

ANNEX

MUNICIPAL MANAGEMENT IN CALCUTTA: CHALLENGES, CHANGE, AND LEADERSHIP

Asim Barman
Municipal Commissioner, Calcutta

CITY MANAGEMENT AS A PROFESSION

The concept of city management is perceived differently according to the background and experience of the observer. One common element, however, is the importance of the political arena in the management of cities. Beyond this common factor, interpretations of city management vary considerably. To some, the concept is seen as one of public administration. To others it is viewed as growth management, organization management, and so on. However, the key concept is coordination. In a large city there are a large number of factors, dimensions, concerns, parties, institutions, and interests — each of which has to be coordinated for proper direction.

COORDINATION BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND PROFESSIONALS

Cities are managed jointly by elected politicians and appointed professionals. At times there are basic contradictions between the legitimate interests of these two groups. Because politicians are responsible to the electorate, they must have the means to carry out the policies they have promised to pursue. In particular, they must be able to hire and trust

professionals who will implement their policies — and to fire them if need be. Professionals who work in municipal administration, on the other hand, must enjoy a certain degree of independence as well as a large degree of security of tenure — otherwise, municipal administration will never be able to attract people of high caliber. There is no simple set of rules to solve this contradiction. More so when the roles of professionals in city management vary from state to state.

In some states the executive powers of the municipal corporation are vested in the elected representatives. In other states it is the municipal commissioner, the appointed professional, who is vested with the basic statutory, regulatory, and executive powers. In either case, the role of professional city managers is quite exciting and challenging because they maintain a linkage between the past, present, and future. Professional managers have to define the broad socioeconomic parameters for city development in such a way that it is acceptable to the political masters within their declared political objectives. They should also play an effective role between the politicians and the NGOs. It is possible for professional managers to effectively coordinate both and simultaneously utilize the services of informal citizens' groups to create awareness.

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Unfortunately, the relationship between elected officials and NGOs is often antagonistic. NGOs often see themselves as crusaders leading the charge against the established order. In return, elected officials frequently have low opinions of these informal institutions. Believing NGO leaders to be self-appointed demagogues without much sense of responsibility, they question the good faith and technical knowledge of the NGOs. In my view these informal institutions should be seen as complementary. Each side should try to realize that they need each other.

Given the sociopolitical diversities, conflicts between the political executive and the appointed professionals cannot be ruled out. But the city managers need to be given a high degree of professional freedom and the opportunity to excel. They should use this opportunity to provide relief to citizens by cutting down red-tape and by initiating innovative measures and upgrading technology to increase productivity of existing human resources.

In Calcutta, for instance, a single window system has recently been introduced with the help of computers for issuance of various licenses for undertaking business and trade. The result is that services are rendered faster and more effectively to customers. It is thus seen that city managers can introduce innovations to bring about a high degree of efficiency in some of the areas of the civic body where the political and social conflicts are either marginal or absent.

For example, Calcuttans used to be harassed by the officials of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) to procure birth and death certificates. The system for issuance of these certificates was such that even with their best efforts and intentions, the employees of CMC could not satisfy the citizens. Today, the process of issuing the birth and death certificates has been decentralized and simplified, allowing citizens to obtain them instantly. The procedural simplification and delegation of powers to the appropriate lower authorities have not only eased the tensions of the citizenry but have relieved medical officers from routine functions. It has freed them to concentrate on preventive health care of the city for which purpose they were originally employed.

Another important initiative where medical officers have been relieved of a routine responsibility is in the control of stray and street dogs. Based on complaints received from various quarters, the street dogs used to be caught by the dog squad of CMC and taken to dog pounds for extermination by

veterinary doctors. Recently, a group of NGOs came up with a concrete proposal for humane control of dogs through sterilization and immunization. The entire city has been divided into zones and each NGO has been given one zone for dealing with the complaints of stray dogs. This new system has already started paying dividends.

PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

Managing a megacity is a very difficult and arduous task, mostly because of the conflicting interests among the various political organizations, pressure groups, and sectoral priorities in the organization itself. Besides, most city organizations have large staffs. Therefore, the personnel management of the organization is crucial to the success of professional managers in city management.

Generally speaking, the best persons are not always recruited for managing a city's affairs. Employees are often recruited because of their loyalty to various political and pressure groups. This makes the organization suffer and the civic services deteriorate. Here lies the importance of professional city managers. They can motivate the workers with their care and delicate handling and improve the technical skill through training and application of modern technology in day-to-day functions.

There is a growing feeling in many parts of the world that the problems of city management can be resolved by inducting more and more private sector participation in urban delivery systems, particularly in infrastructure projects. But to my mind, what is required right now is not private sector substitution but the proper utilization of existing human resources within the city organization through skills upgrading and application of proper technology. What is missing in the public sector is a system of accountability, a willingness to deliver the best, and a sense of competition among employees.

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The rate of return/cost recovery from the users of infrastructure is an absolutely new concept in city government.

The environment in which civil servants have worked over the years has changed. Public sector managers, particularly the top professionals in city management, are generally dedicated and hardworking. It is not usually their fault that the infrastructure services they operate do not perform as well as those of their private sector counterparts. They are frequently placed in an impossible situation with too many constraints and objectives. A public servant is bound to look at the exigency of his political masters. But politics and sound economic management do not follow harmonious equations. Politicians are more often forced to look into matters on a very short term, while many of the major decisions relating to infrastructural planning need to be based on long-term views.

OTHER ROLES OF CITY MANAGERS

The public decision-making process is such that even a relatively simple decision takes a long time. Public sector managers do not have the degree of autonomy or authority to take action as do their private sector counterparts. Moreover, given the sociopolitical scenario of India today, it would not be possible to substitute public sector by private sector in some of the important infrastructural services overnight. The privatization initiative can start with those infrastructure development efforts that do not have direct public contact.

Both human and material resources of city government should be fully exploited, not only for effective operation and maintenance of existing infrastructure, but in stretching them into new shapes wherever possible. This will put the top professional city manager in an advantageous position as regards the employees and the pressure groups. One of the

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advantages of private sector managers is that their database is very sound — the systematic analysis of which gives them an upper hand over the public sector managers. Both public and private sectors should work together for effective infrastructural services. It is possible to do so by clearly analyzing, defining, allocating, and above all, sharing the responsibility for service activities.

Most municipal corporations are already overstaffed. There is therefore little point in further staff recruitment. But to facilitate the smooth induction of the private sector in the new areas, city government employees should understand and appreciate that their job prospects are not going to be hampered by the induction of the private sector into infrastructural services. Simultaneously, they should understand that their importance in city government will not be undermined.

At times, city government is faced with negative credibility in delivering services to customers. Therefore, the top professional managers of the city government have to initiate innovative and creative steps in the areas where the situation can be improved faster and ensure optimum support from all quarters without causing much financial strain in the exchequer of the city government.

What is lacking in many city governments today is transparency. However, transparency and openness can easily be realized in the routine and day-to-day functions of city government. It is quite possible to bring about transparency in the operation and maintenance of the infrastructure by simplifying rules, regulations, and procedures and opening them to public scrutiny.

With the changed political and social scenario of the country, it has become imperative that the top professional managers change their thinking process from the traditional one of red-tapism and conservatism to a new one of dynamism and innovation. The reforms must be undertaken not only

in the economy sector (i.e., mobilization of financial resources to meet the city government's financial needs), but also to initiate reforms in modernizing the organization through adoption of new technology and skill development.

Like elected representatives, appointed professionals used to look to the state and central governments for various grants and assistance. They cannot be blamed for that, because these grants and assistance help in meeting the various infrastructure needs and routine financial requirements of the city government. Rapid urbanization and industrial development rather than sustainable economic development and cost-effective infrastructure development were uppermost in the minds of city managers. Mobilization of resources was not generally the priority agenda item in their meetings.

With the changing global, political, and economic scenario, the professional managers of the city government may be able to turn the tables through increased productivity, proper maintenance, and operation of infrastructure.