

More Authentic Leaders are Needed in the Malaysian Public Service

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Transforming society and the world's economy towards more sustainable approaches is the most significant challenge in the 21st century. For the public sector, the transformation calls for growing leaders who can thrive in ambiguity and work across the public, non-profit, and for-profit sectors to lead effective changes. Rule-based, rigid, silo mentality, authoritative style, and directive leadership no longer work in developing people and need to be abandoned.

Through engagement with scholars, academicians, industry leaders and civil servants, Razak School of Government (RSOG) - a distinctive leadership development institution established under the Public Service Department - has identified many leadership styles known to be essential for the Malaysian Public Service. These include "transformational" and "value-driven" of which the latter was sighted in the "Future of Malaysian Public Service" research published in 2017. Although each leadership style complements different needs, the key to managing the public sector is the ability to use the appropriate skills set to approach different challenges.

The COVID-19 scenario has challenged public service leaders to embrace the new norms and always putting forward what people need foremost. Managing unsureness in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world has led us to explore "authentic leadership" as one of the crucial qualities for today's public sector leaders, to master. The Public Service Department of Malaysia and RSOG has developed the Public Sector Leadership Competency Framework (LCF), highlighting authenticity as one of the five key leadership competencies essential for public servants. The other competencies are strategic, agile and adaptive, transformative, and executive presence. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has also listed authentic as a global leadership quality.

To know thyself is the key to being an authentic leader

Authenticity is not a new concept. It was introduced as early as the Ancient Greek times, in which Aristotle defined authenticity as "being true to oneself". Being authentic can be interpreted as knowing your true self and acting according to it. The definition might have a plain meaning in the Western context. However, for non-Western scholars, it lies within their traditional belief of faith, culture, and societal norms. The concept of 'knowing one's true self' exists in many cultures and faiths around the world. For example, for a Muslim, an authentic individual can be related to a morally responsible person due to some spiritual factors. The more spiritually attached the person is, the more self-aware the person becomes. Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gita* suggests it is better to "*live imperfectly than to live based on imitation of someone else's being*" and, in the Bible, "*while Man proposes, God disposes*". The moment we divorce ethics and morality from leading people and managing processes, it can be reduced to only politics, which means less wisdom in leading followers, societies, and governments.

The character of an authentic leader is developed through life experiences, more than classroom training. Discovering authentic leadership is a non-linear process in the leadership journey. One is required to be aware of many things that help shape authentic characters, such as self values, beliefs, and real-world experiences.

Some studies have indicated that training can still help in developing a leader's authenticity, through group coaching intervention. Having said this, an investment in coaching would be a good step for large-scale organisations that need to strategically manage their talents and to prepare for succession planning in developing more authentic geniuses.

Why do we need authentic leaders?

The way public sector leaders perform contributes to the government's overall performance, with indexes like Gross Domestic Product (GDP), National Productivity, the Ease of Doing Business and Corruption Perception being used as indicators to measure performance. With the economic downturn, ethical dilemma, mental-health predicament, and ever-increasing public expectations happening nowadays, we need leaders who can lead during unprecedented challenges, especially amidst the pandemic, with strong will in making positive changes to their organisations, country and the *rakyat*.

In the public sector, additional challenges in leading include the complex hierarchical nature of bureaucratic systems, numerous sectors and services, and different reporting structures that require capable leadership at all levels within the organisation. It is much more challenging with increasing concerns on staff integrity and morale.

Likewise, organisations benefit too when they have authentic leaders leading day-to-day operations. Studies have shown that authentic leaders promote positive behaviours among their followers and encourage subordinates to exhibit extra effort in performing their tasks, voice their opinions, and cultivate creativity. This will lead to several attitudinal outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and reduced turnover intention.

There are many reasons why authentic leaders are effective in helping others to grow and boost positive organisational outcomes. Based on RSOG's experience in delivering leadership programmes, it has been discovered that authentic leaders are natural coaches, seekers and searchers, and the type of leaders that allow others to make mistakes in order to grow.

It is also important to acknowledge that authentic leaders are value-driven. Studies have shown that leaders who have strong values possess deep spiritual convictions or profound moral principles.

In conclusion, leadership is a journey, not a destination, and there is no perfect framework to develop leaders. Leadership requires continuously developing and upgrading a set of skills that allow leaders to influence, inspire, and work with a group of people to achieve a shared goal. Although the country is facing many challenges with the current pandemic, political, and economic setting, it is believed that more authentic public service leaders can be developed through this experience and help lead the country to be more resilient in the future.