

## **TELEGRAPH JUNE 9 2014**

### MANAGEMENT LESSONS

- Narendra Modi has crafted a sound strategy for governance

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Narendra Modi's strategy to seize and exercise power is a fascinating study in political management. It has lessons for all managers. Politics and governance are different from management only in that the people who enter them may not be as well-chosen as are many managers.

Modi had a superb understanding of his voter-customers and their desires and motivations. His election promises and rhetoric repeatedly and consistently promised them satisfaction. He told them that he had met such wants in Gujarat, and that they should see what he had achieved there. He thus offered a sample of his product promise. He mastered all communication calls at home: hoardings, print, television, holographic images, street rallies, public meetings, mobiles and social media. He used voice, repartee and rhetoric to great effect in his oration. Through unprecedented travel and public meetings, he demonstrated energy in contrast to competition.

He understood that good governance demands an intelligent understanding of issues and strong leadership. He collected an anonymous and well-coordinated team of experts on different areas to prepare policy positions using modern information technologies. He had people closely monitoring what the Opposition was saying and doing and he issued prompt responses. His responses to competition were swift and effective.

As Gujarat chief minister, he limited the size of his ministry. He combined closely-related subjects. By keeping many cabinet positions open, he controlled their functions through junior ministers. He kept his ministerial and administrative teams on a tight leash so that the only messages to the public were those that he wanted to send. He is said to have had an intelligence system to watch over members of his team so that they kept to the straight and narrow path of honest and competent execution. He was a good listener, but the final decisions on all major policy matters would be his. To execute them, he ensured that the team was cohesive and loyal to his leadership. His overall strategy and the sub-strategies for his team members were well thought out and communicated. As his Central government comes on display, he can be seen to have followed the same principles in team-building and

leadership and the techniques he developed in Gujarat. All this calls for enormous physical and intellectual energy and an ability to quickly grasp and insert them in his big picture.

His election campaign from the outset showed that he had exactly evaluated the mood of the people of India. They were frightened about what the future held for them. Would there be enough decent jobs for those entering the employment market? Would those in employment be retained? Would the elderly have adequate support? Would farmers get help with improved access to markets, safe and adequate water, free markets, to improve productivity? Would people be able to afford a decent life in spite of skyrocketing prices? When would their towns and cities become habitable with good roads, sanitation, watersupply and housing? Would their women be safe on the streets of India's cities and towns? Would the bribery and corruption that had become endemic in government agencies diminish?

His answers were always reassuring. He had dealt with all these problems successfully in Gujarat. He perhaps exaggerated his achievements in Gujarat by painting it as the model which he would replicate for the rest of India. (In fairness, he had initiated many programmes and policies that gave Gujarat a good network of roads, industrialization, safe drinking water, adequate power, safety on the streets and far less corruption.) He did not single out any community or caste for special attention. Instead, he would improve the lives of all. He offered an easily understood promise — less government and more governance. He promised that with him, the good times for India would begin.

But leadership in political life is not only about anticipating customer needs and showing them how you can satisfy them. India demands of its leader, the prime minister, that his team of ministers will follow his methods and that they and their bureaucrats will be fully focused on honest, effective and speedy implementation. Has Modi as the prime minister prepared himself for this? He is constrained by his choice of people in his team. He must pick members mostly from electoral winners. He must satisfy allies who will enable the government to function without extraneous agitations. He must get people who are experts in some areas. In this, he has been only partially successful. He has had to take impetuous ministers like Jitendra Singh (in the PMO), chosen for him by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Singh got the government into trouble on its very first day by announcing that the process of the abolition of Article 370, which gives a special status to Jammu and Kashmir, has started. His Shiv Sena ally insisted on pushing the candidature of Anant Geete who had demonstrated his incapability as power minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. Geete had replaced the competent Suresh Prabhu who, not being amenable to the demands of the Shiv Sena founder, was replaced by Geete. Geete dissipated the gains made by the two preceding power ministers (P.R. Kumaramangalam and Prabhu). Modi discarded anyone above the age of 75 for his ministry. But 74-year-old Najma Heptullah was rewarded with a cabinet post for having left the Congress years back to join the Bharatiya Janata Party.

In her second day as minister, she quoted the conclusion of her scholar grandfather, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, that “Muslims are not a minority,” without stating Azad’s logic that India has many Muslims (125 million), mostly well-integrated. Many Muslims reacted adversely. Even the bright Smriti Irani, with her immense energy and quick repartee, lost some sheen for herself and for Modi’s cabinet with a false declaration.

Modi has had to suffer on account of his ministers’ past indiscretions, inexperience, impetuosity, poor sense of priorities and, in some cases, for their alleged

criminal record

. He has wisely gagged them by saying that they will not speak in public on sensitive subjects, but will do so only in the cabinet or on party fora. He also appears inclined to hold cabinet meetings more frequently, presumably to bring his ministers’ thinking in line with that of his own. He has tried to curb nepotism in appointments, no doubt recalling how the residence of Pawan Kumar Bansal, the former railways minister in the United Progressive Alliance government, had become a market for top appointments in the railways.

As a good manager, he has combined closely related subjects. But he has only combined road transport and shipping (hopefully also railways, soon). He is yet to combine the energy ministries (power, renewable energy, nuclear energy, coal, oil and gas), or health with sanitation and water supply. These combinations will enable better coordination and implementation.

There are also strange portfolio combinations, principally finance and defence (with the first budget to be presented soon!); law with communications and information technology; mines, steel, labour and employment; and the peculiar combination of information and broadcasting, environment and forests, climate change, and parliamentary affairs. Many vital portfolios like human resource development (which includes education) and commerce (which should have been combined with external affairs as has been usefully done in Australia, Britain and Canada) have gone to very bright people but with no experience of government. Some of these allocations may presage the combinations to come and give Modi greater control over them, a ploy he used successfully in Gujarat.

Many top managers fail because they ignore what appear to be peripheral issues — the growing intolerance for books that contradict fundamentalist opinion and for a negative media, rewards to riot accused, and so on.

Management principles can help only in execution. Portfolios, allocations, individual appointments and preconceived opinions are ruled by other factors. Modi has to protect the interests of all and nurture democratic values.

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