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ACOMMUNICATION FOR ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS: THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to address this Conference on the subject of Language in Development.

2. The Malaysian Public Service has undergone considerable change since the country achieved independence in 1957. It has transformed itself from a maintenance-oriented administration in the 1950s, to a customer-oriented administration in the 1990s. This evolution was made possible by the numerous administrative reforms introduced to help public sector agencies keep abreast with the political and economic developments in the country.

3. The focus of the public service immediately after independence in 1957 was to maintain law and order and generate revenue. Jolted by unprecedented social and economic crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and pressed by rapid changes in political and public opinion, the government became increasingly concerned with efficiency and effectiveness of the public service. There was an urgent need to adopt and develop new structures, inculcate good values among civil servants so that they could participate effectively in the economic development of the country, generate more employment opportunities, provide more responsive and flexible services, and ensure greater coordination among all agencies, to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Thus, many of the administrative and managerial reforms introduced by the government reflect these needs.

4. In the 1960's and the 1970's, the main focus was on the upgrading of the capacity and the capability of public sector agencies to spearhead the nation's modernization efforts. The establishment of the Development Administration Unit in 1966, the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) in 1972, and the Malaysian Administrative Modernization and Management Unit (MAMPU) in 1977 are important landmarks of this phase of institution building. Values, Public Service Efficiency and Effectiveness

5. In the 1980s, new administrative and managerial reforms were introduced to transform the public service into a more dynamic and higher performing entity. The reforms were aimed at changing the work culture of civil servants and simplifying existing systems and procedures. Recognizing the fact that attitudinal and value changes are critical to any reform efforts, several programmes were introduced to instill desirable work ethics. These include the introduction of the Excellence in the Civil Service Programme (1979), the call for a Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy Government (1982), the Look East Policy (1982), the introduction of the Punch-Clock System and the Name-Tag (1983), the call for Leadership by Example (1983), the Malaysia Incorporated concept (1983), the Inculcation of Islamic Values (1986), and the Excellent Work Culture Movement (1989). The Look East Policy, for example, called Malaysians to adopt the work attitudes of the Japanese and the Koreans.

The Malaysia Incorporated Concept called for the greater cooperation between the private and public sectors.

6. Reform efforts that were introduced to simplify systems and procedures include the documentation and use of Manual of Office Procedures and the Desk Files and the use of Quality Control Circles (1983). All these efforts were aimed at further improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the public service.

7. The decade of the 1990s which is marked by increasing global competitiveness in the international market, brings additional challenges for the public sector. To meet these new challenges, our leaders realise that the public sector must continuously pursue reform efforts that will help to enhance the knowledge and skills of the employees and the efficiency and effectiveness of the organizations so as to remain relevant in a rapid changing environment. It is also essential to develop a public sector that is pro-

active in the delivery of services. The public sector must transform itself from its traditional role of being the custodian of public good and the implementers of socio-economic programmes to becoming the facilitator, pacesetter and regulator of policies, while the private sector becomes the "engine of growth".

8. Among the administrative reforms that have been introduced in the 1990s are - Total Quality Management (1992) Client's Charter (1994) Innovation Awards (1991) MS ISO 9000 (1996), and Electronic Government (1996) From the above, one can see that 2 sets of reforms are involved.

Administrative Reforms In The Form Of Policies

9. One set is in the form of national level policies that are normally and closely associated with reforms to the economic, social and political systems. These reforms were introduced in direct response to and in support of changes in the policy stance of the government. Examples of such reforms include the Look East Policy, the Malaysia Incorporated Concept and the Privatization policy. Agencies are required to implement these national policies.

Administrative Reforms As Good Management Practices

10. The second set of reforms are good management practices, the implementation of which will lead to improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of individual agencies. These reform efforts include the introduction of the punch-clock, name tags, quality control circles, good work values and ethics, total quality management, MS ISO 9000, client's charter, productivity measurement, and project planning and management. These reforms are basically concerned with making changes to organizational structures, rules and procedures, the management of personnel and to the provision of services. Thus, administrative reforms at this level were geared towards making the organizations more functional and more efficient.

CHALLENGES IN INITIATING AND IMPLEMENTING ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

11. All administrative reforms that were introduced into the public service represent the pro-active and re-active responses of the public service to the changes that were taking place in its immediate environment. The public service as a whole must continuously identify, analyze and respond to its environment. The initiation and implementation of reform efforts across the public service has not been an easy task. There are many more challenges to be faced, and among these are - (a) The difficulty in changing the mind-sets of employees; (b) Training and retraining to implant new skills and knowledge, and to increase management capacity and operational capacity in the current complex environment; (c) Effective communication of the rationale for new policies, and (d) Appropriate methodology for the implementation of these reforms.

12. A positive mindset among employees is critical for the successful implementation of reform efforts.

However, it is not easy to change the mind-set of employees in an organization. In our own experience we found there was considerable reluctance to change.

Most employees have found an equilibrium in their working environment - a comfort zone where everything is perceived to be operating without any problems.

Under this mind-set, they follow the philosophy that if it isn't broken, why bother to fix it. There have been others who believe that the public service cannot be improved and that any reform efforts are a waste of time. Myopia may also prevail among some employees who choose to see their own narrow area of work and remain ignorant of the changes taking place in their immediate environment. When these circumstances prevail, it will be difficult to introduce and implement reform efforts as the employees would not be supportive of change. The best ideas will remain mere ideas if those responsible for implementing them chose not to implement them.

13. To ensure continuous acquisition of new knowledge and skills, the integration of information

technology into management and administration is another challenge. Acquisition of knowledge and skills is possible through training, both practical and academic, as well as through reading. Knowledge and skills acquired through whatever means can be used as the basis to discover further knowledge and skills, apart from improving one's work and working habits.

While some may not have had the opportunity to attend training or catch-up with reading (because of workload), for the majority, complacency sets in after entering the labour market. Local research has shown that very few keep up with reading or with the writing habit once they start working. Without adequate knowledge of the changes in the environment, not only will one not see the need for change, but one would also NOT know changes will be required for the public service to function effectively. As a result, reform efforts initiated at the central level may not be seen as a positive thing but more as an additional chore to be avoided, if possible.

14. The next challenge we face is in the area of communications. How do we communicate effectively to the employees of the entire public service the intention, the implementation methodology and the expected benefits of each reform effort? This is an area that must be given special attention. Since the theme of this conference is on language and communications, I will focus on the specific topic of effective communication for the successful implementation of our reform efforts. I will examine three aspects of the communication process that I consider to be important for the introduction and implementation of reform efforts.

These are - (a) The principles of communication; (b) The noises that prevent effective communication; and (c) The effectiveness of the present strategies used to communicate the reform efforts to all levels of the public service.

15. Communications theories suggest that in any communication process there must be five main elements, namely - (a) a sender; (b) a receiver; (c) the message; and (d) a medium to transmit the message from the sender to the receiver to the sender to confirm that the receiver's understanding of the message was as intended by the sender.

In the context of a reform effort, effective communication is considered to have taken place when the intentions of the originator (sender) of the circular or instruction correspond with the intentions of the circular as perceived by the receiver. In this rather simplified communications model, it is clear that there can be problems or shortcomings. Each of these problems can singularly or jointly affect the quality of communication and hence affect the implementation of an administrative-reform effort.

Effectiveness of Present Strategies To Communicate The Reform Efforts 16. The government uses various strategies to communicate its administrative reforms in the public service. The government has, to date, issued 21 Development Administration Circulars and several Treasury Circulars. Each circular will contain the rationale for the reform, principal concepts and guidelines or methodology for implementation. Each circular requires the agency to plan and implement the requirements of the circular. This may require changes in policies, processes, structures or methods.

Additional guidelines are issued to complement circulars aimed at helping agencies implement them.

17. INTAN has designed and developed training packages to train officers and staff to implement these circulars. For example, training is provided for implementing total quality management, MS ISO 9000, quality control circles, micro accounting system and project planning and management. Meetings, conferences, forums and exhibitions are used to convey the intent of the circulars, potential benefits and implementation strategies. At times, the Prime Minister, or the Chief Secretary to the Government, will be involved in launching some of these reform efforts. These are intended to drive home the message that the government is serious in implementing administrative reforms.

18. Publications such as CEKAP, ISO Forum and P & O (Productivity and Quality) Bulletin outlining administrative reforms are published at regular intervals to discuss success stories and provide additional information on how these circulars can be implemented in all government agencies. Quality awards such

as the annual Prime Minister's Quality Award and the Chief Secretary to the Government's Quality Award are used to provide recognition of agencies that have successfully improved their quality of service through the implementation on these reform efforts.

19. Despite these multiple strategies that are aimed at communicating the reform efforts to government agencies, there are still problems. This is partially attributable to failure in the communication process.

Effective communication is difficult in the public service for various reasons. One such reason is its size (about 830,000 in all) and another is the complexity of its organizational structure and complexity of location/distribution. At times, the Development Administration Circulars and other documents do not reach those working in the interiors.

Since communication will be facilitated by the cumulating of knowledge about the reform efforts, those not in touch with the ongoing reform efforts may find it difficult to comprehend the need for administrative reforms.

20. It is possible but extremely difficult to train all civil servants on each of the 21 circulars. Even if it were feasible operationally, it will have enormous cost implications. INTAN has had to be selective in its provision of training, and has had to be selective in its efforts to train public servants to change. It uses the strategy, where suitable, of providing shorter awareness sessions to top management and more-in-depth training to middle level managers involved in actual implementation. INTAN has also adopted the strategy of training trainers who, in turn, will help to train other officers and staff.

21. The public service is not homogenous. It includes officers and staff from various disciplines, with different educational backgrounds, academic levels, experiences and personal motivation. All these will influence their perception of the administrative reform efforts, and thereby their acceptance or rejection of these efforts.

22. To overcome these problems in communicating reform efforts to the entire public service, more efforts must be made to distribute circulars and other documents to officers and staff serving in the interior areas. Officers with an aptitude for training are encouraged to undergo the Training of Trainers course and monitor their subsequent efforts in training others in their respective organizations.

There is also a need for more enforcement to ensure compliance with the circulars. Voluntary compliance can be encouraged by rewarding individuals (and organizations) who have successfully implemented the reform efforts.

CONCLUSION 23. The success of administrative reform efforts initiated from the centre of the government depends greatly on the implementers of these reforms.

Communicating the intent of the reforms to these implementers is critical to ensure successful implementation. The communication process is far more complex than we think. A good understanding and appreciation of the principles of communication is therefore important. Communication will help us design more effective communication strategies to help ensure successful implementation of administrative reform efforts. As the paper indicates, the current strategies used in communicating administrative reforms must be supplemented by additional strategies, to ensure more effective communication and thereby making the effort more successful.

24. I wish you a fruitful and productive debate. On this note, I am pleased to officially inaugurate this Conference.