

22/06/2009 - The New Storm - Building Leadership Through The Currency Of Character

Bismillahir rahmanir rahim

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakaatuh dan Salam Sejahtera

Mr Paul Zahra  
Vice President of CAPAM

Tan Sri Ismail Adam,  
Director-General of Public Service Malaysia

Madame Jocelyne Bourgon  
President Emeritus, Canada School of Public Service

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Welcome to CAPAM Board of Directors and all foreign participants to INTIM, the INTAN regional campus in Kemaman. Kemaman I am told, was mentioned as early as the second century BC by the Greek astrologer, Ptolemy. He identified two ports in his travels of then Malaya, Kole or Kemaman and Perimula now thought to be the mouth of Terengganu River by historians.

2. So I must welcome all of you to the historic town of Kemaman as we know it now and I am honoured to be here today amongst my friends and colleagues from the Commonwealth countries.

#### SLOWING DOWN

3. This conference's theme – Building Public Service Leadership Capacity – has become a topic for debate amongst the general public today. In the past, the deliberations of public sector success hinged on issues ranging from reform to modernisation. The demand for a digital public sector followed as a result.

4. The essence of what makes a service, service is still debated today. In the past the demand was for quick and fast service to serve the customer in a hurry. This led to further digitisation of service and the erosion of personal touch in service delivery.

5. Failures of unimaginable proportions in countries that were in the trajectory of success for centuries, has called to question the basics of what grounds the sustainability and relevance of an economy, a society, a nation. The renewed desire to move away from the fixation of profit maximisation to ethics and values-based business model is influencing all industries. This new storm challenges the very concept and principles of service. Can we revert to service levels of a pre-digitised societal structure in this new world order?

#### ANDROCLES CHRONICLES

6. The reminiscent of Androcles Chronicles, now used by schools and many institutions, brings home some very simple and basic message on delivery of service. It is a fable of a slave named Androcles who takes to the desert to escape an abusive master. As he wandered in search of food and shelter, he comes upon a lion's den. As he turned to flee for his life, to his surprise the Lion stood still. The Lion's paw was swollen. Embedded within was a huge thorn. Androcles removed it and dressed the wound. The lion's gratitude knew no bounds. He looked upon the man as his friend, and they shared the cave for some time together.

7. Years later Androcles was to meet the lion, but under different circumstances, when he was thrown into an arena to be eaten by beasts at a public spectacle in the theatre. On the fateful day when the beasts were let loose into the arena, amongst them stood a lion of huge bulk and ferocious aspect. To the amazement of the spectators, the lion did not pounce on him but instead lay down at his feet with every

expression of affection and delight. It was his old friend of the cave! The spectators clamoured for the slave's life to be spared and that both should receive their liberty.

#### EMOTIONS DEFINE SERVICE RATINGS

8. This fable presents a few poignant messages; the most profound of them is that when a service is rendered and tailored to the needs of the recipient, the experience stays to eternity. For the Lion, the service was given at what seemed like the last mile in life itself. The emotional impact of the service stayed with it for years to come. More importantly the gratitude of such service remains where memories fail. This holds true for the good, the bad and the ugly sides of service. It also brings home a message; even the most ferocious critic can be tamed by good service.

9. How we reach out will touch the senses of our beneficiaries, our customers. In the instance of the public service, the challenge is not about which wave of technology to go for, as much as it is where are the touch points of the public. It is about where the hot-bed issues are and how these touch the public nerve and pulse? What moves the masses, what pulls at the heart strings and what is simply not for negotiation.

10. The parameters for public service strength which was once led by downsizing, reform and modernisation, is now overtaken by the clamour for soft skills to make service real, simple and sensible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

#### FRAGMENTED, POLARISED AND INTERDEPENDENT WORLD ORDER

11. What comes to mind when we think of the typical Malaysian, Singaporean, English, African or Indian families today? Twenty years back it was straight forward: the average family was an extended family or an intact nuclear family comprising parents and children ranging from two on average to five in the more eastern countries.

12. This no longer holds true in any one culture and country. Families are increasingly diverse, and while the predominant family type is still headed by both father and mother, the number of children in each family is shrinking and the nature of family relationships is also changing. These trends challenge the family's ability to fulfil basic functions of production, reproduction, and socialisation. It has redefined the needs of family members regarding health, nutrition, shelter, physical and emotional care and personal development.

13. These social transformations, a result of changing socio-political-economic environment globally has called to question the traditional definition of family and more importantly has challenged the conventional portfolios of public service. As the pressure to make it in a much globalised world ramps up, the challenge of keeping a traditional family defies customs and dares establishments.

14. It is not uncommon to find children today growing up in single-parent homes. Parents travel between a number of jobs to keep up with the monthly bills. Working mothers, single mothers, unmarried professional women are amongst the people who make the present-day fabric of society not only in Malaysia, but across continents.

15. Once ostensibly conservative societies are battling modern social ails and ills. In this world order of seeming fragmentation in social order, we are also so incredibly interconnected and interdependent as nations and societies.

16. We have learnt from experience that when economies in a continent wane, prosperity and affluence can be hurt elsewhere. One person with a deadly flu can concurrently affect several nations and a pandemic would possibly ensue. Open burning in one country can affect the air quality in several neighbouring lands. Excessive development in one part of the world affects the climate in another part of the world. Labour market constraints in one country can result in human trafficking issues in another land.

This is what it means to share this world in the 21st century.

17. Given a fragmented and polarised social fabric in an interdependent world order, “off-the-shelf” solutions to events can no longer apply. The healthcare, education, social benefits, infrastructure, economy and service level demands which used to be of a one and similar mould needs to now be viewed on a case by case basis. It is in such an order that we need to search our souls for our real strengths.

18. Does the strength lie in the hardware or software of what makes our service relevant to our customers? The fundamental questions for a public sector in such a scenario, I would argue are but two:

i. What are the skills needed to deal with this new world order?; and

ii. What are the battles to pursue to win the war of service?

#### PUBLIC SECTOR SERVICE LEVEL IMPACT

Colleagues,

19. We are a service sector. That is as plain as day. I cannot but say that the most fundamental skill in succeeding in a service industry is to be able to influence our customer - to be able to have our customer believe in our delivery, and trust in our product. To have the customer come back for more and/or recommend to others our service. We live in times, when people choose a service not for money but for emotional attachment. People come back for more not because the advertisements were great and mind blowing, but because the quality of service that was rendered touched them. As in the case of Androcles.

20. The public service is reminded that they are a service with no competition. That our public has NO choice. That there is No alternative. This is said to have led to public sector the world over to lean towards plain complacency. Whilst in principle it may be true, but in practice it cannot but be farther from the truth.

21. If the service fails to deliver to the standards aspired, a country can lose its competitiveness, lose its direct investments and could result in associated brain drain issues. Whilst the choices are not as plain and upfront, the ramifications and repercussions of a non-performing public sector are great in its impact and implications to the nation, its people, its economy.

22. That the risks are greater, the investments therein have to be more astute. By this argument, the skills required in delivering a public sector service has to be far more demanding than that which one would demand from the private sector.

23. Yet we are often benchmarked to the delivery of private sector as a model of service and customer relations. I would argue that our levels and standards have to be more superior to that of the private sector, if we are to have the private sector succeed in our economies.

24. Without a functioning and effective public sector, the private sector will not find its full potentials. The facilitation by the public sector enables the private sector to create jobs and business.

25. Unlike private sector businesses which often have a more defined customer profile, the customer profiles of a public sector span the spectrum, from youth to adults, to the elderly, to the homeless; from locals to foreigners, from professionals to academics to farmers in the rice fields.

26. To be able to manage such a gamut of customer profile, the public sector must have the skills and leadership to transact and interact with people from all walks of life, in any situation under any circumstances.

#### SKILLS AND MEASURES TO SERVE

27. To be able to deliver such levels of service, on the scale and complexity of the state of play today, the fundamental personal qualities of those who make the service becomes imperative and vital. The argument of best brains alone will serve best can no longer hold true. The notion of modernisation in systems can no longer hold water. It must be a combination of personal qualities wrapped in strength of character operating in a well enabled environment.

28. When strength of character is imbued in our officials, integrity and accountability becomes the bed of service which we offer the public.

29. In a space where strength of character and personal qualities becomes the basis for sound service, how can key performance indicators play a role? I am often reminded that people behave the way they are measured. If people behave the way they are measured then what happens when we humanly fail to set the right measures?

30. Empowerment must play a role in reaping the best out of our people. The age old argument of how much should you empower so that you do not lose control of the control itself comes to mind. This again goes back to personal qualities. A person of integrity would know his or her boundary of limits.

31. Fundamentally, imbuing people with the quality and strength of character is by far the most urgent need and imperative in our service sectors.

32. We have seen much investment in nano technology and speed of light machinery. The rant and rave of what's next in technology has left most longing for the return to the basics of human and personal touch – a real voice at the end of a telephone line, a customised message to feel that you have been served and not be part of a computer-generated message, a “have a nice day” greeting at the end of a transaction, or an uninitiated follow through call of service. In short, consumers today are demanding the service of humans and not human-generated machines.

#### BATTLES TO PURSUE TO WIN THE WAR OF SERVICE

33. When the bars of our skills are high, the goals of our delivery become wider and deeper. If we are to return to the basics of service yet pursue modernity, I'd say that the 3 areas of priority which a public service must show leadership in character are as follows:

Priority 1: Serving From Cradle To Grave.

34. Stating the obvious, a nation holds no measure without its people. The relevance of the public sector is in its ability to reach out to serve the needs of the youth, the adult and the elderly in communities. In essence, to serve demands from cradle to grave. And, of divergent and diverse customers.

35. The capacity required in such an instance is to properly understand how the needs of a child in the city changes to that in a suburb. The instinctive understanding of the youth's need to excel in an environment where most are socially disadvantaged, to a society where Ivy League education is almost a given. The intuitive needs of a housewife against a career mother.

36. Seemingly same gender, race, colour, creed no longer takes the front stage to service as much as conditions of life itself.

37. The challenge for public sector today therefore is how do we customise our products and services to ensure the various expected outcomes? How do we train our officials to extend the simple innovations of service to make a difference in the lives of the varied publics? How do we equip officials to move beyond programmed solutions to customised service?

Priority 2: Offering Boutique Across All Social Infrastructure.

38. Social infrastructure that commands our societies today are by default designed by the needs of the demographics. The bars of service delivery in healthcare, education, public transportation, local councils are set by the demands of a fragmented yet interdependent social fabric which governs the world today. The speed of service and waiting time in our hospitals must commensurate the quality of healthcare solutions for a society in a hurry. Air travel once deemed only for the privileged is now experienced by all through the introduction of budget airlines.

39. In such an environment, how we serve the varying income profiles, but with the same demands for safety and security and no less courtesy, characterises the strength of a public sector. People of varying incomes, experiencing the same service albeit at different quality levels, yet demanding the same service standards.

40. How does a nation do this without being faced with excessive numbers and costs in public officials? So is the answer in the number or quality of people we recruit to offer the boutique service?

### Priority 3: Serving Across Economic Models.

41. As economies liberalise in some parts of the world, and regulate in others, the service levels desired in such extremes become imperative. The quality in our service is dependent not so much on the understanding of economics as it is in the understanding of the basic needs of the people across the two extreme models of liberalised and regulated markets.

42. For decades now we have focused on the hardware of salvaging economies, and we have as a result probably not done enough in inculcating an economy of character. The currency of character will serve any model as it will know the boundaries and the limitations of each model.

43. Extending this argument further, the currency of character is driven by principles, governance and corporate social responsibilities. It will not be driven by greed, callousness and self interests. No economy or nation, I would safely argue can sustain its relevance and continued competitiveness without it being based on character. The testaments of the recent past would plainly support this argument.

44. So simply put, across economies and infrastructure needs, the one poignant aspect of service that can serve a fragmented yet interdependent social fabric is strength of character. We need to boost the FDI into our economies of character.

### DEFINING OUR WAYS

45. So long as our relationship with our customers and our stakeholders is defined by our differences as opposed to our common needs as citizens of a nation, we cannot be in a position to empower the quality and integrity of what is offered in a service.

46. I would also argue that the more we breed differences between us the provider and the customer, the more we cannot build a bridge of engagement and cooperation; only one of conflict and disagreements. The order of them and us must move to the next cycle of us, the people and the country. As one.

47. I recognise that the civil service of Malaysia needs to further improve its currency of character. I also recognise that character is built from the cradle, not at the grave. The roles that you and I have as parents and mentors at home and at work will define the society we develop.

48. It is important thus for a service sector to move beyond the hard agenda of bottom-line towards soft skills of character and strength.

49. I am convinced that in order to move forward, we must have a public service that is action-oriented, that explains its actions to the public, which allows for engagement and consultation with the customers.

50. The best public service are the best listeners. There must be a sustained effort to listen to the public;

to learn from their angst and anxieties; to respect their frustrations and from there to practice a service that caters for their needs.

51. To do this we need character. We need more Androcles.

With that, I thank you.