

RSOG Alumni Session

“Malay Culture, Values & Leadership”

with

Dato' Vaseehar Hassan

When : 13 November 2014
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : Dato' Vaseehar Hassan, PhD

About The Seminar

Dato' Vaseehar Hassan has been involved in RSOG's Senior Leadership Programmes as a distinguished facilitator to Malaysia's public service officials. While pursuing his doctoral research entitled "The Malay Leadership Mystique: Building a background to a psychoanalytic understanding of Malay leadership qualities in politics and business", he realised that three key factors shape the leadership qualities of a race: historical context, culture, and large group psychology. He uses the clinical approach to understanding the Malay psychology, combining four different cultural models to explore the state of Malay leadership. The four models are Hofstede's Dimensions of National Culture, Schein's Level of Culture, Trompenaars & Hamden - Turner's Five Dimensions of National Culture and Kets de Vries - Wheel of National Culture. In this session, he will share his ideas and findings which draws on the theories of large group psychology to explain the Malay dilemma in business leadership.

Summary

Ethnic and racial studies have been the interest of many, especially sociological and social-psychological studies. The curiosity often lies in understanding how the inheritable trait (i.e. race and ethnicity) affect how one behaves and thinks in group settings and at large, be it in societies of homogenous or heterogenous composition. While it must be understood that the inherited trait is not the 'be-all and end-all' of an individual and collective dynamic, the role of ethnicity and race must not be underestimated and should be understood. As a nation that comprise of a Malay-

Muslim majority, understanding the Malay psyche is not only important to the interdisciplinary field, but also crucial towards nation building.

The New Economic Policy, formulated and implemented forty years ago by past leaders indicate their vision in recognising education as a means of upward mobility. The aggressive pursuit in education brought about many Malay professionals in the fields of accountancy, banking, engineering, and sciences. The crucial factor is providing opportunity to those who, in absence of this policy, would not have an ounce of possibility to move out of poverty or socioeconomic stagnation.

Through his years of experience in banking and financial sector, Dato' Vaseehar shared that he often pondered why are Malays excelling in politics and public service and yet find some difficulty to attain the same success rate in the business sector. This curiosity required him to probe the question further through historical records and utilising a structured psychoanalytical paradigm. The rationale of employing the paradigm is to ensure that the research does not rely solely on what is directly observable and would provide some structure in understanding all forms of behaviour, be it rational or irrational.

Applying the clinical paradigm, he identified three contextual factors that shapes Malay Leadership. The factors are the historical context, culture, and large group psychology. The historical context that shaped the Malays seem to be more prominent and most visible, but it should only be treated as the tip of the iceberg. Years of being colonised and subjected to feudalism is seen to be the root of psychological problems and trauma among Malays.

In understanding the Malay culture, the four models mentioned above were utilised in his research to achieve the following findings:

- 1) Highly collectivistic and communitarianism in relationships formed.
- 2) Power distance: High.
- 3) Particularist - relationships count and rules are relative.
- 4) Language are highly contextual and diffused - indirect, tactful.
- 5) Power: Ascription-oriented - respect for hierarchy and titles.
- 6) Emotions are inhibitive, often suppressed.
- 7) Polychronic: Time is seen as loose and not necessarily structured in linear and sequential fashion.
- 8) Space: Private instead of public.
- 9) Action Orientation focuses on being instead of doing.
- 10) In harmony with environment.

In addition, he found 16 salient features of Malay characteristics and culture, which consists of both positive and negative values. Supremacy of the Ruler (daulat), respect

for hierarchy/status/rank, and feudalism are expected characteristics identified, considering Malaysia's long history and the normative culture of Malays. Virtues such as patience, grace, self-respect and compassion highlights the impact and influence of Islam on Malays. Whereas dependency, envy and prevalence of instant gratification indicates the complexity of the Malay psyche.

The interest in understanding and demystifying the Malay 'problem' is unlikely to cease anytime soon. In the past, colonisers have attempted to describe the predicament facing the Malay through their viewpoint, with the late Syed Hussein Alatas providing the alternative to these orientalist views of the Malays. The research in discussion provides another dimension to the discourse. These attempts are crucial in designing policies that affect the nation. Nevertheless, policy response at this day and age may not be as straightforward and not as swiftly implemented as was in the past. Generational gap, depleting resources, and globalisation are some of the challenges faced by policy makers. These need to be threaded on carefully in ensuring successful and meaningful policy outcome.

Issues raised:

- We are all products of our past and past is the lens through which one can seek to understand the present and shape the future.
- In understanding the Malay culture, it should not be solely viewed in the form of duality Western characteristics vs Asian values, rather historical context and large group psychology needs close examination.
- The duration in which the New Economic Policy was aggressively in place may be insufficient to produce successive waves of Malay professionals to be given similar opportunity to excel in business.
- Feudalism remains pervasive in the Malay culture, and to a large extent, dictates the type of Malay leadership.

About the Speaker

Dato' Vaseehar Hassan, a banker for over thirty years has transitioned from banking to executive coaching and leadership development after completing a consulting and coaching for change programme in 2002 from INSEAD and HEC (graduated with Honours). He is a pioneer in this transition in South East Asia where executive coaching was in its infancy in the early 2000. Wide experience at Board level has placed him in an excellent position to take on his new role in executive coaching and leadership development. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) from Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit.

Contact

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