

Effect of continuous learning on public service delivery



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How openness to continuous learning can change the bureaucratic landscape, aid the effective public service delivery and legitimize the democracy.

PROMPT:

“ We evaluate the student by his ability to answer questions rather than to understand problems...The truth, however, is that the valid test of a student is his ability to ask the right questions.” (Heschel)

1. What questions that should concern public servants today?
2. Why do those questions matter?
3. What significant problems concern the public and/or democracy?
4. Why do those problems matter? How can persons address these problems through public service?
5. What kinds of public service does democracy need today, and why?

Abstract:

Being a Public Servant is commonly attributed to a highly rewarding job and a power position but it is a lot more than just rewards and power. Public service is far more challenging because its power element requires a higher level of responsibility, ownership, and constantly dealing with trade-offs which are critical and confounding. It demands sensitized awareness of diverse individual needs while also requires the public servant to ensure equal and equitable service delivery resulting in satisfaction of the society as a whole. Engaging in public service has its rewards but not just with regard to career prospects, perks, and benefits but it comes with and glory in terms of the unique position of ability and power to change lives of people and <https://assignbuster.com/effect-of-continuous-learning-on-public-service-delivery/>

work for the 'supreme good' or 'collective happiness of the society'. A public servant is honored and entrusted to serve in order to make the world a better place for everyone; however apart from all rewards and responsibilities he also has the most critical and important role of achieving bureaucratic effectiveness and efficiency in a way that it helps in defining, legitimizing, presenting and preserving the democracy. While the role of a Public service agent does look idealistic and enthralling, today it has become even more arduous and challenging.

This paper contends to spell out various aspects and dimension through which we can see how closely Democracy and public service are so intricately interrelated and how they affect each other. The paper analyses the challenges which public servants face especially in the context of demands of the modern world bureaucracy and democracy furthermore how openness and continuous learning can aid the process of public service delivery. At the end of the paper, the recommendations are explained through the Starbucks analogy.

1. The dilemma of a Public Servant - Asking the right questions & continuous learning

'Without learning, the wise become foolish; by learning the foolish become wise . . . Learn as if you could never have enough of learning as if you might miss something.' - Confucius

Abraham Joshua Heschel in "Insecurity of Freedom" creates quite an interesting analogy of a student; to help us understand that how continuous learning is indispensable at all stages and walks of life. When we evaluate a

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student for his ability to answer questions, we disregard the fact that a student will maintain the status of being a ' student' only when he understands the problems and keeps on asking the right questions, He would stop being a student as soon as he stops asking questions and limit his learning. Similarly as public servants, when we develop a rigid understanding of the problems and be satisfied with our solutions to these problems; it brings the learning process to a halt. Ensuring the continuous learning process is even more critical today in this ever changing modern world and especially when we deal with humans who are infinitely unique and their needs exceedingly dynamic. Today we effortlessly give up to the notion of attributing the failure of public service delivery to arrogance, power abuse, non-performance on part of the public servants but the situation is not that simple. Human beings with all their unique characteristics of being social and connected lives and assortments of needs, unexpected behaviors, and infinite expectations make Public service inherently complex. The primary goal of providing equitable service and ensuring equal satisfaction to each and every individual in society is quite challenging to accomplish. But it becomes especially impossible when systems are made rigid with intention of being effective and efficient but lack openness and willingness to learn. The “ willingness to learn” does not just means learning new methods, technologies, providing state of the art infrastructure, world-class strategies, creating highly structured bureaucratic, effective systems, and achieving cost efficiency. Although all these are important factors of achieving operational efficiency but sometimes interrupt the effectiveness when we fail to ask the right questions. This complexity of human needs, satisfaction, definition, and the pursuit of happiness is extraordinarily intricate which <https://assignbuster.com/effect-of-continuous-learning-on-public-service-delivery/>

requires flexibility, openness and constant learning on part of the public servants to be able to serve better.

For past decades, education sector in a developing country worked day and night to ensure that children gets enrolled and attend the school regularly and employed all possible methods, reforms, policies and monitoring checks to achieve that. The sector reform made it mandatory for parents send children to school. This increased the attendance in schools insignificantly but the learning outcomes were worse than ever. Every time they failed they would ask questions like; “ Why are we not able to make any difference? How can we make the system work? What do we change?” They never asked “ What is the difference that people want? How can we make the system friendly to what people need? What change people are seeking?” Little did they know there is a need to re-define and review the problem definition. Only if they would have asked the right questions earlier they would have been able to address the problem adequately. They completely missed to ensure if the parents have enough to feed their children before they even think about their education? Thus not always the intentions are amiss, but pre-conceived notions, assumptions and being pre-occupied with efficacy of the bureaucratic system makes it harder to think if we need to change the track or if we need to question the process. Public servants in the education sector were sure that the solution is right, which made their opinions rigid and blocked the learning process.

It is certainly important to be perceptive and empathize with needs of the people being served which is possible only when we are open to learning by asking the right questions. But it is also equally important to set our actions

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accordingly. Thus even when you ask the right questions and know the answers you still have to evaluate and decide upon an action and be courageous enough to act accordingly. Yet another learning process initiates with our willingness and ability/inability to act. This brings us to the question of why does it matter?

2. The plurality of Humans, Isolated Happiness and Democracy - Why Public Service matters:

Public Service is all about understanding and responding to the intricacy of human behaviors and needs and making it even more complex is the plurality in which they exist thus even if they exist in isolation their acts have an effect on each other and their surroundings. Hannah Ardent has simplified this theory in her book "The human condition" that "Men in plural can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and themselves. Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act."

Looking back again at the Education Sector failures even if the public servants would have realized that people are not prosperous enough to think about the education of their children. SAT scores will neither improve nor the learning outcomes matters if the children in school are malnourished and have stunted growth if we really intend the overall development of the people we are serving. What action would have they taken or if they would have taken any action at all? It is most likely that they would have very conveniently said " *Not my domain. Not my Problem let the department of*

child welfare or Health deal with this". Even if they would have decided to act they would not have been able to contribute enough to make a change but on the other hand, if they don't find a solution together and are unable to break the silos none of us would be better off. Neither department of education or welfare nor any Public Service agency would be able to achieve their targets. The challenge does not end when it is decided that an action is needed and is to be taken but it further transforms into even more critical and backbreaking thought process. If a Public service agent decides to take an action he would still struggle to answer: What action is to be taken? Why should I take this action? What are the consequences? Who will be involved? Who will be affected? Are there any trade-offs involved with regard to equity, efficiency, security, and liberty? Will this action contribute to the welfare and happiness for overall society in the short and long-term? Is this a right thing to do?

It is the plurality of human being in which they exist makes them all connected, their actions or inability to act, their problems as well as their failures, successes, and happiness are all connected and affect each other significantly. We all are connected through our actions because of our uniqueness as social beings thus we have a responsibility towards each other. In this increasingly fast-paced world, we do experience that one man's misfortune is another's opportunity but this does not stand true in the long run. Happiness never sustains in isolation or at the cost of others problem, the problem remains in the society and in the very environment we exist and has an impact on each and every individual at some point of time. Happiness

is not a trade-off, Happiness is connected; one cannot be happy in isolation at-least not for long, practically and spiritually both.

Hannah Ardent in Human Condition calls it's a chain reaction because every action, reaction, and inaction are connected and result in new processes “ Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “ doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because the action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes” This leads us to question about the true meaning of democracy; which means the rule of people. Not one person, not two, not a group but all people. Who are unique, connected with each other, who are different, who make interactions differently, have different problems and their actions affect each other and the society as a whole. Varying in their significance, yet each and every individual in a society plays an important role in a democratic society thus it is important to ensure equal and equitable public service delivery because, In a democracy, the well-being, individuality, and happiness of every citizen is important for the overall prosperity, peace, and happiness of the nation. (A. P. J Abdul Kalam)

3. Problems of Public Service, Bureaucracy and Democracy – Dehumanization & Rule of people minus people:

Bureaucracy exists as a process through which we deal with the affairs of a complex society. A bureaucracy works when its operations are, at every point, made predictable. This is achieved by formulating clear rules and criteria and limiting the scope for personal discretion. These elements are directed to make bureaucracy an efficient system, minimize any loopholes and maximize the operational effectiveness of public service delivery; however, the very structure of bureaucracy aims at dealing with the complexity tends to make it dysfunctional. This dysfunctionality often occurs due to the inherent complexity of human needs, their plurality and how their behaviors and actions vary and affect them as a whole. The bureaucratic rules seldom provide quick and precise guides for dealing with every actual case. A lowly employee may often find it safer and easier to insist on formal compliance with the rules, rather than go the extra mile to deliver substantive service. In this manner do bureaucrats forget their common sense and lose their basic humanity. They can cite all the rules but never the goals. They become timid and cold, unable to use their judgment to help people. (Randy David - Humanizing Bureaucracy).

Public Service, Bureaucracy, Politics or Democracy they all exist for people, by people, with the goal of making people's lives better and providing them with the supreme good. If the public or human element is taken out of all these big concepts it leaves us with a bunch of meaningless words " Service" " Structure" " Affairs of state" and " Rule". In this context, a quick check is to always remind ourselves to include the human context when we are defining the problems, structuring solutions or setting a course of action. It is important to ask if there is a solution which is legitimate, fair, right and

results in satisfaction of all the people involved and achieves the goal of the ultimate end of collective happiness of the society.

4. Role and Challenges of Public Service Agents, Agencies & Bureaucracies: Obedience so total & somewhere beyond the law.

But what is the government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.

James Madison -Federalist 51 - 1788

Obedience so total & somewhere beyond the law. In his trial for organizing the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann displayed no guilt for his actions claiming he bore no responsibility because he was simply “ doing his job”. He did his duty and he not only obeyed orders, but he also obeyed the law. He was right, he did his duty and he followed the law but he was terrifyingly normal about the millions of people who were killed in concentration camps. He was an extremely efficient but mindless bureaucrat who was blinded by “ obedience so total” that he lost his cognitive ability to comprehend the consequences of his actions. Holocaust while seems like something very far-fetched but it happened in the world we live and there are things quite

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similar happening around us just because people of all backgrounds, at all the stages and positions, are merely following orders, limiting their own ability to act and being blind to what is required of them today. This does not mean that the laws are to be broken, but just knowing and accepting that the law and rules might not be enough to encompass everything we encounter in public service and keeping them flexible enough to incorporate the needs of people who are to be served. It is important to know who are we serving and whether we are achieving that goal because laws are created by us so that we live and provide a better life but also knowing that there are things which exist somewhere beyond the law.

Public Servants today are entangled in numerous, complex and conflicting challenges. Some of these challenges and the role of public service in addressing them are presented below:

i) Reciprocity of Trust: The history of distrust between the public and the government is a challenge. It has become harder for the people to trust the Government intention towards the public welfare thus they prefer sources other legitimate ones to meet their needs. In return Government also reciprocates this trust deficit by only making sure that there are rigid regulations and fewer loopholes to make system efficient and ignore that the solution lies in gaining and maintaining the public trust. Improved and contextualized public service delivery will meet the needs of society and increase satisfaction and develop mutual trust. The actions of public agents thus shape citizen views about fairness and effectiveness of the public service and this trust eventually becomes the reason for sustained

legitimized democracy and the overall prosperity of the society as a whole.
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ii) Communications and Building relations: The Public Service agents constantly deal with numerous administrative challenges with regard to limited support and resources and how best utilize these resources equally and equitably for maximized benefits. However, there are multiple expectations with regard to what is legitimate and what is right which makes the decision-making process and consequent actions even more difficult to justify and implement. To achieve administrative efficiency while also improving the public service delivery it is important for Public Service agents to break the inter and intra-sector silos and work as partners rather than competitors. It is always better to take chances and be less hesitant in communicating with peers, supervisors and the end consumers of service to explore all possible alternatives. Having more partners in various relevant sectors increases the legitimacy of action and support, helps in achieving mutual organizational goals make the agency less rigid, effective and more representative of people it serves. Communicating and developing meaningful relations tend to resolve most of the problems in Public Service more swiftly and smoothly and not only that it also is an important factor in reducing the political influence on bureaucratic decision-making.

iii) Constitutional, Legally Correct and Fair Decision Making: The public servants play a central role in defining what government means to the citizens it serves; thus Public servants are stewards of democracy who ensure the legitimacy of the Government and its actions. They need to maintain both upward and downward communication in the hierarchy by communicating the public needs to policymakers through accurate data of what works and what does not. They need to play an important role in

providing contextualized and customized solutions and help develop less rigid bureaucratic structures to accommodate the diverse population needs and expectations. The solutions should be legally and morally correct, result oriented, constitutional and have significant constructive legitimacy but also in the best interest of none but the people and society being served.

iv)Tactic Knowledge backed with Intuition: It is important in Public Service to always regard the feeling of intuition. It is the critical knowledge that gives skilled practitioners a sense of when things are not quite right or when things do not add up regardless of their legal correctness and legitimacy. Listening to intuition is when our own subconscious hints us about something not being right. No bureaucratic system is complex enough to encompass the complexity humans bring into this world. It is efficient in achieving its goals according to what is fed in the system but the structure itself would not learn by itself, understand this complexity and evolve, but people who are involved have to learn, act and evolve and make it part of the system to achieve public service goals. The public service agents no matter how they are trained and have acquired tactic knowledge and experience over time will always require intuitiveness combined with empathy as a basis for judgment.

v)Respect for all persons and Feel for the whole: One of the major challenges in Public Service is to balance competing demands of democracy while also maintaining the strategic sense of the institution establish a cultural identity that makes whole greater than the sum of an organizational part. It is hard to think with a broad and narrowed approach at the same time, even more, the challenge is to contextualize decision for one specific case but
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simultaneously thinking about how it will affect society as a whole. Although even if you do decide to take an action Political influence, public scrutiny, transparency, accountability, and conflicting and partially informed opinions are always a hurdle in implementing the said action.

5. Public Service, Democracy and Coffee - Starbucks Analogy - What people want?

(Disclaimer: A little disclaimer before we go deep into the analogy is that we will completely ignore the fact that Starbucks charges dollars for their service equally from everyone while in Public Service we only tax people who can pay. Because Public Service is most easily understood through a real-life example and makes coming back to it easier that is the only reason this analogy is presented here- also some of the best practices may be over exaggerated)

It is important for a Public Servant to be open to learning and the more he is responsive to the people and activities around the more he would understand the problems and figure out solutions to these problems. Imagine a successful business like Starbucks who serve people every day in a variety of ways possible and see what we can learn from them in our spirit of Public service.

Stick to your mission: They stick to their mission “ to inspire and nurture the human spirit - one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.” And they really do inspire the people by making them satisfied with their service, they are ready to take back the drinks the customers didn't like and their baristas are ready to make any crazy recipes combinations just because

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their ultimate goal is to serve the coffee which satisfies each individual's need and preference. Public Service organizations are created to serve public, hopefully, none of them is to create structures and strengthen bureaucracies. This may be a way to achieve the goal but it is not the goal itself thus the bottom line will always be if the people were served the right way.

Build Trust and Relations: People pay more than any other regular coffee shop and would prefer Starbucks because of their satisfaction in service and maintaining the belief that they will get exactly get what they want. They would be greeted with a smile and they would know each barista with their name. Customers won't judge the baristas if they messed up their coffee once, they know they will get another one. Public trust works the same way, People are all about relations and thus are ready to die for the leaders who succeed in building relations and gaining that level of trust. This trust affects society and democracy positively in the long run.

Customize, Personalize, & Empathize: Starbucks make efforts in maintaining a good environment which suits the needs of all. They have good music, tempting aroma of coffee and food and most of the time good views. A customer already feels welcome as soon as he enters. Their empathy deal is reflected in their seating arrangements, there will be couches, chairs, tall stools and small benches for people of all heights. There will be charging ports for people who want to work, round tables for people so that they don't feel alone, and seating's facing wall for people who don't want to be disturbed, chairs facing the outside view for people who enjoy feeling connected to the outside environment and long tables for groups to be able

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to sit together and interact. The key to improving Public Service is also the ability of the provider how he can relate himself to the people being served and to what extent he can or at least makes effort to Customize, Personalize and Empathize while serving to the people needs.

Eat humble pie - Accept Mistakes: If you give back your drink to a Starbucks barista even for the 3rd time they would not frown upon it, take it back and make you a new one and still they would always have a condiment station so that if you are not satisfied you can customize your drink even more to the way you like. No matter how perfect they are in their training in making the best coffee they do know that people are different and their needs are different. Their goal is not to make structures which produce the best coffee (Although it is also one of their goals) but their ultimate goal is to serve people coffee the way they like. It is not just limited to Public Service but every individual and every piece of knowledge, information, structure, policy or discovery is a "Work in progress" and amidst this imperfection and limited knowledge it is completely fine to make mistakes but the important thing is to understand, recognize and accept that you have made mistakes, unless you accept them you will not be able to solve them.

Red Tape - Green Tape and every individual matter: Customers know that even if they don't buy coffee they can still come and get icy water in warm weather for free and they would be served in the same cup with the green queen (Siren). They can still use the restrooms, unlike other coffee shops where the restrooms have codes or notes on the doors saying "For customers only" which is anything but welcoming. On the other hand, if you

let them in and stay they are welcomed there is still a chance that they would be tempted to buy coffee. It is very important to remove barriers of communication, welcome feedback and receive it graciously because unless people won't feel welcome they would not trust the public agency enough to share their opinions and needs openly. The public should feel more welcomed in Public offices than anywhere else so the notion of " Red Tape" is the first thing to be revamped into a green tape. People can stay as long or as short as they want, Customer who forgot wallet at home can pay with phone or card, if you are in a haste you can order with your phone while you are on your way, if you would ask for a decaf in a coffee shop no one would feel offended or judge you but you will be served with your favorite drink with a smile and totally customized. Service delivery is also about knowing that every individual matter and making sure that there is something available equally and equitably for everyone people who cannot afford it can also enjoy coffee in happy hours at a reduced price. It is important for people in a democracy to be able to feel equal and have trust they are being treated equally. The public agency has to know the needs of every individual and understand how they are different in their needs but equal in their being thus making the public service delivery accommodating to all.

Not my Domain Not my Problem - Initiate: Although Starbucks is definitely a profit-oriented business, however, the spirit of the organization is to serve people is similar to the public service agency. They create happiness and serve those who need to be served also being effective and efficient. Not only that but they respond to the social and environmental problems as well. When climate change, Pollution, and waste management emerged as issues,

they did not say “ Not our Issue” but they played their part in whatever possible they could do and many other causes. It is very important to recognize that any actions and resulting happiness and ultimate good could never be achieved in isolation. Public service agencies should be as connected as human beings are inherently connected and that is only how they would be able to create the collective and meaningful good.

Conclusion:

Being personally involved in relieving the suffering of man is as important as acquiring the technical skills to be efficient in the job of public service. Image of man is larger than the frame into which he has been compressed in order to be a human man has to be more than a human and there is a divine stake in human existence and existence as being a human leads ultimately to the existence, persistence, and sustainability of true democracy.

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