

PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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Introduction

Malaysia's competitive edge at the global level depends very much on the efficiency and effectiveness of its public sector delivery system. This is why it is important for Malaysia to seek ways and means to continuously improve public sector service delivery. This article highlights some of the major challenges confronting Malaysia as it moves ahead into the turbulent future. It then identifies several key areas for improvement to enhance public sector performance. It also proposes several guiding principles on how to develop a high performance workforce in the public sector to ensure it continues to contribute positively and significantly towards service delivery excellence, racial harmony, economic growth and national development.

Managing Success

Since independence, Malaysia has been very fortunate to have capable leaders who helped transform this country into a very successful nation. The standard of living and the high quality of life enjoyed by most Malaysians is a testament of this success. Although we have inherited a successful nation with a vibrant economy and a system of infrastructure that is equal to many developed countries, we cannot be complacent and be satisfied with these achievements.

Complacency has been the root cause of the downfall for many civilisations, nations and organisations. Success should not blind us from the changing reality of the environment around us. It is crucial to manage our success; the success that our leaders and their predecessors have worked so hard for. Since we inherited a nation that is at the pinnacle of success where a strong foundation has already been set, the people expect more from the public sector.

Therefore, the challenge for the public sector right now is to build upon the success of the nation and to avoid sinking into a level of contentment and complacency. In order to sustain this momentum of growth and development, we have to work together to move the country to a higher level of

performance. This is why the government is never satisfied with its excellent past achievements and is constantly looking for ways and means to renew and to improve its service delivery systems.

Attaining Balanced Development

Achieving a balanced development is an essential aspect of our long-term development plan as reflected in our Vision 2020. A balanced development means that Malaysia should not focus just on physical and infrastructural development but must also look into the social and human aspects. What is the point of having world-class facilities and infrastructure, if the people are still having third world mentality and behaviour?

Balanced development must also take into consideration other aspects including regional or geographic imbalances, gender differences, the needs of the marginalised groups such as the disabled, the elderly, the single parents as well as rural and urban poor. Those in need should continue to receive support and no group should be left behind. We must not forget the lessons learnt from the world's largest democracy, where rapid economic development, which benefitted only a small group, is not enough to guarantee electoral victory, when a large proportion of the people are left out of mainstream development.

Furthermore, there is a need to balance present demands with future needs. We cannot keep on exploiting the resources without pausing to ponder about its impact on the environment and future generations. We have a responsibility to ensure that the future generations inherit a planet that is clean, tranquil and inhabitable. However, it seems that our dream of attaining sustainable development is becoming more elusive than ever and this will emerge as a major challenge for the public sector.

Changing Mindset

Although Malaysia has achieved significant progress in several areas, there are still many areas that need improvement. For instance, even though in terms of government efficiency Malaysia improved from 26th position in 2004 to 9th position in 2010, its ranking according to the Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International slid from 39th position in 2004 to 56th position in 2010. Therefore, as long as the mindsets of the civil servants remain the same, no transformation will happen.

Transformation only happens when civil servants start to question and re-examine their basic assumptions in the light of current realities to determine whether these assumptions are still valid. If they still are, we may continue our current approach; but if they are not, then we have to change the way we serve. During the Fifth Premier Civil Service Dialogue (MAPPA

V), the Honourable Dato' Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, the ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia said, *"it is easier to move a mountain, alter the flow of the river, construct skyscrapers and demolish large structures than to change the mindsets and attitudes of the people."* This aspect was emphasised again by the former Prime Minister in his speech during the Sixth Premier Civil Service Dialogue on 20 January 2005. Likewise, during the Twelfth Premier Civil Service Dialogue on 23 March 2011, the current Prime Minister also highlighted the need to change public's perception that the civil service is bloated and unresponsive by creating a performance centric civil service that is highly effective, efficient, productive, innovative and creative.

Truly, there is a dire need for civil servants to change their mindsets and focus on the people they serve rather than purely on processes and procedures. Processes and procedures are merely the means towards the end. If these processes and procedures fail to contribute towards achieving the ends or if they are the source of hindrance to service responsiveness, then immediate steps have to be taken to eliminate the obsolete processes and procedures. However, it is easier said than done; just like the old adage, "Old habits die hard." Thus, changing the mindset of workers in the public sector remains a formidable challenge in our quest towards strengthening service delivery.

Declining Global Competitiveness

Besides the internal challenges described above, Malaysia is also confronted with the external challenges of globalisation and declining global competitiveness. According to the IMD 2011 World Competitiveness Rankings, Malaysia is currently at the 16th position in terms of economic competitiveness, down from last year's 10th position. Malaysia's political stability depends very much on its ability to remain competitive in the world market.

The pie-sharing formula works well as long as we are having an expanding economic pie. If our economic pie shrinks for a prolonged period, there will be less to share and there will be questions on who has to give up as well as how much to give up. It is easier to discuss sharing an increasing economic pie than surrendering a portion of a shrinking economic pie.

Furthermore, for Malaysia to achieve the aspirations of Vision 2020, it needs to attain an average annual growth rate of 7-8 %. This requires a quantum leap in terms of economic growth that can be sustained only by moving up the value-chain and by moving from a production-based economy towards a knowledge-based economy. It is no longer viable for Malaysia to compete at the lower end of the value-chain where we no longer have

the competitive advantage. Therefore, ensuring that Malaysia can compete effectively in the global market will be a major challenge in the near future.

Building a High Performance Workforce for Service Delivery Excellence

To survive and thrive under an environment of extreme uncertainty, Malaysia needs to strengthen its service delivery by building a high performance workforce. The key characteristics of a high performance workforce are: being customer-focused, emphasising on quality, demonstrating a high level of accountability, being effective and efficient, ensuring continuous improvement, and working as a team. Under such an environment, there is zero-tolerance for complacency and inertia.

Thus improvement is continuous while performance is measured and closely linked to rewards. Attention should be on the needs of the people rather than on procedures and processes. Quality of service is not to be compromised for the sake of achieving quantity. Working together in synergy is the order of the day rather than trying to solve interdependent problems in a fragmented and ineffective manner. Each of these aspects will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

i. Customer-Focused

The first key element of a high performance workforce is that it is customer-focused. For the public sector, it means paying particular attention to the needs of the people it serves, including the stakeholders and the citizens. The high performance workforce is highly aware of the fact that its existence is to serve the people and not itself. Therefore, it does not view its customers, particularly the citizens and their stakeholders as a nuisance to be tolerated but as opportunities to contribute and to make a difference. A high performance workforce is not afraid to step out and offer its services or assistance instead of trying to hide itself behind a wall of bureaucracy, procedures and excuses. The key characteristic of a high performance workforce therefore, is its willingness to perform at a better level beyond the expectations of its clients. It is willing to “walk the extra mile” for the customers.

ii. Quality-Focused

A high performance workforce is very concerned about the quality of the service or product and it has a high level of pride in its work. In contrast, a low performance workforce does not care about quality and does not have any pride with regard to

the work done. As far as the workers are concerned, a job is just a job and nothing more. They will rush through the job without much concern for its quality and its long-term impact. They do not take pride in the work done and they expect their bosses to correct the inaccuracies in their work.

They tend to hand in their work at the very last moment so that there will not be much time for the bosses to check their work thoroughly. For example, letters are sent out with obvious typing errors and grammatical mistakes, wrong or unfilled dates, inaccurate addressed or incorrectly spelled names of the addressees. There are also cases where the wrong prescriptions or dosage are dispensed, resulting in fatal or near fatal tragedies. There have also been cases where supervisions are not carried out accordingly, leading to major defects in the buildings or structures constructed.

iii. Accountability

A high performance workforce has a high level of personal and professional accountability. The workers do not hide behind a complex and intricate web of taskforces, working groups or technical committees. They believe that they are personally and professionally responsible for all the work done by their departments or agencies. Therefore, they are

committed personally and professionally to ensure that whatever policies formulated by the government will be implemented quickly and successfully.

The drive for success comes from inside them and not because of pressure from any external forces or the expectation of rewards. Failure to achieve the set of goals or objectives is viewed as a personal failure rather than being depersonalised and blamed on the organisation. However, accountability is not possible if there are no meaningful or appropriate performance measures. Accountability means the willingness to develop a set of performance measures and to gauge one's performance against those measures.

iv. Effectiveness and Efficiency

To achieve our vision and mission, our organisations have to be effective and efficient. Effectiveness is "doing the right thing", whereas efficiency is "doing the things right". Effectiveness is the hallmark of leadership, while efficiency lies in the realm of management. When we talk about effectiveness, it means achieving the set objectives of our organisations. If one of the objectives of your organisation is to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) from RM1 billion to RM2 billion within two years and you are able to do so, then your organisation can be considered as effective. However, if the cost incurred is too high or the time taken is too

long, your organisation may be effective in terms of achieving the FDI target but it is not done in an efficient manner. However, this does not mean that effectiveness is more important than efficiency. Service delivery excellence requires a focus on both aspects, i.e. effectiveness and efficiency.

v. Continuous Improvement

Another characteristic of a high performance workforce is the striving for continuous improvement. In a world that is ever changing, no organisation can survive by remaining the same over a long period. It has to improve, renew and reinvent itself. Even dinosaurs, which ruled the earth for over several hundred million years, can disappear due to the changes in the environment. Therefore, a high performance workforce always looks for opportunities to improve so that it can create its own future, just like the learning organisation as highlighted by Peter Senge. It never ceases to look for opportunities to improve itself, its products, its services, its processes, its systems, its technology and it is never satisfied with the status quo and complacency because it knows that there is always someone waiting to take over if it falters.

One reason why GE or General Electric is able to remain as a high performance organisation for a prolonged period is that it has the shared vision

of being “number one” or “number two” in the industries it competes in. In other words, if your product is not “number one” or “number two” in the market, your organisation will be at risk of being closed down or sold off. Under such circumstances, the drive for continuous improvement is already built-in within the organisation.

vi. Teamwork

No workforce can achieve a high level of performance if it does not work as a team. Teamwork means better coordination, teamwork means less duplication and teamwork means less fragmentation. Often the complaint about government agencies is that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. As a result, policies sometimes seem to contradict one another. For instance, we want to attract investors to bring in more foreign direct investments, especially in strategic growth areas. However, our procedures can sometimes be so complicated, so fragmented and so inconsistent that potential investors find it hard to do any business with us. Such situations provide opportunities for corrupt practices to rear their ugly heads. Such situations result in inefficiencies and ineffectiveness. Such situations lead to unhealthy competition and confusion among federal and state agencies. Thus, improving teamwork is an essential aspect in strengthening public service delivery.

Multi-Level Interventions

We have discussed several key characteristics of a high performance workforce that can contribute towards strengthening service delivery in the public sector. The next question is how do we go about building a high performance workforce? Building and sustaining a high performance workforce requires multi-dimensional intervention at the individual, organisational and community levels.

Individual Level

At the individual level, we need to focus on critical aspects, including competency, integrity, emotional intelligence as well as high commitment and perseverance. To build a high performance workforce, the workers must be competent in their job. Being competent does not only mean having the right knowledge and the right skills, but it also means having the right attitude. We may have an engineer who has the knowledge and the skill to supervise the construction of schools, but because of his careless attitude, he may be negligent in his work which may result in the collapse of the buildings he supervised.

This is why the Malaysian government is giving a lot of attention on developing the competency of the

workers as reflected in the emphasis on providing pre-service and in-service training, both locally and abroad. Similarly, being technically competent is also not good enough; the individual must also have a high level of integrity because the public sector is entrusted to look after the interest of the people. Without a high level of integrity, it will be difficult to ensure the implementation of government strategies and policies.

Integrity is the ultimate performance multiplier. With it, employees always do more, leaders expect more, and everyone believes strongly in what they are doing (Tom McGehee, 2001). Their purpose is consistent with the way they work, how they act, and what they value. Integrity is built on trust and that occurs when what you say matches with what you do. The greater the gap between what is said and what occurs, the greater the credibility gap and the lower the level of trust. A high performance workforce requires individuals to have a high level of emotional intelligence. They are able to gauge the emotional level of the people that they are dealing with and are able to respond appropriately. In other words, they are able to handle their emotions in a way that it contributes positively towards achieving the goals of the organisation.

Persistence and resilience are other hallmarks of a high performance workforce. Failure is never seen

in a negative light but as a valuable learning lesson not to be repeated. Persistence also means never giving up too easily. The spirit of "Malaysia Boleh" has shown that we can achieve our dreams if we put our minds and hearts into it.

Organisational Level

Changes at the individual level are not enough to sustain a high performance workforce. Changes must also occur at the organisational level to support a high performance workforce. The individual cannot do it alone; if he does, he will fail alone. To develop the kind of skills needed, there must be building blocks that support and nurture the required competencies for high performance. It needs the support of the organisation where the environment must be conducive in nurturing the kind of culture and eliminating undesirable behaviour. Towards this end, the public sector will have to work on several fronts including developing shared vision, building structures and institutions, reengineering the systems and processes and adopting new technologies to support a culture of high performance.

Without shared vision, there will be no cohesiveness and synergy among the people in the organisation. Without cohesion and synergy, there will be no alignment in terms of efforts and initiatives. Without alignment, there will be no meaningful results,

but just a hive of activities. Peter Senge once said “structures influence behaviour”. If there is no structure, energy will move towards entropy. Shared vision provides the invisible structure for people in organisations to focus their energy on a common goal. Shared vision is therefore the glue that binds the people together.

Besides shared vision, how the organisation is structured also affects the effectiveness of a high performance workforce. Under a stable condition, where there is predictability and consistency, bureaucracy works best. It provides clear rules of engagement under specific conditions. However, under the current environment of accelerated and turbulent change, the bureaucratic structure may in fact hinder the ability of the organisation to respond to the wide variety of rapidly changing conditions. It inhibits the effectiveness of the high performance workforce. Other organisational forms that are more agile and flexible may be better suited for such conditions. Totally new structures are needed to enable the high performance workforce to function at its best. Like shared vision and structures, systems, processes and procedures changing conditions inhibit the effectiveness of the high performance workforce. Therefore, organisations need to review their systems, their processes and their procedures to ensure that they reinforce and do not undermine the effectiveness of the high performance workforce.

Community Level

Changes at the community level are also required to support a high performance workforce. The community cannot be just an armchair critic who keeps on complaining about everything but never does anything about it. The community needs to actively participate in the management and development of their locality as an active and responsible partner in helping to chart the course that takes the nation to a higher level of prosperity.

To be able to do so, the community needs to develop its capacity and ability in promoting transparency and responsible participation at the local level. The community must be prepared to work together with the departments and agencies to enhance the level of performance in their locality. This requires the development of collaborative leadership skills among the key players that could support consensus decision-making, sharing and learning.

Fundamental Guiding Principles for Service Excellence

To move Malaysia towards excellence, glory and distinction, this article proposes several fundamental guiding principles to strengthen public service delivery through developing a high performance workforce.

These principles are not exhaustive, but essential to ensure Malaysia remains highly competitive in this new century. These include:

1. Building a highly competent workforce;
2. Taking pride and passion in work;
3. Demonstrating a high level of integrity;
4. Applying common sense;
5. Learning from the moments of truth; and
6. Working together in synergy.

Competency-Based Public Service

We have elaborated extensively on the need to have a competent workforce and how it affects our level of competitiveness at the global level. Under current realities, we cannot hide under tariff protections but must compete on the basis of quality and value-add. However, to achieve quality and value-add, we must have a workforce that is highly competent. The current emphasis of the government to develop a competency-based public service is both appropriate and timely. Continuous learning and improvement is a must for all workers and all organisations, whether public or private.

Therefore, the question before us now is to what extent our organisations are investing in people development. Are people a resource to be consumed and used up, a capital expense to be depreciated

or an asset to be further developed? We strongly believe that our people are our assets and they have the potential to perform at a much higher level than they ever thought they could, if only they are given the opportunity and the proper guidance. Therefore, we must strongly support the concerted efforts taken to promote life-long learning among civil servants and the development of learning organisations in the public sector.

Serving with Pride and Passion

Nothing can be done well if there is no pride and passion in whatever we do. Pride and passion provides the internal drive towards excellence, glory and distinction. Compare the story of two workers and their respective responses to additional work given. One sees it as a recognition of his or her ability, talent and competency and therefore welcomes it. The other sees it as an additional burden and therefore finds excuses to run away from it.

Look at your departments and agencies, do you have people who persistently take long tea breaks and lunch breaks even though there is a long queue waiting? Do you have people in your departments and agencies who are immune to the complaints of the customers? Do you have people in your departments who are proud that they are able to play truant and do not feel guilty at all about it? To all of those who

do not feel proud of the job they are doing and do not have any pride in their job, we would like to share with you a meaningful quotation, *"I cried because I have no shoes, until I saw someone who has no feet."* We should be thankful to be given the opportunity to serve the people, because at the end of the day, we are judged by the contributions we made to our country and not by the material wealth we accumulated.

Upholding the Integrity of the Public Service

High moral character and integrity is an important component in the equation to strengthen service delivery. Being civil servants is not just about being efficient in discharging their duties but also upholding their moral integrity by rejecting corruption and abuse of power and being courteous. Therefore, civil servants should uphold the integrity of the public service at all times. Without high moral character and a high degree of integrity, it is not possible to translate the vision of the nation into concrete actions and reality. Without high moral character and integrity, there will be "leakages" along the way that will drain away the funds allocated and weaken the service delivery systems and mechanisms.

As such, the government is giving a lot of attention to eliminate corruption and abuse of power. The

launching of the National Integrity Plan (NIP) as well as the establishment of the Malaysian Institute of Integrity (MIL) is aimed at promoting a society that has a high moral character and an impeccable level of integrity. This is not only the concern of the public sector but of all Malaysians as a whole.

Back to Basics

In our pursuit for rapid growth and economic development, we must not forget about the basics, the basic needs of the people, the basic reasons why we are here and the basic courtesy to our customers. Although we need to ensure that we are not left behind economically and technologically, we also have the moral obligation to ensure that the basic needs of our people are also taken care of. What is the point of having the best communication systems in the world, if a significant section of our population does not have access to telephone, water and electricity? What is the point of having a modern and beautiful administrative centre, if the services provided are still based on third-world mentality? And what is the point of having so many smart schools, if a large proportion of our school children are not encouraged to think analytically, critically and independently? Common sense must prevail in this environment of high speed and high technology where the human touch aspect is often easily forgotten.

We are sometimes so excited by the temptations of technologies and overwhelmed by the surging demands for more to be done in a shorter time that we forget the basics. We must not lose sight of the basic needs of our people in our endeavour to strengthen public service delivery. We must adopt a common sense approach in whatever we do rather than follow blindly what others are doing. Take the example of a car producer. If you keep on producing cars that are problematic from the start, your after sales service is poor and your parts are expensive, how long do you think you can sustain business? Common sense will tell you that it will not be for long.

There will always be people lurking around the corners and peddling their products and services; claiming that it is the panacea to solve all your problems. You might wake up one day to find out to your horror; it is in fact the beginning of your problem. Common sense also tells us that during lunch hours and school holidays the crowd is usually at its maximum and yet we choose to close or reduce the counters or allow a large number of our staff to go on leave during these periods. Likewise, common sense tells us that unnecessary ceremonies and rituals will snap up a huge portion of the energy and resources in our organisations at the expense of our core business effectiveness, yet we still see people giving lots of attention to these ceremonies and rituals.

Delivery Beyond Expectations

By definition, the public service is there to serve the people. Our former Prime Minister himself has declared that he is the "Number One Servant". Therefore, the role of the public sector is to serve the needs of the people and the country. This should be the public image of the civil service in the minds of the people. This image is often formed at the point of first contact where the public interface with the government departments and agencies and not at the corporate headquarters in the offices of the Secretaries-Generals or Directors-General.

This point of contact is called "the moment of truth" and the level of services provided should be beyond the expectations of the customers. You may have the latest technology, the most comprehensive client charter and a whole list of the quality certifications. However, if the people manning the counters are perceived as indifferent, insensitive, rude and incompetent, then the image of the public sector as a whole is ruined. This is why our former Prime Minister was very concerned about counter services and as one of his first tasks, he directed the government to set up a taskforce to focus on improving the services provided at the counters.

Moving Ahead in Synergy

Lastly, we also have to focus on the need for all of us to work together in concert towards strengthening the service delivery. Even in the royal address of His Majesty the King during the opening of the Second Session of the 11th Parliament as well as in the numerous speeches delivered by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, working together is the key towards excellence, glory and distinction. To excel and perform, we cannot do it alone, we have to work with others, leveraging upon their strengths and expertise. According to Davis and Spekman (2004) *"You can't compete and win alone. Today, constellations of firms ally against each other...and the firm that stands alone, may fail alone."*

Similarly, Kenichi Ohmae (2005) is promulgating the importance of cross-border alliances. Likewise, for a nation to be successful, the public sector alone cannot sustain the achievements for long without the support of the private sector and the people, including non-governmental and community-based organisations. There is a need for all of us to work together as requested by our former Prime Minister to work with him and not for him. We need to work together as a team to solve interdependent problems, i.e. problems that no one party can solve alone. There must be shared responsibility among the various stakeholders and constituencies. We

can move ahead in synergy to achieve the level of total customer satisfaction and national prosperity targetted if we do it together.

Conclusion

This article highlights several challenges that are confronting us at this critical moment. It has reiterated the need for a high performance workforce to ensure Malaysia survives and thrives under this extreme condition of rapid change and uncertainty. It has also proposed several guiding principles for the civil service to ponder and take appropriate action. Ultimately, all of us will benefit from an improved public service delivery system because we and our family members are also the clients of government departments and agencies.

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