

Modernizing Foreign Services*

Facing the Internal Challenge

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WHEN SETTING OFF ON A JOURNEY OF MODERNIZATION, THE MAIN INTERNAL challenge to be dealt with is within the leaders themselves. This is the most difficult internal challenge of all. It can even be said to decide the journey's success or failure.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some insight into what—in my view—it takes for leaders to successfully plan, launch, and carry out a modernization program in, as in this case, a foreign service. Leadership has many definitions. The one that I use here is simply the *ability to focus on the right things and align people around a strategy*. There is no doubt that leaders are fundamental to making modernization happen, but unfortunately the opposite is also true. They are also fundamental to making it not happen...

A leader has no choice but to found his or her contribution to success or failure upon his or her personal *capability* and *volition*. For a leader it is essential to fathom the true state of these two qualities within him or her self. Once they are brought into play, it is equally important to make sure that they contribute to, and do not counteract, the fulfilment of the mission ahead. More than anything, it takes *focus*.

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WHY MODERNIZATION?

The complexity of conducting foreign policy has grown immensely since the end of the Cold War's relatively predictable bipolar world order. Accelerating globalization, IT revolutions and new international threats and possibilities, have all changed the prerequisites for conducting foreign policy and indeed also many of its tools. Foreign policy can no longer be run the same way as before. Though many distinctive characteristics of diplomacy will remain, it is likely that the foreign services willing and able to develop a sharp matter-of-fact efficiency are the ones that stand the greatest chance of becoming champions of the international stage (providing of course they have the 'right' ideas). The closely related defence sector realized long ago that its future success will not be built on gallantry, but on operational efficiency and agility in the field.

In many countries public administration is undergoing dramatic change. This chapter is not the place to describe the development of public sectors and how governance issues have reached the top of the agenda for many governments. But foreign services are generally not at the forefront of this movement. There are many reasons for this. One is that the people working in foreign services generally do not perceive themselves as being part of public administration; instead, they bear the stimulating and yet exclusive intellectual and traditional burden of saving the world, rather than providing simple public goods. With the possible exceptions of consular, migration, or trade promotion issues, the customers are rarely met face to face (the problem of the semantics around 'customers' is even sometimes a reason in itself for not buying in to the concept of 'us creating value for somebody else'). Until now any pressure to increase efficiency has generally been exerted by finance ministries or by lean bureaucracy advocates in parliament. Thus, the demand for efficiency was long perceived as a problem in itself, not as an opportunity to get more done with less. Also, the common belief that the results of foreign policy cannot be measured has probably many times 'saved' foreign services from being forced to take internal action and left foreign services with the feeling of having been 'let off the hook'.

Today, reality has caught up with foreign services as well. The need to be efficient in order to be effective is simply too evident.

A proactive stance not only enhances the achievement of great international deeds, but can also improve the standing of the service—

and its leaders—in society. No wonder modernization has risen to the top of the agenda for many foreign services. Who does not want to be at the forefront of a new era for conducting foreign policy?

HOSTING THE LAUNCH

Who is crucial in leading a modernization program? In some foreign services it is clearly a top civil servant, often a permanent under-secretary or the equivalent, who is supposed to run the shop and deliver results to the minister. Other foreign services are run primarily by politicians and top civil servants in conjunction, which clearly puts the politicians in the driving seat of the modernization program. The objective and subjective answers to the question above are often equally important. It is however of great importance that they coincide. If people in the organization believe that the politicians are crucial, then these politicians cannot substitute themselves with civil servants. Remember that we are talking about foreign services, which are staffed by people whose job it is to be very good at picking up on signals. It is they, if anybody, who can tell where the crucial leaders' real focus lies. If it appears as if modernization is not really at the top of the politicians' agenda, the staff simply won't prioritize it over everyday foreign policy work.

BEFORE THE LAUNCH

Capability

Explicit modernization programs are launched for various reasons: as part of an overall general plan for modernizing public administration, due to an increasing realization that things can and should improve, or simply because everybody else seems to be doing it. Often the reasons lie in all three categories.

The challenge ahead is often severely underestimated, no matter what the reason behind modernization is. The latter two types of reason of course give more room for manoeuvre, which in reality makes the challenge even greater. If demanded by a government program for modernizing public administration, there is still some room for the organization to choose its own path in implementing the general outlines provided. However, the more normative the program is, the less room there is

to manoeuvre. But even in such a case, modernization does not happen by itself.

Often, the predominant sense in foreign services seems to be that their combined intellectual capabilities are sufficient to get the job done. External professional expertise in managing change often collides with a deep-rooted sense of exclusiveness (not limited to foreign services): ‘our people will not be told by others about their alleged shortcomings’. In a misguided sense of leadership, the leaders are tempted to show that they are on top of things, rejecting external expertise and thus reinforcing the ‘we can fix it ourselves’ notion.

Heads of departments and other executives in foreign ministries have in most cases reached their positions by being experts in fields of foreign policy. Their only management training is often a result of on-the-job-training, and having learnt from elder peers. The situation differs between foreign ministries, though. I suggest however that the foreign ministries able to establish modern management competencies, succeed in utilizing the executives for the modernization work. In cases where such skills simply aren’t well developed, the uphill struggle ahead is rather self-inflicted.

An understanding of the organization’s strengths and weaknesses, and an idea of what has to improve, must emanate from both the internal foreign policy experts *and* from experts in efficient management and change. Most importantly, the two perspectives must meet. To build an understanding on only one of these sets of expertise without focusing on the right things, will inevitably lead to false starts, with each start barely clearing the launch pad. This is an effective recipe for growing frustration among the avant-garde, and equally among the reluctant.

Before launching a modernization program, it is important to have a clear picture of what capabilities the organization must have in order to carry it through, and if it does not have these capabilities, to find out how to get them.

Capability is ultimately about making sure that you have the right people by your side.

Volition

The thesaurus¹ gives the following definition of *volition*. It is:

¹ See www.thesaurus.com

- the act of willing, choosing, or resolving, exercise of willing,
- a choice or decision made by the will,
- the power of willing, will.

All of these definitions apply to this context.

A leader has to decide on the *level of ambition* of the mission ahead, its place on the scale between minor adjustments and radical reform. After having made your choice, you must consciously measure up to your level of ambition. If you want radical reforms, are you ready for the consequences of the measures connected to this ambition? If you want to see some minor improvements, are you ready to face those who want more? Volition is about making a conscious decision and sticking to it.

If your will is weak from the start, you are set on a road to failure. If you don't believe deep inside, in the modernization that you are about to launch, or distrust its chances of actually taking place, you should either stop the launch, or step aside for someone else. If you carry on, despite this advice, be sure that it is merely a question of time before you will be disclosed. People, in most cases, have a well-developed ability to discover a falsehood, and their judgment falls hard. You have spent their time and dedication for a purpose that was hollow from the start. Don't go there.

There will be many temptations for you to quit. Most modernization or change programs are abandoned just when they are about to take off. At that point, most time, money and energy have been spent, with few visible results. The ratio between cost and benefit is at its lowest point. This is a vital moment to persevere. As faith is said to be able to move mountains, so can true resolve.

Breaking new ground means taking risks. Are you ready to put your credentials on the line?

Focus

Without focus, capability and volition are useless. Without focus, a lot of energy will be diverted to unnecessary and indeed damaging sidetracks. In addition, without focus you never know where you will end up. If you are lucky, it will be close to what you had imagined, if you are unlucky you will have created havoc.

Focus is about two things: making sure a) that the things you want to see happen are the *right things*, and b) that the right things *really do happen*.

If there is focus, the capability and the volition to carry the work through will follow. With focus present you will make sure that you are capable, and along with this, hopefully, your volition will grow.

No such thing as a free launch

Successful leaders during a period of change divert a substantial part of their energy *from* their external agenda, *to* an internal agenda of reform. I am sorry, but there is no other way. To believe that you can lead a modernization program without de-prioritizing other work, means having learnt nothing from the great reformers of yesterday and of our own time.

A severe consequence of launching a modernization program is that leaders have to stick with it. The role of a leader is essential in making change happen. And it is your responsibility to act according to that role. You cannot, for any reason, switch to a less exposed role midway through the program or make yourself invisible, without negatively affecting the mission. In that sense, as a leader, you are no longer 'free'.

Once you are up and running, you have to remain focused. Concentrate on the things that are fundamental. These things are most likely about governance. It is not a quick fix. At the same time, you must therefore also deliver on some visible and useful improvements for everyday work. But beware of spending too much effort on just visible things. The great possibilities lay in the major and long-term governance issues. Time will show that these investments pay off. Unfortunately time is a limited commodity. Patience must therefore be widely recognized in your organization as an important virtue for implementing lasting modernization.

Many will try to make you abandon what you have started, for the benefit of their own interests. Do listen, and do change if you are convinced. But be careful not to get lured into something that might not at all be very well thought out. There is nothing more terrible than resolute ignorance. As opposed to the situation concerning regular external work, where no one would dream of expressing shallow amateur advice, many regard themselves as instant experts in internal affairs.

A leader must listen and pay attention to the insecurities and even fears that many will feel. Without these abilities, a leader will not be able to align other leaders and staff around the strategy. Dialogue is essential, as it is shown that most protests against change are often not directed

against substance, but against procedure. But beware of letting the least common denominator be your guiding star. After all, a leader's mission is to lead. Along the way, it is inevitable that you will lose some people, or actively have to cut loose some people.

All that you do has to be a consequence of the choice that you have made. The decisions in daily affairs must support your plan's chances to succeed. Doing what you say is fundamental to building trust. Losing this connection can be fatal to the mission. A leader must proactively make sure that his or her deeds are in line with the mission, and communicate this.

Internal focus

Focusing takes training. For some people it comes more naturally than for others, but it doesn't come free for anybody. Great leaders have realized their internal purpose and managed to connect it to an external mission, and in this way, developed their ability to focus. In the hectic and fast-paced-results-oriented world we live in today, it is a challenge to achieve this. However, it doesn't take life-long contemplation. It can be acquired by more simple means.

The ability to focus comes from within. At this point some readers may start to feel uncomfortable. It is easier to think of focus as being about establishing a well-structured list of things to do or think about, than as being about things taking place in your brain and in your soul. But, as a matter of fact, this is what it all boils down to.

The former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, a person of high 'spiritual intelligence', had a well-known and solid foundation on which to build an ability to face his challenges. Many such people come to mind. No matter what such a foundation consists of, that it exists at all is the point. These existential questions can only be raised through an internal (individual) dialogue.

The connection between individual purpose and the external mission is potentially explosive. If the two coincide, great energy is developed, but if they counteract each other, you will soon be on the road to failure. All around us and in world politics, we understand this when we see it. We recognize calamities of leaders whose internal compasses, and as a result their foci, were clearly not set on their declared mission but on other matters. At the same time, we recognize the powerful force that came from aligning the individual purposes of persons like Mahatma Gandhi,

Dag Hammarskjöld, Nelson Mandela, or Mother Teresa, with their external missions. But we have great difficulty in seeing this as something we can learn from. Instead of learning from great people, we idolize them. We tend to believe that we humble beings do not move in the same dimensions, and that modernizing, changing, improving (or whatever you want to call it) an organization, is a rather trite mission. I do not suggest that you must try to be Mother Teresa. Yet modernization affects a lot of people, and even changes their worlds. It is a mission that is important enough. It deserves to be taken seriously, and therefore its leaders must be ready.

Experiences drawn from and benchmarking against many private and public organizations, including foreign services around the world, suggest that successful modernization programs depend on leaders whose individual purposes and external missions coincide. Of course, a lot of valuable work can be done without this, but the odds of real success are probably not great.

Foreign services have a lot to gain from sharing with other organizations, learning from others and using the wisdom available. Every organization, every leader, will have to find their own path, but this doesn't mean that common human experiences must be reinvented. The fundamentals are rather simple, but should not be over-simplified. The simple things are often the most difficult to fathom. The reason is that we don't give them enough attention. We should.