

**CSC New Insights Lecture on
"Networking and Initiative in Public Service: Lessons from Experiences"
by Mr Sajjad Ashraf, Former Pakistan High Commissioner to Singapore
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Introduction

In this lecture, Mr Sajjad Ashraf, former Pakistan High Commissioner to Singapore, demonstrates how and why initiative and networking are essential ingredients to being a good public officer. Mr Ashraf's lecture is divided into the following parts:

- 1) Backdrop and changing role of public service
- 2) Need for people-government synergy
- 3) Qualities of an effective public officer
- 4) Public service of the Future

Backdrop and Changing Role of Public Service

Historically, the public service was meant to ensure order to reflect the power of the state. However, the births of new nations after the Second World War and the increase interdependency among countries after the end of the Cold War brought forth new responsibilities on the public service in the international stage. Besides maintaining law and order, the public service is now called upon to manage foreign relations and implement them effectively.

The public service has to rethink the relationships between elected officials, media, and the public officer. Public officers have to move beyond its traditional role of maintaining stability to a more customer oriented one. To ensure that public services can be more responsive to the needs of the people, there has to be an increase in partnership between the public and private sector. All the more so in the current environment of free media where little can be hidden from the public eye. As a result, networking and initiative have become relevant and necessary.

People - Government Synergy

Successful government activity requires participation by all stakeholders. It is about how citizens, leaders, and public institutions relate to each other to make change happen. Public consultation must be regular and frequent and must be followed by action. Otherwise, it impairs their credibility, leading to a decline in participation and eventually recourse to options outside the sphere of public service.

Most people make one critical error of equating governance with just the executive authority. This was indeed the case in the days of the empires. In the times of representative government, governance is also about political parties, parliament, judiciary, the media, and the civil society. It is about how citizens, leaders, and public institutions relate to each other for betterment of the society. Good governance is therefore, based on several factors that include capability, transparency, predictability, participation and accountability.

Capability comes with listening to the citizenry, taking their pulse regularly and taking into account their viewpoint in the developing and implementation of policies.

Transparency is the availability and low cost access to relevant information. A higher level of transparency would result in greater confidence in the public service system.

Predictability results primarily when law and regulations are clear, known in advance, and uniformly and effectively enforced.

Accountability is the ability of citizens, civil society, and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and individuals and to hold them accountable.

Each of these components needs to work together to achieve sound public management. For example accountability is hollow in the face of administrative secrecy, and meaningless without predictable consequences. Predictability of government action and consistent application of the rules is needed by the civil servants to plan for the provision of services.

Qualities of an Effective Public Officer

Qualities of an Effective Public Officer:

- 1) Thinking skills
- 2) Organizational awareness
- 3) Resourcefulness
- 4) Leadership
- 5) Communication skills
- 6) Task Oriented
- 7) Knowledge of the public service environment

The qualities above flow from some basic characteristics of a public officer – one with integrity, empathy, and passion for service.

Public Service of the Future

Systems and institutions that cannot change are doomed for failure. Therefore, the public service must evolve too. Partnership between bureaucrats, politicians, professionals, business

and academic community on the development and implementation of policy is the way to the future.

Public officers need to alter their image from an enforcer of law and order to one that facilitates interactions across different stakeholders. As implementers of law and rules they must be guided by what is in the best interest of the people as a whole. Impartiality, fairness, adjudication of justice through transparency should be the guiding principles of the public officer.

Having a client perspective is also very important to improve the effectiveness of the government. Clear and credible statements of public service standards, action in accordance with these standards, quick responses to complaints etc. are needed to improve the level and quality of public service. Client orientation can also improve the overall quality of government-citizen interaction.

How the public service behaves, especially how it communicates, in this globalized community and in times of rapid change is critical. Transparency, honesty, integrity, openness, are all cornerstones of the future and are more important today than ever before.

Questions and Answers

Question 1: Can you share some examples from your experience on taking initiative and using networking for service delivery?

Mr Ashraf responded by retracing how he was able to persuade Senegal President Abdoulaye Wade to reverse his decision on cancelling his state visit to Pakistan in 2001. Mr Ashraf said that he received the cancellation notice two weeks before the President was due to arrive in Pakistan. Since preparation to receive the Senegal President had already been finalised in Pakistan, Mr Ashraf knew he had to act and think fast to persuade the President to change his decision. Mr Ashraf decided to try to get an audience with the President informally through one of the President's closest friends whom he knew. He was successful and in his meeting with the President, Mr Ashraf was given the opportunity to explain why it would be beneficial for him to visit Pakistan. After reflecting over Mr Ashraf's words, the Senegal President changed his mind and decided to visit Pakistan.

Question 2: Can you share some examples from your experience to illustrate how taking initiatives and using networking can be used to tackle sensitive issues between countries such as those between Pakistan and India?

Mr Ashraf replied saying that he could only discuss his aspiration for future Pakistan-India relations. Pakistan-India relations had improved dramatically compared to four decades ago. But it is still affected by many sensitive issues. To a certain extent, these issues have restricted the movement of people across the Pakistan-India border. For instance, visitors from each country have to obtain visas to travel to some cities. Mr Ashraf then noted that Pakistan's relationship with India is to some extent similar to Singapore's relationship with Malaysia. Both were once united as a country and have a love-hate relationship after separation. However, unlike Pakistan and India, Singapore and Malaysia ensure their differences do not affect bilateral ties such as the movement of their people across each other's borders. As a result, trade and investment between Singapore and Malaysia are able to flourish. Mr Ashraf hoped Pakistan and India could adopt such principle in managing their relationship.

Question 3: What are some advice you can give to younger officers on how they can balance the need to take initiative and establish networks with the two harsh realities of the public service, where 1) time is not a luxury and 2) consulting too many stakeholders could generate too many conflicting views?

Mr Ashraf responded by stating that the public sector should treat initiatives and networking as a norm and a daily endeavour instead of a one-off thing. If the public sector continuously communicates and network with stakeholders regularly, there is no reason why stakeholders could not understand the constraints or difficulties faced by the public sector. Mr Ashraf also added that if the public sector takes initiatives in the delivery of services, it will usually draw favourable response from the people or stakeholders.

Question 4: What are the attributes of a good diplomat? Could you share with us some instances in your career when you choose to speak or remain silent?

Mr Ashraf answered the first question by stating that the key attribute of a diplomat is integrity. A diplomat has to put the word across explaining why things happen in a certain way in the country he or she represents rather than denying them. This is contrary to the common perception that a diplomat is one who lies for his or her country. A diplomat cannot lie because he or she will lose credibility which in turn affects the image of the country he or she is representing. Furthermore, the pace of globalisation and the advance in communication technologies have also made the global population more aware of developments around the world.

As for the second question, Mr Ashraf admitted that there are no special rules on when to speak or remain silent as a diplomat. A diplomat follows the basic rules of good manners and good attitude.

Question 5: How can the public sector draw its boundaries during networking so that it does not offend stakeholders?

Mr Ashraf replied by highlighting that public officers are not politicians. Instead the focus of public officers is on the delivery of services and implementation of policies. The role of the public officer is to understand the needs and difficulties of the public and to pass the information to the politicians for decision.

Question 6: In your interaction with the Singapore public service as High Commissioner of Pakistan, what are some of the challenges you faced?

Mr Ashraf responded by first outlining some of the good qualities of Singapore's public service. He noted that he was impressed with how the public service engages the grassroots and how it upholds and maintains integrity. As for the challenges, Mr Ashraf found that the Singapore public service can be quite inflexible. However, he cautioned that the values that the public service here adheres to are shaped by the country's cultural beliefs. As a result, it is inappropriate for an outsider like himself to judge and comment on how the public service here should behave. Mr Ashraf also added that although the Singapore public service is inflexible, it is still able to deliver its services to the people.

Question 7: How can we work towards a more collaborative public service by taking a Whole-of-Government approach in dealing with uncertainties brought about by a rapidly changing and complex environment?

Mr Ashraf acknowledged that the external environment is changing rapidly. It is becoming more unstable and less predictable. Furthermore, the public service here is unable to control the actions and reactions in the global environment. However, it can monitor to better prepare

and respond to these changes. Good governance is not so much about predicting uncertainties but rather having the capability to respond to them. Mr Ashraf believed that Singapore public service has such capability.

Question 8: Taking initiative often requires some degree of risk-taking. As a result, public officers prefer to “go by the book”. How do you encourage officers to take risk?

Mr Ashraf felt that the phrase “go by the book” is one of the most overused phrases. The phrase was originated from the colonial period when public officers were tasked with duties such as collecting taxes and maintaining law and order. However, Mr Ashraf noted that the public service is different now. Officers could not just “go by the book” in delivering services.

While Mr Ashraf highlighted that duties have to be performed according to a set of rules, this does not mean the officer should not take initiative. For example, a nurse in a hospital may be required to visit his or her patients six times a day. But it is unlikely there is a rule stating that he or she cannot take the initiative to visit her patients more than six times a day. Mr Ashraf pointed out that a good public officer is not one who follows the rules. Instead it is one who takes initiative while maintaining his or her sense of integrity, propriety and honesty.

Question 9: DPM Teo recently said that Singapore needs to have more public officers who can handle and anticipate the future. How can we train such officers?

Mr Ashraf was pleased that DPM Teo made the statement because it shows that Singapore’s leadership is thinking of the future. Mr Ashraf recommended that setting up small informal brainstorming sessions among officers could help the public service in anticipating the future. He noted that it is important to keep the sessions informal because the setting would be less intimidating and imposing for the participants. The leadership can play a role to enhance the effectiveness of these brainstorming sessions. It can either provide incentives by rewarding and recognising the efforts or help the brainstorming sessions by identifying the key issues to be addressed. However, the leadership should refrain from dictating or directing the thinking process.
