

Leadership competencies for effective public administration

Public administration plays a major role in governing modern-day society. The government without the support of able public administrators is like a vehicle without wheels. Public administration is significantly different from the management of private-sector organizations. While the public sector is authorized and controlled largely by law, its mandate is ultimately the collective public good, and it has a long-term horizon; the private sector uses the market as its source of creation and control, the customer as its focus, and has a short-term horizon. The duties of public administrators are multifaceted and often very complex. Public administrators around the world are under increasing pressures to perform and provide quality services with ever-fewer resources and face additional stress emanating from increasing global economic, social, political, and cultural integration.

Meeting the demands of public administration requires a unique combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours, commonly referred to as competencies. Competency-based management is being adopted as an efficient tool by the public organizations in various countries today. The department of personnel and training (DoPT) of the government of India initiated the project titled 'Strengthening HRM of Civil Service' in the year 2011 in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (HRM is short for human resource management). A primary outcome of this initiative was the creation of a 'Competency Dictionary' (Government of India-UNDP 2013). The competency dictionary was developed in consultation with a large number of civil servants in the centre and state governments. These included secretaries to the government of India, cadre controlling authorities, chief secretaries of the states and winners of the prime minister's civil service awards. The overarching purpose for developing a competency dictionary was to foster more effective, efficient, and transparent and accountable public administration at the national and state levels. Towards this end, the Civil Services Competency Dictionary identified 25 core competencies across the various roles and positions of civil service employees. The core competencies were further divided under four categories: ethos, ethics, equity, and efficiency.

Recently, the author was a part of a study conducted by the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) —the nodal institution for training Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers—to identify the competencies needed for the district-level public administrators (referred to as district magistrates, or DMs, in India). Based on focused group discussions and a survey of 218 IAS officers, the study identified eight competencies out of the 25 core competencies listed in the Civil Services Competency Dictionary, namely people first; leading others; integrity; decision-making; planning, coordination and implementation; problem-solving; self-awareness and self-control; and innovative thinking. The eight competencies were further clubbed under four meta-competencies, namely stakeholder analysis and decision-making, managing change and innovation, team building and positive administrator personality (The study was [published](#) in the *Journal of Asian Public Policy*. A detailed description of the behaviours included within each meta-competency is provided next.

The first meta-competency was 'Stakeholder Analysis and Decision-Making'. To be successful, a public administrator should be able to listen to the voices of multiple stakeholders and take a decision in keeping with their diverse perspectives. Understanding the multiple needs of the citizens, listening to the viewpoints/perspectives of others and then being able to balance the priorities of different interest groups is a critical behaviour of a successful public administrator. Decisions and solutions should be made in a manner that takes care of not only the short-term but also middle- to long-term interests of the citizens and the people concerned. Proper analysis of the pros and cons of the alternatives is necessary before a decision is taken. Efforts should be put in to collect the relevant data for decision-making. A public administrator should be able to sift through a large set of information, break down complex issues into smaller problems, identify

critical elements for decision-making and find solutions to problems. In times of conflict, public interest should guide the administrator in decision-making.

The second meta-competency that emerged was 'Managing Change and Innovation'. While leadership is an important driver of change in the public sector, little attention is given to its study in public-sector organizational change process. Being ready for change and willing to redesign and innovate in the public delivery systems is an important characteristic of an effective public administrator. They should be on a lookout for situations where innovations can be made to the existing public delivery systems. Use of technology in bringing about change/innovation, in rigorous data analysis for decision-making, in forecasting of the impact of the decisions and in monitoring the effectiveness of the public systems is essential for successful implementation of change.

'Team Building' was the third theme that emerged. Today, the leadership context in public sector is inter-organizational and is shifting away from a focus on hierarchy, towards a focus on networks and partnerships that cross traditional boundaries. Almost all surveyed IAS officers emphasized the need for teams in public administration. Public administrators need to empower their officials and team members, listen to their viewpoints, be open to new ideas and counterpoints, encourage out-of-the-box thinking, share information with team members, understand the power dynamics between team members and inspire them to achieve the goals set before them. In order to inspire the team, an administrator should lead by example; be a role model; and establish a culture of openness, honesty and integrity.

'Positive Administrator Personality' was the last meta-competency that emerged. Often the pressures and constraints on public administrators are very high. Given the same, they should be able to honour the commitments that they make and should be ethical. They should be able to work under tremendous stress/adversity and demonstrate decisiveness when under pressure or faced with uncertainty. They should be able to manage the inherent complexity and uncertainty that exists in the work of a public administrator. They should be resilient in times of failures or great difficulty and should have the will to keep working even when things are not very conducive for action.

The competencies and meta-competencies identified in the study can help training academies and consultants who often wrestle with the task of identifying appropriate behaviours that can ensure effectiveness of public administrators. Development of training modules around these competencies should lead to better return on investment and will make training programmes more useful for public administrators. The set of competencies identified can also be used to appraise the performance of public administrators. Officers who exhibit such behaviours while performing their duties may have a higher chance of producing better results. Alternatively, the list of behaviours presented here can help officers understand possible reasons for their failure and in determining remedial steps. Appraising agencies may go through the competency inventory, evaluate and provide feedback to the officers on how often they display each of the behaviours reported within respective competencies. This can then help them better understand the areas where they can improve.

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This article presents the author's personal views and should not be construed to represent the institute's position on the subject.

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