

Has the hong kong  
civil service improved  
its service-culture



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The Public Sector Reform in Hong Kong has launched since 1989. The objectives of economy, efficiency and effectiveness guided the reforms that aimed at improving the productivity of the public organizations. In order to further develop a performance and service-oriented culture, the Government announced its commitment to a major reform program in 1995 named "Serving the Community". After a decade, nevertheless, the reform has only been partially successful in cultivating the customer-oriented culture. Although the public is now being better served as "clients" instead of "supplicants" (Scott, 2000), the extent of success is more depending on the quality of the service and, most importantly, the customer (public) satisfaction.

In this essay, I will first outline the Public Sector Reform in Hong Kong briefly. With reference to three examples, I will then discuss and evaluate the quality of some public services under the reforms. Finally, I will illustrate the change of culture in the public service provision after the Public Sector Reform.

### Objectives of the Public Sector Reform

Tsang (1995) suggested that the Public Sector Reform in Hong Kong has two main objectives. The first objective is to examine the structure and relationships within the Hong Kong Government with a way to improve efficiency, making the best use of resources available, and providing the best service for the community and bring the best job satisfaction to the civil service. The second objective is to examine the Government's relationship with other bodies which provide many essential public services in Hong Kong and outside the main Government organization.

## Content of the Public Sector Reform

The Public Sector Reform booklet set out a framework to stimulate changes in financial and management practices across the public sector so as to improve both productivity and accountability (Sankey, 1993). In the following, I will illustrate three types of programs with examples under the Public Sector Reform.

### (i) Trading Funds

The main aim of the establishment of trading funds was to provide an efficient operation that meets an appropriate standard of service. Sankey (1993) suggested that they are accounting frameworks established by law for departments providing services on a quasi-commercial basis with the objective of recovering cost. Under the Trading Fund Ordinance, trading fund departments are required to deliver commercially oriented services to the service receivers. However, the trading fund departments are still government department and their staffs are remained part of the civil servants subject to its terms and conditions (Legislative Council Brief, 1992).

According to Sankey (1993), a genuine customer-supplier relationship is an important condition for a particular department or agency to qualify as a trading fund. If someone consumes the post service, for instance, he or she would be regarded as customer and genuine market exchange relationship involved. As such, customer orientation is another standing for quality service or quality enhancement.

The Hong Kong Post Office (HKPO), for example, has been changed its operation into trading fund in 1995 and it seemed to be the most successful department in trading fund. For the HKPO, there are numerous of improvement after it changed into trading fund. First, the HKPO has undertaken " 100 Projects for Better Service" and launched " Care from the Heart" week in 1997 and 1998 respectively. They aim to fulfill the increasing customers' demand for more efficient and reliable postal service. Secondly, 98.8% of the locally posted letters could successfully delivered to addresses by the following day. Thirdly, 99% of the customers could be served within 10 minutes after they have arrived the Post Office (HKPO, 1999). Fourthly, the HKPO introduced the first Personal Greeting Stamps and Embossed Stamps in 1998 in order to cope with public demand.

However, there is insufficient mechanism to hold the HKPO accountable to the public. The customers can neither involved in the decisions relating to service planning nor the management issues. As such, the customers could not call the HKPO accountable if the services failed to meet their needs.

Worse still, the HKPO enjoy the monopoly and face no competition in issuing the postage stamps. In this sense, customers have no choice in consuming such product or service and no comparison of quality could be made. In short, the improvement in the quality of service is not as much as the Government originally expected.

#### (ii) The Office of the Ombudsman

In late 1980s, the Office of the Commissioners for Administrative Complaints has been renamed to the Office of the Ombudsman and continues to handle

complaints of public service from public. Meanwhile, they have been granted a greater power in conducting investigations and publish the investigative reports. Moreover, the Ombudsman is an independent authority which has exercised the power judiciously to assist public sector organizations subject to her jurisdiction to identify areas where public administration might be improved and become fairer and more effective (The Office of the Ombudsman, 2000).

By means of the advertisements on both television and public transports, the Government broadly promotes the function of the Ombudsman to the public, which greatly improve the transparency and image of the Ombudsman in recent year. In addition, there is limitation in the investigation of the Office of the Ombudsman that some of the Government departments are free from monitored, for instance, the Hong Kong Police and Independent Commission Against Corruption. In the past, public afraid of " authority" and avoid to bother or complaining the Government. Nowadays, their attitudes have been changed and clearly understand their rights. Generally speaking, the Office of the Ombudsman is not fully success yet and there is still a long way to go!

### (iii) Performance Pledges

The Reform aimed to improve not only the quality of the social services provided the Government, but also the openness and accountability of the public sector. Unfortunately, the traditional bureaucratic and " control" approach to management that prevailed was not going to deliver the degree of change needed to make " Serving the Community" a reality (Efficiency Unit, 1998). Under " Serving the Community" program, it also aims to

develop the culture of service so as to improve the quality of service by shaping the organizational culture through performance pledges (Lee, 2000).

Government departments publish their performance pledges annually which set out in plain terms the standards of services which the public has a right to expect (Efficiency Unit, 1998). Hong Kong Fire Services Department, for example, aims to respond to building fire called within 6 minutes in built-up areas and within 9 to 23 minutes in areas of dispersed risks and isolated developments. The Department has achieved these times in 92.9% in 2000, 0.4% above the target (Hong Kong Fire Services Department, 2002).

The statistics seem to be concrete and clear enough to prove how high the quality of service is performed by the Hong Kong Fire Services Department. Apparently, 6-minute respond time to fire calls should reach the international standard and professional enough in protecting the life and property from fire hazard. Nonetheless, does it make any sense to use "respond time" as the yardstick in measuring the quality or performance pledges? It is notable that their arrival time does not relate to the efficiency in putting out the fire or releasing victims that trapped in a lift.

Meanwhile, the Public Liaison Group has been set up so as to improve the communication between the Department and public. Unfortunately, the Group contains only 30 members and meets only once a year. Most importantly, there is insufficient transparency to the public. How would the Department process the public opinion? Is there any follow-up plan after each meeting? Apart from the 30 members, there is any channel for the public to access to the information or minutes of the meeting. In this sense,

the Public Liaison Group seems to be a means on public relation instead of real communication.

From the above three examples, it has been shown that some of the alleged successful programs could not fully meet the customers' satisfaction. It cannot be denied that the culture of public service provision has been changed under implementation of the Public Sector Reform. In the following, I would like to discuss the current culture of public service as well as those in the past days.

### Bureaucratic Culture of the Hong Kong Civil Servants

Scott (1987) described that the Hong Kong civil service as a classic bureaucratic system. It is probably not very different in its ethos from any powerful government bureaucracy. The natural ethos of bureaucracy is conservative and hierarchical. Under such system, the government is distant from the people. Wilding (1997) said that the top civil servants were confident as they knew the best and they had a clear sense of what was good and right for Hong Kong. He further commented that historically the senior civil servants have lived secluded from the society. Public in their eyes were sub-optimized and short-sighted. They could of course voice out their aspiration to the government, but it was the government officials who finally determine what was good or bad and what should be done. In other words, public participation is kept to minimal.

The authoritarian and hierarchical ethos is not only found in the relationship between the Government and the public, but also within the civil service.

Except for the few officials at the apex of the civil service system, the <https://assignbuster.com/has-the-hong-kong-civil-service-improved-its-service-culture/>

majority of the civil servants in Hong Kong are encouraged to exercise reflective choice in their daily work. The Hong Kong civil servants demonstrate remarkable compliance with the hierarchical authority.

Line implementation is highly effective. The readiness civil servants to accept orders from above is largely attributable to conventional Chinese attitudes of respect for the authority and avoidance of conflict (Scott, 1984). It is also reinforced by strict bureaucratic rules and regulations which make violation of hierarchical orders punishable. Fearing that career advancement might be adversely affected, most officials would naturally perceive compliance with their superior as being in their own best interest. Law (1995) criticized the rule-driven management as stifling initiatives and tolerating mediocrity, which would lead to slow response to changing circumstances.

#### Customer-oriented and Service Culture in the Public Sector Reform

Having looked at the prevailing bureaucratic culture among the Hong Kong civil service, we now turn to the customer-oriented and service culture.

Customer-oriented and service culture is originated from the private sector.

It is a less radical prescription, as compared to privatize all public services, to heal the illness of government overload and inefficiency in Western Countries.

Also, it attempts to arouse the awareness of redressing the imbalance of power that exists between those who produce goods and services, and those for whom they are provided for. Customer orientation sets services for, not to, the public as the key organizational value which can drive forward <https://assignbuster.com/has-the-hong-kong-civil-service-improved-its-service-culture/>



management and motivate staffs. It also stresses on improving the mechanism of representative and industrial and industrial democracy as well as user-responsiveness, enlarging the role of the citizen as a managerial orientation for improving all dimensions of service for the citizen.

The value that the Hong Kong Government set upon under the "Serving the Community" included openness, partnership, courtesy, foresight, leadership, integrity and responsiveness. Most of these values are absent in the traditional bureaucratic culture that the Hong Kong civil servants are embedded in. As Pattern (Scott, 2000) suggested all public servants should regard the public as clients instead of supplicants. So the culture requires civil servants, especially the front line staff to put much more effort in interacting with customer, in performing task and in improving workplace condition. It includes identifying themselves by name when dealing with members of the general public; replying correspondence from the public receive within a ten-day period; reviewing government forms and documents to ensure that they are simple and user-friendly; and organizing training courses to help civil servants to develop new orientations of public service (CSTDI, 1993).

### Building a Customer-oriented Culture Among the Civil Service

When comparing two sets of culture, we can notice that the former evolves from the notion of hierarchy. The public is never being regarded as of equal status with the civil servants. Yet in customer-oriented culture, the status of the public is elevated. Public treated as clients interest is placed at the heart of the way that service are planned, delivered and evaluated. The new

interpretation of responsiveness also implies the added notion termed "accountability to clients". Increasing accountability will require judgment and behaviour from civil servants that fully justify the high esteem in which they are held.

### Different Response from the Civil Servants

It should not be assumed that the whole Government would necessarily welcome the Public Sector Reform. Different groups of civil servants may also have different perceptions as to the impact of Public Sector programs on their jobs.

Lam (1996) pointed out in his research on Total Quality Management (TQM) that what was seen by TQM trainers as an unambiguously positive impact on employees, might be seen by others as increasing pressure on staff by getting them to take on more work and responsibility. It can be understood that there may be resistance to change. Take the requirement of wearing name badge to identify oneself when providing service to the public as an example. The Hawker Control Officers of the Urban Services Department had refused to wear name badges under the worries of getting revenge from hawkers.

Opposition to some parts of Public Sector Reform from within the civil service has already surfaced. For example, Cheng (1993) reported in the South China Morning Post that civil service union leaders had been critical of the Government's drive to produce performance pledges for each department. In some cases, the pledges were produced in such haste under pressure from the top that civil servants providing the services (i. e. the front line staff)

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were not consulted about the pledges before they were published. For many junior staff, civil service is a job, not a career. Their prime concern is to have their salary ready by the end of the month. There is a famous saying among the civil servants that " More Work More Fault; Less Work Less Fault; No Work No Fault". Public Sector Reform and the result turned up from cultivating a customer-oriented culture have certainly demanded more from the civil servants, and in particular the front line staff to do more.

### Conclusion

To sum up, this essay covered three main programs in the Public Sector Reform and has shown how insufficient their qualities of service are. Meanwhile, the change of culture from the bureaucratic and hierarchical one to the customer and service-oriented one has also been mentioned.

Although citizens are re-defined as clients or customer, it is the fact that service culture has not fully been cultivated among civil servants. From the view of some civil servants, the Public Sector Reform is just a burden that greater their workload. They may find their own way to cope with it and thus, the quality of public service will not been improved.