

Transforming civil servants into servant heroes

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When people talk about the Philippine government the conversation often turns negative and discussions veer toward corruption, inefficiency, and lack of professionalism. Though these opinions are more commonly heard from the public, it is a sentiment that is also shared by some within the bureaucracy. It is clear that there is an urgent need to reform the image of government, but more importantly, to bring back the pride and self-respect of public servants. As the lead agency in handling human resource (HR) and organizational development (OD) matters, the Civil Service Commission (CSC), using the Institute for Solidarity in Asia's (ISA) Performance Governance System (PGS), has pledged to transform government workers into servant-heroes who are driven by the virtues of excellence and integrity.

Integrating the ARTA

In order to transform the governance landscape through its HR and OD mandate, one of the key initiatives CSC implements is the Integrated Anti-Red Tape Act (ARTA) Program. The Anti-Red Tape Act is a law that was passed in 2007 to address graft and corruption in the frontline services of government institutions. By virtue of its mandate, CSC was made responsible for implementing programs that encouraged accountability and transparency in the government's transactions with the public.

Though the organization recognized the importance of this new role, its focus then was on implementing a performance management system for the whole bureaucracy. This in itself was already a sizeable responsibility, so the regular HR-related work of the agency overshadowed ARTA matters.

This was the case for three years, until a shift in 2010. That year, CSC formulated its organizational strategy focused on becoming the "center of excellence for strategic HR and OD in Asia by 2030". In evaluating its organizational

priorities, CSC realized that the implementation of ARTA-related services would actually be instrumental in improving the performance of public servants. They determined that ARTA was not a supplementary responsibility, but a core obligation that would help them achieve their strategic goal. By emphasizing the importance of efficient and effective public service, ARTA actually complemented the performance management mandate of the CSC.

Initial issues with implementation

Deciding that ARTA was a top priority caused problems with manpower and resource allocation. Ideally, CSC would monitor compliance with ARTA of all government offices with frontline services, but doing so would spread the organization too thin and limit its ability to perform its other functions. The compromise was to implement ARTA programs in high-density or most-complained offices in government. While this would not solve the red tape problem in all government offices, it was the most strategic way to address the needs of the public.

The first two years of implementation saw steady progress. The baseline in 2010 showed that only 50 service offices out of a universe of close to a thousand had been assessed, but by 2012, the number had already reached 599 service offices (representing 43% of the total population). Despite their success, internal issues started to surface. Focusing on the strategic initiatives and implementing goal-oriented work meant that people needed to achieve higher targets. The Initial sentiment from the ground was that the 1200 people of CSC would not be able to do all of the work.

According to CSC union president, Mr. Malenito Jayme, then Chairman Francisco T. Duque III took matters into his own hands by speaking directly to CSC personnel. His consultative approach led to a Participatory Action Research (PAR) which drew out viewpoints from all levels of the organization. Through the activity, CSC was able to understand

that frustrations did not stem from the work itself but from a lack of communication in the first few years of implementation. CSC personnel were proud of the ambition of the organizational vision, and they did want to pursue the strategic initiatives; however, they believed that leadership had to be aware first of its own organizational realities and limitations before it could pursue solving the problems of the bureaucracy.

CSC leadership and regular personnel learned to compromise with each other because of PAR. While CSC started hiring more people and focused on filling up vacant positions, it did so with the mindset of getting only the best people for the jobs. The hiring process stretched longer and became more intensive, but CSC personnel saw this as a positive. Regular communication was also established between Jayme and the Project Management Team (PMT) so that problems on the ground could be heard before becoming major barriers to implementation.



Former Chairman Francisco T. Duque III talks to a citizen as she waits in line to avail of frontline services.

Jayne believes that communication has never been more open between management and staff.

Assess-Assist-Award

The resolution of internal issues helped CSC move away from its transactional management framework. For decades, CSC concentrated on assessments and reviews of government offices. Deficiencies could be identified but not necessarily addressed, and the importance of motivation and enthusiasm for work tended to be overlooked. Because of the unified vision, CSC realized that to manage HR with excellence it needed to focus on developing people into skilled and driven workers. In view of this, training became central to its work. CSC saw that higher performance would only come from the advancement of the bureaucracy itself. CSC leadership also understood that training could only improve services up to a certain point before offices reached a performance plateau. This was where recognition and rewards became influential in molding public servants. If people felt valued, they would work better and harder. Integrating their new mindset with the success of the old model, CSC developed a three-phase system for raising the performance of the bureaucracy:

- Phase 1: **Assessing** the performance of the bureaucracy and the competencies of its people,
- Phase 2: **Assisting** development by offering training and coaching services, and
- Phase 3: **Awarding** exemplary performance to encourage continuous improvement.

Through this process, CSC has been able to facilitate impressive turnarounds in government offices and changes in employee demeanor. A director of the Public Attorney's Office attested to this, "Before strict ARTA implementation, frontline offices didn't see a problem in having three-hour lunch breaks. They would buy their lunch at 10 and eat lunch

By showing which organizations are doing best and which are lagging CSC has developed a spirit of competitiveness between government institutions. This has arguably been the biggest factor in improving public service.

at 11. At noon, the lights would all be off because everyone would be sleeping.

With the 'No Noon Break' policy, however, behavior like that has practically disappeared." Frontline offices today always have their lights on and people present at their desks to ensure that queues are moving and processing is being done. Training and coaching helped in changing the attitude of personnel as well. Although less than ideal working conditions hampered the productivity of workers, CSC emphasized that keeping a positive attitude throughout the day would make the job less stressful with the clients being more appreciative.

The rewards system of CSC also became a feedback loop for the public. A Vice President of Philhealth, the agency for public health insurance, said that since his office received a Seal of Excellence, more clients flocked to their office and found them to be more efficient than banks. Offices like Philhealth now strive to be even better because of the trust they have built with their clients.

Communicating Success to Stakeholders

For the last three years, CSC has been publicizing the results of the ARTA Report Card Survey (ARTA-RCS). While publication is ostensibly for the news, it also serves a secondary purpose for CSC. By showing which organizations are doing best and which are lagging CSC has developed a spirit of competitiveness between government institutions. This has arguably been the biggest factor in improving public service. In fact, many of those that were awarded the Seal of Excellence



CSC directors meet to discuss the status of priority projects under the CSC 2030 Roadmap.

recently, failed the first ARTA-RCS in 2010, but they worked hard to reach higher standards when they realized how they compared with their peers.

CSC hopes to build on the success stories of these agencies in communicating transformation efforts of the government. While news of corruption is constant, CSC believes that it is possible to change the conversation by showing government's willingness to be tried, tested, and trained.

CSC has formed a strategic partnership with leading experts and governance advocates in the form of its Multi-Sector Advisory Council (MSAC). The MSAC has been focused on levelling up the communications of CSC, with their guidance, CSC launched the Contact Center *ng Bayan* (of the Nation) for regular citizens to be able to give their sentiments to the government with assurance of feedback. MSAC Chair Atty. Alexander Lacson hopes that initiatives like this will pave the way for CSC to be viewed as the vanguard of the citizenry.

A New Culture of Governance

All the work CSC has put in the past few years has been for the achievement of the good

governance ideal. CSC itself admits that it is still far from completely reforming the bureaucracy, but the pessimism of before has been steadily dissipating. Assistant Secretary Corazon Davis of the Department of Natural Resources summed up the confident sentiment of public servants, "The fact that you can see the benefit of the changes, makes it worth trying and pushing forward. Gone are the days when you feel it is a sacrifice to work in the government. It has now become an honor."

While ARTA plays a big role in reforming governance in the Philippines, it is just a starting point for the CSC. The organization has been pursuing several other initiatives that can shape the performance of the government as a whole, and in the coming years, it plans to widen the scope of its efforts. CSC aims to keep raising the standards of governance in the Philippines until the country becomes an exemplar in Asia.

The potential for excellence is evident in the bureaucracy even now. The government offices that once failed, but which now serve as models of efficient and effective service, are proof of this. The government simply needs a catalyst to push it forward, and the CSC has boldly taken on that mantle.

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