

Towards an agile public service

October 7, 2020 @ 12:00am



During the time of crisis, citizens witnessed efficiency and smooth coordination of various government agencies working together, pooling expertise and resources as best as they could. -BERNAMA pic

LETTER: As the nation's backbone and main provider of essential services, public service in many countries have been at the forefront in addressing the spread of Covid-19.

During the time of crisis, citizens witnessed efficiency and smooth coordination of various government agencies working together, pooling expertise and resources as best as they could. Thus, the agility of the public service in handling crisis is always looked upon in awe and appreciation.

We are no exception and demonstrated a remarkable and efficient role of inter-agency collaboration in handling the pandemic. Corresponding to this, the FASTER principle (flat, agile, streamlined, tech-enabled, efficient and resilient) emphasised by the chief secretary to the government in conjunction with Merdeka celebration this year was timely with the changing environment.

The agility of the public service that emerged during the handling of crises should be entwined with the new normal. Agility is about outcome, responsiveness, speed, cooperation, collaboration, being flexible, adapting and innovating in coping with the current situation that is filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

It is high time that the public service focuses on agility as the new normal to strengthen the sustainability of our economy and social wellbeing in bracing the impact of the pandemic or any other eventualities in the future. Key enablers for agile public service requires the culture of innovation, active public engagement, collaboration and leadership.

Firstly, public service should be at the forefront in leading innovation, ensuring the sustainability of organisations by being current with the changing technology and customer needs. Overhauling archaic work processes and procedures, creative problem solving by reducing the cost and leveraging technology are crucial measures in promoting continuous innovation. Inculcating the culture of innovation may stimulate agility in government agencies. Continuous new methods and rapid problem solving ultimately increases efficiency in service delivery.

The second enabler is strategic inter-agency collaboration. Breaking the thick organisational silo walls among government agencies is imperative in promoting agility in public service. Inter-agency collaboration enhances efficient use of resources, especially in terms of human resources, logistics and public funds.

Collaboration also promotes ideation and exchange of perspectives of experts from various backgrounds and industries. Collaborating by data sharing across agencies facilitates well-informed and quick decision making. Collaboration can even go beyond government agencies by linking the resources and experts from the private sector.

Active engagement with the public is the third key enabler. As the end-users or beneficiaries of the policies and services, active engagement with the public ensures successful implementation of the inherent agenda of the government. Customer experience, feedback and needs must be placed at the forefront of policymaking.

This approach requires redefining the boundaries of government agencies and the mindset of officers. Moving forward, government agencies should use social media as platforms to reach out to the public to get instant feedback and ideas to provide better and prompt services.

Fourth is the leadership. Capable leaders to helm and steer the team at the workplace by coaching, inspiring and empowering their teams promotes agility. Agile leaders will empower and delegate the decision making to increase the efficiency of the service. The trust and empowerment given to the team creates a positive working culture.

With an increasing number of millennials filling up the civil service, leaders must be the catalyst to nurture and empower this new workforce as mentors and coaches. In essence, during times of uncertainty, "public service must remain stable yet agile working towards the greater mission – to serve the public".

DR G. PERIASAMY

Senior Research Fellow,

National Institute of Public Administration