



LIST

LECTURES FOR INDIA'S
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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A CRISP FRIDAY KNOWLEDGE SERIES

INAUGURAL LECTURE

Making Things Happen

From Policy Intent to Administrative Execution

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Inaugural lecture delivered to the CRISP team

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Editorial Note

This publication presents an edited and academically organised version of Shri Anil Swaroop's address to the CRISP team. It preserves the substance, examples and practical character of the lecture while removing oral repetition, correcting obvious transcription errors, consolidating the question-and-answer discussion, and arranging the argument thematically. It should therefore be read as an authorised-style edited lecture rather than a verbatim transcript. Statements of experience, interpretation and emphasis remain attributable to the speaker.

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Abstract

India does not suffer from a shortage of ideas, policies or laws; its more persistent deficit is execution. This lecture develops a practitioner's framework for converting policy intent into results. It argues that an initiative can endure only when eight conditions are understood together: political acceptability, social desirability, technological feasibility, financial viability, administrative doability, judicial tenability, emotional relatability and environmental sustainability. Drawing on administrative experience in coal, health insurance, education and intergovernmental coordination, the lecture shows how implementation depends on stakeholder understanding, credible value propositions, transparent processes, localised capacity building and leadership that protects and motivates teams. It further distinguishes scale from sustainability: sustainability comes from systems that create value for participants, while scale requires a distributed network of committed carriers of the idea. The concluding argument is both institutional and personal: effective public action begins with a disciplined focus on what can be changed, the humility to learn, and the courage to act without fear of honest mistakes.

Keywords: *policy implementation; governance; public administration; stakeholder management; administrative leadership; transparency; capacity building; scale; sustainability*

Contents

1. The Central Challenge: Execution	4
2. An Eight-Context Framework for Implementation	4
2.1 Political acceptability: understand the decision-maker	6
2.2 Emotional relatability: treat stakeholders as partners	7
2.3 The remaining contexts: from aspiration to operational fit	8
3. Capacity Building Must Be Local and Relational	8
4. Leadership for Execution	9
4.1 Focus on the present and act within the sphere of control	9
4.2 Build credibility brick by brick	10
4.3 Replace fear of error with transparent learning	10
4.4 Practise humility and disciplined non-attachment	10
5. From Value Proposition to Sustainable Scale	11
6. Implementation in Politically Sensitive Domains	12
7. An Execution Agenda for CRISP	13
Conclusion: The Ethics of Practical Action	14
About the Speaker	15
Source and Publication Note	15

Figures and Tables

- Figure 1. The eight interdependent contexts of implementation
- Figure 2. From policy intent to administrative result: the execution sequence
- Figure 3. Stakeholder architecture of an intervention
- Figure 4. Two architectures: sustainability and scale
- Figure 5. The capacity-building feedback loop
- Table 1. The eight contexts and their governing implementation questions
- Table 2. Illustrative administrative cases classified by context

1. The Central Challenge: Execution

There is no dearth of ideas in India. A seminar on how the country should be governed, how its crises should be managed, or how its public systems should be improved can continue indefinitely. Policies and laws, too, are abundant. Yet the citizen on the ground is rarely interested in the elegance of a policy document. The citizen asks a simpler question: what has actually reached me?

The central challenge of governance is therefore not merely to formulate policy but to make things happen. Governments frequently produce ambitious programmes and carefully worded frameworks, only to falter at the point of execution. For organisations such as CRISP, whose work lies close to public systems and field realities, this distinction is fundamental. The appropriate unit of analysis is not the announcement, sanction or guideline; it is the result experienced by people.

Implementation cannot be approached as the mechanical delivery of a centrally designed plan. It is an exercise in understanding context. Administrators and development practitioners cannot freely redesign every circumstance or stakeholder they encounter. Their practical power lies in reading the environment accurately, adapting their own approach and finding the point at which movement becomes possible.

“The real problem is not ideas, policies or laws. The real problem is execution—making things happen.”

2. An Eight-Context Framework for Implementation

For an idea to travel from intention to impact, it must be examined against eight interdependent contexts. The framework is not meant to discourage action by presenting an impossible checklist. Its purpose is diagnostic: to help practitioners recognise the environment in which they must act and identify the constraints that require adaptation.



Figure 1. The eight interdependent contexts an initiative must satisfy to travel from intent to impact.

Context	Implementation question
Political acceptability	Will the relevant decision-maker permit, endorse or champion the initiative?
Social desirability	Does the proposal respond to the lived interests, norms and aspirations of the people concerned?
Technological feasibility	Is the technology appropriate, accessible and capable of adding value in the actual setting?
Financial viability	Are resources available, and can early evidence justify continued or expanded financing?

Context	Implementation question
Administrative doability	Do institutions possess the structure, personnel, skills and operating arrangements required for delivery?
Judicial tenability	Is the proposal compatible with governing laws, rules and regulations?
Emotional relatability	Can colleagues, communities and other stakeholders see themselves as partners and connect with the purpose?
Environmental sustainability	Can the intervention endure without imposing unacceptable ecological costs?

Table 1. The eight contexts and their governing implementation questions.

2.1 Political acceptability: understand the decision-maker

Political acceptability is not confined to elected politicians. It refers to acceptance by whoever has the authority to decide: a minister, secretary, district collector, governing board, donor or organisational leader. A sound idea that cannot be communicated to the decision-maker will not travel far.

Prejudice is a practical obstacle. If one approaches politicians as uniformly corrupt, bureaucrats as uniformly obstructive, or civil-society organisations as uniformly adversarial, one stops observing the individual in front of oneself. Every decision-maker has a particular disposition, incentive structure and way of receiving information. Effective engagement begins with preparation: learn about the person, choose the moment and frame the proposal in terms that are relevant to that person's responsibilities.

A lesson from my tenure in Uttar Pradesh illustrates the difference between compromise and accommodation. When a capable district magistrate was suspended for an error that was not truly his, a direct confrontation with the Chief Minister would probably have produced no remedy and might have created another casualty. I waited for an appropriate moment and presented the matter in a manner that allowed the decision to be reversed without publicly challenging authority. The officer was reinstated. No law or principle was compromised; the communication was accommodated to the decision-making context in order to secure a just administrative result.

The same discipline shaped a later discussion with the Prime Minister on health insurance. I did not merely repeat the technical case. I prepared a value proposition: how the instrument could improve access for the poorest households and why that outcome mattered to the government. Preparation transformed a policy preference into a persuasive administrative case.

2.2 Emotional relatability: treat stakeholders as partners

Political acceptability concerns those who decide; emotional relatability concerns those who must cooperate, implement or benefit. Government often relies on hierarchy: an instruction is issued and compliance is expected. Such compliance may last only while the authority or threat remains. Partnership demands a different language. The practitioner must explain what the intervention means for the stakeholder and listen closely enough to discover what the stakeholder values.

During my tenure as Coal Secretary, mining expansion depended on cooperation from states governed by opposition parties. Formal correspondence from Delhi would have hardened positions. I therefore travelled to state capitals and held discussions where the problem existed. In West Bengal, rather than issuing a warning, I met the Chief Secretary over coffee with a handwritten calculation of the royalty, direct employment and indirect employment the state was losing each day. The message was not “the Centre requires this”; it was “this is what the state and its people stand to gain.” Land for seven coal blocks was made available within forty-eight hours.

A similar opportunity arose while promoting the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana in Chhattisgarh. After an unproductive meeting, I secured only a few minutes with the Chief Minister before his departure. Those minutes had to be used with precision. I explained how the scheme could help the poorest families rather than burdening him with a long presentation. Once the purpose became relatable, the conversation changed and the state went on to become a leading implementer.

STAKEHOLDER ARCHITECTURE OF AN INTERVENTION

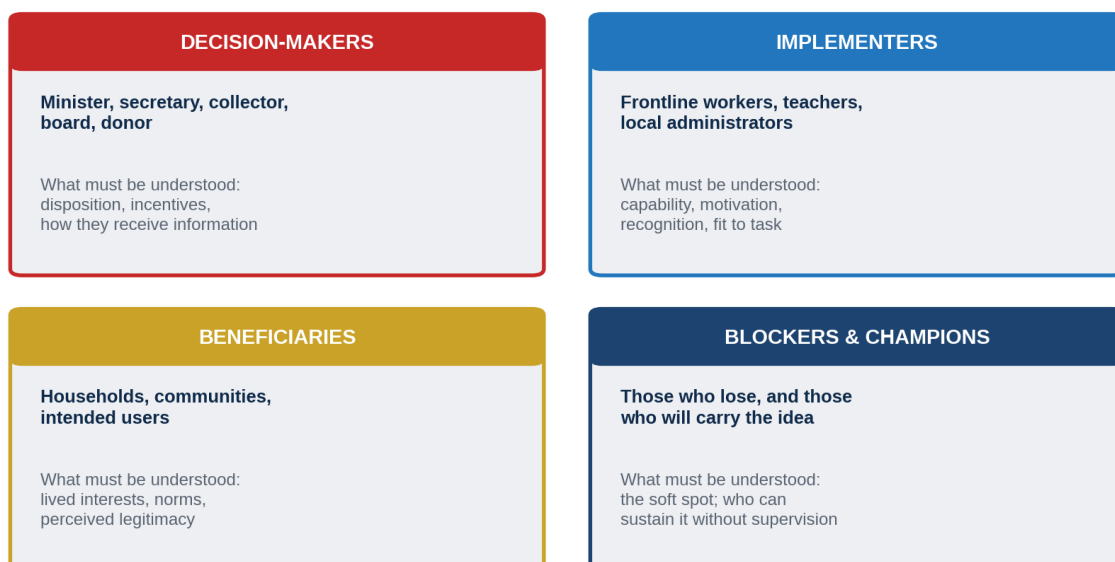


Figure 3. Stakeholders must be mapped separately; each requires a distinct, evidence-based value proposition.

2.3 The remaining contexts: from aspiration to operational fit

Social desirability requires more than administrative approval. People must perceive the intervention as relevant and legitimate. Past failures in areas such as family planning demonstrate the danger of designing policy without adequate regard for social meaning and beneficiary agency.

Technology can be transformational, but only when it serves the task. Younger practitioners should keep an active “antenna” for tools already available to them and ask whether those tools improve access, transparency, training or feedback. Technology is not an ornament; it is valuable when it reduces friction or changes the operating system of delivery.

Financial viability is equally concrete. Ambition without resources creates an implementation gap. Yet the absence of immediate financing need not end an idea. Demonstrating efficacy at a manageable scale can alter the funding conversation. The early years of RSBY were financially difficult; after the scheme proved that it could work, budgetary support became easier to secure. Evidence converts an appeal for money into an investment case.

Administrative doability asks whether the delivery apparatus actually exists. A programme may be socially valuable and fully funded, yet fail because staffing, workflow and training are inadequate. The emphasis on early childhood education is a good example: recognising the importance of the early years is not the same as equipping frontline workers with the specialised capability required to support young children. Policy ambition must be matched by institutional competence.

Judicial tenability and environmental sustainability complete the framework. A scheme incompatible with law or regulation will eventually stall, however attractive it may appear. Likewise, development that ignores ecological limits transfers costs into the future. These contexts must be examined at design stage, not treated as obstacles discovered after rollout.

3. Capacity Building Must Be Local and Relational

Training is one of the most neglected conditions of implementation. Public systems routinely develop a standard module in a national or state capital and distribute it everywhere. Translation into the local language, although necessary, is not sufficient. Effective capacity building must also reflect local practices, rituals, institutional arrangements and ways of learning.

THE CAPACITY-BUILDING FEEDBACK LOOP

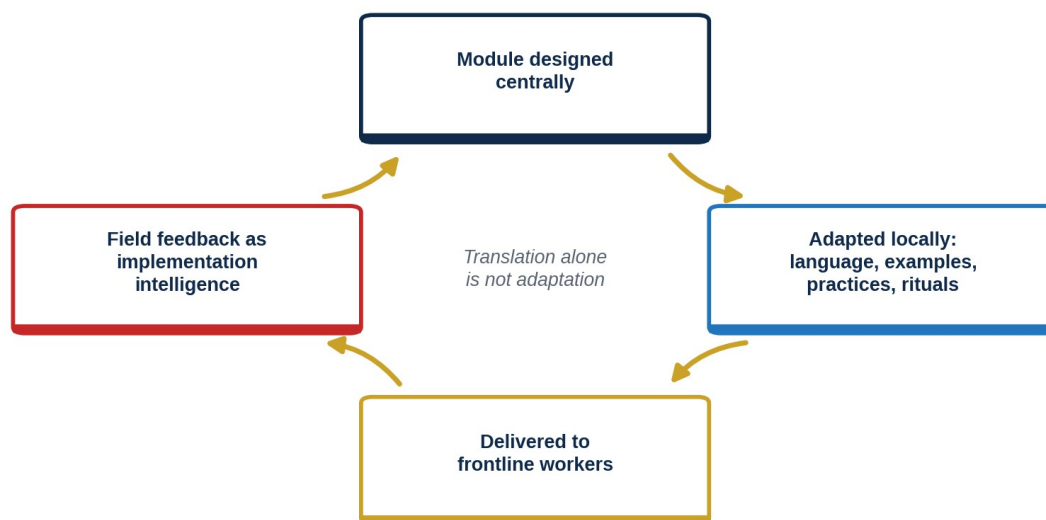


Figure 5. Field experience is not a post-training survey; it is the input that must redesign the module.

Field teams occupy a crucial position in this process. They see which examples are understood, which instructions are impractical, and which cultural assumptions fail. Their feedback should not be treated as a post-training survey; it is implementation intelligence that must shape module design. For CRISP, this means establishing a deliberate loop between frontline experience and the teams that create curricula, guidelines and operating protocols.

Capacity building is also relational. Frontline workers are not merely recipients of technical content. Their performance depends on motivation, recognition and fit between person and task. Leaders should spend time understanding what each team member can do well, what support is needed and how responsibilities should be assigned. Public appreciation can be a powerful incentive; correction, by contrast, should ordinarily occur in private. To make a person feel seen and important is not a sentimental gesture—it is an instrument of leadership.

4. Leadership for Execution

4.1 Focus on the present and act within the sphere of control

Time and attention are scarce administrative resources. The past is useful only for the lessons it yields; it cannot be changed. The future requires vision, but it cannot substitute for competence in the present. The question for a practitioner is therefore: what is the task that can be advanced now?

This discipline becomes especially important when resistance is strong. No serious public project succeeds in every respect. The appropriate test after a failure is not

whether the entire system yielded, but whether one gave one's best and learned enough to locate the next feasible opening. A useful formulation is the serenity prayer associated with Reinhold Niebuhr: seek the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can, and the wisdom to know the difference. The administrative corollary is simple: if we focus on what we can do, the sphere of the possible grows.

4.2 Build credibility brick by brick

Success rarely arrives overnight. Credibility accumulates through repeated conduct: preparation, fairness, follow-through and a willingness to accept responsibility. During the coal crisis, officers were reluctant to decide because they feared that future investigations might punish honest judgement. I told the ministry that I would take responsibility for its decisions—and then stood by the officers. The statement mattered because it was consistent with an established reputation for protecting subordinates.

Credibility does not eliminate hostile stakeholders, but it creates room for action. When the obvious route is blocked, the practitioner should continue to search for the “soft spot”: an accessible interlocutor, a limited component, a demonstration project or a language that lowers defensiveness. If diligent exploration still shows that a path is closed, one must conserve energy and move to work that can produce value.

4.3 Replace fear of error with transparent learning

Fear of failure prevents people from discovering their capabilities. Honest mistakes are inevitable in complex administration. What matters is whether the process is transparent and free of mala fide intent. In the Ministry of Coal, decisions were placed promptly in the public domain. Errors—including consequential ones—were therefore detected early and corrected openly. Transparency protected institutional integrity because it made concealment difficult and learning immediate.

Opacity allows both corruption and suspicion to flourish. Transparency changes incentives: even those who may be tempted to misuse a process know that their actions can become visible. It also protects the honest decision-maker by distinguishing error from wrongdoing. A learning administration is not one that never makes mistakes; it is one that reveals, corrects and learns from them.

4.4 Practise humility and disciplined non-attachment

Leaders do not possess a master key for every problem. They must retain the humility to learn from colleagues, including those formally subordinate to them. “Do not imitate others, but learn from them” is a useful principle: context must shape action, but experience elsewhere can illuminate options.

Personal independence also matters. Excessive expectation—from office, patrons, colleagues or post-retirement opportunities—weakens judgement. Reducing such

expectations creates freedom to speak and act. Equally, practitioners must learn to let go of matters over which they have no control. Mental energy spent on uncontrollable events, status display or the effort to impress others is energy unavailable for public purpose.

Case	Context principally engaged	Method adopted	Outcome
Reinstatement of a district magistrate, Uttar Pradesh	Political acceptability	Timing and framing of the representation rather than open confrontation	Suspension reversed without compromise of law or principle
Land for coal blocks, West Bengal	Emotional relatability	Travel to the state capital; royalty and employment foregone presented as the state's own loss	Land for seven coal blocks released within forty-eight hours
Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, Chhattisgarh	Emotional relatability; social desirability	A brief, precisely framed case addressed to the poorest households	The state became a leading implementer of the scheme
Early financing of RSBY	Financial viability	Demonstration of efficacy at a manageable scale before seeking expansion	Budgetary support became easier to secure once the scheme worked
Decision-making during the coal crisis	Administrative doability; transparency	Public disclosure of decisions; personal assumption of responsibility for the ministry	Errors detected early and corrected openly; officers able to decide

Table 2. Illustrative administrative cases cited in the lecture, classified by the context principally engaged.

5. From Value Proposition to Sustainable Scale

Sustainability and scale are related but distinct. An initiative is sustainable when stakeholders continue it because they derive value from it, not merely because an authority compels them. A punitive campaign may generate headlines, but the system often reverts once the enforcing officer leaves. Durable reform changes the incentives and routines of all relevant actors.

The practical method begins with stakeholder mapping. Identify every actor whose cooperation, behaviour or consent affects the outcome. Understand what each actor seeks, fears or stands to lose. Then frame the intervention's value proposition in terms

that are truthful and relevant to that actor. This requires research and conversation; a generic appeal to “the public interest” will not always be enough.

Scale requires a second architecture: a distributed network of people who believe in the purpose and can carry it without constant supervision. One individual cannot scale an intervention personally. The original champion must therefore create other champions—people who understand the principles, adapt them locally and preserve the core intent. RSBY spread across states because state-level advocates came to believe that the scheme served their own populations and governments.

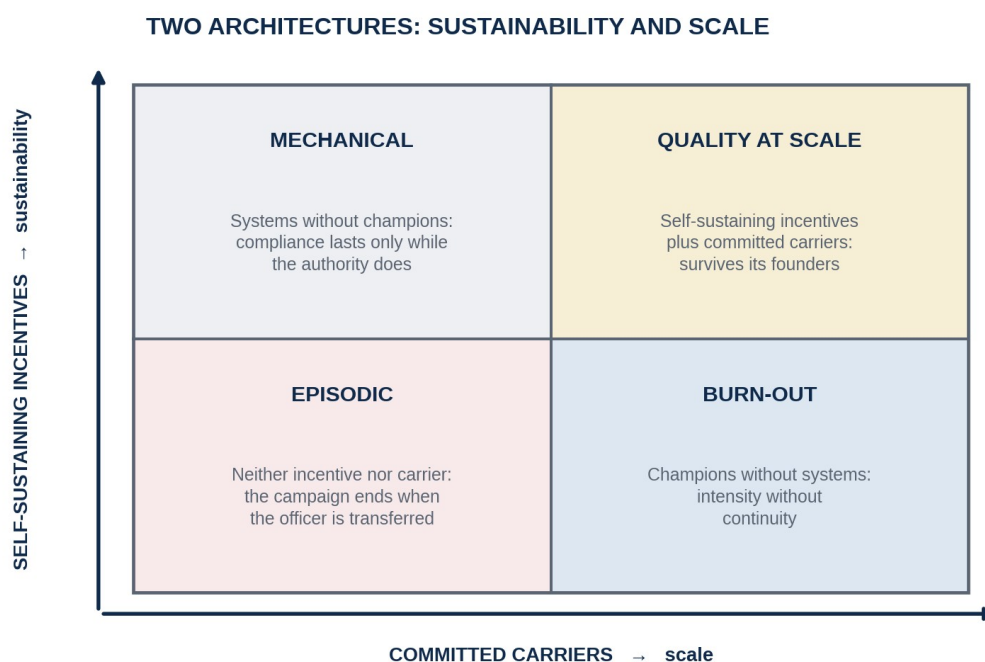


Figure 4. Sustainability derives from value created for participants; scale derives from a distributed network of champions.

Quality at scale depends on the interaction of these two architectures: self-sustaining incentives and committed carriers. Systems without champions become mechanical; champions without systems burn out. Together they enable an intervention to persist after its founder or initial project team withdraws.

6. Implementation in Politically Sensitive Domains

Policy formulation improves when practitioners are present at the table. Teachers, principals, frontline workers and local administrators can test whether an attractive proposal is practicable. Consultation after a policy is drafted is less useful than integrating operational knowledge into the design process itself.

Once a policy has been adopted, however, endless criticism is rarely productive. Practitioners should identify implementable components, especially those that

require modest resources and can demonstrate progress. In education, improvements in teacher selection, pre-service preparation or technology-enabled professional development may be more immediately feasible than financing the entire reform agenda. Low-hanging fruit is not an excuse for timidity; it is a strategy for building evidence, confidence and coalitions before attempting more difficult reforms.

Research recommendations in politicised areas require similar judgement. The responsibility of a research organisation is to analyse honestly and present its findings. Yet language and sequencing affect whether any recommendation is heard. A draft can be tested with a sympathetic and experienced public official who understands the government's perspective. Recommendations can be framed constructively without diluting evidence. Securing adoption of a meaningful subset may be more valuable than producing a rhetorically uncompromising report that is immediately rejected.

7. An Execution Agenda for CRISP

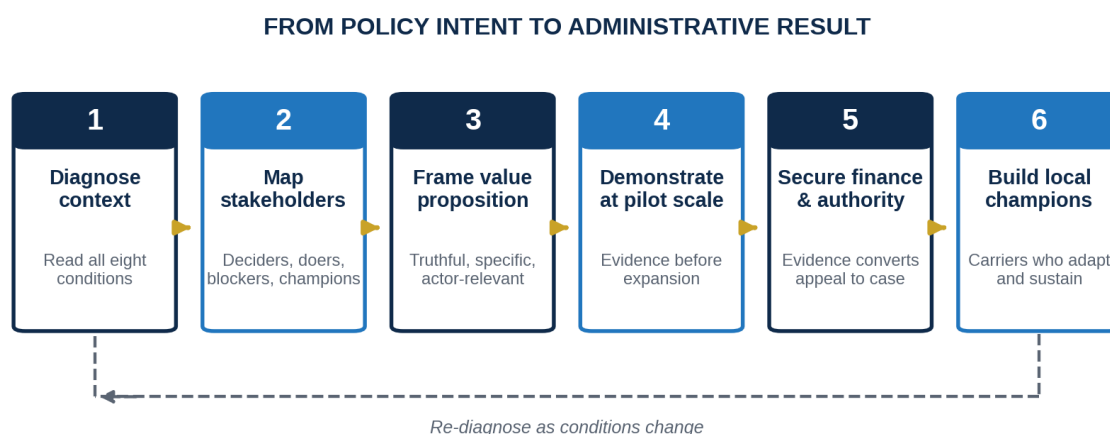


Figure 2. The execution sequence: diagnosis precedes persuasion, and evidence precedes expansion.

The lecture yields a practical agenda for teams working at the intersection of government systems and communities:

- Diagnose all eight contexts before committing to an implementation pathway; revisit the diagnosis as conditions change.
- Map decision-makers separately from implementers, beneficiaries, blockers and potential champions.
- Prepare a distinct and evidence-based value proposition for each significant stakeholder.
- Go to the site of the problem. Direct conversation is often more productive than formal correspondence and escalation.

- Design pilots that demonstrate efficacy and create a credible case for finance, administrative support and expansion.
- Build local feedback into training design; adapt not only language but examples, practices and delivery methods.
- Recognise good work publicly, address shortcomings privately and assign responsibilities according to individual capability.
- Use transparency as an operating principle: disclose decisions, invite scrutiny and correct errors quickly.
- Begin with feasible components that can generate momentum, while keeping the larger reform objective in view.
- Invest in local champions who can carry the idea, preserve its purpose and adapt it responsibly at scale.

Conclusion: The Ethics of Practical Action

Making things happen is not a celebration of expediency. It is an ethic of practical responsibility. It requires clarity about purpose, fidelity to law and public interest, and flexibility in the route by which legitimate outcomes are secured. Accommodation is not compromise when it preserves principle while adapting communication to context.

The practitioner's final accountability is demanding but manageable: Did I understand the context? Did I prepare seriously? Did I deal with stakeholders as human beings rather than obstacles? Did I protect my team, act transparently and learn from error? Did I do the best that could reasonably be done?

Public systems are rarely transformed in a single stroke. They move through carefully chosen openings, credible demonstrations, relationships of trust and the slow construction of institutions. The task is to find the first brick, place it well, and then build.

"If you focus on what you can do, that 'can' will grow."

About the Speaker

Shri Anil Swaroop is a retired officer of the Indian Administrative Service and a former Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministries of Coal and School Education and Literacy. Over a public-service career spanning nearly four decades, he worked across state and Union governments on institutional reform, programme delivery and crisis resolution. He is the Founder-Chairman of Nexus of Good and the author of books on governance, administrative ethics and the practice of making change happen.

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