UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

There are better practices to “best practices”.

“सर्वोत्तम कार्यप्रणाली ” से

बेहतर कार्यप्रणालियाँ भी होती हैं।

EXAM YEAR

2021

PAPER

Essay

SUBJECT

Essay

MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Meaning of best practices; continuous improvement; context-specific solutions; innovation and experimentation; evidence-based policymaking; benchmarking and adaptation; limitations of standardisation; diversity of social and economic conditions; local knowledge and community participation; public administration and governance reforms; scientific research and technological change; learning from failure; institutional flexibility; ethical decision-making; sustainable development; innovation beyond imitation

Model Answer

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, individuals, organisations and governments constantly search for methods that deliver the best possible results. Successful companies study industry leaders, public institutions adopt proven administrative models, and governments learn from policies implemented elsewhere. These approaches are commonly described as “best practices”—methods considered effective because of their demonstrated results or widespread acceptance.

However, the statement “There are better practices to ‘best practices’” challenges the assumption that any method can remain universally superior. What works well in one context may fail in another, and a practice that is

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considered the best today may become outdated as circumstances change. Progress depends not merely on adopting established methods but also on questioning, adapting and improving them.

The statement therefore promotes a culture of continuous learning. Best practices provide valuable starting points, but they should not become rigid rules that prevent innovation. A truly progressive individual or institution recognises past achievements while remaining open to better alternatives.

Understanding the concept of best practices

A best practice is a method, process or approach regarded as particularly effective in achieving a specific objective. It may emerge from experience, research, comparison, experimentation or the successful performance of an organisation.

In business, best practices may include quality control, customer feedback and efficient supply-chain management. In education, they may involve student-centred teaching, formative assessment and inclusive classrooms. In governance, they may include transparent procurement, digital service delivery and accountable grievance-redress mechanisms.

The value of best practices lies in their ability to reduce uncertainty. Instead of starting from scratch, organisations can learn from methods that have already produced positive outcomes.

However, the term “best” must be understood in relation to a particular objective, context and period. A practice that maximises short-term productivity may not maximise worker well-being. A digital system that improves efficiency in a technologically advanced city may exclude people who lack internet access.

Therefore, the effectiveness of a practice depends on what is being measured, whose interests are considered and under what conditions the method is applied.

Why the best practice may not be the best everywhere

Societies differ in their economic resources, cultural traditions, institutional capacities, geographical conditions and social needs. Consequently, a method that succeeds in one setting may not produce similar results elsewhere.

For example, a highly automated public service may operate efficiently where citizens have reliable internet access, digital literacy and secure identification systems. In a remote region with poor connectivity, the same approach may create barriers unless assisted or offline services remain available.

Similarly, an agricultural technique suitable for a well-irrigated region may be inappropriate for a drought-prone area. A crop variety that performs well under one climate may require excessive water or become vulnerable to different pests elsewhere.

These examples illustrate the importance of contextual adaptation. Effective practices cannot always be transferred mechanically from one place to another.

A better approach is to understand why a practice works, identify the conditions necessary for its success and modify it according to local requirements.

Continuous improvement as the foundation of progress

The statement reflects the principle that excellence is not a permanent destination but an ongoing process. Organisations that treat current success as final may eventually lose their effectiveness.

Continuous improvement involves evaluating existing methods, identifying weaknesses, testing alternatives and incorporating lessons from experience. It encourages institutions to regard feedback and criticism as opportunities for development rather than threats to established authority.

In manufacturing, quality-improvement systems seek to reduce errors, minimise waste and improve reliability. In education, teachers can revise instructional methods after evaluating student performance. In public administration, departments can use citizen feedback and service-delivery data to identify delays and simplify procedures.

The central idea is that a successful method should remain open to scrutiny. Even when it produces satisfactory results, further improvements may be possible in terms of cost, accessibility, fairness, sustainability or reliability.

A culture of continuous improvement does not mean changing every system constantly. Unnecessary changes can create confusion and instability. Instead, it requires systematic evaluation and a willingness to revise practices when credible evidence demonstrates a better approach.

Innovation challenges established practices

Many of humanity's greatest achievements have emerged when people questioned methods previously regarded as optimal.

The development of digital photography transformed an industry that had long depended on film-based systems. Advances in communication technology changed how people exchange information, while improvements in medical diagnostics have expanded the ability to detect and treat diseases.

In each case, existing methods had genuine value. They were not necessarily irrational or ineffective. However, new technologies created alternatives that performed better on important dimensions or made previously impossible tasks achievable.

Innovation often begins with a question: can the same objective be achieved more effectively, affordably, safely or inclusively?

Yet innovation should not be confused with novelty for its own sake. A new method is not automatically superior simply because it uses advanced technology. Its performance must be evaluated against relevant objectives and possible risks.

The challenge is to combine respect for accumulated experience with the courage to question established assumptions.

Best practices in public administration

Public administration provides a particularly important field for applying this principle because government decisions affect millions of people with diverse needs.

Governments frequently learn from successful programmes implemented by other states or countries. Such learning can improve the delivery of healthcare, education, sanitation, transport and social welfare.

However, administrative practices must be adapted to constitutional requirements, local capacities and the needs of citizens. A policy that succeeds in a small, wealthy jurisdiction may require substantial modification before it can work in a large and diverse country.

For example, digital governance can improve transparency, reduce paperwork and accelerate service delivery. Yet citizens without reliable connectivity, digital literacy or accessible identification systems may face exclusion.

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A better practice combines digital efficiency with assisted access, grievance redress and appropriate offline alternatives.

Similarly, performance targets can encourage departments to improve outcomes, but excessive emphasis on numerical indicators may lead officials to prioritise easily measurable outputs over substantive public welfare.

Good governance therefore requires more than copying a successful model. It requires understanding the problem, evaluating evidence, protecting citizens' rights and adapting solutions to the realities of administration.

The Indian experience: Learning, adapting and improving

India's development demonstrates the importance of adapting knowledge and practices to local conditions.

The Green Revolution introduced improved crop varieties, irrigation, fertilisers and modern agricultural techniques, contributing significantly to food production. However, its benefits varied across regions, and intensive cultivation also contributed to challenges such as groundwater depletion and soil degradation in some areas.

The experience illustrates that a practice can deliver major benefits while generating new problems that require further innovation. Agricultural development now increasingly needs to consider water efficiency, soil health, crop diversification and climate resilience.

India's digital public infrastructure offers another example of large-scale institutional innovation. Digital identity, payment systems and electronic service delivery have created new possibilities for financial inclusion and efficient transactions. At the same time, concerns involving privacy, cybersecurity, accessibility and exclusion require continuous attention.

Similarly, successful community-based initiatives may provide lessons for other regions, but their effectiveness depends on local leadership, social trust, administrative support and institutional capacity.

India's diversity makes it especially important to distinguish between learning from successful models and blindly replicating them. National objectives may be shared, while implementation strategies need to reflect regional circumstances.

The role of science and evidence

Scientific progress depends on the recognition that existing knowledge is provisional and open to revision. Scientific theories, technologies and research methods are continuously tested against new evidence.

A medical treatment that was once considered effective may be replaced when stronger evidence supports a safer alternative. Engineering standards evolve as materials, technologies and safety knowledge improve. Environmental policies may be revised when new research reveals previously underestimated risks.

This process demonstrates why best practices should be evidence-based rather than protected by reputation alone.

At the same time, evidence must be interpreted carefully. A single successful experiment may not establish that a method will work reliably in every setting. Researchers must consider sample size, uncertainty, replication and possible unintended effects.

Scientific institutions contribute most effectively when they encourage critical debate, transparency and independent verification.

Thus, the search for better practices is not a rejection of expertise. It is the natural extension of expertise, which recognises that reliable knowledge grows through questioning and testing.

The danger of blindly following established models

When best practices become unquestionable standards, they can discourage independent thought and institutional learning.

Organisations may continue using an outdated process because it has historically been successful. Employees may avoid suggesting alternatives because established procedures are associated with senior authority. Governments may adopt fashionable policy models without adequately evaluating their relevance.

Such behaviour creates institutional inertia. It prioritises conformity over effectiveness and can prevent organisations from responding to changing circumstances.

Another danger is the misuse of benchmarking. A school, hospital or government department may be judged against numerical indicators that fail to capture differences in resources, population needs or social disadvantage.

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For example, comparing examination results without considering differences in student backgrounds may encourage unfair conclusions about teachers and institutions.

Therefore, performance assessment must combine measurable outcomes with contextual understanding. Established practices should be treated as informed starting points, not unquestionable commands.

Learning from failure and experimentation

The development of better practices requires an environment in which experimentation is possible and mistakes can be examined honestly.

When a new method fails, institutions should identify the reasons, document lessons and determine whether the problem arose from poor design, inadequate implementation or unsuitable circumstances.

This does not mean ignoring accountability. Negligence, misconduct and reckless decisions must be addressed. However, treating every unsuccessful experiment as unacceptable can discourage the responsible innovation necessary for progress.

Governments can support experimentation through carefully designed pilot projects, independent evaluation and gradual scaling. Businesses can test new processes before implementing them across an organisation. Educational institutions can evaluate alternative teaching methods before expanding them.

The key is to distinguish between avoidable negligence and good-faith experimentation under uncertainty.

A learning-oriented institution does not celebrate failure, but it ensures that failure produces useful knowledge rather than being concealed or repeated.

Ethics and the limits of efficiency

A practice should not be considered superior merely because it produces results quickly or cheaply. Ethical considerations must form part of any meaningful evaluation.

A company may increase productivity by imposing excessive workloads, but such a practice may harm employee health and long-term performance. A government may reduce administrative costs by automating services, yet the resulting system may disadvantage citizens who need personal assistance.

Similarly, a technologically advanced surveillance system may improve some aspects of security while creating serious risks to privacy and civil liberties.

The search for better practices must therefore consider multiple dimensions: efficiency, equity, accountability, sustainability, dignity and long-term consequences.

Constitutional values and ethical principles provide important standards for evaluating institutional choices. A practice that achieves its immediate objective by violating fundamental rights cannot be considered genuinely exemplary.

True excellence combines effective results with responsible methods.

Towards a culture of continuous learning

Building better practices requires individuals and institutions to cultivate curiosity, critical thinking and adaptability.

First, organisations should evaluate existing methods through reliable data, independent review and meaningful feedback from those affected by their decisions.

Second, successful practices should be documented and shared, while their limitations and conditions of applicability should be made clear.

Third, employees, researchers and citizens should have opportunities to question procedures and propose alternatives without facing arbitrary punishment.

Fourth, pilot projects and controlled experimentation can help test new approaches before large-scale implementation.

Finally, institutions should measure success through a balanced set of indicators that include not only efficiency but also fairness, accessibility, quality and long-term sustainability.

Such an approach encourages learning without sacrificing stability or accountability.

Conclusion

“There are better practices to ‘best practices’” is a statement about humility, innovation and the continuous pursuit of excellence. It reminds us that a method regarded as the best today may be improved tomorrow as new knowledge emerges and circumstances change.

Best practices remain valuable because they preserve experience and reduce unnecessary experimentation. However, their value diminishes when they become rigid formulas detached from local realities or protected from critical scrutiny.

The most effective individuals and institutions learn from successful models while remaining willing to adapt them. They evaluate results, listen to feedback, examine unintended consequences and use evidence to improve their decisions.

For a diverse country such as India, this approach is particularly important. Solutions must be responsive to regional needs, constitutional values and changing social and economic conditions.

Ultimately, excellence is not achieved by blindly following what has worked before. It is achieved by understanding why it worked, recognising where it falls short and developing something better when circumstances demand it. The best practice is therefore not necessarily the final answer; it is a foundation for the next improvement.

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