

Emphasise values in the public service - Eugene K B Tan

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The Singapore Public Service, comprising about 136,000 public officers in 16 ministries and more than 50 statutory boards, is integral to the well-being and success of Singapore.

Hence, the recent series of high-profile and sensational cases — such as the police officer accused of the Kovan double murders; the prisons officer convicted of negligence resulting in the death of a prison inmate; the Assistant Director of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) facing 21 charges of fraud; and other cases involving the former heads of the Singapore Civil Defence Force and the Central Narcotics Bureau — have roused concern among the public.

A Prime Minister's Office (PMO) study this year also revealed that about half of errant public officers who were found culpable of graft or other crimes were front-line staff in enforcement units.

While the cases are all not connected, and a couple are starkly different in their nature, this has not stopped some Singaporeans from extrapolating what they see as a trend of the weakening of our public institutions. They seek to make sense of the egregious breaches of trust, criminality or abuse of power — after all, hasn't it been the Government's proposition that competitive salaries of senior civil servants and the robust selection process help keep the system clean?

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean was quick to stress that the PMO study of public officers investigated for corruption and other financial crimes showed that such cases have "remained low and quite stable over the last five years".

But the emphatic assurances given by political and Public Service leaders after each case — that such misconduct is the exception rather than the norm — may lack convincing power, given the latest frequency of revelations. What if these cases are but the tip of the iceberg, with more lesser misdemeanours not publicised because they were subjected to internal disciplinary sanctions? How can law enforcement be seen to be impartial and effective, if law enforcement officers themselves are breaching the laws?

Acting after the transgression

To be sure, the Government has steadfastly taken a zero tolerance approach. The State prosecutes the rule-breakers notwithstanding their seniority, and the Public Prosecutor presses for a deterrent sentence upon conviction. It shows that such misconduct is not tolerated at all.

This stance is critical — anything else would inflict a major blow to Singapore's standing and undermine the legitimacy of the Public Service.

However, is such an ex post facto response effective, when every case is one case too many? Moreover, the larger concern is with the potential erosion of public trust that could undercut the Public Service's standing and authority.

Here, questions persist: Is there something flawed in the way public servants are recruited, assessed, promoted and regulated? Is the ethos of public sector leadership abundantly clear? Do the key performance indicators for officers give undue attention and weight to performance outcomes, but at the expense of assessing how those outcomes are arrived at? What about the character, ethics and moral fibre of the senior officers?

Whatever corrective measures put in place after a transgression comes to light are primarily focused on damage control and prevention of recurrences. For instance, in the wake of the CPIB officer's case, the Public Service Division (PSD) is looking at tightening rules on civil servants visiting casinos. We can be sure of new guidelines in the PSD's code of conduct for civil servants in the months ahead.

But these measures can never cover every possibility of misconduct. So, can more be done — not after the fact of transgression, but before that?

A return to values

One way is to reduce the opportunities for public officers to engage in less than appropriate conduct. The annual Auditor-General's Report, released two weeks ago, contains the usual litany of lapses in internal control systems across the Public Service.

Notwithstanding the Auditor-General's view that the reported lapses "do not necessarily reflect the general state of administration in the entities audited", the public cannot be faulted for being concerned. Sure, the revelation of irregularities and weaknesses is an opportunity to improve the management of public funds and resources. But some also wonder if the audit findings serve as warning of a deeper malaise of inadequate public accountability, complacency and audacity.

The Public Service must decisively assert a return to values — emphasising integrity, impartiality and ethical conduct.

Good values will not simply permeate an organisation by fiat alone; the Public Service's shared values must function as more than just a statement of mission. A systemic effort must be made to ensure the values of public officers are aligned with those of the service. A misalignment of values often results in the greater likelihood of misdemeanours committed in the course of duty.

Greater attention should be paid to ethics. Public officers have to be equipped to recognise that there are ethical dimensions to their public functions. A singular focus on outcomes without due consideration of process will lead to moral disengagement — a situation where people reduce or suspend their personal codes of ethics, yet continue to view themselves as ethical.

In addition, with the Public Service driven to be even more performance-centric in this "new normal" landscape, it must be acutely conscious of the risk of "bounded ethicality" — which



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occurs when systemic, organisational pressures and psychological processes cause people to engage in ethically questionable behaviour.

Given that public officers have to exercise discretion in their duties, being clear on not just their legal powers, but also how those powers ought to be exercised, is fundamental. I would argue that everything the Public Service does is inherently about ethics — whether it sees itself in such a light is a separate question altogether.

Yes, ethics may not have prevented the cases which recently came to light. However, the laws and enforcement mechanisms did not stop them either. The point is that laws, while necessary, are insufficient in nurturing a purposeful organisation.

A culture of ethics may well be the missing link in the furtherance of good governance. Ultimately, the Public Service must be the protector of its own values and ethos, the staunchest advocate of its own ethical standards. Only then can it deliver on its outcomes while infusing them with a soul and a strong social purpose. - July 30,2013.

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