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PUTTING THE SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLIC PROJECTS

Making sure projects are delivered to the public as planned

RECENTLY, Tan Sri Dr Ali Hamsa, the chief secretary to the government, announced that he will personally take charge of monitoring public projects. That announcement is not only timely, but highly appropriate. His announcement catapults project management into the limelight.

Hitherto, judging from the auditor-general's annual — and now quarterly — reports, project management has not been satisfactory. So, even a 10 per cent savings in development expenditure, through strict monitoring against mismanagement and waste, can yield RM5 billion — enough to finance the construction of twenty 150-bed hospitals or sixty 24-class schools.

In the public service, issues gain urgency and move faster when someone at the top, such as the chief secretary to the government, takes a personal interest in them. By taking charge, the chief secretary can overcome some of the lethargy in project management. Ali had previously proved his mettle in project management, having ensured that the Mass Rapid Transit project finished well ahead of time. As Francis Fukuyama argues in his 2014 book, *Political Order and Political Decay*, legitimacy comes in part from delivering results and from being able to respond to citizen demands.

However, the chief secretary's announcement, albeit noble, is a risky one. It implies that he will ultimately be responsible for any project failure. Such was the cost that faced Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The night before the Normandy invasion during the Second World War to liberate Europe, the Supreme Allied commander wrote a note to himself: "If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone." The preparation for the June 6, 1944, D-Day was logistically nightmarish. It involved 12,000 warplanes,

7,000 vessels to ferry troops across the English Channel, and more than three million Allied soldiers assembled for the assault. To this complexity was added the giant-sized egos that Eisenhower had to contend with across the war-planning machinery. A similar responsibility, albeit on a smaller scale, awaits the chief secretary.

The public service is not one given much to taking risks. The chief secretary — in setting the tone from the top — has signalled that calculated risk-taking is necessary for improved efficiency. The following are five proposals which can help ensure greater project success:

FIRST, as Eisenhower advises: "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

The Economic Planning Unit and the agency concerned must be unequivocally clear what the project intends to achieve and, more importantly, whether the government is the preferred provider of that project. When the project passes this policy scrutiny, the relevant agency should develop an action plan for each project that is replete with strategies, detailed initiatives, clear timelines or milestones and key performance indicators to assess progress on outcomes. People made responsible for their part of execution across the action plan must have the requisite skills and capacity.

Such plans induce planning. They offer a strong basis for monitoring. And, while such plans might break into smithereens upon contact with reality, alternative plans can be reconstructed from the broken pieces. To soften the blow of reality, these action plans must constantly be refined, but not diluted, through robust dialogues with stakeholders.

SECOND, a delivery chain must



Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Dr Ali Hamsa has proved his mettle in project management, having ensured that the Mass Rapid Transit project finished well ahead of time. FILE PIC

be drawn for each project. For example, if the project's aim is to enhance farmers' incomes through increased farm yields, then the delivery chain must trace a series of antecedent activities in a logical and sequential manner that will result in the intended outcome. Such activities may include knowledge dissemination, extension services and fertiliser distribution. Again, managers involved must not only have the skills and capacity to deliver, they must also be able to work well with one another across the delivery chain.

The activities across the delivery chain must be analysed with a fine toothcomb to ensure that each activity, which invariably incurs costs, makes a positive contribution to the desired outcome. The activities, too, must have performance targets so that when the outcomes are not reached, one can easily pinpoint which part of the delivery chain is the culprit. As Michael Barber, a public-sector consultant, argues in his 2015 book, *How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers Don't Go Crazy*: "If you can't draw the delivery chain, you can't deliver."

Third, there should be periodic trilateral meetings between the chief secretary, director-general of the Implementation Coordination Unit and the secretary-general of a ministry to review progress against the action plan

and to troubleshoot implementation bottlenecks.

FOURTH, introduce a league-table for project management. League tables are a powerful motivational tool. Those on top will persevere to retain their elite position while those at the bottom will redouble their efforts to scale the higher rungs. That would help develop a culture of meeting high standards in project management. Ministries and departments can be rank-ordered by their performance — from planning to delivering a project without cost overruns or mismanagement.

The league table should be published for greater transparency and to realise its motivational impact.

FIFTH, Albert Einstein said, "The only knowledge is experience." As such, a platform should be introduced to share service-wide implementation success and failure stories for mutual learning.

The chief secretary deserves all the support he can muster from all stakeholders in his new venture. With one of the most-hard-working public services in the world at his disposal, success should be within easy reach. We wish him well!

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