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# *Speaking truth to power: Vice or virtue?*

**Mandarins' and ministers' roles and interests in a political system are different. But mandarins must be able to provide fearless advice.**

**Zeger van der Wal**

For The Straits Times

On Feb 27, Member of Parliament Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) used his speech during debate on the Budget to express worries about the fear among public servants of getting into trouble when speaking up and challenging their bosses.

He warned against having a public service filled with "yes" men and women who are wary that speaking up will affect their appraisal and promotion.

Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) and Second Minister for Defence Ong Ye Kung responded on March 1, emphasising that the head of civil service has called on public officers to have "constructive discontent".

Alluding to the major public service transformation currently under way, Mr Ong stated: "This deep change cannot happen if the public service does not welcome ideas from its own officers".

He mentioned the regular 360-degree feedback exercises as an organisational development instrument aimed at enabling the sharing of new ideas.

**The art of giving effective advice to higher-ups – of being politically astute – may take many years of practice. If more junior public servants tread carefully but prudently, and gain authority through their policy expertise, they may one day become mandarins themselves whose political bosses value– and follow – their truths.**

## VOICE, EXIT, LOYALTY

The exchange between the MP and the Minister touches on a classic dilemma for public servants: balancing between "voice, exit, and loyalty", in the formulation made famous by economist Albert Hirschman in his influential work in 1970 on how people respond to decline in firms, organisations and states. The three roles have since been applied to people in thriving, not just declining, organisations.

Thus, civil servants are expected to exercise "voice". They are supposed to "speak truth" to power and provide frank and critical advice, and voice concerns when needed, while maintaining "loyalty", keeping faith with and sustaining the mission of their agencies and programmes. And while public servants can always "exit" if they are unsatisfied, their career prospects and job security may often supersede such considerations.

Is maintaining such a delicate balance unique to Singapore's public sector? Not quite, as establishing a culture of speaking truth to power is challenging for any government organisation.

What is, however, unique about Singapore compared with many other developed nations is the stability of government.

Elsewhere, public servants have had to get used to switching between political masters with fundamentally different political ideologies and lineages, sometimes in a matter of weeks.

Does one system make it easier than the other to voice concerns and speak one's mind, and maintain administrative autonomy?

One could argue it both ways.

On the one hand, long-established relationships and dependencies may lead to more "group think" and "echo chamber" effects. On the other hand, such relationships could make it easier to provide critical advice and feedback and share concerns because of high trust and familiarity with one another.

Indeed, research evidence tells us easing into a relationship with a new boss is challenging and it takes time.

## PUBLIC SERVICE BARGAIN

However, the issues raised in the exchange last week go beyond just political-administrative dynamics.

In Westminster-based systems like Singapore, such dynamics are guided by the so-called "public service bargain", in which politicians and civil servants respect each other's role and comfort zone, yet provide frank and fearless advice without overstepping functional and personal boundaries.

The concerns also relate to the organisational culture within administrative agencies, and the interactions between senior bureaucrats, or mandarins, and their subordinates.

What, then, are specific measures or frameworks to create organisational cultures in which speaking truth to power is the norm rather than the exception?

Mr Ng's main suggestion is to redesign the current appraisal system by studying the 360-appraisal review used by companies like Google and Alibaba, which allows employees to review and grade their direct managers, rather than just the other way around, arguing that the current system does not incentivise risk-taking and innovation.

We may wonder whether such structure-oriented measures can change deep-seated bureaucratic cultures. After all, private-sector tech companies built on the values of disruption, innovation, creativity and "going against the grain" have fundamentally different operating systems from public agencies that have traditionally rewarded stability, prudence, seniority and hierarchy.

While it is clear that governments across the globe are embarking on reforms and transformations in order to become more future-proof, with Singapore being a front runner in many respects, this does not mean organisational values and principles are easily changed.

Indeed, as I argue in my latest book, The 21st Century Public Manager, various emerging challenges urge public servants to rethink their operating principles, values and competencies.

However, in doing so they cannot simply mimic private-sector practices, or assume traditional practices and norms are easily replaced by new ones.

Rather, they will have to carefully blend traditional bureaucratic qualities – such as political astuteness and diplomacy – with new and emerging ones, such as storytelling and experimentation.

Public leaders, in turn, have to nurture and enable such qualities.

Doing so extends beyond mere recruitment and training, both of which have long been part of the strong points of the Singapore public service. In the end, the key issue is whether critical and visionary policy advice is appreciated by decision-makers.

New structures and frameworks may only partly address this. Trust is key, and so is courage.

After all, ministers, mandarins and the public servants that support them all benefit when they produce high-quality policies and services. This leads to higher job satisfaction, societal standing, public trust and citizen appreciation.

## BEHIND THE SCENES

One would think these are key drivers for those working in public service, regardless of their rank, role and function.

However, my research over the years shows that while ministers and mandarins share many drivers, such as wanting to contribute to society and having interesting and intellectually challenging work, they differ in how they want to achieve policy impact.

Mandarins want to utilise their domain expertise to affect policy decisions and, in doing so, aim to master the art of staying in close proximity to power.

Ministers express a desire to have direct impact, sit in the driver's seat and be seen to do so. Thus, while political and administrative elites both seek influence and need each other to succeed, the former prefer the spotlight, whereas the latter thrive behind the scenes.

Intriguingly, data also shows how drivers and motives change as careers progress. When joining the public service or going into politics, idealism and societal contributions in combination with career prospects prevail.

Considerations of power and impact, job content but also job security become more important when politicians and mandarins move up the ranks. That does not necessarily mean some of the ideals get lost along the way, but it shows that organisations, sectors and positions socialise the individuals who helm them.

So, is speaking truth to power a vice or a virtue for public servants?

It may just depend on where you sit. As a seasoned mandarin told me in confidence a few years back during a lengthy interview: "You matter, you can do things for better or for worse. We're talking about immensely influential positions.

"If you like having influence, and I do, this is a wonderful career choice. If you are a good permanent secretary, your minister always follows your advice".

Just like the popular TV series taught us, often "Yes, Minister" actually means "Yes, Mandarin".

The art of giving effective advice to higher-ups – of being politically astute – may take many years of practice. If more junior public servants tread carefully but prudently, and gain authority through their policy expertise, they may one day become mandarins themselves whose political bosses value – and follow – their truths.

One would hope they themselves will then also encourage their staff to speak their mind, and not forget that they were once in their shoes.

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