

# Framework For Leadership In Public Governance

*Leadership and Public Policy Group, 24<sup>th</sup> Foundation Course*

In discussing leadership at IPD's milestone courses, Mr Lim Siong Guan, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Finance, has spoken about leadership styles in a boss-subordinate relationship. A group of participants from the 24th Foundation Course extrapolated from these styles to try to develop a conceptual framework for leadership in a government-public relationship. An edited version of their paper is below.

## Introduction

The effectiveness of our public governance is often cited to explain Singapore's success. Underlined by the principle that "Leadership is Key", our government does "what is right and not what is popular".

In the early years, a top-down style of leadership was juxtaposed against a social compact of strong public trust. However, changes in the environment and the populace mean that such an approach may no longer be the most effective in all circumstances. We need to move towards a more sophisticated view of public leadership and recognise that the success of a policy no longer depends only on its merits, but also on how it is conceptualised, articulated and delivered.

Extrapolating from Mr Lim Siong Guan's framework of boss-subordinate leadership styles, we have developed a conceptual framework to help us think more systematically about government leadership and how different styles may be best suited under different circumstances. This framework is intended to help us think systematically about a complex issue. Some

caveats are in order. First, no framework can substitute for good, sound judgement by policy makers. Second, effective policy explanation and communication are crucial to obtain buy-in from the people for all leadership styles. Third, we are not attempting to be definitive or exhaustive. Fourth, regardless of the leadership style, a good leader articulates visions and fulfils missions, exemplifies the values he espouses and builds the capacity of his people. Good leaders are driven to make their people into leaders. Good leaders must know what they are doing and where they are going, and have the interest of their people at heart.

## Different Leadership Styles

Mr Lim has articulated four leadership styles in a boss-subordinate relationship:

- **Leadership from the Front:** the boss sets the direction and expects his subordinates to follow instructions;
- **Leadership from the Side:** the boss seeks his subordinates' views, makes decisions in consensus with them and actively encourages them;
- **Leadership from Behind:** the boss plays an advisory role in his subordinates' decisions, with mentoring and coaching as primary modes of influence and the boss only intervenes to prevent a catastrophic outcome; and
- **Leadership from Within:** the subordinates have internalised the values of the boss, and can be left to think through issues and execute their own decisions.

Extrapolating from the boss-subordinate relationship, we have the following possible leadership styles in a government-citizen relationship:

- **Leadership from the Front** means that the Government is paternalistic. Policies are prescriptive and mandatory as the Government sees itself as the main provider of a nation's needs. National Service is an example where the people neither play an active part in determining policy nor have a choice with regards to serving it.
- **Leadership from the Side** means that the Government is in active partnership with stakeholders. Policies are determined through continuous engagement and consensual decisions are the result. An example is the self-help community groups that receive government funding and work actively with the Government to achieve common objectives.
- **Leadership from Behind** means that the Government plays a supporting role to initiatives by the private or people sectors. Policies are predicated on people being allowed to act and decide for themselves, and the Government's focus is on putting in place infrastructure to support them. The current marriage and procreation policy is an example where choice lies with the people but support structures are established by the Government.
- **Leadership from Within** means that the people have internalised the values of the Government. The desired policy outcome is brought about even without the Government's involvement. A distaste for corruption and a belief in meritocracy are perhaps the best examples. Indeed, Singaporeans hold the Government accountable to these tenets.

#### Key Drivers Influencing Leadership Styles

**W**e have identified five key drivers that determine the suitability of different leadership styles for different policies:

- **Maturity** of the Public, or the ability of the

people to make informed and educated choices on a particular issue. An immature public necessitates that the Government set an agenda. While public maturity is generally rising, it may still vary depending on the issue.

- **Impact** of the policy outcome and its strategic significance. The higher the impact, the less affordable the risk, and consequently the greater the impetus for the Government to take the lead.
- **Perspective Divergence** between the Government and the public on an issue. When the people have vastly differing views from the Government, it would be more necessary for the Government to mandate policy and lead from the front to ensure a particular outcome. Market failure and externalities increase perspective divergences. Perspective divergence may also occur between different public constituencies.
- **Practicality** or the ease with which the Government can bring about the desired policy outcome through its policies. If the outcome is easy to achieve, then the Government would have an incentive to push through such policies. Conversely, if the desired policy outcome requires citizens to be active players and not just passive recipients, leadership from behind or within will be required.
- **Urgency** of the policy outcome. If a policy outcome is urgently needed, leadership from the front would be the quickest way to implement policies to achieve it.

These drivers are intended as a guide to sharpen the policy-making process, and to highlight the possibility of thinking systematically about choosing the optimal leadership style. The key is to recognise that the optimal leadership style in any given policy area is affected by external factors or drivers, and that these factors may change over time. The optimal leadership style could thus likewise shift over time as the environment changes, i.e. public leadership style is not a static concept.

### Illustration of Framework: Procreation

**A**s an illustration, consider the Government's stance towards procreation issues, where the leadership style used has evolved from the 1970s to the present day.

In the 1970s, there was a risk of Singaporeans producing too many babies. Public immaturity and the potential impact of overpopulation on a fledgling economy were both high. Perspective divergence was high since people believed that it was desirable to have large families. It was quite practical for the Government to bring about the desired policy outcome, since punitive financial measures are a compelling reason not to have more children. The resulting leadership style was accordingly leadership from the front—the “Stop at 2” policy.

Over time, the environment changed. The problem changed from overpopulation to underpopulation. Public immaturity was lower but the potential impact remained high. Perspective divergence was still high because now people did not want as many children as the Government deemed desirable. The ability of the Government to bring about its desired policy outcome was now low. Politically, the Government was unable to impose punitive measures to compel people to have more children. Given the change in some of the drivers, a change in the Government's leadership style was appropriate. Indeed, we saw a new type of leadership style emerge in the 2004 marriage and procreation policies.

Policy makers also need to assign relative importance to the drivers. In 2004, the potential impact of underpopulation and the level of perspective divergence were both high. If the Government had prioritised these drivers, it would have continued a policy of leading from the front. However, the new policies no longer tried to compel people to have children, but instead provided support structures should people choose to have children, suggesting leadership from behind. This suggests that public maturity and the impracticality of forcing people to have children were the more compelling drivers.

### Conclusion

**D**ifferent leadership styles are possible and, more importantly, optimal for different public policies. The proposed framework helps us to think more deeply about which leadership style is most appropriate under different conditions, in different policy areas and at different times.

Optimal leadership styles could change if the drivers shaping policies change over time. As the importance of each driver differs across policies, the framework also suggests that the optimal leadership style for different policies would be different even at the same point in time.

Is it desirable for the Government to move towards “leadership from within” and for citizens to take on more leadership instead? If it is desirable, or even natural as society progresses, for the Government to move towards leadership from within, it is then crucial to identify the “non-core” policy areas where it should gradually extricate itself from direct governance and the “core” policy areas where it should remain entrenched. The identification of core and non-core policy areas then becomes a key governance question going forward.

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