

"We Must Unleash Our Creative Force Together"

(RAKAN Sarawak's series of interviews with the
STATE SECRETARY on
DEFINING PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY)



face when he or she is deciding to be a civil servant is to give up on the relatively higher salaries and more opportunities to make money that he or she could possibly have being in the private sector.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: In our readings on the history of the Sarawak civil service, we came across these descriptions of the people that Rajah Brooke, in his letter to Templer, had requested to be sent to work in Sarawak. He wrote: "You are aware how little pecuniary inducement we can offer to (Sarawak officers). They will be poor but independent and they will share the success of the government. If they have higher feelings, they will appreciate being nobly employed and leading a life of usefulness...Now for the qualifications, sweet temper is indispensable, (good) judgment in preference to ability and native ability in preference to acquired; moderate and just minded, plucky, refined and gentle. I want them heart and soul in their work."

Would you say that this still very much applies as a requirement for today's civil servants here in Sarawak?

YB DATU WILSON BAYA DANDOT (STATE SECRETARY): Yes, I certainly think so, especially the last phrase he used: "heart and soul in their work". That is basically what we still expect of our civil servants. But the context of how we should look at it is definitely different.

During the Rajah Brooke's time, those who were sent to serve here in Sarawak gave up their "heart and soul" for their jobs because they had to give up their homes and all that were dear to their hearts – family, friends, homeland. But in today's context, we are fortunate that we do not have to face heart wrenching decisions that our counterparts during the Brooke era had to face. Perhaps, the only tough decision that one will need to

When we made the choice to be a civil servant, we have in effect made a decision to put the peoples' interests and welfare above our own. That is the true calling of a civil servant. Rewards, in terms of monetary or other tangible rewards such as public recognition, might not even be forthcoming when we do our jobs. The main consolation that we have as civil servants is the fact that whatever we do will be for the good of our families, friends, neighbours, and our country and state.

So, seen in that context, we are not being asked to "sacrifice" in much the same way that the civil servants during Rajah Brooke's time had to.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: How would you describe a civil servant whose heart and soul is in his/her work?

STATE SECRETARY: Sarawak civil servants in the past were asked to give up what was dear to their hearts and souls in order to serve in an unknown, distant, strange land and work for the welfare of people whom they can only remotely and vaguely relate to in terms of culture, traditions, manners and beliefs.

How much more should we be able to give of our hearts and souls into our jobs when we know that we are fundamentally serving our own families, communities and country?

Putting one's heart and soul into our work doesn't mean that we become obsessive with our jobs at the expense of other areas of our lives. It simply means being totally committed to providing the best service that we can to the people whom we are called to serve.

For instance, we should be prepared to put in more than the usual number of hours into our work day, if and when the situation demands it. There will be days when we must be willing to work overtime, without expecting any additional compensation or even words of thanks, in order to meet the peoples' need for efficient and compassionate service from us.

Besides giving of our time to meeting the peoples' needs, we must also be constantly on our toes thinking of ways that would meet the changing expectations of the people. This requires a great deal of the spirit of creativity and innovation from each one of us in the civil service, especially since we are living in a world that is constantly changing and evolving. We cannot get caught in the rut of doing the same thing the same way that we've been doing it if the need of the time has changed. Or else, we end up disappointing people and eventually, we will become irrelevant.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: You mentioned creativity and innovation. How do you define creativity?

STATE SECRETARY: In a metaphorical sense, I'd like to quote Warren G. Bennis: "There are two ways of being creative. One can sing and dance. Or one can create an environment in which singers and dancers flourish." Of course, we are certainly not tasked to perform a song-and-dance routine up on stage. Our work-a-day world is so far removed from those of artists, inventors, craftsmen, and performers who are almost always recognized and rewarded for their creative talents.

Civil servants are rarely recognized or expected to be creative. In fact, we do not have the "license" to give way to our creative bent in performing our tasks since our primary duty is to be the custodians and watchmen of the structures, processes, systems, procedures that are needed to lend stability and security to our country. We cannot change systems and procedures simply at our whim.

And so, the second category that Bennis described, would be apt as far as creativity in the civil service is concerned. We have been handed the means, mechanisms, resources and capacities that enable us to create an environment in which the rest of society can flourish, where everyone in society can do a better job in whatever field or occupation or position they are in, where the rest of our citizens are able to lead a meaningful and productive life because we are able to give them the help and assistance that they require at the time that they needed it.

In that context then, a creative civil servant is one who has the ability to work around and rise above whatever limitations he or she may face that could potentially disrupt or lower the standard of service that he is expected to provide to the public. Civil servants demonstrate this ability when, for example, they have the initiative to think of solutions to problems or issues without waiting for their heads of department to instruct them. They will then exert efforts to convince their superiors on the viability of their proposed solution, crafting a well-laid out and articulate plan-of-action, which will make it easier for their superiors to approve and/or allocate resources for them to carry out the plan.

Or another example will be of civil servants who do not hesitate to work beyond official working hours in order to complete whatever paper works are necessary for their superiors to make an important decision on the applications of the customers. They know that any delay can cause a spiral of unpleasant circumstances that will affect the customer's business or family affairs. By the simple act of extending their working hours, they have actually created an environment for the customer's business to flourish or help lift a man's spirit who has been previously burdened by an unpleasant situation.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: What is that one thing that you believe can spark creativity and innovation in the civil service?

STATE SECRETARY: That spark of creativity stems from a person's keen desire to keep on improving and upgrading. For example, desiring to keep our offices clean and welcoming for our customers will move us to go the extra mile of bringing flowers or plants to the office, even if we are not expected to. That latent creativity in each one of us will be activated when we consciously start the day asking ourselves, "How can I make my day, and eventually, those of others' around me, be better today?"

Creativity and innovation begins when we try to understand how our customers would respond, use or apply, and finally, benefit from the services that we are providing or introducing. And the best way to gain that understanding is to try and "walk in our customer's shoes".

This brings us back to the heart and soul issue of being a civil servant. We must always remember that whatever we decide to do within the scope of the tasks and duties that we have as civil servants will also affect us directly, or indirectly through the experience of someone we know, somewhere somehow.

Let's look at an example: A company needs to recruit foreign labour. They submit the papers as required by the government agencies involved. The first agency that processed the applications did the job within the time frame that was stated in their client charter. The second agency, somehow didn't perform as efficiently as the first, and delayed the processing of the application. That delay, of course, caused a spiral effect... it caused a delay in the next agency, and so on down the line. By the time the papers were processed and the foreign workers were given their working visas, the company had already lost a great deal of money from the forced downtime they had to suffer from as a result of the delay. As a result, other problems and implications will spiral down the line.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: What would you consider to be a "truly creative idea"?

STATE SECRETARY: Most people have the misconception that creative ideas must be something totally original. I don't look at it that way. Creativity is about thinking in new ways, not necessarily changing the basic idea or premise of why something has to be done.

Particularly in the civil service, we cannot just change anything because most of the procedures and processes and systems that we have in place are bound by the laws of our country, the Civil Service Code, General Orders, etc. But we can always think of creative ways to do our jobs much more efficiently and effectively without compromising the integrity of the civil service.

Creativity involves many different mental capacities: seeing, noticing, remembering, decoding, categorising, associating, comparing, challenging, evaluating, filtering, combining, etc. When we look at a certain approach, procedure or process and we apply all or some of these mental capacities to come up with new ways of doing things, without deviating from the main purpose of why such a procedure or process was introduced in the first place; then, we are being creative.

For instance, in the earlier example I mentioned of the matter of recruiting foreign workers and the procedures involved in processing such applications, I suggest that the agencies involved should sit down and discuss how certain steps in the process can be combined so as to cut down the time it takes and thus, speed up the whole process.

On a personal note, I also need to change a lot of things that I have been used to doing. There may not be anything wrong with those ways, but if finding new ways of fulfilling my responsibilities will

make me more effective and efficient, then I must apply my creative thinking process to discover those new ways. I was actually thinking about how I can improve the way I communicate with others. I understand that when people talk to the State Secretary, there can be an element of apprehension. I realized that I could actually make my encounters with the people I work with, and the people outside of the civil service, more meaningful and productive by improving the way I communicate with others. I know that our choice of words and how we use them could improve communication so I could start by replacing certain words that I have been accustomed to say. For example, instead of saying, "Do you have any question?" I could say, "Is there anything that I could give you an advice or a direction on in this matter that we've just discussed?"

Wouldn't that be a more creative way of finding out whether people have understood my instructions or intentions well, without intimidating them?

RS RAKAN Sarawak: We agree with you that talking to the State Secretary can be quite an intimidating experience. It's nothing personal...it's just that the position of the State Secretary carries with it authority and power that could be intimidating to anyone, if he or she has to talk with the State Secretary. And yes, we can see that if you phrase your question that way, you come across as being sincerely open and honest about your intentions of understanding where a person might be needing some more clarifications, advice or guidance.

STATE SECRETARY: Well, I hope that no one will doubt my sincerity in truly wanting to know how I can be of help to anyone so that they can perform their jobs better. I definitely cannot do the task of providing effective and efficient public service delivery alone. We are one big team within the civil service. So, if there are any weaknesses or concerns, we must address them all together. We must, and we can, harness and unleash our creative force together. We must keep on encouraging each other to continue searching for creative ways of doing things better, or more effectively. Again, I wish to reiterate that the creative process begins with "walking in our customers' shoes". Imagine if all the civil servants in all the 11 divisions of Sarawak will come up with creative ideas on how to serve and carry out their duties well, what an impact we will have and what a difference we can truly make!