

Review

Improving public management as a development imperative: Developing a practical research approach for Bangladesh

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Public management in developing countries like Bangladesh is characterized by long bureaucracy, unnecessary procedures, and they are not customer (citizen) friendly. Many a times, there is good intention from politically elected officials and career public managers. But they are not aware of the basic rules of the game and modern management practices. Most of the public sector management reform studies are done or coordinated by national or international bureaucrats. There are few comprehensive and integrated studies, particularly from business management perspective, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh. A study is needed which will try to argue that awareness of the simple management principles can improve the performance and quality in public administration/management immediately, just with strategic support from top (policy and regulatory reforms), and basic management training (business management principles). The research approach and methodology will be broadly qualitative and will involve in depth observation and case study. The outcome of the study is not expected to be a prescription for any single ministry; rather it will provide examples led framework that can be applied to any government run initiatives to improve day to day management. This paper tries to propose a research approach for a study that will develop a practical road map for solving everyday citizen experience problems right away.

Key words: Research approach, public management, government, business management perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a developing country. It is nearing 40 years since independence in 1971. After a number of political changes and interruptions, democracy is quite established. In economic term, market economy and importance of private sector is well recognized. As government failed in many nationalized organizations, privatization has always been an agenda.

Throughout the world, Government is increasingly under pressure from different communities and citizens to be more responsive and effective. Government needs to play a vital and facilitating role in the enabling environment process for citizens. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) attributed the decline in public confidence to the government's inefficiency and lack of responsiveness. The authors argued that it is not what governments do

but how they operate that engenders distrust.

Today's government and public service management need to be citizen centric (like customer centric in business management) and performance based. "High performance" public organization is marked by the following aspects:

- (i) It is vision, mission and goal directed with continuous performance measurement as a central value.
- (ii) It prefers multi-skilled workers rather than those of narrow expertise because jobs are enriched, employees given greater latitude and discretion.
- (iii) A flatter, more flexible one replaces the tall and rigid organizational hierarchy. As a result, decision-making in a high-performance public organization is dispersed rather than centralized.
- (iv) Because of job enrichment and dispersed decision-making, a policy promoting continuous learning at all organizational levels is a priority.

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(v) Managerial control is maintained less by exercise of formal authority, and more by leadership through an example and continuous effort to clarify organizational vision, mission, goals and values.

Government, in Bangladesh (somehow in developed countries also) is characterized by long bureaucratic and unnecessary procedures. Government systems and organizations do not work well and they are very poorly managed, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh.

Citizens go to government offices for many reasons and they do not find the offices customer (citizen) friendly. Citizens feel from their interactions with these offices that the local public managers are not serious (having problem solving approach) about serving the cases of the citizens.

On the other side of the table, local level public managers do not have the motivation to improve the day to day management. Because they do not have the emotional and strategic support from the top of the government.

Many research and studies, in academia and policy organizations including government itself, have been done and are being done, collaboratively and independently, both in the developed and developing countries. Even then something is incomplete in most studies.

This paper will try to find a “research approach” which starts with a practical down-up view of the public management inefficiency and ineffectiveness problem. Assumption is that local level public managers can improve the day to day management right away, with the strategic go-ahead support and by applying basic management principles of business sector.

IMPROVING PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: A LOOK INTO THE PAST OF AGE OLD CONCERN

Woodrow Wilson (1887), 28th president of USA argued for separation of policy making and policy execution and envisioned for a professional force of managers executing in scientific and objective manner. German sociologist, Weber's (1887) most noted contributions to the study of public administration were the ideas of legitimate authority and bureaucracy. Later, management theories in public and business administration recognize the human side of management.

In line with the study by Osborn and Gaebler (1992) and many others, Government of today should move from the procedure driven to the performance driven domain. Government should be entrepreneurial in use of resources in new ways to maximize productivity and effectiveness. It should be mission-driven, competitive, results-oriented, and customer-driven. Tom Peters (1996), W. Edwards Deming (1991), and Osborne and Graebler (1992) argued that leadership (proactive

management with motivation) is the key to productivity. Public managers lack management skill and they are not motivated enough to be proactive and productive.

Gore (1993) stated in the preface of the National Performance Review (NPR) of US government that Washington was filled with organizations designed for an environment that no longer exists--bureaucracies so big and wasteful they could no longer serve the American people. If this is true about America, what about developing country like Bangladesh! We are filled up with age old British and then Pakistan era bureaucracy that is no longer applicable for serving citizens in an effective way. The Performance Based Organization (PBO) concept was developed as an alternative to TQM and NPR to help the government operate more efficiently (Thompson, 2000).

Then what should be a reform agenda for public management. Frederickson (1999) pointed out that the public management reform agenda in the late 1990s included concepts of (a) competition, (b) privatizing, (c) outsourcing, (d) citizen as customers, (e) reduction of civil service requirements and rules, (f) decentralizing, and (g) unit autonomy.

This recognition of necessity of reforming public sector management has come with understanding that changing employee attitudes about work is important in public administration with increasing demand from the tax payers. There is additional challenge of public accountability in public service management. Accountability involves both the political justification of decisions and actions, and managerial answerability for implementation of agreed tasks according to agreed criteria of performance (Day and Klein, 1987). Improved efficiency is now the overriding aim of public sector reforms in most countries. Consequently, governments should concentrate their efforts less on direct intervention and more on enabling others to be productive (World Bank, 1989: 5).

New Public Management (NPM) is a label used to describe a management culture that emphasizes the centrality of the citizen or customer (Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 1993; Ridley, 1996). It captures most of the structural, organizational and managerial changes and a bundle of management approaches and techniques borrowed from the private-for-profit sector.

Despite the move to reduce the role of the public sector, there is broad agreement about the need to increase the capacity of the State. “Re-engineering” (Hope, 2002) or “invigorating” (Klitgaard, 1997) public institutions is required. To do this, a variety of NPM-inspired measures are used, including the refocusing of public-sector functions through staff reductions and changes in budgetary allocations; restructuring of public organizations through the reorganization of ministries; decentralizing, delinking or ‘hiving off’ central government functions to local governments or the private sector; emphasis on private sector styles of management

practice; marketization and introduction of competition in service provision; explicit standards and measures of performance; greater transparency; pay reform; and emphasis on outputs (Therkildsen, 2001).

Another NPM measure is to introduce Performance management in public service. It is also expected to increase accountability because clear and explicit managerial targets, combined with managerial autonomy and incentives to perform, make it easier to establish the basis for managerial accountability and to achieve outputs (Hill and Gillespie, 1996; Lane, 1995).

About Bangladesh, Sarker (2006) stated in a cross country study that among other things, the advanced level of administrative infrastructure and state efficiency are critical for the success of NPM-oriented reforms. It is stated in another cross country study that unique country-specific contextual factors have played a determining role for which Singapore and Malaysia are relatively successful on their own terms compared to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in public management reforms. (Samaratunge et al., 2008)

A vast amount of literature is available about different country experiences in public sector reform and improving public management. This is a plus for starting the study and comparing with other country practices.

IN SEARCH OF A FRESH APPROACH TO RESEARCHING PUBLIC MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

It is a general perception of the citizens that management of government organizations and units is inefficient and ineffective. The origin of this perception is numerous everyday experiences with government officials in different offices. For example, getting a driver's license, receiving government pension money, filing a case with the court, filing a complain with the police station, sending a express delivery documents through the post office, banking with state owned banks, finding a metered taxi, enrolling in government educational institutions, finding doctors and healthcare in the government health centers, and so on.

Many a times the most important reason of this situation is not the lack of financial or physical resources, rather public management incapability: to develop a well functioning and well coordinated government policy and regulatory environment and incapability to implement basic management principles in day to day management.

So the broad objective of the proposed study will be to find out the ways: how to create more enabling environment through policy and regulatory reforms? and another is how to improve day to day management of the government offices by applying (business) management principles.

Some key issues are:

i) What policies/ acts/ regulations are holding back the public managers from using their good managerial

judgment?

ii) What is wrong with existing age old government policies?

iii) What to keep, and and what to be modified?

Other key issues are:

i) What kind of management improvement is needed in government unit and agencies?

ii) What is the nature of citizen service delivery deficiency?

iii) what are the modern business management principles readily implementable in the public management?

The following may be the specific objectives of the study:

(a) Examine thoroughly the selected policies and regulatory manuals and pinpoint the bottlenecks in terms of their "obsolescence, consequences, inconsistencies, and coordination":

(i) Cross sectoral policies --- Export, import, industrial, SME policy etc.

(ii) Sectoral policies --- Garments, IT, agro, leather, jute, pharmaceuticals, etc.

(iii) Specific service management procedures of the units ---- Bangladesh railway, postal, Port, Customs, Inland water etc.

(b) Develop a clear verbal or graphical model of how these policy bottlenecks are encouraging malpractice and discouraging compliance both at the citizen level and at the organizational levels.

(c) Suggest specific reforms guideline in the above mentioned policies.

(d) Compile and consolidate real life citizen experiences with the government offices and identify the areas where modern business or simply basic management principles can readily be applied within the discretion of the local public managers (the cases where the local level public managers can improve the operations right away).

(e) Provide frameworks that can be applied for improving management in the public organizations and/ or specific recommendations for specific government units.

DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY

Extensive secondary reports from different countries, different donor agencies, and other organizations will be reviewed. For primary information and analysis, diversified qualitative methodologies like case study, narratology, direct visit and observation, whichever appropriate, will be followed. Quantitative and Meta analysis of secondary data will add to the qualitative analysis.

In research methodology literature, there are many

jargons used. But here we attempt not to be specific about the terms of the methodology, rather develop a somewhat heuristics, obvious activity plan.

The following is a brief outline of the planned activities:

(a) Policies related to different areas will be collected from different ministries and government offices and government websites and will be scrutinized in details. Many analyses are already available in popular media and books. These will be compiled, analyzed, and synthesized.

(b) Detailed organization chart of selected government ministries and offices will also be collected. According to that, the roles, responsibilities, authority and flow of activities will be captured.

(c) In depth open ended interview will be taken from businessmen from different business sectors. This will reveal the anomalies of the government policies and lack of coordination among the government units (example, ministries and local offices) approving and monitoring the business environment.

(d) Spot visit will be done in many government organizations which serve the citizens (individual citizens or business firms) to accumulate a narrative account of what is going on (there are already a huge narratives in the newspaper and television).

(i) For example, what is the experience of getting a train ticket in a rail station, getting a trade/ business license from City Corporation, encashing a savings or pension certificate, getting a passport from passport office, getting documents from land office and so on. Besides citizens will be interviewed on the spot and off the spot to develop the graphical model of the bureaucratic inefficiency of the public offices.

(e) Among all these experiences and narratives, those problems will be selected and ranked where the concerned official can use his/her discretion to implement good management principles without waiting for the whole government system to change. That means there might be many problems which the particular office head (even the head of the ministry – the minister himself) alone cannot solve. But many problems might be such that this is simple management problem. Just because they are not aware of the management principles and they are not given any encouragement for that, they cannot solve it. So those areas will be focused.

(f) Caretaker government ruled Bangladesh for almost two years. Advisors in the rank of ministers were appointed under the chief advisor. They tried to initiate reforms in many areas of government activities. They will be a great source of information and insights – how mismanagement in public administration holding back the development opportunity of Bangladesh. These advisors will be a very good source of information and insights.

Now-a-days strength of qualitative and narrative studies and interdisciplinary problem solving based research approach are increasingly being recognized. In that line, this study will be broadly qualitative and

interdisciplinary (example, combining public administration and business administration).

RATIONALE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH APPROACH

The study will be an elaborate document for the government or anyone interested in the issues and challenges in public service, management or administration. The brief literature review shows that similar types of study concerning improvement of public sector management and regulations have been done or underway in many countries by many individuals and organizations. So many cross country experiences from those countries can be shared and tried. That will be one upside of this study.

Many of the studies done in developing countries like Bangladesh are funded by UN, WB like international organizations, conducted by national or international bureaucrats – consultants, which are theoretically very good and well presented. But there are few studies that address public management improvement issue from this certain perspective, that is, from business management perspective.

Business management perspective is practical

Theoretical look and presentation elegance is not the focal issue. It takes the problem cases and brings together different aspects or components to solve it. Business management is performance based, goal oriented and aligned with strategic imperatives. It is not like public management which is typically procedure oriented. Business management ideally rewards innovation and initiative. On the contrary, sometimes, it is punishable (undesired transfer, demotion etc.) in government. But there are many areas where public management that is quality of management in government organizations can be improved by using business management principles. To strengthen this argument, we need to develop success case studies or success stories and compile the insights of the previous ministers, advisers, secretaries, and transfer these learning to current government managers. Also they should be given top level support and permission to try business management like solutions in solving public management problems.

The outcome of this proposed approach is not expected to be a prescription for any single ministry (example, education ministry, communication ministry), or a state owned enterprise (Sugar corporation, chemical corporation), or a state run public service organization (Bangladesh railway, Telephone). Rather it will provide a framework that can be applied to any government run initiatives.

This proposed study will try to model that awareness of

the simple management principles will solve many solutions locally. And many small changes are there which will not need the change of political regime. Just with a little understanding of how policy bottlenecks are created, related government officials (managers) can improve many things. The only thing they need are “go-ahead support from top (enabling environment, policy and regulatory reforms), and basic management training (business management principles).”

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