DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE LEADERS FOR A HIGHLY DIVERSE SOCIETY

Dr. Tam Weng Wah

ABSTRACT

Artikel ini membincangkan tentang pendekatan konvensional atas ke bawah dan berhierarki yang tidak sesuai digunakan bagi menangani isu kepentingan umum yang kontemporari. Ia memerlukan pendekatan yang tidak konvensional daripada segi anjakan minda pihak-pihak berkenaan bagi mengatasi dan melihat permasalahan ini. Oleh itu, perhatian serius bagi aspek yang kritikal penting bagi membantu aspek kepimpinan sektor awam, bukan sahaja di antara penjawat awam tetapi juga pihak-pihak yang lain seperti ahli politik, ahli undang-undang, profesional, pemberi perkhidmatan, pentadbir, majikan dan komuniti bagi memastikan respons yang efektif dalam menangani isu yang berkaitan. Artikel ini membincangkan pemasalahan kontemporari di dalam masyarakat berbilang dan bentuk kepimpinan yang diperlukan untuk menangani problems secara berkesan, selain pembentukan dasar efektif dan pelaksanaan yang berterusan. Secara tidak langsung, artikel ini turut mencadangkan pendekatan alternatif bagi sektor awam dalam membangunkan pemimpin berketrampil yang mampu menangani isu-isu pemasalahan kontemporari untuk mencapai dan mewujudkan penyampaian perkhidmatan yang cemerlang di dalam sektor awam.

INTRODUCTION

To ensure that the public service continues to add value and remains relevant, it is pertinent that public sector leaders possess the essential competencies needed to deal with the emerging demands of a highly diverse society in a rapidly changing global environment. This paper examines the nature of contemporary public problems in a highly diverse society, the type of leadership required to deal effectively with these problems as well as the key tasks involved and the essential skills required for designing and leading effective collaborations to achieve service delivery par excellence. It also highlights several alternative approaches to develop public sector leaders who are capable of resolving contemporary public issues in a highly diverse and rapidly changing environment.

CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP IN A HIGHLY DIVERSE SOCIETY

As the result of increasing diversity in society and rapid technological advancement, the causal texture of the environment has changed from simple, stable, and more or less independent to complex, dynamic and more
interdependent. This rapidly changing environment gives rise to problems that are extensive, complex, and highly interdependent in nature which cannot be solved by a single organisation or with simplistic solutions. Due to the dynamic and interdependent nature of these problems as well as the diversity of stakeholders involved, there is a high degree of uncertainty as to the possible outcomes of planned interventions. In fact, Cote (2007, p. 20) contends that "leaders will increasingly find themselves in situations where they need to satisfy opposing interests, take risk and innovate with less room for error, and generally administer a larger and more complex range of issues with less autonomy". Under such turbulent and diverse environmental conditions, traditional hierarchical bureaucracies and market approaches are becoming less effective in dealing with many of the problems facing today's communities (Powell, 1991).

Examples of such complex problems without easy answers in the Malaysian context include expanding immigrant workforce, escalating petroleum prices, increasing incidents of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse, growing demands for urban housing and transportation, persistence of rural and urban poverty, rising crime rates and declining moral values. These problems are sometimes called "meta-problems", "wicked problems" or "messes" because any attempt to solve them with simplistic solutions will create other problems. For instance, the rapid development of high-density low cost flats to resolve the problems of public housing has resulted in problems of social ills among the residents. Likewise, the extensive felling of trees for housing and development purposes has resulted in serious flash floods and landslides in the city areas. Similarly, the increasing reliance on cheap foreign labour in the manufacturing, plantation and construction sectors has resulted in rising social and health problems. In dealing with these types of problems in contemporary diverse communities, several studies have indicated that collaborative or consensual approaches are more useful than unilateral or hierarchical approaches (Chisholm, 1998; Garred, 2006; Gricar & Brown, 1981; OECD, 2000; Rockefeller Foundation, 1995).

With the emerging importance of collaboration and consensus building in dealing with contemporary service delivery problems in a highly diverse society, collaborative leadership is becoming an important factor in determining whether or not the public sector will be able to deal with "meta" or "wicked" problems more effectively in the future. In fact, according to Martin (2007), leaders in the future will need new skill sets, greater collaboration skills, organisational architect ability, more flexible style, to be open and adaptable to new ideas, and be able to find examples of positive disobedience. Likewise, Martin and Ernst (2005) also found that results of a recent study demonstrate a shift in the practice of leadership from more traditional, individual approaches to more innovative, collaborative approaches. Given the emergence of collaborative
leadership as being a key factor in determining the relevance of public service in this new era, it is essential that appropriate measures are undertaken to develop consensus building and collaborative skills among the current and future corps of public sector leaders (Getha-Taylor, 2007).

Role of Collaborative Leadership

Although we have achieved much progress in addressing human capital challenges in the past two decades, a lot more needs to be done to ensure that public sector organisations are result oriented, customer focused, and collaborative in nature. Generally, collaborative leadership involves bringing a diverse group of stakeholders (individuals or organisations) together to work on a complex problem which cannot be solved by any of the individual stakeholders or by small exclusive groups. Stakeholders are defined as those people who, if they were to reach an agreement, could act together to bring about constructive and sustainable change in resolving a complex problem or issue. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between levels of complexity and organisational levels.

![Figure 1: Levels of Organisational Complexity](image-url)
From Hierarchical to Collaborative Leadership

In hierarchical or traditional leadership, the leader sets goals, explains plans and strategies, organises and coordinates activities, motivates and rewards efforts, and evaluates performance of members. In short, the role of the traditional leader is to take unilateral and decisive action. The focus is on the substance rather than the process. However, collaborative leadership is characterised by very different roles and tasks. Collaboration involves sustained, self-critical interaction among participants. Collaborative leaders have to work across boundaries involving multi-sectoral participants with different and often conflicting values and beliefs as found in a highly diverse society. Collaborative leaders do not have formal powers because of its voluntary nature and all participants are considered as peers or as equals. Without the formal power of "carrots and sticks," collaborative leaders have to rely heavily on their integrative power, their credibility and their acceptance by the stakeholders. Even though the problems may be clearly evident, the strategies for getting results and resolving them are often unclear and uncertain.

Unlike hierarchical leadership, collaborative leadership does not rely on content or subject matter expertise. It relies on the group to work on the content and substance of the issues. There are no given answers; the answers have to emerge from the interactions of the stakeholders to ensure ownership of the solutions. Participants themselves have to do the hard work of defining problems, establishing a vision, and creating strategies to counter the challenges confronting the community. Furthermore, relationships among participants are based on a negotiated order rather than a mandated order. As such, in collaborative leadership, the role of the leader is to catalyse, convene, energise, and facilitate others to create visions and solve problems. Without the power of position, collaborative leaders rely instead on their credibility, integrity, and ability to focus on the process to help solve complex community problems. Table 1 summarises some major differences between traditional leadership and collaborative leadership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Hierarchical Leadership</th>
<th>Collaborative Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>• Sets goals, explains plans and strategies</td>
<td>• There are no given answers; the answers have to emerge from the interactions of the stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of Power</td>
<td>• Depends heavily on formal power</td>
<td>• Do not have formal power because of its voluntary nature; rely on credibility, integrity and ability to focus on process of problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Influence</td>
<td>• Heavily influence the process of determining the goals of the organisation</td>
<td>• Catalyses, convenes, energises, and facilitates others to create visions and solve problems; does not rely on content or subject matter expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>• Takes unilateral and decisive action</td>
<td>• Helps sustain self-critical interactions among participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>• Evaluates performance</td>
<td>• Evaluation by the participants themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis</td>
<td>• Emphasis on substance rather than the process</td>
<td>• Emphasis on the process rather than substance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of Motivation</td>
<td>• Motivates and rewards efforts</td>
<td>• Participants are internally motivated to resolve issues that concerns them and their community</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1: Comparing Hierarchical and Collaborative Leadership
CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

Past research has shown that collaborative leadership has distinct characteristics. Leaders who are most effective in addressing public issues are not necessarily the ones who know the most about the issues. Rather, they are the ones who have the credibility to get the right people together to create visions, define problems and reach agreements about actions that can be implemented to resolve the problems. They are not leaders who tell other members what to do. Instead, they are the ones who help members work together constructively. Their primary task is to create a constituency for change that can reach agreements that can be implemented on problems and issues of shared concern, not to impose a specific solution that they themselves have defined. When they accomplished that task, and only then, will real sustainable results can be achieved. Furthermore, collaborative leaders do not work through small groups of elite positional leaders or through selected interest groups. On the contrary, collaborative leaders are deeply democratic, inclusive, and open in nature. Collaborative leaders have an inherent belief that citizens can work together to address their own needs. Therefore, collaborative leadership is not the exclusive realm of highly visible and powerful leaders. Any citizen with the will and commitment to bring about substantive change has the capacity to practice collaborative leadership and the skills can be learned.

Figure 2: Critical Tasks of Collaborative Leaders
CRITICAL TASKS OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

In bringing about systemic change to achieve service delivery excellence in a highly diverse society, there are several critical tasks that collaborative leaders need to perform. As illustrated in Figure 2, these critical tasks are: (a) identifying key stakeholders, (b) assessing capacity and readiness for change, (c) building relationships, and (d) ensuring an open process.

Identifying and Mobilising Key Stakeholders

The first critical task of collaborative leaders is to identify key stakeholders who are essential in the collaborative process. It is critical to include stakeholders who can make things happen as well as those who can prevent things from happening. In the political arena, there is a tendency to exclude some key stakeholders in the decision making process because they are perceived as “threats”. However, when dealing with the complex problems confronting today's communities, there would not be results without broad-based involvement. For instance, Gardner (1990, p. 103) points out that, “Many a group bent on achieving one or another goal in the larger society has failed because it could not bring itself to enlist allies outside its own field”. Broad-based participation helps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem as more stakeholders share their perceptions of the problem and how it impacts them (Gray, 1989). It also provides credibility to the collaborative process and enhances support and commitment for the solution generated. Thus, in selecting key stakeholders, collaborative leaders have to:

- determine the various perspectives necessary to credibly and effectively define problems and create solutions and identify the people who can speak for these perspectives;
- determine the people, interest groups, or organisations who must be represented in order to reach agreements and to implement solutions;
- identify the people who caused or are affected by the problems and those who will be affected by the solutions; and
- identify the people who could generate the political and institutional will to create significant change.

Assessing Capacity and Readiness for Change

If the community is not ready or does not have the capacity to effect change, then it will be quite futile to try to bring about change through the collaborative process. Therefore, the second critical task of collaborative leaders is to assess the readiness and capacity of the community for change. The first step here involves assessing the level of conflict, mistrust, and
disunity that exists among stakeholders. The higher the level of conflict, mistrust, and disunity among stakeholders, the more difficult will be the process of collaboration. Under such difficult circumstances, it is essential that the key stakeholders see the collaborative leader as being a person who has a high level of credibility, integrity and impartiality. Otherwise, the stakeholders might not be interested to get involved and to commit their time, effort and resources in the collaborative process.

For collaborative efforts to be effective, members of the participating community also need to have some level of awareness regarding the nature of the collaborative process as well as their role and responsibilities. Furthermore, they also need to possess certain essential collaborative skills such as the ability to analyse and understand the particular context or situation, the ability to communicate concerns and to share information, and the ability to develop working relationships among fellow stakeholders. Therefore, it is important for collaborative leaders to assess the level of awareness and collaborative skills among members of the community to determine whether they are ready for the process. Besides that, collaborative leaders also need to identify and gain the support of those community leaders who have the credibility and respect of the community to convene stakeholders around the problems or issues. Without a credible leader, the collaborative effort will lose its credibility and therefore its ability to attract key stakeholders.

In addition to identifying leaders to convene stakeholders, collaborative leaders also need to assess the availability of citizens' leadership capacities to initiate and sustain the collaborative process. Without the community's participation in initiating the collaborative process, the question of ownership and credibility of the process may arise. Eventually, it will be difficult to sustain the collaborative effort over a period of time because the community does not feel they have any ownership of the process. Therefore, it is important for collaborative leaders to enlist the participation of people or groups in the community who have the expertise to design and facilitate the collaborative process. Lastly, collaborative leaders are also responsible for identifying and involving people within the community who can provide the information necessary to make good decisions. Without accurate information from the grassroots level, the decisions of the collaborative process may not get the support from members of the local community.

Building Relationships and Trust

The third key task of collaborative leaders is to build relationships and trust, i.e. helping the various stakeholders to understand, trust and accept each other. Collaborative efforts for resolving "wicked" problems usually require the participation of diverse individuals and groups with different and
often conflicting beliefs and values. For instance, Gray (1989, p. 187) notes that, "While partners are interested in aspects of the same problems, their motivations for joining are not necessarily coincident." As such, there is usually a high level of mistrust and scepticism among participants concerning the collaborative effort at the initial stage. Many people show up for collective action convinced that their primary job is to advocate only for the narrow interests of their own constituents. As a result, key stakeholders tend to adopt a confrontational approach rather than a collaborative approach to protect their respective "turf". Thus, before any constructive work can be done, collaborative leaders have to help participants change from being confrontational to being collaborative. Since there will not be much collaboration without trust, collaborative leaders must start with building trust among participants of a collaborative effort. In fact, Gardner (1990) contends that establishing trust among the participants is critical in coalition building process.

The process of building trust usually begins with informal exploration of interests, sharing perspectives and getting participants to know each other (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). In addition, developing a sense of ownership of the collaborative process as well as the solution(s) generated is also essential for building trust and confidence among participants. Active and unhindered participation helps to increase the skills of key stakeholders in dealing with "wicked" problems and also enhances their sense of ownership over the process and outcomes (Reardon, et al., 1993). Participants are collectively responsible for developing a purpose, defining the mission and goals as well as for initiating and managing the activities of the collaborative effort (Chisholm, Lichtenstein, & Tam, 1995). If participants feel that they have no control over the decision making process, they may not be willing to recognise the legitimacy of the solutions generated. Thus, it is important for leaders of collaborative efforts to ensure that a high level of trust and confidence exists among participants.

**Nurturing Open and Inclusive Process**

The fourth and most important task of collaborative leaders is to create and nurture a credible and open process that promotes trust and confidence among key stakeholders. If there is no openness in the forum, if trust among stakeholders is low, and if not every stakeholders are given the opportunity to articulate their interests and concerns, it will not be surprising if neglected members decide not to support the envisioned goals or the proposed action steps and withdraw from the process itself since participation is voluntary in nature. A credible process is one which has integrity and a fair chance of success. An open process is one which is both honest and receptive to different points of view and there are no predetermined outcomes. Key stakeholders will not be willing to continue their participation if they believe
that the process is being dominated by a certain group and that they are not
given the opportunity to voice their opinions. According to Gardner (1990,
p. 107), "There must be access and openness to participation". Credibility and
openness of the collaborative process are important factors that determine
whether key stakeholders become involved, how intense their involvement
will be and how long will they be involved. Thus, collaborative leaders must
not let the substance of the issues overshadow the need to protect the
credibility and openness of the collaborative effort. Collaborative leaders
need to safeguard the process of building relationships. They have to resist
the temptations of shortcuts and protect the process against vested interests
by adhering to the guidelines of decision making that have been agreed upon
by all participants.

DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE CAPABILITIES OF 21ST CENTURY LEADERS

The previous sections discussed about the nature of contemporary service
delivery problems, the type of leadership required to deal with these problems
as well as the tasks and skills needed for sustainable consensus building
in a highly diverse society. This section of the paper focuses on how the
public sector can help in developing collaborative leadership skills among
the current and future corps of leaders. There are numerous approaches that
could be adopted to enhance collaborative or consensus building skills among
public sector leaders in a highly diverse society (Fitzgerald & Berger, 2002;
McCaulay & Velsor, 2004; Smilansky, 2006). First and foremost is the process
of selection. If the wrong candidates are selected, no amount of training and
development could help change the people involved. Given that a survey of
students conducted in 2003 found 30 percent of the respondents said that
they are willing to take advantage of their positions for personal gains,
there is even a great need to tighten the selection process to ensure that
such people do not get into the public service (Ahmad Said, 2007). Besides
preventing undesirable elements from getting into the public service, there
must also be a conscious effort to select candidates with the appropriate
traits, such as having a strong motivation to lead and serve the people,
having positive values and benevolent motives to help the community to
release its full potential, as well as having potential for learning, growth
and development. In short, for those who are responsible for selecting and
developing collaborative leaders, they need to identify potential leaders
who possess the building blocks of character, creativity, and compassion, as
well as those who have a clear sense of purpose and the energy as well as
perseverance to pursue that purpose.

The second stage after selecting the candidates is to focus on developing the
knowledge, skills and attitude aspects. This is where formal training comes
in, which focuses on enhancing leadership literacy regarding the need, nature and competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) of collaborative leadership for effective consensus building. At the lower levels, the focus will be on gaining knowledge and understanding regarding the nature and practices of collaborative leadership in a highly diverse environment. At the mid-levels, the training programmes will focus on the application and analytical aspects of collaborative leadership. Meanwhile, at the higher levels, the focus will be on enhancing and strengthening the ability of the public sector leaders to synthesise and evaluate the collaborative or consensus building initiatives undertaken by their organisations. For more effective learning, listening to lectures alone is inadequate; there is a need for the training programmes to include case study analyses, simulation exercises, role play, group discussions and project presentations on the subject of collaborative leadership in a highly diverse society. As for training institutions like the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN), it can also help to strengthen collaborative leadership skills by conducting more programmes involving participants from the various sectors. Examples of such programmes undertaken by INTAN to promote collaborative leadership include the INTAN Executive Talk, the Annual Civil Service Conference and the Programme on Leadership and Governance for Emerging Leaders.

Nevertheless, there is a limit as to the extent the formal leadership programmes conducted by training institutions and organisations in transforming public sector leaders from hierarchical to collaborative leaders. Training that enhances leadership literacy on collaborative leadership will not guarantee that a person will become an effective leader in leading the process of consensus building. Just like cycling, swimming or bowling; a person cannot be good at it by reading manuals or listening to lectures. Mastery of these activities entails experimentation and learning, followed by repeated and dedicated practice. In fact, Avillo (2005, p. 1072) argues that "Formal leadership programmes may challenge us or reinforce our self-esteem, but they do not reliably produce long term change in our psyches or our conduct". Thus, knowledge must be accompanied by the opportunity to practise if we are to develop and master the skills of collaborative leadership and consensus building. Leadership competence develops when an individual is forced to address the challenge of innovation, inspiring and adapting. People become leaders by performing deliberate acts of leadership. According to Quaglieri, Penney and Waldner (2007), hands-on approach to leadership, rather than a more structured classroom approach is most effective for young professionals in terms of development, enhanced networking across sectors and an increased appreciation for diversity. In fact, many great leaders report that their greatest learning occurred as result of a failure rather than success. Bennis and Thomas (2002) suggest that all potential leaders must pass through a crucible that provides a transforming experience. By providing challenging assignments
through job rotation, job enrichment and special project assignments that focus on enhancing consensus building skills of young leaders is the first step in the journey towards developing more effective collaborative leaders in the public sector. In other words, there must be a conscious effort in designing the career path of potential leaders and human capital developers as well as the stakeholders involved must be firmly committed to this process to ensure that future leaders are well-equipped with the knowledge, skills and experience to handle the highly complex process of consensus building.

For instance, junior officers might be allowed to participate as observers in the consensus building process at both local and international levels. Later, they could be appointed as facilitators and participants of small group discussions in the process of consensus building. This provides the opportunity for them to get actual "hands-on" experience regarding the complexities, intricacies and sensitivities of the consensus building process. Once they have mustered enough experience and are confident about themselves in handling the consensus building process, they could then be given the opportunity to lead small scale consensus building initiatives such as public forums and town hall meetings to solicit feedback and obtain consensus in the process of policy formulation. Once they have mastered the skills of consensus building, they may then be allowed to lead the process at the regional and international levels as well as to become mentors and coaches to other potential young leaders.

Besides, job rotation, job enrichment, special attachments or assignments as well as regional and international exposure, another approach to collaborative leadership development is through coaching and mentoring. Mentoring is a committed, long term relationship in which a senior officer (mentor) supports the personal and professional development of a junior officer (mentee). Although it may not be possible to teach leadership, it may be possible for a senior and a respectable person in the organisation to provide regular and useful feedback to junior officers who are dealing with various leadership challenges. This will help speed up the learning process of the junior officers as to what they need to do if they are confronted with similar situations in the future.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Within the Malaysian context, there are numerous areas where collaborative leaders can play a critical role in bringing about systemic level change for service delivery excellence. These include areas such as education, health care, economic development, crime prevention, community development, environmental protection, transportation, urban development, agricultural
development, welfare, security, etc. Many of the problems faced by public sector organisations in a highly diverse society cannot be solved unilaterally or bilaterally, but require the participation and commitment of various key stakeholders from the private, public and the third sectors.

For instance, in our effort to transform the Malaysian economy into a knowledge-based economy, the public sector by itself alone cannot bring about the required change at the systemic level. It can only provide the policy and legal framework to facilitate the transformation process. For the transformational process to be successful, the public sector also needs the active participation, cooperation and commitment of key stakeholders from the other two sectors, i.e. the private and the third sectors. Likewise, initiatives taken by the public sector to promote a healthier lifestyle among the people will not be successful without the participation and commitment of the people. The public sector can only provide the policy and legal framework as well as the information to facilitate the transformation process. The people themselves have to decide what is best for them in terms of the choice of food and drinks; they themselves have to decide whether or not to patronise unhygienic stalls and the people themselves have to decide whether they should exercise regularly.

Likewise, in the area of urban development, the public sector, i.e. the local authorities themselves alone, cannot resolve the perpetual flooding and pollution problems if the private sector and the people in the local communities keep on dumping their garbage and waste products into the local drainage network. Similarly, in the area of education, the schools by themselves will not be able to do much in developing students who are socially responsible, the involvement of parents, community-based organisations and the local business community is also crucial. For example, we often hear that schools are so short-handed that they are not able to carry out many extra-curricular activities that are essential for a well-balanced development of the child, yet there is not much attempt to mobilise the parents to help out; although many of the parents would be very much delighted to do so if given the opportunity. One possible reason for the reluctance to involve parents in such activities is the perception among teachers that involvement of parents, especially the more vocal ones, would bring more troubles for them.

Last but not least, in the area of community development, we often hear that residents complain about the poor maintenance of public amenities and they usually point their fingers at the local authorities for not doing their job. Yet we often see children abusing the playground equipment while their parents just stood by and laugh about it, saying this is part of growing up. There
is no sense of ownership of the playground equipment among the residents since they perceive that it is the responsibility of the local authorities. This situation of extreme apathy can be changed if the local authorities are able to mobilise the participation of the residents associations and the local business communities in sharing the responsibility of maintaining the public amenities such as recreational parks and playground equipment. This will enhance the sense of ownership and pride among residents towards the public amenities, increasing their level of vigilance and thus reducing the incidence of abuses.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated above, in a highly diverse society like Malaysia, there are many opportunities to bring about systemic level change through collaborative efforts of key stakeholders. However, for these collaborative efforts to be effective, the leadership approach has to be different from what public sector officials are used to, i.e. traditional hierarchical leadership style. It requires the approach of collaborative leadership, where public sector officials do not have as much control over the process as the more traditional command-and-control approach. However, as our society develops, matures and becomes more diverse, citizens will be clamouring for more active participation in the governance process. Therefore, it is essential that public sector leaders of the future develop more effective collaborative leadership skills if they want to remain relevant and create value in this highly turbulent environment of rapid unprecedented change. It is also pertinent that other key players, including the local communities, the corporate sector as well as the civil society understand their roles, responsibilities and their contributions in this collaborative process to ensure sustainable success in responding to the various challenges of public concerns and service delivery excellence in this millennium.
REFERENCES


