



Making 'Lateral Entry' Work

(Editorial in The Hindu, for August 14, 2018, highlights key points on how to make the 'lateral entry' initiative a success in India)

'Lateral entry' is the new buzz in administrative circles. This is when executives or talented individuals are selected to an administrative post of the government despite them not being selected in or being part of a bureaucratic setup. Lateral entry is needed because the contemporary times require highly skilled and motivated individuals at the helm of affairs, without which public service delivery mechanisms do not work smoothly. India is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon.

In this editorial, five elements have been identified, based on experience from all over the world, without which the lateral entry initiative of the government may not be as successful as it can be.

Element One: Establish objective criteria

- What key skills, qualities and experiences a particular role requires must be objectively decided.
- Having an objective criteria allows the government to relegate confidently, knowing full well that the chosen appointees will be able to fulfill their work obligations as well as stand up to public scrutiny without fear.
- This also removes any fear of bias in a candidate or in an appointment for caste or region, or for political affiliations.

Element Two: Target the talent you need

- Instead of waiting for talented individuals to apply for a particular post under the lateral entry initiative, the government should 'headhunt' desired individuals by proactively approaching them with job offers. Doing this becomes much easier when the aforementioned objective criteria for talent is rationally established.
- This is important because highly talented individuals have plenty of opportunities elsewhere, where besides good pay they also get ample opportunities at job satisfaction.

Element Three: Look for potential to succeed in this environment

- The potential mentioned in this point comes as three personal traits in a lateral appointee.
- First, the candidate has to have resilience, which is here, the ability to persevere in the face of constant pressure from multiple stakeholders. Government bureaucracy is after all, very different from the private sector and can prove to be 'tough' for outsiders.
- Second, lateral appointees would have to have a high degree of curiosity. They should be willing to learn from career civil servants, and willing to adapt to established forms of formal and informal systems with which the government functions.
- Third, any lateral appointee must have the ability and skill to engage with others, and build consensus among various stakeholders in the process.

Element Four: Less is more when it comes to selection panels

- In the current method, a candidate is interviewed by a panel of three to five interviewers.

Unfortunately, this method only yields results which can be best described as a surface-level understanding of the candidate. The better method is one-on-one or two-on-one interviewing where the candidate can open up more easily, leading to a proper understanding of what the candidate's career requirements and goals are, what his mindset is about on various issues, and most importantly, what his approach would be on key government policies and undertakings.

- This method of interviewing can be supplemented via extensive referencing (from former or current employers; from important institutions or individuals etc.) which would provide further insight into the candidate's 'character, integrity and moral compass — all critical qualities for government roles'.

Element Five: Accelerate the new hire's integration

- Success of the lateral entry initiative does not end with a successful recruitment. Rather, it is the first step of two. The second step is the successful integration of the newly appointed individual in the new organisation.
- Towards this end, the differences in cultural and working environments should be addressed by providing the newly appointed official with information (for ex. profiles on individuals handling management; priorities and concerns regarding the department and its employees, etc.) and training/coaching immediately upon his joining the organization.
- The success of leveraging talent lies in the ability to harness it. Merely hiring from the private sector will not do. The key to the lateral entry initiative is in 'objectivity', and lessons learned globally should be incorporated into this. The goal of preserving public trust, of improving the bureaucracy and of increasing productivity and innovation, will be met to a greater extent only if the 'lateral entry' initiative is a success. Therefore, this is the future of governance and there should be no turning back from this.

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