

Nation Branding Part 1: The Role of the Public Service

The public service of a country is a frontline interface with domestic and international audiences. When state institutions are well run, manned by skilled and competent professionals and consistently and efficiently deliver high-quality services, the ensuing effects are felt by all. Therefore, any effort to improve the perception of a nation cannot ignore how the public service operates and is perceived.

There is a decisive move by many governments towards the idea that the public sector, just like the private sector, should operate in ways to improve efficiency, accountability and connectivity with its "customers". The justification for the public service to do so can even be said to be compelling beyond that of the private sector. In the private sector, branding serves to create or exploit a comparative advantage in order to increase profits. In the public sector, a positive brand image does not bring monetary rewards in the direct sense but indirectly. It has the tremendous potential to enhance a country's reputation, which could potentially translate to more investment dollars, more exports, more tourist arrivals, more international trade partnerships and so forth.

In its Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020), the Malaysian government is embarking on comprehensive efforts to transform the public service to become more citizen-centric. This is driven by trends towards market-based efficiencies, new technologies and management models, as well as a public call for more responsive and accountable public services.

Among the notable targets, the Malaysian government hopes to:

- reduce public service bureaucracy;
- improve delivery processes to increase responsiveness;
- increase outreach of services with greater public engagement;
- increase accountability and uphold integrity;
- realign institutions to reduce overlap;
- restructure and right-size the public service with an exit policy for underperformers;
- strengthen talent management recognising that it is the public service's most crucial resource;
- enhance implementation efficiency through better project management; and
- empower local authorities to strengthen service delivery at the local level.

All of the above have the potential of positively altering how the Malaysian public service is presently perceived; that is from one that is bureaucratic, hierarchical, rigid and operating in silos; to one that is efficient, flexible, clean and efficient.

Even if a formal public service branding exercise is not undertaken, the targets enshrined within the Eleventh Malaysia Plan alone, by default, can play a significant role in public service branding. Only if the public service can successfully meet these targets, however, can other efforts at nation branding be truly effective. After all, the functioning of the public service with its multiple touch points – with citizens; with the private sector; with civil society; with international

organisations; with trading partners; with investors; with tourists – to great extent represents the functioning of nation as a whole.

International indices

On the subject of perception, it is impossible to ignore how nations perform in international indices. The main international indices that directly point to the functioning of the public sector include: Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index; the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index; and the Government Efficiency and Infrastructure components of IMD's World Competitiveness Yearbook.

Malaysia has performed fairly in IMD's World Competitiveness Yearbook 2016, ranking 19th out of 61 countries. However, its position has fallen five notches from 14th place in 2015. Its Government Efficiency component of competitiveness stands at 18th place, however, its Infrastructure component comes in only at 31st place, where the worst performers were Health and Environment at 40th place, and Education at 38th place¹.

The Corruption Perception Index and Rule of Law Index both show that Malaysia's performance leaves much to be desired. The former measures perceived levels of public sector corruption, while the latter measures constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, and criminal justice.

In the Corruption Perception Index 2015, Malaysia scored 50 out of 100; and ranked 54th of 168 countries², down four notches from the year before. In the Rule of Law Index 2015, Malaysia scored 57 out of 100; and ranked 39th out of 102 countries³.

¹ IMD, 2016.

² Transparency International, 2016

³ World Justice Project, 2015.

Admittedly, there are many who believe we should not be overly consumed with indices, but the fact of the matter remains that perceptions do not arise out of thin air. In fact, perception has the potential to uplift a country as well as undo a lot of the efforts and good work that is or has been undertaken.

For instance, the Malaysian public service has performed enviably in improving delivery of public services through initiatives such as the creation of Urban Transformation Centres (UTC) and Rural Transformation Centres (RTC). These are one-stop centres for all front-line services operated seven days a week and located in urban as well as rural areas. The creation of 1Malaysia One Call Centre (1MOCC) is another endeavour to provide fast and seamless service through a single point of contact.

These achievements, however, are compromised by poor performance in other areas, particularly Malaysia's scores on corruption. The resolution to uphold integrity and eradicate corruption in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan is therefore with the hope that it will help enhance public perception with respect to the integrity of the public sector, and it is stated as a target to improve Malaysia's position to the top 30 in the Corruption Perception Index. The public service cannot become truly citizen-centric as it intends to be, without the confidence of the public of its integrity.

Therefore, it must be recognised that corruption eradication efforts must take place at a fundamental level. Studies have shown that Malaysia has not been able to effectively tackle corruption because of a failure to address its root causes, which point to a culture of condoning and adapting to the way present systems and institutions work⁴.

⁴ Anis Yusal Yusoff, Sri Murniati & Jenny Greyzilius, *Combating Corruption: Understanding Anti-Corruption Initiatives in Malaysia*, (Kuala Lumpur: IDEAS, 2013).

Everywhere we look we see signs that public sector organisations are under pressure to protect or regain the trust of sceptical consumers, investors, and members of the general public. These audiences expect reassurance that public organisations have strong values, are benevolent, and hold good intentions, in other words, are truly citizen-centric. Therefore, the realisation of public service transformation in this respect can be very significant in closing current gaps.

Talent

Ultimately, the public service brand image lies in the hands of public servants themselves. The people in organisations are the very embodiments of the brand. It is no surprise, therefore, that in Malaysia's public service transformation effort, strengthening talent management is given prominence.

One of the targets under the Eleventh Plan is to secure top talent in critical areas. Expertise is a fundamental prerequisite of gaining organisational trust, indeed, has crucial impact on credibility. As the public service attempts to transform into one that delivers high value efficiently, it also must be able to inspire, empower and engage its people to ensure they are always motivated to deliver high performance.

According to talent experts, Bill Conaty and Ram Charan, a key to doing this is to differentiate, recognise and reward people according to their talent, behaviours and values. They staunchly propose the philosophy of "differentiation breeds meritocracy, sameness breeds mediocrity"⁵. All too often in public services, there are standardised measures of performance targets and standardised systems of training and development and advancement. Such systems however can serve to demotivate people if it is

viewed that having diversity and depth of talent, going the extra mile, or shaking things up are not deemed valuable.

The public service must also look introspectively and examine if it has the necessary foundations that would make the public service attractive to top talent. Much of this has to do with fundamental values and purpose of existence. All organisations have values that may be stated or unstated. Some stated values are meaningful and some are boilerplate clichés. In the case of the latter, these statements can do little more than breed cynicism (both in employees and in external audiences) and drive top talent to look elsewhere.

On the other hand, if the values are "working values", they can have direct impact on how results are delivered because they are absolutely expected of both leaders and employees (and are also linked with recognition and reward), and hence govern how people operate and behave⁶.

Leadership

When we say that people are an organisation's brand ambassadors, the most prominent of these are the leaders. For the public sector, not only are leaders expected to be credible and respectable figures on the international stage, more importantly, they are the ones responsible for creating a vision, inspiring others, living the values and bringing about positive organisational and national transformations.

While heads of state and politicians are typically excluded when referring to the public service, they, however, do exert significant influence over the workings of the whole of government, including the public service, and hence the reputation of the government as well. Most often, leaders in government, whether they are public

⁵ Bill Conaty and Ram Charan, *The Talent Masters: Why Smart Leaders Put People Before Numbers*, (New York: Crown, 2010), pp. 18-19.

⁶ Ibid. p. 19

service officials or politicians, are grouped together as representatives of the country.

As branding expert, Paul Temporal, put it: not only can heads of state, politicians and other officials influence the national brand as ambassadors, they are, de facto national brand managers as well, as they are ultimately responsible for the brands of their countries⁷.

The conduct of public sector leaders attracts great public scrutiny and by virtue of their office, they bear the great responsibility of ensuring they inspire the trust and confidence of the people (both internal to the country or organisation or external to it) and are true guardians of national interest. Needless to say, if leaders themselves fail to walk the talk, the entire nation branding agenda or any form of public sector transformation agenda will attract strong criticism and can bring about the opposite of the intended effect.

Conclusion

Consumers of public services may not be able to switch providers if they lose confidence in the brand, the way they can with products or services. However, while those outside a country's borders have many options as destinations for their investment or travel, where the local citizenry is concerned, it could impact upon their feeling of national pride and attachment to what they consider their homeland. If for no other reason, this one alone must act as the driver of public service transformation to be accountable, effective, efficient and truly citizen-centric.

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⁷ Paul Temporal, *Branding for the Public Sector*, (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), p. 44.