

Cold Food, Warm Hearts

By Tan Cheng Kwee

The 23rd Foundation Course held late last year included a community attachment to a volunteer welfare or not-for-profit organisation. Participants attached to Dorcas Home Help, part of Presbyterian Community Service, assisted in providing home help services to the elderly. Tan Cheng Kwee used his experience of delivering meals to reflect on the way the Public Service designs and implements tough, realistic policies which he likens to 'cold food'. He asks if these policies can be delivered in such a way that they will still generate 'warm hearts' among the public. In particular, he argues that it is necessary to communicate the rationale behind these policies.

Introduction

During the 23rd Foundation Course, I tried my hand for the first time at delivering food to elderly folks at their homes, and subsequently conducted surveys for the home care provider. It came as no surprise that several of the elderly said that their meals, sent using an ambulance doubling as a delivery van and packed in nothing more than simple Styrofoam boxes to keep them warm, arrived cold. What surprised me though was the large number among these who remained positive. Some were just happy to have some food to eat for as little as \$0.50; others simply appreciated the daily human contact from young food deliverers just starting their careers. Indeed, these people felt warm in their hearts regardless how cold the food was. Of course, some disgruntled old folks complained of receiving the food cold, making the simple job of delivering seem onerous and unappealing. As I reflected upon this community attachment at the end of Foundation Course, I began to wonder if this experience could be extrapolated to the job in the civil service.

Cold, Sound Policies and Strong Emotions

As a civil service entrusted with the governance of Singapore, we have the duty to formulate policies to ensure the continued survival and prosperity of the nation as well as implement them on the ground. No doubt most if not all civil servants try their utmost to develop well considered plans that are beneficial to Singaporeans in general, but a large number of these policies bring about some degree of short-term pain to Singaporeans and are not well accepted.

Economic restructuring bringing about structural unemployment for long term economic growth generation, foreign talent attraction schemes to support the economic drive, COEs to curb private vehicle population, education streaming to segment the populace into different skill niches—these are some of the policies which Singaporeans have found unpleasant although on deep analysis they might be necessary for Singapore's survival in the medium to long term. Is it at all possible that this 'cold food' for the Singaporean stomach can eventually still create 'warm hearts'?

Psychologist Daniel Goleman has studied the human brain and human responses to events and found that the emotional brain responds to events more quickly than the rational brain. In an individual, the brain wiring has preserved the most primitive survival instinct that causes the individual to respond almost immediately to policies emotionally before rational thought takes over. In some cases, the emotional outpouring may actually overwhelm the sheer logic behind the acceptance of policies beneficial to Singaporeans.

Many historical examples have demonstrated that when put together in large masses, the human collective emotion is exponentially amplified

whereas the inverse is true too. For human collective intellect and collective emotion spurred The Third Reich into committing genocide in the Holocaust and the Chinese people into such extreme and passionate action during the Cultural Revolution. These actions are well beyond the comprehension of the onlookers who were not stirred by the emotions, but analyzed the events through their own rational eyes.

The Administrative Service of Singapore comprises some of the smartest individuals of the nation. They are deliberately and painstakingly groomed, and receive an education that trains their analytical skills and thought processes. These individuals are assessed on their helicopter qualities, their abilities to look at events from a vantage point above the crowd and make decisions. The processes have ensured these individuals who craft and implement the policies behind the governance of Singapore do so with the greatest logical thought and judgment. In other words, these people are capable of generating the most 'nutritious food' for the country. But are the policies created by these people 'warm food'?

Pragmatic but Lacking Compassion

The policy makers of Singapore realize the challenges they are facing and are furiously working on tough plans to ensure the country's long-term survival. Pragmatism and concrete results are main considerations behind formulating these survival plans. Unfortunately, much of Singapore's survival is dependent on firstly her claim to sovereignty and secondly on her economic prosperity. Our policy decisions have been driven by these two motives, making public servants seem mulish, uncompassionate, money-driven.

In a bid to maintain an impartial, incorruptible and efficient government, public servants have created an image for themselves of being inflexible in the implementation of policies, sticking to the letter of the law in every aspect of dealing with the public. We are perceived to be overly bureaucratic and business-like, concerned with the generation of revenue in the interest of the government and not for the public. When our policies and intentions are not communicated well to the public, the government is branded as self-righteous and autocratic. The nutritious food that we have prepared so that the country can remain strong and continue to progress is viewed to be cold and unpalatable.

Striking a Balance

I am not advocating that policy makers in Singapore should turn themselves into demagogues who rely on mass appeal and sentiment in order to gain acceptance of their ideals and policies. To do so would be to forsake the consistency that our forebears have advocated in order to build up our image of being reliable, trustworthy working partners that our international partners look for in trade and diplomatic relations. This consistency is something that our own citizens count on for stable and credible governance.

Nor am I saying that Singaporeans are stirred by passion to the exclusion of any form of logical thinking. We have seen in cases like the hanging of Flor Contemplacion that other governments have been strongly pressured by public sentiment into action while Singaporeans handled the incident matter-of-factly. Citizens of many countries would have responded less sedately than Singaporeans did at seeing images of the burning of their country's flag, a universal symbol of national sovereignty, on national television.

Although we cannot base our decision-making solely upon the emotions of our people, this does not mean that we can ignore the impact of the feelings of Singaporeans towards our policies. As humans respond emotionally to policies first, this affects their receptivity towards the policies, and ultimately even determines the success of the implementation of the policies.

If the government continually churns out policies that the populace does not like and the ultimate purpose of which they cannot see, the trust between the people and government will slowly be eroded. If the business of the government is to ensure the continued survival and prosperity of Singapore, the relationship and trust between the government and people must be seen as integral to national solidarity. It must then be the core business of the government to warm the hearts of the Singaporean people with its cold food.

How then, to create warm hearts with nutritious but cold food?

Warming Hearts with Empathy

As a start, I think public servants must believe that it is indeed possible to warm hearts with cold hard policies, similar to the

"Public Service values steer all public servants, regardless of their roles, in a common direction."

experience with cold food for the elderly folks. We must recognise that while we must try our utmost to come up with nutritious 'food' that reaches the masses 'warm', in reality the food will often still be 'cold' when it reaches them. Thus there is a need to warm the hearts of the people receiving 'cold food' through the way that it is served. This goes beyond the mindset of simply placating the people or sweetening policies with some goodies so that the people are pacified. The end result in service would be different if public servants, from policy makers to implementers alike empathized and provided measures to cushion the impact of policies on the people.

The Public Service must have confidence in the policies that it implements and be firm in carrying them out. Far from being self-righteous, having the conviction that what we do will eventually benefit Singapore allows us to convey our intent correctly to Singaporeans. We must know that our job is not to paint a rosy picture for Singaporeans and shield them from the realities of the world. Our job is to tell people that it is unrealistic of them to expect to upkeep large condominiums and cars in an economic downturn; that they must pay for COEs for cars because Singapore simply cannot accommodate so many vehicles; and that they must be prepared to lose their jobs to Bangladeshi workers if they cannot offer more skills and output than they do.

However, it is also our job to provide viable options for people caught in such situations, to allay their concerns and to manage the expectations of Singaporeans reasonably. Such trust and confidence in the Public Service as an organisation should be the foundation on which public servants exercise their authority in governing Singapore and serving her citizens.

Public Service Values

Public Service values are essential to public servants in executing their jobs. Integrity, service and excellence must not remain simple buzzwords that people occasionally speak of. They must be internalized as deep beliefs throughout the service for a few reasons. Public Service values provide the common purpose of serving the interest of the public with integrity and in the best way possible. This purpose will motivate public servants to create policies for the good of the people. It will also provide the motivation to deliver them so that they will be received well and achieve the intended objectives, regardless of whether the policy is cold or warm by itself.

Public Service values steer all public servants, regardless of their roles, in a common direction. They serve as the common syntax with which public servants can communicate their intentions with each other and the public. They provide stability amidst changing management philosophies and measurement benchmarks like organizational learning and Six-Sigma, allowing such tools to be optimized in their use. Although many would regard the promulgation of something as abstract as Public Service values to be indoctrination and idealism, my personal belief is that subscribing to a set of values provides the fundamental motivation. It is secondary to setting arbitrary benchmarks and quotas, for example in WITS and staff suggestions.

With confidence in the organization and values to guide us, we should be able to achieve the warming of hearts even when policies are 'cold'. However, are these two elements pervasive in the Public Service? It may not be altogether possible for every Division IV customer service officer to know and ascribe to Public Service values when several Division I officers did not

know of them prior to attending the Foundation Course.

Can every Administrative Officer believe his performance is judged based on his degree of service and the warming of hearts in the policies he delivers instead of the economic performance indicators that he is able to produce? Wouldn't public servants themselves be put off if Public Service values were simply taught to them lecture style in a deliberate indoctrination package before they were allowed to start their work? What is clear is that in order to inspire confidence in the organization and promote a common set of values, a strong leadership emphasis must be present and it remains the challenge of every level of leadership in the public service to promote them as key drivers of our success.

The Art of Communication

In the implementation of policies, successful communication of the policy to the public signifies half the success in implementation. If the public understands the intent behind the policies, they are less inclined to resent and reject the policy no matter how 'cold' they are. Successful communication is a function of both intellectual as well as emotional discourse and it is an art to communicate to the masses to elicit the appropriate emotional response for ideas to be understood in their rightful context. *Forum Page* letters and complaints by the public suggest that the Public Service might not be so adept at this art. It is important for us to acknowledge this and to start to develop this expertise. This is not to say that we should compromise our fundamentals of adherence to the law and regulations in dealing with the public. Instead we should aim to convey messages that would provoke less resentment without losing their content.

We must understand that human interaction is an integral part to communication. Communication is not simply about the words, sentences and paragraph in a policy message but more importantly about the human face behind the policy. Policy makers must realize that their duties do not stop when their policies are endorsed by the political leaders. They must be prepared to personally defend the policies in front of the public, as opposed to relying on grassroots leaders and CDCs. Policy-makers must be able to see that although their brethren in the CDCs are best suited to provide integrated services for the numerous policies that have been developed, there is a

human toiling at the end of the policy implementation and that human is equally subjected to stress, emotions and limited resources of time and energy.

Powerful public figures are important for conveying policy messages correctly and resoundingly. Who is not to say that Senior Minister Lee is not a demagogue in his own right, achieving successes in his plans for Singapore when not all of them are easy for the masses to swallow? Prime Minister Goh himself is acclaimed to be a Prime Minister of the people, constantly making appeals to the public in his humble but respected manner. However the Public Service should not leave it to the political leaders to be responsible for communication to the public. Every public officer has a role in the communication of policy messages, especially those responsible for the implementation of the policies at the front line. Each customer service officer must be given due recognition as an important spokesperson for the Public Service when interacting with the public, and understand his or her role in communicating the intention behind every policy.

Conclusion

It might sound overly idealistic to expect to warm Singaporean hearts while implementing unpopular policies, but public servants should not adopt the cynical attitude that Singaporeans cannot understand the wisdom behind policies. Admittedly, there will always be people who complain no matter how hard we try, as in the case of the delivery of meal services, but we must remain confident of our decisions and actions. ■