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Taj Mahal, Agra, India. Courtesy, Simon Steinberger

INDIA

A State of Responsiveness Amid Crisis – Learnings from India

— Dr. Vijaya Sunder M

Responsiveness is one of the most often used terms in business to represent a primary source of agility in organizational systems. Firms that respond quickly to uncertain situations often succeed. However, responsiveness under a higher level of uncertainty is challenging. Another way of looking at uncertainty is to define an opportunity within the crisis. Put differently,

uncertainty is not an everyday routine and hence determines an opportunity to demonstrate leadership through responsiveness.

The COVID19 situation is a classic example of a highly uncertain context. Ever since the World Health Organisation (WHO) characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the routine life across the world has been disrupted. Several countries have gone into a state of lockdown, leaving significant economic disruptions around the world. As social organizations, nations have been under a compelling need to demonstrate responsiveness, not merely to safeguard the respective economies, but also in the interest of the safety of the citizens. This article describes a few initiatives that the Government of India has undertaken as a response to the COVID19 crisis. Being the second-largest country in terms of population, with a wide area of 3.2 million square kilometers, it has been a mammoth task for the Indian government to respond to the pandemic, within a thriving demographic setup. But in our opinion, the government has done a splendid job amid the crisis. The United Nations and the WHO have praised India's response to the pandemic as "comprehensive and robust," for containing the spread and building necessary healthcare infrastructure.

Nationwide Lockdowns

India experienced a 14-hour voluntary public curfew on 22 March. Two mandatory lockdowns followed it. First, on 24 March, the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in consultation with the state governments, ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, affecting the entire 1.3 billion population of India. As it was apparent that the COVID infections in other nations have been increasing exponentially, on 14 April, a decision to extend the nationwide lockdown till 3 May was administered. According to the WHO COVID19 tracker, India has been able to control the pandemic growth compared to other developed countries like the US and the UK due to this timely measure.

However, lockdown is not a permanent fix. It had its adverse side effects on the Indian economy. The chief economic advisor to the Government of India (GOI) said that there is a drop of 3.1% in India's growth quarter of the fiscal year 2020 due to this effect. Nevertheless, the health and safety of the Indian citizens was prioritised, and several parallel initiatives have been taken by the GOI. The responsiveness in decision making and timely implementation is a true example of leadership under crisis.

Economic Package

With the adverse crisis that COVID19 has brought into every nation, the operations in India have been severely affected. In some way, the large corporations could come back quickly due to their diverse portfolios, and the crisis serves a significant attack on small and medium enterprises. The PM, addressing the citizens of the country, announced Rs Twenty lakh crores (Rs. 20,000 billion) package to various sectors of the country. During the announcement, it was mentioned that "the COVID19 pandemic has brought an opportunity for India to be self-reliant....21st century belongs to India." This echoes with the management quote — *Where others see obstacles, leaders must see opportunities*. The GOI package has given some relief to the micro, small, and medium enterprises to recover back from the COVID attack.

While the state governments led by leaders of several political parties supported the GOI in effectively responding to the crisis, the federal leadership played a significant role. The common man's problems were understood and empathized. Under a special provision, the

GOI had announced that citizens could withdraw three months' salary from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) account amid the coronavirus crisis.

During the lockdown, an estimated 140 million people lost employment while salaries were cut for many others. This has created a significant disruption among the middle-income segment of the Indian population. To address the situation, the government declared a plan to set up a chain of 2 million retail shops called "Suraksha Stores" across India, to provide daily essentials to citizens while maintaining stringent safety norms.

On 28 March, the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund was set up to provide relief to the affected people. Towards helping rural India that constitutes about 70% of the population, GOI declared that the poor households using 5 kg cooking gas cylinders would be entitled to eight free refills in three months as a relief from the disruptions due to the COVID19 outbreak. Further, GOI has been determined to provide providing free cooking gas cylinders for three months to over 83 million economically poor women. A large number of farmers around the country who grow perishables also faced uncertainty. As an initiative by GOI, 60 million farmers of India received a total grant of Rs.138,550 million as loans with a waive off of the first instalment of credit payback. Over 20 million construction workers received financial support worth Rs 30,660 million under the Building and Construction Workers' Fund.

Shramik Special Trains

As it became apparent that the lockdown would continue beyond the second phase too, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) was concerned about the migrant laborers in India. Limited job opportunities in a few economically weaker states of India had led laborers to migrate to other states for their livelihood. The COVID19 lockdowns have disabled the migrant laborers' movement back to their native states, a major concern to the MHA. Amid the social distancing norms imposed during the lockdown, transporting 6.3 million migrant laborers across different destinations in a country was a major challenge. However, GOI demonstrated a high level of responsiveness to overcome this challenge.

Indian Railways, a public sector enterprise established under the leadership of GOI, decided to run special "Shramik trains" to transport migrant laborers across India. By providing two meals, drinking water, and personal protection equipment, Indian Railways coordinated with all major states of India to safely transport 6.2 million migrant laborers in a record time of 48 days. Amid the political pressures and time constraints, this challenging project was executed without compromising on the safety of laborers. One success metric of the project was that none of these migrant laborers were infected during the transit. More than 5,000 Shramik special trains, with each train carrying about 1,200 passengers, carried out the mammoth task. State governments and non-government organizations provided their support to this initiative. The key highlight of the initiative was that 36 pregnant women delivered babies during the travel, with utmost health care provided to both mothers and the kids under the complex situation.

With growing infections, Indian Railways has put their train coaches into an effective purpose in a timely way. More than 50% of coaches were converted into COVID19 coaches towards providing treatment for the COVID19 positive patients. In each of these isolation coaches, the four toilets have been turned into two bathrooms. Ventilators, oxygen tanks, and other medical items were arranged with each coach mapped to a hospital in respective Indian towns from

which doctors were scheduled to attend the COVID19 cases. This paved the way to create more beds to accommodate the growing number of infected patients towards supplementing the other health infrastructure initiatives taken by the GOI.

Building a Health Infrastructure

The public health facilities in India dedicated to COVID19 case management were classified into three. First, dedicated COVID hospitals offer comprehensive care primarily for those who have been clinically assigned as severe. Second, dedicated COVID health centers offer care for all cases that have been clinically assigned as moderate. Finally, dedicated COVID care centers offer care only for cases that have been clinically assigned as mild or very mild cases. The responsiveness that the GOI has demonstrated on this front has resulted in 7,740 such facilities across the country. 656,769 isolation beds, 305,567 beds for confirmed cases, 351,204 beds for suspected cases, 99,492 oxygen supported beds, 1,696 facilities with oxygen manifolds, and 34,076 ICU beds were created in less than two months as an outcome.

Further, the GOI has been investing heavily in health research and development to discover a vaccine for COVID19. A top scientific advisor to the government, in an interview about health infrastructure, said, “efforts that normally take 15 years and cost US\$300 million were being condensed into a 12-month period.” Additionally, GOI is also providing medical insurance cover of Rs.0.5 million per person to health workers fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

While the physical infrastructure development efforts have been significant, a major concern on creating awareness among the people towards health and hygiene was dominant. On 2 April, GOI released “Aarogya Setu,” a mobile app to spread awareness of COVID19 and to connect essential COVID19 related health services to the people of India. Aarogya Setu has been available in both Android and iOS app stores. The app is enabled with contemporary technology and has the capability to work with Bluetooth to determine the risk if one has been near (within six feet of) a COVID19 infected person by scanning through a database of known cases across India. The app reached more than 100 million installs in 40 days. While speaking about the Aarogya Setu, the CEO of the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) mentioned, “the app has been able to identify more than 3,000 hotspots in 3-17 days ahead of time.”

Alongside these developments, social distancing norms have been advertised in television channels. Police cops and railway security officers were involved in conducting awareness sessions on health safety measures and their importance to adhere under crisis.

Key Takeaways

The complex problem of COVID19 has been the same across countries, with no exception. However, how every country responded to the crisis helps us learn a few management lessons. Being the second-largest country in population, with a high population density and low literacy rate compared to several developed countries like the US and countries in the European Union, India responded to the crisis in an agile way. Under the able leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India, comprising of 28 states and 8 union territories led by various political parties, came together and operated as a corporation. Participative leadership paved the way for responsive governance and timely decision making.

Three important management lessons that one can derive from India’s COVID19 response landscape are as follows. First, responsiveness includes flexibility. The GOI demonstrated a

great level of flexibility to put things into different purposes during the crisis. Converting train coaches as COVID19 facilities is a classic example of such an effort. Second, responsiveness includes agility. While flexibility denotes “willingness to change” – agility is beyond flexibility and denotes “timely responsiveness.” The way GOI developed the health infrastructure to accommodate the increasing number of cases has been recognized as a great example of agility by WHO.

Finally, another key management lesson one can learn is the “adaptability” exhibited by GOI. It is the excellent support and adaptability exhibited by various stakeholders, including 1.3 billion citizens of India that determines a true transformation, a crisis demands. In line with systems thinking research, the efforts of the system may be incomplete, unless all the sub-systems adapt themselves to inherit the system characteristics. While the leadership of the prime minister in terms of flexibility and agility has been commendable, the adaptability of other sub-systems like state governments, private sector firms, citizen communities, etc. has supported the leadership efforts.

About the Author



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