

Serving as One

Speech presented at the Division
Transformation Retreat

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Introduction

Today's event brings together some of the most senior civil service leaders in Sarawak. Senior public sector leaders are special people exercising very special responsibilities. Among them is the responsibility to lead an on-going transformation of the civil service and to leave public institutions in better shape than how they were inherited.

Leading transformation extends beyond public service reforms, which typically preserve the status-quo. It involves responding to the changing needs and expectations of citizens, and adapting to the rapidly changing landscape of the world we live in.

Transformation in the public sector never ends. It is an on-going process that ensures that the civil service is able to face the challenges of the times.

Before focussing more precisely on the agenda for the day, let's briefly review the key findings of the New Synthesis Initiative.

The New Synthesis

The NS Framework is built around four independent but inter-related vectors.¹ The vertical vectors represent the different kinds of results pursued by public agencies.

Think Public Purpose

Public agencies serve a public purpose. Their role is to generate results of ever increasing value for society. This means that public organisations must position their contribution in the broader context of system-wide and societal results.

For instance, reducing instances of illegal logging requires an efficient and sustainable forest management system. An efficient system will ensure that citizens can enjoy the public value of their forests and that the next generation will reap the benefit of today's careful management.

System-wide and societal results exceed the capacity of any single organisation working alone. They require co-operation across a number of agencies and sectors (public, private, civic), as well as the active contribution of multiple agents in society and the participation of citizens and communities.²

1 Jocelyne Bourgon, A New Synthesis of Public Administration (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2011).

2 Ibid.

Think Beyond State Authority

In every country, a small group of people have the legal right to use the authority of the State to achieve results. This is the authority to tax, spend, regulate and ensure compliance through coercive measures. You are among them.

The authority of the State, although vast, is insufficient for solving many of the problems we are facing as a society. The key is to uncover how to use the authority of the state to lever the contribution of others in order to achieve better public results and propel society forward.

This is my definition of smart government. Smart governments are able to achieve better results than others with fewer resources, less effort, and a minimum use of authority because they are able to build on the strength of others. The challenge is to use existing assets to harness the collective power of government and society.

Think Citizens

Producing civic results is one of the most fundamental roles of government. It involves:

- creating the space for self-reliant individuals to pursue their interests in a manner that also promotes collective interests;
- creating resilient communities able to take charge and find solutions to problems they encounter by working with others and government; and
- promoting a civic spirit to encourage collective action.

Public institutions transform people into citizens. They transform our diverse human communities into a citizenry that is able and willing to build a better future together. People become citizens as they accept the constraints and responsibilities that stem from being a member of a broader community.

Citizen engagement is not a “feel good” practice or a way to avoid responsibilities. It is hard work and involves some risks. However, citizen engagement is essential for building a well-performing society.

People are public value creators. Their actions generate the results we care about and produce societies that are worth living in. There is no law-abiding society without law-abiding citizens and no public safety without people caring for each other.

Government plays an essential role in building the capacity of citizens, families and communities to work with government to build a better future and improve the human condition.

A Search for Balance

Governing is a search for balance:

- too much reliance on state authority stifles innovation and imposes a high cost to society;
- too much reliance on the market and civil society increases risks and erodes public confidence in the capacity of government to advance the public interest; and
- too much reliance on government may create dependencies, reduce the natural resilience of society and adversely affect society's effectiveness.

The State is the steward of the collective interest in all circumstances and acts as the insurer of last resort whether government is involved or not. This role cannot be delegated; it cannot be left to the market, the private sector or civil society. It is at the heart of the responsibility of the State to steer society through a process of change.

The NS Framework does not provide answers to difficult questions on governing. Rather, the Framework helps to bring together the contribution of government, citizens and society, and brings coherence to government actions across agencies and multiple levels of government.

What Difference does this Make in Practice?

The NS Initiative has revealed the need for approaches that are significantly different from the conventional.

Past efforts have produced institutions able to govern with legitimacy and accountability. They were built to mass-produce standardised services and work reasonably well under relatively stable conditions. These institutions have contributed to nation building, growth and improving the standard of living.

However, no organisation or institution is fit for all times. Our system of public administration displays a mechanistic view of the functioning of public organisations. Our current system assumes that:

- matters are either public or private;
- policy decisions and implementation are separate policy components; and
- ministries and departments work more or less independently from each other with minimal interference from the Centre of Government.

With everything and everyone in its rightful place, this system of public administration should work as expected...except when it does not. This is more and more frequently the case.

In reality, issues do not fit into the boxes we have created. They cut across multiple agencies and various levels of government. They have private, public and civic dimensions. The economic, social, environmental and technological facets are intertwined. No department is an island.

Citizens are no longer passive. They want to have a say and have found new and powerful ways to ensure that their voices are heard.

Conventional public administration systems were not designed to serve in the increasingly global and interdependent economy and society that we find today. They were not built for a world prone to volatility and unpredictability.

We are lacking the systems, ramps, and platforms for government-wide co-operation. Public agencies suffer from limited capabilities to share knowledge across agencies (to know what we know). We have not created the instruments for early detection and shared intelligence gathering needed to encourage actions before problems reach crisis proportions. We are lacking the tools for pooling resources and capabilities, for resolving inter-agency conflicts or for making collective decisions.

As a result, problems that could have been resolved by the civil service escalate to the political level. This is not a good use of Ministers' time.

Preparing public organisations for the challenges of today entails a shift from a focus on agency to system-wide capabilities and from the efficiency of the parts to the effectiveness of the whole.

This is where your retreat comes in. Your discussion today will help you to address the questions:

- What new systems, practices, and capabilities are needed for you to work as one?
- How will old and new approaches, and old and new capabilities, fit together?
- What do you need to do to ensure coherence across government and civil service-wide co-ordination to serve citizens?

What Difference does this Make for You?

Leading transformation starts by challenging conventional ideas. This includes the way we think of our role as senior public sector leaders.³

As senior leaders you are responsible for the overall performance of the organisation you are leading.⁴ You must ensure that your organisation fulfills its mission, produces value for money, and uses taxpayer's money with prudence. You are concerned with improving productivity, efficiency and user satisfaction, and you must ensure that the men and women under your authority behave in a manner that deserves public trust.

Public sector leaders are responsible for producing results of ever increasing public value and for the performance of their organisation.

But there is more.

The responsibility of public sector leaders extends beyond their organisation. They are responsible for working with others to bring about viable solutions to the complex problems we are facing as a society, and for working with others to achieve better public outcomes. A better future - one that includes growth, shared prosperity, but also social peace and inter-generational fairness - requires a collective effort. Working across boundaries is a defining characteristic of modern governance and world class organisations.

Public sector leaders are the stewards of the civil service as an institution. You are collectively responsible for the overall performance of the civil service and preparing the civil service to be fit for the future.

Your agenda today is about your collective responsibility for leading public sector transformation. This means creating a civil service that is able to:

- act as one when the public interest demands it;
- serve as one to produce results of increasing public value; and
- learn as one to anticipate, prevent and work to reduce risks and generate more favourable outcomes for society.

Leading civil service transformation is your greatest challenge and most important contribution to the future of Sarawak. This is a contribution that can only be achieved by working as a group. Leadership in a public sector is a collective enterprise. You have the power to neutralise each other's efforts by working in a disjointed way and the power to lift-up each other's efforts by working as a community.

³ Jocelyne Bourgon, *Leading Transformation: The New Synthesis in Action* (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2014).

⁴ Jocelyne Bourgon, *Leadership: An Integrated Process of Change* (Ottawa, Public Governance International, 2014).

Common Challenges and Different Contexts

Common Challenges

Some challenges are common to several countries. Among them is the need to:

- ensure government-wide coherence and an integrated approach to problem solving and policy-making;
- foster public service-wide co-ordination. This has generated renewed interest in the role of the Centre of Government;
- encourage citizen centricity as a way to design and provide services adapted to citizens' needs while making better use of people's assets; and
- support civil service stewardship including leadership development, common platforms, and shared knowledge.

In all of these cases, it is possible to learn from the experience of others

Different Context

At the end of the day, leading public sector transformation is highly contextual.

Public institutions are deeply embedded in the fabric of a society. They were forged by past events. They reflect history, culture and the rich tapestry of a country's diversity. The deep roots and specificity of public institutions are assets. Successful transformation puts these valuable assets to productive use. However, there is a need for change and continuity.

Learning from Practice

Acting as One

Acting as one is easier to achieve when there is agreement on the desired outcome. A lesson learned from other countries is that acting as one requires co-ordination at the ministerial, inter-ministerial, and regional levels.

Acting as one requires clarity of purpose and a common understanding among ministers and key agencies about the desired outcomes. In each context, leaders much ask themselves:

- How can we work to ensure a co-ordinated approach on the ground and across departments?
- How will we know if our efforts are successful?
- What can we learn from recent events and what can be done to do better in the future?

Serving as One

Serving as one is more difficult than it seems at first glance. It has internal and external dimensions.

I am always struck that in times of crises, government is often able to excel at the same functions that it has difficulties performing on an on-going basis. In many cases, it is testament to the capacity for people to pull together to overcome difficulties. In times of crises, decisions are made quickly, co-ordination happens close to the locus of action, course corrections are introduced as needed, and resources are redeployed across agencies in a timely way.

Co-operation is a mind-set supported by good practices. Ministries and agencies must be empowered to work across boundaries and mandated to deploy resources to address common issues.

Serving as One (Internal Dimension)

A number of systems can be re-designed to encourage co-operation in government at the national, state and regional levels, including:

- a common knowledge information platform;
- a performance management system that recognises and rewards shared results;
- an HR system that rewards a diversity of experience and inter-agency mobility;
- an esprit the corps - one team with common values, training and development requirements and leadership development at all levels;
- common systems available to all; and
- multi-tasking for government-wide and public service-wide priorities.

Serving as One (External Dimensions)

One is unlikely to find a civil service that is very good at providing integrated services to citizens if it is unable to work as one internally.

There again, serving as one has several dimensions. It starts with a commitment to putting citizens at the centre of all we do. Citizen centricity ensures that government programs and services are designed from the perspective of the users of government services. It works with citizens and communities to generate better solutions and achieve better results.

It values citizen engagement because governments are unable to generate the desired outcomes on their own. Citizen engagement is a way of exploring how government can make better use of the assets of citizens and communities.

Learning as One

Learning is the capacity to avoid repeating the same mistakes. It is also the capacity to:

- anticipate emerging issues before they reach crisis proportion;
- prevent greater damage to society by acting proactively; and
- monitor results and introduce course corrections when the initial interventions do not produce the expected results.

Learning as one is about developing the capacity to adapt and change course as required. It starts with enhancing linkages across government to share the knowledge that is already known.⁵

Conclusion: From the Outside Looking in

Allow me to present some observations from the perspective of someone on the outside but with some experience in leading public sector transformation.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that public sector transformation is an ongoing process of change. It will never end. You are collectively responsible for the overall performance of the civil service, to build the capacity of the civil service to adapt to changing circumstances and respond to the changing needs of citizens.

Secondly, there is no ideal way to organise government. You are not looking for some ideal theory of organisation but for what would work best in your current context and with the resources available. Your challenge is to design, build and operate a public administration system able to act as one, serve as one and learn as one.

The questions in front of you are:

- Who is best positioned to do what?
- How will you deploy and use your existing assets?
- What new capabilities and systems are needed?
- How will it all work together?

Government-wide coherence and public sector wide co-ordination are the trademarks of a civil service fit for the time.

A world class civil service is one that is able to anticipate what might be, prevent what can be, and invent and discover new and better ways to fulfil its mission.

⁵ Jocelyne Bourgon, *Leading from the Centre of Government*, (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2014).

I have witnessed a common pride in the mission you serve and a great camaraderie and solidarity among senior leaders. Let's make sure that the organisational model and the system in place lives up to your aspirations for a world-class civil service.

Great leaders are easy to recognise. They leave behind better institutions than the ones they have inherited. This is the challenge ahead of you today.

And so the journey continues...

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