

Joint Conference

Razak School of Government (RSOG) and Blavatnik School of Government

Reinventing Public Services 2015

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Where : The Marriott Putrajaya

A quick online search on innovation can sprout at least 460 million results in less than a second. It's not difficult to see why innovation is highly sought after, considering the number of challenges many institutions face, especially governments that are further hampered by declining resources, increased citizen expectations, and the need to adapt to changing demography and needs. To innovate, ideally, is to come up with sustainable solutions within a certain constraint. It is high on the agenda of many private sector institutions and becoming increasingly so for governments across the world. However, when one talks about innovation, governments are not necessarily immediately identified as the focal point of innovation, instead other social entrepreneurs are acknowledged as sources of inspiration for innovation. This is despite the numerous efforts, including financial and introduction of infrastructure, to encourage and inculcate innovation in the government.

Considering that challenges faced by governments are not entirely unique in its core, it makes sense for governments to learn from one another. Thus, in light of challenges faced by problems, a period of new opportunities arise. Reinventing Public Services is a day-long programme that aims to strengthen public sector leadership in Malaysia by exposing participants with knowledge and experience from international practitioners and experts. Targeted at senior management in public service, the programme is a collaboration between Razak School of Government and Blavatnik School of Government (BSG), University of Oxford. Four faculty members with background in governance, innovation, economics, and politics were tasked to share their thoughts and experience relating to transformation through lecture, interactive questions and answers session, group discussion, and sharing of experience and cases. Theodore Roosevelt, who was the President of the United States of America made a famous statement "do what you can, with what you have, where you are". A

century on, the saying still rings true and it became the running theme of Reinventing Public Services.

Professor Ngairé Woods, Founding Dean of BSG puts forth the purpose and scope for reinvention and why it is critical to governments in adapting to changing citizen demands and preserving its relevancy in the digital world. Most governments are faced with three common issues: (i) On talent acquisition, emolument, motivation, management, and promotion of high-performing civil servants; (ii) On building integrity, values, and ensuring a coherent and compelling narrative in the public service; and (iii) On innovation and ensuring that public servants are attuned to citizens' needs, responsive to data, and work towards strengthening diverse societies. The rise and democratisation of social media and other information and communication technologies have made such challenges more complex, however, this is a period of new opportunities where technologies and the thirst for communication (to communicate and be communicated) can be leveraged on for the betterment of societies.

A simple question was asked – “why do you do your job?” Numerous studies have been conducted to identify whether financial incentives are the ultimate driver for performance and its results indicated that motivation is inherently humane and the need of serving a specific purpose. For instance, a radiologist who needs to interpret volumes of medical images are likely to spend more time and effort when the document is supplemented by short descriptions of the person in the image. Considering that public services cater for millions of citizens, the inclusion of small details regarding the person shifts the attention from just another x-ray of a faceless person, to an individual with a condition that may or may not affect their lives and the people around them. This psychological inducement somehow leads to more accurate interpretation of the image and indicates that motivation is inherently humane and when one is reminded of the human element, one is more likely to perform better on the task that they are responsible for.

It shows that small incremental changes – or innovations, influences how results can be improved. It is important to note that innovation does not happen merely through good intention or desire. Instead, systematic structure is needed – therein lies the importance of structural change as enablers for innovation. The Fellow of Practice of BSG, Kristina Murrin, shared her views that innovation needs to have three components – insights (to know what exactly is the issue in hand, with the right evidence and data), ideas (what can be the solution and how it can be effectively delivered), and implementation (the process that covers from the point of intent to execution to evaluation, and having contingency plans). In gaining insights, getting the right input and the relevant data in solving the specific issue is crucial. This can be done through series of engagement with stakeholders, triangulated with other existing information and understandings, where one can get insights on the root of the issue. Nevertheless, one must also be mindful of the constraints that exists in your mind and the people around you in pursuit of a solution. These mental blocks can be overcome by

recognising that these biases exist and making the effort to embrace new ways of thinking and doing.

Bearing in mind that stakeholders would consist of individuals representing a larger group of society with a myriad of needs and requirements, engagements can be challenging in priority setting. With multiple objectives by different stakeholders, there will be some who will gain (and happy with the outcome) and some stand to lose, resulting in dissatisfaction and may feel marginalised as needs are collectively deemed unimportant). The challenge lies in ensuring that people move in the same direction despite having very different objectives initially and overcoming resistance to change through clear communication of decision rationales and encouraging participatory decision making. Dr. Mara Airoidi, Lecturer in Economics of Public Policy, BSG, shared that in some efforts to change or intervention, economic principles may be utilised to aid decision-making and to justify the rationale of tough choices made, such as utilising the Value for Money (VfM) – the ratio of value to cost. VfM triangles are generated by plotting an intervention's value (vertical) against its cost (horizontal) and the slope represents the intervention's VfM. Thus, steep slopes indicates high VfM interventions compared to those with shallow slopes (low VfM). These permutations can aid public servants when fighting for resources or requesting for budgets. Nevertheless, limitations exists in utilising such methods. For instance, the immeasurability of certain variables such as impact and not incorporating managerial time as cost is only identified as something monetary. Thus, a socio-technical approach is needed – one that combines stakeholder engagement and utilises principles of cost-effective analysis, backed with evidence and data. These inclusions can help form and reshape debates and ensure that the right innovation needed is identified.

In any effort towards change, resistance may somehow be inevitable. However, to simply see it as a personality, mind-set, or cultural driven reasons may not lead to any concrete or practical solutions. Instead, John McTernan, the former Director of Political Operations for former United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair, stresses that the key towards overcoming barriers and blockages is resilience - the ability to take a step back and identify a different route to get to the objective. A good plan has strategic clarity, focusing on its purpose and priority – clear sense of what needs to be done and why. Nevertheless, even the best laid plans can come into difficulty and they often are caused by people, politics, and persuasion (communication). The best basis for strategic clarity is to get the argument right by getting right to the core of the issue and providing consistency and clarity in communicated messages.

There are more efforts by governments around the world to rethink the way they do things, reshape opportunities for innovative approaches to problem-solving, and reinvent the way services are delivered. The advancement of technologies are to aid public services such as utilising big data to make informed decisions and evidence-based policies. Nevertheless, despite whether the world is flatter or becoming more fragmented, governments must not only make sense by communicating clear rationale of choices and decisions undertaken, but must also touch the hearts of its citizens in its

attempt. To quote the former President of the United States yet again, “People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care”.

Issues Raised

1. Key Performance Index (KPI) is useful as a dashboard to monitor performance and it serves many purposes for strategy setting at highest level. However, evidence for many countries have indicated that it doesn't deep change motivation – an aspect crucial to performance for front liners. Other strategies to encourage high and meaningful performance from the front liners are needed and KPIs need to be done in engagement with those who are executing the tasks.
2. Trust is a crucial quality of leadership. A leader that wants to be liked, may make the wrong decisions to ensure that they remain favoured. Trust-building is crucial for leadership, which can be done through demonstration that one is listening, exhibits honesty, and communicates that one has a plan.
3. As for the public sector, impartiality is the most important quality. Past studies have shown that citizens' confidence (including higher willingness to pay taxes) increases in line with transparent actions that indicates impartiality in public service.
4. Practices in big organisations that kept occurring despite its failures indicates the lack of accountability as no one is held accountable to the failure. While it may be difficult to ensure everyone is accountable to everything, it may be useful to ensure that there is someone accountable for any one thing.

About the Programme

Reinventing Public Services is a joint programme between Razak School of Government (RSOG) and Blavatnik School of Government (BSG), University of Oxford. It is aimed at sharing updated knowledge, best practices, and experience on government transformation and its challenges from practitioners and academicians with background in governance, innovation, economics and politics. Professor Ngairé Woods, the Founding Dean of BSG led this programme, ably supported by Kristina Murrin (Fellow of Practice at BSG), Mara Airoidi (Economic & Public Policy Lecturer at BSG), and John McTernan (Political Advisor and Strategist for British Labour Party).

Contact

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