



Innovating around a bureaucratic organization

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Abstract

The school of behaviorist psychology believes that bureaucracy, especially the one which exists in government organizations, is basically methodical and organized which leads to efficient implementation of schemes and policies but is bereft of new ideas and technology. This has led to a general notion that large government organizations have little place for innovation. Bureaucracy has been extremely reluctant to introduce new reforms and ideas in its functioning even at the cost of obvious consequences such as inefficiency and dogmatism. Policy makers with progressive ideas face a herculean challenge to introduce some reforms in the bureaucratic functioning cause too many interests become vested in their continued existence. However, with the advent of new technologies and a newer social order, it is being increasingly felt that changes, even in small proportion, are absolutely necessary for their sheer existence and functioning. By definition, innovation implies the capacity to change or adapt. Innovation in an organization refers to the genesis, recognition and application of new ideas, processes, products or services. An organization which adapts itself to new changes may not be innovative (as it may not give birth to new ideas) but an innovative organization is definitely adaptive (as it can implement new ideas).

Keywords: Bureaucracy, organization, hierarchy, innovation, desk class, rewards

1. Introduction

The bureaucratic structure in Public Administration works on the philosophy of a set of Service Rules and Procedures which explains its hierarchy and functioning. The organization may be visualized as an “owner” and the bureaucracy as a “tool or means” to achieve its objectives. The bureaucrats get remuneration for their service and gradually get promoted in the hierarchy with seniority. This principle may be akin to “production theory”. The bureaucratic leadership at various levels controls the entire administrative activity so that the desired targets are reached within the specified time. Like any “good tool”, the bureaucracy is expected to perform reliably and predictably and any new idea is visualized as “unreliable”. The “production theory” implies a categorical and comprehensive structuring of bureaucracy where every employee is assigned a specific set of tasks. This reduces the complexity of execution of schemes and makes it convenient for the leadership to monitor the performance of each and every employee. In the words of Henry Ford, “all that we ask of the men is that they do the work which is set before them”. Thus the employee ends up getting an assignment which requires only a part of his knowledge or training and as a result, this theory fails to do justice to both the employee in particular and the organization in general.

2. The organization

The bureaucratic organizations reflect two features, namely, a huge difference of position and remuneration among the various strata of employees which affect their social standing and a working mechanism which could easily be understood by all employees. In this hierarchical setup, the bureaucrats at the top, who are considered as omniscient, issues directives to their subordinates and the chain cascades to the very bottom where the scheme is actually executed. This delegation of responsibility maintains a strict

monitoring throughout so that the outcome of the work may be properly recorded. In order to ensure uniformity, clarity and accountability, each and every employee is assigned a definite role in the whole chain without any overlapping of functions and he is responsible solely to his immediate supervisor. So there is only a single source of authority due to which any conflicting idea has no place in such organization. So it is obvious that innovation will be considered as a distracting proposition, if not illegitimate, in such a situation.

The inability to express one’s idea or thought depresses innovation. However, innovation leads to rethinking the existing scheme of things and functions which leads to uncertainties and confusion before an optimum solution is drawn up within a limited time frame. This disturbs the otherwise “disciplined” bureaucracy which tends to ignore such “aberrations” for the sake of the larger interest of the organization. So we can safely assume that more of “bureaucracy” leads to less of uncertainty and stifles any contrary thought or idea completely. The administration maintains a strict control over the bureaucracy and in return the employees get his share of status, remuneration and other fringe benefits. Research has indicated that while a poor salary system can make for dissatisfaction among employees, a well-structured salary system does not necessarily motivate one to perform brilliantly. The concept of “job satisfaction” is itself relative as a section of the “innovative” bureaucrats gets disenchanted and stifled by this practice as they could neither vent their alternate ideas nor get recognition of their expertise. The administration fondly caresses the “average meritocracy” as they fear to lose their control if they allow the “brilliant minds” to “innovate” alternate practices. This necessitates the organization to design the remuneration and benefit system in such a manner that it is strictly based on hierarchy and convince the bureaucrats to willingly accept the functions

which are imposed upon them. Since most of the jobs require a basic degree to apply for the entrance examination and the selection is based on various criteria, many meritorious and creative minded people are eliminated from the competition. Those who remain and finally join seek solace and satisfaction from outside their job- in pursuing creative hobbies, community-based activities and their families. As a result, they turn docile and consciously blind their creativity for the sake of their profession. Thus we can safely assume that the standard system of bureaucracy stimulates adherence to the existing procedures rather than innovation. The “especially skilled” bureaucrat finds that he has very little to exert, if at all, from his knowledge and wisdom, if he has to “succeed and survive” in his profession.

An individual bureaucrat is expected to complete the task assigned to him within the stipulated time period. As a result, the hierarchical competition becomes individualistic and vindictive which increases the anxiety level of the bureaucrat who shuns from team effort and mutual cooperation among his peers. The higher he climbs in the positional ladder, the more ambiguous and biased become the standards by which he is judged by his superiors. So his only safe bet is to conform to the set rules and innovation becomes a taboo. A very few bureaucrats chose to tread the other way by applying creativity in their functioning but they never get rewarded for their noble efforts. Instead they are deprived of the position they deserve by their superiors who feel insecure and suffer from inferiority.

Another important characteristic of bureaucracy is that the hierarchical authority affirms all the policies and procedures which are directed by the leadership. In other words, there is no room for any alternative as any innovative suggestion is summarily rejected by the immediate superior even before such idea could be acknowledged at the next higher level. The “intelligent” bureaucrat is forced to chew his own theory and is constantly persuaded to fall in line with the mediocrity.

In large bureaucratic organizations which employ a number of bureaucrats at different levels, each bureaucrat is assigned a particular task which requires a specific set of skills. This skill set is usually too basic compared to his knowledge and expertise and is possessed by a semi-skilled clerk. Nigel Walker has aptly termed this class of bureaucrats as “desk class” who do not require any technical or managerial quality to perform their function. This class is dependent on the extrinsic rewards devised by the organization and they gradually develop a conservative attitude towards their functions. Barring a very few, the general morale of the whole group is one of chronic dissatisfaction.

The bureaucratic orientation follows a traditional approach. Any new idea appears to threaten the existing norms. This policy is more concerned with security and stability of power distribution across the hierarchical levels rather than serving the larger interest of the organization. This gives birth to an internal political strife among the bureaucrats who view every new policy with a “how does it affect me?” approach. If a new idea or approach could not be rejected, the bureaucratic hierarchy tries to disrupt and divert it so that it is ultimately removed from the hierarchical channel. Research activities which exist in such organizations are more concerned with preserving the status quo rather than innovating something new.

A bureaucratic set up finds it extremely difficult to adopt a new idea in its existing structure. This is because all the resources have already been specified and committed to their respective functions and creation of a new unit or department is virtually impossible. An individual bureaucrat with an innovative idea also faces a similar issue as it is not feasible to function with two different approaches at the same time. So any new approach upsets the existing pattern of approach and might even lead to rise of divisive patterns of functioning both of which are highly detrimental for the health of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Beyond the issue of bureaucratic interest, there are several other factors which lead to bigotry in administration. Each department or section is assigned a particular function with a single purpose, a definite set of procedures which requires a particular set of skills and comprises of several subunits composed of a superior and several subordinates. These bureaucrats suffer from short-sightedness and are concerned only about completing their specified targets and care little for the interest of the department. Thus one sub section of a department completes a piece of work and hands over the same to the next and any problem or error that creeps in the system is simply dodged by each unit. As a result, it becomes virtually impossible to trace the problem in the first place let alone find an optimum solution for the same. Since the sub units have clearly specified functions and each of them performs only a small part of the entire assignment, there is very little room for diversity in approach. The functions are planned in such a manner that all the time and resources are fully utilized and one cannot even attempt to try something different. Even the “specialized” bureaucrats who are hired for research are involved in the mainstream so that they also spend their efforts to maximize the “production” of the organization.

In administration, bureaucrats are praised and blamed if they are unable to perform their designated function. So it is evident that a bureaucrat will be held individually responsible if he treads out from the prescribed path and fails in his endeavor to try something new. Since any new idea is inherently unpredictable, the bureaucrat becomes hesitant to “think out of the box” even though he might be sure of a fruitful outcome. Since the appraisal system does not give due cognizance to such an idea even if it proves to be beneficial, it is once more evident that the larger interest of the traditional organization comes in the way of individual “interest” and innovation takes a backseat.

In a few rare cases, especially in research organizations managed or funded by the government, a few “brilliant minds” may coincidentally meet each other and strive to an atmosphere conducive to innovation. They build up a dedicated camaraderie under a “visionary” leader and achieve a superb level of organizational creativity within a short span of time. Such organizations are mostly small and the hierarchy is comparatively horizontal. With the passage of time, more creative minds are attracted towards such an organization which predictably starts assuming a higher proportion both in terms of employee strength and “productivity”. This continues for a further period till the “bureaucratic hangover” penetrates among the rank and file of such an organization and it gradually starts losing its “innovative character”. The “visionary” leader loses control and each individual joins one lobby or the other, to protect his own interest, which tries to assert its “idea” resulting in more chaos and internal politics. Max Weber has termed

this phenomenon as “institutionalization of charisma” and such an occurrence could be found in the case of several post-independent institutions in India.

3. Turning innovative

There are several requirements for an organization to inculcate innovation, adopting new procedures and ultimately yielding tangible outcomes which could be beneficial for the community in the long run. Such qualities would require a conducive environment, ample resources to work upon and a favorable management in order to deliver promising results. For the sake of clarity, the requirements are classified under basic and structural.

The basic requirements for an institution to become innovative are unlimited time, a vast pool of “skilled” minds willing to try something “new”, adequate and untied resources and finally a “charismatic” leadership. It means that each employee is “specialist” in his field, is aware of his limits and possesses the required experience and confidence i.e. a thorough “professional”. Such an institution incorporates modern technology and gives emphasis to continuous learning and modification. Technology itself plays the role of hierarchical control and coordination is maintained through team effort. The bureaucrats are readily encouraged to infuse new ideas in the “system” which is then put to rigorous tests and finally the best idea is accepted as the new “norm”. This induces the process of “brainstorming” where a wide range of ideas are put to test and this leads to freedom of thought and expression within the whole organization.

Unquestioned loyalty towards the organization is definitely an impediment to free thought and equally undesirable is a completely “free spirit”. The employee should regard the organization as a means for his professional as well as creative “enrichment”. This will gradually deepen his bonding with the organizational interest and stimulate him to persevere to discover better solutions to the problems. Organizational growth will take place as the employees will be bound to become more efficient as they perceive their creativity as a tool for professional growth.

In an innovative organization, employees derive satisfaction not merely through extrinsic rewards in the form of salary, recognition and organizational status but through satisfaction to create something “viable” which is immediately “utilized” by the organization. He also derives encouragement from the fact that his contribution is “recognized” by his peers and colleagues and views it as his “personal worth”. This inspires him to take even bigger challenges as he does not feel “apprehensive” to “try something new”. The atmosphere of such an organization should be independent of external pressure. An employee under constant pressure to deliver a “fruitful idea” is bound to fail if his personal security is at stake. In such a case, he will adopt a defensive posture which is “hardly compatible with creativity”. He might also feel a compulsion to accept the first gratifying idea whether or not it seems unique or the most “suitable”. The employee also requires a considerable amount of, if not entire, freedom to carry on his innovative pursuit.

The innovative organization should have both an autonomous as well as professional attitude. An employee will be assigned a function based on his experience and knowledge and the “desk class “theory should be completely eliminated. Emphasis will be given to the

academic pursuits of an employee who wants to constantly upgrade his skills in a related field and horizontal movement in hierarchy based on specific skill sets should be given predominance. Professional competence is preferred over hierarchical loyalty. Employees will seek “recognition” of their creativity rather than crave for better pay structure. Power and influence by the peers will be gradually taken over by individual commitment and integrity. It is thus evident that the traditional organization practices based on ‘production theory’ is an impediment to an independent and innovative atmosphere in an organization.

In terms of structural requirements, an innovative organization should have a clear and non-overlapping distribution of functions and responsibilities. The channels of communication should be free and move in all directions without any procedural hindrance. The resource distribution should be decentralized and the leadership should be far-sighted and technically sound. The rewards system should encourage ‘performers’ and give due recognition to professionalism. There should be greater stress on team effort with higher level of interpersonal communication and less segregation of functions. This will stimulate new ideas as the employee is exposed to a wider paradigm of activity and the leadership should motivate horizontal transfer of positions so that “creative” employees could get exposure to all the activities of the organization. Wider participation of employees will lead to generation of more creative ideas as well as facilitates its recognition and implementation. The existing process of departmentalization has led to a bigoted approach where new ideas emerging externally are vehemently resisted by employees. They fear that they might lose their position or need to constantly upgrade their skills to cope up with the new situation. Over specification of functions at department levels prevents innovation as there is little room for diversity. Frequently we find “suggestion-boxes” in organizations where employees are persuaded to drop their innovative ideas and suggestions. The ideas and suggestions which are found beneficial are sometimes accepted by the organizations after giving due recognition, in the form of token rewards, to the concerned employees. This system has its share of benefit as well as drawback. On one hand, it encourages the individual to come up with novel ideas and schemes but on the other hand, it gives rise to dispute and resentment as the group often feels that it collectively deserves the appreciation. The innovative organization should necessarily possess a high degree of technical interdependence among various departments so that the “skills” of professionals of one department may be utilized to solve the problems of the other. Individual professionals should be given the option to move to different departments if they are willing to do so provided that they possess the requisite skill sets to function there. This will expose them to new challenges and complex situations which will enable them to develop creative and optimal solutions thus enriching their own experience and knowledge and turn up to be profitable for the organization in terms of investment in research and human resources and savings through efficient and cost cutting procedures.

When an innovative organization faces a complex problem, it can dissolve the departmental set up and restructure the whole organization in the light of the problem at hand. This enables the leadership to maximize the utilization of resources to face the emergent challenge and come up with a feasible solution in the least possible time. Once the

solution is accepted by the leadership, the entire organization restructures in its original form to implement the same. Separate forms of leadership and hierarchical structures are required to solve different problems and so bureaucratic rigidity is inherently unacceptable. This will in turn render the organizational structure more responsive to manipulation. This theory is termed “integrative departmentalization” which creates more space for expression of thoughts and ideas along with freedom of communication and activity. So it is evident that the innovative thrust will not just remain limited to the Research & Development department but will include contributions from individuals and groups cutting across departments and sections. The control of resources should also be sufficiently decentralized so that adequate means are provided to the “vital” departments engaged in implementing the innovative functions.

Unfortunately, the present bureaucratic structure is gradually moving towards “traditional monocacy”. The highly specialized bureaucrats are threatening the basic functioning of the organization as the required skill sets are too primitive and basic compared to their knowledge and they are unwilling to part with their power and status. The small cubicles and glass chambers are limiting the scope of free flow of ideas and communication. The system of “extrinsic rewards” is once again creeping up in the system as “talents” are attracted towards the organization which has to pay a “high cost” to retain them but is not helping innovation in any way.

Several administrative practices also need to be changed, if not completely eliminated, from the system. Annual Performance Assessments by superiors need to be done away with as it is contradicting the spirit of professionalism. Instead, there should be a multiple ranking system where employees are judged on several parameters by several peers. The hierarchical position should not be the sole determinant of power as we need to move towards multiple roles. The functions and responsibilities of an employee need to be “widened” rather than limited to “desk class” descriptions. Peer evaluation should be encouraged in the appointment process. Interdepartmental mobility should not alter the benefits of the employee. Redundant resources should be eliminated gradually and procedures and functions should be categorically defined so as to remove the “pseudo skills” or “spurious” positions. Rapid expansion of organization has increased its utility and productivity at the same pace and so each departmental function has to be justified or eliminated. Decentralization of several managerial functions will enable bureaucrats from all levels to contribute to decision making and problem solving so as to find “in house” solutions rather than wasting resources to over external consultants.

4. Conclusion

Therefore, it is needless to state that “innovative organization” is way different from the traditional one. Even though the resources required to transform the latter into the former may not be too costly, the very first thing is a change in “thinking”. The traditional functions and procedures need to be changed and the bureaucratic top brass itself has to undergo a massive “transformation”. It is true that, even with all these changes, an organization may not grow up to be a vastly “innovative” one but definitely it will possess all the ingredients to become one in future. It will also

encourage employees to think “out of the box” and motivate them to become efficient professionals. It will also make the organization more vibrant and create an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and communication. Finally it is presumed that the existence of any organization in the near future will depend upon its flexibility to adapt to changes and its transformation to an “innovative” organization is definitely a large step in that direction.

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