

Empathetic leadership in Indian bureaucrats

Richa Thapliyal¹, Dr. Laxmi Rawat Chauhan²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

²Associate Professor (English), Graphic Era Hill University

ABSTRACT

Across the spectrum of leadership styles, none of the leadership styles suits the Indian bureaucracy. Therefore, the present study seeks to present an overview of empathetic bureaucratic leadership styles in Indian civil servants to tackle the menace of corruption and nepotism as well as to bolster trust of the citizens and engage the latter in policy-making processes. Empathetic leadership style in bureaucratic set-up of India has been positioned in an exploratory way and further research is warranted for empirical validation of the proposed definitions of empathetic leadership in bureaucrats in India. The study concludes with directions for further research.

Keywords: Leadership, Empathetic, Bureaucracy, India.

INTRODUCTION

Bureaucrats have been perceived as authoritarian and autocratic since times immemorial and there has been a tendency of being top-heavy in bureaucracy. Officialdom has been a remarkable trait of the bureaucrats and there is no denying the fact that management leadership among the bureaucrats assumes an absolute indifference towards the citizens for whom they are ultimately accountable eventually. Bureaucrats are imbued with this indifference owing to their elitism and the fact that they are being spoken of with endearment and respect everywhere. Their tendency of considering themselves as elites speaks a lot of the leadership style adopted by them. In the context of India, bureaucracy has witnessed a churn over the years and this gets reflected in the bureaucracy of present times. The present research seeks to trace the progression of bureaucracy from colonial times until the present with a focus on the Indian landscape. The structure of the paper is as follows: following a brief regarding the emergence and development of Indian bureaucracy, the paper seeks to provide a review of the portrayal of leadership among the bureaucrats in the extant literature. Thereafter, the paper the concept of empathetic leadership in Indian bureaucracy has been detailed and the conclusion of the paper unravels the key learnings from the proposed framework along with the study limitations and further research pointers.

Background

Bureaucracy has a French lineage as far as its etymology is concerned given that the word “bureau” means a “desk” where there are a lot of papers concerning the official who holds the chair. Bureaucracy has emerged across the globe in diverse forms and the most pronounced forms are revealed in the developed and developing countries where the nature and scope of bureaucracy

assumes huge proportions given the expansive set of functions and operations related to the dealings with the citizens. Bureaucrats are the high-paid officials who are made to appear in some of the rigorous examinations and trainings and thereafter allocated the suitable postings in the central, regional and local levels. Across their promotional progression, bureaucrats are poised to become more autocratic and this is one of those obnoxious tendencies among them that mar the congenial relationship of the bureaucrats with the citizens. Bureaucrats assume authoritarian powers and they impose their directives upon those subordinate to them and this extends to the common people as well. While interacting with the common man, there are tendencies linked with red-tape and nepotism and these tendencies curb the development of a transparent and corruption-free country.

The emergence and development of bureaucracy in India assumed different proportions. For instance, in the colonial times, it was for the first time when the likes of Surendra Nath Banerji or Subhash Chandra Bose could crack the prestigious Indian Civil Services examinations that were held in England and India. These stalwarts gave their best to serve the British government but quit to take on different paths to realize the goals of Indian independence and freedom from the British yoke. In the post-independence period, there were instituted pathways for the training and development of the bureaucrats in the universities and other institutions based in the United Kingdom and India as well. For instance, the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) was established in Mussoorie in 1954 and the precursor to the same was established in Shimla. Paul H Appleby, an American expert in bureaucracy, was roped in to refurbish the Indian bureaucratic system and efforts were directed towards providing the right climate for the Indian bureaucrats to flourish and “serve” the citizens. However, what needed to be emphasized was the need for a strong and sustainable leadership among the bureaucrats. In contradistinction with the expectations, the colonial mindset continued to linger among the bureaucrats in India and the latter would exercise their dictatorial authority on the common man. For instance, in return for small favors, Indian bureaucrats would assist the aggrieved. Ills of overt exchanges of money would be rampant and these tendencies corrupted the system altogether. In due course of time, “babudom” became the coin-word of Indian bureaucratic system that symbolized corruption and officiousness with no concern for the common people. The bureaucrats were viewed as despicable individuals who would indulge in corrupt practices and favoritism and this was disliked by one and all, including the subordinates and other staff members.

Research context

Extant research on leadership has identified leadership styles in multifarious ways. The present study seeks to provide an overview of bureaucratic leadership in terms of a new leadership style, specifically, the empathetic leadership. Hitherto, leadership styles have been analyzed in terms of telling (giving direct orders to the subordinates), selling (self-marketing activities of the leaders), participating (leaders need to involve and engage the subordinates in decision-making process) and delegating (leaders tend to give the responsibility of decision-making to the subordinates) (Gipson et al., 2017). Furthermore, leadership styles have been identified as transformational (when a leader has the potential of effecting changes in the organizational and leader-member relations on account of his leading by example and non-enforceable attitudes), transactional (when a leader engages in a dialogue and interaction with the followers for effecting any organizational change) (Nguyen et al., 2017), charismatic (when the leader has a vision and aura of his own and the followers can relate to the vivacious personality of the leaders) (Swid, 2014) authoritarian (when the leader behaves as a despot

and exercises his authority over the subordinates) (Nir & Hameiri, 2014), autocratic (when the leader behaves in a self-styled manner such that the leader imposes his authority over the subordinates), paternalistic (when the leader behaves like a parent to his child and facilitates the growth and development of the subordinates), authentic (when the leader behaves in a credible manner and there is belief and trust in the leader on account of the leader's influence and aura on the subordinates) and servant (when the leader behaves in a servile manner to the subordinates and caters to the needs and requirements of the subordinates out of bon homie and camaraderie) (Renko et al., 2015).

Empathetic leadership

Empathetic leadership may be identified as the feelings of care and empathy for the subordinates from the end of the leaders. A leader should try to empathize with the conditions of the subordinates and put himself in the shoes of the subordinates before making any decision. Empathetic leaders are warm-hearted and compatible to the surroundings. Such leaders help the subordinates to grow and develop themselves. Equal opportunities are provided to the subordinates for developing themselves in a professional manner (Huque & Ferdous, 2019). Leaders provide the subordinates with the opportunities of participating in the decision-making processes. Such leaders entrust the subordinates with responsibilities and duties and they make the subordinates feel honored and accountable to themselves. There is no hard-handedness while dealing with the subordinates in this style of leadership and the leader is able to come to terms with the situational contexts in which the subordinates are placed. Empathetic leaders are visionaries and involve the subordinates in the designing of the vision for the organization.

As far as the bureaucrats are concerned, it is important that leaders demonstrate empathy in their dealings with the subordinates (Ohemeng, Darko & Amoako-Asiedu, 2020). Empathetic bureaucrats consider the subordinates as their colleagues and friends and they provide the latter with all opportunities to express themselves in best possible ways. Empathetic bureaucrats facilitate the decision-making processes especially in terms of public policy-making. Involving all the subordinates and giving them opportunities to express their opinions is an important facet of the empathetic bureaucrats. Bureaucrats are able to understand the needs and requirements of the subordinates and the latter are able to provide their perspectives and problems to the leaders in a democratic and fearless manner.

In the context of Indian bureaucrats, it is must that empathetic bureaucrats come to the fore. Leadership style is not born but may be developed over a period of time. For the development of empathetic leadership, it is important that the bureaucrats be trained and conditioned mentally in terms of mental toughness, empathy, courage, fearlessness and the ability to take prompt and weighted decisions to support the colleagues and subordinates. Empathetic bureaucrats will be better able to hear and address the grievances of the aggrieved complainants thereby making the latter more comfortable in putting across their grudges and complaints to the bureaucrats. Instead of a top-heavy bureaucratic set-up wherein the bureaucrats are supposed to sit in their ivory towers, empathetic bureaucrats would be able to hear and listen to the needs and requirements of the subordinates and colleagues patiently and with poise. Good listeners are good in making judgments and this holds good for empathetic leaders as well. Indian bureaucrats need to understand the significance of empathetic leadership for better dealing with the clients and subordinates and making decisions in times of

emergencies because it is during contingencies that the actual benefits of empathetic bureaucratic leadership shall be better realized by an organization. Bereft of corruption and lackadaisical attitudes, empathetic leaders would be better able to deal with the citizens in a transparent manner such that the citizens' trust would be bolstered in the long run. Finally, Indian bureaucracy would be better able to position and sustain itself in the global bureaucratic landscape amidst the cries of effecting transparency, trust and citizen participation in administration.

Conclusion

It was the purpose of the present study to provide a new leadership style for the bureaucrats-empathetic bureaucratic style wherein the bureaucrats would be imbued with feelings of camaraderie and feelings of togetherness with the subordinates and colleagues alike. It was positioned in the study that empathetic bureaucracy would be better equipped to redress the grievances of the citizens on a daily basis as also facilitate in providing the required atmosphere for the subordinates and colleagues to express their perspectives in a non-hostile atmosphere. The study was based on a novel leadership style after a careful perusal of the existing leadership styles. Whereas it was not possible for outlining the literature on leadership at length and exploring empathetic bureaucracy was done in its primordial stages, further research is warranted to conduct empirical studies on the efficacy of empathetic bureaucratic leadership styles in Indian context as also in other developing and developed countries' context. Furthermore, more leadership styles befitting the Indian bureaucracy may be conceived in further research. Finally, it would be a worthwhile option to take perspectives from the citizens and bureaucrats regarding the optimum conditions for instituting empathetic bureaucratic leadership styles in India.

As far as the practitioner implications of the study are concerned, it may be pointed out that Indian bureaucrats may appreciate the need to be careful and meticulous in terms of adapting themselves for meeting the needs of the citizens. Civil servants in India may appreciate the need for being empathetic and caring for the citizens and this would go a long way in furthering citizen involvement in democratic processes. Empathetic bureaucrats may be better able to garner the trust of the people and Indian civil servants need to appreciate the problems of the common man to be better equipped to resolve the problems in an amicable manner and design the public policies accordingly.

References

1. Gipson, A.N., Pfaff, D.L., Mendelsohn, D.B., Catenacci, L.T., & Warner, W. (2017). Women and leadership: Selection, development, leadership style, and performance. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 53(1), 32-65.
2. Huque, A.S., & Ferdous, J. (2019). Bureaucratic and political leadership in Bangladesh: Dynamics of administrative reform and the public interest. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 41(3), 169-180.
3. Nir, A.E., & Hameiri, L. (2014). School principals' leadership style and school outcomes: The mediating effect of powerbase utilization. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 52(2), 210-227.
4. Nguyen, T.T., Mia, L., Winata, L., & Chong, V.K. (2017). Effect of transformation-leadership style and management control system on managerial performance. *Journal of Business Research*, 70, 202-213.

5. Ohemeng, F.L.K., Obuobisa, D.T., & Amoako-Asiedu, E. (2020). Bureaucratic leadership, trust building, and employee engagement in the public sector in Ghana: The perspective of social exchange theory. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 16(1), 17-40.
6. Renko, M., Tarabishy, A.E., Carsrud, A.L., & Brannback, M. (2015). Understanding and measuring entrepreneurial leadership style. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 53(1), 54-74.
7. Swid, A. (2014). Police members perception of their leaders' leadership style and its implications. *Policing: An International Journal*, 37(3), 579-595.