

## Seeded Change

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**Abstract:** *Better government is a widely accepted goal in public policy. As Bangladesh faces ever more difficult global economic conditions everyone agrees it is a must. However, how to achieve necessary changes in the structure and functioning of government remain a problem. This paper contrasts two strategies, 'root and branch reform' and 'seeded change'. The latter, it is argued, is somewhat neglected in the literature but is closer to the realities of the change processes in countries such as Britain, than the rhetoric of root and branch reform might suggest. Furthermore, it is a strategy that leaves initiative and responsibility in the hands of national politicians and officers whose leadership is essential if greater effectiveness is to be achieved.*

### Introduction

This paper reflects upon the method that was developed for a Civil Service training and development project in Bangladesh. Managing At The Top (MATT), was a three year training based project, in which batches of senior civil servants were given training in Britain and undertook some mini-reform projects in their own offices once they return to Bangladesh. The project was, in effect, an experiment to see whether outside stimulus can assist a cohort of officers, selected on the basis of their eligibility for the top posts in the civil service, to work out their own agenda for management development and reform. Both the UK government as donor and the Bangladesh Government as co-financier, recognised that this was a tangential approach to a

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recognised need to improve the functioning of the public service in Bangladesh. But to achieve a Bangladesh owned agenda for improvement would be a true success and a good return to the investment of aid money. How this might be achieved however, was not totally clear at the inception of the project, requiring reflexivity and ongoing learning throughout the project?

This paper explores the background thinking to the MATT Project, and touches upon some of the developments that were subsequently worked out, concluding with a 'state of the art' review that indicates how far the project may have progressed towards the development of a 'seeded change' strategy that could embed itself successfully within the BCS.

Whether the project designers and commissioners were fully aware of it or not, the starting point however, assumed an approach to change in government and public management that was distinctly different to that which is often promoted by international agencies and governments. The dominant approach to public service reform demands root and branch reform. The changes that MATT promoted were small, incremental, and were to be launched into a process of adaptation to suit the culture and environment of Bangladesh. They are like seeds, or to use a more contemporary metaphor, bacteria – hopefully friendly ones. It is tempting to use idea of virus as a model but we will resist this metaphor because of its usually negative connotations. Seeds or friendly bacteria achieve change through finding their way into fertile environments, spread because they suit the place and people, are internalised until they are no longer foreign, and accumulate in numbers to produce substantial change.

There are two reasons why this incremental approach to change makes sense. One is that in Bangladesh, as in many places, the dominant reform agenda has encountered the usual obstacles of inertia and political resistance. The other reason, equally persuasive, is that it is far from clear that the reform models that

are available through the experience of other countries, are suitable to the conditions of Bangladesh without substantial modification.

### **Macro models**

Much of the discourse of governmental change or civil service reform that dominates the international scene has been based upon models for sweeping change. These are supported by claims of grand achievement. There are various ways of categorising these, but for simplicity, the following may do;

- One model relates size and structure to efficiency, or sometimes effectiveness notions, leading to recommendations for downsizing, rightsizing and restructuring. An early favourite with international agencies, this kind of model is based upon the simple understanding that ambitious governments had tried to do too much, are overextended and must 'cut their suit to fit the cloth'. There are success stories; but these tend to refer to countries where there has been an economic melt down – such as Ghana and Uganda in Africa.
- A second model is about normative change. Ideologically it stems from industry, and is based upon a managerialist philosophy, seeing change in organisational culture as the keystone to reform. Entrepreneurial qualities, managers accepting responsibility, and 'can do' culture are seen as essential ingredients of the new governance. Restructuring, privatisation, internal markets and other structural change follows, facilitated through processes such as business process re-engineering. New Zealand, as a leader within the 'Old Commonwealth', is taken as exemplar.
- A third kind of model is based upon ideas of decentralisation and re-development of civic institutions, democratic practices and public accountability, stressing political change and the separation of political and administrative institutions and

modes of accountability. A recent focus within this strain of thinking is upon partnerships of various kinds. This institutional approach is much discussed, particularly in relation the re-emerged nations of Eastern Europe, but are there clear examples of success?

Models of these kinds share the characteristic that they are based upon radical principles and they are demanding. They sound revolutionary. They are demanding simply because they indicate the need for complete transformation. Yet it is difficult to pin down cases of success (Hesse 1996). Even where success is claimed; a claim sometimes made for public sector reform in Britain; the processes through which transformation took place are generally not revolutionary but complex, sustained over time and tortuous. There is no clear sense in which transformations, where they have occurred, are transferable to other contexts (Foster and Plowden 1996). Close interpretation of what happened depends upon understanding of context and circumstance. Would the reform process in Britain have made the headway that it did if Mrs Thatcher had not been fortunate enough to win the Falklands war (leading to a landslide electoral victory)? What would substitute as a vote winning distraction for the public in a country such as Bangladesh?

Grand change reform models also share the characteristic that they need to be centrally driven (Werlin,1992). In a strange way the state has to be powerful, with sufficient political capital and managerial capacity in order to be able to strategically plan the major changes required (Corkery and others 1998). Yet, often the demand for reform stems from the fact that the state is weak. For any of these models to be put into practice immediate questions arise about political will and administrative leadership; with the counterpart questions about political support and civil obedience. These are questions about feasibility. Yet the advocates of grand reform are so convinced of the need for greater efficiency, for

more responsive government or for better accountability or whatever, that the feasibility issue is ducked'.

### **Feasibility**

One consequence of the prevalence of grand reform models of change is that their national or international advocates are bold in their claims and demands, but meet resistance from politicians or administrators whose first concern must be feasibility. Resistance to these demands is then put down to 'vested interests' in inefficiency (ensuring jobs for the boys), in unresponsiveness to the public (maintaining elite privileges) or in unaccountable procedures (protecting opportunities for corruption). Political or administrative leaders will, of course, include these in their personal calculation of the costs and the benefits that they face personally. But, as reasonable members of their societies, they also have to include the consequences of reform proposals for the broad interest groups with which they interact and upon whose support they depend. And, in general, leaders do not like to inflict pain on politically articulate supporters.

What we would expect to find in the confrontation between advocates of radical reform and those who face the feasibility calculation, is a lot of manoeuvring. Conditions are set, commissions are set up, processes are initiated, the language of change is learned and heat is generated. However, real radicalism often has to await a more neutral external or internal stimulus. Constitutional reform in Thailand for instance, had been brewing for many months and was only enacted after the collapse of the currency on international markets. Economic melt down in Ghana made life so bad for most people that the charismatic Flight

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<sup>1</sup> Another part of the feasibility issue concerns the limited likelihood of sensible reform being undertaken as a result of donor conditionality. If a government undertakes reform in response to external pressure, is this guaranteed to reflect national needs? If so, what about democratic accountability?

Lieutenant Gerry Rawlings was welcomed back into power. No such eventuality has occurred in Bangladesh.

### **Models never fit**

So far the critique of the grand reform models has been based upon the observation that they are unlikely to have sufficient support within national political and administrative circles to be implementable. However, a further critique has been hinted at already. Perhaps the grand reform models are themselves too grand. I mean by this, for instance:

- ❖ Western inspired models of public accountability and parliamentary democracy may commit countries to formats that gives room to political thugs, and in Britain leads to apathy about a 'least worst' choice at the polls. Surely there is room for new forms of democratic participation in countries such as Bangladesh, as Professor John Stewart argues for the UK (1999 - 2000).
- ❖ Civil Service Reform Models are themselves polarised between bureaucratic reconstruction and marketisation. But neither model will do on its own. Donors are sometimes a bit coy about which they are encouraging. But the pursuit of either gives no credence to the fact that in real life there are no pure systems. Hierarchical principles, group principles and personal networks are always present in all public management systems. Reform is better aimed when it seeks a workable juxtaposition of these principles, in patterns that produce positive public outcomes (Curtis 2002).
- ❖ Strengthening Civil Society is perhaps the most demanding and at the same time most vague of current reform prescriptions. It is the agenda upon which donors and their intellectual allies can most readily be accused of falling back on ethnocentrism in groping for some way of filling the gap left by the 'state failure'. But British, American, Scandinavian

or whatever models will not do. It is this area that it should be abundantly clear that social institutions must evolve (Kothari 1999). Ideas are necessary and should be common currency but institutions are particular and should only be grown indigenously. The Civil Society concept is necessary as a counter to the idea of the All-embrasure State. But beyond that, response to context and circumstance is all-important.

If it is accepted that grand models never fit, then a consequence is that reform must, to a large degree, be about the *processes* of adjustment, adaptation and modification that will allow the essential underlying notions room to take root. I am back to the seed metaphor.

### **Seeded change**

The 'seeded change' idea needs to be further explored. In this, we will not have much help from the literature since, in the confrontational atmosphere of our times, it is a relatively neglected species (apart from echoes from the past such as that of Esman (1991). Its neglect is perhaps surprising since these are also times in which emergent **change has** recently been the focus of scientific interest in many disciplines. The classical economic concept of change or growth through the operation of 'the hidden hand' is back in fashion. Indeed, there are now a wide range of models that give clearer shape or pattern to the processes of emergent change than does the 'hidden hand' metaphor.

Support for the idea of starting small comes from one of the Gurus of corporate management, Tom Peters (1987). Peters is seeking transformatory strategies, but points out that success often follows upon small scale innovation where the risks are less and the means of control are greater. Most importantly, small scale experimentation and piloting of innovative ideas, products or practices allows learning to take place. It avoids the risk that is

associated with the large scale endeavours and the pain that follows large scale failure.

'Topping the...list among those who have followed this "small starts" strategy are Hewlett-Packard, Allen Bradley, and Chrysler. An executive of a European systems software house concurs. Successful European firms have followed what he calls a "prototype" strategy, starting small and learning one's way forward. Less successful firms have spent years and tons of money developing a rigid master plan. They have been locked in from the start, as a result of attitude and of capital expenditure, to a grand design that seldom holds up, but which they are unwilling to scuttle as implementation begins.' (Peters, 1987, 203)

The seeded change model does not claim to be grand but may nevertheless aim for transformational outcomes. Let us expand upon the metaphor. Seeds are sown and those that fall on fertile ground prosper and multiply. Those that fall on stony ground wither and die. At harvest, the best seed pods or heads are taken by farmers for planting next season. These best heads will be from plants that have survived and thrived: showing that they are most suited to that particular soil. So the farmer is the conscious or unconscious agent of selection for change. Over time the seed stock takes on the characteristics most suited to production in local circumstances.

If we pursued the friendly bacteria metaphor we would find a similar cycle of production, selection and reproduction with the added feature that friendly bacteria are catalysts to necessary processes in their hosts. Friendly bacteria abound in the digestive systems of most animals help these digestive processes along. We humans go so far as to introduce bacteria into our digestive tracts through cheeses and yoghurts or fermented grains. Some management practices could perhaps be seen as the 'friendly

bacteria' of administrative systems, inducing favourable changes in outcomes while reproducing themselves within the system.

Added meaning would be gained if we were to pursue the virus metaphor – rejected earlier because of its unhappy association with illness in humans and crashes in computers. A virus succeeds in overcoming resistance in its hosts by very rapid adaptation of itself. The year 2000 computer internet 'love bug' changed itself every time that it was opened and sent itself off to all addresses on the lists of the opener in its new form, thus making detection difficult.

Seeded change, when successful, can hope to have multiplying effects, leading eventually to quantitative and qualitative difference. In Scottish dialect there is a saying which translates as "many a little thing makes a big one" ("mony a mickle max a muckle"). This describes the goal of seeded change. The mechanisms need further refinement.

### **The seed**

The seed is the operative part. Seeds (or bugs) have the following characteristics, they;

- contain the necessary parts to grow and become a bearer of fruit
  - respond well to water and nutrients
  - adapt, though imperfect replication and/or selection, to suit different environments
  - die, if exposed to hostile environments
  - and let us add, from the bacteria metaphor the idea that
- the seed / bacteria is a friendly facilitator of change in the environment

If we transfer these notions from the realm of metaphor to that of administrative practice we can come up with the following criteria for a successful change mechanism.

An administrative change seed should;

- ❖ Contain the necessary guidelines and competency requirements, in order to be able to interpret the environment, diagnose needs as well as define necessary actions for change (remembering that it must..)
- ❖ fit in with the culture, interests and competence of the change agent (the Civil Servant) and other stakeholders
- ❖ adjust to suit particular circumstances and be subject to ongoing review and adaptation
- ❖ Take a form that will facilitate wider changes within the administration.
- ❖ be allowed to die if it fails to 'take'

The MATT programme introduced the Portfolio Project (PP) – which we might be tempted to rename 'the administrative change seed' or 'change bug' as a facilitator of change. It has the characteristics listed above. It was conceived as such and should be used as such.

The Portfolio Project should be a 'seed' or 'change bug' that suits the culture and competence of officers so well that the idea and practice replicates itself in these officers' minds. Portfolio Projects need to fit the needs, interests and frustrations that are felt by officers within the administration. They should provide simple procedures that officers will want to use to make small, but significant changes in the efficiency of the administration, or in accountability, or performance management, or in other practical ways. Then a transformation process will set itself in motion.

## **Improvement**

Portfolio Project (PP)s were undertaken by all MATT participants with a view to improvement of performance and practice within their offices. PPs addressed issues about 'what to do' – policy issues, as well as 'how to do' – the administrative ways of achieving outputs and outcomes. Administrative improvements are about simplification in the interests of speed and efficiency, increasing responsiveness, responsibility and accountability, and facilitating the implementation of change. All these themes are central to the idea of administrative improvement and better government. There is no grand design in seeded change but accumulative improvement can be real improvement.

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