

ENHANCING WORKFORCE EXCELLENCE IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit.
- Aristotle

Human capital constitutes the bulk of the assets of an organisation. There is a causal link between human capital development and value creation. Hence, developing the public service workforce will greatly contribute to the implementation of the 9th Malaysia Plan. It will also ensure a service delivery that is timely and of a quality that exceeds public expectations. Workforce excellence can contribute significantly to organisational efficiency and effectiveness in realising the strategic thrusts of the 9th MP. A 'high thinking and high doing' and a highly relevant workforce will ensure its continued excellence. Public service workforce relevance depends, among others, on the public service ability to manage change in a discontinuous environment, develop its capacity through the development of its competencies and its single-minded focus on public needs and results. Leadership is crucial in ensuring the sustained relevance of the public service. It will have to focus on human capital and the enabling systems that contribute to human capital capacity development to ensure workforce excellence and, consequently, extraordinary performance.

INTRODUCTION

A noble and urgent mission has been entrusted to the public service. It has been charged with, among other tasks, the implementation of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9th MP). It is now the bounden duty of the public service to bring this plan to fruition, and thereby, help realise the national aspiration of Vision 2020.

It behoves the public service, therefore, to redouble its efforts to create value in fulfilment of this mission. We have implemented many development plans before. We have learnt much from the past. Given this learning, the public service should be able to achieve more at lesser costs than before. Figure 1 shows the path that the public service treads in adding value to its public services provision.

As Figure 1 shows, the public service offers added value when it provides more efficient and better services at affordable prices. Such services should improve the quality of life of society (Jupp and Younger, 2004, p. 18).

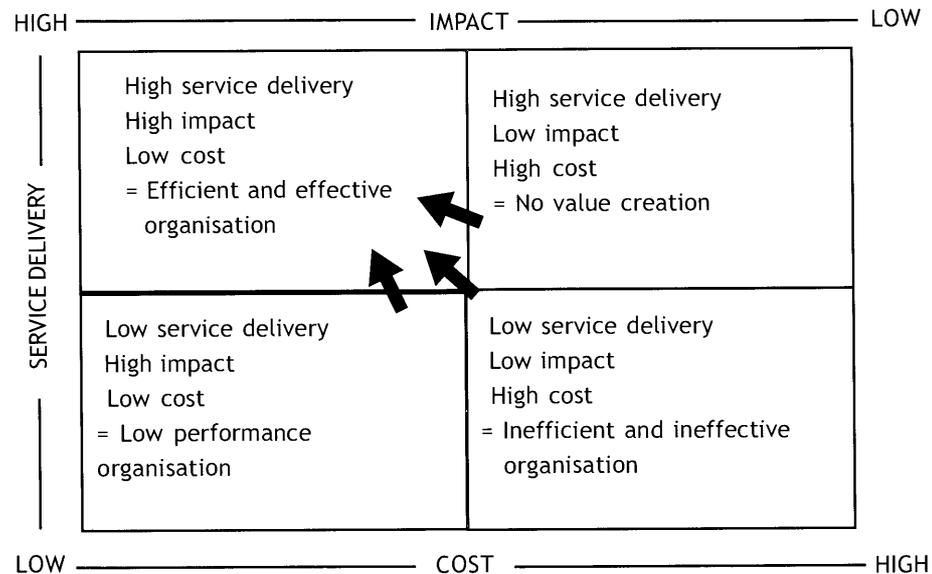


Figure 1: The Path to Value Creation

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN CAPITAL

In an organisation, over 75% of its assets are intangible. These intangible assets - human capital, information capital and organisation capital, including leadership, culture, and structure - are central to executing the mission and strategy of an organisation (Kaplan, 2004, p.5). Further, 40% of corporate expenses goes to remunerating and developing human capital (Fitz-enz, 2000, p.3). A similar quantum can be ascribed to the public sector.

This situation that prevails in an organisation is even truer in the case of a country. Physical resources mean little without the requisite human resource endowment. For example, physical resource-rich countries such as Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela have high resource endowments. Notwithstanding, these countries have not been able to achieve the superior levels of per capita income of physical resource-poor countries such as Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. The lag in capita income levels of these physical resource-rich countries can be attributable to the relatively lower level of human capital (and related systems) development compared to those of the physical resource-poor countries. The latter invested much in human resources to compensate for the physical resource deficiency. Consequently, they produced far more output per person than that of resource-rich countries (Kaplan and Norton, 2004, pp. 4,16).

Other governments too have realised the central importance of education and human capital development. India, China and New Zealand have invested heavily on human capital development. They are now reaping handsome dividends from their investments. Indeed, India and China are being considered the next global economic giants threatening the U.S dominance in the world economy.

Our government recognised this nexus between human capital development and national affluence a long time ago. Our development plans have consistently emphasised human capital development. The 9th MP takes this recognition to an even higher plane. It has allocated over 45 billion Ringgit or one quarter of the total budget to the development of human capital (pp. 63, 260). As an economy, we have done all the better for this emphasis.

The public service too, as the implementer of national development goals, has long acknowledged that its distinction in delivering beneficial outcomes to society depends on its human capital development and the parallel development of supporting systems and culture. Figure 2 maps out the central importance of workforce excellence in value creation. We are most valuable, and relevant, when we add the most value to our services provision. Therefore, it is vital for the success of the public service that we keep adding value to our service provision.

Figure 2 also maps out the cause-effect relationship between human capital development - and the corollary development of related systems to build human capital capacity - and the value created for society. Where human capital competencies are upgraded, where the culture and values promote an outcomes and customer orientation and where complementary information capital is developed, better operational performance should follow. This, in turn, should result in value creation - better services rendered efficiently and targeted outcomes achieved cost effectively.

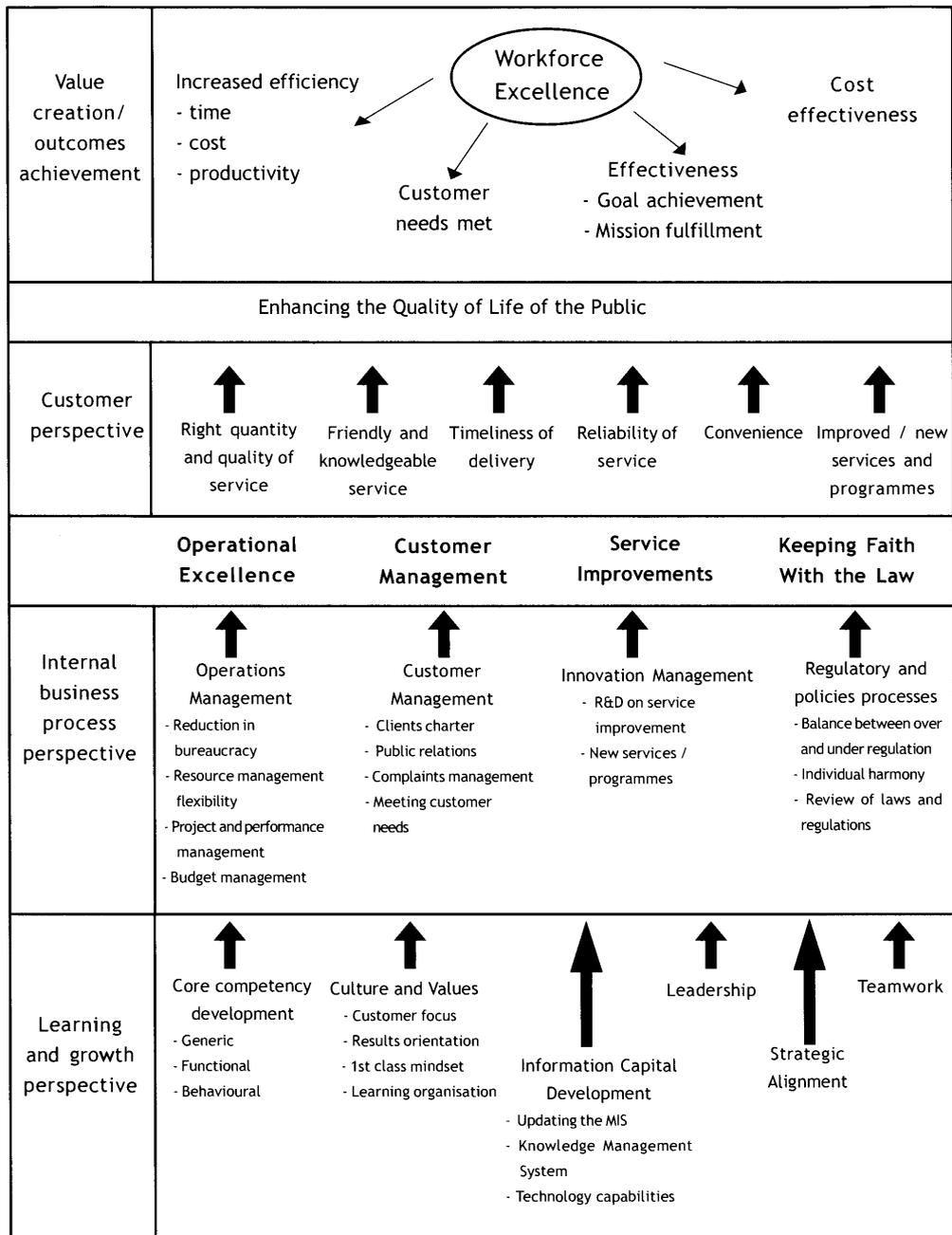


Figure 2: The Strategic Framework For Service Excellence

Indeed, a nation's competitiveness depends fundamentally on government efficiency. The International Institute of Management Development (IMD) competitiveness model (see Figure 3) ascribes a nation's competitiveness to four (4) elements: economic performance, business efficiency, government efficiency and infrastructure.

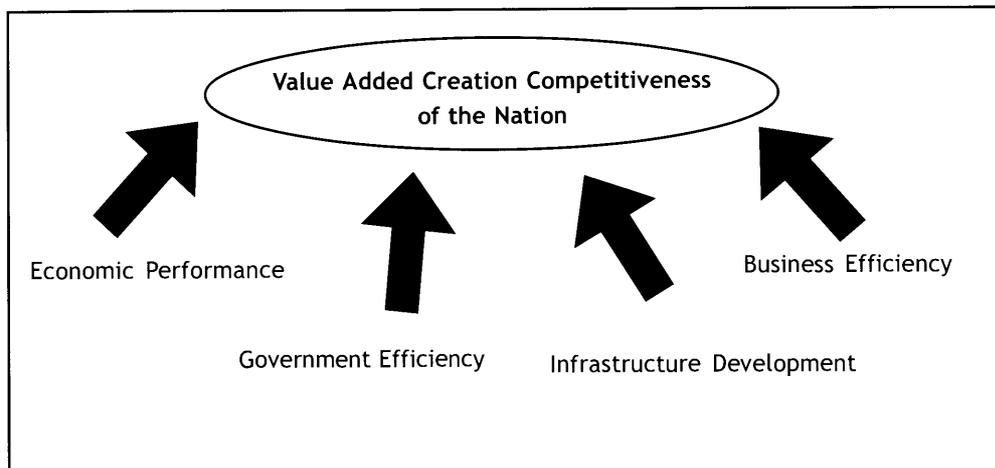


Figure 3: The IMD Competitiveness Model

Adapted from IMD World Competitiveness Model

Given that it is an engine of growth, the private sector drives economic performance and, consequently, national prosperity. However, private sector efficiency depends much on public sector efficiency. The speed, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the private sector depends on the speed and efficiency of public sector operations. Infrastructure development too is largely a public service responsibility. Ultimately, it is public service efficiency that holds the key to a nation's competitiveness. As such, public service workforce excellence is an essential prerequisite to national development.

ENSURING THE CONTINUED EXCELLENCE OF OUR WORKFORCE

Given the causal connection between human resource development and economic development, it is imperative that human capital development be given the priority it rightly deserves. Just as physical resource endowment means little without the necessary processes of extraction and refinement to a level fit for consumption, so too human capital per se counts for little without the additional investment on its development. It is this investment that makes for a knowledgeable workforce that can implement government policies and plans to achieve the desired outcomes.

Achievement of outcomes is good. However, given the resource constraints of the government, outcomes achievement at whatever costs is not a sound proposition. Outcomes are all the more desirable when they are achieved in a cost-effective way.

A High Thinking Workforce

A knowledgeable and an innovative workforce is the second strategic thrust of the 9th MP. A knowledgeable workforce is one that uses its skills and public resources in service provision optimally without compromising on the quantity and quality of the services rendered. To create such added value, the workforce should perform have an experimental mindset - a mindset that inquires or is curious about alternative ways of delivering service. Such a mindset is geared towards achieving the organisational mission in a cost-effective way and is a central attribute of a knowledgeable workforce.

It was such thinking - doing something different - that enabled Christopher Columbus to discover the Americas in the 15th century while seeking to reach India through a westerly route across the Atlantic.¹ Similarly, such thinking helped overcome the problem of the ever-increasing cost of air travel through the introduction of low-budget airlines. So, experimental thinking can help us discover new ways of meeting public needs. As Albert Einstein once said, "if ever we wanted to solve a problem, we would need to engage in a higher level thinking than that which created the problem firstly".

High thinking is also about the capacity to reflect deeply about complex issues and anticipate emerging challenges. Such thinking would require public servants to constantly ask the following questions:

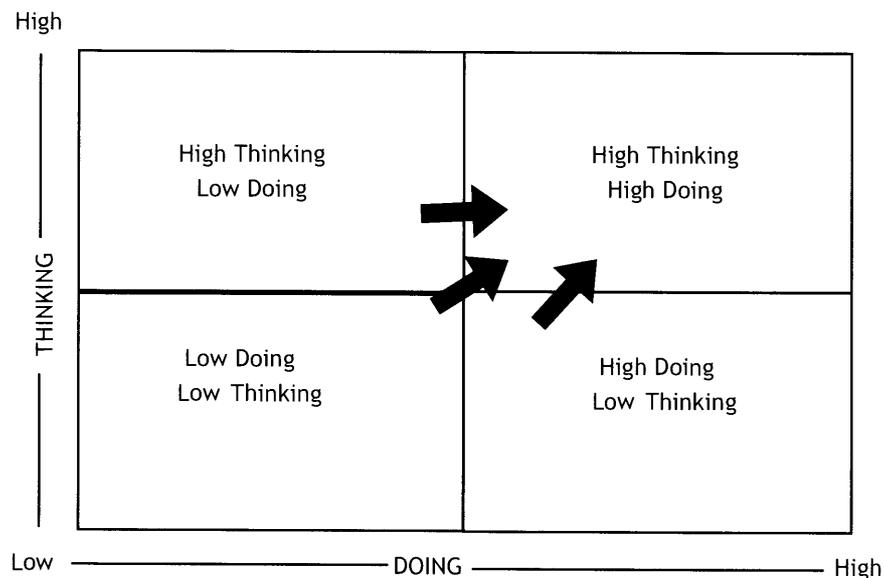


Figure 4: Workforce Excellence

- How can I find a solution to this apparently difficult - if not impossible - problem?
- How can I turn this challenge or difficult situation around to benefit my organisation?
- Is my department strategically positioned to fulfil its responsibilities?
- Can my department come up with better cost-effective alternatives to meeting its responsibilities?

It is in constantly asking these fundamental questions that we can hope to get answers that, upon implementation, would create value and secure public service workforce excellence. The ability to generate alternative mechanisms for service delivery and policy choices is central to workforce excellence.

However, thinking alone will not do. Public servants will have to, subsequently, implement the best course or mechanism for enhanced service delivery. Creative thinking should be complemented by the ability to translate insights thereby obtained into action. Figure 4 illustrates the four types of workforce and the type that would be needed (upper right-hand quadrant) for value creation.

As can be seen in Figure 4, while high doing is preferred, it is high thinking that galvanises the ability to work hard to effect workforce excellence. Lenin once said, "Theory without practice is pointless and practice without theory is mindless." A knowledgeable workforce, therefore, is high on the dimensions of high thinking and high doing. A knowledgeable work force would have to think out a conceptual framework of service delivery that delivers the best outcomes. The workforce would have to think through the impact of its actions before embarking upon them. Doing without thinking whether we are doing the right thing in the right way would not add value. It would not give the results that we want. We might be doing it right but we might not be doing the right thing. The ladder might be leaning against the wrong wall! It would prove costly to realise that after we had climbed up the ladder.

High thinking requires that we not only find better ways of doing what we are doing but also question whether what we are doing needs to be done in the first place. For example, let us say that ministry A has the objective of providing low-cost housing for the poor. There can be many strategies to realise this objective. The ministry could:

- build the houses by outsourcing their construction to private contractors
- buy houses already constructed for distribution to the poor or
- provide grants or interest-free loans to the poor to buy their houses.

The choice of the optimal strategy - the best and least-cost solution in obtaining the desired impact - will involve high thinking. It is such thinking and implementing the chosen strategy that gives rise to value creation. Thinking and doing are more important for organisational success than either.

High thinking requires a workforce that can connect the dots and see emergent patterns in the sea of discontinuous change. Being able to make sense of the apparent disorder in the marketplace and to customise service delivery to suit the preference of the public are the hallmarks of high thinking and doing. Together, these attributes make for value creation. Kodak, the household name for films, failed to see the emergent market for digital imaging. It soon lost its market supremacy to other companies that were better able to see the eventual and inevitable dominance of digital imaging over film.

High or critical thinking can take place in the context of the Eliminate-Raise-Create-Reduce Grid (adapted from Kim and Mauborgne, 2004). This grid impels the public service to pursue all four choices by determining the required action in each quadrant. As Figure 5 shows, the public service must find ways to eliminate bureaucracy by simplifying processes and regulations. It has to constantly raise the bar of its performance by setting higher and ambitious yet realistic performance targets. It must create value by being flexible in its operations, innovating and becoming cost-effective. And it must reduce the tendency to centralise operations in headquarters. This can be done by the delegation of authority and responsibility over finance and operations so that operational decision-making takes place at the point of service delivery.

<p>ELIMINATE</p> <p>Unwanted bureaucracy (rules, regulations, processes) Unwanted services</p>	<p>RAISE</p> <p>Performance targets Performance standards</p>
<p>REDUCE</p> <p>Centralisation Paperwork Hierarchy</p>	<p>CREATE</p> <p>Value addition New services Flexibility in operations Values that promote knowledge sharing, networking, results and customer orientation</p>

Figure 5: Eliminate-Raise-Create-Reduce Grid

A Relevant Workforce

Investments in human capital development should not only make the workforce knowledgeable and strategic in their thinking. It should also make human capital relevant, in the sense that it has the necessary skills to meet current challenges. Workforce relevance is one of the biggest challenges that the public service faces today. Only if we maintain our relevance will we be able to maintain our monopoly on policy advice and execution without political intervention.

Public service workforce relevance depends on the following 4Cs. That dependence can be expressed in the following equation:

$$R = f (Cm, Cd, Co, Ca)$$

where:

- R = Workforce relevance
- Cm = Change management
- Cd = Competency development
- Co = Customer orientation
- Ca = Capacity development

Progress requires change. If the public service is to go on being relevant, it has to change. That is, over time, it has to become better, more disciplined, more agile and more strategic. Change management refers to the ability of an organisation to adapt in the face of increasingly discontinuous change in the external environment. To be relevant, public employees will have to exploit this change to advance their organisational mission. They will have to be flexible in thought and action to do so. Thomas Friedman in his book "The World is Flat" espouses the idea that the internet has levelled the global playing field to such an extent that competitiveness of a nation will depend on how creative or imaginative its people are in delivering more and better products and services at affordable prices.

A simple example of change management that we have long initiated is the use of information technology to cut paper-based management and service delivery. Many of the services provided by the public service no longer require paper-based applications, such as the applications to renew road taxes and driving licences. This change management must proceed apace if we want to keep abreast of world developments in service delivery.²

The internet brings knowledge at the click of a button. The public is knowledgeable as, for example, about a particular illness or disease, thanks to the internet. As such, doctors can no longer rely on knowledge obtained in medical school if they are to be ahead of their educated patients who are internet savvy. A similar necessity prevails in the provision of other public services. Such a necessity requires public servants to be abreast of global developments in their field if they are to maintain their integrity and relevance in service provision.

Change management would also require that our competencies be upgraded in keeping with new technologies or mechanisms of service delivery if we are to remain relevant. Public servants will have to master the skills required to do their work better. They would have to become experts in their jobs. They must have the passion to do so. Indeed, they have little choice other than to upgrade their competencies. The increasing complexity of their jobs requires that public servants galvanise the institutional memory, workplace experience and upgraded skills to do a better job than before. It is the amalgam of these factors that will assure the public service its continued relevance.

Particularly, public servants will need to upgrade their analytical skills to assess correctly the needs of the public and to provide for them. Reskilling becomes mandatory if the method of service delivery has been fundamentally altered.

Apart from the specialised skills required for cost-effective service delivery, generic skills would also have to be burnished. Communication skills - verbal and non-verbal - are vital in policy formulation and communication. Team building skills create synergy in combining the individual skills of team members to enable efficient and effective goals achievement. We also need to be good at managing people and interacting with them. That is, we need good people skills.

This is more so, as our society is a caring society. As such, the public service, as a microcosm of society, would also need to focus on upgrading the soft skills that would enable it to provide services in a caring manner - skills of caring, friendliness and empathy. It is these personalised, high-touch interactions with the public that is going to keep the public service relevant; simply because such manner of service delivery can never be outsourced or automated (Friedman, 2006, p. 306).

The implementation of an integrated competency-based model is important to identify the skills gap in a particular job. A comprehensive competency-based model is being pilot-tested in ten pilot agencies that are participating in the HRM Information System project (HRMIS). It is a model that an individual can use to determine any

gap between his present skills and that required of his job. The model should inform the actions that the individual would have to take to eliminate the competency gap. Such a practice in HRM would ensure workforce excellence in achieving the government's objectives.

Public employees too will have to be customer focused and results oriented. In the provision of many services - immigration, customs, vehicle registration and licencing - the public service has a monopoly. Notwithstanding, in an age of increased consumerism, customer orientation is a must if the public service wants to maintain its integrity and relevance. Competition for other services - health, education - will make public thereof less relevant if we are not customer-focused while keeping faith with public policy.

To ensure customer focus, public servants will have to identify who their direct clients are, that is, who benefits directly from the services provided. They would also need to know who are their indirect clients, that is, who benefits indirectly from the services provided. Through this simple process of client identification, public servants - being part of society - will come to realise sooner that they are the ultimate beneficiaries of their own services through the impact their services have on society. For example, the provision of health care and education benefits directly or indirectly everyone in society, including the service provider - the public servant. Even if he is not a direct beneficiary of the service provided, he benefits from a healthy and educated society that is the outcome of the health and education services. An educated society would be more civil while a healthy society would require less of the taxpayer's money to be channelled into the health care system.

Customer orientation requires us to serve the customer in the best way possible.³ It also demands that we know what the public, as consumers of public services, thinks of us and what it will need in the future. We would need to be proactive and anticipatory in our thinking if we want to maintain the relevance of our services. Leprosy and tuberculosis were diseases that had been almost eradicated that it was pointless to provide such curative services on an extended scale. However, tuberculosis is making a comeback that portends the extension of that curative service. It is through such quick and anticipatory thinking, coupled with the doing, that we meet, if not exceed, public expectations, create value in the delivery of public services and retain our relevance.

Capacity development also determines public service relevance. Capacity has to be strengthened in the areas of human capital, information capital and organisational capital to enhance workforce excellence. A public service that is sensitive to changing

customer needs and subjects itself to continuous transformation in response to environmental challenges is well attuned to strengthening its capacity to enhance service provision. It is this capacity for constant never ending improvement that distinguishes an excellent workforce - that does its job well for a reason - from workforce excellence. The latter refers to a workforce that constantly improves itself and sets higher standards to deliver quality performance.

As Figure 6 shows, quality performance depends on actions, which springs forth from decisions. These decisions are the outcome of attitudes, standards and beliefs. When we constantly improve on what we do, do not settle for mediocre performance, raise the bar of our work standards, have the core beliefs of integrity, hard work, and a 'can do' spirit, then the decisions we make and the actions we take can only make service delivery more relevant.

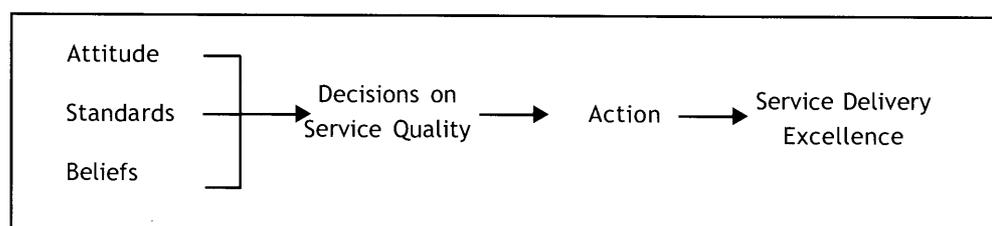


Figure 6: Service Delivery Excellence

Organisational capital - an element in enhancing the capacity of human capital - refers to internal business structures, systems, processes and culture. It was Alfred Chandler who first argued that structure follows strategy. An organisational structure that does not follow the organisational strategy will be misaligned. It would not have the capacity to deliver services efficiently and effectively. For example, a centralised structure would not be able to implement a strategy to devolve authority over service delivery to those who interface with customers. So too would an organisation be lame where it delivers services with outdated delivery systems and processes.

Organisational culture becomes a barrier to capacity development and workforce excellence if it does not encourage innovation, organisational learning and continuous improvements to service delivery mechanisms - rules, regulations, processes and organisational structures. A culture that focuses on the customer and values quality results will not only build capacity but also ensures high performance leading to workforce excellence.

Similarly, capacity development requires the development of information capital. Knowledge management - the acquisition, sharing and use of knowledge to add

value to an agency's operations - inter-agency collaboration, partnering and networking will together promote workforce excellence in the public service. The practice of knowledge management and knowledge sharing must become an integral feature of the public service if we want to retain our excellence and relevance. The era of 'command and control' is over. Today is the age of 'connect and collaborate'. Such a paradigm will contribute to more dynamic networking and teamwork among peers and across agencies that can facilitate timely and quality delivery of public services.

Mentoring can also enhance the capacity of an organisation in maintaining its relevance. Mentoring involves the offering of guidance and advice by someone experienced and senior to someone junior on how to do a better job. Mentoring also helps to retain and develop talented staff. Mentoring relationships are such a potent force in developing workforce excellence in the public service that many countries, such as Singapore, Norway and the UK have placed high-flying civil servants on the fast track to senior management positions under the guidance and advice of mentors (United Nations, 2005, pp. 103-104).

LEADERSHIP CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN

Given the urgency to remain relevant and to excel in its delivery on the five strategic thrusts of the 9th MP, public service leadership - in the Public Service Department and agencies - would have to take stock of where the public service is in terms of workforce excellence and capacity development. It will have to focus on the people and the enabling systems to ensure capacity building for workforce excellence.

Leaders should be able to exploit the competencies - behaviours, knowledge, skills - of their workforce to the hilt. That way, the staff would be able to provide the highest quality service to the public. Leaders should ask their staff whether their skills are being put to maximum use and where in the organisation the staff feel they would be able to contribute the most. Based on the feedback, leaders should be able to tap the competencies of their staff by matching the job descriptions to the competencies of their staff. There should also be a strategy in agencies on how the staff will contribute to the goals of the agency. Thereby, not only leaders add value to their agency operations but the staff too through a better match of their skills with their jobs. As Figure 7 shows, to meet the challenges of the 9th MP implementation agencies would have to carry out a gap analysis on the following:

- *The leadership within an agency.* Is the leadership capable of setting the direction to enable the agency to make a meaningful contribution to the

execution of the strategic thrusts of the 9th MP? What competencies would the current leadership require to do so? What is the state of succession planning? Will it be smooth so as not to be disruptive of service delivery?

- *Making managers manage.* Under the concept of “Let Managers Manage” central agencies have devolved authority and flexibility over the use of resources - financial and human. Managers must now be made to manage through the enforcement of accountability mechanisms such as programme agreements and balanced scorecards. The questions that have to be asked are: Are these systems effectively in place? What is the state of follow-up action on performance deficit? Have managers been assigned to account for the progress of all development and service delivery projects?
- *Human resource requirements.* What is the gap in the staff strength required to execute the agency’s mission and objectives? Is human resource planning conducted in line with the agency’s strategic planning?

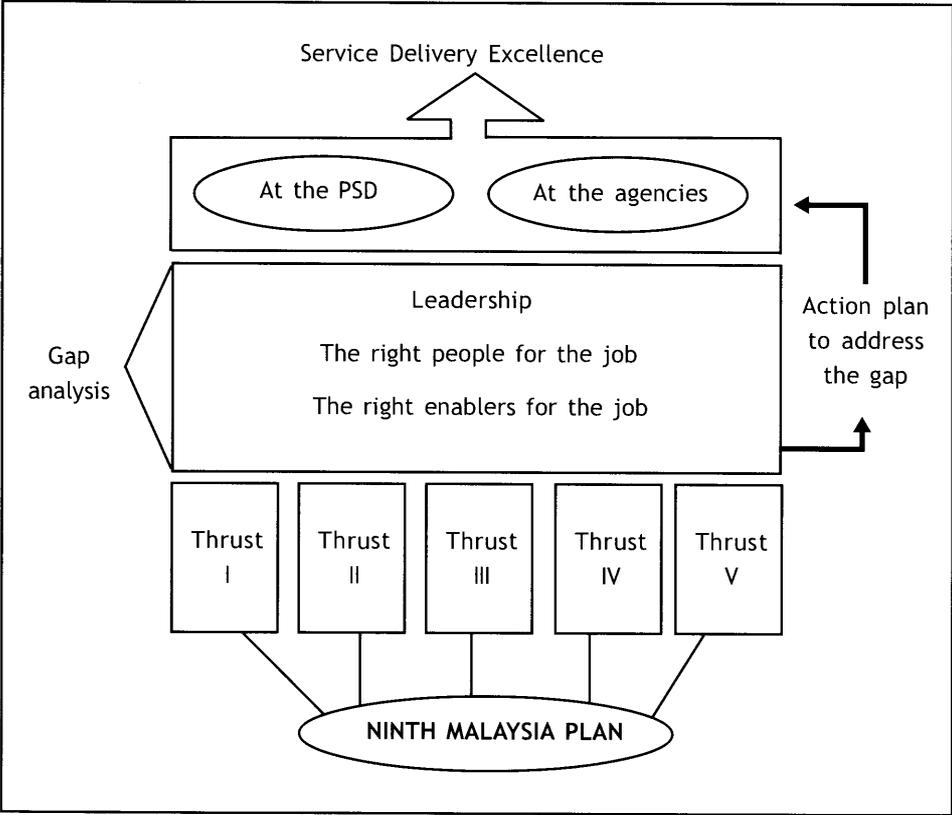


Figure 7: Action Plan for Public Service Workforce Excellence

- *Intellectual capital/competency development.* Have the mission critical skills -generic, functional, behavioural - been identified? What is the competency gap among the workforce as measured against the requirements of service delivery?
- *Organisational capital development.* What is the deficit in the structure, systems, technology and processes that currently constrains effective service delivery? Does the culture promote a focus on the customer, results and continuous learning and improvement? Is the agency citizen-centred, delayed and mission-focused? Does it leverage e-government in the provision of services?
- *Information capital development.* What is the gap in the practice of knowledge management for better service delivery? Is there adequate knowledge sharing and its use to advance agency mission? What is the gap in inter-agency collaboration, networking and partnering that impedes synergy in service delivery and project implementation?

Based on the gap analysis, an action plan should be implemented to bridge the identified gaps so that the workforce would be ripe and ready for the execution of the 9th MP. The action plan, in particular, should contain a training road map for the agency to enhance all mission critical skills.⁴

Training and development should be related to gaining skills to achieve organisational outcomes rather than mere knowledge acquisition. Informal learning, through such initiatives as mentoring, to develop competencies should be pursued with vigour. Indeed, 90% of learning takes place informally at the workplace. The action plan should also specify initiatives that would have to be taken to upgrade the organisational and information capital so that these too measure up to the level required for the implementation of the 9th MP and service excellence.

CONCLUSION

Workforce excellence is about adding value to service provision. It is also about retaining the relevance of the public service in continuing to serve its political masters and citizens. Value creation and the continued relevance of the public service require high thinking and doing. These also require agility on the part of the workforce to respond expeditiously and effectively to dynamics of the marketplace. Mission critical human resource competencies, organisational capital and information capital would have to be upgraded in tandem with the efforts of

upgrading intellectual capital. Together, they combine to build the capacity of the public service human capital.

Leadership at the central agency and operating agency levels play a critical role in enhancing workforce excellence. Simply recognising the need for change does not define leadership. The leader is one who has the courage to act on what he sees as the current gaps in the driving and enabling forces of workforce excellence.

Both at the central and agency levels, we need to strengthen our performance management system to ensure that the public service is truly geared to achieving agency and national goals - and not to merely implementing rules and procedures. Public servants must be made accountable for performance and rewarded accordingly. Our data management system needs to be further strengthened so that the public service is capable of matching the right person to the right job, that is, an employee's competencies matches his respective job description.

Agency leaders and managers should energise the bulk of their human resource through motivation and the provision of a learning environment that drives continuous improvement in service delivery. The relevant skills of leadership to achieve the mission and goals of the organisation should be identified. Potential leaders, identified through succession planning should be groomed in those skills.

Leaders can also ensure a high performance workforce by having a shared vision that all employees, working as one team can strive to accomplish. Empowering them and linking their performance to organisational goals and desired results will also conduce to workforce excellence. Only excellence can ensure our continued relevance.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hitherto the route taken by the Europeans to India and the East Indies - renowned for precious stones, silk and spices - had been around the Cape of Good Hope. Muslim empires of the day had then blocked the overland routes. Columbus thought that the route that he had taken was a short-cut to wealth, glory and power. Mistakenly, he discovered the Americas.

² For example, the Immigration Department has leveraged IT to provide one-hour passport renewals at selected branches, visa on arrival approvals for almost all foreigners and on-the-spot maid application approvals. (See The Star, 25/9/06 p. 1: Express Service.) Similarly, the Road Transport Department has shortened the time it takes to approve transfer of vehicle ownership from three days to 30 minutes. (See The Star, 25/9/06, p. N25: Transfer vehicles in 30 minutes.)

³Nordstrom is a huge departmental store in the US. It excels in customer orientation. Once a client - who lived 200 kilometers away - went into one of its stores to buy a particular type of scarf, only to be disappointed that it was no longer available. Upon stock replenishment, Nordstrom immediately shipped the scarf to that customer for free. Bowled over by such an impressive customer service, the customer became a loyal customer of Nordstrom to the extent that she began to make the 400-kilometer return journey just to shop at Nordstrom.

⁴All employees are important in an agency. However, there are a few job families that are crucial for delivering on the mission and objectives of the agency. For example, Gray-Syracuse (GS), a US precision casting company that designs castings and select alloys, identified the front end of the work on producing these designs and alloys as the key determinant in reducing rework. It further identified the mould assemblymen as the critical job family that can reduce rework and enhance quality manufacture. Consequently, it focused its human resource development programme on this set of key personnel. The competency development through this development programme brought down rework by 76% and considerably brightened its bottom line (Kaplan and Norton, 2004, pp.237,239).

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