

HUMAN RELATIONS THEORY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: ANALYSING ITS RELEVANCE IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Human Relations Theory has always been considered significant in maintaining a positive work environment and creating a workplace more productive. The theory holds a lot of importance, especially during the pandemic time when the workers have been psychologically and emotionally impacted which necessitates the study of the relevance of the theory. The paper highlights the importance and relevance of the Human Relations Theory in an organizational setup and more specifically to the Indian Setup. The Post Pandemic Public Administration setup is analysed through the lens of this theory.

Keywords: Human Relations Theory, COVID-19 Pandemic, Work-from-home, Public Administration, Organization

INTRODUCTION

The Human Resource Theory was founded as a comeback to the failings of the scientific management theory. This fallacious theory emerged as a side effect of the Industrial Revolution which stripped workers of any agency and reduced them to mere cogs in the wheel of capitalism. Acknowledging the de-humanizing nature of this administrative model, the Human Resource Theory arose with the view to concentrate on employee satisfaction, informal workplace organizations, and ways to influence employee productivity. Human relations theory, unlike scientism, does not regard workers as interchangeable tools.

The theory resulted from what is known as the Hawthorne Experiments, conducted by Elton Mayo from Harvard University. The experiment found that the workplace is a social structure in which a variety of factors affect an employee's performance. Most of the time these factors have underlying psychological roots and organisations must attach importance to these aspects in order to effect change. The theory holds that humans are complex beings whose behaviour is influenced by a variety of factors. People are not solely motivated by monetary compensation for finding meaning in their work holds tremendous significance; and when invited to participate in discourse, they are more open to change. Managers must recognise that each employee has different needs and that one size does not fit all; effective communication across various levels of administrative hierarchy is critical.

This theory of organisation, although widely acclaimed, has faced severe roadblocks in the Work from Home (hereinafter, "WFH") setting as was necessitated by the onset of the pandemic, wherein all modes of communication were virtual, the lack of human contact inhibited creaseless administration, and trans-dimensional discourse within organizations was curbed by systemic factors.

There is an abundance of advocacy of the Human Resource Theory of organization, with it today being acknowledged as the most efficient way of drawing the best out of employees within the administrative set-up. There have been sincere efforts to implement the same across the public sector at large. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic majorly disrupted administrative functioning, reduced individuals to an exclusively virtual workspace, created barriers to professional as well as personal

communication, and created an unprecedented level of organizational dissatisfaction. The relevance of this Human Resource Theory of organization under such gruelling circumstances

The development of literature in Public Administration is felt mostly in times when the situation presents itself as one which affects the sector in a manner such that it could effectively turn around the existing structure of the field; the COVID-19 pandemic being one such occurrence. All the major literature referred to belongs to the pandemic and post-pandemic era.

Laura-Mariana Cismas and Cornelia Dumitru's work¹ draws attention to the necessity of reviewing policymaking, existing policies and measures, and interventions among other things in light of the entirely new set of ground rules which the pandemic present. It looks to highlight the greater role of globalisation in changing the agenda and manner of operation in the field of Public Administration. The Harvard Business School Working Paper² emphasises upon the foreseeable economic, social and psychological risks that workers would be most likely to have to face during the pandemic and the emerging changes by way of "best practices" that organisations across sectors were trying to incorporate. It recognises the multiple factors which affect the working conditions of employees and how the same has caused detriment to the quality of work.

Another study by the OECD³ brings forth the accidental agility that has become the consequence of the pandemic and the various principles underpinning the global strategies adopted by different jurisdictions as early responses. This study takes a more duty centric approach and places the liability on the government in a public administrative setup to rightfully be accountable for the well-being of its employees. A 2021 book series by the title Marketing and Smart Technologies: Smart Innovations, Systems and Technologies explores the need to revitalise the Public Sector by way of marketing⁴ recognises the need to democratise the system of public administration and inculcate trust in the citizens and advocates that the same can be done by way of implementing a new marketing model for the public sector which models itself on the lines of a corporate house. While discussing the New Public Management and Post-New Public Management concepts, it seeks to build an effective new structure of Public Sector which finds its foundation in a well-founded marketing strategy customised to the needs of the time. The Paper seeks to highlight the obstacles that the Human Relations Theory faced post the pandemic in the workplace with special reference to the Indian Scenario.

Universally Pandemic-Induced Roadblocks to the Human Relations Theory

As a theoretical concept, the Human Relations Theory built itself on an ever-changing dynamic approach; its primary objective being that towards change in values, attitudes and structures so as to better adapt to contemporary times. Unlike other organisational concepts, the Human Relations Theory manifests the identification of the personal with the organisational goal and calls for effective interpersonal communication and broad participation in decision-making. Such a manifestation will

¹ Laura-Mariana Cismas & Cornelia Dumitru, *SARS-COVs as Trigger for Reviewing Strategic and Operational Public Administration Frameworks* 6 LOGOS UNIVERSALITY MENTALITY EDUC. NOVELTY SECT: POL. SCI. & EUR. STUD. 17 (2020).

² Kevin M. Kniffin, Jayanth Narayan et al., *COVID-19 and the Workplace: Implications, Issues, and Insights for Future Research and Action* HBS WORKING PAPER 20-127 (2020).

³ *Public Servants and the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic: emerging responses and initial recommendations* OECD (April 2020).

⁴ Fernandez-Villancanasa Marin M.A., *Public Sector Marketing 4.0: A Catalyst to Boost the Improvement of Public Management in the Post-Pandemic COVID-19 Era*, In: Rocha A., Reis J.L., Peter M.K., Cayolla R., Loureiro S., Bogdanovic Z. (eds.) *Marketing and Smart Technologies: Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies* VOL. 205 SPRINGER SINGAPORE (2021).

ensure that the connections formed are broader based on the variety tool of technological tools present but will also be deeper owing to the culture that blends technology with the necessary nature of in-person connections.⁵ *Particularly against the backdrop of the pandemic, this becomes immensely relevant contemporarily*, given that the WFH set-up necessitated an unprecedented scale of administrative cohesion.

Exploration of the Indian Framework

The shift to purely online functioning has been *exceptionally hard on the Public Sector*; the basis of Administration of which has typically been formulated by social and interdepartmental interactions. Hence, the pandemic came as a major psychological and emotional specifically to the public administration structure so much so that a return to the normalcy of work environments will present itself as a discomfiting mixture of familiar and unfamiliar.⁶ In the *Indian context* the situation presents as entirely different, with State machinery having continued to operate in the pre-pandemic format, but on the basis of an “essential worker” classification. Each bureaucratic department functioned on the basis of this classification, and administrative work, therefore, prevailed in previous office settings, with a smaller workforce.

One perspective of looking at this is to realize the red-tape bureaucracy that exists in India and the fact that the needs of the pandemic are greater than the utilization of the unique opportunity that the pandemic presents for a transformation of the Public Administration system. What the Indian system has done is focus on the development of such a response best suited to its needs, and focused on a disaster management mechanism built on legal statutes of the past. The transformation of human thought and the global nature of this situation in a world economy that was already moving towards intense globalisation pre-pandemic requires that the agenda and manner of operation of Public Administration is addressed.⁷ Some individuals are more stressed during a pandemic because they are unable to communicate their anxiety to others. In addition, with uncertainty about the future, such as layoffs, pay cuts, and bankruptcies, employees experience a serious increase in internal stress.⁸ The pandemic has only made it clear that the scope of review for Public Administration needs to become more complex and knowledgeable of the policies and developments elsewhere in the world. The need for a collaborative and concentrated approach, such as through a holistic adoption of the Human Relations theory, is important now more than ever.

Appraisal of the path lying ahead

With this thought behind the Public Administration response, it is clear that the nuances of the pandemic have had far-reaching consequences on the lives of employees across all sectors. The unfamiliar WFH settings, virtual event management, and the unprecedented scales of economic and

⁵ Bonnie Marcus, *What Will it Take for Companies and Employees to Succeed in the Post-Pandemic Workplace?* FORBES (11th August 2020) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniemarcus/2020/08/11/what-will-it-take-for-companies-and-employees-to-succeed-in-the-post-pandemic-workplace/?sh=79d7849e1593>.

⁶ PA Times Online, *The “New Normal”: The Post-Pandemic Workplace*, PA TIMES ONLINE (2020) <https://patimes.org/the-new-normal-the-post-pandemic-workplace/>.

⁷ Laura-Mariana Cismas & Cornelia Dumitru, *SARS-COVs as Trigger for Reviewing Strategic and Operational Public Administration Frameworks* 6 LOGOS UNIVERSALITY MENTALITY EDUC. NOVELTY SECT: POL. SCI. & EUR. STUD. 17 (2020).

⁸ Chen Z (2021) *Influence of Working From Home During the COVID-19 Crisis and HR Practitioner Response*. *Front. Psychol.* 12:710517. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.710517

socio-psychological impacts are important moderating factors to understanding the overall impact on the efficiency of work culminating from the efforts of the bureaucracy.

A systematic dearth of paid medical leaves and disincentivizing compensation scheme has and has pushed employees to feel mandated to go to work even when they are ill.⁹ Such an atmosphere makes for a decrease in coordination and an escalation of the conflict by compromising human relations. Seeing how the administration functions as a point of translation for policy into action and is responsible for the operation of policy-making processes at an operational level, the presence of hostile conditions will not affect the quality of work but will in turn affect the dissemination of policy measures to the masses.

In the circumstance of dismal working conditions and the pandemic raging for two long years, there is an urgent need to address the pressing needs of the employees in the newly created environment by way of the pandemic. The process of *achieving such a change intrinsic to the manner in which the foundation of the Public Administration in India is built will require not just a review of the policy towards the administrative employees but a consciousness process of unlearning, changing and learning again*. This requisite process has been termed the “Kurt Lewin Change Model”, with the steps of Unfreezing, Creating the right environment, Changing, Implementation, support, and Refreezing and anchoring the changed position.¹⁰

Another aspect of Public Administration system which functions as an obstacle to the efficiency of the system and can be essentially remedied and brings forth the relevance of the Human Relations Theory is the marketing of the structure and the lack of trust in the efficacy of the administration and the most prominent practice contributing to this lack of trust is the influence of political ideology in the furtherance of the bureaucratic function.¹¹

A UK-based understanding of the post-pandemic work-administration culture highlights that employee engagement and the well-being of employees make up two of the top four considerations which have been identified as the fundamental conditions for creating new revenue in a post-pandemic work environment. Utilizing “best practices” like the encouragement of creating smaller teams within existing structures make for a strong sense of belongingness and accountability which only grow when the work culture comes back to its pre-pandemic stage.¹² This highlights the need for the Human Relations Theory of Organisation to be given paramount consideration during the phase of post-pandemic recovery.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, it is evident from the method in which Public Administration structures have responded to the multi-fold requirements of the pandemic that the system cannot be done away with, but needs to be made open to the newer tools of the trade. This is to ensure that issues of fundamental incidence which have been pulling down the efficacy of the public administration system are addressed. A

⁹ Kevin M. Kniffin, Jayanth Narayan et al., *COVID-19 and the Workplace: Implications, Issues, and Insights for Future Research and Action* HBS WORKING PAPER 20-127 (2020).

¹⁰ *Cultural Evolution in the Workplace: A Silver Lining to the Pandemic*, PECAN GROUP 4 (June 2020).

¹¹ Fernandez-Villancanasa Marin M.A., *Public Sector Marketing 4.0: A Catalyst to Boost the Improvement of Public Management in the Post-Pandemic COVID-19 Era*, In: Rocha A., Reis J.L., Peter M.K., Cayolla R., Loureiro S., Bogdanovic Z. (eds.) *Marketing and Smart Technologies: Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies* VOL. 205 SPRINGER SINGAPORE (2021).

¹² PA Times Online, *The “New Normal”: The Post-Pandemic Workplace*, PA TIMES ONLINE (2020), <https://patimes.org/the-new-normal-the-post-pandemic-workplace/>.

model most suited to revisit the organizational structure of Public Administration and incorporate the principles of the Human Relations Theory is the Four-Quadrant Theory elucidated upon in the work of *Frederic Laloux*.¹³ The model functions on the end goal of collating data and facts in a manner that represents the entire organization as an organism.

Furthermore, resistance to the formal/informal network management in a system stuck in the archaic folds of paperwork and formalities needs to be countered to bring in more digitization and transparency leading to greater decentralization not just for the employees to display more commitment to the organisation but to nurture a bottom-up approach to development. Such an approach has to be furthered by the creation of a culture of accountability in order to ensure healthy contribution and performance.

An extensive review and reconstruction of performance management and appraisal mechanisms presents itself as the need of the hour for fundamental change of mentality to be brought about within the employees. Incentivisation needs to evolve into a more personal approach to ensure commitment not just to the institution but to the idea and growth of its objectives. The duality of lean and agile management techniques will play key roles in the streamlining and elimination of “waste” in the operational process and administrative political organs, with the aid of optimal utilization of the Human Resource Theory.

¹³ Frederic Laloux, *Reinventing organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness* 1st ed. 14 NELSON PARKER (2014).