Layers, still more layers: the governance conundrum

How do you go from up to 15 to just four?

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Narendra Modi has so far tried to follow his mantra of Minimum Government, Maximum Governance in the process of Ministry-formation, by restricting the numbers. He has done away with the Groups of Ministers and the Empowered Groups of Ministers, and kept the powers they had exercised under his direct control. While these measures are welcome, what about decision making at the lower levels of government?

Mr. Modi has suggested restricting the number of layers in the government to four. Considering that most States and the Central government boast of 12 to 15 layers, how can these be cut to four?

In any State, the typical layers in the Secretariat are: Junior Assistant (clerk), Assistant, Senior Assistant, Section Officer, Under Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Joint Secretary, Additional Secretary, Secretary, Principal Secretary, Minister of State, Cabinet Minister. These make for a total of 12 layers. (This example is drawn from Karnataka; designations may vary from State to State.)

Any government file begins at the lowest level and typically travels all the way up, before travelling all the way down. Assume each layer takes three working days. Your file can take 36 working days or 50 calendar days to reach the top, that is, the Minister. If all the layers have written favorable comments, the file is cleared by the Minister - if he agrees with the proposal. If he gives his approval, it begins its journey back and can take one day at each level.

Some Ministers, owing to ulterior motives, may delay proposals. Others, who have genuine concerns, may ask for more information. That means the file will take another 12 working days, or 17 days, allowing three days for the junior assistant to type the order and get the Under Secretary's signature, and for the peon to hand it over to you. Thus you wait for about 70 days to get your government order, or GO.

You are fortunate if the file is cleared with no negative observations. However, the file can get delayed if at any one of the layers a negative noting is made. Often one of the layers comes up with adverse comments. Assume that the Secretary raises some issues and pushes the file down. The Joint Secretary may not answer those issues, but push the file down further, which may end up at the lowest level. The file has to again travel all the way up. Hence the file can go on for months before a decision. That could be another six months.

Playing it safe

The file can get delayed due to inaction, and inaction is seldom punished. The bureaucracy plays safe, since only actions are reviewed and officers may be penalised. If the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Central Vigilance Commission become hyper-active and the officers don't receive the support of the executive and the judiciary, they will slow down. The bureaucracy has been going through that phase with countless scams, investigations and Right to Information (RTI) questions, that make any bureaucrat take his decisions with lot of thinking and slowly. That implies our assumption that each layer will clear the file in three days is wrong and more delay can be expected.

Can we then say six months to the GO? Not really. There are referral departments in the government, to which files are often referred. If your file is referred to the Finance' Department, then another 12 layers can kick in, delaying the GO by another 70 days. Sometimes a file is referred to the law departments, which can sit on it for years. Lawyers and judges often take years to clear files.

Will the government be more efficient with fewer layers? Yes, certainly. As IT Secretary in Karnataka, I ran a lean department with the minimum number staff and only three levels of decision-making. This helped it become' one of the most efficient departments and attracted a lot of IT and Biotech companies to Bangalore. If I had followed the usual norms of government I could have recruited a joint secretary, deputy secretaries, under secretaries, section officers and assistants. But the Information Technology Department had one Under Secretary and no section officer. We had one employee in the newly formed Biotechnology Department. He helped set up the Institute of Bioinformatics and eventually joined it as a faculty member. Bangalore attracted a number of biotech firms.

I could function with just three layers because IT and BT were new departments. However, it is not possible to reduce the number of layers in the older departments that have set procedures. The implementation involves studying the pros and cons carefully, simplifying government procedures and identifying surplus staff. The critical part is to take the staff into confidence and find useful places for them elsewhere.

While reducing the layers is a challenge, it is not impossible with political will at the highest levels. I would like to believe that Mr. Modi has the will to make the change. The nation is watching to see how these changes are going to be executed on the ground.

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