

Profile: Uma Mahadevan– Managing for Empowerment in the Indian Administrative Service (Additional Chief Secretary)

“They have the right to love their work as much as I love my work”

“I’m a curious person, as it is. I want to know everything about everything.” Uma’s voice fills the room when she speaks. She laughs frequently when storytelling, and with Uma, every conversation is a story.

When asked about what drew her to the civil service, Uma speaks of the generations that came before her – to their achievements, but also their hardships. She draws inspiration from family members who sought justice for their country as freedom fighters. Uma “wanted to fight against injustice” with the same commitment her uncle had dedicated to the country. She was also attracted to the civil service because she cares deeply about reducing social inequalities. Her grandparents were born into families that lacked personal resources, and who couldn’t access education due to the absence of public support.

Uma had the benefit of more resources and felt strong support from her parents, but she was struck by the stories of injustice that seemed to surround her. The woman who cleaned her family’s house would sometimes arrive with bruises from an abusive relationship that went unchecked; women in other parts of her family were denied education or control over their futures because of their gender. “I felt that if the government can change that, then I should be a part of that government and I should work there.”

When Uma looked around at the urgent social inequities of her generation, she thought, “this has got to be changed and I want to be part of something that can help change this.” She “want[ed] to enter public service to actually serve. I mean to do something and to improve people’s lives.” To say that Uma is motivated to do this work is an understatement. “Ultimately, the only thing that really is exciting about this job is that *you get to work*. It’s enormously exciting.”

Over the course of her career, Uma has worked in the sectors of land administration, literacy, poverty alleviation, health, atomic energy, agriculture, women’s empowerment, nutrition, rural development, and democratic decentralization. In each role, she’s kept central the interests of the communities she serves. She was still quite junior when she began taking a principled and creative approach to her roles. “I started appropriating developmental functions to myself. I started saying that if I’m doing a regulatory job, like clearing 10 or 20 huts that are in an encroachment, then I will move them *only* if I find the right place where I can move them and build replacement houses for them and ensure that there’s water and electricity and so on.”

Uma is not just a Mission Driven Bureaucrat in her own right; she also manages in a supportive way, attracting and kindling the mission motivation of others. As part of a campaign that she launched to fight malnutrition in the state of Karnataka, Uma displayed “MRIs of the brains of a stunted child at the age of two and three months, and a well-nourished child.” She believes that “it’s very important as a leader to make everybody part of the big picture”, which is why she not only showed the pictures of the MRIs to the highest-level leadership in the state but also to all her field-level staff. “We showed the same thing [to everyone on the team].”

Also in Karnataka, Uma oversaw a major initiative to support early childhood education, including providing meals to children, educators, and families. She had 125,000 frontline staff members working directly in their communities, and the initiative required everyone to go above and beyond their official work requirements. Uma motivated employees, not with financial reward, but by explaining the mission and convincing everybody of its effectiveness in improving welfare; “I communicated like hell. I mean, I communicated, we all communicated, all of us and we said that every single person must do this because it's the right thing to do.” Her motivation and supportive approach “made everybody the owner of a big story, [so] they feel that this is worth achieving and that's what we did.”

After she explained the mission to her team and convinced them of its value for the public, Uma saw her staff “carry it forward.” While the program was set up to support those living in the local region, it was clear that the mission point was to assist *all* families. When temporary residents (who may not have technically met the qualification criteria to access support from the program) were in need, employees didn’t hesitate to serve them. In fact, staff “didn’t feel that they had to ask [Uma or other managers] for special permissions to cover everybody because we said that the scheme is for everybody.” Bureaucrats, empowered and driven by the mission point, weren’t worried about asking for permission or about some future regulatory process when enacting the program.

Uma’s management style doesn’t rely on strict hierarchy; she closely consulted her staff throughout the projects: “Even while developing the program, it's not that we imposed something saying that this is our wisdom, and we know more than you. We said, how do you think we can do this?”

Passion is the main ingredient to Uma’s success as a manager and bureaucrat. The excitement of doing work that matters has paved the way for many great accomplishments. Her individual success, though, is only one piece of the puzzle. As a leader, she knows that “if you show that you're enjoying your work, it kind of becomes a little infectious.” She firmly believe that “There's no *I* in government; it's all about getting the entire system to work.”

Uma’s advice for others in similar environments? Catalyzing the motivation of other bureaucrats is core to her leadership approach. She volunteers that not all bureaucrats have the same level of mission motivation - she believes about 25% are already mission motivated (Binas). Another 50%, she estimates, can change with the right leadership and management (Samirs). For Uma these mission motivateable Samirs “are the ones who are exciting because that's where I can show and challenge myself [as a leader].”

Uma thinks individuals’ motivation can change – but also expresses unprompted that more ought to be done to recruit the mission motivated Binas and motivateable Samirs, as the next chapter will explore. She thinks that “selection has to get to the heart of what motivates people to get into this.” Doing well on an assessment test not the same as having the mission motivation to do well when serving in the Indian Administrative Service.

It's worth it, in Uma’s view, to make sure the Government is staffed by people who are mission motivated, and managed in a way that maximizes that motivation and performance. The work of

government can be “a lot of minutiae and a lot of small talk and boring meetings.” But the impact that it can have, “it’s just so awesome.” So, for Uma “it's just been the job of a lifetime.”

When I spoke to Uma it had been two and a half years since she led child education initiatives in Karnataka. She had visited the department the previous week to see if the program was still going strong and felt that it had “carried on because everybody feels that it's their own, and they have the right to. They have the right to love their work as much as I love my work.” After hearing about her passion, and her approach to leadership, it's easy to imagine Uma managing so as to kindle the mission motivation and performance of those fortunate enough to serve with her.