

Bhagavad-Gita: History's First Manual on Results-Based Management

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Background: This is one in a series of articles in which the author attempts to relate Eastern philosophy to contemporary programme planning and evaluation.

Purpose: The author compares and contrasts the Bhagavad-gita with contemporary guidance on Results-based Management.

Setting: Not applicable.

Subjects: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: The author used the four pillars identified as being the base of RBM from a UNDP technical note as the framework for the analysis.

Keywords: Results-based Management; RBM; causality; accountability; indicators; United Nations Development Programme; UNDP; Krishna; Arjuna; Bhagavad-gita; Gita; renunciation; unattached action; Karma; Kimo's rules

Findings: Not applicable.

Conclusions: In RBM strategic goals are defined that initiate a causal process in which results are specified to achieve the goals, and these, in-turn, determine programmes, processes and resources.

One of the central ideas of the Bhagavad-gita is the performance of activities without attachment or any expectation of results. This is a concept to which the tome refers as renunciation. Furthermore, the Gita states that renunciation enables us to enter into a conscious alignment with the higher order.

Introduction

The responsibility for opinions expressed in this study rests solely with the author, and the publication does not constitute an endorsement by the International Labour Office or the Evaluation Capacity Development Group of the opinions expressed here.

Many organizations within the United Nations system have declared their intention to implement results-based management (RBM) as part of the 1997 reform programme (OIOS, 2008). OECD DAC defines RBM as "A management strategy focusing on performance and achievement of outputs, outcomes and impacts" (DAC, 2002),

According to OIOS (2008), there are no internationally agreed upon standards that define what should be included within a results-based management system. Therefore, many agencies, programmes and funds have developed their own

guidance on RBM. One of the earliest of these was a technical note published in 2002 by the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP).

However, from my on-going review of the Eastern philosophy, I have identified guidance on Results-based Management that was published even earlier than that of UNDP, about 2200 years earlier, to be exact. That guidance is the Bhagavad-Gita (to which I will affectionately refer as the "Gita").

The Bhagavad-Gita is Hindu scripture that narrates conversation between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna which took place in the middle of the battlefield before the start of the Kurukshetra War.

In the conversation, Krishna responds to Arjuna's confusion and moral dilemma about fighting his own extended family, who had misappropriated a disputed empire. The Lord explained to Arjuna his duties as a warrior and

prince, the law of Karma, reincarnation, and of course, RBM.

I thought that it might be interesting to compare and contrast ancient and contemporary RBM guidance. I will use the four pillars identified as being the base of RBM in UNDP's technical note (see below) as the framework for the analysis.

- the definition of strategic goals which provide a focus for action;
- the specification of expected results which contribute to these goals and align programmes, processes and resources behind them;
- on-going monitoring and assessment of performance, integrating lessons learnt into future planning;
- improved accountability, based on continuous feedback to improve performance.

The Definition of Strategic Goals That Provide a Focus for Action

Appendix 1 contains the Theory of Change (ToC) for RBM (Evaluation Office, 2007). According to the ToC, the definition of strategic goals initiates a causal process with five key elements. The goals specify the achievement of certain results, and they, in-turn, provide a focus for action. As such, the goals should lead to practical, coherent, concrete and time-bound courses of action that conduce to measurable results.

One of the central ideas of the Gita is the performance of activities without attachment or any expectation of results. This is a concept to which the tome refers as renunciation. Furthermore, the Gita states that renunciation enables us to enter into a conscious alignment with the higher order.

The Gita suggests that attachment springs from desire and so, to the extent that strategic goals engender desired results, they should probably be avoided. This idea was famously expressed as one of Kimo's rules: Goals are deceptive; the unaimed arrow never misses.

So what would programmes and projects that do not have strategic goals and objectives look like?

They would probably be aligned with broad purposes, which I see as being different from goals and objectives. Instead of being determined a priori, they would have emergent properties. In addition, they would probably somehow tie into

naturally occurring cycles rather than upon mechanistic causality (Russon & Russon, 2010).

The Specification of Expected Results Which Contribute to These Goals and Align Programmes, Processes and Resources Behind Them

According to the ToC for RBM (again, see Annex 1), the results specified to achieve the strategic goals determine programmes, processes and resources. The advantage of RBM is that it enables managers to verify the alignment of the elements in the causal process.

Often the alignment is verified using "if-then" logic; if we do this, then we will get that. The implication is that scarce resources will only be expended on actions that are viewed as bringing results.

The Gita invites us to transcend this notion of mechanistic causality. When we think of ourselves as the doers of activities, we adopt a false sense of proprietorship. This is because the accomplishment of action is caused by factors that are often largely outside of our control. The Gita identifies five such factors:

- Context (the place of action)
- Agents (the performer)
- Means of action (the various senses)
- Action to be performed (the many different kinds of endeavor)
- Motivation (the super-soul)

This new, or perhaps better said, ancient, orientation towards action, frees us evaluators to think about the contribution from many factors instead of attribution of the few contained in the strategic framework (Russon & Russon, 2010). The Gita counsels that, despite everything we do; results often come of their own accord.

On-Going Monitoring and Assessment of Performance, Integrating Lessons Learnt Into Future Planning

Indicators are established to measure achievement of the strategic goals. Indicators should be clear and straightforward to interpret and should, to the extent possible, be quantifiable and consistent to enable measurement over time. In order to ensure high-quality indicators, we often use the SMART mnemonic device. Indicators should be

Specific
Measureable
Appropriate (or Attainable)
Reliable (or Realistic, or Relevant)
Time-bound (or Timely, or Trackable)

According to the Gita, “One who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among men [sic], and he is in the transcendental position, although engaged in all sorts of activities.”

The challenge that this poses is: how can one monitor action that seeks an intuitive cooperation with the natural order without the interference of ignorant human action (Russon, 2008). Conversely, how can one monitor action that is inaction. (Ernest Hemingway is famously quoted as saying “Never mistake motion for action”.)

Improved Accountability, Based on Continuous Feedback Performance

OECD (2002) defines accountability as the “Obligation to demonstrate that work has been conducted in compliance with agreed rules and standards or to report fairly and accurately on performance results vis-a-vis mandated roles and/or plans. This may require a careful, even legally defensible, demonstration that the work is consistent with the contract terms.”

The Gita concerns itself with accountability to a high order rule called the Law of Karma. Karma refers to the universal law of cause and effect. It reflects the notion that every action leads to a result that reflects the nature of that action (Russon & Russon, 2009).

According to the Gita, action based on a mechanistic causal orientation would be subject to the Law of Karma. However, the Gita goes on to state that, when one acts without attachment, one is able to transcend the Law of Karma. The tome

states definitively that the highest perfect stage of freedom from reaction is through unattached action.

The implication is that, when one acts without expectation of results, one enters into a conscious alignment with the higher order (Russon & Russon, 2009). This may enable one to realize synergies and economies of scale that would not be possible when one is acting from a mechanistic causal orientation.

Conclusion

Finally, and in conclusion, the Gita offers wisdom about the permanence of things. It says, “When the senses contact sense objects, a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These experiences are fleeting they come and go. Bear them patiently.” I find myself wondering about the permanence of Results-based Management. Is it here to stay, or like cold and heat, pleasure and pain; is it a fleeting experience?

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Appendix

The theory of change for RBM (Evaluation Office, 2007)

- (1) Set out a strategic framework that describes the objectives and desired results of the organization and the strategies to be used to achieve those results.
- (2) Develop programmes and sub-programmes in the organization aligned to the strategic results framework, showing more specifics on the results expected—resources, outputs, and the logic, sequence and timing of outcomes expected to lead to the accomplishment of the programme objectives—and how the results are to be measured.
- (3) Measure and analyze results achieved and the contribution being made by the programme to the expected results through both ongoing monitoring and periodic evaluations.
- (4) Use the results information gathered to improve the design and delivery of programmes.
- (5) Report on the levels of performance achieved as part of the accountability process.