



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

Tapping into the "Power of Ideas"

patterns of thinking and behaviour, even causing us to radically change our set patterns. When that happens, we experience what I call the impact of a "powerful idea". This new idea shakes our foundations, so to speak, and forces us to make radical paradigm shifts.

RAKAN Sarawak: Can you give us some examples?

STATE SECRETARY: The notion that the "world is flat", for example. Early on in the world's history, people thought that the world is flat. Until the voyages of Christopher Columbus proved that the world is round. This new idea made it possible for people to imagine, and eventually, embark on the challenge of circumnavigating the globe. We have become so comfortable with the fact that the world is round and then, when Thomas Friedman wrote a book called it "The World is Flat", we were intrigued. His ideas challenged us, and it forced most of us to reorient our world views.

Another powerful idea was the use of money. Money is only an idea, and yet, it has become an amazing social institution so much so that people are willing to exchange valuable goods and service for pieces of currency bills or notes.

And when Bill Gates came up with a very simple and yet powerful idea that computers will need software and operating systems, it not only changed his life by making him the richest man in the world, it also ushered in the information age, impacting our lives greatly.

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RAKAN Sarawak: We've heard you say often enough the phrase "the power of ideas". What exactly do you mean by that?

YB DATU WILSON BAYA DANDOT (STATE SECRETARY): We are all equipped with sets of skills, competencies and mindsets that have been shaped by our respective experiences in, encounters with, and exposures to different environments, situations, peoples, philosophies, teachings and ideas. These are the foundational stuff that make up our personalities and qualities that define us as individuals.

While we remain uniquely different from each other, we also

tend to share similar patterns of thinking, behaviour or attitudes, since we all go through the same process of acculturation and assimilation as citizens of a certain country, as neighbours in a certain community, as colleagues in a particular profession, career or business and so forth. And so, we often have similar reactions or responses to a certain idea, situation, event, place or person. Some of our behaviours and attitudes even become habitually ingrained that other people can rightfully predict how we would respond to a particular situation or condition or information.

However, once in a while, we encounter an idea or information that challenges our existing notions and

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In fact, everything that man has ever accomplished, everything tangible that we have created, well, it all stems from an idea.

Now, in our Sarawak civil service context, we have also undergone some significant paradigm shifts as a result of our Chief Minister’s (YAB Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud) wealth of powerful ideas on how to run and manage the affairs of the State wisely.

When our Chief Minister espoused his “Politics of Development” idea, among the systems that was “revolutionized” was the administrative machinery or the civil service.

I remember clearly what the Chief Minister once said: “Development is not exclusively a matter of money. It is a total effort involving money, efficiency of government and absorptive capacity of the people. And to bring this about, the administrative machinery should play its role in a proper manner.”

As he had said then, we had to become a “New Civil Service”. This basically means that we had to work in partnership with the private sector and the political leaders in achieving the development goals of the State. As a result, our main role shifted from that of keeping the status quo (of keeping law and order and performing administrative functions) into that of a “development manager” or “facilitator of the development” process.

As a manager or facilitator of the development process, we had to learn to work in tandem with our political leaders in translating the peoples’ aspirations into administrative aims. Moreover, we had to cope with policy changes that required us to understand and work closely with the private sector whom we have come to recognize as our partners in achieving our development goals.

Following this major paradigm shift in our roles, we had to evolve systems,



structures, processes, procedures and approaches that will allow us to move with accuracy, speed, and agility without compromising the integrity of our role as custodians of the State’s resources and the peoples’ rights and assets.

In effect, all the changes that we had seen in our civil service over the years, was essentially a result of the impact of the Chief Minister’s “Politics of Development” idea.

RAKAN Sarawak: How can anyone of our civil servants tap that power? Do you think anyone of us have that capability?

STATE SECRETARY: Why not? In fact, all our civil servants should be able to draw upon their experiences, their knowledge, their encounters with the people they serve to come up with ideas that will generate positive impact or change in our society.

The capacity to tap the “power of ideas” stem from our sincere desire to help change an unpleasant or

unfavourable situation into something that will be beneficial for the common good.

One great example is Dr. Mohamed Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize awardee who pioneered the micro financing idea to help the poor. He came upon this idea because of his frustration in teaching great economic theories while seeing hordes of poor people outside his university campus. He started talking to the people and came across a group of 42 women basket weavers who were in “bondage” to loan sharks because they cannot pay their debts. Dr Yunus was shocked to find out that these women only owed a total of US\$27! Because of his desire to help one person, one family at a time, he had the inspiration to start the “micro lending” program among these women. Now, the Grameen Bank has helped over a hundred million poor women throughout the world.

The civil servant’s vocation is to serve the people...When our hearts truly desire to serve others, we will have the inspiration to come up the ideas that may not have a major impact in the world, but will definitely have the power to change a person’s life for the better.

There’s one quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupery that I think brings home that point: “A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.”

