

To Listen, Labour and  
Lead: Building a Better  
Singapore Together

*Lee Hsien Loong*

Successful Governance:  
A Conversation

*Interview with Gus O'Donnell*

Governance Through  
Adaptive Urban Platforms:  
The INSINC Experiment

*Chng Kai Fong, Balaji Prabhakar  
and Jeffrey Siow*

Commissioning Public Value:  
The Role of Civil Servants

*Peter Shergold*

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# ETHOS

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## EDITORIAL

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In an earlier edition of *ETHOS* (Issue 4, April 2008), we traced the evolution of contemporary public services and surmised that, driven in part by technological change and social pressure, they would advance towards greater adaptability, fluidity and collaborative engagement across agency and sectoral boundaries. Much has happened in the world since, but this trajectory holds mainly true today, albeit for somewhat varied reasons. The global financial crisis has obliged many developed countries to pursue austerity in government spending, prompting renewed interest in innovative means of delivering public services that devolve the resource burden away from state actors. Globalisation has facilitated Asia's economic resurgence — but the relentless traffic in value, labour and resources has also widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, and led to ever more diverse societies, with divergent priorities and needs that governments must juggle. The proliferation of social media and mobile technology has altered the balance of information — and of trust — between the public and the institutions they interact with, although it also paves the way for ubiquitous, intelligent

services of unprecedented breadth. In many areas, particularly online, the scope and quality of public services lag behind the service standards set by corporations with global influence and scale: think Google, Facebook, Apple. For many countries, nimble, adaptive, connected government is no longer a developmental goal to aspire to in an ideal future — it has become a pressing, present imperative.

The accelerated pace at which change has taken place makes its own particular demands on the business of governance. In a recent address to Singapore's Administrative Service (*p. 6*), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called for the Civil Service to embrace a broader range of perspectives from both within and without the public sector, in order to avoid policy blind-spots and to gain a better appreciation of the impact public policies have on those affected by them. He also expects the Government to be prepared to adopt partial solutions, in the interest of overall progress, if the time is not right for a fuller resolution of difficult issues.

Lord Gus O'Donnell, until recently the Head of the British Civil Service, has advocated a more pragmatic, clear-eyed approach to governance rooted in

the behavioural realities of actual, often imperfect decisions made by individual citizens and households every day (*p. 12*). To do so, he argues, requires a broader measure of what constitutes national wellbeing and resilience, as well as new tools, systems and structures to take stock of how well the country and its citizens are in fact doing.

These are challenges that Singapore's public sector agencies have not only confronted but become increasingly sophisticated in grappling with, as they transit from transactional to relational modes of interaction with the public (*p. 17*). Public-facing agencies such as the CPF Board (*p. 24*) and the Ministry of Manpower (*p. 28*) have developed a range of strategies for monitoring and differentiating service delivery. In an environment of growing customer traffic, rising expectations and increasing case complexity, these mechanisms help them channel scarce service resources to where they are needed most. The wealth of data gathered in the process is also becoming invaluable to policy design, and to the development of a new generation of more nuanced, citizen-centric services.

Sound and sufficient data could also unlock better evidence-based methods of policy analysis, assessment and design, helping to overcome false assumptions, stereotypes, ideology, habit and other cognitive biases endemic to the field of governance. Researchers from the Public Economics team in the Institute

of Governance and Policy make a compelling case for the use of randomised controlled trials — already *de rigueur* in the healthcare sector — to enrich and strengthen policymaking (*p. 36*).

The experience of many public agencies also suggests that timely, credible, relevant and accessible information, appropriately shared, can itself be a powerful prompt towards positive behaviour. The Land Transport Authority's experimental INSINC platform marries the objective rigour of transport data with social elements such as peer networking and competitive gaming to encourage off-peak travel on public transport, with promising results (*p. 45*). MindLab Director Christian Bason points out that listening to evidence of actual public views has spurred civil servants to rethink their roles as public managers, and to redesign their services in ways that encourage citizens and government to work together for the public good (*p. 54*).

The coming together of state and non-state actors to achieve increasingly complex goals continues to represent a rich new ground of possibility — and of anxiety. Public service veteran Peter Shergold reflects on the conditions and considerations necessary for such collaborations to succeed (*p. 65*), while communications expert Geoff Wilson outlines key strategies for successful public engagement (*p. 71*). Other contributors discuss worldwide trends towards more participatory governance in the context

of globalisation, demographic transition, and growing disaffection with public institutions. It may be that the most successful governments of tomorrow will be the ones that not only do things right and do the right things, but that continue to earn the trust, support and partnership of a public that is becoming more capable and engaged than ever before. In so doing, they could open the way for new forms of public value creation and delivery to emerge: not by fiat, no matter how sophisticated, but through learning by doing and shared ownership of the issues that matter.

I wish you an engaging read.

**Alvin Pang**

Editor-in-Chief

ETHOS

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# To Listen, Labour and Lead: Building a Better Singapore Together

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Addressing public sector leaders, Singapore's Prime Minister calls for greater diversity in the Civil Service, and a change in the Government's approach to policymaking.

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BY

LEE HSIEN LOONG

Lee Hsien Loong is the third Prime Minister of Singapore. This article is an adaptation of a speech delivered at the 25th Administrative Service Dinner and Promotion Ceremony on 27 March 2013.

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## Introduction

Fundamental changes are underway in our society. Our demographics and population mix are shifting. Elderly Singaporeans worry about retirement needs and healthcare costs. Younger Singaporeans have high aspirations, yet harbour nagging anxieties about whether they can achieve them. Businesses are struggling with the significant slowdown in foreign worker growth.

Income distributions are widening. Social media is fundamentally changing relationships between the Government and people, and within society. The interests of different groups are now more diverse and stridently expressed, as we can all attest. Many countries grapple with these challenges. We see this in their economic and political difficulties, whether in Europe, the US or even China.

Singapore is not immune from these global trends, but we are better placed than others to overcome our challenges. Singaporeans are well educated. We have an efficient and well-run system. Our strong economy gives us resources to improve lives. Our reserves, if carefully husbanded, will help us to weather storms. We are located in the most dynamic region in the world. Above all, we have a Government that is committed to serving Singapore. We should therefore look to the future with confidence.

## How Government Must Change

Our job as political leaders and civil servants is to build upon these strengths, and work with Singaporeans to solve our problems and build a better Singapore. This means getting both our policies and politics right.

### *Pressing Problems*

Our first priority is to deal with pressing problems, especially housing and public transport. These are urgent political and national imperatives. We must make visible progress on these problems, and address the valid concerns of Singaporeans. The Ministry of National Development (MND) and Ministry of Transport are fully seized with the task, but these are issues for the whole Government.

As a Government, we need to respond faster and more coherently to new and urgent priorities. Whether we are resolving issues like housing and public transport, or battling an imminent danger like SARS, we need to break out of ministry silos to think and act as one Government. In particular, we must share more data across agencies, to put together a more complete picture of the overall landscape; and take a whole-systems perspective, not just that of our own ministries.

### *Reviewing Policy Fundamentals*

To respond strategically to our new environment, we must make some major shifts in philosophy and policy. We

must find a new balance between self-reliance and social support to mitigate widening income distributions. We must strengthen safety nets for specific groups of Singaporeans, especially our elders. We also need to rethink major social policies, including healthcare and housing. The Government is doing so across different platforms, including in Our Singapore Conversation.

While these strategic shifts are essential, some hard truths do not change. We must continue to strengthen and reinforce our core values. We must stay united and face the future together. We will always need a strong Home Team and Singapore Armed Forces to keep our country safe. We still rely on a competitive, vibrant economy to provide good jobs for our people and generate resources for our social programmes. We must strengthen our Singapore identity, while remaining open to the world.

*The Administrative Service must increase the diversity of experiences among its officers.*

This being the Administrative Service Dinner, one more of these hard truths is worth stressing: The need for a high-quality public service that is competent and honest, staffed with able and committed officers, imbued with a sense of responsibility to the nation

and a spirit of service to their fellow citizens. One reason we have been able to build such a Service — though by no means the only reason — is that we have paid our officers realistically and competitively, in line with the quality of the officers and the value of their contributions. We have been reviewing Administrative Service salaries, but we are not changing this principle.

Making this calibrated change will not be easy. We must consider carefully what to change and what to reaffirm, and avoid raising unrealistic expectations in the process. We must be prepared for uncertainty and anxiety before we reach a new settled position; we can see some of these emotions in the reactions to MND's suggestion to lower the cost of new Built-To-Order flats. But staying put is not an option, and we have to navigate this uncertain environment together.

That is why close cooperation between the political leadership and the Civil Service is so important. Both must be clear about their respective roles. The political leadership has to set the direction, develop the narrative, manage the politics, and carry the ground. For this to work, policies and programmes have to deliver not only practical results but also political dividends. For its part, the Civil Service has to develop options imaginatively, analyse issues objectively, and implement policies well. It has to be more customer-centric, for

citizens see our front-line officers as the face of the Government. Ministers and civil servants have different roles, but a common mission — to improve the well-being of our fellow Singaporeans.

### **What Civil Service Must Do**

Fortunately we have an excellent Civil Service, especially the Administrative Service. You have all been working hard — reviewing policies, adjusting to the new environment, engaging the public, raising the morale of your colleagues. I appreciate your commitment and support. But there is more that the Administrative Service can do.

First, the Administrative Service must increase the diversity of experiences among its officers. Administrative Officers (AOs) should be sensitised to the challenges faced by the less fortunate, to anticipate their needs and ensure that our policies continue to benefit all segments of society. AOs should also have more experience in business. It is one thing for a ministry to set rules like foreign worker dependency ratios, quite another to be a small- to medium-sized enterprise having to cope with such changes which may massively impact business.

The Administrative Service has posted AOs to the People's Association and the Community Development Councils. It has seconded officers to companies like Shell, McKinsey and IDEO, and it is constantly on the lookout

for good mid-career recruits. Many AOs also volunteer with voluntary welfare organisations or serve in charities during their free time.

What more can the Service do? More operational and external postings will help, especially to expose officers to perspectives on the ground. I am glad that the Community Attachment Programme will be expanded, to keep AOs in touch with ground realities.

The Service must also reach out to external parties to work with the Government. For example, the Ministry of Trade and Industry is engaging industry associations to develop productivity roadmaps, because the associations know their own industries better than SPRING or International Enterprise Singapore can. We should also bring in more officers from the private and people sectors, and help them adjust to the Service's culture and environment so they can contribute more.

Beyond the Administrative Service, the Civil Service must develop more specialist leaders from the Professional and other Services. We will put more emphasis on sectoral and professional expertise within the Public Service Leadership corps. This will complement AOs who are “generalists”, and build deeper expertise in specific areas. That way, the Civil Service as a whole will be a “T”-shaped organisation, with a wide breadth of experience but firmly anchored in critical competencies.

Second, the Government must change its approach to policymaking. We no longer have the luxury of making policy “in a lab”. Today’s environment is more complex and fluid, and our trade-offs more stark. Ideas are more vigorously and widely contested, especially online.

Our policy process must adapt to this new landscape. We must gather a wider range of views, especially from outside the Government. We must market-test and adjust our policies more. We must also acquire a better feel of how our policies impact different groups, and what their likely reactions and concerns will be. With win-win solutions more elusive, we must be more willing to “satisfice” to achieve our main goals. This includes recognising when it is better for the Government to wait for the right time to solve a problem, or to take a partial step and defer a fuller solution to some more propitious moment.

*The Civil Service must harness the energy and passion from within its ranks, especially among our younger and junior officers.*

These imperatives apply to all our policies, whether community projects like developing Wisma Geylang Serai, perpetually thorny issues such as public transport or car ownership, or major reviews like our housing policy rethink.

The adjustments will not be easy to make. They require confidence and skill on the Government’s part, and maturity and commitment on the part of the public. But they are essential to avoid blind-spots, generate buy-in and improve the quality of our policies.

Third, the Civil Service must harness the energy and passion from within its ranks, especially among our younger and more junior officers. Many officers have a healthy idealism, and lots of ideas to change society for the better. We should tap their passion, and empower them to identify problems, develop solutions and drive change. Give them the satisfaction of championing an idea, and seeing it through from concept to completion. If we dampen their fire, they will leave for more exciting opportunities elsewhere. Indeed, many good ideas have emerged this way. Workfare had its roots in an Amoeba Team, while young officers from the Ministry of Finance were the ones driving the design of the Wage Credit Scheme in Budget 2013.

We must institutionalise these arrangements and make this the prevailing ethos of the Civil Service. This means changing how the Service engages its officers. We should encourage more bottom-up initiatives, and use Whole-of-Government platforms like the Strategic Issues Group to overcome Ministry silos. We should explore new ways to “stress-test” our approaches, such as by using “red teams”.

### *Upholding Values and The Public Good*

These changes can be unsettling. In this “messier” environment, we may feel off-balance at times, but we cannot go off-course. Always let our core values guide us, and remember that our role is to serve Singaporeans and Singapore. This is true for both political leaders and civil servants. Three values in particular are salient.

Firstly, always carry ourselves with the highest standards of integrity and incorruptibility. This is fundamental to our mission, and a key factor in Singapore’s success. Our system functions properly because policies are developed for the public good rather than for private or vested interests. We do not tolerate any impropriety. Anyone breaking the rules will be caught and punished, whatever his post and however embarrassing it may be. If we lower our standards, we are headed down a slippery slope.

Secondly, serve with humility. Let us do the right things and do things right, but never be self-righteous or arrogant. Being humble also means accepting that Government does not have all the answers. That is why we must engage the public more, to walk in their shoes and tap their diverse perspectives.

Lastly, always be stewards of the public good. We are in positions

of authority, and must live up to the trust bestowed on us. Stewardship also means improving those around us — our colleagues, the rest of the Civil Service, and most importantly the lives of Singaporeans. Ultimately, stewardship means developing our successors and handing on to them a better Singapore than the one we inherited.

*The Government does not have all the answers. That is why we must engage the public more, to walk in their shoes and tap their diverse perspectives.*

### **Conclusion**

Building a better Singapore is what Government is about. This is an exciting time to be in the business of governance. The world and Singapore are changing rapidly, but the possibilities are endless. Despite our challenges, I am confident we can succeed. We have an excellent Civil Service and Administrative Service, a strong base to scale loftier heights and a shared passion to improve Singaporeans’ lives. We must *Listen* with empathy, *Labour* with conviction and *Lead* with humility. Let us persevere in our mission to create a brighter future for all Singaporeans. 🌸



INTERVIEW WITH GUS O'DONNELL

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## Successful Governance: A Conversation

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The former Head of the Home Civil Service in the UK discusses national wellbeing, meritocracy, the future of service delivery, and the value of public service.

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### GUS O'DONNELL

Lord Augustine O'Donnell served Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron as Cabinet Secretary and Head of Civil Service from 2005 to 2011. He stood down from this position at the end of 2011 and was appointed to the House of Lords in January 2012. Prior to his role as Cabinet Secretary, he served as Permanent Secretary of the UK Treasury from 2002 to 2005 and as press secretary to Prime Minister John Major from 1990 to 1994. In 1999, he was appointed Managing Director of Macroeconomic Policy and International Finance and was responsible for fiscal policy, international development, and European Union Economic and Monetary Union.

Lord Gus studied economics at Warwick University and then Nuffield College, Oxford, before lecturing in political economy at the University of Glasgow. He has honorary doctorates from Warwick and Glasgow universities.

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In his first visit to Singapore as CSC Senior Visiting Fellow in November 2012, Lord Gus spoke on “Innovations in Governance and Leadership”, and headed a Roundtable on “Income Inequality, Social Mobility, Well Being and Behavioural Economics”. He shared these views in conversation with ETHOS Editor-in-Chief Alvin Pang.

### On Alternative Indicators of National Success, and the Value of Data

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was the first attempt to measure everything that is going on in an economy, but of course it's an incomplete measure — we've known that for a long time. GDP is a measure of flow and not of stock: if you run down your natural resources, your income grows but your total wealth diminishes and that is not captured in GDP. After an earthquake, GDP may go up during reconstruction, yet it would be absurd to suggest that people are better off because of the disaster.

But people like simplicity, so looking at one number that is comparable

across countries seems like a good idea and that number has been GDP. In the absence of anything better, it's what people revert to. The challenge is to come up with better measures. I am not suggesting that anyone stops measuring GDP. It is more a question of supplementing income indicators with other sensible ones. We should think more about measuring people's wellbeing in ways that comprise a broader view, allowing for things such as health and sustainability, environment, people's capabilities, whether they're flourishing or not, and so on.

We know that wellbeing rises quite rapidly with income, and then

flattens out — this suggests that you could increase your overall national wellbeing by helping the lower end of the economy and reducing unemployment. In Singapore, with full employment, the bigger benefit might come not from creating jobs at the lower end, but perhaps by improving the quality of the commuting experience, for instance.

I think it is quite important for every country to be looking at its own performance relative to what it ought to be, given its public policies, investments, quality of services and employment rates. The concentration of thinking on wellbeing and what we value will help people realise that the pursuit of income alone is not going to achieve the goals we think it will. In the meantime, we should err on the side of collecting more data now, so that we will learn over time what is really valuable to society, and what perhaps we can do without.

I'm generally in favour of openness and transparency in terms of data. It allows people to understand what's really happening; informed debates are always better than uninformed ones. Also, the private sector will quite often come along and use available data to create useful services that have not been possible or thought of before.

Of course you need to think about the benefits that you get from greater openness and do your own cost-benefit analysis. It is not a case of “publish everything and be damned”. In the UK,

we expanded the publication of public service wages from the top down to the middle level, hoping to put downward pressure on wages. But this created a lot of resentment, when people started looking around and comparing their salaries to others in their grade or those in the private sector.

*The concentration of thinking on wellbeing and what we value will help people realise that the pursuit of income alone is not going to achieve the goals we think it will.*

#### **On Capabilities that the Public Sector Will Need in the Coming Decade**

It is very important to be measuring capabilities. One of the things I did when I was in the UK was launch a programme called Capability Review, where we look at various skills such as strategic capability or service delivery. We found that in an environment where we are trying to explore alternative ways of delivering services, one of our weaknesses was commissioning. So instead of doing everything ourselves, we set up contracts and commission services from someone. But how do we specify that contract? It is a skill that we will need more of in future.

Many aspects of the public service will need to be professionalised: human resources, IT, process re-engineering and so on. We will also need people to



design better online solutions, which have enormous untapped potential for service delivery. The next generation of online services needs to be more intelligent: for example, systems that “cross-sell” services. When people apply for one benefit, we can make them aware of other benefits for people in their position and so on, based on the data available.

*We should be aware that we tend to come up with the kinds of solutions for the world we've been in.*

When it comes to delivering public service to a vast number of people, one of the benefits of online systems is that they enhance fairness. A computer is not going to treat you differently because of how you look, or discriminate based on stereotypes or bias. This fairness and predictability are good for citizens.

However, we should go on to determine those things that can only be done face-to-face for various reasons, and concentrate resources there. There may be disadvantaged groups who cannot use online systems or who have multiple problems that do not fit standard guidelines. These call for bespoke solutions, and we need people with the right skills to help them.

So one of the things we will need is public servants who are better at interpersonal relations and who can

understand the kinds of problems experienced by the people they are dealing with. We therefore need to draw our public servants from much more diverse backgrounds, with more varied sets of experiences.

### **On Meritocracy, Diversity, and Behavioural Insights**

One of the great things about civil service is that it should be the ultimate meritocracy. We should be the ones that show no fear or favour, who are not biased one way or the other. We should have people of diverse backgrounds. Our civil servants should simply be the best at what they do.

The question of course is how we define “the best”: I think these should be people who have a range of skills, rather than those with the highest IQ scores. However, what may have happened is that we've defined “the best” narrowly, and having defined it in that way, we continue to hire people like ourselves — not surprisingly, because we've defined ourselves as the best.

We should be aware that we tend to come up with the kinds of solutions for the world we've been in. So if you ask an economist for a solution, he'll probably suggest a tax or a subsidy. If you ask politicians who sit every day in a legislative body, they'll probably come up with a legalistic answer. Whereas if you ask someone who has lived that problem — say you ask ex-prisoners



about how we can help prisoners to stop re-offending — you'll probably get some really interesting answers.

We need to start working with and thinking about a world inhabited by humans — humans who make mistakes, who can be inconsistent, dishonest, short-sighted, who do things they later regret. All of these shortcomings give rise, one way or another, to public policy issues. Building up public policy interventions around the basis of understanding how real people make choices, I think, has fundamentally got to be right.

Certain quarters think of this as an attack on economics. Now, my first job was as an academic economist and I still think of myself as an economist foremost. What I'm trying to do is to create a much richer field of economics, which has a lot more to say about public policy. The point about behavioural economics is to look at real evidence, about the way actual people make decisions. There is a very good piece by Ronald Coase in the latest *Harvard Business Review* where he argues that we need to start developing economics that treats man as man is and companies as companies are.<sup>1</sup>

#### **On Foresight, Long-Term Planning and National Resilience**

It is important to keep an eye on both current and long-term trends. Some issues that citizens complain about will quite often disappear from the

public eye if something is done about it. But there are other issues where early policy action can prevent what could have been a terrible problem later. For instance, look at what Singapore has done with water — it is no longer a significant issue for the people of Singapore today, but only because of the government's long-term thinking and investment in the past.

In that sense, Singapore has done incredibly well in thinking ahead, and it is important that you do it well. I come from an environment with a great degree of political change, so an element of change is built in for us. We live in an unstable world. But you have a very stable political system and you might be tempted to wish that stability will continue. When you are in such an open and vulnerable situation, I think what you need to be doing is to build resilience: resilient individuals and institutions that can manage shocks.

*We need to start working with and thinking about a world inhabited by humans — building up interventions around the basis of understanding how real people make choices.*

A resilient society can withstand big shocks and bounce back. During World War Two and the recent terrorist attack on the Tube, there was public

determination in Britain borne out of a feeling of a just war, and of not letting the terrorists win. The politicians and the public were aligned, and the attacks were not allowed to completely disrupt life. We proved resilient.

But our banks failed the test of the recent financial crisis. Almost all of them were bankrupted and had to be helped out by the government. We could afford the small risks but we didn't think about the big shocks. We now know that we should have been thinking about a much broader range of possible future outcomes and different institutions will need to be tested. It may be in areas where nothing much has

happened that the capacity to respond to really big shocks diminishes.

At the same time, I think what we do in public service as well as the way we set things up supports national resilience. For example, the financial crisis put many individuals in shock: through redundancy and becoming unemployed, with personal finances being depleted when people get sick and so on. So by helping people to get back to work, supporting them in the period when they haven't got any income and providing healthcare help when there's been a sudden accident, we are helping to build resilience in our society. 🙏

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#### NOTE

1. <http://hbr.org/2012/12/saving-economics-from-the-economists>

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# A New Paradigm for the Delivery of Public Services

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Public agencies looking to step up service delivery should invest in people-centred reforms and smarter data tools.

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BY  
**PANG KIN KEONG**

Pang Kin Keong is the Chairman of the Quality Service Committee (QSC). Within this Committee, he meets bi-monthly with a core group of Quality Service Managers (QSMs) from 27 public agencies to discuss service delivery matters pertaining to the development and promotion of effective service management practices across the Public Service.

Pang has been the Permanent Secretary (Transport) since July 2012. Before his current appointment, he served in various portfolios in the Public Service Division, Ministry of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Home Affairs. He was the Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister and Director, Internal Security Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, before his appointment as Permanent Secretary (Law) in 2010.

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REACH (Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home) saw a

**29%**

increase in feedback in 2012 compared to 2011, and overall, a **seven-fold** increase between 2006 and 2012.



LTA has reported an increase of almost

**25%**

per year in email volume from 2008 to 2011.



HDB today receives close to

**1 million**

calls and

**720,000**

written

correspondences per year, with the numbers looking set to increase further in 2013.

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a sharp escalation in public interaction with government agencies. Public agencies have experienced quantum jumps in feedback volumes and service requests.

The nature of feedback and expectations of government responses have also become more complex. This is in part because a better educated, better informed and more sophisticated citizenry have come to expect greater responsiveness, accountability and personalisation in services. They also expect public agencies to have more empathy and understanding of their individual needs.

All this calls for deep reflection on how the Public Service should improve — or where necessary

overhaul — its services. To be sure, we have achieved a high level of efficiency in service delivery to date, but the Public Service will need to re-examine its service paradigm, and consider how to evolve further to meet the changing needs of our people.

## Reframing Public Services:

### From Transactional to Relational

In 2011, the Public Service's Service Principles were expanded to include **People-Centricity**, **Shared Responsibility for Public Good**, and **Mutual Courtesy and Respect** in addition to CARE.<sup>1</sup> This was done in acknowledgement that our compact with the people is changing. It is no longer sufficient to provide transactional services alone.

## THE SERVICE PRINCIPLES FOR THE SINGAPORE PUBLIC SERVICE



Achieving the principles will require a shift towards a more relational form of governance. Apart from trying to understand our customers better and seeing things from their point of view, we also need to proactively look for well-rounded solutions that can better meet their needs.

### *People-Centricity*

Public agencies have sought to be more people-centred, by infusing citizen perspectives into policymaking and service design. The Ministry of Manpower and the Housing & Development Board, for example, studied how their counter services could be delivered with greater customisation and sensitivity to their customers. The Public Service Division (PSD) introduced the First Responder Protocol in 2012, complementing the No Wrong Door policy, to ensure that public requests and feedback are expediently addressed by Government as a whole, even if the right agency was not the first to be approached. This was particularly necessary for issues that do not fall neatly within a single agency's purview. Such initiatives reflect our desire to create convenience for our

people, and to make government services more useful from the perspective of the citizens and customers who use them.

### *Relationships and Mutuality: A Two-Way Street*

Is there a limit to how far the Public Service can go towards being people-centric? Public resources are finite: manpower and financial resources are already being stretched to cope with the increasing volume and complexity of requests. The fact is that government agencies will not be able to accede to every request.

While the Public Service strives to be more people-centric, it has also to ensure that Singapore remains well-governed, that our procedures are fair, and that no one gets short-changed because of undue attention to the demands of a few. A minority of customers can also be especially insistent, even unreasonable, with their demands, sometimes resorting to threats and verbal abuse of service staff, which is clearly unacceptable.

We are seeing more cases of abusive behaviour towards front-line service officers, with customers throwing tempers and threatening staff when their



The Animal Response Centre (ARC) under the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority and the Department of Public Cleanliness (DPC) under the National Environment Agency were both set up as single contact points to manage all animal and cleanliness issues respectively. Together, they eliminate the need for the public to navigate our bureaucracy to find out which agency had responsibility for different aspects of these two issues.

*While the Public Service strives to be more people-centric, it has also to ensure that Singapore remains well-governed, that our procedures are fair, and that no one gets short-changed because of undue attention to the demands of a few.*

## DRAWING A LINE FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

The South Australia State Government makes clear on its website and in letters the overriding consideration why penalties for traffic offences are strictly enforced, and emphasises this again when rejecting waiver appeals: speeding kills lives.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they emphasise that individuals are personally responsible for the safety of their fellow citizens, and draw a line against people's expectations to be excused for violations.

In the USA, the White House turned down a petition in November 2011 that asked for marijuana to be legalised and regulated in a manner similar to alcohol, notwithstanding the fact that the petition came with 75,000 signatures. This was decided on the consideration that use of marijuana is associated with addiction, respiratory disease and cognitive impairment, and would raise serious concerns about public health if the request was acceded to.<sup>2</sup>

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### NOTES

1. [http://dpti.sa.gov.au/roadsafety/safer\\_speeds/new\\_speeding\\_penalties](http://dpti.sa.gov.au/roadsafety/safer_speeds/new_speeding_penalties)
2. <http://www.drugfree.org/join-together/advocacy/white-house-turns-down-petition-to-legalize-marijuana>

requests are not granted. Where service interactions between public officers and customers become unproductive or abusive, it is necessary for us to halt interactions after appropriate service has been rendered.

PSD has developed guidelines on how agencies and officers may respond in such instances. This is to ensure that public resources can be freed up to serve other customers. We also need to protect our officers from unreasonable and abusive behaviour, and should not hesitate to take legal action against abusive behaviours where warranted.

Mutual courtesy and respect is fundamental for any constructive interaction. A relationship works best when there is respect and consideration for each other, coupled with the understanding that both parties are trying their best to achieve a common goal: in the case of public service, it is to arrive at the best possible outcome for both the customer and society.

### *Shared Responsibility and Community Ownership*

The Public Service works to ensure a progressive society in which our

citizens can thrive: a society aligned to the people's wishes and ideals. Our citizens and residents are a necessary and rich source of feedback and ideas. Some members of the public are able and willing to go even further and co-develop public initiatives for the greater good. This should be encouraged. Both Government and the people should be partners in the development of society — as is represented by the clasping of hands in the Service Principles motif — each bringing their own perspectives, experiences and expertise to bear. Citizens who have experienced our policies and services can often offer good answers to the problems we are trying to solve.

Agencies come some way in co-developing solutions with the people. However, the Public Service can do more to foster creative partnerships, where appropriate, in which the Government plays the role of facilitator — not just

regulator — by convening and clarifying public voices and choices in policy and service delivery.

### **Service Management in Public Sector Organisations**

Service excellence cannot be the sole responsibility of front-line departments but must involve all parts of an organisation, and be empowered by its leadership, in order to effect real and palpable change to the citizen experience. In general, public agencies seeking to transform their service delivery should consider four general areas of development.

#### *Service Leadership and Organisation Development*

Leadership is critical for public agencies to effect a strategic shift towards service excellence. Senior leaders are responsible for charting a people-centric vision, building a service-oriented culture,

## **PARTNERING THE COMMUNITY**

**O**n 31 January 2013, the National Library Board (NLB) opened its first community-supported Library@Chinatown at Chinatown Point Mall. The library is funded privately by donors and run almost completely by volunteers. The library works with various community groups to organise programmes for library-goers, and this results in programmes which are better tailored for the community and more pertinent to their interests.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) set up the Community Partnership Network (CPN) in 2007 to engage and co-create ideas with local communities on transport matters. The National Environment Agency (NEA) established a 3P Partnership Strategy to develop environmental programmes with the people and private sectors.

and for providing strong support for staff contributions to service, particularly the efforts of front-line officers. Leaders need to emphasise that service is an important priority for the organisation, and demonstrate this by devoting management attention and resources towards service design and delivery. Internal organisational health is also integral to service excellence. In Singapore, the Quality Service Managers of public agencies are appointed from the ranks of senior management so they have enough influence to drive a culture of service excellence and change.

#### *Integrated Sense-Making and Feedback Loop*

For better customer insight, agencies should develop robust Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and data systems that integrate feedback and data from different sources. These systems should allow the agency to analyse trends and test hypotheses. In order for the data to be sufficiently rich and meaningful, divisional boundaries may need to be broken down through the sharing of information and supporting cross-unit projects. Feedback and data analyses should also be systematically looped into policy reviews and service improvements, and be surfaced regularly for leadership attention and decision. Effective sense-making and feedback loops will allow agencies to achieve significant improvement in service

quality by enabling them to proactively identify and address customer needs.

#### *People-Centred Service Design*

Services should be designed with the customer experience in mind, and aligned to the needs and preferences of different customer segments. Part of service design includes simple and clear communication that facilitates understanding. Agencies should also make better use of technology (such as mobile applications, e-appointment systems, and automation of services) to create convenience for customers. These systems should be designed with intuitive interfaces that are easy to use and transact with. Where cases fall outside the scope of policy, there should be procedures to facilitate the handling and resolution of exceptions.

#### *Service Capabilities and Support*

Agencies should be prepared to make extensive investments in service capability building. Front-line officers and managers should be equipped with the skills, expertise and motivation for good service. Agencies should find ways to recognise their efforts, and to ensure the wellbeing of front-line staff. As the volume of customer transactions increases, operational practices can be improved to help balance the workload of these officers (such as through staggered deployment to better manage peak hour demand). Agencies should




*“One of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth doing is what we do for others.”*

*– Lewis Carroll*

also seek to broaden development opportunities for service staff, such as through rotations across organisational functions or creating service specialist progression tracks.

### **Conclusion**

As members of the Singapore Public Service, we should continue to strive to bring value to the people through the services we deliver. Nevertheless, bringing the new Service Principles to life in the next phase of service excellence will be challenging.

Public sector leaders will need to continually refresh their service strategy, and chart out the next leaps of progress they intend their agencies to achieve. Public officers at every level need to understand the role they play in their organisation’s overall service strategy, and take personal ownership for achieving service excellence in their own field of influence. Front-line officers are of particular importance in this effort, and their conviction to serve, despite today’s complex and demanding environment, should be appreciated. 

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#### **NOTE**

1. CARE stands for Courtesy, Accessibility, Responsiveness and Effectiveness.



INTERVIEW WITH LIM BOON CHYE & STEPHANIE NG

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## CPFB's iCARE Advantage

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Two senior managers from the Central Provident Fund Board discuss the strategic benefits of the agency's iCARE customer information system.

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BY  
**LIM BOON CHYE**

AND

**STEPHANIE NG**

Lim Boon Chye was Director of Accounts and Services Planning and the Quality Service Manager in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board. He is now Director, Policy Studies & Business Insight.

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As part of its research on innovative service delivery, the ETHOS editorial team met with Boon Chye and Stephanie in January 2013.

### **iCARE Offers a One-stop, Total View of Customer Relationships**

The iCARE project was started in 2006 to develop a single, complete, 360-degree view of our customers. We needed a common repository for all information pertaining to a customer, across our various schemes as well as service channels. So even if a customer came through our service counters one day, and the call centre the next, we would have a single, consistent and integrated view of their case history.

When a complaint is filed, we can track it and make sure it has been noted and followed up on. We track the number of transactions that our members have with us. If a member calls or visits a

service counter, the Customer Service Executives (CSEs) can leave a message on iCARE for backend officers, indicating that this particular customer needs to know some specific information and would like to be called back by a certain time. Everything is recorded.

iCARE empowers our CSEs to be more productive. In the past, they would probably have had to call the back office for customer information. Now they can use the integrated system in front of them, similar to how banks manage customer accounts. iCARE enables us to build a much better relationship with our customers, with better case management.

Given the standards of technology in the market today, customers now expect us, as a government agency, to have a good overview of their account details, and to keep track of all the contact they have had with the Central Provident Fund Board (CPF Board). They expect more personalisation of services, and to have relevant information delivered to them. In the past, some features might have been “nice to have”, but today, they have become critical to good service delivery.

The iCARE system helps us accomplish all these and more. We can keep track of key customer life stages, for example, if a customer is just starting work or buying a house. We can then use this information to push targeted information and services to them, or notify them when an application has been processed. If we know who you are, and know, say, that you’re reaching 55 years of age, we will be able to send you messages related to your imminent CPF withdrawal at 55. People who reach retirement age can become very anxious about their entitlements, what they need to do next and so on, so we want to offer information that would be relevant at that stage in life. Proactively delivering targeted information to customers also helps free up demand on call centres, because customers now know the status of their transactions without having to call us. Our officers can then focus on other cases that need their attention.

#### **iCARE Helps Collate Feedback and Service Trends**

In CPF Board, we track two types of feedback — service feedback and policy feedback — and these can also be captured by iCARE. For example, some of our top enquiries are about early withdrawal of CPF funds and the use of Medisave funds for healthcare. Although Medisave policies come under the Ministry of Health, we collate the relevant feedback and forward it to them. You would have noticed that over time they have relaxed their policies on the use of Medisave, for instance for outpatient treatment of long-term chronic diseases. The feedback they received from us, and from elsewhere, would have factored into their decisions. The same goes for feedback on the use of funds for housing, or withdrawal rules under the Ministry of Manpower and so on. The feedback we receive represents a ground feel, for which the CPF Board faces pressure from the public, so this is something we need to pass on to the policymaking ministries.

*In the past, some features might have been “nice to have”, but today, they have become critical to good service delivery.*

Sometimes we get good suggestions from the public. For instance, one member suggested that we should allow credit card transactions, which we didn’t in the

past. We explored it, and today we do allow credit card payments. Whatever the outcome, we always reply to those offering feedback. The member who suggested the use of credit cards was pleasantly surprised to hear back from us!

Currently, our feedback is sorted into quite broad categories. In future, we hope to have finer, more granular demarcations. We could potentially also sort out feedback according to customer demographics, such as by age group.

#### **iCARE Paves the Way for More Sophisticated Data Mining and Analytics**

Today, sites such as Amazon can already intelligently predict, based on your transactions, where your interests lie. We hope in future to employ this sort of data analytics in order to anticipate what our members might want and then pull out relevant initiatives or information for them, based on the rich data residing in iCARE.

*The key philosophy behind iCARE is that all relevant information must be captured by the system. It should not be a case where people choose what to include and what to leave out.*

CPF is at the heart of many key government policies from healthcare to housing, so patterns of CPF usage could be insightful to policymaking. In this regard,

it is important that key characteristics and attributes of members are kept up to date. A member's marital status, for example, is important in CPF's context since a marriage would invalidate any CPF nomination made prior to the member's marriage. Such status data is dynamic and can change, so the system will have to keep information up to date. Because timeliness is important in these matters, CPF links up with other government agencies instead of waiting for members to notify us — say of a marriage or a death, which would trigger changes to related CPF accounts.

Of course, the privacy of members' accounts is very important, and information from iCARE cannot be released without their consent, for example to banks. Confidential information (such as medical conditions or bankruptcy status) retained in members' accounts are also flagged for restricted viewing by authorised personnel only. So the data is captured, but appropriate clearance is needed to view the details.

Nevertheless, the key philosophy behind iCARE is that all relevant information must be captured by the system. It should not be a case where people choose what to include and what to leave out — the data would then be incomplete, which would compromise its value and integrity. Instead, we can restrict who has permission to view sensitive data.

### iCARE is Designed to be Well Used

The premise of iCARE is that all relevant information should be included in the system, so we can have a total view of customers. For a system like iCARE to be useful, everyone has to come on board and all the data has to be there. A system that is technically good but not well used is a white elephant, just like a knowledge management system where nobody puts in their fair share of knowledge. The people factor is more important than the system.


So how do we encourage people to use the system, and be willing to share new knowledge through the system? Strong management endorsement is a must. But the trick is also to make sure the system complements operations and actual work processes, to make it more worthwhile for staff to come on board. They have to feel that the system is of use to them and is part of their actual workflow, and not something extra they have to do. You have to show that the system actually helps make tasks easier, or reduces workload. For example, we helped staff slowly transit from the old Excel spreadsheets to the new system by giving them a system to upload their Excel files instead of re-entering the data. We put the point across that iCARE helps them keep track of customer cases automatically. It would even reduce the number of multiple calls on the same issue since the system already tracks and

records all customer activity, including previous correspondence with CPF. With iCARE, they don't have to do everything themselves. Even front-liners can resolve an issue before it gets to the back office.

We have tried to make the system user-friendly. We piloted the system with selected groups. We also held focus group sessions on an ongoing basis to understand where the new system's pain points were, and to understand their established ways of doing things.

As a system becomes better used and more successful, more people are willing to come on board, and a virtuous cycle of system usage develops. Today iCARE is deployed widely across CPF. Over the years, we have also made continual enhancements to make the system even easier to use and more productive for our staff.

*The people factor is more important than the system.*

Since its inception, iCARE, supported by our strong service culture instilled over several generations of leadership, has helped propel CPF in its service excellence journey. We believe it will be an important part of our future strategy to deliver more streamlined, integrated and relevant services for our members. 

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# MOM's Smarter Service Initiatives

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Customer demand and limited resources drive front-line and backend process redesign at the Ministry of Manpower.

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BY  
**ROSLYN TEN**

Roslyn Ten is Director of the Customer Responsiveness Department at the Ministry of Manpower, responsible for managing the ministry's service touch points, including its outsourced MOM Contact Centre, and building staff capability in service excellence. She is also the Ministry's Quality Service Manager. Mrs Ten has more than 30 years' experience in the public service, spanning labour relations, employment facilitation and work injury compensation.

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### A Tougher Operating Environment

Service delivery in the public sector has never been more challenging. As policies and procedures are introduced or refined to meet the evolving needs of Singaporeans and industry, the administrative burden can become ever more complex, and ever more difficult for those affected to understand and comply with.

At the same time, the public has become much more demanding about the quality of our service delivery, and more critical of the rationale and effectiveness of government policies and processes. They expect more empathy and more personalisation when public agencies address their needs. Customers also tend to be more persistent and often demand that issues be escalated to senior management, even if their requests may be unreasonable.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM), being responsible for a broad range of manpower issues that impact businesses and workers, has not been exempt from the challenges facing many public service organisations today. Workload across all MOM touch points has increased substantially, particularly since the 2011 General Elections, which saw a spike in customer volume.<sup>1</sup>

### Re-engineering Service Delivery

Given the increasing number of customer visits, MOM has had to rethink its approach to service delivery. This includes a re-design of its service touch

points, including the MOM Services Centre (which handles the public in person) and the MOM Contact Centre (which handles calls and emails from the public), to better cope with the increase in the number and complexity of issues they deal with.

Such service re-design efforts include:

- *Deploying better educated officers to front-line work to resolve issues*

While the service desks have traditionally been manned by corporate support officers, MOM has progressively moved the service staff profile to management support officers and management executives with graduate and higher qualifications. They are now better able to handle more complicated issues without having to escalate most cases.

- *Shifting customers to an appointment-based system*

The Appointment@MOM system has been expanded to cover all advisory and work pass card registration related services. By shifting customers from walk-in to scheduled, appointment-based services, MOM officers can better manage customer flow and devote appropriate attention and time to addressing more complex cases. Customers can also be served at their appointment time and no longer need to wait in queue.



## APPLYING BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TO SERVICE DESIGN

**B**ehavioural insights (BI) draw on research in the fields of behavioural economics and psychology to encourage, support and enable people to make better choices. These techniques have been used by governments such as the UK to “nudge” people towards desired outcomes.

MOM has begun exploring how BI could be applied towards its business goals, such as to achieve higher compliance with regulations as well as to direct customers to use appropriate channels for different services. For example, BI could be useful in reducing the number of customers who insist on calling the Ministry’s hotline or even visiting its services centre just to check the status of applications or appeals, despite being aware of service timeframes and the fact that they will be informed of outcomes in due course.

- *Expanding online services*  
Simple, straightforward transactions have been moved to online platforms (e.g. e-services such as Work Permit Online, Employment Pass Online, Check Worker Training Records), freeing up the service counters to handle the issues that require bespoke attention.
- *Improving iFAQ (Ask MOM) as a viable self-help service channel*  
Ask MOM, the online FAQ portal, allows free text queries and features “Most Asked” questions, “Trending Questions” and FAQs grouped by categories. This self-service channel addresses the most common issues that users may face.
- *Revamping the MOM Contact Centre*  
To better manage complex calls and emails, the MOM Contact Centre (MOM CC) now operates on a two-tier model of service. The first tier is fully outsourced and handles simple enquiries. The second tier comprises experienced staff who can handle more difficult cases, with support from MOM officers. This two-tier approach helps MOM allocate its in-house expertise to the cases that need the most attention, and to better manage the overall quality of services rendered.

### Using Smarter Systems

Improvements to service delivery touch points alone will not give MOM the edge it needs to manage its growing service demands. MOM has also developed



richer data systems in order to gain a much better view — both at the macro and micro levels — of its interactions with customers.

MOM's new Customer Relationship Management system, CaRe@Mom, provides a 360-degree view of all customers' interactions (such as their past and current enquiries, or case-specific matters) with the Ministry. Used extensively by both front-line and back-room case-management officers, it helps MOM to monitor and track interactions with customers, to ensure timely resolution of issues as well as consistency and accuracy in service delivery. CaRe@Mom also supports the reporting and trending of customer

issues; it allows for customer surveys, so that MOM can analyse customer satisfaction at the various touch points and gather meaningful feedback for service improvement.

*Improvements to service delivery touch points alone will not give the edge needed to manage growing service demands.*

Tapping on the wealth of data it collects, MOM has structured CaRe@Mom to provide useful indication on areas of concern and recurrent issues. Analytical tools (including non-numerical textual analysis) are used to

## CULTIVATING PROFESSIONAL EMPATHY

**B**efore the introduction of a policy mandating a rest day for Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs),<sup>1</sup> time was set aside for the policy officers to consult front-line staff on possible service issues that might arise as an outcome of the change.

Experienced customer service officers helped to fine-tune policy FAQs to be more relevant to both FDWs and their employers. Front-line staff were also primed to address public queries after the policy announcement.

Subsequent feedback from the front-line helped MOM plan education and outreach programmes that target gaps in the public's understanding of the new regulations.

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### NOTE

1. <http://www.mom.gov.sg/Documents/foreign-manpower/FAQs%20on%20weekly%20rest%20days%20for%20FDWs.pdf>

## SERVICE COMMITMENT AND SERVICE DIFFERENTIATION

In response to the greater volume of customers and higher public expectations, MOM has more clearly articulated its service commitment. This helps to establish mutual expectations for service behaviour, optimise the use of limited manpower resources and protect staff from abuse.

### Service Differentiation Framework

With limited manpower resources, MOM had to focus its service strategy and re-calibrate internal guidelines to prioritise customers with genuine and critical needs. A service differentiation framework was developed, making it clear that the Ministry would not deal with anonymous parties or those who persisted with unconstructive or abusive feedback. Guidelines were also developed to help departments improve their tone and empathy when replying to customers.

### Service Commitment

To better implement and express the service differentiation framework, the Quality Service Management team did an extensive study of the service charters of private and public organisations both locally and overseas. MOM's Customer Responsiveness policy (known as

its "Service Commitment") was developed with a clear message on what is expected of customers transacting with MOM — such as compliance with rules and regulations, and behaving in a professional and civil manner.

### Service Charter

To address an increased number of abusive customers and to protect its front-line staff more effectively, MOM revamped its service charter (displayed prominently wherever its front-line staff serve customers). In the past, the Charter stated that MOM would not hesitate to take legal action against abusive customers (though it rarely did). Now, MOM makes it clear that its officers will not serve those who are abusive. Such customers would therefore feel the immediate impact of service denial; this also helps to safeguard front-line staff.

MOM's new Service Charter now reads:

*"We know your issues are important. Our officers want to serve you well and give you our attention and respect. Likewise, we would be greatly motivated when you return the mutual understanding and respect."*

*"We want to provide a conducive and safe environment for our customers and staff. We will not serve any person who is abusive, offensive or threatening in language or behaviour."*

help make sense of customer feedback on specific issues. Officers with a deeper understanding of MOM's broad range of interrelated business processes have also been able to spot relevant trends or anomalies in the data, leading to more incisive insights and innovative, practical solutions that enhance overall service delivery.

For example, instances of employers failing to pay their foreign worker levies on time may indicate that the firms in question are cash-strapped and may also have difficulty paying salaries to their employees. In such cases, MOM could initiate early intervention measures — for instance, by stopping them from bringing in more foreign workers — hence pre-empting issues which may affect the interests of workers downstream (such as salary payment arrears).

### **Tighter Integration Upstream**

Policies that are well designed and easily understood enhance public compliance and minimise enquiries through emails and calls downstream at MOM's service touch points. MOM has therefore sought to integrate insights from front-line service operations with policy formulation upstream. Its One-MOM Policy-to-Operation process is applied ministry-wide, and consists of four stages: Sensing and Agenda Setting, Policy Formulation, Policy Implementation, and Policy Review.

Operating front-line departments and public-facing statutory boards

are consulted at an early stage during policy formulation, so that policies can be designed and implemented in an effective, customer-centric manner. Policy and line departments keep these front-line customer-facing departments well-informed ahead of planned policy and procedural changes that have customer impact. This ensures sufficient lead time to plan for the changes, including the crafting of timely and relevant Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to address customer enquiries that may arise after policy announcements. After policy deployment, feedback and insights are gathered from front-line departments and discussed at ministry-wide platforms such as Joint-Ops and Foreign Manpower Planning into Operations meetings. This allows front-line departments to help improve FAQs and suggest ways in which policy or process changes can be better communicated or delivered to aid public understanding and compliance.

### **Looking to the Future:**

#### **Opportunities and Challenges**

MOM continues to review and explore other initiatives and opportunities for service improvement. Some areas that it is working on include:

- Ensuring that MOM **has the right level of staffing, and with the right profile of skills**. This is key to effective service delivery. MOM believes that front-line officers are

in demand across the rest of the organisation because of their service experience, and have thus not locked them into a specialist track for front-line service. However, in order to meet the demands of increasingly complex public interaction, the challenge is to balance and retain business knowledge and experience in customer service, while providing for these officers' aspirations in terms of career development and progression.

- Reviewing the entire customer handling process at the MOM Services Centre, to **better differentiate walk-in customers from those who make enquiries on case-specific issues**. By offering alternatives for customers to either self-help or be moved to an appointment-based process, MOM hopes to better regulate the flow of customer visits, thereby ensuring that each case can be given its appropriate attention, without overwhelming staff with heavy customer flow during peak periods.
- Deepening its capabilities to **leverage data analysis**, in order to better harvest the wealth of customer interaction information collected by CaRe@Mom across the various service touch points. Making better sense of this data on what MOM customers are

saying and doing will translate into improved policies, processes and service delivery.


While MOM continues to transform and improve its service delivery to meet customer expectations, it is also mindful that there are limits. First, while IT and automation play a large part in many service transformational efforts, IT-enabled improvements do not necessarily translate into manpower cost savings. Instead, it allows the agency to add value and provide more complex, personalised advisory services. Automation may in fact mean an increase in the resources that are needed (such as having more qualified staff to handle residual services which take up a longer time per interaction) because the straightforward transactions have already been migrated to online and other self-help platforms. New service needs and opportunities that subsequently open up may also require manpower resources to fulfill.

*The hard truth is that better service delivery does not necessarily mean happier customers.*

Second, MOM believes that “you can outsource the service, but you can’t outsource the problem”; it seeks to remain fully accountable for the full range of services under its mandate,

since these services have an impact on the public no matter who delivers them. This means that the customer experience for services that are not rendered directly by MOM, but by external service providers (such as the commissioned MOM Contact Centre), should also be well designed, delivered, and monitored.

Finally, the hard truth is that better service delivery does not necessarily mean happier customers. Often, citizens are responding to the impact of policies rather than the service standards of the agency. Chasing compliments will only take a service organisation so far, and in fact risks becoming counter-productive after a point.

Customer satisfaction is ultimately limited as an indicator of the work done by public sector organisations. The value proposition of a public service agency is often based on less tangible and quantifiable outcomes such as citizen trust, empathy, policy effectiveness, and the prevention of crises or other public problems down the road. Hence, conventional efficiency-based KPIs may not be as relevant as they might be in a profit-making private sector organisation, and could in fact drive the wrong processes and behaviour. This begs the deeper question: How can we best assess the value and performance of public service delivery in this brave new future? 

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTE

1. There was a substantial increase in customer volume after the 2011 General Election. For instance, the workload for the MOM Quality Service Management team alone almost tripled from the low 200s to more than 500 cases per day via email and phone. This spike may be due to several factors, including the tightening of immigration and foreign worker policies, redirected cases, and a greater willingness by the public to come forward with feedback.

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# Randomised Controlled Trials in Policymaking

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Controlled trials can bring rigour to the process of determining what works — and what does not — in public policy.

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BY

**DO HOANG VAN  
KHANH**

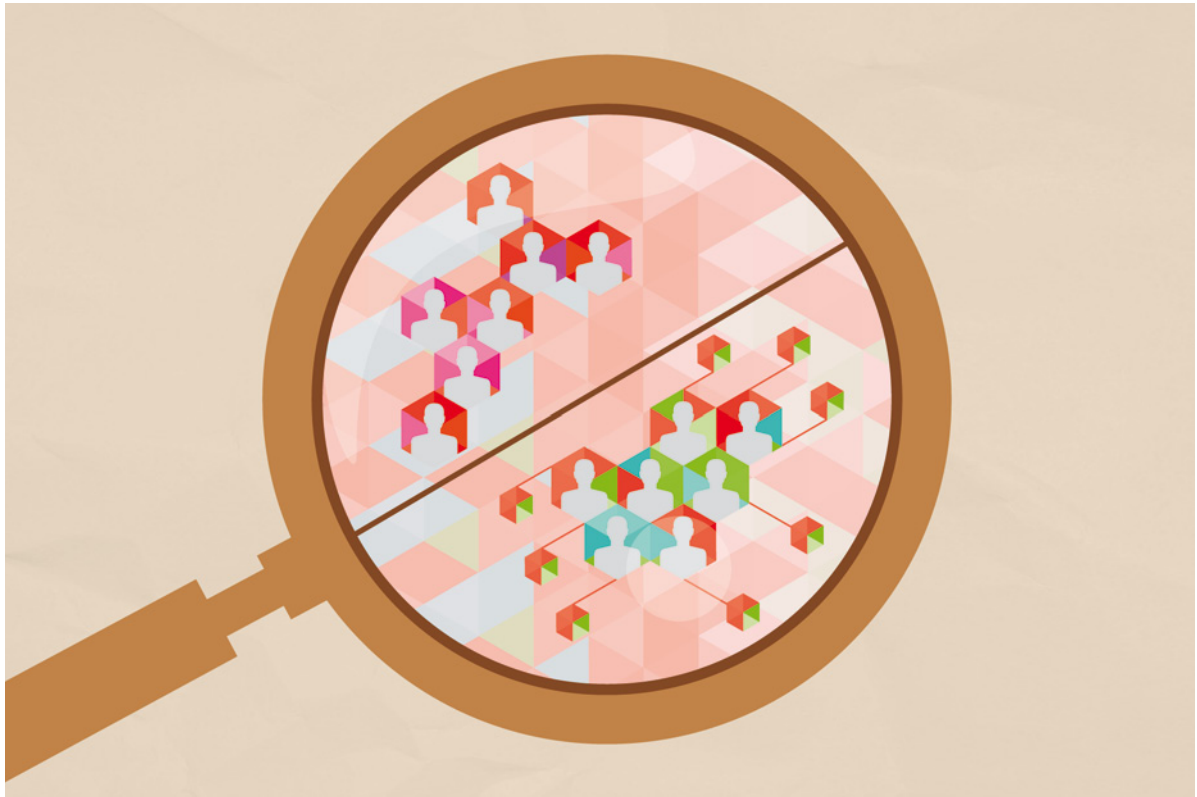
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AND

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## Introduction

There is no doubt that public policy should rely on evidence to ascertain whether intervention is likely to work. Historically however, many policy decisions have been dominated by values, interests, timing and circumstances — political realities, in short.<sup>1</sup>

Proponents of a more evidence-based approach argue for the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in public policymaking. They have long been used in healthcare research design: people are selected randomly to receive either the intervention being tested or the standard intervention (as a control group), so that on average all possible causes are evened out across different groups. Today, most new drugs and medical treatments are required to pass an RCT showing that they are more effective than existing medicines before they are cleared for prescription.

In recent years, RCTs have increased in prominence, with Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo pioneering the use of RCTs in development economics.<sup>2</sup> Their work, and that of others in related fields, has raised the prospect of RCTs as a means to help policymakers find realistic answers to questions at hand. Policymakers can be better prepared and informed when implementing a new policy intervention, or when evaluating and refining current interventions.

Yet policymaking worldwide — including in Singapore — has yet to enjoy such systematic rigour. Inertia,

cognitive bias and ideology often prevent proper randomised trials from taking place. In addition, there are ground issues with RCTs such as ethical concerns and administrative costs that further impede running trials.

## How Do We Find Out What Works? Run a Trial

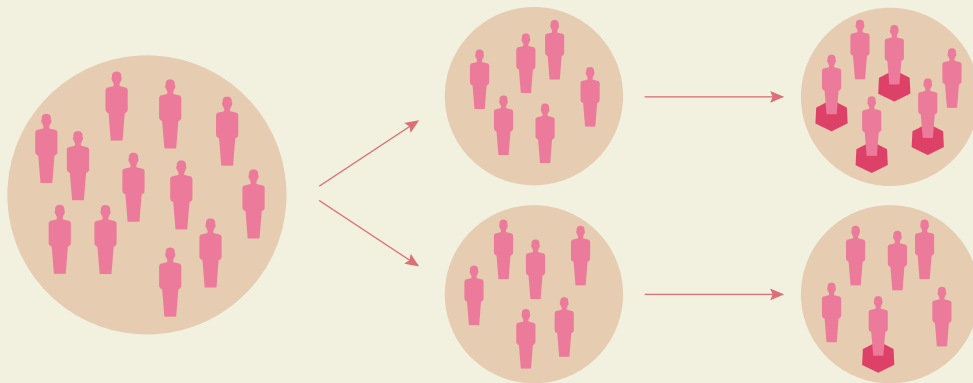
RCTs can play an important role in the rigorous evaluation of how policies actually work in practice. First, theory is often ambiguous on the effects of policy intervention. For example, wage supplements for low-wage earners can result in either more (substitution effect) or less (income effect) working hours. Thus, trials can help shed light on the overall effect of policy interventions. Second, even if the overall direction of a policy effect is known, it is still important to assess the magnitude of its impact. Third, trials can help discover unintended consequences of policy interventions.

In Singapore, a trial conducted by the Ministry of Social and Family Development on the impact of selected activities on active ageing found that adults engaged in some activities had stronger social engagement than the control group. While this may seem rather intuitive, the RCT also provided a way to quantify the extent to which these programmes have actually improved the overall wellbeing of elders. This helps policymakers decide where and how much resources should be channelled,

## HOW A RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIAL WORKS

**R**unning a trial involves splitting the study sample into two groups by random lot, one of which (control group) will get the standard

intervention, while the other (treatment group) will get the new intervention.



Determine the trial sample

Split sample into  
two groups randomly

Evaluate effect of policy  
intervention between control  
and treatment groups

This allows for a more robust and transparent comparison of how effective a new intervention is, compared to doing without it.

In addition, when individuals are assigned randomly and the sample size is large enough,

the control and treatment groups can be expected to have the same characteristics. This eliminates the possibility of external factors (e.g. bias in the sample group) that could affect the results.

and what policy refinements could be made to achieve the desired outcomes. In other cases, RCTs have also revealed which aspects of a policy have the greatest effect towards desired outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Trials have also helped uncover false interventions that were believed

to be effective. The “Scared Straight” programme in the US was intended to deter juvenile delinquents and at-risk children from criminal behaviour, by exposing them to the realities of a life of crime through interactions with serious criminals in custody. The programme



was designed on the assumption that these children would be less likely to engage in criminal behaviour if made aware of the serious consequences. A trial run of the programme showed otherwise: the intervention, in fact, led to higher rates of offending behaviour, while costing the taxpayers a significant amount of money.<sup>4</sup>

### Obstacles in Conducting RCTs and Overcoming Them

Despite the merits of RCTs, it is generally acknowledged that governments are not making the most of their potential in the policymaking process. Many attribute this to the persistence of ideologies,

political priorities or habit. There are, however, other real obstacles to running reliable trials, including ethical concerns, administrative challenges of running a randomised trial, institutional capacity and problems of external validity.

**Ethical concerns** seem to be among the most common obstacles. Many people believe that it is unethical and unfair to withhold a new intervention from people (e.g. the control group) who could benefit from it, even for the purposes of a trial. This is particularly the case where additional money is being spent on programmes that might improve the health, wealth or education of one group. In The Tennessee Study of Class Size

## THE IMPACT OF PROGRESA ON HEALTH IN MEXICO

**P**ROGRESA combines a traditional cash transfer programme with financial incentives for families to invest in human capital of children (health, education and nutrition).<sup>1</sup> In order to receive the cash transfer, families must obtain preventive healthcare and participate in growth monitoring and nutrition supplements programmes.

Approximately 10% (506) of the 50,000 PROGRESA communities were chosen to participate in trials. These communities were randomly assigned to either a treatment group that would receive PROGRESA benefits immediately or a control group that would be given the benefits two years later. The trials showed that the utilisation of public health clinics increased faster in PROGRESA villages than in control areas, with significant improvements in the health of both adult and child beneficiaries.

### NOTE

1. GarGertler, Paul and Boyce, Simone. "An Experiment in Incentive-Based Welfare: The Impact of PROGRESA on Health in Mexico". University of California, Berkeley, 2001. [http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/gertler/working\\_papers/PROGRESA%204-01.pdf](http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/gertler/working_papers/PROGRESA%204-01.pdf)

## MODULAR CURRICULUM FOR CHINESE LANGUAGE IN SINGAPORE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

In line with recommendations made by the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee, a modular Chinese Language curriculum was piloted at 25 schools in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Various aspects of the new curriculum including the modular structure, pedagogical approaches, textbook and activity book, instructional resources and students' learning outcomes were studied.

Outcomes in terms of teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning from pilot and non-pilot schools were compared. The pilot schools yielded encouraging results and indicated that the curriculum objectives were largely achieved. By the end of 2006, the new curriculum for Primary 1 and 2 was ready for implementation in 2007.

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### NOTE

1. "New Chinese Language Curriculum Ready for Implementation at Primary 1 and 2 Levels in 2007". Ministry of Education, Singapore press release. Singapore: November 15, 2006.

in the Early School Grades, researchers faced objections from parents to the variation in the treatment of children.<sup>5</sup>

In light of these ethical issues, policies that are planned to be rolled out slowly and on a staggered basis present ideal opportunities for public policy experimentation. A very large scale RCT on the effectiveness of the conditional cash transfer programme in Mexico was conducted on the basis of budgetary and administrative constraints, which meant that the programme could not be extended to all eligible communities at the same time. In phases staggered across a two-year period, treatment and control groups were randomly assigned, allowing for

robust randomised evaluation of the programme (see story on "The Impact of PROGRESA on Health in Mexico").

In Singapore, the Ministry of Education conducted a trial of the new Chinese Language Curriculum in 2006 for Primary 1 and 2 levels. Instead of a full roll-out to all schools, 25 pilot schools were selected to represent an even spread of school types and students' home language profiles, so that a better estimate of the effects of the new curriculum could be made (see story on "Modular Curriculum for Chinese Language in Singapore Primary Schools").

One natural opportunity for RCT is when current policy gives rise to

## DEMONSTRATING THE IMPACT OF TEXT MESSAGING ON FINE REPAYMENTS IN THE UK

The Courts Service and the Behavioural Insights Team carried out two trials to test whether sending text messages to people who had failed to pay their court fines would encourage them to pay prior to a bailiff being sent to their homes.<sup>1</sup> The individuals in the initial trial were randomly allocated to five groups. The control group was not sent any message, while the other intervention groups were sent either a standard text or a more personalised message (with the name of the recipient, amount owed or both). The trial showed that text message prompts yield far better payment rates compared to no text prompts.

A second trial was conducted to determine the aspects of personalised messages that were key to increasing payment rates. It ascertained that not only were people more likely to make a payment if they received a text message with their name, but the average value of fine repayments went up by over 30%. This amounted to an additional annual recovery of over £3 million in fines, and eliminating the need for up to 150,000 bailiff interventions annually.

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### NOTE

1. Laura Haynes, Owain Service, Ben Goldacre and David Torgerson. *Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials* (UK: Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team, 2012).

exogenous changes. A study done by Angrist and Lavy<sup>6</sup> on the impact of class size took advantage of such a situation. In Israel, schools must open an additional class when they reach a certain maximum number of students per class. Termed the “Maimonides rule”, this resulted in a credible source of exogenous variation for class size research, allowing researchers to conduct RCTs on the impact of class sizes on scholastic achievement, with less concern about ethics or fairness.

Another limitation of RCT adoption is that **randomisation can be expensive**

**and administratively challenging.** On the ground, complete randomisation is often extremely costly to administer, and may be impossible if the policy has already been rolled out. This is a significant reason why RCTs are often substituted by simple experiments or pilots within a community or locality, even though they lack rigour and reliability and are prone to selection bias. Voluntary participation can exaggerate or distort observed effects because volunteers may be more experienced or more motivated than those who refuse to participate. Policy interventions borne out of

studies based on highly self-selective samples can go awry because they do not present a realistic picture of how the intervention will work.

High costs can be overcome. For instance, experiments could be carried out on current policy and outcome data already being collected from routine monitoring systems (whether administrative or survey data). To illustrate: the UK Courts Service and the Behavioural Insights Team wanted to test whether sending text messages to people who had failed to pay their court fines would encourage them to pay prior to a bailiff being sent to their homes (see story on “The Impact of Text Messaging on Fine Repayments in the UK”). The trials were conducted at very low cost as the outcome data was already being collected by the Courts Service, and the only cost was the time taken for the team to design and set up the trial.

### *Voluntary participation can exaggerate or distort observed effects.*

Apart from costs, policymakers often also **need to undertake longer-term studies** to understand the effects of a policy intervention over time. This poses administrative and logistical challenges (e.g. ensuring participant follow-up). As time goes by, response rates may fall, leading to higher attrition rates, and the probability of contamination (control group having

access to the equivalent programme) increases. Trials examining long-term effects of policies therefore need to be carefully planned and mindful of these possible obstacles.<sup>7</sup>

In situations where randomisation may not be possible, it may still be useful to find alternative ways to randomise the recipients for the purposes of analysis. Researchers evaluating Singapore’s Work Support Programme (WSP) were unable to randomise the selection of recipients into the programme because it had already been implemented. Instead, they randomised the receipt of different versions of the programme (i.e., variations in the amount and duration of assistance) so that the effects of differences in amount and duration of assistance could be reliably tested. This could still provide further insight into “what matters” when WSP recipients try to attain financial independence, sustained employment and earnings.<sup>8</sup> In other cases where randomisation is not feasible or the best approach, there are evidence-based tools of similar rigour that might be explored; quasi-experimental research designs that could substitute for RCTs include matched subjects design<sup>9</sup> and regression discontinuity design.<sup>10</sup>

RCTs also require **sufficient institutional capacity**. In a speech on evidence-based policymaking, Gary Banks (Chairman of the Australian Productivity Commission) argued that “any agency that is serious about

encouraging an evidence-based approach needs to develop a ‘research culture’”.<sup>11</sup> Nurturing such a culture would involve a range of elements, from establishing evaluation units and achieving a critical mass of researchers to strengthening links with academics, research bodies and institutions working in the field. Such holistic commitment could prove challenging amidst competing priorities and demands on resources in government.

**RCTs also suffer from problems of external validity.** It is unclear whether the findings from one specific trial can be carried over to another economic and social context. When scaled up, a policy may generate effects that were not picked up in a smaller trial: the local impact of a policy may not be the same as when it is more broadly applied. For example, smaller class sizes may improve learning outcomes in a trial. But when all schools reduce class sizes, there will be an increased demand for teachers. This can cause a change in teaching quality, which may not be accounted for in the trial.

Furthermore, the context of an evaluation (place, time, participants, norms and implementer) may influence the final outcome of the trial. However, these evaluations could still inform decisions on whether or not to implement new policies. They should also encourage governments to replicate the trial in their own countries to verify the results.<sup>12</sup>


At any rate, the external validity problem is not unique to RCTs — it

affects any evaluation derived from studying a policy in a specific context, and is a general problem that remains to be addressed in the social sciences.

## Conclusion

Beyond being a powerful tool to evaluate single policy interventions, it is useful to think of RCTs as part of a continuous process of policy innovation and improvement. Trial findings can be built upon to identify new ways of improving outcomes, especially when trials are used to identify which aspect of a policy produces the greatest impact.

In Singapore, government agencies embarking on new programmes recognise the value of RCTs, as evidenced by nascent efforts to conduct trials on new policy interventions. We are not spared from the challenges faced in conducting RCTs, and in some cases, conducting an RCT at the policy level may not even be feasible.

However, there are ways to make the best of the situation and data on hand, such as by looking for alternative ways to randomise, or by using other tools of similar rigour. This is far better than settling for a pilot that is conducted on a self-selective sample based on vicinity or other factors of convenience. Without evidence and robust ways to test the outcomes of interventions, policymakers can only rely on intuition, ideology and inherited wisdom, risking good intentions that produce disappointing or unintended outcomes.<sup>13</sup> 

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## NOTES

1. Gary Banks, "Evidence-Based Policy-Making: What is it? How do we get it?" ANZSOG/ANU Public Lecture Series, Canberra, Australia, February 4, 2009.
2. Taking the lead with their work at the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), Banerjee and Duflo have identified new aspects of the behaviour and needs of the poor, including the way financial assistance impacts their lives. They have also debunked certain presumptions — that microfinance is a cure all, that schooling equals learning and that increasing immunisation rates among the poor is costly. See: Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York City: Persus Book Group, 2011).
3. In 2006, the then-Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) embarked on a seven-year study of families placed under the Work Support Programme (WSP) in 2009. The study includes a randomised trial of WSP recipients to understand how differences in the duration and quantum of assistance may affect their capability for self-reliance.
4. Laura Haynes, Owain Service, Ben Goldacre and David Torgerson, *Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials* (UK: Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team, 2012).
5. Frederick Mosteller, "The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades", *The Future of Children* 5(1995): 113–127.
6. Joshua D. Angrist and Victor Lavy, "Using Maimonides' Rule to Estimate the Effect of Class Size on Scholastic Achievement", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114(1999): 533–575.
7. Researchers undertaking the longitudinal study to evaluate Singapore's Work Support Programme put in place measures to minimise attrition, such as requesting contact information of three people closest to the respondent to increase contact points, and providing a token for participation as an incentive to keep respondents in the study.  
See: I. Y. Ng, H. K. W. Ho, T. Nesamani, A. Lee and N.T. Liang, "Designing and Implementing an Evaluation of a National Work Support Programme", *Evaluation and Program Planning* 35(2011): 78–87, doi: 10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2011.07.002.
8. Ng, I. Y. H, K. W. Ho, T. Nesamani, A. Lee and N.T. Liang. "Designing and Implementing an Evaluation of a National Work Support Programme". *Evaluation and Program Planning* 35(2011): 78–87. doi: 10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2011.07.002.
9. For more information on Matched Subjects Design, visit <http://www.education.com/study-help/article/matched-pairs-design-comparing-treatment/?page=2> and [http://www.une.edu.au/WebStat/unit\\_materials/c6\\_common\\_statistical\\_tests/special\\_matched\\_samples.html](http://www.une.edu.au/WebStat/unit_materials/c6_common_statistical_tests/special_matched_samples.html)
10. For more information on Regression Discontinuity Design, visit <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14723.pdf>, <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/quasird.php> and <http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/Blogs/EITM/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/RD-Lecture.pdf>
11. See Endnote 1.
12. Adrien Bouguen and Marc Gurgand, "Randomised Controlled Experiments in Education", *European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE) Analytical Report*, no. 11 (February 2012).
13. As Duflo candidly puts it in an interview, RCTs are good news "for people who don't have a hugely strong view about how anything in particular should work and are willing to apply that mindset but are willing to be proven wrong by the data... By measuring well and showing what the effects are, you get these kinds of realistic answers. When you don't measure you can always claim something big. From Tim Ogden, "An Interview with Banerjee and Duflo, Part 4", *Philanthropy Action* (July 13, 2011), [http://www.philanthropyaction.com/articles/an\\_interview\\_with\\_banerjee\\_and\\_duflo\\_part\\_4](http://www.philanthropyaction.com/articles/an_interview_with_banerjee_and_duflo_part_4)



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# Governance Through Adaptive Urban Platforms: The INSINC Experiment

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Cloud and mobile technology meet big data and behavioural economics in LTA's public transport experiment.

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BY  
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Technology companies such as Google, Amazon and Facebook are redefining “customer service”. Every search we make on Google, every book we browse on Amazon, every Facebook post we “Like” or share is stored and analysed to build a customer profile. They predict customer likes and dislikes with uncanny accuracy. Google is able to find the information users are looking for in context. Amazon suggests books that we would enjoy reading. Facebook recommends long-lost primary schoolmates as friends.

These companies are able to do so because they build their services on top of a *platform*, by which we mean a collection of technologies that support multiple applications. It is interesting to note that the platforms of Google, Amazon and Facebook are all converging technologically while offering a range of different services, from search, online shopping and social networking to video sharing, document sharing, and cloud computing. They seek to expand their user base and increase the number of user interactions on their platforms, because doing so increases their database, which in turn enables them to serve more customers better and improve their bottom lines. Their business model is “One Customer; One Platform; Many Services”.

Like Google’s consumers, citizens also interact with government services regularly, in a variety of ways and in

great numbers. Governments are in an enviable position given the breadth of services they offer and the depth of detailed personal data they can collect about their customers: births, deaths and travel movements, income, medical records, educational qualifications, the usage of water and electricity from individuals to households and commercial entities. Unlike Google, however, governments usually offer each service on separate platforms, i.e., they are not integrated. There may be sound regulatory or other reasons for this separation, but it can prevent governments from leveraging data the way Google does in order to serve the public better.

*Governments are in an enviable position to offer integrated, personalised and real-time services based on the breadth and depth of citizen data they can obtain.*

Fortunately, governments around the world are fast catching up to these opportunities, and are integrating their services into unified platforms. An increasing number of cities, such as Chicago,<sup>1</sup> are pursuing predictive analytics platforms that warehouse all



## INTEGRATED SERVICE PLATFORMS IN BOSTON AND NEW YORK

**B**oston's BUMP<sup>1</sup> platform allows a citizen to post “glitches” that need fixing; e.g., potholes, broken hydrants, faulty lighting, bad taxi service. This helps authorities to target areas that require the most attention. For example, if data analysis finds that 20% of the potholes in Boston are found to make up 80% of the complaints, the public works department can prioritise the potholes that attract the most complaints for repair.

Similarly, New York's Office of Policy and Strategic Planning has used public data on carting service licenses to track down illegal dumpers of grease.<sup>2</sup>

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### NOTES

1. <http://www.cityofboston.gov/internships/BUMP.asp>

2. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/nyregion/mayor-bloombergs-geek-squad.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/nyregion/mayor-bloombergs-geek-squad.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

the data collected by municipal agencies. Policy Exchange, a conservative think tank in the United Kingdom,<sup>2</sup> called on the British Government to set up an analytics capability in the Cabinet Office “to identify big data opportunities and help departments to realise them”.

Such platforms remain largely *passive and non-real time*, because the data collected by the platform is analysed by public agencies periodically offline. They do not involve the user in a real-time feedback loop. *Adaptive* platforms, however, feature a tight feedback loop between the platform and the user. Google Maps, for example, adaptively directs users to travel on routes with minimal congestion and hence travel time, based on data from central databases as

well as the real-time locations of other smartphones on the map.

There are three elements to an adaptive platform:

- First, they **mine** the data across a large user base;
- Second, they provide valuable **feedback** to the users; and
- Third, they **affect the state** of the system by nudging users to adjust their behaviour in response to feedback.

### INSINC: Singapore's Adaptive Platform for Public Transport

Singapore has been experimenting with an adaptive platform based on

## HOW INSINC WORKS

INSINC is best described as a frequent commuter programme, similar to an airline miles programme. Its main goal is to shift commuters from peak to off-peak trains.

### Signing up, Winning Rewards, Inviting Friends

A commuter registers and sets up his INSINC account using the unique identification number of his fare card. Trips made using this card earn credits proportional to the distance travelled, *with extra credits for off-peak trips*. The credits earned by a commuter are redeemable either at a fixed exchange rate, or for prizes ranging from \$1 to \$200 in a fun online game — essentially a “self-administered raffle”. This leverages behavioural economics — the general preference of people for a \$100 prize at 1% odds over a \$1 prize — to induce a larger shift, which in turn improves cost efficiency.

There is a strong social element to INSINC. Participants may invite their friends to join from social networks and email services (Facebook, Gmail, Yahoo! mail, etc.), and they earn bonus credits when their friends sign up. Friends are displayed on a participant’s INSINC page in a “ranking list” style: off-peak commuting friends on top, followed by others.



### Personalised Recommendations via the Magic Box

Every Friday at 10am Singapore time, commuters receive a “magic box offer”, which is an offer of extra rewards should they achieve behaviour targets the following week. For example, a commuter travelling consistently in the peak hour may receive extra credits for off-peak travel the following week, while a different commuter may earn extra credits for inviting friends; yet another commuter may get extra credits for answering a few survey questions.

Such personalised offers allow administrators to understand a participant’s utility function: i.e., a commuter’s willingness to exhibit a particular behaviour, measured in monetary terms.

## APPLYING INCENTIVES IN A PRINCIPLED WAY

The Stanford Center for Societal Networks<sup>1</sup> has been running a series of projects to study the effect of incentives as a way to nudge people to change their behaviour. Their research has uncovered several insights:

- Receiving money is more motivating than avoiding charges — carrots work better than sticks.
- When the stakes are small, a random reward is more appealing than a deterministic reward of the same expected value — a fact underlying lottery systems. Games are an intuitively pleasing, fun and engaging way of conducting lotteries.
- Humans are social animals. Viral adoption, peer comparison and collective spirit are all powerful motivators.
- Fine-grained measurement and data mining allow desired behaviours to be targeted and rewarded precisely. It allows offers to be personalised to users, depending on the negative externality of their behaviour on system efficiency.

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### NOTE

1. <http://scsn.stanford.edu/research.php>

the public Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) rail network. The platform is known as INSINC, which stands for “Incentives for Singapore Commuters”, and is provided as an online cloud service at [www.INSINC.sg](http://www.INSINC.sg). Launched as a Stanford/NUS trial in January 2012, the platform is supported by Singapore’s Land Transport Authority and SMRT.

*Solving the Problem of Traffic Congestion*  
Transport planners aim to supply sufficient public transport capacity

(e.g. buses and trains) in anticipation of long-term projected demand. However, planners are typically less adept in accommodating transient or short-term demand fluctuations, which can occur from time to time. Moreover, purely adding capacity to address short-term peak demand does not always solve the problem: when capacity is added, latent demand moves in to fill it, thus leading to a marginal reduction in peak hour crowding. In Singapore’s context, this “peaking” concept is better

understood for road capacity, where it is now generally accepted that road capacity is finite — but it is much less recognised in terms of public transport. Thus, peak demand for public transit must also be managed; capacity addition alone is not sufficient.

### *Using Incentives: Behavioural Economics and the INSINC Concept*

INSINC adds a new option to the transport planner's arsenal: using incentives to change travel behaviour. Incentives are attractive because they are seen as a win-win solution: commuters are not “penalised” for wrongful behaviour; rather, the system rewards them for exhibiting positive behaviours. Further, since commuters view them favourably, incentives can be deployed incrementally and be customised to the individual, unlike penalties, which for reasons of equity have to be applied across-the-board.

*Incentives are attractive because they are seen as a win-win solution.*

### **INSINC: Results and Benefits of Urban Platforms**

INSINC has grown at a phenomenal rate since its inception, with about 3,500 participants in January 2012 and doubling its subscription rate every three months. INSINC has over 103,000 registered participants as of 15 May 2013, and does not appear to have

reached saturation point. Over 70% of the participants have enlisted through friend invitations. Comparing travel patterns of trips made by participants before and after registration, we have observed shifts from peak to off-peak in the range of 8% to 15%. Those with friends on the INSINC platform shift significantly more: good behaviour appears to thrive on inspiration and competitiveness. The platform has a weekly engagement rate of between 25% and 30% and a monthly engagement rate of over 50%, comparable to mainstream social platforms such as Facebook. However, beyond shifting peak commuters to off-peak, the true utility of INSINC is best expressed in terms of its capabilities *as a platform*.

INSINC participants, through registration and use of the platform, actually offer up a wealth of personal information, including demographic profiles and commuter logs. This database provides tremendous insights for INSINC administrators, both at the individual and aggregate levels. For example, over 17% of males shift to the off-peak, while only 11% of women do the same. When men shift from the peak, they shift to both pre- and post-peak; women, however, shift primarily pre-peak (possibly because of childcare responsibilities). About 25% of the participants contribute over 90% of peak hour trips; this means that if we can induce these 25% to shift, the marginal impact would be very significant.

We can do so because we know the individual's propensity to shift. INSINC allows customised testing, as participants are offered different individual payoffs because we know how likely they will shift given a certain payoff: this is the idea behind the Magic Box. With a larger base of users, we would be able to do small group experiments on a large scale, much as Google, Amazon or Facebook do today.

### Looking Ahead: Further Applications for Adaptive Platforms

Once INSINC achieves critical mass as an adaptive platform, it would have built up a pool of users who are familiar and comfortable with the “methodology” of INSINC as well as INSINC administrators who can posit outcomes based on past behaviour. Potential applications in a range of public service fields could then open up.

*Health Promotion and Exercise:* Using concepts from INSINC, Accenture employees signed up to a programme which gave them points for clocking a certain number of walking steps. The experiment yielded similar results in that employees responded to incentives — monetary and social. More importantly, the experiment demonstrated the viability of a health promotion platform that is adaptive. The platform evolved as employees invited their friends, transacted regularly, and habits of walking started to form. We

see the potential to scale such a platform to the national level, given the ubiquity of sophisticated smartphones that already have gyroscopes and location sensors embedded. Indeed, INSINC commuters can be incentivised to get off one station before their destination and walk the rest of the way — to work or home. This would decongest the trains while, simultaneously, promoting physical exercise.

*Municipal Services:* Residents often transact with town councils or local governments. These transactions include complaints, requests such as clearance of bulky items, or inquiries. There is potential for a platform to be built around enabling citizens to report faults and file complaints in return for points (these could be monetary, material or reputation points). Such an adaptive platform could also use the concept of gamification and incentives to build desirable community norms and ownership. More active levels of response on the ground would enable the government to capture and analyse data in the backend, and micro-target incentives or messages.

*Personalised offers allow administrators to understand a participant's utility function: i.e., a commuter's willingness to exhibit a particular behaviour, measured in monetary terms.*

*Energy Conservation:* Every home-dweller receives a utilities bill every month. Using incentives, a home-dweller could be nudged to conserve energy. His behaviour can then be used as social proof for other home-dwellers, thus creating an opportunity to cultivate good habits and reinforce energy conservation norms.

### **Conclusion: Lessons on Designing Adaptive Platforms**

The INSINC experiment demonstrates great value for the potential of adaptive platforms in urban settings. As governments build data platforms to serve policy objectives, there are opportunities to develop these platforms further as adaptive ones, amplifying their effectiveness through the tight feedback loops and shaping individual behaviours and norms. Based on the INSINC experience, some insights on how to design an effective adaptive platform have emerged:

- a. A platform should support a **large user base**. Platforms with few users will vanish or be absorbed into a larger platform.
- b. A platform should provide **an interesting and useful service**. This sounds like a tautology, but it suggests the kinds of service around which effective platforms may be built. For example, birth registries are a

statutory requirement—hence they are large—but they are not very interesting or useful on an ongoing basis.

- c. A platform should have **frequent user engagement**. Such a platform has the potential to influence highly dynamic societal processes, even ones with which it may *a priori* have very little or no relationship. Witness the manner in which smartphone-based mapping solutions help with traffic management.

- d. A platform should be **extensible**. Platforms should not be over-engineered to suit only one particular application.

- e. Platforms should **evolve in a data-driven fashion**. The effectiveness of the Magic Box offers is a testament to the power of mining data to understand the behaviour of fine-grained commuter segments and apply appropriate nudges.

- f. Platforms **induce good social norms**. Many online fora have their own social norms and “good behaviours”; for example, good Internet communication is famously termed “netiquette”. As large numbers of users engage with urban platforms, they will create and propagate a new “civic sense”.

Such adaptive platforms have great untapped potential to provide a significant leap in performance in public sector service delivery and cost efficiency, at

a resolution commensurate with the individual's needs and expectations. In doing so, the adaptive nature of such platforms can help the government

understand and strengthen its evolving relationship with citizens to a much greater and nuanced degree. 🦋

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## NOTES

1. <http://www.informationweek.co.uk/big-data/news/government/leadership/chicago-cio-pursues-predictive-analytics/240153231>
2. <http://policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/the%20big%20data%20opportunity.pdf>



# Public Managers as Innovators: In Search of Design Attitude

Can public managers see themselves as active designers of innovation and change processes, involving both citizens and the government?

BY  
CHRISTIAN BASON

Christian Bason is the Director of MindLab, an innovation unit that is part of the Danish central government. The author of four books on social innovation, design and leadership, most recently *Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-creating for a Better Society* (Policy Press, 2010), he is a frequent presenter and advisor to governments around the world. Bason is a member of numerous advisory boards and was recently appointed Chairman of the European Commission's Expert Group on public sector innovation. He holds an M.Sc. in political science and is currently writing a doctoral thesis on public management as a design discipline.





## Introduction

The economic, financial and social crisis in many developed economies is putting public managers under almost unprecedented pressure to deliver more value while reining in cost. From Europe to the UK and the US, austerity measures have been put in place which leave no doubt that governments will be severely cash-strapped for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, “wicked” societal challenges abound, which require smarter solutions in increasingly turbulent, complex and interdependent societal and human settings.<sup>1,2</sup>

*The voice of the citizen, captured through audio or video, is a crucial trigger for change.*

This growth in both turbulence and complexity has occurred in tandem, perhaps coincidentally, with an increasingly systematic exploration of what design<sup>3</sup> can do for government. We appear to be seeing a period of rapid experimentation, often framed in the context of new forms of citizen involvement.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade, public sector organisations in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, France, Denmark, the UK,<sup>5</sup> Canada and the US have, to varying

degrees and in different forms, taken up such design approaches as a tool to drive innovation and change.<sup>6,7</sup> Just within the past year, governments in the US, Australia and Singapore have set up their own innovation labs and design centres.

## Co-designing for Solutions that Work

Design approaches provide a different set of tools and ways of working systematically with innovation in government. Qualitative, ethnographically inspired design research; highly interactive and tangible workshop formats; visualisation and rapid prototyping; user testing of redesigned services: these are emerging as effective approaches to innovation.<sup>8</sup> Such co-design approaches help public managers understand how the system/user relationship is shaped, concretely, in terms of space, time and interactions. This “outside-in” perspective has a disruptive potential, because public managers get to view the results of their organisation’s efforts in a new light.

The voice of the citizen, captured through audio or video, is a crucial trigger for change. Qualitative research seems to engender an empathetic, engaging, but still professional, (re)connection between public service staff and users: what can be termed “professional empathy”.<sup>6</sup>


**T**he Human Experience Lab (THE Lab) helps Singapore's public agencies design and develop public policies, services and experiences that are more human-centred. Established in April 2012 within the Public Service Division, PS21 Office, it has worked with agencies to:

- Reframe existing problems by injecting user perspectives and challenging current assumptions and practices
- Better understand the needs of customers and stakeholders through deep ethnographic approaches and sense-making
- Build capabilities in human-centred design techniques
- Tell stories to inspire decision-makers in ways that will inform their policy design, implementation and communication.

THE Lab staff serves as “design mentors”, helping project teams apply the full design process to their challenges. Through its work, THE Lab aims to build design capabilities and communities across the Public Service. Some of the current initiatives and platforms include:

- A full-day Design Thinking Boot-camp to help agencies understand the potential benefits of design
- Two-day design thinking programmes as part of the Management Associates Foundation Programme at the Civil Service College
- Harnessing the vibrant online design thinking community in Cube, the Public Service's social intranet.

### **OpenIDEO Challenge<sup>1</sup>**

The National Environment Agency, in collaboration with innovation and design firm IDEO and the Public Service Division, launched a crowd-sourcing effort to explore how communities could be encouraged to take more initiative in making their local environments better. More than 50 participants across industries participated: 271 inspirations and 102 concepts emerged from the challenge, from which six winning concepts were selected for further development and prototyping at a two-day Make-A-Thon on 15 and 16 March 2013. 

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#### **NOTE**

1. <http://www.openideo.com/open/connected/brief.html>

## The Hidden Ingredient: Design Attitude

Change and innovation, however, do not just come about by way of smart methods and tools. It is also a question of stewardship. It is one thing for public managers to hire or employ designers to conduct citizen-centred innovation projects. It is quite another for managers themselves to relate to and drive the change efforts. It turns out, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the most forward-thinking managers don't just commission design projects, but engage actively with the process of innovation. We might even think of them as *designers*.

*We appear to be seeing  
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citizen involvement.*

In their seminal 2004 book *Managing as Designing*, Richard Boland and Dick Collopy suggest that *design attitude* might be a useful way of understanding how managers shape and make desirable futures. Innovative public managers tend to immerse themselves in a set of activities around identifying problems

and opportunities, seeking new ideas and solutions, and acting on them through engagement with actors inside and outside the organisation. Boland and Collopy make the point that “a design attitude views each project as an opportunity for invention that includes a questioning of basic assumptions and a resolve to leave the world a better place than we found it”.<sup>9</sup>

In this light, design attitude could help us understand the role of the public manager as someone who drives innovation by taking responsibility for designing organisational responses to the challenges and opportunities they face. How can managers more fundamentally relate to their role as problem solvers and innovators?

In an exploration of what design attitude might entail, Kamil Michlewski undertook a doctoral study in which he interviewed a number of design consultancies, such as IDEO and Philips Design, and mapped the ways key people in design functions in those organisations viewed their roles and practices.<sup>10</sup> He subsequently proposed a range of behaviours which characterise design attitude, including: “Consolidating multidimensional meanings”, “Creating, bringing to life”, “Embracing discontinuity and openness”, “Engaging polysensorial aesthetics” and “Engaging personal and commercial empathy”.

## Engendering Professional Empathy

Peter Gadsdon, Development Director in the Borough of Lewisham in the UK, worked with a design firm to reshape how his organisation dealt with homelessness. Front line staff were instructed to use video to film each others' client engagements, and then to prototype and iterate new solutions for citizens.

Gadsdon says the process had a “profound effect on staff because it changed their view on the service they were providing.”

Source: Christian Bason, “Public managers as designers — Can design-led approaches lead to new models for public service provision?”, Danish Journal of Management & Business Vol. 77(4), December 2012.

**H**ow do design attitude archetypes play out in the real world? Consider how Ms Anne Lind, Director of the Board of Industrial Injuries, reflected on the purchase of a new IT system for her organisation, a Danish government agency of around 300 employees:

*“Back in 2005–6 or so, we decided to work towards a new IT system which needed to be much more dynamic and which should be able to do ‘objective’ case management, that is, hyper-modern technology. What we spoke about was that we needed a new IT system. And then I was home during my summer holidays, and I thought there is something wrong. One doesn’t ‘just’ buy a new IT system. It is great that IT is so smart and can do all these things. But that means that one just puts those things into it, the ways we work today, and then we don’t go any further. So when I came back I established this Secretariat for developing our case management, which we call SUS, where we simply decided to go through and assess our entire organization. Because an IT system will never be better than what we put into it.”*

This style of thinking and questioning assumptions points to “embracing discontinuity and open-endedness”. The manager chooses to open up her organisation to explore what the implications of the new technology can be, and she begins a journey to find out what they are going to “put into” the new system.

Another example is Ms Christina Pawsoe, the manager of a small institution for mentally handicapped adults in Odense, Denmark’s third-largest city. Using design-led approaches, she transformed her organisation to provide a much more satisfactory and meaningful service to citizens, effectively casting her wards as the everyday innovators in spite of their disabilities. Describing her approach to innovation and change, Pawsoe says:

*“We must make some trial-balloons, and then see if it works. If it does not work, fair enough, so we just change it, so that we always have some new goal, or a new angle on our challenges.”*

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### NOTE

1. Christian Bason, “Design Attitude as an Innovation Catalyst.”, in *Public Innovation through Collaboration and Design*, eds. Chris Ansell and Jacob Torfing (Oxford: Routledge, forthcoming).

## Design and Management: A Complex Dynamic

There seems to be a complex interplay between managers as commissioners of design work, managers as designers themselves, and managers as they are affected by the design work as it unfolds and impacts their organisation. There is a distinction between “managers as designers” and “managers absorbing design”.

First, evidence suggests<sup>11</sup> that it is because of their fundamental attitude in favour of problem solving that managers are open and willing to work with designers. Many of the managers who choose to engage with designers have a long track record in continuously exploring new or different management tools and technologies. They tend to have had a career pattern of heavy engagement in developmental activities, personally and professionally. One might therefore speak of a certain “design management maturity” as a leadership trait.

Second, it appears that the managers’ exposure to design approaches — through actual project work — amplifies or catalyses extant design attitudes. The design work stimulates their thinking and perhaps teases out a more “designerly” way of addressing current and possibly future problems.

*The most forward-thinking managers don't just commission design projects, but engage actively with the process of innovation.*

While the work of Michlewski and others help describe what a design attitude might look like, the very notion still raises questions for how we should educate current and future public managers. What is their role in initiating and stewarding systematic, design-led problem solving? What specific competencies and skills are required? And perhaps more fundamentally: Is design attitude even something that can be learned? ✧

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## NOTES

1. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning", *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155–169 [Reprinted in Cross, Nigel, ed. *Developments in Design Methodology* (Chichester: J. Wiley & Sons, 1984).]
2. Tom Ritchey, *Wicked Problems — Social Messes: Decision Support Modelling with Morphological Analysis* (Springer, Heidelberg, 2011).
3. Charles Eames aptly describes design as "a plan for arranging elements in such a way as to best accomplish a particular purpose". From: Bill Moggridge, *Designing interactions* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).
4. In her keynote address to the 2008 IPAA National Conference, Sydney, NSW, June 2008, Jocelyne Bourgon argues that "Citizen engagement aims at opening up new avenues for empowering citizens to play an active role in service design, service delivery and, perhaps most importantly, the ongoing process of service innovation".
5. Sophia Parker and Joe Heapy, *The Journey to the Interface: How Public Service Design Can Connect Users to Reform* (London: Demos, 2006). See <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thejourneytotheinterface>
6. Christian Bason, *Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-creating for a Better Society* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010).
7. Bryan Boyer, Justin W. Cook and Marco Steinberg, *In Studio: Recipes for Systemic Change* (Helsinki: Sitra, 2011). See <http://helsinkidesignlab.org/instudio/>
8. Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, "Co-creation and the New Landscapes of Design", *CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts* 4(2008): 5–18.
9. Richard J. Boland and Fred Collopy, *Managing as Designing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9.
10. Kamil Michlewski, "Uncovering Design Attitude: Inside the Culture of Designers", *Organization Studies* 29(2008): 229–248.
11. These issues are the subject of ongoing research. See: Christian Bason, "Design Attitude as an Innovation Catalyst.", in *Public Innovation through Collaboration and Design*, eds. Chris Ansell and Jacob Torfing (Oxford: Routledge, forthcoming).



OPINION

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# Rethinking Public Service Delivery for the 21st Century

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BY  
JANINE O'FLYNN

Janine O'Flynn is Professor of Public Management at the University of Melbourne and an Adjunct Professor at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. Her expertise is in public sector management, particularly in the areas of public sector reform and relationships. She is currently involved with addressing the performance framework aspects of the Australian Government's *Ahead of the Game* blueprint for reforming the Australian Public Service. In 2012, O'Flynn published *Rethinking Public Service Delivery: Managing with External Providers*, co-authored with John Alford (Palgrave), which explores how government organisations can work with other providers, in various modes, to deliver public services. *Crossing Boundaries in Public Management and Policy: The International Experience* will be published in July 2013 (co-edited with Deborah Blackman and John Halligan; Routledge).

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The effective delivery of public services is a complex challenge. At a time when many governments face incredible fiscal pressure and increasing demands from citizens, the question of who does what has again taken centre stage. For some, the answer will always be that the private sector can do it best; for others, the state. But such one-size-fits-all approaches do not help us to deal with the increasing complexity of public service delivery. It is time to rethink public service delivery: just *who* are the providers of public services? *When* should governments externalise?

Rethinking *who* and *when* is just the beginning of rethinking public service delivery. We also need to determine:

who decides and who produces, and what the right combinations of these activities might be; the appropriate mode of coordination between the parties; the motivations of various actors and how to tap these to deliver public services; the obstacles that government organisations encounter in effectively managing relationships; how we should recalibrate public organisations to manage this complex portfolio of providers and relationships in order to best deliver public value in the 21st century.

In *Rethinking Public Service Delivery: Managing with External Parties*, my co-author John Alford and I explore these ideas: we argue that using various

modes of coordination to simultaneously manage a complex portfolio of providers with different motivations represents one of the most pressing public management challenges of our time.<sup>1</sup>

## *Rethinking **who** these external providers are opens up a much broader menu of options in the delivery of public services.*

### **Rethinking the Providers**

In our work, we identify an external provider as any entity outside of a government organisation that produces some or all of the service. This seemingly simple definition, however, opens up a much broader menu of providers than conventional wisdom suggests.

Three types of providers have long been part of the public service delivery landscape: *private firms*, *non-profit organisations*, and *volunteers* who give their time and effort to government organisations. In recent years, we have also seen an increasing interest in government organisations working with other government organisations in more *joined-up* or *whole-of-government* ways. In addition to these four commonly identified providers, we explore the contributions of three more sets of actors.

First are the *clients* of government organisations, the ones we usually think of as recipients, or at the business end, of public services: school children, hospital patients and job seekers.

The second are *regulatees* — mainly organisations — that are subject to government regulations. Good examples are firms who must comply with environment regulations, or restaurants that follow food hygiene regulations.

Finally there are those *other actors* that we call on to make contributions to public services in different ways. Child protection is a good example: this service needs contributions from a range of different providers. We ask teachers, doctors and neighbours to report suspected cases of abuse and we seek changes in behaviour from family members. All of them make some contribution to this public service, albeit in different ways.

Some may find these additions to our external providers list unusual. However, each, in their own way, makes contributions to public services. Recall our definition: *any entity outside of a government organisation that produces some or all of the service*. Both clients and regulatees make critical contributions to public services and the creation of public value. Clients co-produce public services: jobseekers, for example, look for jobs, undertake training to increase employability, and go to interviews; patients take medicines and follow doctors' advice to improve health outcomes; schoolchildren do homework and engage in the classroom to co-produce education; restaurant owners follow food regulations to ensure public safety. Such contributions represent co-production of



public services, enabling the achievement of governmental outcomes, and the creation of public value.

Rethinking *who* these external providers are opens up a much broader menu of options in the delivery of public services. On the one hand, this is not a radical change because these external parties are already performing these functions. On the other, we have not tended to think so broadly when we consider public services. Once we rethink *who* we might work with, we must then rethink *when* we should externalise to other parties.

### Rethinking Externalisation

Government organisations, like any other, have always had to confront the *make-versus-buy* decision. What has tended to surface, in the current debate about externalisation, (in particular on the topic of outsourcing), is a return to old positions: with a pro-externalisation bias on the “right” and an anti-externalisation bias on the “left”. Both positions are, however, misguided and we need a more nuanced discussion.

We define externalisation as any arrangement in which one or more external providers produces all or some of the service. Given our more expansive set of potential external providers, we make the case that the answer to the question of *when* to externalise is: it all depends. On the one hand, this may seem an ambiguous and unhelpful foray into the debate, but on the other, it can offer

profound insight into the complexities of public services and externalisation.

Our argument is that, to date, views on the costs and benefits of externalisation have been far too narrow. We point to three major categories of considerations that should guide the decision.

The first category gets plenty of attention, in fact all of the attention in some cases. These are the service benefits and costs aspects of the argument, often expressed as “**value for money**”. Here we see governments focused on whether an external party can do something better and/or cheaper and this has often driven externalisation decisions.

The second category gets some attention, but not enough given the potential for this to add or detract from “value for money”. These are the **relationship costs**. Even if some other party can potentially do something better or cheaper, government organisations expend considerable effort and resources in making that happen. They must define services, often run processes to select providers, and then monitor that the provider is doing what is expected. None of these activities is cost-free for either party, but these rarely get discussed in any public debate about externalisation.

*Views on the costs and benefits of externalisation have been far too narrow.*

The third category barely rates a mention until there is a scandal. These are the **strategic costs and benefits**, such as how externalisation may enable government to take a more strategic rather than operation role (the classic “steering rather than rowing” narrative), how risk is allocated (or not allocated) between parties, the reputation building or destroying potential of outsourcing, the loss of core competences, and the handing over of legal force to other parties. Again, these factors tend to come to the fore when there is a scandal but do not otherwise get enough attention in externalisation decisions.

Whilst our argument of “it all depends” might on the face of it seem simplistic, it does, in fact, represent a much more sophisticated way of considering the externalisation decision. To answer the question of *when* to outsource then requires public managers to weigh up these various costs and benefits on a case-by-case basis. One-size-fits-all approaches cannot deliver when there is such complexity in determining what the potential benefits and costs may be.

## Conclusion: Rethinking Public Service Delivery

With a broader set of providers and a more robust framework for weighing up the externalisation decision, we are just starting to rethink public service delivery. Once we make the decision to externalise, public managers are only part of the way there. They must determine *who* will do what — who will take on the deciding and producing roles and in what combination? They must decide *what* mode of coordination — compulsion, supervision, classical contracting, negotiation, or collaboration — can connect the parties together. They must consider the *motivations* of those they will work with and then determine what *motivators*, or levers, they can use to tap these contributions. Finally, they must consider how to build the organisational capabilities to manage external parties and in doing so, confront a range of potential government obstacles to effective relationship management — accountability, interdependency/complexity, turbulence, and cultural differences. All are potential barriers to optimising relationships for the delivery of public services and the creation of public value. ✨

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### NOTE

1. John Alford and Janine O'Flynn, *Rethinking Public Services: Managing with External Parties* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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# Commissioning Public Value: The Role of Civil Servants

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Civil servants should see themselves as the architects of new, flexible, cross-sectoral arrangements for creating greater public value.

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BY  
**PETER SHERGOLD**

Peter Shergold, Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney, is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Civil Service College, Singapore. From 2002 to 2008, he was the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in the Australian Public Service. He is now Chair of the Commonwealth Government's Aged Care Reform Implementation Council, the New South Wales Public Service Commission Advisory Board and Social Investment Expert Advisory Group, and the Western Australian Premier's Partnership Forum. He serves on the Queensland Public Sector Renewal Board and is leading a Victorian Government project on reform of the community services system.

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In many ways the role of democratic governments in sovereign nations remains bounded by tradition and practice. On the basis of a successful election outcome, governments claim a mandate to set political direction, subject to the ongoing need to win legislative approval (and, of course, to withstand media scrutiny). They establish revenue and expenditure parameters within which they frame budgets. Through legislation they regulate civic conduct, although the laws they enact are open to judicial review and, increasingly, subject to international agreements. Every few years they face the court of public opinion at the ballot box.

*Most governments are now finding that the expectations of citizens are rising faster than their capacity to deliver.*

What has changed in recent years is the manner in which public policies are implemented. Today, governments rely on a variety of institutions, and not just their civil services, to deliver programmes.<sup>1</sup> In effect they look to a mixed “public economy” to provide defence and ensure order, raise revenue, build and maintain public infrastructure and provide financial assistance and services to citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Too often, the willingness of governments to embrace market mechanisms is portrayed as representing

the emergence of a “contract state” or the “privatisation” of the public domain, driven by a “neoliberal” agenda. This hostile characterisation narrows and simplifies the transformative process that is underway.

What is actually occurring is that governments are commissioning the implementation of the outcomes they seek. The process of selection, often referred to as market testing, contemplates the entry of competitive providers. It encourages incumbent public sector agencies to focus on performance. The emphasis is on contestability.

### **What Commissioning Really Means for Government**

Commissioning does not preordain outcomes. In many instances, governments will continue to rely upon civil servants to dispense justice, maintain security, collect taxes, issue passports and deliver citizen payments. On other occasions, delivery may be undertaken more effectively by third-party agents. With the construction of major infrastructure, the focus is increasingly on sharing cost and risk through varieties of public-private partnership. With the delivery of human services, success frequently involves the engagement of not-for-profit institutions (schools, hospitals and community organisations), both faith-based and secular. The creation of an “evidence base” for policy is now often undertaken by universities,

think-tanks or consultancy companies, although public sector research agencies continue to play a significant role.

Governments, and in particular their civil services, need to take a more strategic and holistic approach to commissioning. Not infrequently decision-making focuses on the merits of outsourcing — that's not the best approach. The starting point should be to decide, on the basis of price and quality, what is the most effective way to design programmes, deliver services, fund policy initiatives and evaluate outcomes. Procurement, in the broadest sense, should be driven by a continuing process of commissioning and recommissioning the goals of government.

It should not be assumed that civil services are necessarily the best institutions for delivering government policy. Their bureaucratic structures are often inflexible and process-driven. The vertical hierarchies and horizontal demarcations of officialdom tend to undermine public sector capability. The skill, expertise and creative impulse of front-line managers, for example, is rarely harnessed in the design of programmes: in fact, their creative energy is too often directed to finding work-arounds to the prescriptive guidelines under which they work. Similarly, the silos of authority continue to act as obstacles to joined-up government approaches to delivering holistic citizen-centric services. Moreover, while civil

servants tend to be highly proficient at articulating the benefits of a policy intervention, they are often less willing or able to identify the regulatory costs imposed on those who are subject to it.

In short, there is a danger if civil servants wield monopoly power. Governments need to choose the mix of public, private and social service sector delivery that can contribute most effectively to the creation of public value. The task should be approached with strategic intent. Assumptions need to be tested. Context and circumstance rather than ideological persuasion should determine the most effective channel by which to implement the ambitions of government.

*It should not be assumed that civil services are necessarily the best institutions for delivering government policy.*

The key is for all those involved in the design and delivery of government policies to recognise that they are partners. If the relationship between “purchasers” and “providers” is defined solely by contractual obligation, the likely result will be a self-defeating emphasis on the micromanagement of process compliance rather than an agreement on a joint approach to outcome-based performance. A rigid approach will stifle the innovation that should be the hallmark of contestability. It will

limit the search for new approaches. It will fail to create choice and diversity for citizens. Commissioning must be understood as far more than the exercise of purchasing services in the market: rather it is about inspiring more effective and creative governance arrangements.

### **Commissioning: Advantages and Opportunities**

New opportunities are emerging. Governments are increasingly recognising the value of engaging community-based organisations in the design of programmes, rather than just encouraging them to tender for their delivery. More flexible ways are being found to achieve outcomes. In Australia, place-based solutions are being devised for the provision of services in ways which can respond flexibly to the distinctive needs of particular communities — whether it is regions, neighbourhoods, school zones, hospital authority areas or remote Indigenous settlements.

Around the world, funding pressures are acute. That is not just a consequence of economic volatility. Most governments are now finding that the expectations of citizens are rising faster than their

capacity to deliver. It is becoming ever harder for governments to balance expenditure with revenue. Consequently, there is growing interest in the potential to harness social finance (from the philanthropic or private sectors) to help fund public initiatives.

In Australia, for instance, the New South Wales government is introducing “social benefit bonds” to scale-up not-for-profit innovation by allowing social service organisations to attract private sector funds.<sup>3</sup> Such new financial instruments enable mission-driven social enterprises to pay a return to investors on the basis of sharing any reduction in public costs with government. It is an approach which is particularly valuable in trialling preventative interventions which can reduce the need for crisis management later — such as lowering the likelihood of released prisoners re-offending or reducing the need for out-of-home care for vulnerable children by helping parents cope more effectively.

Commissioning can also benefit from applying the insights of behavioural economics to the delivery of public services. This requires not just improving the quality and accessibility

*While civil servants tend to be highly proficient at articulating the benefits of a policy intervention, they are often less willing or able to identify the regulatory costs imposed on those who are subject to it.*



of information made available to citizens but changing the context within which they exercise discretion. In Australia, there is increasing focus on allowing disadvantaged individuals (such as those with a disability, suffering from mental illness or becoming frail with age) to be directly involved in the choice and management of the services that they need to fully engage in the community.

“Consumer-directed care”, we are discovering, means that those in need are likely to treat public money as their own rather than belonging to the government. As a result, they make spending decisions far more wisely and the incentive for fraud is lessened. Placing citizens in control reduces the antisocial and self-destructive behaviours that often mark the learned helplessness of marginalised welfare recipients. Individualised budgets represent an investment in citizen empowerment.

### **A New Facilitative Role for Public Servants**

Do such collaborative approaches to public policy diminish the role and status of public services? Not a bit. Civil servants remain at the heart of governance. The transformation is that instead of designing and delivering public policy alone and directly, they increasingly have to focus on how best to generate and intermediate cross-sectoral relationships in order to implement most effectively the ambitions

of government. They are central to the commissioning process.

Some tasks should continue to be undertaken by a professional public administration. Many can be performed by outside suppliers. Nevertheless, the ability to provide confidential advice to successive governments — and the obligation to be answerable and accountable for the expenditure of public funds — means that civil servants are likely to remain at the centre of political decision-making. The question is how effectively they can perform their role.

*There is a need not to reduce the power of public services but to redirect it.*

Civil service leadership skills need to be redirected to the important task of facilitation. This requires the ability to exercise strategic judgement on which modes of creating public value work best. It calls for the capacity to assess objectively what expertise, from which sectors, and in what forms, should be steered towards the achievement of government objectives.

Civil servants have to develop the skills to listen empathically, to stand in the shoes of other stakeholders, to negotiate carefully and to remain focused on results. Collaboration demands a much more sophisticated skill set than consultation or coordination. The creation and maintenance of partnerships


requires trust, respect, intuition and emotional intelligence.

At the same time, civil servants need to bring to discussions of policy formulation and implementation their inside understanding of the governance structures which distinguish decision-making in the public arena. They must bring to any cross-sectoral arrangement their intimate knowledge of governance processes.

*Collaboration demands a much more sophisticated skill set than consultation or coordination.*

Civil servants need also to be able to manage risk prudently rather than avoid it. They need to take responsibility for

the introduction and careful evaluation of pilots, trials and demonstration projects. Performance metrics have to be designed which can audit and measure the returns on public investments. Failure needs to be contemplated and, when it happens, learned from as quickly as possible. It is central to the pursuit of public innovation.

There is a need not to reduce the power of public services but to redirect it. Civil servants should take pride in their position at the centre of the “co-production” and “co-management” of public policy. As the commissioners of government policy implementation, they are, in a real sense, the architects of a flexible and innovative design and delivery system. It is a crucial role to which to aspire.<sup>4</sup> 

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## NOTES

1. In fact there is a long history of governments commissioning the delivery of public policy. Much of the responsibility for the transportation of convicts to the American and Australian colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was, for example, contracted out by the British government to private providers.
2. For a more detailed assessment of “the public economy”, see Gary L. Sturges, *Diversity and Contestability in the Public Service Economy* (Sydney: New South Wales Business Chamber, 2012) and ‘Double Government’: The Art of Commissioning Public Services, November 2012, [http://www.anzsog.edu.au/media/upload/publication/107\\_Sturges-oration-November-2012.pdf](http://www.anzsog.edu.au/media/upload/publication/107_Sturges-oration-November-2012.pdf)
3. [http://www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/site\\_plan/social\\_benefit\\_bonds](http://www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/site_plan/social_benefit_bonds)
4. A broader assessment of my views on the future for civil services can be found within Shergold, Peter, “Reform of the Australian Public Service” in *State of the Nation: Aspects of Australian Public Policy*, Don Markwell, et al., eds (Victoria: Connor Court, 2013).





INTERVIEW WITH GEOFF WILSON

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## Public Engagement That Works

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A veteran strategist shares advice on how to make the most of public engagement as an instrument for governance and decision-making.

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**GEOFF WILSON**

Geoff Wilson was President of the International Association for Public Participation International (IAP2) from February 2010 to November 2012. He is Director of Patient and Public Engagement in Capital Health, Nova Scotia's largest provider of health services in Halifax, Canada. Wilson last spoke in Singapore at the 2012 MICA-CSC Public Communications Conference on "Public Engagement and Organisational Culture".

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### **What is distinctive about public engagement in the public sector?**

There are some basics common to all public engagement activities no matter which sector is undertaking the work. However, I believe there are some important fundamental differences.

Motivation is one important difference. Public accountability, acting with public good in mind, public ownership, democracy and citizenship are unique priorities in the public sector environment. These will have an impact on the kinds of issues or problems that are addressed through public engagement as well as the approaches and intended outcomes of such activities.

Confidentiality is also a limiting factor to an extent. In my experience,

however, governments sometimes use confidentiality as an excuse for unnecessary secrecy or to control an issue, the public discourse around it, or to achieve a predetermined outcome.

But open and transparent information is a critical component of meaningful public engagement, especially if the engagement process seeks significant decision-making input from citizens. The best decisions are made when decision makers and their advisors have the best possible information. If government information is opaque, there will be a lower quality outcome from public engagement precisely because people will not have all the information they require to have well-informed views.

Notions of privacy and confidentiality are changing dramatically, especially



Leadership is an incredibly important component of public engagement.

### Some **key leadership attributes**

that are necessary for the practice of public engagement include:

- being fully present, open and available to others
- compassion
- enabling learning, growth and meaningful contributions
- deep listening
- effective communication with diverse stakeholders
- self-reflection and awareness
- ability to recognise, identify and challenge assumptions (including your own)
- ability to explore without jumping to solutions
- ability to let go
- accountability for actions
- honesty, integrity
- fulfilment of promises and commitments

for those of the younger generation who live their lives very openly in the world of social media. This demographic is unlikely to share the same devotion to confidentiality and privacy as previous cohorts. This will continue to challenge more traditional and conservative government practices around privacy and confidentiality.

### How should public sector agencies decide when and how best to engage the public?

I am an advocate for meaningful and appropriate public engagement. I do not believe public engagement is relevant or useful for every situation, and discerning when it is appropriate to engage with the public is an important skill for the public sector to master.

There are many situations when it is inappropriate to engage the public in a conversation or decision:

- When a decision has already been made and there is no opportunity for the public to influence the outcome
- In situations where rapid decision-making and action is critical, such as emergencies
- When there is not enough time to allow for thoughtful public deliberation of an issue: for example, if a quick decision is necessary to take advantage of an opportunity
- If the outcomes of the public dialogue are unclear

- If the public is not ready (i.e., they may not have the information they need to participate)
- If the public does not see the issue or decision as important or relevant to them
- In circumstances where the subject or issue is so esoteric or highly technical that the dialogue and decisions are rightly in the domain of technical experts. That is not to say that the public cannot engage in issues that involve complex ideas or technical information, but it requires much more effort on the part of the public body to help citizens prepare and build knowledge and understanding. In these cases, it will take more time to plan and educate participants and careful, focused attention should be paid to the specific input that is being sought from the public.

Some basic questions I always ask when I am assessing an opportunity to see if public engagement is an option:

- Is the decision or issue one that affects peoples' lives directly? Is it something people care about?
- Is there opportunity for the public to influence the decision?
- Can the public body undertaking the engagement take the time and devote the resources necessary for meaningful public engagement?

- Will people have all the information they need to participate in the discussion? What information will they need?

These are just some of the basic considerations when judging the rationale for public engagement.

*Discerning when it is appropriate to engage with the public is an important skill for the public sector to master.*

Like any tool we would employ in policymaking, programme design and for deciding public issues, public engagement has both great potential and great limitations. It is not a panacea or the solution to everything wrong with government or public decision-making. However, it can uncover hidden knowledge and motivations around an issue. It can generate new and creative approaches to problems; it can repair relationships between the public and the public sector if done well and thoughtfully; it can build trust; it can lead to productive collaboration. But there are also many risk factors that need to be carefully weighed in every situation or decision before public engagement is undertaken. This is as much about skill and knowledge of

good public engagement practice as it is about experience and applying sound judgment.

#### What kinds of structures and approaches might help public organisations leverage public engagement more effectively?

There is a debate about whether or not governments should have in-house, paid public engagement staff designing and facilitating public engagement, or whether it is better to contract external consultants. The only reasonable response to this question is to take the approach that best fits the context in which the public engagement is taking place.

The approaches to take and structures to employ can also be informed by other contexts (e.g. cultural, operational, etc.). However, I find the approach to public engagement advocated by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)<sup>1</sup> to be the most flexible and adaptable that I have come across, and it seems to work well within a public sector context.

Regardless of the approach adopted, however, it is important for there to be a well-established base of understanding among both public servants and politicians of the advantages and limitations of public engagement in general before embarking on any process.

For any government or organisation, it is important to truly embrace engagement in the right spirit.



Some other fields worth exploring in terms of **skill-building** for public engagement include:

- negotiation
- group facilitation
- project management/ planning
- mediation and conflict resolution
- public relations and communication
- social media
- community development

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: HOW TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE, BALANCED AND CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

- Begin the dialogue by exploring and celebrating points of agreement among the parties, including shared values and beliefs that may be at the heart of the issue.
- Be deliberative in your approach to these kinds of conversations. Put in place ground rules and practices for holding people accountable for engaging respectfully.
- Acknowledge the diversity of viewpoints without judgement or preference. Ensure fair and balanced information, facts and perspectives are welcomed into the dialogue.
- Assert equality of perspectives involved in the issue, and their validity.
- Take steps to design a process that allows for open dialogue and the exploration of healthy tension among the varying views. Create the conditions for people to “see the issue through another’s eyes” or create opportunities for participants to share in another’s perspective or experience of the issue.
- Embrace and acknowledge the conflict that is inherent in these situations. With skilled facilitation, conflict can be turned into a creative rather than a destructive force in public discussions.
- Cultivate compassion among the participants.
- Be prepared to make compromises.
- Take the time to build trust among the dialogue participants.
- Collectively define what success looks like.
- Know when it is time to take a break.
- Be prepared to let go.
- Go slow in order to go fast. Plan and prepare well. Invest in participant learning. These will accelerate people’s ability to engage in the issue.
- Do not be afraid of emotion. David Brooks, New York Times columnist and author of *The Social Animal* (Random House, 2012) makes this point in a TED Talk: “Emotion is the foundation of reason because it tells us what to value”.<sup>1</sup> That is, we can learn about peoples’ values and what they value by paying attention to the tone and tenor of emotions during such dialogues. This can lead to a deeper understanding about the values that are involved in the exploration of an issue.

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### NOTE

1. [http://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_brooks\\_the\\_social\\_animal.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_the_social_animal.html) (posted March 2011).

## TOWARDS MORE EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- Go slow at first and take the time to build understanding about public engagement within the public service and its agencies, but also among the public. Understand its limitations.
- Set reasonable goals for early public engagement initiatives. Do not try to tackle the biggest issues early in your learning and skill-building phase of development.
- Be clear about the appropriate role of citizens in public engagement on public issues.
- Be forthright about making mistakes: make mistakes, and learn as much as you can from that experience. This is particularly difficult sometimes in public sector environments, which tend to be highly risk-averse.
- Set reasonable expectations for public engagement.
- Public engagement supplements, but is not a replacement for, democratic process.
- Take time to train staff, and build skills and capacity to conduct public engagement properly. Create understanding and support for public engagement at senior levels within the public service.
- Put policies and frameworks in place to provide consistent guidance for public engagement, such as defining accountability, defining circumstances of appropriate use, and establishing guiding principles, procedures and accepted models or approaches.
- When designing engagement initiatives, use methods that are appropriate for the issue and the participants, and that will satisfy the needs and style of the organisation. For example, don't use online engagement tools if participants cannot easily or comfortably use online tools to engage.

Half-hearted efforts or superficial engagement processes will only alienate the stakeholders with whom you are trying to build a rapport. Meaningful engagement involves being genuinely interested in and taking account of the ideas, opinions, beliefs, aspirations and values of the stakeholders you are engaging.

### How might we best evaluate the success of public engagement initiatives?

Evaluation is an evolving and emerging field within the practice of public engagement, and it is most certainly the aspect of public engagement practice with the most work yet to be done.

As in many fields, the measuring process is much easier to conduct

than the measuring of outcomes. As a practitioner, I am very interested in knowing from participants what they learned through their involvement in an engagement exercise. I also try to understand how they perceive an issue or a topic at the start of an engagement process, and then how they perceive that issue at the end of the process. Furthermore, identifying how public engagement may have affected decisions or key outcomes during engagement is an important factor.

### *Public engagement supplements but is not a replacement for democratic process.*

From a public perspective, a successful project is one in which the public can see that they have had a visible or demonstrable impact. Being able to ask participants at the start of a project about how they believe their input will influence decisions, and then asking them at the end of the project if they

think they did influence the decision is an approach that will help gauge the overall success of public engagement efforts. I want to emphasise however that it is still very important to evaluate the public engagement work itself and to recognise the significant measurement challenges involved in doing so.

Standards of practice are beginning to appear in various places around the world, and these can offer guidance and insight into some of the appropriate process and outcome measures common in the field. The IAP2 will soon have practice standards based on their approach. However, there are many organisations and jurisdictions that have created practice standards, for example, Scotland, the AA1000 Standards Board in the UK<sup>2</sup> and Australia,<sup>3</sup> to name just a few. The Brisbane Declaration on Community Engagement<sup>4</sup> also outlines a set of general principles that can be readily adapted into a standards or evaluation framework.<sup>5</sup> 

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#### NOTES

1. <http://www.iap2.org>
2. <http://www.accountability.org/standards/aa1000ses/index.html>
3. [http://www.aceig.org.au/upload/program1/1320191471\\_Community\\_Engagement\\_web.pdf](http://www.aceig.org.au/upload/program1/1320191471_Community_Engagement_web.pdf)
4. [http://www.qld.gov.au/web/community-engagement/guides-factsheets/documents/brisbane\\_declaration.pdf](http://www.qld.gov.au/web/community-engagement/guides-factsheets/documents/brisbane_declaration.pdf)
5. <http://www.iap2.org.au/sitebuilder/resources/knowledge/asset/files/40/undeevaluationframeworkforcommunityengagement.pdf>



# What's Past is Prologue: Kissinger on China

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## BOOK DETAILS

### On China

By Henry A. Kissinger  
Penguin Books Ltd (paperback published in April 2012); 624 pp.

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## REVIEWED BY LEONG MING WEI

Leong Ming Wei is Principal Strategist in the Strategic Policy Office, Prime Minister's Office. His current research interest is China. He holds a Master in Civil Engineering degree from Cambridge and a Master in Public Management degree from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The views expressed in this review are his own.

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Described by the *New York Times* as “shrewd” and “fascinating”, *On China* is a *tour de force* account by a renowned former US Secretary of State of how China's long history has shaped its global perspective as well as foreign policy.

Competent futuring cautions against blind extrapolation from past trends. However, a reading of Kissinger suggests that modern China's broad strategies have been and will continue to be influenced heavily by its rich past. For example, Kissinger describes Chairman Mao as drawing heavily from strategies of the Three Kingdoms of Wei (魏), Wu (吴) and Shu (蜀), an oft-romanticised civil war period in the 3rd century, to manage both Cold War superpowers.

He shows how Mao secretly coordinated China's actions with former US President Nixon and his successors to balance Soviet influence worldwide — similar to the temporary Shu-Wu alliance formed against Wei at the Battle of Red Cliff — even while both sides understood the mutual need to trumpet ideological differences publicly in order to placate their respective citizenries.

### On Strategic Encirclement and Influence

Kissinger's account of China's strongest external fear — that of “strategic encirclement” by a coalition of its immediate neighbours — is particularly salient. He argues that China has, since

antiquity, realised its inability to deal simultaneously with military threats on all its borders, and has thus sought to pre-emptively “sow disunity among [the] barbarians” by pitting them against each other. He describes how Qing diplomats had delayed the fall of China’s last dynasty by enlisting Tsarist Russia’s assistance against other European powers, and details why China invaded Vietnam in 1979 in defiance of a Hanoi-Moscow pact. Reading this, one cannot help but draw a parallel to alleged Chinese influence at the July 2012 ASEAN Ministerial meeting, which failed to issue a joint position on South China Sea developments. One might then conclude warily that more such suspected interventions could be forthcoming.

But Kissinger’s closing chapters may assure the patient reader that China has no aspirations, at least officially, towards taking over global leadership in a US-led world. Unlike America with its “missionary” zeal to propagate its values worldwide, the Middle Kingdom (or so the author suggests) seeks only to Sinicise those who willingly come forward to pay it homage, as was the case in dynasties past. In this regard, while China’s preferred relationship with its neighbours might be that of a peaceful *Abang-Adik* (Malay for elder-brother/younger-brother) fraternity, such influence would be decidedly shorter ranged and more defensive

than America’s ideal vision of its place in the world and its relationship with strategic partners around the globe. Nevertheless, Singapore, with its relative geographic and cultural proximity to China, is bound to experience a growing degree of Chinese influence that former Secretary of State Madeline Albright has described as “too big to ignore, too repressive to embrace... and very, very proud”.

### **The Future of Sino-US influence in the Pacific**

The trajectory of the evolving Sino-US balance of power in the Pacific and its possible second-order effects on Singapore have been pondered by many, although pessimist views appear to dominate both sides of the Pacific at present. Both Colonel Liu Mingfu (author of *China Dream*) and Stanford Professor Ian Morris (author of *Why the West Rules — for Now*) expect substantial turmoil in the world order, with flare-ups as early as mid-21st century. Kissinger’s *On China*, however, ends on a non-committal but generally optimistic note, making the most reassuring and credible argument to date: that China’s peaceful development is “neither a ruse... nor naive delusion... [but] best serves Chinese interests and comports with the international strategic solution”. A prudent Singapore strategy would therefore be to encourage, without compromising its own aims, China’s



development along a path guided by considerations of legitimacy.

Among the many virtues of reading Kissinger's *On China* is a realisation of the vastly different timescales upon which the three countries of Singapore, US and China view their history — 40, 400 and 4,000 years respectively — along with the sobering fact that for most of recorded history, the GDP and advancement of the Middle Kingdom has

far outpaced that of Europe. It has been pointed out that China views current Western dominance not as a strategic shift, but as an aberration of the past few centuries that will eventually cease. On this basis, it has been argued that the much-vaunted “Rise of China” may be more accurately termed as the “Return of Sino-Centricity”. Readers of Kissinger's account might be inclined to agree. 🌸



OPINION

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# The Age of Angst

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How should governments contend with the rise of social discontent in the wake of rapid globalisation?

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BY  
**CHARLES NG**

Charles Ng is Assistant Director in the Legal Industry Division, Ministry of Law. Prior to this, he was Assistant Director in the National Security Coordination Secretariat. The views expressed in this article are his own.

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A sweeping groundswell of public discontent, catalysed by the advance of social networking technology, appears to be traversing both developed and developing countries alike. This phenomenon of social angst is evident even in countries that have experienced high growth rates and sustained prosperity in the face of a sluggish global economy. Of this discontent in Germany, Sanders writes:

*Shops are busy. Home sales are rocking. Unemployment hasn't been so low since the eighties. In terms of growth, profits and productivity, the current German economic boom has surpassed even the "wonder years" of the 1950s. These are, by several measures, the most successful people in the world... Yet it is very hard to find anyone here who is happy about this state of affairs... If*

*previous German booms were marked with a national mood of confidence and optimism, this is a prosperity of angst and fear... provoking Germans to turn against their government.<sup>1</sup>*

Such a response in even the better performing nations of the world — including Germany, Israel and Singapore — should give policymakers pause. What are the roots of this social angst? What implications might this “Age of Angst” hold for the social compact between governments and their people, and how should governments respond?

## The Origins of Angst

It is not the first time in history that the twin forces of globalisation and technology have generated social angst. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century was a well-documented period

with distinct similarities (see story on “Social Angst in the Industrial Revolution”). Both then and now, rapid economic progress and dramatic improvements in social connectedness led to profound social stresses, and consequently widespread socio-political movements and upheaval.

Historically, the convergence of a technological boom with exponential economic growth and integration tends to lead to a flattening and reordering of social hierarchies. In our time, the integration of markets and ease of labour flows that characterise globalisation have had three main palpable effects. First, they expose businesses to cheaper global labour, depressing wages of the broad middle class and resulting in reduced or even negative growth in real incomes for lower- and middle-income groups. Second, knowledge acquisition and management talent are prized and rewarded disproportionately. The result is a widened income gap. Third, large-scale migration driven by cross-border labour demand increases local tensions as societies struggle to adjust to the accelerated interaction and assimilation of disparate cultural groups.

In the past few years, two notable narratives have emerged across manifestations of social angst. The first is *depressive success* — the angst that arises when the positive effects of globalisation, though substantive, are slow to trickle down or are not spread evenly. The issue is partly one

of salience: while the overall benefits of globalisation may outweigh its tradeoffs, the frequency of having to deal with its defects has a disproportionate impact on people’s perceptions. This also explains why empirical improvements in economic outcomes may not result in correspondent improvements in perceptions of wellbeing. A growing sense of social dislocation at the pace of cultural and social change, greater income inequality and the local stresses that result from these global forces then arouse deeper existential concerns of fairness, belonging, identity and values, resulting in a *deficit of meaning*.

These narratives of social angst, and their underlying discontent, are then amplified by rapid developments in information and communications technology (ironically also a key driver for globalisation). Platforms such as social media accelerate and proliferate the exchange and expression of views, which in turn shape social dynamics with unprecedented pace and scale. The progression from ideation to mobilisation and collective action has become so rapid that traditional government institutions now struggle to keep up.

### Effects of Social Angst

The angst that is generated by these global forces affects society in three ways: it re-shapes national discourse by influencing the framing of popular issues; the polemical nature of discourse

Since 2004, Israel’s growth rates averaged

**4.5%**

per annum and unemployment had fallen from 11% to 6%. But in July 2011, crowds as large as 400,000 thronged the streets of Tel Aviv to express their discontent at the high cost of living.



Germany emerged relatively unscathed from the recession in 2009 and achieved a growth rate of

**3.5%**

in 2010, its best performance since 1991. Yet in this climate of economic prosperity, Stephan Grünewald, who interviewed 7,000 citizens for his book *Germany on the Couch* (Campus Verlag GmbH, 2006), writes, they are “repeatedly finding that despite the very good economic data, there is a huge amount of unease and uncertainty, where a manifest crisis of trust (is evident).”

creates new schisms in society; the relationship between government and the people is affected, and this influences the process of policymaking.

First, we begin to see angst influence and frame the local discourse. Although angst is fundamentally a result of global phenomena, it contextualises itself in the language of local concerns. In the past five years, there has been a global rise in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Correspondingly, the anti-immigrant narrative feeds on local flash points, arousing strong emotive feelings on issues of national identity, fairness and concerns about integration.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the polemical nature of the narratives of discontent has an ongoing polarising effect on society. Such angst tends to be directed against a common, oft-caricatured antagonist. If uncontrolled, such social discontent

## SOCIAL ANGST IN THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

**B**eginning in Britain with the introduction of textile-producing machinery, the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century and throughout most of the 19th century, quickly spread throughout Europe, shifting it from its predominantly agricultural and mercantilist base to an industrial economy. With it came a great burst of innovation, leading to critical developments such as factories, steam power, railroads, the telegraph, electricity, and more.

On the one hand, modern medicine, steam power, the telegraph and industrial processes of printing reinforced rising literacy and increased the life expectancy of children dramatically. On the other hand, as Brown and Hopkins<sup>1</sup> conclusively point out, the majority of people in Europe suffered severe reductions

in their living standards for most of the 19th century. Poor living and working conditions, malnutrition, unfettered population growth and depressed wages reflected the Dickensian realities of 19th century life. This combination of increased literacy, greater connectivity and lowered standards of living gave rise to a groundswell of discontent.

Notably, there was a growing clamour for political participation, leading to social unrest across Europe. In 1848 alone — without the internet or social media — the whole of Europe underwent an unprecedented wave of social revolutions. This puts to question theories that isolate the IT revolution as the sole cause for modern day social angst.

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### NOTE

1. Woodward, D. "Wage rates and living standards in pre-industrial England", *Past & Present* 91(1981): 28–46.  
[http://past.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/pdf\\_extract/91/1/28](http://past.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/pdf_extract/91/1/28)

can frame itself as “people against government”, “rich against poor”, “locals against foreigners”, “religious against non-religious”, and so on. We see this repeated in a number of issues, from the local-foreign divide to income inequality (see story on “When Does Angst Become a Movement?”). Increasingly, cultural differences will come to the fore. While such narratives may in fact increase and consolidate national identity (in a reactionary way), local concerns may begin to dominate national discourse, obscuring the global forces that are the real drivers of change.

Finally, social angst in the 21st century has the potential to permanently alter the relationship between government and the people. From “Occupy Wall Street” to the Arab Spring, angst has re-shaped the socio-political landscape, suggesting a shift in society’s expectations of the

policymaking process and political participatory norms. Nicholas Kulish observes “from South East Asia to the heartland of Europe and now even to Wall Street... citizens of all ages, particularly the young, are rejecting conventional structures like parties and trade unions in favour of a less hierarchical, more participatory system modelled in many ways on the culture of the Web”.<sup>3</sup> Yochai Benkler, director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, further argues that “a generation of 20- and 30-year-olds” are rejecting the old social structures of the “industrial economy”, and are searching for a new model of engagement between government and society to deal with the growing stresses that have emerged from globalisation as well as other longstanding local concerns.

## WHEN DOES ANGST BECOME A MOVEMENT?

Every social movement is broadly manifested in a three-part sequence: Ideation, Catalysation and Mobilisation. Ideation refers to the point at which the idea is planted and becomes a compelling narrative, shared and accepted by a substantial audience. Catalysation refers to an event or a series of incidents that ignites the movement. Mobilisation is the final phase where collective action is taken, bringing the narrative to fruition.

The Arab Spring of 2011 exemplifies this sequence. Prior to 2011, the narrative of angst that resulted from income inequality, corruption, high youth unemployment, perceived western injustice and growing political frustrations at the lack of democracy was gaining credence. The immolation of a single street vendor in Tunisia acted as the catalyst. Accelerated through the internet and social media, large crowds were mobilised and before long, a socio-political movement was underway.

### Dealing with the Age of Angst

Globalisation will remain a necessary driver of economic success, but governments will need to mitigate its affective fallout through an understanding of the underlying drivers of social discontent. While globalisation has no doubt brought about significant change and uncertainty to countries, its broad benefits should not come to be overshadowed by its costs (as embodied in the narrative of depressive success and deficit of meaning).

*Although angst is fundamentally a result of global phenomena, it contextualises itself in the language of local concerns.*

Three broad strategies might be pursued. First, governments need to detect and understand public perception early in order to influence the development of emerging social narratives in good time. This requires governments to integrate information-sharing efforts and to develop more effective sense-making capabilities. These should include broad analytical capabilities to determine, for example, whether particular public issues are borne out by facts on the ground or in fact represent gaps between perception and reality. Second, governments need the creative and emotional acumen to generate smart options in order to communicate, engage and influence the tenor and mood of discussions. For example, in

Finland, the maternity pack or “baby box”, a starter kit of toys, clothes and sheets given to every newborn child, has become a powerful symbol of a government that cares for its people. It serves as a reminder that narrative shaping actions do not always need to be expensive grand gestures. Third, good sense-making and communication should engender a collaborative process of policymaking that, if harnessed well, can help shore up social resilience.

Admittedly, in the long run, a more responsive and relational government is only half of the solution. A culture of collaboration, where multiple domains harnessed across society support and enhance the delivery of outcomes, is the essential ingredient to the recipe. In such a scenario, government will continue to play a leading role, except that it is now able to draw from a greater range of options and develop better pathways for policy implementation. Yet therein lies the challenge, for societies would need to undergo a paradigm shift where they eventually see themselves as partners in the solution, rather than just depending on governments to resolve all of society's ills.

History has shown us that difficult challenges have always unearthed opportunities for nations to unite around common goals and ideals. In the face of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in 1863 offered a language that enunciated American beliefs and goals, and aided a

country torn by internal strife to move beyond its existential challenges. When facing the tensions that arise from global change, governments must be able to enunciate a unifying goal or ideal that transcends current social difficulties.

Nevertheless, the factors that allow a society to deal with acute occurrences are quite different from those that allow it to respond to chronic forces. For example, Japanese society dealt remarkably well with the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. However, against

longer-term concerns like globalisation and ageing, Japan has proved itself less adaptable as its society continues to struggle to find a consensus to deal with these emerging issues. As governments learn to navigate the age of angst, they will have to expand their communication and engagement strategies, moving beyond conventional speeches and press releases to embrace affective approaches,<sup>4</sup> in order to more effectively shepherd social narratives towards the greater collective good. ✧

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## NOTES

1. Doug Sanders, "Germany's Season of Angst: How a Prosperous Nation is Turning on Itself", *Globe and Mail*, June 25, 2011.
2. Such as the Ferrari incident in Singapore. See <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120512-345585.html>
3. "Walking Out of the System". *International Herald Tribune*, September 29, 2011.
4. New York in the 1970s was struggling with the highest crime rates in the history of the city. This not only affected its public image, but also had aggravating effects on public opinion. Through a campaign to generate tourism, celebrated American graphic designer Milton Glaser devised the "I Love New York" symbol, which has endured far longer than anticipated. In an unintended fashion, this powerful symbol was heavily utilised by New Yorkers after 9/11 as a sign of solidarity collective strength.



# Context, Connection and Continuity: Governance in the Next Decade

Three eminent participants from Singapore's 5th Leaders in Governance Programme discuss the evolving role of the public sector, and the need for governments to engage with changing norms in society.

The ETHOS Roundtable was conducted by ETHOS Editor-in-Chief Alvin Pang in September 2012. Ms Vani Tripathi, Datuk Noharuddin Nordin and Ambassador S. Francis Moloi were participants in the 5th Leaders in Governance Programme (LGP) organised by the Singapore Civil Service College from 10–18 September 2012. Drawing from Singapore's development experience, the LGP offers practical insights into the fundamentals of good governance and effective policy implementation for sustainable economic development and social cohesion. Over the eight-day programme, participants interact with senior government officials and thought leaders, and visit key government agencies to understand their operating philosophies and values.

## PARTICIPANTS

**Ms Vani Tripathi**, National Secretary, Indian Bhartiya Janta Party, India

**Datuk Noharuddin Nordin**, Chief Executive Officer, Malaysian Investment Development Authority, Malaysia

**Ambassador S. Francis Moloi**, Chief Director, Department of International Relations and Cooperation, South Africa

## On Key Challenges Facing Governments Around the World

**Tripathi:** Despite India's yearly economic growth of a steady 9% or so, poverty, malnutrition, education and primary healthcare remain challenges. However, the greatest challenge India faces is demographic in nature: by 2014, 60% of India's massive population will be under 40. So we are a very old civilisation with a very young population — and young people are very difficult to please.

A young Indian person today is bombarded with stimulus that he or she often may not understand very well but which nevertheless influences their reaction to governance and policy. Some of our young people are brilliant and very well-educated, particularly in the urban centres, but there is great cynicism about political and governmental processes — and not just in India. All across the globe, young people feel disenfranchised from their political



systems. Nevertheless, we cannot just disregard them because they are disengaged. So the question is how do we effectively involve the young of our countries in the processes of governance from which they feel alienated?

**Moloi:** In African countries and in South Africa in particular, the major challenge is not so much in having the right policies — we have good plans for education, housing, infrastructure development and so on — but in the implementation of those policies. We operate in a context where there are many interrelated demands: youth unemployment, poverty, urban slums. What should we deal with first? Do we devote more resources to education or do we address immediate issues of crime and insecurity? We do not have the luxury of parking issues to one side and dealing with them one at a time. We must find the right balance of policy priorities and solutions in order to address the many challenges that we face.

What makes this even more difficult is that South Africa as a whole (not just the public sector but the private sector and NGOs as well) lacks the right mix of managerial, organisational, technical and leadership skills needed to respond to the challenges we have on the ground. So there is a lot of trial and error both in the civil service and outside government, and since not

every intervention is an appropriate one, issues are sometimes compounded.

It has also been my observation that in many African countries, the political mandate has not been viewed as a mechanism for service delivery to fulfil the needs of the people. Without greater public deliberation and understanding of the proper uses of power, we open the way to a lack of accountability, corruption and abuse.

*How do we effectively involve the young of our countries in the processes of governance from which they feel alienated?*

**Noharuddin:** To me, the biggest question is not so much what the right solutions are, but how we come to decide on the solutions and their implementation in the complex environments we have to operate in. The issue is how we define and understand our context and how we adapt the available solutions to our context.

Furthermore, not only must we develop solutions suited to the challenges we face in our own countries, but we have to do so in an interconnected world — we can no longer operate in isolation. Whatever we do, there is always an international context to consider. When I talk to businessmen in Malaysia, I tell them that there is no

such thing as a domestic market versus an overseas market — there is no such clear division anymore. In the past, the competitor to a sundry shop was another store down the road or in the neighbouring state. Now with giants such as Tesco and Carrefour coming in, their competitors are not their neighbours next door but companies in Europe and America. Competition is now global.

#### On the Responsibilities of Public Sector Leadership and the Nature of Talent

**Moloi:** The question of leadership becomes very critical: we need leaders who are skilled, focused, able to take very bold decisions and also able to influence people in a diverse society such as South Africa.

*Without greater public deliberation and understanding of the proper uses of power, we open the way to a lack of accountability, corruption and abuse.*

When we hosted the 2010 FIFA World Cup, we saw how sports could unify South Africa: the entire country from village to city came together to make it succeed, and we projected a South Africa that we could be proud of. However, we have not been able to sustain that momentum after the event. Continuous and consistent leadership is important.

Mr Mandela played a key role in taking us from apartheid to democracy and attempting to unify the people; now we need the same kind of leadership to take us forward through the challenges that we have. In the case of South Africa, we also need to have the right people with the right skills at the local government level. At the moment, the best minds are concentrated at the national level, but it is at the local level where intervention is most necessary.

**Tripathi:** People often have the idea that because they vote you in, you are supposed to be like a god, with the power to change or save lives. Government structures are then regarded as so many ranks under god. But that is not how it is. As a politician, I think of government as a process, and a very long road.

In India, the bureaucracy would sneer if I were to say that politicians and civil servants have a shared responsibility to implement policy and they too have to exercise leadership. They might say, this is your constituency, you're the politician, go do what you want to do. So one has to learn how best to work around the bureaucrats in the structure, and identify the ones who are effective and who can serve as a bridge between the government and the people. An important question then becomes: how do we identify these figures? How can we find out who are the best people to staff the bureaucracy?

**Noharuddin:** Everybody talks about talent. In every country, policymakers grapple with the “talent gap” in their country, and think about how they should adjust their education system in order to produce the right talent to match the needs of the market.

Unfortunately there is no clear definition of talent. What is it really? It is not just a function of education, or of knowledge of science and math. Sometimes the capability of a person is not a matter of intelligence but one of exposure. I have seen a lot of people who are brilliant — but neither they nor anybody else were aware of their brilliance until they were exposed to the right circumstances.

The right exposure can come very late in life — especially for those who are less fortunate or from the rural regions — so if we come up with a system where people are discounted at a very early age, we may be depriving them of the opportunity to move up and let their talents show. The country then also loses the talent. Our perception of talent can sometimes be too narrow. The kind of people we need tomorrow may not be the kind of people that delivered results in the past.

### On Dealing With an Uncertain Future and the Singapore Experience

**Moloi:** Just as the Singapore of fifty years ago is neither the Singapore of today nor the Singapore of thirty years to come, so we will all need

to deal with very different contexts in future. How do we respond to the changes and the opportunities that are out there? What type of skills and competencies will we need from our population and how do we acquire them? Can the skills that we relied on in 2000 be the same ones that we use to address the challenges of 2015? Obviously not — so this is where innovation and some creative thinking comes into play. We may be compelled not to focus so much on grades or on traditional concepts of talent but on other qualities.

One thing I have found helpful from the experience of Singapore is the concept of a whole-of-government approach to solving complex, interconnected problems. In South Africa, we do operate through what we call clusters of government, with ministries clustered under economic development, labour, international relations and so on, but these clusters do not quite communicate with each other. Yet one of the most effective ways of delivering service and developing policies that reinforce one another is for these clusters to connect and engage with each other.

**Noharuddin:** The most important thing is to have self-awareness. If you don’t see yourself for what you really are, then you wind up addressing the wrong issues. I think one important thing that Singapore has is a good process

for self-examination and assessment. It does not mean that you have all the solutions, but you have a mechanism for clarifying the issues, for anticipating and understanding the challenges that you will face, and that is a good start.

I think your process works also because you have the right people in the right place — some of them work out and some of them don't, but you practise meritocracy and you end up with a team that is able to deliver what Singapore aspires to be. One remarkable strength is how you are not only able to identify capable people, but also move them around from one organisation to another, apparently without any barriers at all, even to positions that they had not originally been trained for.

*Our perception of talent can sometimes be too narrow. The kind of people we need tomorrow may not be the kind of people that delivered results in the past.*

**Tripathi:** The vigorous participation of the people in democracies such as India can sometimes look like a disadvantage from the outside. But it also means that despite being very diverse, we are a people united by our political consciousness and principles. When we have issues, we fight over them, we have the means to express and debate our views — all of which enrich our policies and the country as a whole. It makes us more robust.

As a small country without resources, Singapore has developed a very successful, disciplined system thus far. You have some challenges with an ageing population and declining fertility. But I think your national debate is not really about these issues. When you began your development, you could not have envisaged the direction that society would take. Since the 1960s, society has become more progressive and more liberal. People's ideals and values have changed.

Are you listening to the voices that are now more open and critical of the way society is governed? From the perspective of the internet generation, I think there is a big gap between your print and broadcast media and what is being expressed on social media. You have to engage your population more instead of falling back on the collective instinct of controlling or censoring the media.

You need to make a conscious effort to open your doors more to young people, who are the future of any country, and also to women, whom I notice are a minority in government. Why women? Because I believe they are intrinsic community builders even if they may not always be economic providers, and they bring a different touch to leadership. I think these are the issues that Singapore will need to address a little more, in the challenging decades you have ahead. ✧





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