**Bureaucrats under stress**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2020-11-26

OCCUPATIONAL stress is a problem that all bureaucracies face and no government can ignore it. Advanced states have devoted considerable effort to overcome this phenomenon. In Pakistan too, the matter has been receiving attention for quite some time from the controllers of bureaucracy. Two studies, one on occupational stress in the police force and the other one on the auditor general`s office, were done some time ago. A new study on a wider segment of bureaucracy carried out by the National Institute of Public Policy (NIPP) has met an increasingly felt need.  
  
Titled Occupational Stress in Pakistan`s Mid-Level Bureaucracy, this study uses a sample of 357 civil servants in BS-18 and BS-19 working for federal, provincial and territorial governments and conducts a survey to find answers to three questions: 1.  
  
To what extent do mid-level civil servants in Pakistan feel stressed? 2. What are the mental, physical, and behavioural signs and symptoms of stress in these civil servants? 3. What are the causes of stress and what are the coping mechanisms employed by them? The survey findings are: 1. A majority of respondents agree that they experience stress while doing their job and that this affects their decisions. (Emphasis added) 2. In a majority of cases the most prominent mental signs of stress are frustration, anxiety and irritability. The key physical symptoms of stress are fatigue and strain in the neck and shoulders.  
  
Increased social isolation, short-temperedness and lack of creativity and initiative are among the prevalent behavioural symptoms.  
  
3. The mental, physical and behavioural signs and symptoms are most pronounced among officers who have six to 12 years of service/experience, lesser in officers with experience of 13 to 17 years and least in officers whose experience is 17 years or more. Although stress profiles experienced by both genders are similar, the signs of stress are more visible among female officers.  
  
4. The spread of stress symptoms across different service groups reveals that ex-cadre officers manifest more frustration and back-ache and increased social isolation than officers belonging to regularOCCUPATIONAL stress is a problem that all bureaucracies face and no government can ignore it. Advanced states have devoted considerable effort to overcome this phenomenon. In Pakistan too, the matter has been receiving attention for quite some time from the controllers of bureaucracy. Two studies, one on occupational stress in the police force and the other one on the auditor general`s office, were done some time ago. A new study on a wider segment of bureaucracy carried out by the National Institute of Public Policy (NIPP) has met an increasingly felt need.  
  
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4. The spread of stress symptoms across different service groups reveals that ex-cadre officers manifest more frustration and back-ache and increased social isolation than officers belonging to regularoccupationalservice groups.  
  
5. There is work-life imbalance among civil servants that needs to be addressed. A majority of of ficers argued that they work not only over weekends but also give work priority over family or leisure attractions.  
  
6. Job demand and job control are perceived to be a smaller cause of occupational stress in the case of a majority of civil servants. Matters of concern include contradictory directions from different bosses, work overload and non-commensurate wages.  
  
7. A majority of civil servants think lack of support by bosses and colleagues and external pressures are negligible occupational stressors.  
  
8. The main coping mechanisms employed by civil servants are socialising with the family and friends and colleagues. Only a few civil servants consult health experts about stress management.  
  
A number of recommendations have been made.  
  
Stress audit: A majority of civil servants experience stress while doing their job but only a few officers seek medical help while all other officers under stress do not report their problem. To overcome this obstacle the relevant ministry/department should carry out stress profiling of officers annually with focus on resolving the problem. The controlling authority should have on call doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists to determine the level of stress among officers and suggest remedial measures.  
  
Organisational culture: The study has established that only a few civil servants actively seek medical help. This may be due to the possibility that the level of stress is not considered high enough to warrant medical intervention. With a view to overcoming individual officers` lack of interest in dealing with their stress problems, a change in organisational culture should be promoted so as to demolish any social taboo that might be hindering treatment. Anybody who requires at tention may take his or her problem to the appropriate forum without any feeling of being isolated.  
  
Rationalisation of work: The study has established that symptoms of stress vary across grade and gender. This indicates possibility of unevendistribution of work between these two categories and the problem can be solved by a rational distribution of work so that officers in Grade 18 may not be over-frustrated early in their careers and BS-19 officers may not be over-frustrated with the increasing job experience expected of them.  
  
There are other recommendations as well such asregulartrainingsessionsthatinclude butare not limited to expert assessments and exercises, which address mental, physical and behavioural symptoms of officers. The officers can avail resources whenever necessary. The hierarchy and line of command should be improved so that stress can be reduced and not aggravated. To improve time management, regular result-oriented training sessions on time management could be held. Transfers put considerable pressure on families and therefore these ought to be avoided. Also, the question of remuneration is becoming more and more important and complaints of inadequate wages must be addressed as early as possible.  
  
This study can serve as a concept document for reform of bureaucracy`s functioning, especially stress management mechanisms, and turning it into a vehicle for promoting public good. Whatever the definition of stress that finds favour with the government the phenomenon adversely affects the quality of service available to the state, and the people have to pay a heavy price. A bureaucracy working under stress can never serve the purpose of a dynamic and just state. What this discussion makes clear is the urgency of restructuring the state apparatus in a manner that it can be prevented from promoting the public cause neither fortuitously nor by design.  
  
Another obvious conclusion from the study is that all systems of managing the affairs of a state must be resilient enough to accommodate any changes in the spirit of the age and the escalating expectations of a wide-awake citizenry. At no stage in the process of administrative streamlining can the ideal of public service be compromised.  
  
Further, no one should ever forget the fact that even the most carefully devised reforms may need review and revision during the implementation phase and periodically afterwards.