

# An Executing Executive, Please?



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In his Art of War, 6th-century military strategist Sun Tzu had famously written that “strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory, and tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat”. In the five-year period, the PR machinery of the outgoing NDA government has been going all out to project success of various initiatives. The administration either defined and redefined outcome objectives based on the evolving results, or tweaked data to prove the desired results. From GDP correction to employment statistics, the evidence to this has been overwhelming.

The government had the best chance to reverse India’s dismal trend of ‘execution deficiency’, given the strong majority vested on Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But successful execution requires a good governance system around the mission. A committed leadership is both necessary and sufficient for that — contrary to the belief that this alone is unable to carry out execution.

But, alas, the Modi administration lost a golden opportunity by missing

strategy for tactics, and not making use of frameworks to align systems. NITI Aayog, on its part, failed to guide the PMO, and ended up mimicking the erstwhile Planning Commission — and, worse, becoming more of an event management unit of the PMO.

If you don’t know where you want to go, any road will take you there. This government was exactly doing that with metrics — never defining what success (‘achhe din’?) looked like, and letting outcomes define the metrics to show success.

Take two of GoI’s flagship projects: Startup India and Make in India. Various government folks prematurely chest-thumped India as an ‘innovation nation’ based on the number of startups, rather than by the



Now, for some follow-through

kind of innovation being produced. As for Make in India, without much investment in the manufacturing sector, the government was happy to simply trumpet the World Bank’s ‘ease of doing business index’ improvement as a metric of success.

By not having clearly defined success metrics, governance suffered and real success eluded India. Only infrastructure projects and public image building took off very well.

Yes, this government has been fiscally disciplined, something that is indeed necessary and vital. But just sticking to budgeted expenditure won’t deliver results. It is a wrong metric to judge *performance*. GoI and NITI Aayog should have drawn up a strategic change agenda based on what success would look like during the policy period.

Post-Independence India has not seen a single elected government — at the Centre, state, city or panchayat — delivering in full what was promised before elections. This is a dismal record that’s much worse than in the corporate world, where at least one in 10 companies delivers what it promises its shareholders. Any incumbent government wanting to change this failure rate of good governance will do well to configure the strategic change agenda to define ‘citizen-jobs to be done’, instead of maintaining status quo of a long wish list and sub-optimal allocation of budgets to

various ministries, irrespective of mission or policy.

A balanced execution agenda (BEA) can help governments communicate the cause and effect of policy objectives in themes and perspectives, and allocate responsibilities and monitor the performance of driver objectives. The outgoing government only looked at outcome metrics that cherry-pick success. Perhaps the new government, even if led by Prime Minister Modi again, can utilise a BEA that organises various objectives around five perspectives — mission, constituent, fiscal, processes and government capital — to facilitate execution with a clear definition of objectives to be achieved, metrics and targets.

A strong leader can overcome the biggest threat to execution: bureaucratic resistance to thinking differently and taking risks. He or she can shake this inertia to embrace new frameworks that are proven to deliver results. Despite the non-delivery of promises made in 2014, if Modi gets the 2019 Lok Sabha mandate today, this time around, NITI Aayog must prepare to drive execution and good governance. If any other political formation or party gets the mandate, it could start on the same trajectory without baggage, from scratch.

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