

RSOG Seminar : **“Turning Around Bureaucracies: Myths and Realities”**

With

YBhg. Dato’ Dr. Tam Weng Wah
Director General
Road Safety Department, Ministry of Transport

When : 4 March 2014
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : YBhg. Dato’ Dr. Tam Weng Wah

About The Seminar

Change is inevitable. To ensure its relevance, the public sector is required to transform itself so that it continues to add and create value for the society it serves. However, being so entrenched in its existing culture with a hierarchical mind-set, this change process often calls for a “turnaround” approach in public sector organisations. In this seminar, Dato’ Dr Tam shared with participants his experience in turning around two public sector organisations over the past five (5) years. He discussed application of knowledge and experience gained in the field of leadership, leading change, strategic management, learning organisations, collaborative leadership as well as quality management in this transformation process.

Summary

“Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up, it knows it must outrun the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must ran faster than the slowest gazelle, or it will starve. It doesn’t matter whether you’re the lion or a gazelle – when the sun comes up, you’d better be running.”

The parable of the lion and the gazelle was utilised to illustrate the need to keep up with current challenges that persists globally and locally for the public sector. Dato' Dr Tam Weng Wah, who was tasked with the responsibility of turning around two organisations – The Public Complaints Bureau and the Road Safety Department of Ministry of Transport, shared his experience with an audience that mainly consists of civil servants at Razak School of Government on 4th March 2014.

In any turnaround exercise, whether in private or public sector, it indicates that there is something amiss with the organisation in question. Currently, there is an abundance of literature on private sector turnaround, specifically on strategies in turnaround management and how the public sector can incorporate the elements demonstrated in successful private sector change. While the intent in sharing best practices in private sector may have its merits, public sector operates at a different pace and serving a different purpose than its corporate counterparts. As such, examples of successful public sector turnaround are sought after as it offers suitable benchmarking and provides a meaningful case study for other public sector organisations.

Two crucial elements in turning around organisations are leadership approach and management tools. In leadership approach, the speaker shared the importance of feedback with stakeholder in understanding the nature of the organisation in question. Common culprits for stagnating organisations include sense of powerlessness (which includes lack of responsibility or no sense of ownership, often quoting the need to have certain legislation in place to be empowered), reactive response in addressing issues, silo mentality and complacency. All these point out to competency and leadership issues. Organisations are then identified in a matrix whereby components of doing and thinking is rated. The lowest quadrant would mean that the organisation has low doing and low thinking, whereby for a high performing organisation, it needs to be in the high doing and high thinking quadrants. In both case studies, the speaker managed to change the organisations towards highest quadrant.

As leaders, it is important to align team members within the organisation towards a shared goal and vision. This addresses complacency and silo mentality while it empowers subordinates and minimises reactionary response and ensures that it leads to a changing and forward thinking environment. For instance, the Public Complaints Bureau's purpose was as an agency to collate complaints but it has grown out to be an organisation that provides proposals or recommendations to abate the situation for agencies in question. This adds value to the Public Complaints Bureau and creates the idea of relevance and responsibility to the service as a whole. One of the common pitfalls of incoming leaders is the danger of being "house-trained" whereby one assimilates to the current practices and cultures that one was tasked to change. As such, thoroughly critical assessment of the situation and buy-in for team member towards the change embarked is crucial.

Management tools utilised towards this change is the prerogative of the change agent/leader itself. Some of the tools introduced include change processes and strategies (steps towards creating a high performing organisation), business excellence model (a holistic model that looks at all aspects of the organisation, including enablers and results), learning organisations (where it organises agencies to be more pro-active and not complacent with current practices), balanced scorecard (vision and strategy are aligned with both internal processes and external perspective) and quality management (such as MS ISO, McKinsey 7 S Model, 5 S Methodology and Key Performance Indicators). The speaker cautioned the audience on utilising consultants for every issue that arises because internal capacity should be empowered and encouraged to initiate improvement at any level.

The session then focused on the importance of human resources department of an organisation in human capital development. He believed that the head of the organisations should impart the vision of the organisation to the human resources department to ensure that there is an alignment between the two in achieving organisational goal. While he believed that training will enhance competencies and skills, on the job training is more crucial, therefore the training for any competency or skills should start within the organisation through inculcation of values and exemplary behaviour.

In essence he viewed that structure influences behaviour. Therefore, in turning around organisations, there is a need to look into the structure in effort to change behaviours. Leadership by example is seen as one of the ways to gain confidence of the subordinates towards organisational change. Resistance is expected, and as leaders, it should be dealt in a professional yet strict manner. Ultimately, public sector organisations must ensure that they continuously deliver service improvement. This eventually enhances national competitiveness and overall wellbeing of the people.

Issues Raised :

- There are distinct differences between leadership and management. Both are crucial in turnaround exercise. Resolute leaders are needed in initiating change and effective management, through utilisation of appropriate tools and instruments, is critical in managing such changes.
- Structure is in place for a purpose as it ensures order. This is especially so in bureaucracy as it is meant to enhance accountability. However, there are instances where it can be redefined, especially in times where modification is vital towards driving the necessary change in stagnating organisation. When bureaucratic process is seen as unnecessary "red tapes" (where it creates no value or adds no purpose) it requires change in the process.

- Responsibility must be shared and not shirked in fear of being blamed. Low risk-taking in the service means low responsibility takers and this leads to inefficient decision-making and ineffective outcomes. Cascading responsibility not only ensures that each level serves its cause but it also enables team members to have greater ownership and stronger sense of belonging and purpose to the organisation and the public service as a whole.
- Efforts of government transformation is evident through its process improvement and numerous initiatives undertaken, However, public service needs to relook its way of doing things especially focusing on holistic outcomes instead of piecemeal outputs.

About The Speaker

Dato' Dr. Tam Weng Wah is the Director General of the Road Safety Department, Ministry of Transport, Malaysia. He was previously the Director General of the Public Complaints Bureau. Prior to this, he was the Deputy Director (Policy) at the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN). He holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration from the Pennsylvania State University. He received his B.A. (Hons.) degree and a Masters of Public Administration (MPA) degree from the University of Malaya. Among his teaching and research interests include leading and managing strategic change, learning organizations, governance and collaborative leadership and effective complaints management.

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