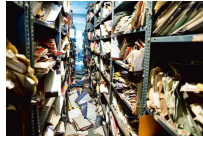


Working with the government, effectively

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He was wealthy, worth about a thousand crores, and had just about started a philanthropic effort focused on education. He wanted advice on how they could work with the government effectively. He listened to me patiently. After a few months, I heard that he had signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the chief minister of a state in a high-profile ceremony, and soon with three more.

It has been a few years. Once in a while we encounter the remnants of his work in a couple of the states that we work in. It is usually in the form of kits gathering dust and the ill-will that teachers and officers express. It is sad to see his efforts having ended in this manner. He was well intentioned and committed a lot of his money. What went wrong?

There must be many reasons, but there are two that I can make out from the outside. First, his educational programmes were misconceived, which I will not detail. Second, his approach of working with the government was flawed. It was flawed at such an elementary level that he should have seen it using his business experience, without any advice from people like me, which also he had taken.

His method of working was entirely top down. He assumed that since he had signed an MoU with the chief minister, everyone would fall in line within the government's administrative set-up and in the schools, to support his programmes. Even in a business organization, carrying people at all levels of an organization with you is critical, despite a chief executive officer's endorsement. It was a basic mistake, which surely he did not make in business. He seems to have acted on the belief that "the CM has endorsed my programme, and I am doing good without expecting anything in return, so everyone must enable my programme."

This sense of entitlement was unwarranted. It failed to recognize that hundreds of thousands of teachers and officers in the school education system have invested their lives for the same good ends. Any effort by the philanthropist was only additional and small in comparison to their efforts. Combine this with the authoritarian nature of many in government administration, who would pursue orders from the top without any other consideration. It was a classic recipe for fostering passive resistance and quiet antipathy. Add to this the educationally misconceived nature of the programmes, and it became a script for complete failure. The top-down approach also eliminated the possibility of feedback from the ground.

Many people ask the same question as this wealthy man, “How does one work effectively with the government?” This includes not only philanthropists, but also business leaders, for their corporate social responsibility work. The question is triggered by the realization that collaborating with the government and its agencies is essential for noticeable impact in many sectors (education, health, conservation, etc.), and even more so if they wish to scale up their efforts. In response, I share our experience from almost 20 years of working with governments across the country. Let me list the key points.

First, “the government” is a monolithic abstraction that doesn’t actually exist. In reality, it is people that you have to work with, not a monolith. These people will naturally have wide variations in their capacities and attitudes. They will also move in and out of roles.

Second, therefore, you have to establish working relationships across levels. MoUs are of very limited usefulness. It is insufficient to be able to work with the politicians or the senior officers who are often from the Indian Administrative Service. It is absolutely essential to work with district-, block- and cluster-level officials from within the relevant departments. It is at this level that things change or don’t.

Third, a very large number of the officials are smart and work very hard. They may speak a different language, but let that not mislead you into underestimating them. Don’t be patronizing.

Fourth, go with a large dose of humility. The complexity that government has to deal with, and which you too will grapple with, is dramatically more than business. The “uncontrollables” and “unknowables” are also many times more. And so experience matters, which the government officials have decades of.

Fifth, you must have some genuine expertise to contribute. Officials have too much on their hands to spend time humouring people who want to fulfil their own need to do good, without having substantive relevant capacity.

Sixth, invest everything in developing a sound approach and details of your work. After this, do not change priorities and approach, just because some senior official wants it another way. This will happen all the time, you have to stay the course to make any real contribution.

Seventh, do not seek credit or recognition for your work. The media loves to highlight the philanthropist do-gooder. That ignores the reality that for anything to work well, the government people have put in many times more than you. And this can only leave deeply disgruntled partners.

Much of this is just common sense, not any blinding insight. It doesn’t really require two decades of experience to understand these principles. But acting on these principles does require eliminating hubris that comes from past success, and banishing any sense of entitlement that arises from trying to do good.

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