

Grooming 21st century civil servants

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The complexity of today's world, a subject of practical importance and metaphysical proportions to boot, is not for faint hearts. Thankfully, there are those who are game enough to unravel it in the sphere of governance, like former head of civil service Peter Ho. He will be giving a series of lectures on governance in a complex operating environment, as the Institute of Policy Studies' latest S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

There is no question that fresh approaches must be taken by today's civil servants as they have to contend with the multifold effects of globalisation, social diversity, new technologies and highly technical systems, some perhaps of their own making. When such complexity abounds,

"we often get things wrong when we make projections... (as) things often don't follow the predicted trajectory", noted Mr Ho. That means just relying on received wisdom and going by the rulebook will not always yield satisfactory answers. But being bold enough to change rules after having achieved much over the years involves considerable risks: "a bad miscalculation can mean losing it all", as Mr Ho rightly pointed out. So, how can a new generation of civil servants be equipped to meet new challenges?

To be sure, there continues to be a place for the civil service's proud traditions of efficiency and incorruptibility, as well for established tools of governance like cost-benefit analysis. However, old forms of governance in both the public and private sectors are "becoming increasingly ineffective". Further, the "tendency to vest initiative exclusively in the hands of those in senior positions in the hierarchy" must give way to greater collaboration, maintained the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development study, *Governance In The 21st Century*.

When physical infrastructure like housing and transport networks is being planned, one could rely largely on technical experts. But when intangibles like holistic education, social integration and balancing resources are concerned, initiative has to be diffused, in order to involve those with both a deep appreciation of specific needs and of the complex means to fulfil goals. In some areas, high-order introspection among civil servants might be sufficient to change old practices that are out of step with the times, like the routine issue of arrest warrants for municipal infringements or the shackling of elderly frail suspects being taken to court. In other spheres, like the Smart Nation initiative and development of digital government, there is merit in seeking inputs from a broader range of players so solutions are not merely technocratic but also take into account people's diverse and changing needs. Technology holds both promise and peril. Naturally, managing these and other complex risks cannot be left to civil servants alone.