

SETTING TARGETS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

AT YOUR SERVICE
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Without execution, challenging goals are only as good as the paper they are printed on. A delivery plan is needed and it must be executed to completion.

To make his motto of 'People First, Performance Now' a reality, the Prime Minister has implemented a system of key performance indicators (KPIs) for all ministers.

He has also specified national KPIs for lead ministers who have been made responsible for the six national key result areas – crime, corruption, public transport, poverty, rural infrastructure and education. KPIs of secretaries-general and department heads will automatically be aligned to their respective minister's KPIs. For example, the reduction of street crime will be very much the KPI of the Inspector-General of Police and that of the Minister of Home Affairs.

Additionally, the Public Service Department (PSD) assesses the performance of these department heads through a further set of KPIs that measure the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery, quality of consultation, governance and accountability and leadership effectiveness.

The civil service leadership takes charge of delivering not only on its KPIs but also that of its ministers. KPIs by themselves are insufficient to assess performance. KPIs are yardsticks that identify areas that a minister and their department head will want to know how well they have performed. Only then can the public, minister and agency concerned know whether that agency has lived up to its commitments or whether it has under-performed in a particular area of operations.

This feedback on performance deficit is especially useful for an agency to determine where it had gone off-track and what it has to do to put its operations back on course. It is in this spirit of accountability and feedback that the Prime Minister has specified performance targets for each KPI of his ministers.

These targets are for the short-term — to be achieved by the year's end; and for the medium-term — to be achieved over the next two to three years as, for example the reduction of street crime by 20% by the end of 2010.

Similarly, at the start of each year, the PSD sets jointly with department heads one minimum acceptable level of performance and two stretch targets for each of the mutually agreed KPIs. The annual assessment of department heads at the end of the year is done against those targets. The stretch targets that are set are ambitious yet reasonable. They drive department heads and their staff to perform beyond the minimum acceptable targets of performance. Thereby, these stretch targets seek to take departmental performance to greater heights.

What gets measured gets managed and what gets managed gets done. In the course of meeting the targets, change kicks in and operations improve for the better.

Setting performance targets also gives the whole organisation a sense of the quantum and quality of service that needs to be delivered to achieve agency mission. It also helps an agency to determine the appropriate level of resources that should be shunted to a particular performance area so that the performance target is met.

The department head can then be made accountable for both performance achievement and resource usage. Target-setting also gives a clear signal to departmental staff as to what is it that they have to achieve. Knowing what to achieve is itself another motivating factor for enhanced service delivery. It is akin to telling our children what is expected of them.

Targets must make a difference to service delivery and citizen satisfaction. Leadership must ensure that everyone in the organisation considers the targets doable.

Everyone should feel challenged to unleash their creative effort to better their performance. Conservative target setting, on the other hand, merely maintains service delivery to the level that exists now.

In setting targets, public service leaders consider past performance. They then factor in the potential for better performance through institutional learning and experience (or the learning-curve effect). Public service leaders also benchmark their performance standards against superior performance in other countries.

Malaysia has matched, if not bettered, performance overseas in many areas. For example, infant mortality rate (0.5%) is lower than that of the United States of America and comparable to that of the United Kingdom. We pay a smaller percentage of gross domestic product (4.2%) to get 'better' health (our longevity averages 74 years) compared to more affluent countries who spend twice or thrice as much.

Notwithstanding, the public service considers that it can always improve when we pitch our performance against world standards. Public service leaders continue to shoulder responsibility for this benchmarking exercise.

Performance targets for top civil servants and their ministers should put service delivery on an accelerated track. However, for that to happen, setting KPIs and performance targets alone will not be enough.

As in any management initiative, leadership commitment to the achievement of its targets is vital. Such a commitment shows in the development and implementation of an action plan to achieve those targets.

It is boldness in target-setting coupled with execution that propels an agency towards more effective service delivery. Without execution, challenging targets, while generating controversy, are only as good as the paper they are printed on.

All efforts at improving public service delivery through bold performance targets will come to nought if leaders do not put in place a delivery plan and execute it to completion.

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