The public service as a learning organization: the Malaysian experience

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Abstract
Current environmental demands require public sector organizations to respond effectively and efficiently to the needs of the people and the nation. Given the bureaucratic nature of public sector organizations, where change and responsiveness are difficult to achieve, this paper highlights some of the issues that need attention to transform public sector organizations into learning organizations. It also examines some of the initiatives taken by Malaysia in general and INTAN (the National Institute of Public Administration) in particular to help enhance learning in the public sector so that the various components of the government machinery can work together across organizational boundaries for a common purpose, responding effectively to challenges, as well as delivering integrated and customer-centric services.

Introduction
In today’s highly globalized world, a persuasive argument can be made that the organizations that most need to adapt to changing times are the large organizations in national or local governments. Since these organizations are complex and highly structured, it is sometimes difficult for them to respond to change in a timely manner. The negative impact of failure to respond is often not felt immediately within these organizations. Therefore the urgency to act quickly is often absent or recognized too late. Since public sector organizations are more sheltered and isolated from the changing environment, there is a pressing need for them to seek more innovative ways and means to anticipate and respond to change more quickly and more effectively. They need to enhance their capability to learn, unlearn and relearn so as to become more effective learning organizations.

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Why a learning organization?

The importance of learning was first put forward by the Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551–479BC). He believed that everyone would and should benefit from learning. According to him, ‘Without learning, the wise become foolish; by learning the foolish become wise . . . Learn as if you could never have enough of learning, as if you might miss something.’

The underlying cause for the recent emphasis on organizational learning is the increased pace and complexity of change. Traditionally public sector organizations have been thought of as conservative, bureaucratic, slow and difficult to change. Learning was something divorced from the way the public service functions and learning itself was regarded as alien to the working culture in the public service. But globalization, like an incoming tide, has brought with it increasingly complex, relentless and sometimes overwhelming challenges for which we must be prepared. Thus the public service cannot and should not function in a traditional bureaucratic manner but should be open and flexible and promote continuous learning.

Knowledge as a critical asset is beginning to supplant the traditional factors of production such as land, labour and capital, and has become a central corporate and competitive resource. The most dramatic change has resulted from advances in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The result is the digital world that has connected the globe through the internet, intranets and extranets with e-mail as a major communication medium and e-commerce as the new frontier for marketing products. For the public service, the accelerated pace of change in today’s digital world increasingly requires effective mechanisms for continuous learning, the development of new skills and techniques by managers and workers, and greater innovation and creativity.

Defining a learning organization

The terms organizational learning and learning organization are sometimes used interchangeably. However, organizational learning refers to certain types of activity that take place in the organization while a learning organization refers to the organization itself (Tsang, 1997). Peter Senge (1990) defines learning organizations as ‘organizations where people continuously expand their capacity to create results they desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together’. Thus a learning organization is one that tries to develop its human resources to their full potential and uses learning as a means of improving its business performance. Public servants need to improve their core competency through knowledge management, work as members of a team, and commit to a shared responsibility and aspiration to achieve the ultimate result of total customer satisfaction.

The learning process itself can be divided into four tiers. The first tier concentrates on learning facts, knowledge, processes and procedures. This applies to known situations where changes are minor. The second tier is learning new job skills. This level applies to new situations where existing responses need to be changed. Bringing in outside expertise is a useful tool here. The third tier — learning to adapt —
applies to more dynamic situations where the mode of learning is experimentation and deriving lessons from successes and failures. The fourth and final tier is learning to learn. It is about innovation rather than merely adapting to it. This is where deeply held assumptions, beliefs and perceptions are challenged and hypotheses are tested. An organization in pursuit of a learning culture has to pass through these stages before becoming a learning organization. Since a learning organization is always evolving, it is understood as a philosophy rather than a program. A learning organization is a vision of the continuous development of an organization, its people, its capabilities, and its capacity to enhance or create its own future (Kofman and Senge, 1993).

**Building blocks for a learning organization**

For a public organization to be molded into a learning culture and to develop as a learning organization, a solid foundation must be laid in the form of such attributes as awareness, a learning culture, a shared vision, environment, leadership, empowerment and continuous learning.

**Awareness**

In the Malaysian context, stakeholders are aware that government employees must learn so as to improve the public service as a whole and, thereby, to help the nation achieve its 2020 objectives of developed status and a united, caring and progressive society. To succeed in the 21st century, the public service must be innovative and knowledge-driven. Therefore, stakeholders in government must ensure that valuable expertise gets priority and is made explicit. At the same time, public sector employees must obtain relevant knowledge from wherever it is available, including external resources when necessary.

**Building a learning culture**

Knowledge, rather than money, is now widely recognized as the key resource for development and success. It is no longer a question of cutting corners, reducing costs and overheads, or making improvements on selected operational parameters. Knowledge management has become a question of survival strategy, competitive advantage and creating wealth by invisible capital, mainly organizational knowledge. Public sector organizations as learning organizations have to look at the macro level, i.e. the nation’s economy. The main features of a knowledge economy (K-economy) are a highly educated labour force, including workers who are skilled in the application of knowledge and the use of ICT. The result promises to be more value-added and higher end production as well as greater international competitiveness. For instance, agriculture, which once exemplified the production-based economy (P-economy), can be revolutionized by the K-economy. It is essential, however, to have a system of education that can support this transformation.

For the public service to be the facilitator and pace setter and to assist the private sector in nation building as well as trading and export, it must be have a knowledgeable, skilful and competitive workforce. The public service needs the right kind of labor in place and at the right time. The way of thinking and working among public
sector managers and employees has to change. Employees must be part and parcel of a corporate learning culture where proactive and creative approaches to changes and uncharted challenges are the norm.

It can be argued that the infrastructure, the machines and the equipment of government are the easiest parts of the equation. The difficult part is finding the people with the right skills and training to carry out government and national projects. The emphasis must be on educating the workforce through a continuous learning process. Public sector stakeholders have realized that investment in the generation of knowledge, the education and training of the workforce and the capacity for innovation are now the key requirements for success. Employees' skills, IT systems and an organizational learning culture are worth far more than government's physical assets.

**Systems thinking**

The uncertainties brought about by the rapidly changing external environment cannot be managed by conventional management practices. Red tape and bureaucracy in the government service should not be allowed to stifle progress. Centralized, mechanistic structures are not conducive to effective government. Moreover, individual employees need to have a comprehensive or holistic picture of the whole organization's or government's objectives, goals and aspirations. The segregation of employees from mainstream planning and thinking may lead to political and parochial systems that sometimes spring up here and there in public organizations and stifle the learning process.

A more flexible, organic structure must be formed, that is, a flatter structure that encourages innovation. A flatter structure also promotes the passing of information between employees at various levels and in different occupations and thereby creates a more informed workforce. Since the new workplace will be fast-paced, more uncertain and ambiguous, it will require a workforce that is not only highly skilled from a technical standpoint but also one that is inspired, motivated, enthused, creative, committed, flexible, adaptable and resilient to change. Thus, it is necessary for public sector managers to adopt a new philosophy — one that encourages openness, transparency, accountability, reflectivity and acceptance of errors and uncertainties. Constant communication between management and the workforce is imperative. This approach is a prerequisite for Malaysia's new MS ISO 9001:2000 quality management system.

The systems thinking should be holistic in nature whereby managers constantly monitor not only the operational systems in the departments (e.g. quality management systems and infrastructure maintenance) but also such soft aspects of the organization as whether the organization's values are upheld, whether people share the organization's purpose and whether they are working as a team to achieve the organization's objectives. In a learning organization, the decision-making process needs to be transparent and the employees must be given the opportunity to seek clarifications without fear of reprimand. The fundamental values that are promoted and reinforced through this process are transparency, accountability and professionalism.

Employees who seek clarifications can often highlight problems at an early stage and reduce time-consuming errors. In the past, more often than not, human factors
such as ego, status-consciousness and power-centered thinking have discouraged this practice. One way of overcoming the reluctance to raise questions is to introduce anonymity so that questions can be asked or suggestions made but the source is not necessarily known. In this manner both management and employees are able to learn from their mistakes or errors or learn from their past experiences. To cultivate such a learning paradigm, managers would have to demonstrate the virtue of magnanimity. The paradigm would also have to include:

- preparing a strategy to cope with uncertainties and rapid changes in the external environment;
- developing internal flexibilities in the organization by reducing bureaucratic methods and focus on content rather than form;
- promoting a culture of learning process through questions, mistakes and experience as well as a culture of innovation, creativity, sharing and diversity;
- establishing a framework for effective management of knowledge resources and creating a data bank for knowledge references;
- learning and gaining knowledge on a continuous basis, sharing that knowledge among top management and workers as well as with stakeholders and applying the knowledge effectively to enhance competitive advantage; and
- creating a workplace with a proactive, creative approach to the unknown, encouraging individual workers to express their feelings and using intelligence and imagination instead of just skills and authority to find new ways to be competitive and manage work.

Leadership

The next vital factor to consider in developing public sector learning organizations is leadership. Top management must provide commitment for long-term learning in the form of resources. The extent of the resources (money, personnel and time) made available signals the extent of top management’s commitment to long-term learning and determines its quantity and quality. Management must support and reward the continuous learning of employees and help to restructure the individual views of team members. For example, management must help the teams to understand that competition among the Quality Control Groups, Quality Improvement Work Teams, Quality Coordinators and other work improvement teams through the annual quality and innovation awards are forms of learning and improvement from previous mistakes — they should not encourage hostile rivalry or comparisons.

The leadership must promote an organizational culture that enables the employees to understand and believe in their organization’s vision, mission and core values. This will encourage employees to do things because they want to rather than because they have to. The organization’s leadership must also foster a learning culture with both a future and an external orientation. This is to encourage the free flow of information between customers and workers to improve the quality of service and products. Individual public servants should be allowed to network extensively with the outside world, crossing organizational boundaries to enhance and develop knowledge and expertise.
The practice of shared vision

This involves the genuine commitment of public sector employees to government policies and the nation’s aspirations. It is the dedication of public sector employees rather than the compliance culture of ‘saya yang menurut perintah’ or ‘your obedient servant’ that is required. Shared vision among employees involves looking at the picture of the future envisaged in Malaysia’s 2020 vision as ‘a united caring and progressive society’. Management must be dedicated to drawing out plans and programs that lead to learning and personal development at all levels. There is also a need for managers to value workers’ ideas, creativity and views and to make use of them if those ideas or suggestions from the workforce produce positive results and lead to organizational efficiency. Managers must, in addition, tolerate mistakes so that employees can learn from them. A learning organization requires continuous testing of experience and transformation of that experience into knowledge so that it is accessible to the whole organization and relevant for its core and shared purpose. There is also a fundamental requirement for management to emphasize strategic thinking. They have to think or plan ‘outside the box’ so as to challenge assumptions and at the same time encourage the workforce to think creatively.

The public service has indirectly been promoting a learning culture through the annual performance appraisal system. Performance appraisal is meant to reflect the organization’s commitment to a learning culture by promoting the acquisition of new skills, teamwork as well as individual effort, openness and objectivity, and continuous personal development by such means as courses and seminars. The fragile human ego in each public sector employee yearns for acknowledgement from superiors and fellow colleagues for his or her work, in some form of reward or simply positive feedback. All employees want to feel that they are doing a real job and actively contributing to the proper functioning of their department. Some public sector organizations have embarked on benchmarking programs to improve performance and to produce better results or outcomes. But caution should be used when defining benchmarks for performance appraisal. No employee should be left feeling neglected or not valued. When these employees lose confidence or give up hope, positive learning will be replaced by negative learning, which will in turn reduce their contribution to achieving the organization’s objectives. Both the long-term and short-term contributions of employees need to be recognized. An important dimension of a learning organization is caring for the individual employee over the course of his or her public service career.

Empowerment

Empowering employees requires a radical change from the traditional bureaucratic approach of command and control. The public service must accept the idea that it can learn from its own employees. Kanter (2001) has commented that ‘[e]mployees themselves, more often than not, know what needs to be done to improve operations’. The job experience and the skill and expertise of public servants are central assets for organizational learning and provide a solid basis for employee empowerment.

Every change requires a certain degree of experimentation. Thus, permitting
experimentation is a central component of a learning organization. While advocates of empowerment argue that public servants should be encouraged to experiment, some commentators argue that empowering employees, especially lower-level ones, is risky. However, for a government organization to learn, permitting employees to take risks is essential. Empowering employees can bring many benefits in the form of creativity and innovation. Public sector employees should be allowed to experiment by having both formal and informal ways of asking questions, prodding, seeking out theories, developing hypothesis, testing them and reflecting upon them.

If managers expect risk-taking behavior, they must let their employees know that they are trusted. Organizations with a friendly and trusting working environment are more likely to succeed in today's climate of change. While experimentation can be a costly and time-consuming process, learning from mistakes can pave the way for new ideas for innovation. This is the so-called research and development process used by private sector companies. The companies try to predict events and plan to avoid mistakes by being active rather than passive in their experimentation. The Japanese strategy is to send executives or workers on study visits to other countries to raise questions and to gather data, information and ideas.

Thus, public sector managers should not shy away from empowering their employees even though the locus of control shifts from managers to workers. Managers do not lose control; rather, they focus more on monitoring and supervision and workers take responsibility for their own actions and decisions. The managers are responsible for creating an open, flexible atmosphere that encourages employees to be innovative and creative by taking risks through experimentation.

The changing role of the Malaysian public sector

In the eyes of Max Weber, the public service was seen as a bureaucratic organization based on rationality and efficiency. Peter Drucker then proposed the performance-based organization that was focused on seeking results and effectiveness. In comparison, Peter Senge's learning organization emphasizes the need for continuous adaptation and keeping ahead of change.

The Malaysian public sector has evolved from being primarily a collector of revenue and an enforcer of laws and regulations to being an implementer and then to being a service provider as well as a facilitator, regulator and pacesetter. These developments resulted from changes in the internal and external environment in response to the quality challenge for products and services in the global marketplace. The Malaysian public sector has achieved marked improvement in service delivery to customers (i.e. the public, the private sector and social sector bodies) by practicing 'single loop' learning — adapting successfully to changes in the environment and challenges surrounding it.

The Malaysian public sector as a learning organization

The Malaysian public sector entered a new paradigm on improving management and public service delivery with the launching of the 'Excellent Work Culture Movement' on 27 November 1989. Since that time, the public service has embarked
on a learning organization concept in implementing development programs as well as monitoring and evaluating its effectiveness in enhancing the public delivery systems and mechanisms to pursue the total satisfaction of customers and end-users.

In the 1990s, with the ICT and digital revolution engulfing the world, the government responded by launching the multi-super corridor in 1996 followed in July 1997 by seven MSC flagship applications — Electronic Government, Telemedicine, Smart Schools, Multipurpose Card, R&D Cluster, World Wide Manufacturing Web and Borderless Marketing. The flagship application of Electronic Government revolutionized the functions of the public sector. Five pilot projects, namely e-Services, e-Procurement, GOE (Generic Office Environment), the Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS) and the Project Monitoring System (PMS), paved the way toward making the Malaysian public sector a learning organization by enhancing communications and interactions among the public, private and third sectors.

In addition, public sector processes and systems were improved by the introduction of the MS ISO 9000:2000 Quality Management System, Benchmarking, Total Quality Management, Quality Control Circles and other related strategic management tools. The values and ethics aspects of the public sector were also given due emphasis with the government launch of the National Integrity Plan in April 2004. Positive personal values, ethical behavior, close rapport among employees and teamwork are cardinal aspects for nurturing a learning organization. This new paradigm on which the Malaysian public sector has embarked is based on the incremental phases of moving from a quality system organization to a learning organization and then to the ultimate goal — a world-class public service.

To encourage competency development and continuous learning, the government introduced the Malaysian Remuneration System on 1 November 2004. The System’s objectives are these:

- encouraging self-development through continuous learning;
- encouraging the application of knowledge, skills, creativity, innovation and multi-skilling in the workplace;
- nurturing a culture of teamwork;
- building a learning organization that nurtures the development of knowledge workers;
- implementing a competency-based human resource management approach; and
- rewarding deserving employees through merit salary progression.

Under this System, a new element called the Competency Assessment was introduced to assess the levels of competency of public sector employees. Those who meet the requirements of the Competency Assessment for their respective levels and who also excel in their work performance can be considered for a merit salary progression instead of the normal annual increment. Unlike the previous system where the individual did not have much influence over whether he or she received a merit salary progression, the Remuneration System gives a certain level of control to the individual. If the individual is competent and meets the requirements of the
Assessment, he or she stands a better chance of getting a merit salary progression, subject to the approval of the agency’s Human Resource Development Panel.

To ensure the success of the Malaysian Remuneration System, public sector organizations must be able to identify the competencies required for effective job performance. In this respect, the government is developing a competency model for the public sector. Once the model is fully developed and implemented, an individual will be able to compare his or her level of competency with the competency level required for the job by using the process of Competency Identification. For each competency (except language and ICT), there are six levels of definition, i.e. (a) entry, (b) basic, (c) competent, (d) proficient, (e) expert and (f) strategists. There are four levels of competency definitions for ICT competency, namely (a) none, (b) basic, (c) proficient and (d) mastery. There are also four levels of definition for language competency, namely (a) poor, (b) basic, (c) proficient and (d) mastery. If a gap is identified in one of the competencies, the individual can then refer to the Development Advisor who provides suggestions as well as follow-up actions needed to reduce the gap and to prepare the individual for the Competency Assessment. This competency-based approach to Human Resource Management is essential to the building of learning organizations in the public sector.

INTAN as a learning organization

The National Institute of Public Administration (commonly known as INTAN) is the premier public sector training institute of the Government of Malaysia. It has been entrusted with the task of training and developing Malaysian public sector officials to meet national objectives as expressed in Vision 2020. In its effort to become a world class organization, INTAN has been moving toward a learning organization since the introduction of systematic quality training programs such as Total Quality Management, Benchmarking, MS ISO 9000:2000, Strategic Management, Learning Organization, Leadership and Organizational Management, Change Management, Creativity and Innovation Management and Financial Management.

INTAN’s management is constantly aware that building a learning organization is not a quick fix. In INTAN we have cultivated the perception that a learning organization is more an idea than a tangible thing. That idea is the vision of the continuous development of INTAN, its people, its capabilities, its capacity and its need to enhance its performance in the future. In line with this thinking, the management came up with INTAN’s vision, namely to become a world-class public sector training organization.

INTAN’s motto ‘One Step Ahead’ reflects its initiatives to move toward being a learning organization. One can tell whether INTAN is on the journey toward a learning organization when one walks into any of INTAN’s facilities, either on the main campus or in one of its branch campuses in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah or Sarawak. The facilities and surroundings on the main campus of INTAN and its branch campuses provide a very conducive environment for learning. INTAN has also moved from a procedural and program-based training orientation toward knowledge- and competency-based training. This awareness, coupled with the advanced developments and introduction of ICT, has contributed to shaping and transforming the
thinking of the people in INTAN with regard to training and development. INTAN’s staff are constantly seeking more innovative ways to enhance learning not only among themselves, but also among the participants and the stakeholders through the continuous acquisition, interpretation and sharing of knowledge.

Several indicators identify INTAN as a learning organization. First, there is a strong sense of shared purpose between the management and the rest of the staff. The shared purpose is the shared thinking among the management and the staff in meeting and fulfilling customers’ and stakeholders’ demands. INTAN’s top management, course coordinators and support staff are closely aligned in the overall shared purpose of providing training courses to the Malaysian public sector. In fact the lower ranks of INTAN are able to talk about the shared purpose with the same level of candor that one can see at the trainer, officer or the top managerial level. Any genuine disagreements on course content, the methodology and its effectiveness are discussed and shared openly. Discourse and communications of this nature are strongly encouraged so as to ensure efficient and effective training for customers. In INTAN people are open to new ideas and perspectives. There is not a sense that staff members are overly concerned with what can or cannot be said. Internal customer feedback is now formalized under the new quality management system of MS ISO 9000:2000. The feedback provides ideas for continuous improvement. As part of its continuous learning process, INTAN conducts evaluations for its courses, its trainers (lecturers) and its coordinators at the end of every course. By this means INTAN learns from its own experiences and mistakes.

The next step taken by INTAN in building a learning organization was to enhance the sharing of knowledge across the faculties. For this purpose, a knowledge bank was created which is a repository of articles, write-ups and case-studies on management subjects. Trainers can access this literature in order to enhance their capability. The strength of this knowledge bank is that it creates a network among the trainers who generate and share knowledge among themselves by reinforcing and renewing their expertise, learning new ideas, coaching one another and sharing practical tips and lessons over time. At INTAN the individual officer or staff member is encouraged to learn and become a knowledge worker. He or she is encouraged to place a high degree of emphasis on enhancing his or her level of expertise and professionalism. Each senior trainer is given a lap-top to do his or her own research and learn more from the Internet and is given incentives to write in INTAN’s management journals and INTAN’s monthly periodicals. Moreover, the management has made it compulsory for all employees to attend courses, seminars, forums or workshops for a minimum period of 14 days for trainers and seven days for non-trainers in a given year. The management and the employees discuss the nature and relevance of the course or seminar to the employees’ profession and allocate resources for them to attend these training courses. This encourages the continuous learning process among INTAN officers.

The other prime method of learning in INTAN is systems thinking. The implementation of the international Quality Management System of ISO 9000:2000 in 1997 made INTAN a learning organization in terms of the operational learning of methods and processes for continuous improvements. In operational learning INTAN has made improvements in streamlining the processes involved in training, catering
and related activities. The management is committed to systems thinking as it involves dynamic complexity such as the human dimension in the training process, the complexity of technological and ICT systems in INTAN, officers’ mental models and staff members’ mental models which often conflict with the systems they are involved in operating. This complex activity requires that management think strategically and come up with planned solutions.

**Common obstacles to becoming a learning organization**

The common obstacles to becoming a public service learning organization can be summarized as follows:

- a deeply entrenched mindset and attitude;
- too much preoccupation with traditional operational and firefighting functions;
- undue focus on systems, procedures and circulars to the exclusion of all else;
- reluctance to train employees or invest in training programs; and
- too much top-down management and lack of real empowerment.

**The way forward**

The public service must now think of itself as a 21st century organization. The principles of democracy and liberalism that changed the map of the world drastically in the late 20th century have finally trickled down to the workplace. Hierarchies are being flattened and formalities are being discarded. In many Western private companies the highest-ranking bosses are rejecting many of the perks and trappings of the privileged taskmaster. They want success and since their bottom line is profit they want their organization to be part and parcel of the learning culture.

Public sector employees are now better educated, well traveled and more ambitious than ever before. They resent being over-managed and driven from the top. They want to be inspired and led. They expect to have intelligent exchanges with their bosses and to help guide the direction of their departments and organizations. They want their bosses to be team players not taskmasters. The discipline of two-way communications between the superior and manager is that of a mutual respectful dialog where interactions lead to learning as a team to the benefit of the organization. Public sector employees are open to new ideas and perspectives. Lower-ranking staff now talk about issues with the same level of openness as those at the top levels. As in the learning organization, genuine disagreements are shared openly and discussed frankly. In meetings and discussions, different views are presented and debated. There is a tendency for management to search for the best view to support decisions that are rationally made and mutually agreed upon.

The public service will thrive on change. According to Tom Peters, ‘In a fast-paced, continually shifting environment resilience to change is often the single most important factor that distinguishes those who succeed from those who fail.’ Thus, for public sector organizations to become learning organizations, there is a need to implement major changes with the full support of political masters and other key
stakeholders. Public sector managers and employees must be fully committed to this effort. Otherwise, the public service cannot achieve the status of a learning organization as envisaged by Peter Senge. Hence the public service must be constantly re-framing, re-engineering, refocusing and looking at problems and complaints from the public from different angles. Public sector employees must constantly develop new knowledge management skills through a continuous learning process that should never be static. It is also vital that a learning culture and change process be driven from the very top levels of the government. Public sector managers must lead the changes with a positive attitude and have a clear vision of what is to be achieved. It is crucial that all the public sector stakeholders and managers agree on the strategy of a learning organization and believe in it so that they exude a sense of urgency, security and self-assurance. If all these factors are present, there is no reason why public sector organizations cannot transform themselves into agile learning organizations to meet the demanding challenges of the 21st century.

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