

The Community of Ethics

A note on Communication – an essential ingredient of public service

The other day, Mangu Singh, MD of Delhi Metro said during his presentation during the programme on 'Ethical Work Culture' that there were no barriers to communication within the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation.

He had made a significant point relating to organizational culture. I believe that effective and unhindered (unobstructed, unimpeded) communication is a building block of successful organizations. In other words, communication acts as organizational blood. Its flow is synonymous with healthy organization. Good communication builds institutional intelligence.

Generally we find in business and public organizations that employees have a lingering resentment that their voice is not heard in the organization. They are frustrated because they think that they could give solutions to the problems in the organization, but they do not have a platform or an opportunity. The policy makers of the organization are at an unbridgeable distance from the common employees.

Poor communication in the workplace leads to unmotivated members of the staff who may begin to question their own confidence in their abilities and inevitably in the organisation.

Communication is the key to better management. It is also a door opener to the ethical culture of an organization.

In the bureaucratic hierarchy it is assumed that wisdom is synonymous with position. This belief is accentuated by the occupiers of the higher echelons of the giant hierarchy. I have seen it in many situations that the word of the boss is grudgingly accepted without a need for applying one's mind to it.

In the Weberian world, communication is generally carried out in meetings and in official paperwork comprising of file notings and correspondence. Both are seriously flawed because of the traditions of officialdom where creativity is despised. Besides, jealousy is a ubiquitous quality in all organized services including the hallowed All India Services. There are numerous instances where innovative practices started by officers are

derided by their colleagues and initiatives of predecessors are terminated by successors. I sometimes wonder if constructive communication is at all possible in the Indian civil service system.

I recall that in 1997-1998, the model of public-private-partnership was on the drawing board of the Union Government. The details of linkages and terms and conditions were being worked out in the committees consisting of the representatives of different ministries. The concerned ministries included finance, law, industries, shipping & transport, commerce and the planning commission. Meeting after meeting the documentation between the government and the private parties were discussed. The discussions were inconclusive when I took over as Cabinet Secretary, my predecessor advised me to keep out a young joint secretary who raised objections to every draft of the contractual document defining the relationship between the government and the private contractor. He considered the joint secretary insufferable because of the roadblocks created by him by raising objections. 'He fights with every one; he is obstructive and obnoxious', my predecessor told me.

In the first meeting of the Committee of Secretaries (COS) where the matter was placed, the joint secretary raised objections to the prepared text. His tone was offensive, but what he said made sense to me. It was clear to me that he had public interest in mind. So, I listened to him without making any comment. In fact, I did not allow other senior officers to cut him short. The more I listened to him, the more I got convinced of his commitment to the interest of the State.

In the meeting, I decided that Gajendra Haldea should be included in the subcommittee to prepare the documents and I asked him to put all his ideas into the contract papers. I asked him to find ways to meet the objections he had raised. The rest is, as they, history. Gajendra Haldea became the person celebrated for all PPP arrangements and much more. (Unfortunately, he passed away last week)

Two-way communication is a source of information to the organizational members for decision-making process as it helps identifying and assessing alternative course of actions. Effective downward communication promotes motivation by informing and clarifying the employees about the task to be done, the manner they are performing the task, and how to improve their performance if it is not up to the mark.

Communication also plays a crucial role in altering individual's attitudes, i.e., a well informed individual will have better attitude than a less-informed individual. Organizational magazines, journals, meetings and various other forms of oral and written communication help in moulding employee's attitudes.

And as a result, it helps controlling organizational member's behaviour in various ways. There are protocols that employees must follow in an organization. They must comply with organizational policies and perform their job role. These can be realized efficiently if work problems and grievances are routinely conveyed to their superiors. An effective and efficient communication system improves managerial proficiency in delivering and receiving messages.

An effective leader of an organization must explore the structural barriers to communication, analyze the reasons for their occurrence and take preventive steps to avoid those barriers.

More than forty years ago, I was posted to a moribund state enterprise as its Managing Director. I was a total outsider in the organization with technical experts of textile technology, marketing, procurement and financial management manning the corporation.

Within a few days, I discovered that in order to be effective, I would have to shed my official status and start listening to them. I soiled my hands at the machines in the mills and tried to understand their technical jargon. And it paid off. The Corporation became a trailblazer in public sector management in the niche area of its operation. The secret was listening to the executives, which brought them emotionally closer to me and helped me understand their mindset.

In the five years I spent in the Corporation, I learnt that building effective teams is really all about how those team members communicate and collaborate together. By implementing effective strategies, one can go a long way toward building effective teams. This, in turn, improves morale and employee satisfaction.

I found that constructive communication gives everyone a voice. Employees derive a lot of satisfaction on their having a voice and being listened to. Well established lines of communication should afford everyone, no matter their level, the ability to freely communicate with their peers, colleagues and superiors.

Where employees are enabled to openly communicate ideas without fear of ridicule or retribution they are far more likely to bring their idea to the table. Innovation relies heavily on this and an organisation which encourages communication is far more likely to be an innovative one. The last person in the line should have the freedom and the confidence to express his/her views on the subject; and he/she should be listened to without any prejudice or bias.

I have seen that when civil servants are strong communicators, they are better able to lead their teams. The delegation of tasks, conflict management, motivation and relationship building are all much easier when you are a strong communicator. Strong communication is not just the ability to speak to people but to empower them to speak to each other.

Occasionally, there comes a boss in a public organization – a secretary of the ministry, a director general of a department, a chairman or MD of a public enterprise – who believes in unblocked channels of communication. He/she initiates open brainstorming sessions and welcomes new ideas from the members of the staff. The environment on the organization becomes more constructive and creative. But the moment he is replaced by another boss who is averse to deliberation and analysis, the organization goes back to the precedent bound culture.

This is the tragedy of bureaucracy. Since innovation is not embedded in the bureaucratic system, the culture of unhindered consultation and intrepid expression of views in the bureaucratic world is not consistent. It varies with the character of leadership.

The civil servants do not seem to realize that to become a good communicator, it is important to be a good listener. It is imperative to practice active listening – pay close attention to what the subordinates are saying and rephrasing their observations for greater understanding.

Active listening is a technique that is used in counselling, training, and solving disputes or conflicts. It requires the listener to fully concentrate, understand, respond and then remember what is being said. It prompts the speaker to express himself better.

There are a multitude of factors that impede upon someone's ability to listen with purpose and intention; these factors are referred to as listening blocks. Some examples of these blocks include rehearsing, filtering, and advising.

Rehearsing is when the listener is more focused on preparing their response rather than listening.

Filtering is when a listener focuses only on what they expect to hear, while tuning out other aspects of what is being said,

Advising is when the listener focuses on problem solving, which can create a sense of pressure to fix what the other person is doing wrong. Some barriers are due to hunger or fatigue of the listener, making them irritated and less inclined to listen to the speaker.

All these types of barriers are common in government circles. I have come across political leaders and senior colleagues of the All India Services being regular victims of these barriers. They could not put aside their own emotions and ask questions for the junior colleagues to clarify what they intended to say. Judging or arguing prematurely was a common characteristic of holding onto a strict personal opinion. Had they observed active listening, they would have been much superior leaders and administrators.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee listened to others, but it was not clear whether he was paying full attention to the speaker. Every week, I would spend hours explaining to him the issues to be brought for the Cabinet's consideration in the meeting to follow. That he heard me was evident, but how much he understood was unclear. Almost always he would indicate agreement with me. It was perhaps because he relied on my dedication to his government. Still, he was much better than many other political leaders who are averse to listening to anyone, particularly the bureaucrats working under them.

Among other important leaders of the country, I found Vishwanath Pratap Singh another leader who would listen patiently. In every setup, he sincerely tried to learn the protocols and abide by them. Once in a review meeting, while other ministers and secretaries were fidgeting to have their say, he sat intently listening to me for about half an hour and absorbing everything I said. That was the beginning of a long association. It made me his devotee for all time to come.

I think the new entrants to the superior civil services of the Union and State governments should be consistently trained in the spirit and skills of positive communication in their work.

They need to be told that respecting what others have to say and acknowledging them is an important aspect of communication. Being respectful can be as simple as paying attention to what they have to say, using the person's name, and not being distracted. By respecting others, the other person will feel appreciated, which will lead to a more honest and productive conversation.

In situations where they disagree with what someone else has to say, whether it be with a boss, a co-worker, a specialist or a citizen, it is important to sympathize with their point of view rather than simply try to get their message, however good, across. They should be trained to respect the opinion of others and never resort to demeaning those who do not agree with them.

That would be a special way to make our civil servants more emotionally mature, more open to their experiences, less defensive, more democratic, and less authoritarian.

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