

Master-plans and paradigms
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By KJ John

My first job was at the Implementation, Coordination, and Development Administration Unit (ICDAU) in the then-Prime Minister's Department. My first boss was Clifford Francis Herbert.

On the first day of work, when three of us reported to ICDAU at the PM's Department, the administration officer assigned us to one shared room. The entire morning we were left to ourselves. Since we were in the PM's Department, we were even afraid of wandering around as we were in a Class One security area.

The three of us had fun 'boraking,' or what is today called 'lepaking'. The same afternoon the administrative officer called us in and wanted to learn more about us. So he asked us to introduce ourselves. We each did, giving our basic backgrounds and qualifications. This is today called a CV or biodata. In those days, they did not ask for them.

Then he asked a disturbing question: What had you all done all morning? I proffered a quick response as I was bothered by the "not-so-clever question". I said, "I was reading my newspapers, which I had brought along." He immediately chided me without any hesitation and suggested that, "we do not like smart people in the Public Service."

I now realise that this was a lesson I will learn, relearn, and refuse to unlearn in some areas of life itself. Smartness knows the difference between context and text in any given circumstance.

Then he asked an even more inquisitive question: "Who has done a research project while in the university?" Two of us replied that we had, as part and parcel of our undergraduate thesis project at the Faculty of Economics and Administration at the University of Malaya. Our third colleague answered that he had not because he was in the Arts Faculty with a major in Economics and was not required to do so.

Then this smart Public Service 'boss' said something that sent me ballistic. He concluded, "This means you cannot do research." I immediately interjected, "That does not necessarily follow." To which the boss looked at me rather angrily and sternly and said, "We do not like clever people in the public service." I did not respond but kept quiet as I knew I could not push the envelope any further without 'losing my job!' Basic survival, too, is also real.

'Not-so-smart' character left behind

Within a week, my two colleagues were transferred out to different ministries, and this "not-so-smart" character was left alone and behind. But what the smarter manager did not know was that I had specifically requested to be posted to this department because two of my other good friends and classmates were already there and they told me it was a very good place for great work.

Therefore, when he asked around with former classmates from UM, they all said I should be retained. My classmates were Malays, were on government scholarships and therefore on "attachment" with the government even before the Public Service Commission interviews. I joined after success with the PSC interviews.

NONEOne of my first big assignments was to prepare research papers with policy issues and concerns for the PM, through our bosses at the ICDAU. The then-prime minister, Abdul Razak Hussein (right), had set up the National Operations Council (NOC) as the nerve centre of "all project monitoring and evaluation."

The so-called RED (or the Rural Economic Development) Book system of project monitoring was started jointly by the PM and Field Marshal Gerald Templar.

Templer was Field Command Officer of the British Forces in Malaya's war against militant communism of 1948-1960. The project management system was used to monitor and ensure development in 'hot areas', or sometimes called red areas with many communist sympathisers.

Razak, jointly with other leaders of the Public Service then (Razak was a public servant before he went into politics), deployed the same agenda and military model of "physical project development" to now ensure that progressive battle against poverty and starvation would also become successful.

For the formal record one can state categorically that Malaysia is the only country in the modern world that has fought and won a militant war against communist ideology, poverty and starvation within one generation.

Nevertheless, the subject of master planning of a strategic kind was never a trait that belonged to the operational levels of the public services. Most were only 'operational grassroots leaders' who can only handle operational level of technical realities; but lack the conceptual skills requisite of higher order thinking, contemplation, and reflection. Therefore, at UCSI, our Master's in Public Policy is designed to address this issue.

DG fainted and taken to hospital

In 1973, during one of those 'infamous NOC Briefings' scheduled for the Tourism Department, the director-general led the team. ICDAU officers had visited and reviewed their projects, and written views, and raised issues and concerns for the review of the PM and his select team of cabinet ministers.

The then-DPM, Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, only asked one question to the DG after his "powerful briefing", Where is the master-plan for the tourism development of Malaysia?

With that question, the DG fainted and an ambulance came and took him to the hospital. The rest became history and folklore about how to come prepared before the NOC, especially when one gives a briefing to the powers that be.

That lesson taught me that regardless of how clever or smart you are, one is better off always assuming that there are smarter people always around. After all the David and Goliath story is within our recollection, simply to state the fact that there are many factors outside of human cognition which also defines the future, and often reality.

A headline last week in The Sun read: "Langkawi action plan: RM5 billion to turn idyllic island into a premier destination by 2015". My only problem with this action plan is that it is called "Langkawai Tourism Blueprint 2-11-2015." The language defines both the etymology and the operating philosophy of its intent.

My fear that it will be limited to focus only upon physical infrastructure plans with ambitious programmes for customer attraction and promotion but only from a production point of view. But, not from a customer or market point of view.

My guess also is that this so-called physical development plan is not about how to develop and nurture the people of Langkawi to improve their English, or the social and interpersonal skills, or how to teach them to share their culture and values to outsiders and visitors.

It is definitely not about teaching the Kedah Islamic Religious Department 'How not to undertake raids on foreigners and accuse them of khalwat'; regardless of the reasons and the number of complaints received. My guess is it's not a socio-cultural development plan.

NONEldris Jala (left) is reputed to always say in his lectures that he does not like the word 'plan' and prefers the word 'programmes'. I agree that our focus should be programmes and not plans. He then teaches the step-by-step process of programme development. Any organisation that has not "captured

this form of organisational learning” cannot unlearn the bad habits, and relearn new habits for improvement and change.

My sincere prayer is that both the secretary-general of the Tourism Ministry and the minister will read my column, so that they will not have to faint come 2015; because we the people will evaluate them on the RM5 billion spent in terms of outcomes and impact; and never from inputs or outputs alone.

May God bless Malaysia with better planning and a real paradigm shift.

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