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PEMANDU'S DISBANDMENT

CHALLENGING TASK TO FILL PEMANDU'S SHOES

Its inter-agency collaboration to resolve issues broke silos in the public service

THE teleological approach in philosophy argues that every creature has a purpose in life. So, we can surmise that the purpose of the birds and bees is to help pollinate flowers and plants to keep the earth verdant. Stephen Grellet, a 19th century Quaker missionary, wrote a poem that perhaps sums up part of man's purpose: "I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now... for I shall not pass this way again."

Similarly, the public service has a purpose – to create value. The public service creates value when it makes society more prosperous and liveable. It creates value whenever it meets citizens' needs efficiently. The public and government can partner to create public value. For example, if crime is a concern, citizens can be empowered to institute programmes, such as neighbourhood watch and citizen patrol.

And, in tackling issues that cut across sectors, related agencies can link up to solving those. The collaboration of the police and the military in combating crime is a classic example; so, too, are joint patrols by the military, police and wildlife and forestry rangers to protect forests and wildlife.

Value creation through citizen engagement and inter-agency collaboration has been the hallmark of the government's Performance Management and Delivery Unit or Pemandu. Alas! It

will be soon disbanded. Pemandu was never intended to be permanent. It was to transfer its role to the main-stream public service once it had put in place the national transformation process.

The public and the public service have come to accept Pemandu as the engine of the National Transformation Programme or NTP. Even though its job will be continued by an equally capable public service, that has championed one reform after another over the past 50 years, it is rather nostalgic to see Pemandu go.

Pemandu has diligently delivered outcomes in areas of concern to the public. Since its inception in 2009, Pemandu has engendered public trust in government. Its modus of inter-agency collaboration to resolve cross-cutting issues broke silos in the public service. And, through its challenging performance targets, ministers and secretaries-general have come to appreciate that accountability for the delivery of public services and national goals is as major a job as policymaking and legislating.

Ernest Hemmingway, an American writer, once said: "It is good to have an end to journey toward. But, it is the journey that matters, in the end."

And so, as it readies to take over, the public service has a challenging task to fill Pemandu's shoes.

The environment within which Pemandu operates – a hybrid organisation comprising public and private-sector talent that is employed on private-sector-bench-



Malaysian youth at the launch of the National Transformation 2050 in Kuala Lumpur in January. FILE PIC

marked remuneration and with readier access to funds and political leadership – may no longer be available. But, the public service has a long tradition of service delivery and reform to fall back on to perform in the same way Pemandu has done. Added to this is the institutional heft that the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) will bring to the work of coordinating the NTP across the public service. Nevertheless, we offer five pointers to ease the transition.

FIRST, in its coordinating work, EPU should be accorded the same status and privilege that Pemandu enjoys. Namely, the top political leadership should continue to shower the same level of care and involvement in resolving key public anxieties. Also, the EPU should be given the discretion to choose the talent it wants at its delivery unit.

SECOND, the invaluable execution machinery that Pemandu has built should be retained. This will include the whole-of-government approach to tackling cross-cutting issues, citizen participation, performance agreements and reporting arrangements for ministers and secretaries-general, and regular prime-ministerial stock-takes over delivery.

Departments should not feel less scrutinised or less held to account after the handover. The previous system of having stretch targets, with appropriate incentives for achievement, should be re-instituted. And, a more comprehensive approach at assessing outcomes and impact that factors in social and environmental externalities should be engineered.

THIRD, there is close learning that has to ensue on the workings of Pemandu. Understudying Pemandu's operations through the attachment of its officers there will prove beneficial for the public

service when the time comes to hit the ground running.

FOURTH, although the national key result areas of the Government Transformation Programme and national key economic areas of the Economic Transformation Programme – that together comprise NTP – remain as relevant as when they were first crafted eight years ago, they may be ripe for review. Sustainable leadership is about tapping into society's changing preferences and shaping programmes to accommodate these shifts.

The public will have to be consulted. During the heady days of NTP, consultative laboratories, citizen surveys and open days were among the instruments to solicit public feedback. These tools should be added to the public service's arsenal of civil-society engagement.

FIFTH, the culture of performance that values outcomes over outputs should be retained. Pemandu has created islands of excellence in ministries and departments that are involved in implementing the key result and economic areas. These pockets of excellence should be enlarged to envelope the rest of the public service. This could be done by bringing to bear the same amount of focus on ministries outside the ambit of the national key result and economic areas as on those within.

The retention of Pemandu's elaborate execution framework, tools, and talent coupled with an institutional culture that allows for a whole-of-society approach will ensure that the public service is positioned to deliver.

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