

Final Report:

**Reflections on the Series of Workshops
to Enhance Competencies
of the Public Officials**

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Reflections on the Series of Workshops

Introduction

Many lessons were learned from the four workshops organized for the Office of Public Sector Development Commission. Each workshop was successful in the sense that a new body of knowledge was acquired by Thai public officials (as intended). However, in spite of the fact that the participants appreciated the workshops they joined, the workshop management team pinpointed some minor shortcomings which need to be taken into consideration for future curriculum-building to improve the capacity of Thai public officials. More importantly, the shortcomings observed will lead to suggestions on curriculum development which is a major theme of this report.

This report consists of two major sections; the observations made and obstacles to the workshops that took place and the suggestion for further curriculum development. Those who wish to know the details on each particular workshop can find the descriptions of each one in the summary report.

Barriers

From the observation, many cultural barriers which inhibited the efficiency of the workshops emerged. These barriers did not result from any individual participant's action or lack of cooperation. Rather, there were by-products of the lack of certain competence and the mindset of Thais as a whole. The workshops rolled along smoothly despite these barriers owing to the experience and skill of the facilitators. The sections that follow list the barriers observed.

Linguistic Barrier

As all the workshops were conducted in English, most participants were uncomfortable expressing him/herself in this language even though they spoke English. In these four workshops, it was fortunate that the facilitators were very understanding and tactful enough to make the participants feel unembarrassed. Dr. Behn, for instance, paraphrased what the participants said. Dr. Sparrow never showed his impatience with people's English ability. Dr. Cragg never made corrections on the participants' grammatical mistakes. When he did not understand something, he simply

asked the person to speak louder. Since the feeling of intimidation came from the participants' side, it might be useful to encourage them beforehand to talk more. Perhaps a brief orientation from the organizer before the workshop is necessary. Participants should be convinced that it is acceptable to make grammatical mistakes and that English ability is not the focus of the workshop; it is their ideas that are needed. In short, the goals of the workshop need to be stated clearly and the anticipated fear needs to be eliminated beforehand.

Cultural Barrier

Since culture entails almost all behaviors (group as well as individual), there are a few points to be mentioned here. They are:

1. Non-participatory nature

In general, Thai people are not very participatory. The workshop facilitator needs to be made aware of this fact so that he/she can come prepared with techniques to solicit participation. The understanding of this will also prevent her/him from feeling discouraged. In the first workshop, for instance, the level of participation from the perspective of a Thai observer was quite high, but the facilitator still expressed that he expected more.

2. Inherent nature of being submissive to hierarchy

Thai society is highly hierarchical. Patron-client relationship as a tacit social value runs deep. Young people have been taught to be seen, not to be heard. Those with lower status usually give way to those with higher status. In the public sector, the observation of the hierarchy of officials is stronger than in any other sectors. A workshop aims at soliciting equal contribution from those taking place, but the participants' strong sense of respect for hierarchy inhibits the expected idea of equal contribution. Those with higher status tend to dominate the discussion, while those with lower status tend to be reluctant to express their ideas for fear of being considered aggressive or impertinent. Therefore, they stay quiet and keep their (sometimes good) ideas unsaid. As such, in a group discussion, we tend to see one person dominating the discussion and insist on his or her idea being right.

In addition to (some) high-ranking officials insisting on their own ideas being right and therefore should be the main topic of discussion, there is another inhibiting

aspect. It is well-known that high-ranking officials in Thailand are used to having at least a person (sometime his/her secretary) accompanying them. The person who accompanies them usually acts as an assistant. In a workshop, however, all participants participate on an equal basis. When such accompanying persons intervene in the workshop, for example to take photographs, etc., it is contextually inappropriate. High-ranking officials should be made known that they are invited because their ideas are valuable and count, not their presence. Therefore, a photograph taken to show that they joined the workshop is unnecessary, and having someone to come in to take it could be disruptive.

The organizer may need to announce at the onset that the administrative team is responsible for picture-taking and individual participants need not worry about this. In a workshop of this nature, **all participants are to be treated equally. All voices and ideas (sound or unsound) have equal contribution.**

3. A sense of commitment

In all workshops, as observed, many expected participants are high-ranking officials with a lot of responsibility. Some who could not attend sent people from his/her office. The representatives sent did not belong to the target group. They appeared worried about taking notes so that they could report to their boss who could not attend. In the case that the note-taker did not understand the message clearly, misunderstanding of the content could occur. Compounding this problem was that the officials attending were constantly called to perform other duties. The result was the interrupted flow of knowledge and participation. If this continues, it might be necessary for the organizer to provide a final report on each workshop in Thai language, so that those who were supposed to but failed to come could get the right message without having to send any representatives.

Another point worth mentioning is that in the two workshops given by the facilitators from the Kennedy School of Government, it was made clear at the onset that cellular phone calls (either work-related or personal) were prohibited. Still, one could constantly hear the participants' phones ringing which was disruptive to both the facilitators and the participants. The organizer needs to inform the participants on how serious it is that this rule be respected.

The degree of participation, as observed, was sporadic. Some participants appeared not fully committed to the whole workshop. It was noticed that each

workshop was well-attended on the first day but the attendance rate dropped on the second day, especially towards the end. The organizers might need to find an effective method to enforce full attendance rule.

4. The participants' background knowledge

While some workshops were very general (ratcheting up performance and participatory governance), some can be very specific (risk management) and requires participants with some background knowledge. From the workshop on risk management, confusion did arise as to how one distinguished between risk control and work process improvement. If lack of clear understanding occurred at the onset and went undetected, the workshop would not achieve its full intended results.

5. The contents

These four workshops covered four areas related to public administration. The participants of each workshop came from diverse agencies with different responsibilities. In the future, given more time, selection of participants ought to be carefully made to maximize mutual learning and exchanges. Thematic issues of specialized workshops can be used to create a cohort of like-minded practitioners with a view of further networking to upgrade their acquired knowledge and skill.

As far as the content of each workshop was concerned, we saw that case studies were brought into use. The aim, as stated by the facilitators, was to get the participants to think analytically about, for instance, how a problem should be solved or whether or not the action taken by the characters made sense. Admittedly, though these cases were real and useful, some were not directly relevant to the Thai context. For instance, in the last workshop, the facilitator had to clarify who lobbyists were, since the concept was new to some Thai officials.

In sum, the above mentioned paragraphs provide details on workshops observed by the workshop management team. These observations lead to suggestions on how workshops of this type should be organized in the future. The following section discusses what the curriculum to improve the capacity of the Thai public officials should be like.

Suggestions for Future Workshops and Curriculum

Suggestions on Administrative Aspects of Future Workshops

Cultural aspects inhibiting the efficiency to the four workshops mentioned earlier are solvable problems. As observed, the participants' behavior gradually changed as time went by. Small personal groups with common personal interest were formed and they appeared more comfortable expressing their ideas. The atmosphere inevitably became more relaxed and each workshop was well-appreciated in the end. As such, the following tactics might be useful:

1. Ice-breaking activities prior to the workshop: this can be done by the workshop facilitator. Professor Bob Behn did this well by asking each to tell the whole group about something only his/her friend knows and he called the participants on the nickname basis which helped to relax the tense atmosphere. Every facilitator may need to be reminded of this in advance.
2. Setting time for evening activities if the workshop is not in Bangkok: small tour of the town together might help to minimize the well-engrained respect of hierarchy. This, however, means that the workshop cannot be intense and more days might be needed. In the four workshops, contents were somewhat dense and the participants appeared weary at the end of each day.
3. Distributing readings in advance: in these four workshops, the readings were distributed in advance, but the organizers need to find out what the optimal time is. Some participants need more time to read the assigned readings. In case of those who need maximum help with English, a so-called "tutor" on comprehension might be needed to aid them. This will help reducing anxiety on the participant's side.
4. Soliciting cooperation from the agencies represented by the participants: agencies from which the participants come might need to be asked for cooperation. They need to realize that the workshop is serious and will help the whole public system in the long run. As such, they should not call their representative to do things during the workshop. Participants really must be free of other duties and to

concentrate fully on the workshop. In essence, the agency has to give full commitment.

5. Assessing participation: the degree of participation was sporadic with some participants disappearing towards the end of the workshop, a method of keeping the participants is needed. The assessment of participation can be very formal. It can come in a form of comprehensive test on what has been mentioned and what they have learned. For a less threatening way, the organizer might hand out a certificate of full attendance which is to be ceremonial, and the agency of the participant should demand to see it.
6. Analyzing needs: as suggested that in some workshop, the topic was new to some participants and misunderstanding of the concept could go undetected, the organizers might conduct a needs analysis to identify which participants are appropriate for which workshop. For certain groups such as those in regulatory agencies, workshop on risk control might be their first priority. In short, the organizers should segment their audience to achieve the maximum benefit.
7. Keeping the workshops continued: if the public sector is to be really improved, a continuing series of workshop is necessary so that the knowledge gained does not slide back. As the nature of the public sector changes (because of policies changes or service demand changes), new problems and challenges will arise and public officials need to keep readjusting their work tactics. It has to be kept in mind that public administration is never stagnant. Rather, it is dynamic in nature and those involved in it need to keep learning new things.

Suggestions for Future Curriculum

Lessons learned from the content of the four workshops are highly valuable and lead to a lot of suggestions on curriculum. In each workshop, the participants expressed a lot of positively critical ideas. This demonstrated that they identified the weaknesses of the existing system. While some expressed their lack of hope that changes could be made, some were very positive and creative. Some crucial steps on curriculum development should be as follows:

1. Issuing the topic thematically: this aspect is most important of all. Those in charge of improving the Thai public sector performance need most of all to analyze the current situation to ascertain where the weaknesses lie and structure the theme of the workshop series around them. Once this is done, other aspects of the workshop curriculum can be planned.
2. Emphasizing evolution and incremental changes from skeptical to receptivity: specific effort needs to be put in to change the mindset of most Thai public officials that the system can be evolved and changed for the better. They also need to be convinced that there are policy makers who are sincere about bringing about changes. Extreme cynicism is not healthy for the system as a whole. Constant emphasis of this message at the beginning of each workshop and example of changes that have occurred might be needed to persuade them.
3. As seen, case studies used in the workshops were based on situations occurring in other countries. To make the problem closer to home, Thai cases should be developed for use. With them, those attending can have more empathy and, as a result, can learn better and faster. The Thai cases will bring in hands-on experience. With their real life experience, certain members might be asked to help develop new cases to be used either in the workshop or for the future ones as well.
4. In any topic discussed in the future workshop, the content should partly address the issue of changing mindsets and the need to embrace change and innovation. Public officials need to be made aware also that good governance is essential and that moving towards efficient public service rendering is a slow process. Limited success is a good start. But changes will never occur unless they themselves agree to be one of the change agents.

Important Remarks for Core Theme of Curriculum to Enhance Competency of Public Servants

Even when the workshops are given or facilitated by world-renowned experts, they will never yield benefit if the knowledge gained from them is not applied.

Applying knowledge requires that practitioners (in this case, public agencies) need to know their agencies' role and mandate in the context of overall public management. They all need to seriously realize the common goal which is to perform well for the betterment of the public. As such, each agency needs to be able to pinpoint what its function is in the larger system. Metaphorically speaking, it needs to know which organ it functions as and which other organs it works (closely and distantly) with so as to get the organism to live healthily. In addition, an agency has to look beyond the Thai context to the international community. Commitments made by the government on the international arena could affect or even alter the agency's goals. So, the curriculum writer has to address all of these aspects. Simultaneously, while goals are important, all need to be reminded that process is not to be overlooked. In often cases, the end justifies the means, as said in an old saying, but it should not be achieved at the expense of **ethics and common good**. The contents and issues put into the curriculum should gear towards how to set goals, agenda, and priorities in the face of competing needs and conflicting interests. Ethics needs to be inherent in all issues and ways of mitigating goals and ethics should be suggested so as to alleviate practitioners from being caught in dilemma. In the curriculum for improving performance of the public sector, one has to ensure that harmonization of agency goal attainment vis-à-vis public well-being is **most** crucial.

Conclusion

This report begins by outlining observations made in the four workshops for improving the Thai public sector. It identifies shortcomings and suggests some administrative steps deem essential for improving the quality of the future workshops. More importantly, in terms of curriculum development, the report makes crucial recommendations as to what issues it should include. Most significantly, it ends with an important reminder that if the whole system is to be improved, its parts have to work hand in hand and share the core common goal. The goal, however, will not be valuable if ethics is overlooked in the process of goal reaching.