Conceptual Validation of Four Aces Framework of Execution Excellence

Introduction: The Literature of strategic management has been heavily focusing on superior strategy formulation. However, recently, both researchers and practitioners has realized that the key attributes separating companies that succeed brilliantly is usually execution (Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan 2002). Instead of designing brilliant strategies, today leaders and managers must increasingly apply their energy to heady demands of execution also (Eric Beaudan 2001). Failure of many giant corporations show that organization cannot invent appropriate strategic responses fast enough to stay ahead of rivals (Peter S. Delisi 1998). Many surveys conducted by leading scholars found that major giant corporations failed due to poor execution of strategies. One of the most fundamental reasons for execution failure is the lack of execution framework in organizations. Some scholars have suggested approaches to strategy execution and addressed different aspects of the strategy execution process. However, what is lacking is a comprehensive approach to strategy execution. Suhil (2009) provided a comprehensive framework for strategy execution, "Four Aces Framework of Strategy Execution". The purpose this study is to validate one major building blocks of the framework i.e. Align.

Review of Existing Frameworks of Strategy Execution: The literature treats strategy implementation and strategy execution interchangeable. There is no universally accepted definition of "strategy execution". Several definitions of strategy execution stress the role of top management (Schaap J. I. 2006). Only a few definitions stress the external environment (Lehner, 2004, and Harrington, 2006). Surprisingly, not a single definition mentions the non-managerial employees and their crucial role in turning strategic plans into results. There is clearly a lack of even a comprehensive definition of strategy execution. The literature also shows that there are limited frameworks for execution. Since last decade, scholars started paying head to developing strategy execution frameworks and addressed different aspects of the strategy execution process.

For example, Noble (1999) provided as strategy execution framework, which is organized around four major stages of the implementation effort – pre-implementation, organizing the implementation, managing the implementation process, and maximizing cross-functional performance. There are five managerial levers for these implementation phases: goals, organizational structure, leadership, communications, and incentives. The management of these factors changes through the implementation stages. Considering these factors in combination with each major stage provides a useful heuristic to improve strategy execution. The close look of the framework reveals that the people aspect is highly focused but the adapt aspect is compromised. Kaplan and Norton (1997, 2001, 2008) has given framework of balance scorecard, strategy focused organizations, and execution premium for efficient execution. All of their frameworks work as measurement or navigation tool of strategy execution. However, it lacks the empirical support and fails to comprehend other elements of execution such as internal customers. Larry Bossidy and Ramcharan (2002) propose a framework of three core processes i.e. people process, strategy process and operation process of execution and their inter-linkages for superior execution. The framework has been successful in developing the understanding of important elements of execution framework. However, they could not comprehensively touched the adapt element, which is critical in today's continuous changing environment. Higgins's (2005) "8-S" framework of strategy implementation include strategy and purposes, structure, resources, shared values, style, staff, systems and processes, and strategic performance. The

framework enables senior management to enact, monitor, and assess the cross functional execution of strategies. A good alignment among all these eight factors helps in effective strategy execution.

The review of these existing frameworks brings out the important elements that could be critical in execution. These elements covers all the aspects of execution ranging from strategy formulation itself to adaptation of strategy as important factor for success of execution. These frameworks treat a piece of the strategy execution process. However, what is lacking is a comprehensive framework to strategy execution - one that addresses not only the management science portion of strategy execution, but also, the people, cultural and organizational factors (Sushil 2009). Sushil (2009) proposed "Four Aces of Strategy Execution Model" focusing on four broad dimensions of execution excellence - Alignment, Automation, Action, and Adaptation. He argues that clear linkages of the four aces leads to the better organization performance on four perspectives of finance, customer, learning and growth, and internal business processes. He further identifies sub dimensions of the four main dimensions as follows

1. *Align*: People, Processes, Technologies, Units, Operations, Policies/Operating Procedures, Budget, and Best Practices
2. *Automate*: Processes, Plans, Performance Management Systems, Support systems, Information Systems/Controls, Analytics and Knowledge Base across the Value Network
3. *Act*: To Achieve Targets, Execution Leadership, Performance Culture, Ethics, Right People in Right Place, Innovate, Review, Reward/Motivational Practices, and Incorporate Reflections
4. *Adapt*: Adapt the Targets, Modify Strategies, Reformulate Strategic Plans, Redefine Operational Plan, Reassess Capabilities and Changing Culture

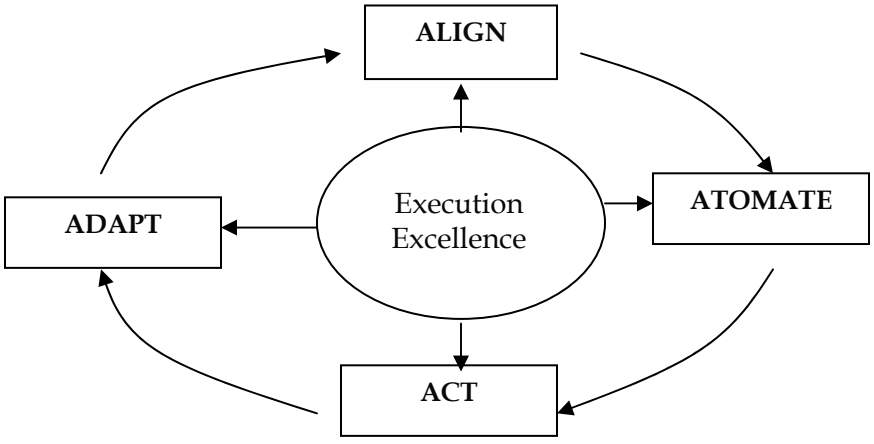

Figure: The Four Aces Model of Execution Excellence

Research Methodology: This study focuses on Align dimension of "Four Aces Framework of Execution Excellence", proposed by Sushil (2009). We have taken the rout of longitudinal analysis in real life case study of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), India. The huge size of the DMRC project, direct involvement of multiple stakeholders and agencies, efficient and profitable service to people, and helping the environment at large make it an appropriate case for

studying strategy execution. We have studied DMRC since 1998, when it was formed, to March 2010. As the understanding of past is not accurately possible through collecting primary present data, we have used secondary published data. Total 43 news items, interviews, and articles have been selected from all the recognized national level newspaper. The analysis figures out the patter of execution excellence in DMCR. For cross validation of the case findings through literature, we have searched two electronic databases: EBSCO and Science Direct and selected 23 research articles. The articles cover most seminal to most recent research work.

Case Study of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, India

Initially, when the Delhi Metro was conceptualized, there was not a lot of optimism about India; nevertheless, as project succeeded people started gaining belief that India can do it. Delhi Metro has empowered the markets and locations by increasing footfalls into the otherwise bustling and 'out of reach' markets in Delhi. A senior government official commented, "*Delhi Metro is not just another public infrastructure project but a symbol of incredible achievement, pride and managerial skills*". The system is truly world-class and profitable. In India, where public works are often models of dysfunction, it is nothing short of a miracle.

Delhi Mass Rapid Transit Systems (MRTS): Indian cities of all sizes have been facing the crisis of urban transport because of the increasing travel demand and inadequate transportation system. Delhi, the capital of India had been facing this problem since very long and situation had been deteriorating day by day. With phenomenal population growth and increased income level, number of two wheelers and cars continued to rise. As a result, the number of motor vehicles increased from 5.4 lakh in 1981 to about 51 lakh in 2007. The motorized vehicles alone were contributing to about two-thirds of the atmospheric pollution. The road accident rate in Delhi was about 40 times more than in U.K. To address the problem, in 1990, Rail India Technical and Economic Services (RITES) recommended a rail-based system to meet the traffic demand up to the year 2021 in Delhi. An expert, expressing his view on MRTS for Delhi, said, "*Conceptually, the rail-based MRTS is ideal for a city like Delhi, however, the challenge is the implementing such a huge project with many managerial, financial and political constraints*".

Launch of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC): For implementation and subsequent operation of the Delhi MRTS, a company, Delhi Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. (DMRC), was registered, on March 05, 1995, with equal equity participation by the Government of India and the Government of Delhi. The project report stipulated implementation of the project within 10 years from April 1, 1995 to March 31, 2005. As more than three years had elapsed by the time DMRC started functioning, the implementation period was compressed from ten years to seven years. Since the beginning, the DMRC worked fast but carefully. For example, apart from taking measures of quality control, DMCR assured rehabilitation of people. The corporate culture of DMRC says, "*Personal integrity should never be in doubt; we should maintain full transparency in all our decisions and transactions. Employees should discharge their responsibilities with pride, perfection and dignity*". The DMRC started functioning with mission

- To cover the whole of Delhi with a Metro Network by the year 2021
- Delhi Metro to be of world class standards in regard to safety, reliability, punctuality, comfort and customer satisfaction
- Metro to operate on sound commercial lines obviating the need for Government support

Aligning Strategy with People: Research shows that aligning people with the strategy is one most of the most critical factors for execution. For example, skill set enhancement are the activities that are key to building basis business infrastructure for better linkages to support the execution of the strategy (Govindarajan, 1989 and Machael Hays, 2001). The relationships between different strategy levels also reflect the effect of relationships among different cross-organizational levels on strategy execution (Slater & Olson, 2001). Strategy execution may fail if the strategy does not enjoy support and commitment by the majority of employees and middle management (Alexander 1985). The communication of the strategy to all employees linking each employee's personal objectives with organizational strategic objectives leads to better execution (Kaplan and Norton 2008). According to Heide & Grønhaug & Johannessen (2002), factors relating to the organizational structure are the second most important execution barrier. A proper strategy-structure alignment is a necessary precursor to the successful execution of new business strategies (Schaap 2006). Finally, for executing strategy effectively, a leader should spend more time on developing the structure, processes, and culture to ensure that individual are equipped with the knowledge and incentives that promote them to behave in a way that promote the strategy (Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan (2001). The leaders should also lead the successful culture to make an organization more result oriented (Thompson & Strickland 2001 and Larry Bossidy & Ram Charan (2001).

The case of DMRC clearly demonstrates the findings of above-mentioned researches. The DMRC was given full powers to hire people, decide on tenders and control funds, which lead to the timely completion of projects. Since beginning, the DMRC focuses on lean but effective organization structure. Delhi Metro had 36 persons per km (for general operations) at the end of Phase II, which was among the lowest in the world. The top bosses who should be held responsible for the project handpicked all the personnel. This ensured that only personnel of great integrity are put on the job. Apart from technical training, all employees were trained for physical fitness and mental alertness. For upcoming Commonwealth Games, DMRC is creating a special cadre of customer relations officials who will be deployed all across the Delhi Metro network to guide commuters. The customer relations assistants are being imparted rigorous eight-wee in spoken English, effective communication, customer care, handling public complaints, behavioral management, and team building. The officials are also being trained in different aspects ranging from station management to disaster management.

Leadership has been the key issue in DMRC success. As many as 35 studies done on the transport sector of Delhi since 1950 have suggested several ways of bringing the Metro rail in Delhi. All of them lay gathering dust until Mr. Sreedharan took over as the MD of DMRC on November 4, 1997. "*That man has the ability to get things done. He just goes full steam ahead with the task*," said a DMRC official working closely with Mr. Sreedharan. His fortitude and never-say-die attitude has helped him in his career spanning decades. The first time people saw these qualities in action was when a tidal wave had washed away the Panbam Bridge in 1964. As an Executive Engineer, He restored the bridge in 45 days, an achievement for which he was given the Railway Minister's Award that year. After retirement in 1990 came his appointment as the Chairman and MD of Konkan Railways. A network of 760 km was set up in seven years, the first major railway project since the British left India in 1947. It was a daunting task of rail tracking through the rugged mountains. Environmentalists protested, politicians said it could never be done and the project ran short of money. Nevertheless, Sreedharan raised public bonds

to finance it in an unprecedented manner. "*One Finance Commissioner of the Indian Railways had said that it would take at least 25 years*," said Mr. Sreedharan. It took seven years.

Bureaucratic red tape tried to delay his work, contractors would not meet commitments and corruption threatened to slow him down. However, he never lost hope. The billion project of DMCR has been running ahead of time and strictly within budget. He has revolutionized the India's public transport. He reaches office 15 minutes before his staff. He admits that he is not a workaholic but he simply likes his job for him work is worship. After accepting a Policy Change Agent of the year award from ET, Mr. Sreedharan explains, "*...we made sure that the project was completed within time and also within the budget. This was largely due to the fact that there was a distinct work culture, skills in project execution and ethical work values. I firmly believe that the team behind the leader should get the real credit and I accept this award on behalf of the entire team*," Sreedharan said.

However, retaining the talent at DMRC was the challenge. After the success achieved by the people of DMCR, many corporates offered lucrative ob to them. In the month of August 2007, DMRC's Director (Projects & Planning) Mr. C B K Rao, the second in command at Delhi Metro after MD E Sreedharan, has resigned. Rao was the man behind planning Metro's phase-I lines, and the under-construction phase-II. "*I was looking for an opening for some time and thought it was time to go. I am emotionally attached to DMRC but as you grow old you also learn to let go of attachments*," said Mr. Rao. He was in race for the top job at DMRC after Mr. Sreedharan's retirement; however, Mr. Sreedharan got an extension of term.

Aligning Strategy with best Practices: Competent strategy execution entails visible, unyielding managerial commitment to best practices to improve efficiency, lower costs, better services, and greater customer satisfaction. Aligning the strategy with best practices is another key success factor for execution (Thompson and Strickland 2001). Research shows that while some companies benefit from process improvement programmes such as reengineering some do not. The biggest beneficiaries are companies that view such programmes not as ends in themselves but as tools for executing company strategy more effectively (Thompson and Strickland 2001). In the case of DMRC, it has not only learned but also implemented many best practices in India. For example, to ensure safety all Metro trains were protected through Automatic Train Protection and Automatic Train Operation systems that have been introduced for the first time in India. The DMRC expanded the rail system with technology from Skanska International Civil Engineering AB, Mitsubishi Corp., Alstom Transport SA and other overseas companies, as part of efforts to reduce traffic and pollution. It has gone beyond the technology and demonstrated some of the best business acumen. On May 07, 2008, Citibank India and the DMRC announced the launch of India's first co-branded, '2-in-1' transit credit card. The card combined the benefits of a Metro Smart Card with the advantages of a Citibank Credit Card and offered several benefits. The use of Smart Card benefited DMRC in reducing clerical work, like issuing tickets, and gave the card user benefits like not requiring standing in line at the station.

The DMRC has collaborated with the private bus, mini-bus and taxi operators on revenue sharing basis to improve the feeder services to cater to the growing number of passengers so that more and more people were encouraged to leave their personal vehicles and take the Metro for work. The DMRC got the idea from Kolkata Metro. DMRC was also thinking of involving big corporates for feeder services and received encouraging responses form them. A major decision

in this context also pertained to the exclusion of Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) from the scheme to avoid any delay. The buses used by DMRC for feeder services were fitted with Global Positioning System devices and run on environment-friendly CNG engines.

Keeping in mind the huge loan that it had to repay, DMRC encouraged energy conservation and efficiency by adopting best practices. The DMRC became the first railway project in the world to be registered by the United Nations under the clean development mechanism, which made it possible for the Metro to claim carbon credits. DMRC could claim 400,000 certified emission reduction (CERs) for a 10-year crediting period beginning December 2007 when the project was registered. This translated to Rs 1.2 crore per year for 10 years. The money from sale of CERs was to use to offset additional investment and operation costs incurred in implementing the project activity, to stimulate R&D to reduce emission of green house gases and to give extensive training to train operators for optimum regeneration. DMRC was also working on a project to claim carbon credits for modal shift of commuters from buses/cars to the metro railway as tail-end emissions of such vehicles contribute to global warming.

Aligning Strategy with Budget: Financial support is one of the key to building basis business infrastructure for better linkages to support the execution of the strategy (Machael Hays 2001). Depriving strategy critical groups of the resources needed to execute their pieces of the strategy can undermine the execution process. New strategies usually call for significant budget reallocation (Thompson and Strickland 2001). Usually, budgets are built around the results top management wants, but it does not discuss of specify the action programmes that will make those outcomes a reality (Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan 2002). Aligning budget with strategy is required for successful strategy execution.

In DMRC, GOI and the Delhi Government, through equity contributions, financed 30 per cent of the project cost of Delhi Metro. The two Governments have also agreed to give an interest-free loan to cover the cost of land acquisition, which roughly works out to 8 per cent of the project cost. The Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC) has financed about 56 per cent of the cost through a soft loan. The balance 6 per cent of the project cost was met by raising money through property development. The Delhi government subsidised the DMRC operations. To maintain its revenue, the DMRC has got leeway from GOI to independently set fares. Still, generating revenue has been critical and conflicting issue. After its commencement in 2002, the DMRC on March 30, 2004, for the first time, announced a substantial hike of up to 50 per cent in its fares. The increase was necessitated to enable the DMRC meet costs of operation and maintenance as well as liabilities, including loans and depreciation costs. However, the issue sharply divided DMRC's 13-member Board of Directors, with four of the Central Government nominees opposing the move, rest, including five representatives of Delhi government, being in favour of hike. The decision was adopted by a majority after a marathon meeting. Again, when DMRC planned to extend the Metro to the other states, it has seen headway over funding issue.

DMRC again hiked the fare in December 2005. After the bus fare hike, the DMRC on November 11, 2009 announced further increase in fares by 36 per cent. Commenting on fare hike, Director (Finance), DMRC, said, "*The consumer price index has played a dominant role in fixing the fares. There is an increase of over 30 per cent under various heads. We have to repay a loan of Rs.11,000 crore to the JICA and the DMRC need to provide for huge depreciation. And, all that*

requires funds." However, discount on smart cards was continued to encourage long distance journey. To keep operating cost low, a single driver was handling the train. Though, there were necessary mechanism to handle any mishap, passengers were concerned on the issue of a single driver handling train.

Aligning Strategy with Operations and Processes: Kaplan and Norton (2008) say that companies generally fail at implementing a strategy or managing operations because they lack an overarching management system to integrate and align these two vital processes. They emphasized the importance of linkage of planning of strategy to its operational execution. Linking people, strategy and operation also helps distill organizational challenges for the coming years (Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan 2002).

DMRC was probably the only infrastructure project in the country that was running ahead of schedule, despite having a huge interface with a number of government agencies and private contractors. While contractors like L&T and AFCONS were associated with delayed flyover and other projects in Delhi, it is interesting to note that they have been working perfectly for DMRC and there have been no delays on sections built by them. This reflected that the problem definitely lies in the way the projects are handled. Commenting on the reasons of timely completion of project, one of the officials of DMRC said, "*Detailing of the tender document is of utmost importance. Every detail and perceivable situation should be addressed therein to remove any vagueness, which may result in an altercation later on*". To obtain better results, DMRC allowed contractor to decide on how to carry out a job and then seek a price for it. It emphasized that while there should be a penalty for delay in construction, there should be a commensurate clause, which provides for time payment by the government agency failing which it should be compelled to pay a penalty. DMRC used to release 80 per cent of the amount within the first three days and the remaining after complete scrutiny in the following 25 days. The prompt payment ensures that the contractor does not run into liquidity problem and has sufficient funds at all time to complete the project on time.

Having laid down one of the most difficult and tight punctuality yardsticks in the world for train operations by considering a train late by 60 seconds as "not punctual", DMRC also achieved the unique record of achieving a punctuality level of over 99 per cent in Metro Rail operations. Metro rail systems in other countries, in contrast, consider a delay of around three to five minutes as train delay, though they too have a punctuality rate of approximately 99 per cent. In the underground Metro system in London, three to four stations covering a distance of three to four km are shut down for maintenance work at any point of time. The DMRC, however, undertook maintenance work only during night and on Sundays, when the rush was lower.

DMRC strictly followed quality and safety guidelines of appropriate authorities. Apart from designing train operation such as automatic breaks and modern signaling system, DMRC has also given attention to even the small things that many organizations usually forget. For example, DMCR stressed that small measures such as installation of hoardings around construction sites and flasher lights, floodlighting at night, and positioning of traffic marshals, help to secure project site, maintain cleanliness, and prevent theft. "*All these measure put together do not even add 1 per cent to the project cost, but their benefits are immense…,*" commented one of the officials. However, DMCR was facing some operation problems due to misuse by commuters

due to lack of awareness. They were using lifts, which were for handicapped and the elderly. At times young children intentionally pressed the emergency button to stop the escalators. At least two to three cases of the automatic fare collections gate bars being broken every day, as commuters try to force their way through. The DMRC has also been facing problems of track thefts. In one year, 53 theft cases were registered, which included stealing of cables, hose pipes used for fire extinguishers and nozzles. After some mishaps and accidents, DMRC became extra cautious about safety, which lead to the delay in some work.

In April 2003, an Indian company, Integral Coach Factory (ICF), alleged that DMRC had not approached any Indian coach manufacturers to willfully pave the way for import of coaches from Korea at higher costs. Claiming "transparency" in its acquisition process, DMRC clarified that it had imported coaches from South Korea as they were not manufactured anywhere in India. "*The coaches supplied by the ICF to metro rail in Kolkata and elsewhere were completely different from those used by the DMRC. It would take over 3-4 years for any Indian company to acquire the technology needed to build the coaches in the country. Many Indian companies had applied for our tenders but could not pass the pre-qualifying stages*," Mr. Sreedharan clarified.

Aligning Strategy with Technologies: The use advance technology displaces the role of the competitors if they cannot match with it (Thompson and Strickland 2001). Despite heroic efforts in strategic planning and performance tracking, there is still widespread dissatisfaction with operating results because of chronic disconnect between strategic objectives and execution value. This applies across the organization but especially in support functions – Finance, Marketing, Technology, and People (Robert Angel 2008). The DMRC has brought to the country the most advanced rail technologies for the first time and accomplished many technological innovations. It has built India's first "extra-dosed" bridge only the second of its kind after Japan to be built over a railway crossing (five very busy lines of the Indian Railways, with nearly 200 trains passing on the tracks) anywhere in the world. It had to be constructed without any disruption to the train movement. The main span was also kept long to allow for future expansion of the Indian Railways lines. Metro site and design engineers used to be present all night for spot decisions to avoid any delay in the operations. DMRC also implemented India's biggest and most efficient graphic design system, which were bilingual (English and Hindi) signs with about a dozen basic categories including way finding, statutory, safety etc. It has also developed special signage system for physically handicapped, besides introducing Braille signs for the visually impaired. The sings inside the trains carried vital information for train users. The sings were in metal for fire protection and longevity. DMRC is building the longest Metro Bridge, passing over an operating railway line in the city. It employed Cantilever Construction (CLC) technology so that the rail traffic below the bridge is not hampered. In 2005, the Delhi MRTS has selected Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) to manufacture 45 modern trains through technology transfer from the international consortium of Mitsubishi-Rotem. BEML is to supply train not only to DMCR but also to Metros coming up in other cities in India.

Aligning Strategy with Units: The institutional relationships among different units/departments and different strategy levels is a significant factor that affects the outcome of strategy execution. Three aspects of the corporate-business unit relationship are especially likely to affect a unit's success in executing a particular strategy: business unit autonomy, sharing programs and synergies across units, and control and reward systems (Yang Li at al. 2008). Mr. Sreedharan

achieves timely completion of various projects of Delhi Metro by dividing the project between sub-managers and giving them each a deadline. He reviewed daily progress reports and met with top staff and consultants weekly. The timely completion of work by one unit in DMRC helped achieving deadlines by the other unit.

DMRC Performance: The excellent alignment of policies, people, and program helped DMCR achieving excellence in executing its mission of serving the people of Delhi through metro network, setting world class standards in regard to safety, reliability, punctuality, comfort, and customer satisfaction and operating metro on sound commercial lines obviating the need for Government support. Though DMRC has faced some hurdles such as political difference between controlling body of DMRC, economical constraints, social constraints in terms of re-settlement of people, it has been effective in executing its strategy and objectives. A notable achievement of DMRC is compressing the whole implementation period for Phase-I from the originally planned 10 years to 7 years. It has set certain benchmarks about quality and safety in constructions and developed excellent public image. DMRC has also been trendsetter concerning timely completion of project within budget.

In 2007, the Delhi Metro claimed to be one of only five operationally profitable metro systems in the world. Over a period of time, the DMRC has charted a steep rise in popularity, as has its revenue earnings. In the 2008 financial year, it had revenue of $100 million and profit before tax of $3.98 million. The month of September 2009 saw an average daily earning of over Rs 1 crore, while the average footfall stood at 8.53 lakh. As a result, pollution levels in Delhi are down by a third and congestion has eased to where those buses now travel an average of 11 mph as compared to 8 mph before the metro was built, a serious achievement in a city with world-class traffic jams. DMRC got the ISO 14001 certification for environment-friendly construction and operations, the second metro system in the world after the New York Metro to achieve this standard and the first one to receive it in the construction stage. DMRC is also planning to convert many of its stations into green stations. DMRC has an ISO 1402 certification for environment protection. While the city environmentalists were happy with the sensitivity DMRC towards the environment, they said it also is in stark contrast to what has been seen in other developmental projects. "*Their holistic approach makes the difference that sadly is lacking in other projects,*" said an environmentalist.

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