



# Cutting the red-tape?

BY K P SHASHIDHARAN

Does the recent reshuffle of about 50 bureaucrats holding senior positions in the Government of India teach any lesson? Does the bureaucracy, known for its DNA-red-tapism and enjoying wielding mammoth power, let loose the process of decision-making? At times it puts the process in cold storage and even tries to alter the expected outcome? Is there a growing case for de-bureaucratization to metamorphose the archaic steel frame into mere civil servants, enjoying more in serving the people?

The writing on the wall is clear, the time has come now. The bureaucracy must be aware of the dynamics of the pressing demands of a rapidly transforming society. Decisions cannot be any longer put in infinite queuing at the risk of the affected. The bureaucrat must apply due diligence in his delegated sphere of responsibility. If he's not, who's there to untie the red-tape, unwrap the *khaki*-clad file covers to read the comprehensive notes to choose the most appropriate decision options presented to him? If by knowingly or unknowingly he waits for the situation to become explosive demanding fire fighting and contingency planning, does it help in bringing good governance?

We follow undoubtedly the world's best practices: every office has now hung citizen charters, quoting the best possible ideal people-centric governance. But many government functionaries still get tempted to sit insensitively behind heaps and heaps of files, showcasing their workload, power and importance. No doubt, problems are flagged before them in different labels and are judiciously classified "Immediate", "Most urgent", "Out today" and "Parliamentary Question" to facilitate timely decision-making. Files are everywhere, they are on either side of the table; some sit in trays labelled 'IN' and others the 'OUT' nomenclature to signify the inbound and outbound traffic of files in the corridors of power. Bureaucrats are seen walking head heavy, apparently hassled going in and out of various chambers

and meetings, taking phone calls, attending visitors, sandwiched between lots and lots of "PUC" waiting for time, attention and the application of mind.

The people affected on the other side of the table are increasingly becoming impatient empowered under the Right to Information Act. When the decision-making process is proverbially bureaucratized, the people are compelled to wait impatiently, begging blessings from the authorities and go in for complaining and whistleblowing against bureaucrats. Obviously, the people are in a hurry for the resolution of their problems in a fair, transparent, objective and timely manner; but decisions are not forthcoming many a time when the work culture and environment are kept typically bureaucratic. It is time to realize the importance of a positive attitudinal change and a judicious decision-making process for better governance rather than files being tossed between different ministries.

Good governance demands time-bound programme execution and effective service delivery by disentangling the decision-making process from the red-tape. It is time for adopting innovative practices and e-governance solutions and using the Internet, web-based applications, interactive kiosks, social network sites and mobile phones to maximize the positive outcome. Currently, senior civil servants are increasingly held accountable by politicians, legislative committees, courts, investigating agencies and vigilance, audit and inspection bodies. Politicians often raise questions about the accountability of civil servants, which creates mounting tension in the work atmosphere. All said and done, the bureaucracy is the permanent executive acting as its own extended arm. Civil servants must be trusted and supported for enhancing project execution, public service delivery and management and the better budgetary outcome. ■

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