



# HOW THE OMANI PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPS LEADERS

**By:**

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## **Chapter Three Part Two**

**The Singaporean experience in leadership development for the public sector**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of  
Master of Science  
(Organisational Leadership)**

**August 2015**

## Chapter 3 : Literature Review

### Part 2 :

#### 1.1. The Singaporean experience in leadership development for the public sector

There are three main elements that contribute to leadership development according to the Singaporean experience:

1. Governmental structure.
2. Governance; rules and regulations.
3. Leadership development enablers and mechanisms.

The vision of Singapore was for it to become an international city with a clear picture of ideal standards of living and education. This happened over time and leadership development could not be isolated from the economic development, organisational structure and the learning culture.

In reviewing the Singaporean experience, a range of sources were accessed and given that this dissertation is focused on leadership development it was helpful to review the Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew (Yew, 2009), the founding Prime Minister of Singapore. Most research papers refer to Lee Kuan Yew, as the founder of the new Singapore. Key questions arising from this include “What major decisions did Lee Kuan Yew take to build a pool of talent?”, “How was leadership development built into the public sector?”, “What were the lessons learnt and how did it provide a sympathetic atmosphere for leadership development?”, “What is so unique about the Singaporean public sector leadership development programmes?” The following section explores these questions.

#### 1.2. Governmental structure

One of the most important elements of studying leadership development is to understand the relationship between the organisational structure and leadership development, and to understand this in the case of Singapore.

The founder, Lee Kuan (Yew, 2009), refers to the progress of the government structure that evolved due to the economic growth of Singapore from 1959 to the new millennium. To avoid bureaucracy and too much centralization, Yew decided to separate the Port of Singapore Authority and other organisations from ministerial overview (Yew, 2009). This is an example where the removal of constraints and decentralization can accelerate overall progress and the ability to cope with rapid changes and needs. The determination to develop human resources in Singapore was translated into a unique development programme. Wal's research paper (2014) gives a comprehensive analysis of human capital development in the Singapore public sector. The Skills Development Fund was created, where all employers contribute 1% of the annual wages of each employee. This fund has ensured that employers utilise the training programmes (Van der Wal, 2014). Singapore is one of a few countries where the best leaders are public servants rather than those who lead the private sector. In 1993 the Civil Service College was established with courses in policy and strategic planning and leadership skills for public servants (Van der Wal, 2014).

Singapore was a British colony for more than 100 years from 1819-1959 which gave Singapore an established administrative base. However the British infrastructure and administrative systems did not serve Singaporean interests and a deep bureaucratic legacy has remained (Yew, 2009), where Wal's paper disagree with. Singapore was initially left without strong socioeconomic sectors such as housing, banking, education, finance, transport fields. Similarly, there is a legacy of pre-2010 bureaucracy in Oman that does not seem to service Oman's best interests.

The idea is not to compare Oman precisely with Singapore, however it is fair to state that Oman started with fewer schools and hospitals, for example, prior to 1970. Since the 1990s Oman has built a good foundation of basic facilities (Hvidt, 2011) and has the chance to reach comparable levels of development such as those of Singapore and Dubai.

## **1.3. Governance/Learning culture**

### **1.3.1. Governance in the Singaporean public sector**

“Keeping the Government Clean” is the title of a complete chapter in Yew’s book (Yew, 2009) describing the painful periods in Yew’s journey of building Singapore and to defeat corruption as “corruption is a way of life in Asia” (Quah, 2013), as emphasised by Yew in his autobiography (Yew, 2009). In 1960 Lee Kuan Yew improved the outdated 1937 anti-corruption law, to that which reflects the building of good governance in Singapore (Quah, 2013).

Quah (2013) argues that the Singaporean experience cannot be transferred to other Asian countries due to a lack of political will and unfavourable politics. This emphasises the importance of the leadership role which Quah’s paper didn’t emphasise. Leaders with the right leadership skills and a strong political will to carry out necessary reforms are lacking in these countries. In relation to the focus of this thesis - leadership within the public sector - (Quah, 2013) mentions four policies which have a strong public effect and can be summarised as: the reform of the Singaporean Civil Service, anti-corruption laws, decentralization and competitive salaries for public servants. Without these main components leadership development is seen to be impossible, irrespective of the qualifications of the public servant, who will struggle without seeing any identifiable goals.

Many research papers agree that having competitiveness as the main factor for recruitment and promotion is necessary (Quah, 2013; Van der Wal, 2014; Yew, 2009).

All agree on ‘meritocracy’ as a form of competitiveness. It was not easy to defeat corruption in the Singaporean public sector. The history of this battle mentions a number of names of high government officials who were accused and punished (Hin, 2011). But by setting a good example for the private sector, the “public servant was able to hold his head high and make decisions with confidence” (Yew, 2009).

#### Salaries

“Underpaid ministers and public officials have ruined many governments in Asia” (Yew, 2009). It was a radical move to benchmark government salaries with the private sector in 1994 in Singapore (Van der Wal, 2014). International financial crises meant that salary reductions were necessary and even the Prime Minister’s salary was reduced to set an example and reflect flexibility with the situation (Quah, 2013). In paying for the best and brightest, (Yew, 2009), Prime

Minister Goh decided on a formula that pegged government salaries to the private sector. Any increase or decrease in the private sector would be reflected in the public sector.

### **1.3.2. Learning Culture in the Singaporean Public Sector**

In the Singaporean public sector emphasis is placed on creating a learning culture, which is different from the current situation in the Omani public sector. A study was conducted to find out the ways and means of Developing Public Leaders in Singapore (Wilson, 2008). The findings were not surprising or unusual: a leader is developed either by on the job training which challenges them with tasks or by providing them with learning courses. 92% of the interviewees in the study said it was the challenging assignments that developed them as leaders. If there was no emphasis on having a learning culture, building on capabilities and understanding the importance of developing potential leaders, the Singaporean government would not provide opportunities for on-the-job training.

Yeo (2007) explained this concept of a learning organisation as opposed to the classic method of associating learning with the notion of training which is really only a platform for new knowledge. In order for government officials to be able to transfer knowledge, the mind-set of individuals needs to be changed to accommodate change. Yeo (2007) also showed that organisational learning is essential to cope with the dynamics of the changing world and it has an intimate relationship with organisational performance. The adaptation to a learning organisation has shaken the Singaporean public sector from its bureaucratic culture that has been hindering individual creativity, and helped it move to a more performance based culture.

### **1.3.3. Leadership development enablers, and mechanisms: competitive salaries**

It is often stated that Singapore has invested in human development, but the philosophy behind this achievement is not fully explored. This is linked to Yew's philosophy and in relation to leadership development he spoke about "putting faith in our young officers who have integrity, intellect, energy and drive" (Yew, 2009).

Economic growth has vitalised human development in Singapore and it is worth expanding our understanding of what distinguishes the Singaporean experience from that of any other third world country. Wal, (2014) mentions the mantra which is Lee's philosophy "no one owes us a living", i.e. no country can build a pool of talent unless it can depend on its own human capital resources.

This philosophy has been reinforced by ensuring that the first priority of any multinational company investing in Singapore is to transfer knowledge. All third world countries are included in the school of dependency, (Yew, 2009) where the doors open for these companies to use their raw materials but the secrets of technical knowledge are kept just that: secret. In terms of development the third world is never able to reach the level of the developed world. A new philosophy has been created in the third world and this is where Singapore differs and why Singapore should be used as a benchmark when it comes to human development and government efficiency.

With all the compliments and admiration that senior politicians in the world expressed towards Lee Kuan, however his leadership was criticised by Western political analysts for not respecting individualism and he was described as a dictator, but a favourite dictator (Post, 2015). Lee Kuan said he admired the American style of social justices but there should be a limit, related to values and roles (Zakaria, 1994). He felt that the successful Western style does not make it the only successful model. To build society and to lift it up from third to first world can't be accomplished without solid social values, or that society loses its identity. This led to critical points which were analysed in the research paper of Low (2006),

- What is the most suitable leadership style for a country?
- Will Paternalistic Leadership which built Singapore, work in the West?

Western analysts may consider this strange because such a leadership style is associated with favoritism and political manipulation. Singapore has appeared to succeed all the way, economically and politically. One of the research findings of Low's study (2006) is that father leadership has caused a loss of creativity and entrepreneurship, which other political analysts agree with (Ryder, 2011). However, there are priorities to be balanced in building nations, and the necessities of proper education and creating jobs, and Lee Kuan Yew felt that opening up for democracy at that stage when Singapore was not ready, would not be wise (Yew, 2009).

#### **1.3.4. Leadership selection criteria:**

In 1961, at the early beginning of development of the Singapore economy, the best and brightest students were selected for scholarships and recruitment into the Economic Development Board (EDB). Thereafter they were groomed by the EDB with on-the-job training in leadership development and some went on to become cabinet ministers, some outstanding permanent

secretaries and one of them, Pillay, became chairman of Singapore Airlines, the most profitable airline in Asia (Yew, 2009).

Selection criteria for leaders in the public sector can be challenging to identify and a factor for destruction and failure if not based on solid scientific and objective mechanisms. It was clear from Lee's memory (Yew, 2009), that his selection criteria were based mainly on academic performance. In the 1960s and 1970s leadership selection and development was ad hoc, then in 1983 the Singaporean public sector adopted the Shell performance appraisal system (HAIR) (Van der Wal, 2014). This step put in place a solid base for leadership development by having an effective performance appraisal system.

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