

Book Review

The Black Box of Governmental Learning: The Learning Spiral—A Concept to Organize Learning in Governments. Raul Blindenbacher and Bidjan Nashat. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2010. 183 pp. \$25.00 (cloth).

Restoring Values: Keys to Integrity, Ethical Behaviour and Good Governance. E. Sreedharan and Bharat Wakhlu, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010. 228 pp. \$39.95 (hard).

These two books present an overall spectrum of components that taken together constitute governance. Many problems of governance are embedded in learning and knowledge dissemination within the government before the challenges of policy execution and ethics are resolved. Raul Blindenbacher in his first book explained that shortcomings in democratic governance occurred because those in government failed to learn. Blindenbacher's thesis concerns the appropriate learning processes that should occur in government, which are the *sine qua non* of democratic governance. It suggests that most governmental policy failures, including those concerning capacity and strategies for achieving the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Project of 2002 (further elaborated in UN Millennium Project 2005), relate to a knowledge deficit. Because governments do not learn, "development" remains a set of disparate programs controlled by an age old bureaucracy. The book analyzes government failure to address even their routine responsibilities. It also explains the failure to achieve the goals now included under the new metaphor of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs prescribe action within a stipulated deadline without actually suggesting appropriate means to accomplish the goals. MDGs are no more than a reinstatement or a summary of a large number of developmental initiatives from the many past international summits. The stated goals of the 1990 International World Summit on Children, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, and the expert committees composed of the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and World Bank development specialists are now part of the MDGs. Thus, even though the goals that governments need to achieve are not new or novel, the repeated failure to perform makes success in achieving these MDG goals seem not merely elusive but impossible. Blindenbacher's "learning spiral" promises to resolve this and other governmental maladies.

According to development experts, problems of capacity and learning are faced by many developing countries when they attempt to initiate a

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frontal attack against poverty, illiteracy, disease, and preventable deaths. Blindenbacher indicates governments can improve the way they function by using appropriately designed learning methodologies to illuminate what he calls the *Black Box of Governmental Learning* and thus better attack the problems their populations face.

Goals linked to deadlines, as in the MDG framework, accelerate the demand for knowledge and the need for learning in government. The Government Innovation Network located at the Ash Institute of Democratic Governance at Harvard University has studied government initiatives that have changed lives of ordinary citizens. Eugene Bardach (1998), Rashman Lyndsay and Jen Hartley (2006), and Stanford Borins (2008) have also touched many related areas. Blindenbacher investigates the problem of knowledge in government using innovative tools of learning, equipped with studies in psychology, public administration, and management. The process of documenting information and knowledge within governments suggests that many issues that were so far understood as systemic and organizational are now surfacing as learning defects in government. This learning problem does not involve simply a mechanical module preparation but engages a philosophical, as well as a psychological, exercise. Blindenbacher's template for learning and accountability is a resource that leads to improved public policy. The template is an innovative device used to cover a vast expanse of information-based learning in a meaningful way.

The Black Box of Governmental Learning addresses the problem of garnering information from the evaluation frameworks used in government. With appropriate inputs to motivate the policymaker, on one hand, and encourage the involvement of stakeholders, on the other, a range of rigorous tools and methods help provide empirical information about what succeeds and what does not. In the absence of meaningful documentation of government experience and empirical findings, gaps between governance practice and theory continue to widen. The central argument of the author is that learning improves accountability, but because learning is nonlinear and highly contextual, there is an enormous need to document individual experience, specific area information, and special initiatives. The foreword by Hans-Martin Boehmer from the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group emphasizes the application of knowledge to improve future outcomes.

Blindenbacher's research highlights Lloyd Etheredge (1981), who introduced the term "governmental learning," which was further developed by Bennett and Howlett (1992) into three learning concepts: social learning, instrumental learning, and political learning. This stands in contrast to government learning to emphasize a more open or an input/output-related dynamic in a learning system.

Taking a cue from the books mentioned earlier, the author develops a learning spiral to organize events conceptualized in a template composed of eight consecutive stages: conceptualization, triangulation, accommodation, internalization, externalization, reconceptualization, transformation,

and configuration. The learning spiral appears to be a heuristic concept, significant to governance offering an useful alternative to the donor driven reforms, which according to Chant and McIlwaine (2009, 292–293) carry a “fear of success” in governance among donors. That is, genuine reforms would greatly reduce the donors’ power in terms of consultancies and advisory role to government agencies. Developmental agencies permit state governments to ignore many results that are clearly retrogressive to the governance of the country. In these circumstances, a learning spiral may help governments foresee how certain actions and policies constitute a sustainable agenda.

Blindenbacher has reinstated the importance of planning and design. The New Public Management (NPM) movement, which swept the globe starting in the late 1980s, narrowed the scope for planning. NPM scholars such as Aucoin (1990, 115–137) recommended explicit contracts and performance agreements in place of Allen Schick’s (1996) planning approach. Blindenbacher moves out of the narrow NPM framework and attempts to fill the gaps between isolated individual initiatives. This learning is not about skills and finances but a qualitative content analysis within a learning spiral. The performance record of government is abysmally poor and consequently constitutes a liturgy of “wasted resources, undelivered services, and denial of social, legal and economic protection for citizens, especially the poor” (1). Above all, the government continues to repeat these mistakes. In the section “A Concept to Organize Learning in Government,” the learning spiral template serves as practical guideline to organize learning. Templates provide the required focus and document the learning process when unconscious learning occurs.

Most transitional states of the Asia-Pacific region initiated evaluation tools and documentation of best practices as a learning device. Evaluation of best practices by the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management, the Global Development Research Centre of the University of Birmingham, the Governance Knowledge Centre of the Government of India, and the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) Malaysia and Chinese National Academy of Governance (CNAG) China have brought to surface many hidden realities about the limitations of adopted models. Nevertheless, because of the structure of the evaluations, the findings contributed very little to learning beyond legitimizing the preexisting top-down order. Worse still, if the evaluation was donor dependent for funds, then learning appeared to be further minimized.

The basic framework used to address the problem of learning is borrowed from systems theory, which attempts to look into the “governmental black box.” The transfer of knowledge within this box is a challenge for the learning spiral. One of Blindenbacher’s concerns is the need to protect knowledge from biases and personalization by developing knowledge structures that are based in abstract reality (51). Interestingly, in India and other Asia-Pacific countries, evaluation remains with the government

departments, thus reducing the scope for presenting the true picture of reforms. Moreover, as developing countries are unlikely to have funds available for evaluation in the near future, they will continue to be dependent upon external funds from the international donor agencies. Under these circumstances, a situation of collusion between administrator, evaluator, and sponsor may not be ruled. Thus, learning may fail to become an ongoing iterative process through which it is constantly reviewed, renewed, and replaced (85).

Those in academia may feel comforted to read about international conferences as important learning tools. The eight templates of learning provide a scientific framework to obtain feedback from participants of international workshops and to produce reports on appropriate learning. The author in conclusion suggests a framework of evaluation-based conferences and capacity-building workshops using multimedia training tools developed by many international organizations. The book carries an important message for governments across the world that investment in appropriate learning tools for administrators is the only way to improve and sustain enlightened governance.

E. Sreedharan and Bharat Wakhlu in *Restoring Values, Keys to Integrity, Ethical Behaviour and Good Governance* address causes of falling values and degenerating public life in India. Many articles published in this book were selected from the National Conclave organized in New Delhi by the Foundation for the Restoration of National Values in November 2008. The contributors to the book are public luminaries who have closely followed the rise of new India as it raises skyscrapers in villages and builds rails for subway trains under city roads. This development of New India has hounded ordinary people of all classes and occupations, while a minority of influential firms has acquired wealth by influencing public institutions and distorting accountability regulations. The editors suggest strong measures that are needed beyond the narrow domains of theoretical academic debate to go against the morally outrageous corruption in government. Hence, a full-blown people's movement or a war against corruption in government has now become a necessity. Those who are looking for a standard academic discourse on corruption may be disappointed, but the book may interest those who desire to resolve the paradox of the crumbling body politic of India that has somehow sustained a high growth rate.

There are comparable books that focus on the same issues in other Asia and Pacific countries. For instance, Tunku Abdul Aziz (2004) reflects that same impatience and loss of trust with governmental institutions in Malaysia as does Sreedharan and Wakhlu in India. However, neither of the two books has developed a set of principles or theories that facilitate further examination of the issues. Brian Woodal (1996) and Nadirsyah Hose (2010) succeed in providing an anchor for analysis that is missing in *Restoring Values*. For instance, Hose examines the potential influence legal reforms have on the transition toward modernization in Indonesia. However, *Restoring Values* was not aimed at generating understanding

about the state capacity to tackle corruption but, rather, to provide a narrative on corruption in India and generate awareness of the factual data on corrupt state departments. In some instances, the book may deter policymakers from using the information presented in the book because there is no framework that would allow the reader to analyze the range of ethically relevant information. However, the book contains information from original sources, such as policymakers or individuals close to the policymaking process, making it a good reference for research on ethics and corruption in India.

The consistent failure of the government to reach out to people with appropriate programs for development is an ethical failure. This failure is compounded by the diverse culture and geography in India that leads to a difficulty of ethical ordering of public goods. In this situation, the policymakers may suggest an a priori list of ethically relevant issues of utilitarian homogeneity (Sen 1987, 62) that would then prevent any further philosophical discussion on ethics and corruption. The contributors to Sreedharan and Wakhlu's book suggest introspection and spiritual cleaning without a deeper philosophical enquiry on the Socratic question, "how should one live?" This Socratic question is the at the core of ethics and suggests, "human ends of all policies."

Wakhlu's comprehensive but insightful introduction captures the outrage and anguish at the falling public values in India. Sreedharan is the administrative leader and the chief executive officer of the great Metro Project in Delhi, initiated to modernize Delhi transportation infrastructure prior to the Commonwealth Games. He is more aware than anyone else of the politics of power that can obstruct any action or effort aimed against corruption. He explores the reasons that place India in the 85th position of the 180 countries surveyed for the Global Corruption Index carried out by Transparency International.

The book *Restoring Values* analyzes some of the prominent corporate scandals such as the recent Satyam Scam, which rocked the Indian legislature and shook all investors. The impact of this scam on institutional ethics has been logically scrutinized by Arun Maira and carried forward into a more insightful understanding of policymakers who occupy the top slots in democratic governance. Sreedharan, Wakhlu, Madhu Trehan Pratyush Sinha, and Krishna Murthy remind the reader of a movement toward an impeccable recruitment process for the highest public posts. Varma, Balakrishnan, Karthikeyan, Vittal, and Shankar Sen's probe of the law enforcement and justice system suggests a long-drawn battle that will require, among other things, institutional and constitutional revivalism and narrowing of individual discretion. Abdul Kalam's piece on "Possible Solutions for Nurturing National Values" suggests profit with integrity by inculcating an enlightened citizenship. Venkatachaliah focuses on legislative dimensions of the ethical problem, but this becomes more meaningful when read with Advani's attention to the leadership question. It is interesting to find voices from religious sects such as Father Kunnunkal

and Swami Bhoomananda coming in to rescue the “wanderer” in the degenerated world of politics. Important figures in Indian politics such as the Speaker in the Lower House, Somnath Chatterjee, stood as a steel frame against corruption in Parliament and has written a meaningful section on constitutional morality in the Parliament. Jayaprakash Narayan draws a close interdependence of institutions and values that is more specifically and objectively attended to in the last section by Gopal Ganesh in his explorations of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission Reports.

The contributors have not touched upon the history of independent India, which is replete with problems of policy design and planning resulting in corrupt governance. Vinoba Bhave, who was the leader of land movement in India, popularly known as the Bhoodan movement or voluntary land surrender by the rich land owners to the poor in villages, rejected the First Five-Year Plan presented to him by the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru. All subsequent plans demonstrate planning failures that encouraged corruption in development programs. Opportunities of collusion, *mala fide* action or inaction, nepotism, bribery, and above all, tolerance to a regime of corruption helped corruption to grow and to escape the demands of accountability.

Many scams have shaken the Indian government since independence and many civil rights activists have spent their lives fighting this evil in public lives despite castigation and obloquy that they suffered. Anna Hazare, Sunderlal Bahuguna (late), and Medha Patkar are familiar names in India, but Aruna Roy’s Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan movement against corruption has brought the right to information as a weapon in the hands of ordinary people with which the fight against corruption has found a new momentum. Few outside India would know about the massive governance revolution waiting to unfold with the implementation of the 15 reports prepared by the Second Administrative Reforms Commission in 2007–2009. But this might never take place despite the moral outrage of people captured in the book. In the end, progress will hinge on political will and leadership, which if given sufficient impetus through evaluation-based learning, may change the face of governance.

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