

CSC

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COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

**ISSUE 30**

**From Capability to  
Performance:  
Learning How  
to Evolve**  
Eleanor Ng

**Five Dispositions for  
Future Public Officers**  
Aaron Maniam

**Memory,  
Momentum, Meaning**  
An Interview with  
Jocelyne Bourgon





# ETHOS

ISSUE 30, 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

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The mission of the Civil Service College (CSC) Singapore is to develop people for a first-class Public Service. CSC was inaugurated as a statutory board under the Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office, in October 2001. As the public sector's core institution for training, learning, research and staff development, CSC builds strategic capacity in governance, leadership, public administration and management for a networked government in Singapore.

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# Editorial

by **Dr Alvin Pang**  
Editor-in-Chief, ETHOS

In 2005, I was invited by the Civil Service College (CSC) to reconceive *ETHOS*, then an internal newsletter circulated among Administrative Service officers, as a practitioner-oriented professional journal. Geared towards a readership of decision-makers in the Singapore Public Service, as well as their international peers, the journal's mandate was to promote deeper thinking on prevailing topics related to governance and public administration, and to showcase Singapore's own advances in addressing these areas.

Over the next 20 years, a small editorial team reached out to senior government officials, distinguished scholars and other thought leaders for their insights. Cabinet ministers, Nobel laureates and heads of civil service have shared their original ideas generously with *ETHOS* readers: some of these views have been debated in Parliament; others have been shared well beyond our shores as useful case studies, intriguing perspectives, or inspirational possibilities.

The journal's guiding ambitions reflect both the growing confidence of Singapore's Public Service, increasingly recognised as among the world's best

in the field, and its developing thoughtfulness about the work ahead. Iterations in *ETHOS* mirror the evolution of its publisher, CSC, in grappling with a governance environment much changed in the past two decades.

Aptly, this final issue of *ETHOS* commemorates the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CSC, an institution that has played a key role in readying Singapore's public service corps for its vital work amid rising public expectations, rapid technological change, polycrises, and shifts in the nature of governance (p. 46).

Continual learning and development have long been seen as strengths in our public service arsenal, accounting for our ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. With volatility and complexity, rather than coherent stability, becoming the mainstream in public affairs, active and effective learning should be regarded as part of the core practice of governance — the iterative cycle of sense-making, policy design, implementation and review — rather than as an add-on or remedy for unsatisfactory performance (p. 10; p. 22). An example of proactive learning

and development that have paid off down the line is CSC's own digital capability journey, in which early experimentation laid the groundwork for the subsequent mass digitalisation and AI push in the public sector (p. 58).

At the same time, there is now greater appreciation for learning approaches that centre workplace outcomes rather than theoretical frameworks, and that keep the human subject in mind — participants have an energy budget; they want to see the relevance of workshop activities; they learn differently in groups than by themselves (p. 36); they need to take charge of their own development (p. 94). More nuanced human-centred strategies are also crucial to cultivating the next generation of public service leaders (p. 76), who will need steadfast values, backed by strong reflective and relational capacities, to build the successful institutions of tomorrow (p. 66).

CSC has been at the heart of the Public Service's learning and development not only because it hosts a multitude of training programmes, talks, fora and other activities. It also convenes public officers across government to meet, chat,

exchange notes, building bonds and a shared ethos that will stand them in good stead long after the courses are over. The College is a living laboratory for forward-thinking ideas about public administration and governance in practice. It also serves as institutional memory for the work of government, broadening and deepening our hard-earned professional repertoire of public service tradecraft. As a veteran contributor reminds us, amnesia hobbles informed, decisive action; the costs of forgetting can be steep, and may only show up down the line (p. 102).

*ETHOS* has always sought to be a platform for new thinking, and a chronicle of significant strides, in addressing some of the most pressing public concerns of our time — even as CSC has strived to prepare our people to meet these challenges on the ground. I hope this vital work will continue in other forms, so Singapore can benefit from a Public Service that is ever more able, agile, canny, and wise.

Thank you for your many years of support for *ETHOS*.

I wish you, as ever, a thoughtful read. ■

# Foreword

by **Chan Heng Kee**  
Head, Civil Service

The Civil Service College (CSC) marks its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, a milestone that merits both appreciation and reflection.

My association with the College has been a personal and fulfilling one. I served as Dean from 2006 to 2008 and have continued to teach and speak at its programmes in the years since. These engagements have reminded me of the value of giving public officers space to step back from immediate demands, learn from experts and from one another, and return to our work with a clearer sense of what good public service requires.

Over the past quarter century, CSC has played a central role in building the capabilities of Singapore's Public Service. Its training programmes have helped officers understand Singapore's distinctive context, develop essential competencies, and make sense of the changing environment in which we operate. Its leadership interventions have supported public service leaders at different stages of their journeys, while its organisation development work has helped agencies strengthen their capabilities. By bringing officers, leaders and agencies together across organisational boundaries, the College has also strengthened our sense

of community, collective capability and whole-of-government mindset.

Anniversaries, however, are not only occasions to look back. They also invite us to consider how institutions must evolve, and where they can stretch themselves further.

The operating environment today is markedly different from when I was Dean. The world is more contested, interconnected and fast-moving, and developments beyond our shores affect us more directly. At home, societal expectations continue to rise. AI and other emerging technologies are changing how we work, carry out our responsibilities, make decisions and serve the public. We do, however, have solid foundations on which to build. Singapore's Public Service is well regarded internationally and continues to enjoy the trust of Singaporeans. But we cannot assume that past strengths will be sufficient for the future. Our collective capacity to learn and adapt with purpose and urgency will remain an important source of resilience and advantage for Singapore.

This points to the kind of Public Service we need to continue building: officers and leaders with the expertise and competence to do their jobs well, as well as the curiosity, adaptability and

courage to question established thinking and long-held ways of doing things. It also underscores the importance of deeper transformation within agencies, and stronger collaboration across agencies, disciplines and sectors.

For all of us, this means continuing to learn, not only to perform our current roles better, but also to prepare ourselves and our organisations for what lies ahead. Learning cannot be confined to formal programmes or classrooms alone. It must increasingly take place through digital means, in the workplace and in the course of our daily responsibilities. As tools such as AI become part of our everyday work, they also prompt us to reconsider both what and how we learn, so that we can extend our capabilities while remaining grounded in our values, exercising sound judgement and taking responsibility for the choices we make.

Learning and development should therefore be seen not merely as a supporting activity, but as a strategic capability that enables organisational performance and transformation. CSC can work alongside leaders and agencies to anticipate the capabilities we will need, embed learning more deeply in the workplace, and translate new knowledge and skills into better performance and outcomes for Singaporeans.

One of the College's enduring strengths is its close connection to practice. Many of the most valuable lessons in public service come from lived experience, including the difficult trade-offs we have had to navigate and what we have learnt from successes as well as setbacks. I hope more senior leaders and experienced practitioners will step forward as teachers and mentors. CSC, in turn, can continue to create trusted spaces where we share our knowledge candidly, learn across agency boundaries, and benefit from perspectives different from our own.

My aspiration for CSC's next chapter is straightforward. It should remain at the heart of learning and development in the Singapore Public Service, and serve as a trusted learning partner to our officers, leaders and agencies: close enough to understand our challenges, forward-looking enough to anticipate the capabilities we will need, and bold enough to try new ways of learning with us. In doing so, it can connect learning more closely with work, make thoughtful use of digital technology and AI, and continue to bring together people, ideas and practice across the Public Service.

CSC cannot do this alone. As public officers, each of us has a part to play and must take ownership of our own development. Those of us who lead teams and agencies need to be clear about the outcomes we seek and the capabilities our people need, and create space for them to learn, experiment and put new capabilities into practice. Across the Public Service, we should be generous in teaching and sharing what we know, humble enough to keep learning from one another, and open to working with CSC to try new approaches.

This commemorative issue of *ETHOS* reflects the College's enduring commitment to meeting these imperatives. It invites us to consider not only how public officers and leaders learn, but also how learning can strengthen our organisations, deepen our collective capabilities and improve the way we serve.

The work of building a strong, responsive and values-driven Public Service is never finished. As CSC enters its next chapter, let us deepen our commitment to learning together. I am confident that the College will continue to strengthen our people, leadership and organisations, help us remain ready for change, and enable all of us to serve Singapore and Singaporeans with integrity, service and excellence. ■

# Opening Message

by **Han Neng Hsiu**

Dean and CEO, Civil Service College

The Civil Service College (CSC) celebrates our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a statutory board this year, at a time of greater complexity and uncertainty in the geopolitical and domestic environment, and a rapidly evolving technological landscape. These challenges require the Public Service to anticipate and deliver better; they increase the premium on speed, adaptability and effectiveness. Learning is no longer a supporting function — it is a strategic capability that helps the Public Service perform, and adapt and renew itself.

To respond well, it will be more critical than ever for the Public Service to learn well. We must help public officers adapt to new demands, build new capabilities and raise performance. Learning preferences have shifted. Digital learning is now mainstream, and officers increasingly expect learning that is bite-sized, personalised and just-in-time.

As the heart of learning and development (L&D) for the Public Service, the College has changed and adapted to keep pace. We have refreshed LEARN, our digital learning platform, to provide

curated and relevant learning that officers can access easily, while enabling agencies to deliver learning customised to their particular needs. This reflects a deeper shift in how CSC understands its role: not only to provide learning, but also to help the Public Service translate capability into effective practice, better judgement and clearer outcomes.

The College has advanced competency-driven growth through stronger programme design, robust assessment, and professional certification. We are making more adaptive use of digital and AI-enabled tools to diagnose learning needs, sharpen interventions and shorten the time to impact. We have also strengthened leadership development with refreshed approaches, revamped milestone programmes and greater use of diagnostic tools to help leaders and leadership teams.

Our next stage of growth is about going beyond delivering learning differently. We want to elevate L&D as a strategic capability that supports organisational performance and transformation.

This requires a reframe: moving from formal training to a broader set of interventions that help officers, teams and organisations perform and achieve outcomes.

The College's inaugural *State of Learning in the Public Service* report points in the same direction. Public officers increasingly value learning that is relevant to their work, shaped by peers and embedded in day-to-day routines at the workplace. This is why the College's refreshed strategy is centred on performance-led L&D.

In practice, this means diagnosing performance needs upstream, partnering agencies on performance consulting, and designing learning that is embedded in work, supported by digital and AI-enabled tools. We must look beyond learner participation or satisfaction. What matters is whether learning is applied, practices change, and organisational performance improves.

Formal learning will continue to matter, especially in building foundational knowledge, common

standards and shared understanding at scale. But it cannot be the only answer. The College aims to strengthen learning in the flow of work, where feedback loops are shorter and the impact on performance is more direct.

To support these strategic shifts, the College is strengthening our core capabilities. We have established the Learning and Development Office to deepen L&D strategy, build professional L&D capabilities, and advance thought leadership for the Public Service. We have also set up the Enterprise Technology Group to bring together digital learning, technology, data and AI capabilities, to drive learning innovation at scale.

This commemorative issue of ETHOS explores the next frontier of L&D in the Public Service in partnership with Ministries and agencies. As CSC enters its next lap, we will shape the future of learning: empower the Public Service to enhance its capacity to learn, adapt and excel in a changing world. ■



# From Capability to Performance

## Learning How to Evolve

by **Eleanor Ng**

Public service performance is shaped not only by what officers know or can do, but also whether these are reinforced in an organisation's actual workflows, decision-making and operating culture. This insight is driving new performance-led learning and development strategies at the Civil Service College (CSC).



**Eleanor Ng** is Chief Learning & Development Officer at the Civil Service College. She has close to 25 years of experience in leadership development and talent management in the Singapore Public Service. Her work explores how learning, unlearning and organisational adaptation can strengthen performance in a rapidly changing environment. She currently leads efforts to advance a performance-led approach to capability development across the Singapore Public Service.



## Where Capability Breaks Down in Practice

The paper comes back in a sea of red, covered in comments. The recommendations are unclear and do not force meaningful choices because key trade-offs have not been clearly laid out. Important stakeholders' concerns appear late, if at all. After several rounds of revisions, a familiar diagnosis emerges – “our officers need better policy writing skills”.

A paper or submission is often only the point at which upstream issues become visible. The real difficulties may have started much earlier – how the problem statement was framed, which assumptions went untested, or what trade-offs were left unresolved. By the time these weaknesses surface in a draft, they may appear as a technical or skill gap, even though their origins lie elsewhere.

*The issue is not whether learning has taken place, but whether learning takes place early enough in the workflow to reshape habits, routines, and expectations.*



Once a problem is interpreted as a writing skill gap, a writing intervention naturally follows. These interventions can be useful, but they occur late in the process where choices and critical thinking possibilities are already constrained.

This pattern is not unique to policy work. Across the Public Service, many challenges now cut across organisational boundaries. Decisions in one domain have implications in another, and outcomes depend on how well different parts of the system work together. Even when officers are capable and committed, results hinge on whether teams and organisations can adapt everyday practices, exercise judgement in new circumstances, and translate intent into sustained action. We end up intervening at the point where problems become visible, rather than addressing the organisational conditions that gave rise to those problems.

In such contexts, the point at which learning enters the work matters as much as what is learnt. The issue is not whether learning has taken place, but whether learning takes place early enough in the workflow to reshape habits, routines, and expectations.

This is why learning deserves renewed attention — not merely as training,

but as a strategic capability that helps the Public Service build the capacity to evolve and perform under changing conditions.

## A Ground Reality: Why Organisations Default to Training

When organisations face a pressing challenge, there is often pressure to respond quickly and visibly. A training programme is tangible, familiar and executable. It signals that something is being done.

This illustrates a broader organisational tendency. When a learning and development (L&D) team is engaged mainly at the point of training delivery, it has fewer opportunities to influence how the problem is framed in the first place. This reinforces the perception that its role is programme provision, rather than helping the organisation understand what is getting in the way of performance.

These tendencies are not accidental. They are shaped by how responsibility, authority and expertise are organised within agencies.

## Why L&D Functions Get Pulled Downstream

In many Singapore Public Service agencies, L&D functions are small teams located within HR, responsible for helping their agencies build the knowledge, skills and capabilities needed to deliver their mission. Some agencies may also have dedicated academies or Public Sector Training Institutes where professional, technical or operational training requirements are substantial.

Much of their work centres on training administration, course design and delivery, learning systems management, onboarding and professional development programmes. While more L&D teams are also supporting capability planning, workplace learning and organisational performance outcomes, these demands can leave limited room for diagnosis, experimentation or engagement with organisational priorities.



What happens within Public Service agencies mirrors how they currently engage CSC. We are asked to enter the picture downstream, when the diagnosis of the organisation's learning needs has been settled: a course is requested, and the job is just to deliver it well. This reinforces CSC's perceived role as a training provider and narrows the space for us to enquire about what is actually constraining performance.

CSC's annual customer satisfaction survey shows that agencies continue to expect greater timeliness from us in addressing capability development needs. This expectation is largely anchored on the provision of training solutions. Responding faster to already defined learning needs can only take us so far. The shift requires CSC to engage earlier. More importantly, it requires us to change the questions we ask.

If the issues lie upstream, our starting points should be the organisational challenges and priorities that agencies are facing, and whether there is a capability or learning angle to the performance issue. We must move upstream to support agencies while they are still diagnosing the problem, so that we can help shape the conditions for improving performance, rather than be only engaged downstream as a training provider.



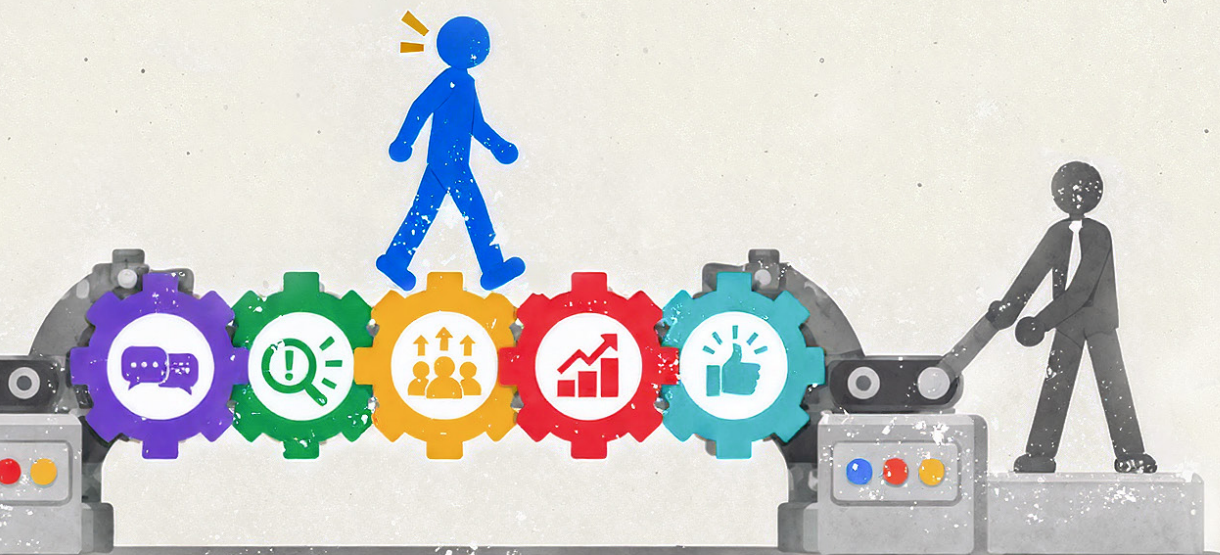
## What Needs to Shift: Start with What Is Preventing Good Performance

A performance-led approach begins with the question: “What is preventing good performance from occurring?”

Sometimes the answer will be capability: officers may need new knowledge, sharper skills or more structured practice in a particular area. But the main constraints to performance often lie not in capability but in unclear roles, limited authority, weak reinforcement, conflicting priorities, workflow design, or the absence of opportunities to apply what has been learned.

In CSC’s experience, programme quality alone does not explain whether learning translates into improved performance. Most of our programmes receive strong participant feedback and are highly rated by learners, yet the intended changes in workplace practice do not always materialise. This is an experience the learners often reflect to us when they express sentiments like “my manager needs to learn this too”.

The factors that determine whether learning is transferred and applied to the workplace lie beyond the classroom. Are managers reinforcing new behaviours? Do officers have opportunities to apply what they have learnt? Are workflows supporting different ways of working. Is there sufficient space for reflection and feedback? Such questions have led CSC to pay closer attention not only to designing meaningful learning experiences, but also to understanding the workplace conditions that enable learning to take root.



## What This Means in Practice

Performance-led L&D starts with what needs to improve in the ways of working, then considers how learning, workplace conditions and evidence

can work together to enable that change. It recognises that learning is not only about what officers know and can do, but also how they exercise judgement when applying that capability in changing circumstances. It changes how L&D functions approach performance challenges in three ways:

**1**

### **L&D enters while the problem is still being framed.**

Rather than starting with a request for training, it helps organisations clarify the outcomes they are seeking and understand what is producing the current performance challenge. The focus shifts from specifying an intervention to diagnosing what is getting in the way of performance.

**2**

### **L&D designs capability development and workplace conditions as one integrated response.**

Knowledge and skills matter, but so do the expectations, workflows and reinforcement mechanisms that enable new behaviours to take root. Instead of treating learning and application as separate stages, the design considers from the outset how learning will be supported and used in practice.

**3**

### **L&D uses evidence to adapt the response as practice changes.**

The focus moves beyond programme completion and participant reactions towards understanding whether different ways of working are being adopted and sustained. Evidence from workplace practice helps organisations understand what is reinforcing change, where application is being blocked, and what may need to be adjusted, strengthened or stopped as implementation unfolds.

## Looking Beyond the Training Request

Leadership development is a priority for many Public Service agencies, and one concern is that managers need to have better feedback conversations. Say an agency approaches CSC for a workshop on giving effective feedback.

A performance-led approach begins with inquiry rather than immediately asking for details to deliver a programme. Why are feedback conversations not happening? What is preventing managers from holding timely and constructive feedback conversations?

By looking at the conditions around the presenting problem, the diagnosis may shift. We may discover that some managers need greater skill or confidence. It may show that operational demands are causing managers to deprioritise feedback conversations. Organisational expectations about regular feedback may also be unclear, and difficult conversations may be avoided because there is little support from senior leaders. What appears to be a capability gap may in fact be a broader workplace issue.

Depending on the diagnosis, the response might combine training with clearer managerial expectations and accountability, regular check-in routines and prompts for performance conversations, and peer support and follow-through mechanisms that reinforce application in the workplace.

L&D does not have leverage over every condition that influences performance. Line managers, HR partners and organisational decision-makers all play critical roles in setting expectations, allocating attention and reinforcing desired behaviours. L&D's contribution is to bring evidence, inquiry and learning expertise to the table, helping organisations understand what is happening in practice, what may be getting in the way of performance, and whether changes are taking root over time.



## Learning How to Evolve

For 25 years, CSC's purpose has been to support a capable Public Service in serving Singapore. That purpose remains unchanged. What has evolved is how capability needs to be built, applied and sustained as the work of government becomes more complex.

Transformation requires more than new activities or capabilities. It demands that organisations examine the assumptions that shape how they understand problems, what options they see, and what they consider possible. This is why transformation involves learning, unlearning and relearning at the same time — retaining strengths that continue to serve, while questioning and abandoning assumptions that no longer fit changing circumstances.

At CSC, we have been relearning what it takes for capability to translate into performance. Designing high quality and

impactful learning experiences remains important. But programme quality alone does not determine whether learning changes how work is done. Learning creates value not when the individual leaves with new knowledge but when that learning shapes judgement and influences decision-making over time. Hence, we are now paying greater attention to learning transfer and the conditions in the organisation that shape opportunity to apply learning.

The harder part of transformation may be not what CSC needs to learn next, but what we need to unlearn. We need to look at the assumptions that have grown around how we create value, where our influence begins and ends, and how we deploy our expertise.

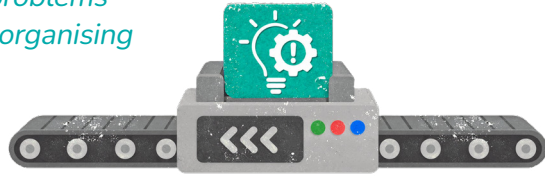
### **One is where we locate our impact.**

CSC has long recognised that training alone is insufficient, and successive generations of officers have sought to move beyond programme delivery towards broader forms of partnership and value creation. Yet our systems, measures and ways of working may still draw our attention towards what we can most readily see and deliver: the quality of programmes and learning experiences. Performance-led L&D asks us to extend that view of impact — from

*We must move upstream to support agencies while they are still diagnosing the problem, so that we can help shape the conditions for improving performance.*



*We need to move from organising problems around our domains of expertise to organising our expertise around the problem.*



the quality of what we provide to what changes in practice through the work we do with agencies.

**A second is how we think about the boundaries of our influence.** Many of the conditions that shape performance sit outside CSC's direct control. Managers, agency leaders, HR partners and other organisational actors determine priorities, workflows, incentives and reinforcement. But the limits of our control need not define the boundaries of our contribution. CSC also has other sources of influence that matter, such as our ability to convene across the Public Service, our thought and practice leadership in areas that support Public Sector Transformation, and the implicit trust that agencies place in us – something we must not take for granted.

These create opportunities to shape conversations, connect perspectives, surface emerging practices and influence how problems are understood before solutions are fixed. Addressing performance challenges may require

CSC to work more deliberately through different forms of influence, alongside a wider set of relationships and levers — including agency leadership, Centre of Government agencies and, where relevant, policy and system mechanisms — to create the conditions in which learning can have greater effect.

**A third is our relationship with expertise.**

CSC has built deep capabilities in areas such as learning design and development, leadership development and organisation development. But real performance challenges do not necessarily fall neatly within these domains. We need to move from organising problems around our domains of expertise to organising our expertise around the problem. This means working with more interdisciplinarity, and using expertise not only to provide solutions, but also to help agencies inquire, diagnose, make sense of complexity, test assumptions and learn from what happens in practice.

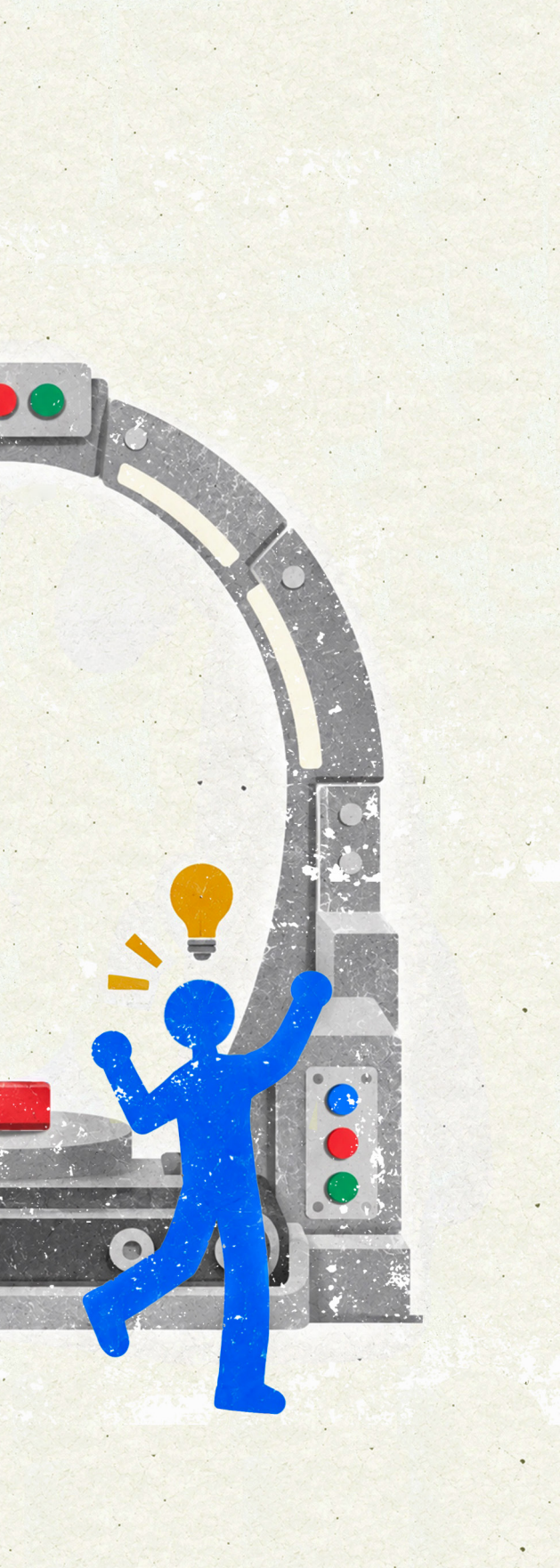
Seen this way, CSC's evolution is itself an example of the capacity we

hope to strengthen across the Public Service. Evolvability is not simply the ability to learn more. It is the ability to discern what should be retained, what may need to be unlearned, and how existing strengths can be relearned and recombined as circumstances change. To be performance-led is not to focus on performance alone, but to take responsibility for how learning, judgement and everyday work combine to produce results over time.

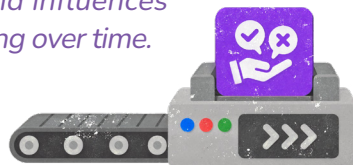
Many of the challenges facing the Public Service are not resolved when strategy is formulated, policy is announced or technology is introduced. **They are solved, or not solved, in the translation of intent into practice.** That translation depends on the judgement exercised by officers, teams and leaders as they navigate trade-offs and adapt to circumstances that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. Helping individuals, teams and institutions to learn and adapt in that translation is therefore an increasingly important part of how the Public Service renews itself.

CSC's role cannot begin and end with training. We need to work more closely with agencies, Public Sector Training Institutes and organisational stakeholders to understand performance challenges,





*Learning creates value not when the individual leaves with new knowledge but when that learning shapes judgement and influences decision-making over time.*

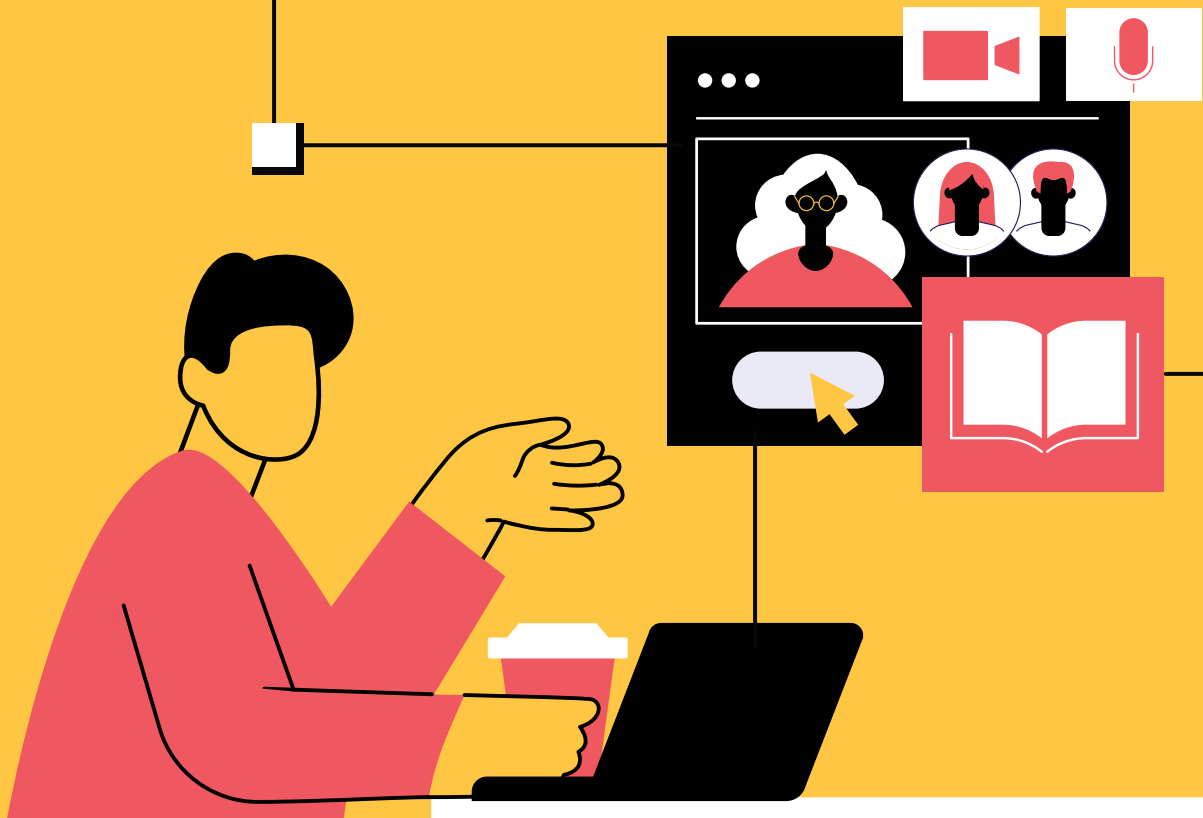


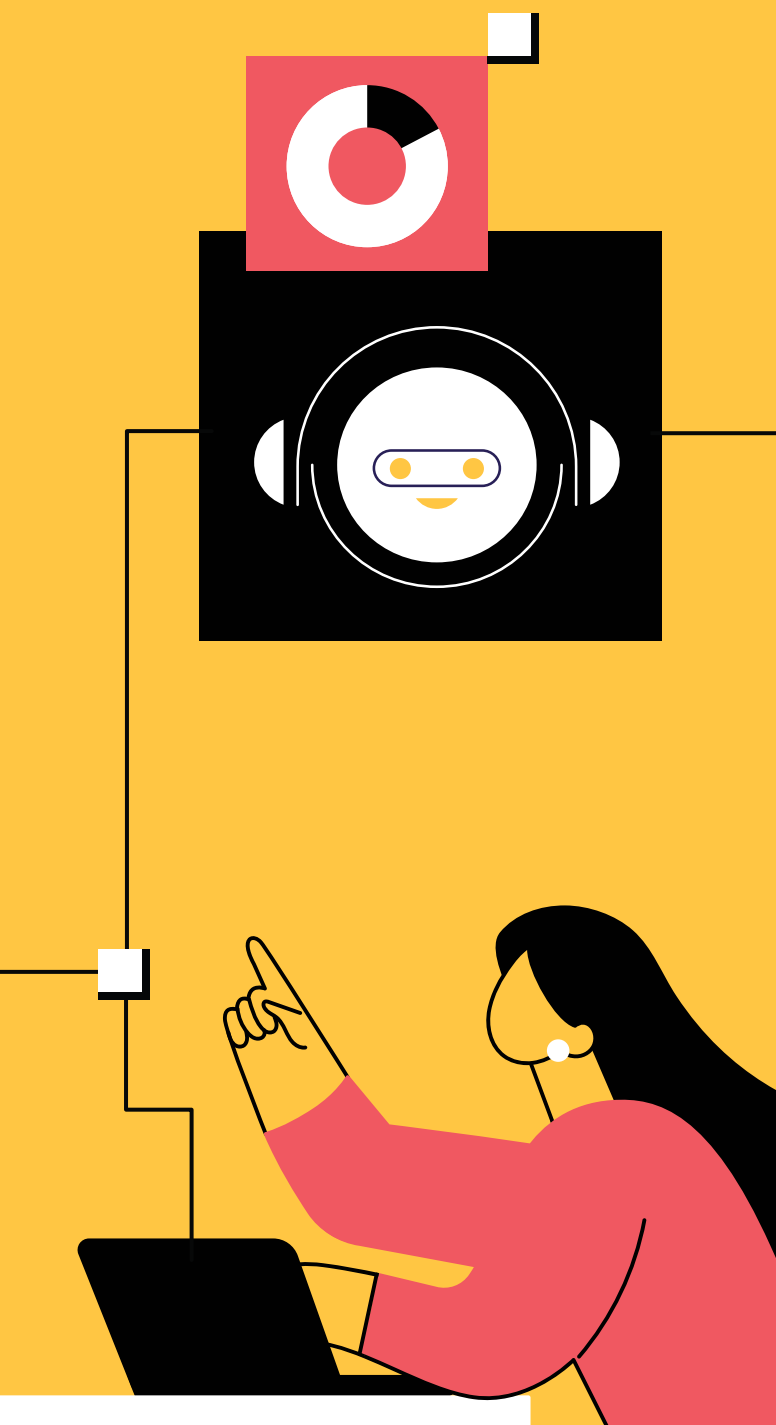
strengthen the conditions that support change, and learn alongside agencies as new ways of working take root. This requires CSC to contribute not only to capability development, but also to the inquiry, experimentation and organisational learning that accompany transformation.

CSC plays an institutional role in the Public Service. Part of that role is helping to strengthen the judgement, stewardship and values that guide action in complex and changing circumstances. By connecting experiences across agencies, surfacing emerging practices and supporting collective learning, CSC helps build capabilities that endure beyond any single programme, intervention or organisation. In this way, the Public Service strengthens not only its ability to perform today, but also its capacity to adapt, renew and serve Singapore well over time. ■

# How Adult Learning Is Changing in a Transformed World

by Terence Ho





Insights from the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), Singapore's national centre of excellence for adult learning, highlight the need for relevant, continual learning that is embedded into organisational workflows and practices at every level.



**Terence Ho** is Executive Director and Associate Professor (Practice) at the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), Singapore University of Social Sciences. He is also an adjunct faculty member of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

In his public sector career from 2002 to 2020, Terence served in research, policy and leadership roles at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Education, South East Community Development Council, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Manpower. He was a Board Member of the Workforce Singapore Agency (2017-2020) and the Building and Construction Authority (2016-2021). He is currently a Nominated Member of Parliament and a Board Member of the Civil Service College.

A Straits Times bestselling author, Terence has written four books, three book chapters, and over a hundred opinion-editorials published by major news organisations, since 2021.



## Introduction: Shift in Learning and Capability Development

Seismic shifts in the context, content and modality of learning are transforming adult learning today. They are accelerating trends towards more industry-relevant and flexible modes of learning that bring tangible gains to organisations and individuals. Increasingly, the focus is on work-embedded learning, team-based capability development, and the integration of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Learning institutions and training providers must likewise move beyond just classroom delivery towards supporting learning in the flow of work.

These shifts call for frameworks and mechanisms to recognise skills demonstrated at the workplace, in addition to formal training credentials. There is also a need to equip learners to deal with uncertainty, empowering them to become co-creators rather than just passive recipients of knowledge. To be effective in this new context, learning institutions cannot operate in siloes — they must partner with a range of stakeholders, as part of a learning ecosystem embedded in industries, organisations and communities of learners.

## Driving Forces of Change and Disruption

Adult learners today face significant disruption and uncertainty arising from technological change, geopolitical rivalry, supply chain disruptions, demographic transition, climate change, and other forces. To stay relevant to the current needs of organisations and learners, learning systems and institutions must become more responsive to external driving forces.

## Changes in Skills Requirements Arising from AI

Since 2022, the most palpable impetus for change has been the emergence of generative and agentic AI models of ever-increasing capability. By taking over not just routine cognitive work but also complex reasoning and creative tasks, such as research, writing and coding, AI is changing the role of human workers and how they contribute at the workplace. What skills now matter, and hence what people need to learn, are changing.

A 2026 joint study by IAL and the Burning Glass Institute (BGI) of approximately 15.3 million job postings in the US and Singapore from 2020 to 2025 found rapid changes in skills requirements in both countries, with Singapore

recording a rate of change 2.4 times higher than the US.<sup>1</sup> While entry-level roles have been particularly affected, skills requirements are evolving across all experience levels, suggesting broad-based workforce transformation.

Organisations and individuals must learn to leverage AI tools and agents for improved productivity and performance. But AI has also increased the premium on critical thinking, judgement and empathy, making these skills essential for adding value at the workplace. These can be cultivated through courses on leadership, communications and teamwork, and can

be reinforced at work through structured feedback, personalised or group coaching, mentoring, and communities of practice.

## New Possibilities in Technology-Enhanced Learning

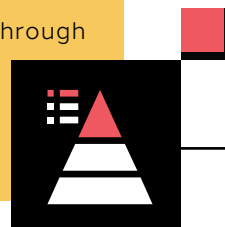
In tandem, learning institutions must consider how best to harness AI to support teaching and learning. Technology holds considerable potential to customise learning and make it accessible to learners around the clock via AI tutors and chatbots, and to support immersive learning via role-playing or augmented reality environments.

### IAL's Adult Educators Digital and AI Proficiency Taxonomy (ADAPT)

ADAPT, a digital and AI competency framework developed by IAL, helps adult educators benchmark and strengthen their digital and AI skills, providing a national shared reference for digital and AI proficiency.

The framework comprises 18 subdomains across four competency domains (teaching and learning, assessment, digital literacy and resources, and professional engagement), recognising three levels of proficiency (basic, intermediate and advanced).

ADAPT is designed with self-assessment and course analyser tools, through which educators can get an instant alignment report mapped to ADAPT proficiency levels. Learners increase their proficiency through learning pathways comprising continuing professional development courses co-developed and certified by IAL and its partners AI Singapore and Google.



As AI takes on more of the routine load in curriculum design, delivery and assessment, it frees educators to exercise higher-order professional judgement and expand their practice beyond instruction into mentoring and convening — motivating, guiding and inspiring adult learners, and facilitating activities that encourage cross-disciplinary learning. Here is where educators can add the most value, particularly as learning agility, cross-disciplinary learning and self-management are becoming increasingly important.

## Fractionalisation of Jobs and the Changing Employment Relationship

AI is likely to spur the fractionalisation of jobs, where traditional job roles are disaggregated into various tasks that are then distributed to AI and human workers for more optimal productivity. This could accelerate trends towards gig work, where employers maintain contingent rather than permanent workforces, and workers are compensated for specific tasks.<sup>2</sup>

***Labour markets now require far more agile updating of skills than traditional qualification systems often provide.***

However, most organisations will still require a core team of employees who are tied to the organisation and may be flexibly deployed for a range of tasks. Here, job redesign will play an important role in deriving synergies from teams of human workers and AI bots. Increasingly, learning and development must dovetail with organisational priorities and work redesign. Learning institutions can support organisations in redesigning work and reskilling workers through repeated cycles of change. For instance, IAL guided manufacturing firm Cragar Industries through a structured work transformation project to convert an existing Finance Executive role into a new Business Data Analyst role.<sup>3</sup>

## Emerging Frontiers in Learning and Organisational Development

### Supporting Flexible, Modular and Just-in-Time Learning

As AI shortens the half-life of occupational knowledge, learning institutions must update training programmes and curricula more frequently using labour market analytics of job postings, market intelligence and horizon scanning.

Concurrently, microcredentials are gaining popularity. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2026) observes that labour markets now require far more agile updating

of skills than traditional qualification systems often provide.<sup>4</sup> Small, modular courses can be launched more quickly than full qualification programmes that require considerable time for institutional approval. Such credentials support flexible, just-in-time learning catering to working adults who cannot afford to take significant time off from work. Often, these credentials can also be stacked towards larger qualifications.

### **TAFE NSW: Balancing Learning with Work**

TAFE NSW, the largest public provider of vocational education and training in Australia, offers practical, career-focused education across a wide range of industries. Many of its courses support flexible study by combining on-campus, online, part-time, full-time, and workplace-based delivery, so learners can balance education with employment or other commitments.

It offers microcredentials — industry-recognised, skill-specific certifications that provide targeted training in high-demand areas designed to be completed much more quickly than traditional qualifications and that contribute credit towards further study through credit transfer or articulation agreements.



***Much of what people learn in formal training is not applied at work, often because there is no opportunity to practise what they have learnt.***

### **Embedding Learning in Work and Organisational Context**

It has long been recognised that the bulk of learning takes place on the job rather than in the classroom. In the early 1980s, the US-based think tank Centre for Creative Leadership developed a 70:20:10 model which suggests that 70% of learning comes through hands-on experience, 20% through social learning and only 10% through formal training courses.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, it is well established that training is more relevant and effective if it addresses actual challenges learners face in the workplace, rather than if it is treated as a standalone exercise detached from work. Research suggests that much of what people learn in formal training is not applied at work, often because there is no opportunity to practise what they have learnt.<sup>6</sup>

Today, technology is driving changes in processes that make it even more imperative to connect training with work.

***When learners grapple with real-world issues rather than hypothetical situations, they get to weigh competing considerations and exercise judgement and empathy.***

The task for learning institutions is hence twofold: to increase the industry relevance of training, and to partner employers to embed learning in the flow of work.

The first task can be achieved by designing curriculum and classroom time around the sharing of work experiences, or projects where learners can apply

their skills towards solving actual work challenges. Where possible, this should move beyond the theoretical by giving learners the chance to implement their projects at work. When learners grapple with real-world issues rather than hypothetical situations or sanitised case studies, they get to weigh competing considerations and exercise judgement and empathy.

### **Domain+: AI Skilling in the Flow of Work**

IAL's Adult Learning Collaboratory conducts collaborative experiments with companies and public sector organisations to explore new models of learning and capability development. Among these was Domain+, which investigated how AI capability building could be more effective.

The initiative involved experiments integrating AI learning with real-world work challenges, thereby bringing workers' expertise to the fore, as well as training activities that were team-based rather than individually focused. This approach led to significant organisational and worker-level gains. AI solutions built using Domain+ demonstrated 35% gains in originality and 20% gains in business relevance, with workers also showing 14% increase in AI readiness, and 15% gains in engagement.<sup>7</sup>



The second task entails identifying opportunities for timely learning interventions in the flow of work. This form of learning is highly contextual and requires close engagement with supervisors, line managers and operational leads. Workers and supervisors, as the domain experts, must co-create learning in complex, fast-changing environments. External trainers or consultants can help with facilitation by partnering learners and teams to co-develop and customise learning solutions that meet organisational and individual needs.

### **Strengthening Workplace Learning Architecture for “Learning Organisations”**

Beyond one-off interventions, learning institutions can support organisations in formalising and strengthening workplace learning.

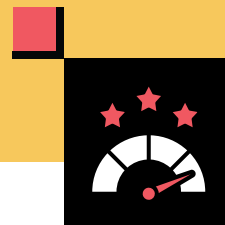
While workplace learning has always been important, it has become more urgent than ever. As AI drives transformation across the workplace, it has become an integral part of organisational development and change management to continually redesign work and equip workers for new job requirements. This demands that organisations develop effective learning architecture.

### **National Centres of Excellence for Workplace Learning (NACE) ● ● ●**

The Skills and Workforce Development Agency (SWDA) has appointed seven National Centres of Excellence for Workplace Learning (NACE) to help Singapore organisations retain and build competencies through workplace learning to support business growth and strategies.

Since 2018, this initiative has seen workplace learning consultants helping companies build capabilities by developing on-job-training (OJT) blueprints, learning needs analyses, job-role competency mapping, performance management, coaching and mentoring skills, and so on.

In 2021, NACE introduced the National Workplace Learning Certification to recognise companies dedicated to fostering continual learning at the workplace.



***Learning must be situated within the broader organisation, and not treated as an activity set apart from its regular work.***

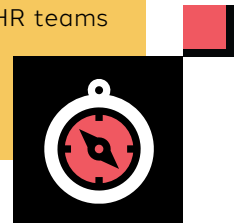
Findings from IAL's Skills and Learning Survey provide insights into why investment in training often does not lead to improved workplace performance.<sup>8</sup> It turns out what matters is whether workers are motivated to engage in deep learning and pursue skills mastery. Such motivation is shaped by the learning environment at work, including whether management practices support worker autonomy.

Learning must be situated within the broader organisation and not treated as an activity set apart from its regular work. To be successful, enterprises must become learning enterprises, with learning built into their corporate DNA. For instance, organisations could adopt a Plan-Do-Act-Adapt methodology where there is continual experimentation and adaptation to improve workflows and processes. By dovetailing people development strategy with business strategy, the former is elevated from an optional activity to a core priority that is integral to organisational success.

## **Enterprise Compass: Linking Enterprise and Workforce Performance**

IAL has developed an "Enterprise Compass" (EC) informed by its Business Performance and Skills Survey, a large-scale dataset in Singapore that connects how enterprises operate (e.g. business strategy, innovation, technology) with workforce dimensions (job design, talent strategy, learning strategy, rewards strategy), with clear links to business performance, and workforce outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

The EC lets companies benchmark themselves against top-performing firms and provides evidence-based recommendations on job, skills and career practices to improve business outcomes. It gives business leaders, managers and HR teams a common basis to identify and act on opportunities to improve. The EC has been tested with small and medium-sized enterprises, yielding evidence that it motivates firms to act.



Leadership is critical for a learning organisation: leaders provide resources and backing for learning and experimentation, and set the tone for the organisation. Learning institutions must therefore engage an organisation's senior leaders to ensure buy-in, define learning goals and objectives and ensure alignment with the organisation's strategy. HR professionals, line managers and unions, too, are key in enabling learning within organisations by activating mindsets, securing training resources, embedding learning in work, and creating conducive environments for learning and experimentation.

It is helpful for organisations to set aside protected time for learning and experimentation, particularly in teams. This way, learning does not appear to be an additional imposition on top of work. Learning together in teams helps to keep workers engaged and motivated by emphasising the relational aspect of learning.

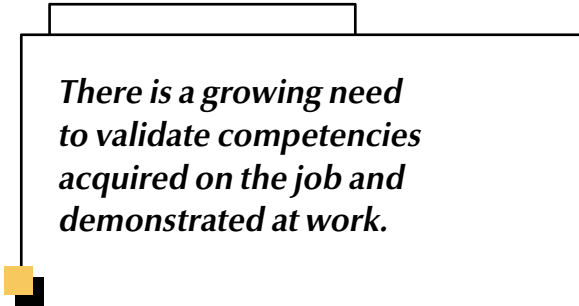
## Workplace Skills Validation and Credentialling

While traditional courses often include exams or assessments leading to formal credentials, there is a growing need to validate competencies acquired on the job and demonstrated

at work. Learning institutions, besides supporting workplace learning, can play a role in this nascent area of sectoral skills credentialling.

IAL has established a framework for the skills credentialling of adult educators, and is now piloting sectoral skills credentialling in sectors such as healthcare, in partnership with regulatory agencies and unions. If successful, this could be replicated in other sectors. Validating skills acquired through work would support a more seamless integration between classroom learning and workplace learning.

Skills passports could be made more comprehensive and relevant by combining formal academic credentials with workplace-validated skills credentials, using a common skills taxonomy. This could in turn support performance-led and skills-first employment practices spanning hiring, deployment, learning and development, career progression and remuneration.



***There is a growing need to validate competencies acquired on the job and demonstrated at work.***

*Organisations must be able to depend on the instincts and confidence of their workers to make sense of the evolving environment and co-create solutions to unfamiliar problems.*

## Learning for Adaptation and Innovation in Emergent Scenarios

With organisations having to operate in an increasingly volatile, complex and ambiguous world, learning should aim to equip ‘worker-learners’ to navigate uncertainty. In the emergent contexts

commonly encountered today, there may be no tried-and-tested solution or best practice to fall back on. Organisations must be able to depend on the instincts and confidence of their workers to make sense of the evolving environment and co-create solutions to unfamiliar problems.

## Future-Oriented Pedagogies

The “future-oriented pedagogies” pioneered by IAL focus on how learning processes can generate knowledge and not just transfer it. The emphasis is on dialogue and collective sensemaking to address emergent or complex scenarios.<sup>10</sup>

IAL has worked with educators, workplace leaders and organisations to test two future-oriented learning techniques: **Emergent Scenarios**, where learners respond to evolving or uncertain situations that mirror real workplace challenges, and **Generative Dialogue**, where learners discuss ideas, challenge assumptions and develop understanding collaboratively.

Together, these approaches encourage learners to think ahead, adapt to change and apply learning more actively. The study has found that deeper engagement facilitated by these approaches resulted in stronger participation, critical thinking, emotional involvement, and collaboration during learning sessions.



A further benefit of this approach is encouraging ground-up innovation, tapping on the skills and expertise of workers throughout an organisation to drive change. This is particularly

important in a fast-changing environment where senior leadership lacks the time and ground knowledge to come up with all the solutions themselves.

## People-Led Innovation for Enterprises

IAL's People-driven Innovation in Enterprises (PIE) Programme supports Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to strengthen their innovation capacity by mobilising their workforce to create new growth areas, drawn from the practices of Singapore's top-performing SMEs.<sup>11</sup>

Following a diagnostic assessment using the Enterprise Compass, firms are guided to improve on their products and services, with employees taking a leading role to shape the product and go-to-market strategies. The approach shifts leadership from control to trust — positioning the workforce as a source of insight, innovation and strategy. Employees work on strategic activities such as product category creation and minimum viable product (MVP) testing, engaging customers closely to develop premium, differentiated products.



## Supporting Learning Communities and Ecosystem through Technology and Partnerships

Learning institutions should seek to build enduring learning communities designed for sustained participation, allowing learners to enter, leave and re-engage throughout their careers. They can leverage technology to blend physical and digital communities, enabling collaboration at scale.

Rather than merely providing instruction, the institution then becomes a platform that connects learners, educators, employers and technology. This requires partnering other stakeholders in the ecosystem, including business associations, professional bodies, unions and policymakers. Learning organisations can also serve as conduits to matched ed-tech products and platforms with specific learning needs, helping to customise learning solutions to meet organisational priorities.

## Shanghai Open University



Shanghai Open University has broadened the concept of community-based learning to create virtual learning communities, in which learners collaborate with one another, instructors facilitate learning, AI agents provide personalised support, and digital platforms enable anytime, anywhere interaction.

The university describes this as a multi-interactive learning environment where learners, teachers and AI agents work together, emphasising knowledge sharing, learner autonomy and collaborative problem-solving.



## Conclusion

The changes brought about by technological advances, as well as heightened uncertainty and complexity in the operating context, point to a future where learning institutions will be defined less by what they deliver, and more by how they enable others to learn, adapt and perform.

As factual knowledge becomes cheaper and more abundant, the comparative advantage of adult learning institutions will shift towards cultivating uniquely human capabilities, helping organisations adapt to change, curating trustworthy learning, and building the ecosystems needed for lifelong reskilling.

They will have an expanded role in supporting organisations and individuals not just in formal learning, but also learning in the flow of work, and activating mindset changes and people-driven innovation. This will necessarily entail broader and deeper partnerships with other stakeholders in the learning and development ecosystem. ■

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# OUTCOMES THAT MATTER

Learning in a More Complex Public Service

What does it take to create meaningful  
learning for public officers today?

by **Anuradha Shroff, Brigitte Deden, K U Menon,  
R Jai Prakash, Roshini Ganesan and Yip Ghenglai**





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**R Jai Prakash** is Founder and Principal Consultant of Soci.Train. He is a social change consultant passionate about inspiring and facilitating social change through innovative and collaborative solutions that address complex social issues and challenges. With over 20 years in strategy, policy, operations, and senior leadership experience, Jai has been instrumental in advancing policies and developing services for persons with disabilities, youth at risk, and families in need. Jai set up Singapore's first Social Service Office and had served as Director of Child Protective Service at the Ministry of Social and Family Development. He has led national strategic communication and engagement efforts for social and educational issues.



**Roshini Ganesan** is Manager and Partner at The Change Business. She has been in the corporate training business for 25 years and has trained in more than 10 regions (including United States, Australia, China, India, Japan, Mozambique), skilling people in several areas like business presentations, emotional intelligence, and communication. Roshini has also been actively involved in the design process of workshops in the areas of customer service and communication. She has extensive experience in training personnel at a range of levels, from interns to managing directors, across a variety of industries, including finance, manufacturing, hospitality, and government agencies.



**Yip Ghenglai** is Co-founder of Morph Consulting, a seasoned facilitator and career strategist with 12 years in public service and corporate HR leadership, and 10 years of designing and facilitating learning interventions across sectors. She holds a Master of Learning & Professional Development (Distinction) and is a certified Emergenetics®, Five Behaviors®, and Everything DiSC® Associate. She specialises in engaging employees, managers, and leaders on career development and transition, manager effectiveness, and team effectiveness.

**A**s the Public Service adapts to a faster and more complex world, learning must do more than transmit knowledge. It must help public officers interpret complexity, exercise judgement, practise new behaviours and apply what they learn in the workplace. This has required trainers to design learning more deliberately across different modalities, even as learners juggle competing demands and increasingly fragmented attention.

Six leading CSC associate trainers reflect on how learning has changed and how their own practice has evolved in response. Drawing on their collective experience across different fields of public sector work, they discuss changing learner expectations, the possibilities and limits of technology, and what it now takes for learning to make a meaningful difference at work.

## **WHAT ARE YOUR OBSERVATIONS ABOUT HOW LEARNER BEHAVIOUR HAS SHIFTED OVER THE YEARS?**

**Shroff:** Officers are coming in more time-poor, more attention-fragmented, and quite frankly, more tired. The energy in the room at 9 am on a Monday is simply not what it was 10 years ago.

Learners' needs have also become more practical and more personal at the same time. Practical, because the work has grown more complex — more cross-agency,

more publicly scrutinised, more politically nuanced — they want frameworks they can use, not theories to admire. Personal, because the line between work and life has blurred and they bring more of themselves to the room than they used to.

A decade ago, a common question was “How do I manage this stakeholder?”. Today, it is often “How do I keep going?”. Now we build in purposeful pauses for reflections and spaces for officers to bring their real situations into the room. The most useful learning often happens in these spaces and discussions.

**Ganesan:** What has remained remarkably consistent is that participants want answers to a few fundamental questions very quickly: Why am I here? Why is this important? Why is it important now? Why should I listen to you for the next few hours?

Today, learners are perhaps more willing to ask those questions openly. People recognise the importance of continuous learning, but they are also juggling demanding workloads and competing priorities. Time spent learning is time away from work and its operational demands. Facilitators have to be much more intentional about establishing relevance from the very beginning.

I spend more time helping participants connect the learning to their real-world challenges, demonstrating practical application early, and creating opportunities for them to see immediate

value. My goal is not just for participants to enjoy the workshop; it is for them to leave feeling that their time was well spent, that they gained something useful, and that they can apply what they have learnt back at work.

**Yip:** Adult learning principles remind us that people learn best when they can connect new knowledge to real problems they are trying to solve. Learners' fundamental needs have not changed much; the desire to grow, to address workplace challenges, and to acquire knowledge and skills relevant to their context. What has shifted is the environment around it. Learners today are busier than ever. In virtual sessions, multiple browsers are open, and the inbox is never far away; in face-to-face settings, work does not stop just because they are in the classroom.

This makes two things critical – establishing relevance early and designing engaging learning experiences. We need to quickly establish a clear connection between what they are learning and how it helps them perform better. When it is aligned, they become more willing to question what they think they know, unlearn assumptions that may no longer serve them, and engage with new ways of thinking and doing. When we design learning that is engaging enough to leave no room for distraction, with activities and conversations that can spark discussion, the energy in the room will be compelling enough to hold attention.



*Participants want answers to a few fundamental questions very quickly: Why am I here? Why is this important?*

We have moved away from the idea of learning as mere content download to something more active and applied. Theories and information are readily available online; what learners cannot easily access on their own are the best practices, lived experiences, and insights that emerge from participating in the activities and conversations in the room. That is also where social learning is valuable.

**Prakash:** I think learners are now looking for more applied and contextualised learning. I often hear from learners that they not only want to know the theories, concepts, or frameworks but also how these can be used in government settings at work. They value the war stories and actual case studies that can help them navigate workplace realities.

I do my best to bring the concepts I teach to life, illustrating what works and what may not by sharing many of

my own government experiences as a policy officer, middle manager, and director in service. Learners appreciate when theories connect with the realities of public service work.

**Menon:** Today's officers are not passive recipients of knowledge. Many are among the 'digital native generation', given their familiarity with constant connectivity, immediacy and information abundance. They operate in an environment shaped by social media, generative AI, open-source intelligence and constant public scrutiny. They are accustomed to ambiguity, competing narratives, and dialogues rather than monologue, participation rather than prescription, and accelerated feedback loops.

As a trainer, this means one can no longer rely on institutional authority alone. Credibility must be earned through relevance, intellectual rigour, and authenticity.

*“Technology cannot replicate what happens when we bring people together.”*



## HOW CAN LEARNING EXPERIENCES BE MORE MEANINGFULLY DESIGNED TO SUIT LEARNER NEEDS?

**Yip:** Outcomes are what I focus on, and to do that, both modality and the learning experience are important. What is the right modality? How do we design the learning activities to achieve the intended learning outcomes? Modality sets the stage. A virtual session can have powerful scenario-based discussions, and a face-to-face workshop can be passive and forgettable. It is more about whether the learning activities within it are designed to serve the learning outcomes. That requires thinking through what participants need to experience, practise, and reflect on, and how to sequence those moments.

Learning experiences should allow learners to address the gap between knowing and doing. The goal is not solely to impart knowledge, but to enable participants to solve problems and perform better at the workplace. This means application-based learning where participants work on real challenges rather than abstract concepts. When people can connect what they are learning directly to a problem they are experiencing, the knowing-doing gap narrows considerably.

Take simulating difficult career conversations, for example. Participants bring their past experiences into the room, practise having those conversations,

and work through the discomfort in a safe environment. Struggling over a real work problem together in a safe space is far more powerful than being told what a good career conversation looks like, because participants get to exercise and build muscle memory and confidence.

Technology can deliver some content efficiently, and it will only get better at that. What I don't think it can replicate is what happens when we bring people together. The unplanned moment when someone shares a struggle, and others quietly nod because they have experienced the same thing. The camaraderie that builds when a group works through something difficult together. The shift that happens when a peer says something that resonates with the rest. As the AI landscape expands, one of the most valuable things we can offer could be the power of social learning.

**Prakash:** Practitioners need to be grounded in understanding the lived experiences of government officers in today's context, actively listen to what they share in classrooms, and curate the curriculum accordingly. It is key to bring in our own experiences to demonstrate applicability in government. In addition to being the teacher, practitioners should also take on the role of a student to learn from the learners themselves and constantly evolve the materials and delivery.

Today, the reality is that most of the content and frameworks can be

learned online with the help of AI. So, I take it as a personal challenge to design experiential activities to see how I can convey my teaching points. It also gives me an opportunity to tap into the participants' wisdom, sense where the learners are, and debrief accordingly. After the debrief, I then share the theories or frameworks. For instance, one of the activities I like most is taking learners on a walk through a rental community to help them understand the lived experiences of citizens, to bridge policymaking with the actual needs and aspirations of citizens.

**Ganesan:** Whether online or in person, I now place greater emphasis on participation, practical application, and creating space for every learner to contribute. Participants become active contributors to the learning experience instead of just passive recipients of information. When programmes are designed with greater participant involvement in mind, more opportunities for reflection and application can take place.

What has surprised me about the move to digital learning is that it has improved some aspects of learning. Participants who might have spoken less in a physical classroom often find their voice through chat discussions, polls, and small-group activities. This has challenged many of my assumptions about how learning should happen, and has changed how I facilitate even today.

**Menon:** In many respects, the integration of technology has significantly improved the learning environment. Disseminated materials can be updated dynamically for each cohort. With collaborative digital workflows, participants can upload draft speeches onto shared platforms for collective discussion and critique. The classroom then turns into a live editorial workshop where entire paragraphs are dissected in real time — structure, tone, sequencing, rhetorical devices and political sensitivity.

The speed and efficiency of feedback loops have improved dramatically. Post-course feedback reaches lecturers within days. That helps me regularly recalibrate aspects of my delivery and materials in response.

**Shroff:** The deeper challenge is helping officers slow down enough for real learning to happen at all. Reflection takes time and a quiet mind, and both are in short supply. Today, 10 minutes is the new hour. With phones, hybrid distractions, back-to-back meetings, the bar for keeping a group genuinely present has gone up dramatically.

Part of the work now is creating the conditions for learning before the learning even begins — quietening the room, helping people land, creating psychological safety and giving them permission to step out of execution mode. I have had to also be more disciplined about pacing — with fewer slides and more open questions. I sometimes spend

the first 20 minutes of a workshop helping people simply arrive. That used to feel like a luxury; today it feels like the foundation.

## HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE TRAINER SHIFTED TOWARDS CULTIVATING JUDGEMENT AND DISCERNMENT IN LEARNERS?

**Deden:** Earlier in my career, much of my focus was on helping leaders solve problems, achieve specific goals and develop certain leadership capabilities. Over time, my work has become more systemic and contextual. I now pay much greater attention not only to the individual leader, but also to the teams, organisations, stakeholder relationships and wider environments within which they operate.

One development that I have found particularly impactful has been the growing integration of systemic thinking into my coaching work. As leadership challenges have become increasingly interconnected, helping leaders understand the broader systems in which they operate often creates more sustainable change than focusing exclusively on individual behaviours.

**Yip:** Rather than answering questions from my own perspective, I now start from the assumption that participants bring not just a great deal of wisdom



but also the ability to think critically and to problem-solve together. My role is to create conditions that draw that out. I do add my own perspective, but deliberately after their sharing; to summarise, reinforce, and highlight what matters most. When participants hear their own insights validated and built upon, it's quite different from when I simply lead with the answer.

We need to be clear on what training can and cannot solve. Most organisational challenges require multiple levers; learning and development is one, but things like culture, sponsorship, processes, and policies all play a role.

Take career development as an example. If we want managers to have meaningful conversations with their officers, training is necessary but not sufficient. There must be psychological safety, an open culture that respects officers' personal needs, opportunities for growth within and across agencies, and leaders willing to release people for development while balancing organisational and team needs.

**Ganesan:** The challenge for practitioners will no longer be access to knowledge. Knowledge has never been more available. What matters more is helping people develop the judgement to know what to do with that information. That means placing greater emphasis on critical thinking, discernment, communication, collaboration and the very human skills that technology cannot easily replace.

I've learned to create the space for participants to learn from one another and apply ideas to their own context. The pace of change is unlikely to slow down. Our role is not simply to transfer knowledge, but to help people navigate uncertainty, make sound decisions and continue learning long after the programme has ended.

### **WHAT REMAINS THE MOST VITAL CHALLENGE IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TODAY?**

**Shroff:** Today, the unspoken question is: did it make a difference? This is a much harder bar to meet. It means we must design backwards from behaviour change.

A single workshop is rarely enough on its own — what actually works is a programme that strings together check-ins, action learning sets, peer coaching, manager involvement, and time for application in between. We need to measure different things, not just “I enjoyed the trainer” but “I tried something different at work, and here is what happened”.

It also means accepting that not all effective learning is comfortable. Some of the most impactful sessions I have run were the ones where participants left a little unsettled. I remember a participant saying he felt less equipped after a leadership workshop because he realised how much he did not know before that and now felt consciously incompetent.

**Ganesan:** Effective learning used to be measured largely by classroom engagement. If participants enjoyed the session, contributed actively, and gave positive feedback, that was often seen as success. Today, the bar is much higher.

Learners and organisations want to know, “What can I do differently because of this programme?”. There is greater emphasis on workplace application, behaviour change, and measurable outcomes.

**Deden:** The most important capability for practitioners working with the public service will be the ability to support leaders in navigating complexity while remaining grounded in purpose and service. Technical expertise and leadership skills continue to matter, but equally important will be the capacity for reflection, perspective taking, systems awareness, learning agility, experimentation and meaningful collaboration across boundaries.

Since around 2015, and particularly following COVID-19, I have seen a growing number of very senior leaders participating in coaching programmes. The conversations increasingly extend beyond the individual leader to workforce constraints, digital transformation, innovation, AI, geopolitical uncertainty, organisational resilience and employee well-being.

Earlier leadership development efforts often focused more heavily on acquiring

new knowledge, frameworks and skills. While these remain important, there is now a much stronger emphasis on sense-making, adaptability, reflection and the capacity to respond thoughtfully to complexity.

**Yip:** We need to ask ourselves harder questions about whether learning interventions have shifted mindsets, strengthened practices, and improved performance over time. That means developing not just skills for today's challenges, but the attitudes and capacity to keep learning and adapting as things change.

The real question is whether anything changed at the workplace. Did the manager have that career conversation with their officer after the training? Did it go well? What can be improved? How does developing that skill now set them up for future growth? Acquiring knowledge is easy, whereas shifting behaviour in the workplace remains challenging.

There is a growing expectation of just-in-time learning — the idea that learning should be as close to the moment of need as possible to have the most impact. But 'just-in-time' looks different for everyone. Some learners come in anticipating a problem; others only engage fully once they are already in the thick of it. Effective learning must account for that range of readiness rather than assuming everyone is at the same point.



*“We must design backwards from behaviour change.”*

Effective learning is also about how we multiply good effects. Particularly in the public service, it is about scale. I have been more deliberate around how we build mental models within individuals, groups and, over time, the whole of government.

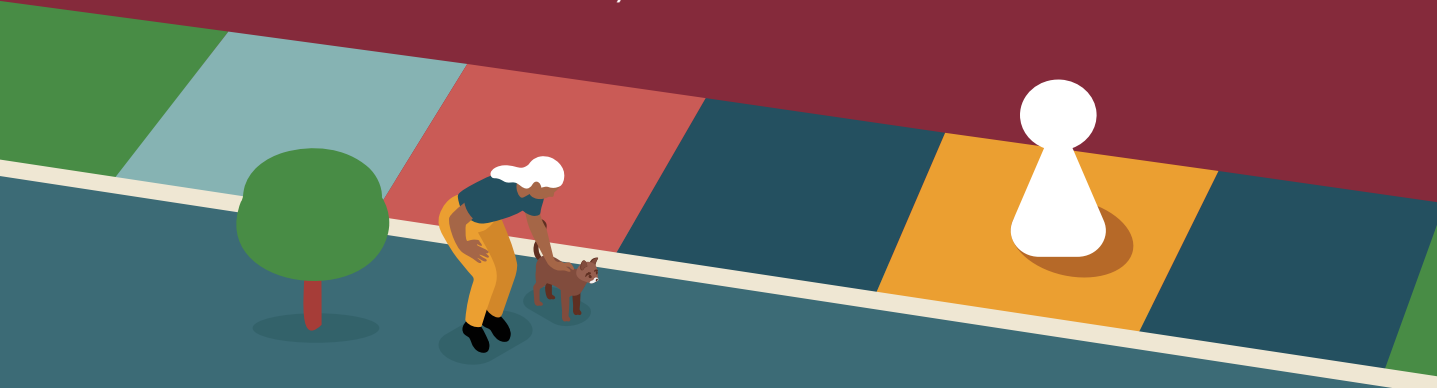
For instance, some managers have never experienced a great career conversation themselves and have no reference point for what good looks like. Research reminds us that talent for great management doesn't come naturally to most. Those who do it well are often the most intentional, not the most naturally gifted. Without a shared way of thinking, such differences play out across teams and agencies.

The aspiration is that over time, a common approach and mindset will gradually shape how managers — and how public officers — think and act across the system. That is a much higher bar and requires more than training alone to get there, but it is also where the multiplier effect lies. ■

# TEACHING GOVERNANCE

# THE LONG GAME

by June Gwee



From technical knowhow to understanding context, engaging with empathy, collaborative learning, and beyond, the cultivation of Singapore's public officers has been driven by the need to anticipate and address the nation's evolving demands.



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## Governance

*In Singapore's context, it is defined as "the manner in which the Government, working together with other stakeholders in society, exercises authority and influence in promoting the collective welfare of society and the long-term interests of the nation".<sup>1</sup>*

When the Civil Service College (CSC) became a statutory board in 2001, it inherited three decades of governance education that had grown alongside the nation: shaped by Singapore's unique circumstances and development, and informed by broader shifts in thinking about governance and public policymaking as a field, reflecting the changing demands placed on those who govern.<sup>2</sup>

At CSC, what is taught, and how it is taught, hinges on core and inseparable questions: what is worth knowing about public governance, how the knowledge is best acquired, and what kind of thinking and judgement we are ultimately trying to cultivate in public officers. While governance education is for all public officers, the focus, and hence instructional strategies, may differ in accordance with the roles and responsibilities officers are expected to carry out.

### **First Foundations: Knowledge Acquisition and Transfer**

In the era of colonial administration, men were prepared to govern more by

convention than design. A university education was considered sufficient foundation; practical governance was acquired through experience: by shadowing, observing and working with those already practising it, and absorbing its unwritten conventions. Embedded within this practice is the tension of whether governance is a science transmittable through systematic instruction, or an art cultivable only through apprenticeship and accumulated judgement.

Singapore's self-government in 1959 changed everything. The fledgling government established the Political Study Centre in the same year as an institutional approach to re-orientate public officers away from governing by fiat on behalf of the Crown towards serving Singaporeans and building a nation. To bolster technical training, the Staff Training Institute was set up in 1971.

With economic development a priority at the time, planning and project analysis capabilities were needed in public policymaking. To address this, public officers' practitioner insights were combined with the

specialist knowledge of academics and professional experts, through collaborative initiatives in governance education. In an early partnership, the Asian Institute of Economic Development and Planning conducted a “Techniques of Project Development and Analysis” programme jointly with the Staff Training Institute. Experts from universities and professional bodies gave lectures for more advanced courses.

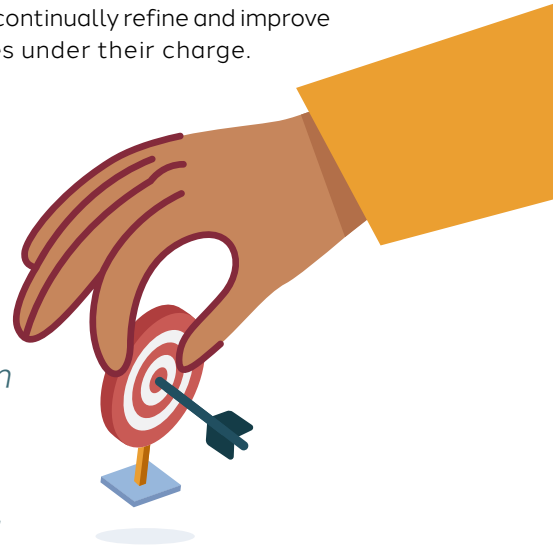
Governance education in this early phase was based on a knowledge acquisition model, driven by the urgency of building up a common foundation of skills and knowhow across the civil service. Governance knowledge was treated as a fixed body of content that could be neatly structured, broken down into discrete units, systematically delivered and stored. The role of the instructor was to transfer expertise into the minds of the learners who would absorb, retain and apply it. Learning was an individual, pragmatic and cognitive endeavour.

## Understanding Context; Learning Socially

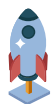
By 1993, after more than two decades of nation-building, the urgency of survival had given way to deliberation: there was now room for deeper analysis, broader consultation, and more open debate. Policymaking was also maturing. While the governance and policy experiences of other countries offered valuable lessons, such solutions could not be transplanted wholesale to Singapore, given the different social, political and economic realities.

This meant that teaching public officers technical skills on project analysis and management was not enough. They needed a keener appreciation of the context in which policies were made, including an understanding of Singapore’s operating environment, and what would be workable and acceptable to citizens. There were new expectations for public officers to continually refine and improve the policies under their charge.

*Governance education was driven by the urgency of building up a common foundation of skills and knowhow across the civil service.*



While the central premise of building a strong and capable Public Service had not changed, this new thinking shifted governance pedagogy. Governance could not simply be taught, it had to be learnt, actively and experientially. The new goals were:<sup>3</sup>



To develop among public officers a deep understanding of the key factors which are the cornerstones of Singapore's continued survival and success. These fundamentals must be debated and internalised, and from time to time changed to fit changing circumstances, so that public officers share the same goals and values.



To build a value system, a sense of esprit de corps, camaraderie, and a sense of tradition among senior public sector leaders. They must have a shared spirit of service to the nation, competence, dedication and integrity, and the public must continue to expect this of them.



To bring officers up to date with the latest ideas, thinking and trends in a world of rapid change.



To work together with the private sector to make Singapore a success, especially since private and public sectors are now to join hands to build the external wing of the economy.

Governance and policy knowledge was not only transmitted from instructor to learner but also constructed through conversations and context. This shifted learning from knowledge acquisition to learning through interaction and dialogue. Knowledge was not regarded as stored in individual minds so much as built and re-built through human interaction as officers participated in discussions to solve messy, real-world, context-specific problems alongside others.

An important instructional method introduced at this time was the case method, a learning approach made popular by Harvard University to teach decision-making in business and government. Unlike a lecture, a well-crafted teaching case raises real questions with no final answer. The narrative of the teaching case offers a schema for critical thinking, interpretation and judgement. Real-life dilemmas with compelling trade-offs ground policy discussions in concrete, lived situations relevant to policy practice. Case studies and the case method frame governance as an art as much as a science. Policymaking is a continual, iterative process that goes back-and-forth, sometimes ending in failure, simply because no policy decision is valid for all time. Every decision is made within a specific context and circumstance.

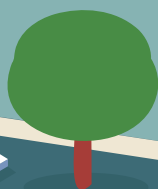
The adoption of the case study and case method marked a turning point in governance education: a deliberate epistemological shift from knowledge

acquisition to knowledge construction. The case method encouraged re-examining and revaluating existing policies in response to new circumstances, and anchored policymaking practices in Singapore's context.

## Pursuing Principles and Possibilities

By 2001, when CSC was established as a statutory board, Singapore's approach to public governance, including the

principles of governance and public service ethos, had become even more defined. Teaching governance became about conveying values and beliefs on what makes Singapore tick, and what its national concerns and long-term interests are. The articulation of Singapore's principles of governance in 2004 would shape how CSC thought about governance education, including the role of institutions and policy innovations, for years to come.



## Principles of Governance <sup>4</sup>

### Leadership is Key



- ✦ Eschew corruption
- ✦ Do what is right, not what is popular
- ✦ Be pragmatic
- ✦ Provide long-term vision

### Reward for Work and Work for Reward



- ✦ Self-reliance, not welfare
- ✦ Meritocracy for best use of talent

### A Stake for Everyone, Opportunities for All

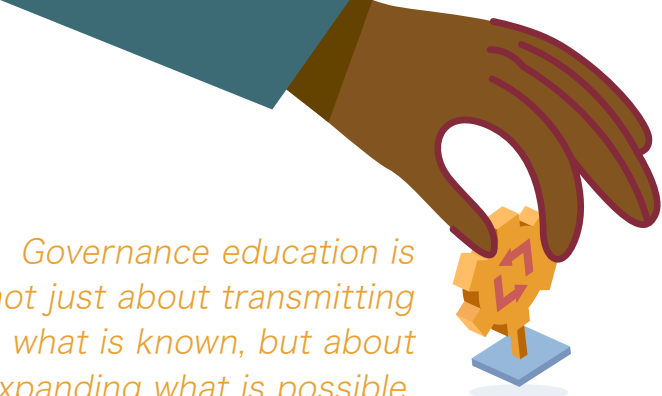


- ✦ Singapore a global city and choice home
- ✦ Promote collective responsibility
- ✦ Beyond physical stakes
- ✦ Preserve core values and interests

### Anticipate Change and Stay Relevant



- ✦ Stay nimble and flexible
- ✦ Be better organised than competitors
- ✦ Exploit opportunities even in adversity
- ✦ Turn constraints into advantages

An illustration of a brown hand with a maroon sleeve placing a yellow puzzle piece with a red arrow onto a blue base. The puzzle piece has a red arrow pointing upwards and to the right.

*Governance education is not just about transmitting what is known, but about expanding what is possible.*

Economic thinking was introduced into the governance and policy curriculum, with a focus on its application in public policy. Evidence-based analysis, industry and stakeholder engagement, as well as structured policy design frameworks, became core elements of how officers were taught to approach policy problems. Behavioural sciences, then still an emerging field, was also incorporated as a new lens for policymaking.

Underpinning this expansion of governance curricula were two complementary thematic pillars. The first was sense-making: building a rigorous knowledge base around the rationales behind past and present policy decisions, the principles of good governance, and Singapore's governing context. The second was generative: using this foundation not merely to inform, but to challenge assumptions and provoke new thinking. The goal was not simply to explain how Singapore governed, but to equip officers with the intellectual tools to ask harder questions and imagine better answers. Together, these pillars reflected a maturing philosophy: that governance education is not just about transmitting what is known, but about expanding what is possible.

## The Making of a Public Officer

In its first decade, CSC's curricula developed a distinct set of instructional elements, each with its specific purpose, that continues to define governance education today:



**Team bonding activities** cultivate shared public service ethos and esprit de corps. Held within the first few days of a programme, they let learners bond and develop mutual trust: pre-conditions for intellectual risk-taking. For real learning to take place, governance conversations and discussions during the learning process are candid, honest and sometimes uncomfortable.



**Seminars** let external experts, such as those in academia, share their disciplinary knowledge, theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and new trends in governance and policy thinking. Practice without theory risks mistaking familiarity for wisdom and continuity for correctness. Seminars introduce emerging and cutting-edge knowledge, expand learners' conceptual thinking, and offer alternative mental models with which to interpret the complexity of governance and policy work.



**Study trips** immerse learners in different governance environments and make governance concepts tangible. Through carefully designed encounters, learners see another country's governance environment and policies up close and network with their policymakers. This provokes thinking on governance and what is particular to Singapore's context.



**Case studies** and the case method remain central as a teaching tool as well as a means for collaborative learning and participative knowledge construction. The insights that emerge — co-built, captured, tested against reality, refined, and shared — contribute to a growing body of collective knowledge about how Singapore governs which may then be taught to new generations of public officers. Crafted and delivered well, the case method can convey the ambiguity and complexity of a policy situation.



**Fireside chats** are intimate conversational sessions with senior public sector leaders who have shaped Singapore's policies and institutions. They represent cognitive apprenticeship with a master practitioner in its most direct form. Unlike formal lectures and seminars, fireside chats are unscripted, creating space for officers to ask leaders about dilemmas they have navigated, judgements exercised under pressure, and mistakes made. Hearing a senior leader speak candidly about a policy crisis or decision gone awry makes governance feel lived, consequential, and achievable in a way no textbook or case study can. Such encounters spark genuine interest in policy work, strengthen officers' sense of vocation and professional identity, and build confidence that they too can grow into the challenges ahead. The learning impact is as much motivational as it is cognitive — shaping not just what officers know, but who they are becoming.

## Winning Hearts and Minds

The second decade of governance education in CSC (2011 to 2021) demanded a rethink of both what governance means and how it should be taught. Singapore's watershed 2011 General Elections signalled a shift in the relationship between government and citizens. Latent tensions in the nation's governance model were sharpening, with robust economic growth accompanied by deepening inequality and widening social divisions. The gap was not just between policy intent and outcome: there was a divide between what government was achieving and what citizens were feeling. It was no longer enough to teach public officers to engage citizens more effectively; they had to be able to listen, to engage with empathy, and to co-create with other societal stakeholders.

Governance curriculum responded accordingly. Programmes incorporated public engagement approaches, as well as citizen-centric policymaking practices that bring government closer to the communities. Co-creation initiatives and best practices were used to facilitate discussions at leadership and policymaking programmes. To provide a more complete and integrated understanding of the

machinery of governance, a number of additional elements were also added to governance education at CSC, including: complexity theory, a deeper grounding into the structure of government, the policy development and evaluation cycle, and sector-specific policymaking concepts.

If governance was to become more citizen-centric, the approach to teaching governance also had to be more humanistic to cultivate empathy, sensibility and relational capacity. By this point, the arc of governance education had moved through two distinct phases of learning. The case method had cultivated analytical judgement — teaching officers to think rigorously about complex problems, to sit with ambiguity, and to reason through competing values and trade-offs. Fireside chats had added a motivational and identity-forming dimension — sparking genuine interest in governance work, building confidence, and inducting officers into a professional community through direct encounter with those who had lived the hardest decisions. However, neither could fully replicate the conditions of real decision-making under pressure — the incomplete information arriving in real time, the weight of consequences, the stress of the clock, and the emotional and physiological dimensions of governance.

*If governance was to become more citizen-centric, the approach to teaching governance also had to be more humanistic to cultivate empathy, sensibility and relational capacity.*

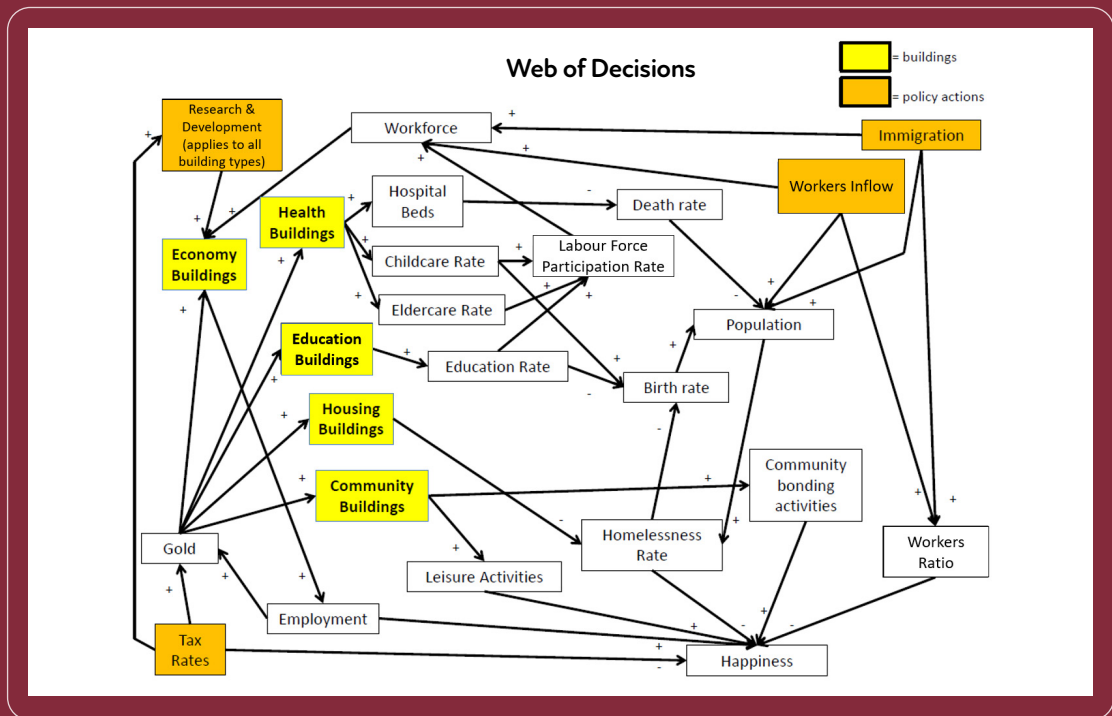


Games and simulations filled that gap — and in doing so, added affective and physiological dimensions to the learning cycle. Unlike with the case method, games and simulations place learners “inside” a hypothetical, fixed scenario.

Decisions have a consequence in the game world. Learners encounter the scenario only when they enter class and do not have time to prepare: this forces them to act under pressure, with incomplete information, just like in the real world.

## Cities of Albion

Cities of Albion is a policy simulation game commissioned by the National Population and Talent Division and built by Nanyang Polytechnic with inputs from CSC’s Applied Simulation Training unit.



Played over 90 minutes in teams of six, it immerses participants in whole-of-government decision-making — having them manage trade-offs across ministries to achieve shared national outcomes under real-world constraints.

The game is designed to surface the full texture of policymaking: resource constraints, competing needs, time lags, population dynamics, and public pressure, followed by structured reflection linking gameplay to actual policy work and public service challenges.

*The long game is building not just capable officers, but an institution that grows wiser with each generation it teaches.*



Games like The Troubleshooters, the Persona Card Activity, How Does Singapore Make a Living, Too Many Cooks, and Mars High School place learners inside the dynamics of real governance challenges, making abstract concepts tangible and immediate. Through games, cognitive work spreads across people, tools (technology), roles and an environment — what cognitive scientist Hutchins (1995) describes as distributed cognition,<sup>5</sup> where learning emerges from how a system performs.

### **The Long Game Continues**

CSC's approach to governance education is distinctive not because of any one method. By combining the analytical rigour of the case method, the lived wisdom of fireside chats, and the visceral, embodied learning of games and simulations, governance education completes the arc of preparing officers for governance not as a technical exercise but a human one — developing the wisdom to think clearly, the purpose to serve meaningfully, and the grit to act decisively under pressure. These methods are combined and sequenced to address the gaps in each approach. At every inflection point in CSC's history, there has been a conscious decision to lean into new methods and adapt to new demands, without discarding what came before. The instinct is to hold the

tension, draw on the complementary strengths of multiple disciplines and push the boundaries of emerging andragogy<sup>6</sup> to deepen the impact of governance education. This is, and has always been, the long game: building not just capable officers, but an institution that grows wiser with each generation it teaches.

Underlying CSC's approach is an enduring conviction: that governance is neither pure science nor pure art, and neither is the education that prepares officers for it. The science lies in the rigour — analytical frameworks, competency models, evidence-based policy design, and structured reflection. The art lies in the judgement — knowing when the framework does not fit, exercising situational judgement, when to hold firm and when to adapt. Taken together, they constitute CSC's philosophy for teaching governance: not as a body of knowledge to be transmitted, but as a practice to be embodied.

This philosophy becomes indispensable when AI and uncertainty are changing the context of governance. The challenge now is not whether machines can think, but whether human institutions can continue to exercise wisdom, responsibility, and collective judgement in an environment shaped by machine-generated knowledge.

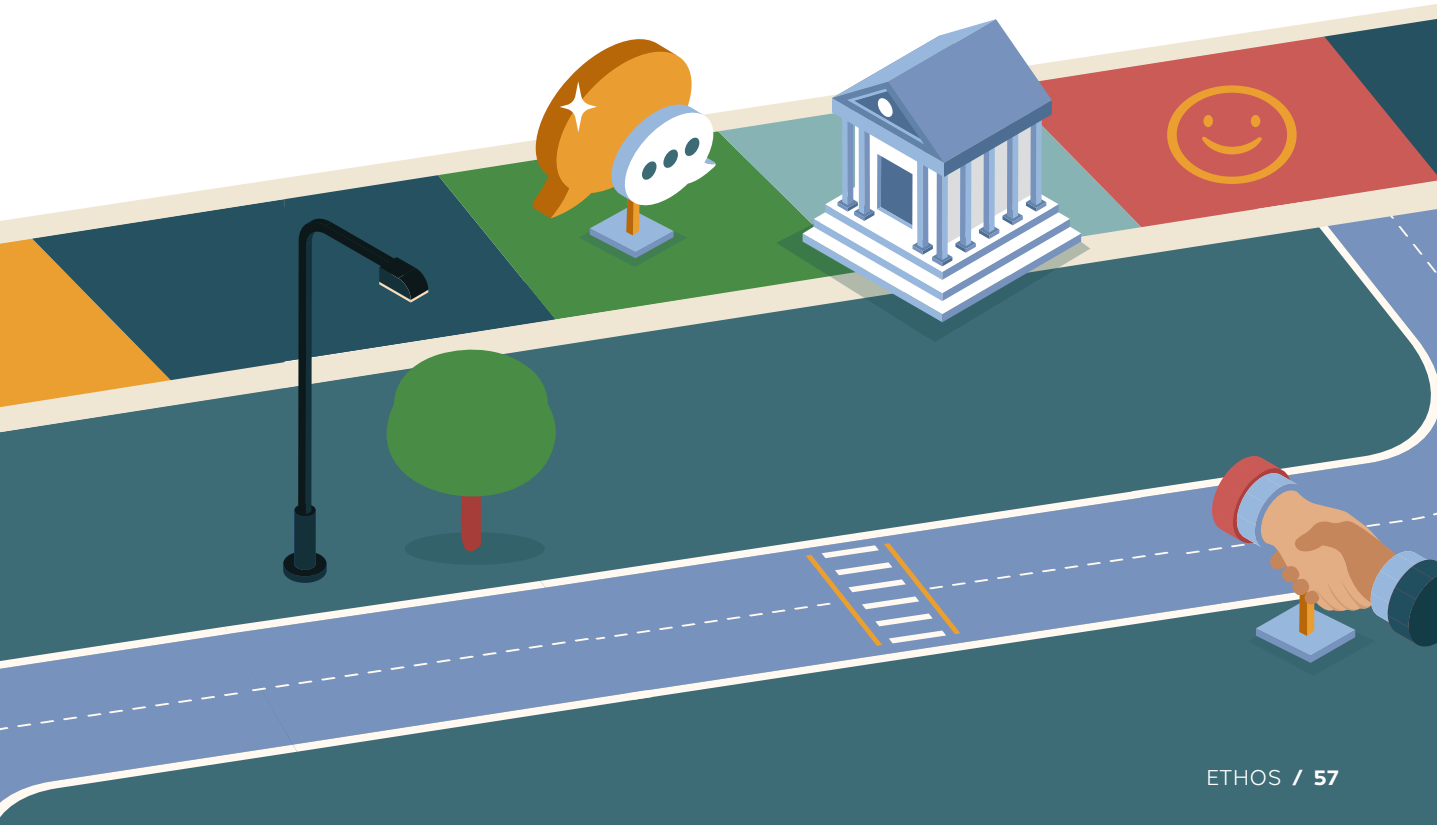
What will have to keep transforming is CSC — staying agile in pedagogy, embracing digital enablement, and activating learning in communities and at the workplace, so that governance

education remains relevant beyond the classroom, in moments of rapid change, new transitions, failure, and unexpected developments — the moments that matter most. ■

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## Notes

1. “Context: Preserving our Fundamentals” in *ETHOS*, Vol 10, Issue 3, Nov, 2004, Civil Service College, Singapore, pp. 2-5.
2. The scholarly study of governance and public policy making can be traced to the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyn Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service and later Woodrow Wilson’s 1887 essay “The Study of Administration” in *Political Science Quarterly*, 2(2), 197-222.
3. “Top govt officers must take courses before promotion”, *The Straits Times*, 30 April 1993, Page 1.
4. “Context: Preserving our Fundamentals” in *ETHOS*, Vol 10, Issue 3, Nov, 2004, Civil Service College, Singapore, pp. 2-5.
5. Hutchins, Edwin. *Cognition in the Wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
6. Andragogy refers to the theory and practice of adult learning which emphasises self-direction, experiential learning, and relevance to real-world application.



# CSC'S DIGITAL CAPABILITIES

From Quiet Bets to Big Moves

by Lam Kai Wah and Tan Zheng Yi



The College has taken a ‘try first’ approach to developing digital skills — identifying evergreen capability areas, and experimenting early with learning interventions that may grow to become key moves in shaping the Public Service’s growing digital understanding.



At Civil Service College’s Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), **Lam Kai Wah** is Institute Director and **Tan Zheng Yi** is Assistant Director and Lead Learning & Development (L&D) Specialist with the Strategic Human Resource (SHR) and the Digital Capabilities Team (DCT).

The DCT helps public service officers develop the confidence, mindsets, and skills to work effectively with emerging digital technologies, moving them from awareness to adoption, and from individual upskilling to organisational readiness. The team is supported by a group of L&D specialists, overseeing digital capability building for general public service officers in key areas such as artificial intelligence and data analytics. Their work goes beyond introducing new tools; it focuses on designing practical, accessible and relevant learning experiences that help officers make sense of technology and apply it responsibly in their work.



**A**s technology has come to shape the way we live and work, it has also come to inform citizens' ever higher expectations of public service. To stay ahead of the curve, the Singapore Public Service has emphasised the development of digital capabilities. Indeed, for almost a decade, courses related to digital capabilities have been the most frequently attended programmes at the Civil Service College (CSC).

In the past decade, CSC's approach to building digital capability in the Public Service has been characterised by a series of quiet bets that have later scaled up into significant system-wide shifts as technologies and their applications evolved. By initiating smaller experiments in offering pragmatic digital skills sought after by public agencies, CSC has been able to learn by doing; it has also sought to intentionally identify capability areas that would remain useful beyond any one technology cycle. Some of these early bets would later serve as the foundation for whole-of-government moves, such as mandatory digital literacy and AI capabilities.

## EARLY BETS

In 2013, with the dawn of the age of big data driven by technology development

and data democratisation,<sup>1</sup> CSC sensed a strong need to build data analytics capabilities. As agencies were collecting more data to improve citizen services, they needed officers trained to make sense of that data and act on it. To address this, CSC introduced a Data Analytics (DA) suite to support managers and supervisors with this increased data use. These were early developments, made without the benefit of a clearly defined policy, but grounded in real and emerging needs.

When it was clear that demand for these skills was here to stay, a Digital Capabilities Team (DCT) was formally established within the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) in 2016. The team would determine what to skill officers on and what content to prioritise, ensuring that skills are built beyond the hype of one technology cycle.

By 2017, the Public Service's demand for digital capability was growing quickly. At that point of time, many more public service agencies were digitalising their services and work processes. Public officers had to have the basic skills to operate these new digital systems confidently: to use digital platforms, handle online transactions, understand data, protect info, and work with tech teams to improve work processes.



*CSC understood the perspectives of non-technical public officers, particularly from a learning and development viewpoint. Our contribution was our tradecraft: how to take complex ideas and make learning them easy.*

With growing demand, CSC's challenge turned from figuring out what to teach to how to scale the learning. The College had developed a curriculum framework, based on ground-up research, to build capabilities across three segments of the public service: Digital Leadership and Strategy, digital capabilities for non-ICT officers involved in digital projects or workstreams, and foundational digital skills for officers who simply needed to work effectively in a digital environment.

With this framework in place, CSC then sought partners who could help ground and realise the skilling: these ranged from Ministries and fellow public agencies committed to digitalisation, to subject-matter-experts from the private sector. Although CSC understood the perspectives of non-technical public officers, particularly from a learning and development viewpoint, we were not ourselves technical experts. Instead, our contribution was our tradecraft: how to take complex ideas and make learning them easy.

## LAYING FOUNDATIONS FOR SERVICE-WIDE CHANGE

Our work developed at the right time. As part of the service-wide Public Sector Transformation (PST) movement, public agencies were required to develop and submit their digitalisation plans. The Smart Nation Digital Government Office (SNDGO) launched a Digital Maturity Index (DMI) that specified the traits of a good digital organisation and measured how agencies were faring against them. At the same time, the Digital Government Blueprint 1.0 was launched, establishing the ambition of the Singapore government to be “digital to the core” and described the end goals for a digitally transformed public service. While many agencies were starting with basic skilling, more progressive agencies already had their own digitalisation plans. The Blueprint gave these plans coherence both within agencies and across the Public Service — guiding agencies in building the skills, processes and systems needed to meet these goals in practice.

Working with partners such as GovTech and the Public Service Division (PSD), CSC developed a Data Analytics Framework, and subsequently a Basic Digital Literacy (BDL) Framework, to help all public officers meet a baseline of digital capabilities needed to deliver more productively. E-learning and quiz requirements were mandated by a government-wide SNDGO circular — as a concrete step in realising the Public Service’s digital aspirations for the general body of public officers.

CSC also worked with GovTech on the Job Relevant Digital Skills (JRDS) framework to help non-ICT officers innovate using technology in their day-to-day work. This focus gave rise to interventions across four areas: Digital Governance and Security, User Experience Design, Agile Project Management, and Data Analytics — the last of which had been underway since 2017. The Skills for Digital Transformation (SDT) framework was also developed to empower directors and managers in leading digital transformation

efforts within their agencies. To offer public service leaders a broader global view, CSC also collaborated with institutions such as Accenture, NUS, INSEAD, and Harvard Kennedy School to bring in fresh perspectives on leading digital innovation, managing transformation, policy-operations-technology integration and understanding disruptive technologies.

## EXPERIMENTING WITH TECHNOLOGY FOR LEARNING

In 2018, CSC launched its e-learning platform, LEARN, as a one-stop learning portal for all public officers, giving digital skilling much greater reach and accessibility. LEARN housed the modules developed across the BDL, JRDS, and SDT frameworks in a single online hub. LEARN also features curated learning interventions from third party vendors such as Harvard Business Publishing, LinkedIn Learning and Udemy, greatly broadening the scope of available learning content.



***CSC is in a position to design learning interventions that are aligned with policy goals, and are also pragmatic and useful for implementation on the ground.***

With LEARN, officers could now access the right learning interventions anytime, anywhere, and progress could be monitored, at scale. All this made it possible to roll out digital skilling more consistently across the public service.

CSC also experimented with learning for technology topics that had yet to become official priorities. Some of these were novel technologies at that time – such as robotic process automation (RPA) and machine learning. While these were familiar to the tech community, they were largely unfamiliar to non-tech public officers.

Topics like machine learning later became significant; others like RPA were helpful for a period of time; some, like blockchain, did not bear out their potential. CSC's focus was to increase officers' awareness of these technologies and skill them up to use them in delivering better outcomes, without overwhelming them with deep technical knowledge. By listening to our client agencies, we could better understand their operational realities, even as engagements with GovTech and private sector companies gave us a peek into technologies that had future potential to make a difference to the work of public service.

CSC has also been a partner, with PSD and SNDGO, in setting policy

directions for digital capabilities, including determining which were ready to scale. This triangulation of realities-technology-policies has worked well, because we are involved in both upstream policy development and downstream implementation, giving us a broad view of policy priorities, agency realities, technology possibilities, and officers' learning needs. CSC has therefore been in a position to design learning interventions that are not only aligned with policy goals, but also pragmatic and useful for implementation on the ground.

At the same time, CSC has kept a light but present touch on digital or technology-related areas that show potential but have yet to become national priorities. For instance, we might hold introductory awareness webinars, or collaborate with public and private sectors just to stay abreast of developments without applying the full weight of government policy. The principle has been to keep options open, until directions are clear.

Indeed, CSC began exploring AI-related skilling even before AI literacy became mandatory in 2025. When ChatGPT, powered by large language models (LLMs), was released and took the world by storm in late 2022, CSC immediately started experimenting with the new skill

of “Prompt Engineering” with forward-looking officers — with early large-scale webinars to share prompting tips, and then pilot classes. These experiments took off and demand grew rapidly.

By 2024, with 99% of officers having met the BDL digital competency requirements, the Public Service was ready for the next phase. In late 2023,

the newly formed Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI) was tasked with pushing digital skills development nationally and across the public service. It looked to CSC as its partner for the Public Service, since CSC had been consistently deepening its work in this space even as other public agencies were evolving their approaches to technology.

## LEARNING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

While many were still getting comfortable with data analytics, CSC was already testing new ground — experimenting with topics like Machine Learning and AI, partnering early on initiatives such as the CSC–NUS Executive Programme *Digital Disruptions & Public Policy* (2018), rolling out *AIS10: Public Service Applications in AI* (2020), introducing practical skills like *Introduction to Machine Learning Techniques* (2022) and *Prompt Engineering* (2023), and even hosting webinars with playful titles like “Bot to the Future”.

At the time, these topics felt niche, so the focus then was on raising awareness. Looking back, they were early signals — low-friction ways to help officers engage with AI in a practical and meaningful way.



## STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

In 2025, CSC collaborated with MDDI in PST Agile Squads<sup>2</sup> to ensure the public service was positioned to tap on the potential gains of AI. This led to the formation of the Institute of Digital Government (IDG), a department within MDDI, with CSC as a formal partner.

IDG represents a structural move to close the gap between upstream policy and downstream implementation. It is a training academy set up to equip public officers with digital, data and AI skills to support citizen-centric government services. With policy and learning now coordinated, there is now a much better chance for policy intent to become real capabilities for officers. Regular discussions, chaired by senior sponsors, bring together upstream policy teams and downstream implementation teams to clarify what is being planned, what needs to happen on the ground, and where learning can support execution. These discussions are not just exploratory — they help align priorities and confirm deliverables that teams commit to. With this shared understanding and

accountability, implementation can be better coordinated and more likely to deliver on the policy's intent.

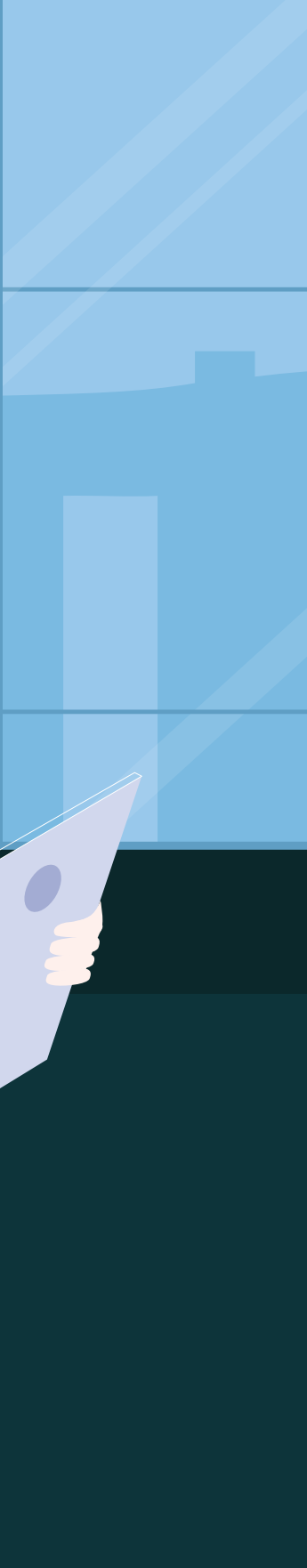
CSC's digital capability-building initiatives did not happen overnight, nor did we simply wait for policy direction before acting. Instead, CSC has made educated guesses and experimental moves even as the pace and trajectory of technological change seemed uncertain. Through each wave of change, we have stayed curious, kept close to the ground, and made deliberate bets on what the public service would need next — focusing on 'no regrets' moves that are likely to be valuable regardless of how the technology evolves. This way of working has secured CSC's relevance as a key contributor in equipping public officers with emerging skills to excel. Our partnership with MDDI through newborn IDG is not an overnight move, but a natural culmination of our consistent investment and involvement in helping public officers engage with the emerging technological capabilities they will need to do their work well. With policy and learning now working in closer step than ever, the conditions are ripe for CSC to do its most meaningful work yet. ■

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### Notes

1. Chung, Cheryl. "The Age of Big Data." *ETHOS* Issue 09 (2011). <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-09/the-age-of-big-data/>
2. An initiative set up in 2025, PST Agile Squads are formed to look at how different areas of the public service could be transformed. Each task force-like team focuses on a specific area, identifying opportunities for change and exploring how the public service could work better, faster, or more effectively.





# Five Dispositions

## FOR FUTURE PUBLIC OFFICERS

by **Aaron Maniam**

The veteran public sector practitioner, observer and CSC Fellow argues that an increasingly turbulent world calls for the intentional formation of human habits – of mind and action – that cannot be automated away.



**Aaron Maniam** is Professor in Practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Deputy Director of the Institute of Policy Studies, both at the National University of Singapore. From 2023-26, he was Fellow of Practice and Director of Digital Transformation Education at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government. He previously served in the Singapore Government, including as founding Head of the Centre for Strategic Futures and as Institute Director of the Institute for Public Service Leadership at the Civil Service College. He has been a Fellow of the Civil Service College since 2024.



You can go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been.

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

## HOME AS A PLACE WE HAVE NEVER BEEN

An anniversary is an invitation to re-read oneself – a less comfortable exercise than it sounds. Preparing this essay, I reviewed the pieces I have written for *ETHOS* since 2011, expecting to find positions I had outgrown. Mostly, I found the opposite: arguments that still seem broadly right, made with a confidence I would now temper, about a world that has arrived faster and stranger than I anticipated. Le Guin's paradox describes the sensation exactly. The words on the page have not moved. The place they describe has.

What has shifted for me is less the content than the underpinning concepts. In 2011, writing about preparing public officers for new modes of governance, I thought I was writing about skills and capabilities that could be specified, taught, and assessed. I now realise that I was writing, without naming it, about formation: the slower work of shaping officers as whole persons: what they perceive, attend to, are willing to sit with, who they become over the course of a career. Skills are acquired. Formation happens, well or badly, whether or not an institution intends it.

This matters now because of the particular pressures on public services. Artificial intelligence and digitalisation are the most conspicuous forces, and rightly command attention and budgets. But they are best understood against a broader context: ageing populations and shrinking workforces that make productivity acute public concerns; climate transitions that will force severe distributional decisions; geopolitical turbulence that has turned supply chains, semiconductors and sea lanes into instruments of statecraft; a fraying of shared identity in many societies that makes collective life much harder than it was a decade ago. Each of these compresses the time available for decisions while expanding the number and weight of considerations that bear on them.

The temptation, faced with such a list, is to respond with a curriculum: modules on AI literacy, modules on climate, modules on geopolitics. In the spirit of formation rather than simply skills-building, I suggest something more difficult. Technical upgrading is necessary yet insufficient. What the next generation of public officers will need is a set of dispositions that make technical capability usable under conditions of turbulence, moral difficulty and public scrutiny. Five qualities seem particularly indispensable.



## COMPLEXITY-READINESS

In 2011<sup>1</sup>, I argued that the Singapore Public Service had passed through successive developmental stages, from providing basic services and security to building adaptive and then relational institutions, and that the later stages demanded three unfamiliar capabilities: obliquity, or addressing root causes indirectly rather than attacking problems head-on; bio-empathy, or reading systems as ecologies with feedback loops rather than as machines with levers; and creative making, the instinct of *homo farens*, the doer, alongside the analyst.

I still believe this. But I underestimated how much of this is temperamental rather than technical. Obliquity is not really a method; it is a tolerance for delayed gratification and for the professional risk of appearing to do nothing while working on long-term causes. Bio-empathy is not a modelling technique; it is a willingness

to be surprised by one's own system. Both are undermined by the very things public administrations reward: speed, decisiveness and legible attribution of results. This is why rigidly performance-led approaches to learning and development have to be handled with care. Measuring what learning produces is right and overdue. But a system that measures only what resolves within an appraisal cycle will quietly select against exactly the officers who can wrestle with a wicked problem long enough to understand it.

Complexity-readiness is partly a curricular question, answered through simulations, policy gaming and cross-agency sense-making of the kind the Civil Service College (CSC) pioneered, and partly a question of institutional conditions: whether an officer who says "we do not yet know" is treated as rigorous or as evasive.



# 2

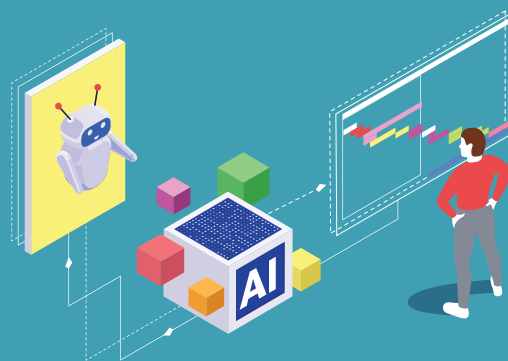
## DIGITAL AND DATA LITERACY

Writing in 2019<sup>2</sup> about how governments might measure digital success, I was chiefly worried about vagueness. Indices told us whether governments had technology, not whether the technology worked; “modernity” stood in for effectiveness, and presence for usefulness. I proposed what I hoped were more honest measures, covering project completion, price competitiveness, system effectiveness, usage and usability, data security, timeliness, and whether data actually informed policy.

Two things have deepened since. The first is a point I made in a later *ETHOS* conversation<sup>3</sup> on data, policy and outcomes: the right operating model is that some people must do this work all the time, and all people must do it some of the time. Specialist data and AI teams cannot be the whole answer, because the demand side matters as much as the supply side. What determines whether evidence changes

decisions is trust between parties, skills at every level, someone able to bring people around a table, genuine hunger for the evidence, and a peer group that sustains the habit. Most of these qualities cannot be procured; they must instead be nurtured.

Second, generative AI has changed what literacy means. It is no longer mainly about interpreting output, but judging what to delegate and what to withhold; recognising the specific texture of a plausible falsehood; knowing which decisions require a human author because someone must be answerable for them. Public officers work under a standard the private sector does not face: a citizen who is refused a benefit is owed reasons, and ‘the model determined this’ is not a good enough reason. Literacy in the public sector therefore has an irreducibly human dimension, linked to an individual’s constitutional rights and the state’s concomitant obligations.



# 3

## NEW METAPHORS

Writing for this journal's issue on the future of learning<sup>4</sup>, I argued that our dominant metaphor for learning, the learner as receptacle to be filled, carried several assumptions that no longer serve us, among them instrumentality, linearity, fixed capacity and passive receptivity. I proposed the metaphor of a garden instead: uncertain, non-linear, requiring pruning as well as growth, with organisms that shape their own conditions.

I have since extended the argument<sup>5</sup> from learning to governance itself, suggesting that networks and platforms, for all their advantages over control towers and vending machines, remain too static, too government-centric, and too transactional to carry the moral weight of public life. Governance is better imagined as a moral ecology: living, untidy, subject to cycles of decay and regeneration, and

bound together by obligations rather than transactions.

The metaphors currently on offer for AI in government are doing enormous unexamined work. "Copilot" implies a cockpit with clear instruments and a single destination. "Agent" implies delegation to something with interests of its own. "Augmentation" implies that the human task remains fixed while capacity around it expands. Like all metaphors, each highlights something real and hides something important. Officers who can notice the metaphor they have absorbed, and consciously choose another when needed, will make better decisions about where these tools belong, and be better able to communicate these decisions to an increasingly discerning public. This is among the most practical skills on my list, even if it looks the least practical.



# 4

## NEW ABUNDANCES AND NEW SCARCITIES

A decade ago I wrote about generative resources<sup>6</sup>: data, knowledge and relationships, which expand rather than deplete through use, suffer from underuse rather than overuse, have fuzzy boundaries, and settle at no clear equilibrium. I argued that governing them well required different instruments from those we use for oil, land and time.

AI is among the most generative resources we have yet encountered, and it makes the argument both more urgent and more complicated. Cognitive tasks that were once scarce — drafting, summarising, translating, first-pass analysis — are becoming abundant. But abundance in one layer creates scarcity in adjacent ones, and the new scarcities are the interesting part. Verified information becomes scarce

as unverified information becomes free. Attention becomes scarce as content becomes limitless. Institutional trust becomes scarce precisely when synthetic media makes it easiest to counterfeit. And in a striking return of old-school physical constraint, energy, water and land become scarce again as data centres compete with households and industry for all three. This is where the AI agenda and the climate agenda stop being separate conversations.

The core disposition needed here is diagnostic: we need to ask, of any new capability, what it makes plentiful and what it thereby makes precious. As my earlier piece notes, we are not facing a utopia of abundance. Scarcity and inequality persist, and generative resources tend to accrue to those already positioned to use them.



# 5

## HARNESSING DELIBERATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Most recently, I argued<sup>7</sup> that participatory governance succeeds or fails less on institutional design than on micro-motivations, and that projects fall into four archetypes depending on whether governments and stakeholders are each willing or unwilling. I cautioned about the trap of a suboptimal Nash equilibrium in which both sides find it rational to assume the other is unwilling, and both are proved right.

Two developments have sharpened this. Polarisation and identity-based fragmentation raise both the cost and the value of deliberation: it is harder to convene, but even more consequential when it works. AI now sits on both sides of the ledger. It can enable deliberation at genuine scale, through real-time

translation, synthesis of thousands of submissions, and surfacing of the points on which people unexpectedly agree. It can also flood the same channels with synthetic participation, making it rational for officials to distrust the very inputs they solicited.

Which way this goes will be settled by something Conway's Law anticipated: technology tends to reproduce the communication structures of the organisations that adopt it. Hierarchical systems will use AI to consult more efficiently while listening no better. That makes willingness itself, the readiness to be changed by what one hears, a capability worth developing deliberately, and one that no procurement exercise will supply.

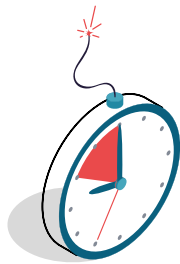


## CONNECTING THE DOTS

Nobel Laureate Wislawa Szymborska has a poem, “Nothing Twice”, that all public officers should probably be pointed to on their first day:



Nothing can ever happen twice. In consequence, the sorry fact is that we arrive here improvised and leave without the chance to practise.



Wislawa Szymborska, “Nothing Twice”

This is the condition the five capabilities can address. Consequential decisions are taken by people who did not get a rehearsal, in circumstances that will not recur in the same configuration. No syllabus removes that. What a syllabus can do, at its best, is form people who are steadier in their decision-making.

The five dispositions are not modules to be delivered sequentially. They are facets of a single formation, and formation requires conditions as much as content: time that is genuinely protected rather than nominally allocated, seniors who model uncertainty rather than perform

omniscience, and career structures, of the sort that CSC’s Career Fitness agenda is reaching towards, that treat a public service career as something cultivated over decades rather than optimised each year.

It is easy to think that the case for AI in the public sector is about productivity, and that the human questions are downstream constraints to be managed. The reality is the reverse. The reason to automate routines is to return officers to the work only humans can do: sitting with a distressed citizen, holding a trade-off that cannot be dissolved, taking responsibility for a judgement that will be wrong for someone. Technology’s contribution to human flourishing in the public sector will be measured by how much truly human work it allows us to do, and how much it quietly takes away.

Which brings me to the hard truth underpinning all five skills. Public officers of the future will work under conditions that no capability framework can make comfortable: climate losses that have already begun, conflicts that will not resolve within the span of a career, neighbours who no longer share a common account of reality. Formation is not preparation for a world that will eventually settle down. It is preparation for one that will never settle, where steady states are theoretical concepts at best.



Novelist Italo Calvino puts it better than any competency framework could:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.



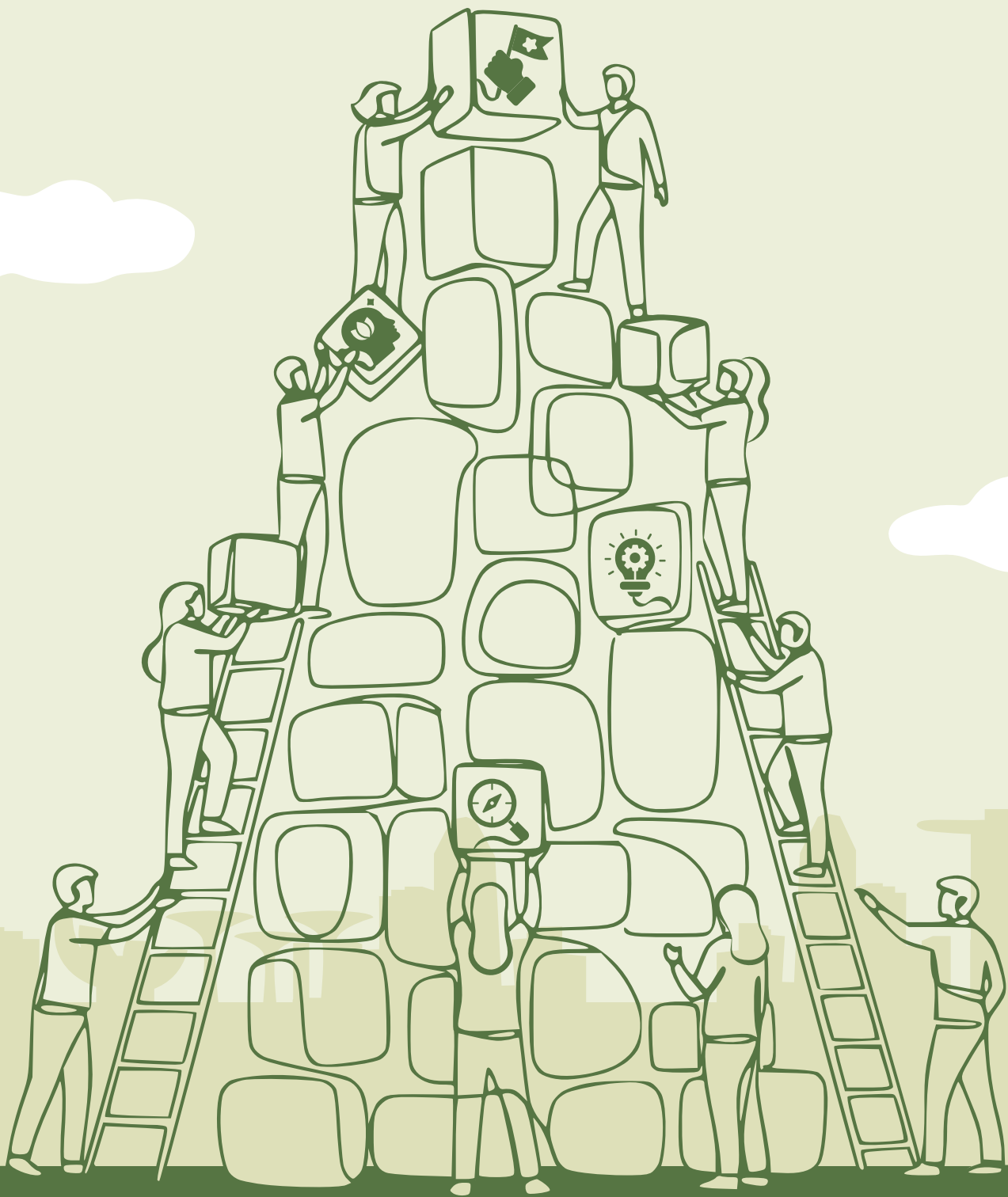
### Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Twenty-five years of building a public service's capacity to learn is, at its best, an exercise in Calvino's second approach. Seeking out what is not inferno: what is precious. Making it endure, giving it space, and ultimately forming ourselves to return to homes where we have never been. ■

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# The Work Beneath the Work

# Cultivating Leaders for a More Human Public Service

by **Chia Nah Nah**

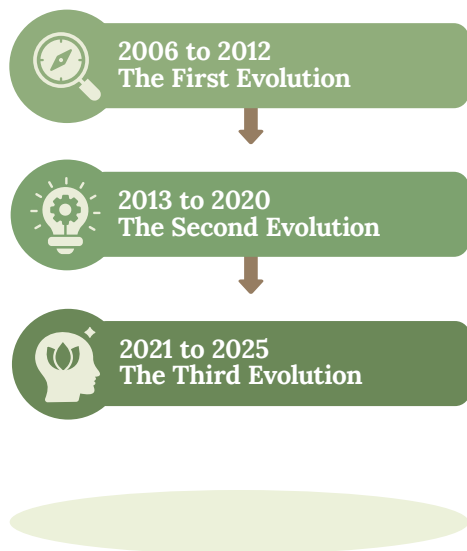
Twenty-five years on, what has changed most in the Public Service's leadership development is not what we teach. It is what we have come to believe leaders need to serve well and to help their teams thrive.



**Chia Nah Nah** is Director and Senior Principal Consultant at the Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development (ILOD), Civil Service College. She has two decades of experience in leadership, organisation and people development, partnering agencies to strengthen leadership capability, organisational effectiveness and culture. She pioneered the Leaders Building Leaders initiative for a ministry in 2017, an organisation approach to develop leadership capacity through coaching, mentoring and peer learning. Her current work focuses on generative conversations, leadership learning and presence, mentoring, team development, systems psychodynamics, and building adaptive leadership for an increasingly complex operating environment.

Developing Singapore's public service leaders has been a core function of the Civil Service College (CSC) since its inception. In the past two decades, how this work has been carried out has shifted discernibly: from the individual leader to collective leadership; from command-and-control authority to relational, human-centred leadership; from siloed, function-based expertise to systems thinking and boundary spanning partnerships.<sup>1</sup>

As CSC enters its third decade, there are three lines of inquiry that we would like to explore for insights: what have we learnt about growing leaders, which assumptions beneath that work are still relevant for the world that our leaders are walking into today, and what might leadership development need to become next?



## What do we mean by leadership?

In CSC's context, leadership is defined as a process of influence whereby the dynamic persuasive interaction between leaders and followers results in leadership happening. This process has the facilitative effect of creating a shared purpose, alignment of efforts and a level of mutual commitment.<sup>2</sup>



Leadership is **context-dependent**.

It must respond with agility to its operating environment to facilitate change.



Leadership is **intentional**. Before forming their intentions, leaders need to know what they stand for — their interior quest or purpose in life. Given their outsized impact, leaders must test the 'goodness' of their intentions and purpose.



Leadership is **relational**. It occurs in relation to other people and within a community. It is in the connections and spaces between people that change can happen.



Leadership is **not defined by the exercise of power, but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led**. The essential work of the leader is to create more leaders — moving away from concentrating power in one person towards expanding the capacity for leadership at a broader level.<sup>3</sup>

As the Public Service faces multifaceted challenges that are complex, ambiguous and beyond the problem-solving capacity of a small group of leaders, leadership development has shifted from the individual to the collective.

‘Collective leadership’ is an umbrella term for a wide range of different expressions of leadership — such as “shared, distributed, plural, networked, collaborative, integrative, and complexity leadership” (Watters, 2022). It involves multiple individuals engaging in leadership roles, often in dynamic constellations within a network and across different levels, all contributing knowledge, skill and meaning to the task at hand.



### **Turning Inward – Why Inner Work Became Foundational**

Since its establishment as a statutory board, CSC’s signature leadership milestone programmes have been spearheaded by the Institute of Policy Development (IPD), now known as the Institute of Public Sector Leadership (IPSL). Its programmes have given opportunities to cohorts of leaders to grow and gather, and to build networks across public service agencies. Traditionally built around governance and policy topics, with a strong focus on deepening content

knowledge, these milestone programmes have drawn on the experience and expertise of guest resource people ranging from ministers, senior public servants to industry experts. As the city state developed and the operating environment changed, so did the view of what skills were required in response to the evolving context. There was a growing resonance, as early as 2006, where IPD had started to take steps to address the focus and balance of leadership, as well as governance and policy coverage in an apex milestone programme for leaders.

In January 2010, the Centre for Leadership Development (CLD)<sup>4</sup> was formed to advance leadership development in the Public Service and to develop a Public Service point of view about the work.<sup>5</sup> It partnered with IPD to review CSC’s milestone programmes, integrating a personal leadership module into the curriculum for every level of leaders in stages. Its first experiment —the Leadership Development Programme, was designed for newly absorbed Administrative Officers without policy and governance components.

Working with collaborative partners such as Impact International and Roffey Park International — CLD’s practitioners learnt their craft in areas such as humanistic psychology, group dynamics, psychodynamics, and self-managed action learning. These principles and practices still underpin much of how CSC designs its learning experiences today.

What the practitioners learnt in this first phase reads, in retrospect, as one discovery made many times over: the learner, not the programme, should be the focal point of the design. Attention shifted from our programme agenda to what was actually happening in the room. Data from profiling instruments were held up like mirrors to the leaders. Plenaries were complemented with small group work, where leaders could be more transparent with one another, working through their leadership challenges through a facilitated

process of reflection-action-learning cycle. The facilitator stopped being the source of knowledge and became the one who created the conditions for the leaders to path find their own solutions. With demand outstripping the supply of programme spaces, the positive feedback ratings, the 'aha' moments experienced by the learners, and the rise in requests from agencies to learn from CSC – these indicators signalled that CSC has reaped some developmental yields in supporting leaders to develop self-awareness through their interior journey.

## The Shifts to Journeying Inward, at a Glance



**Programme**

to

**Person**

Design followed the learner rather than the plan — reading the room's dynamics, engaging resistance, refining design on the fly — and support was timed to where the need was greatest, such as supporting leaders in transitions — reviewing their leadership identity, and naming the psychological shifts a new role demands.<sup>6</sup>



**Content**

to

**Interiority**

Emphasis of leadership milestone programmes moved from acquiring knowledge and skills to gaining self-knowledge. Psychometric profiling and multi-rater feedback tools became core, not to measure leaders but to let them grow in awareness of their impact on others.

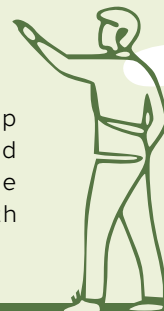


**Expert**

to

**Facilitative Conditions**

Facilitation replaced instruction, and plenaries gave way to small group work, hosted by trained facilitators. Agency and ownership returned to the learners, with a psychologically safe space for leaders to be who they were, and to work on their own leadership challenges with constructive feedback.



*The facilitator stopped being the source of knowledge and became the one who created the conditions for the leaders to path find their own solutions.*



## 2013 to 2020 The Second Evolution

### Innovating Outward

In 2013, the CLD merged with the Centre for Organisation Development (OD) to form the Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development (ILOD). The integration of these two centres into a single Institute would strengthen CSC's ability to support public service change and transformation. This move parallels the Public Sector Transformation work initiated by Mr Peter Ong, the former Head of Civil Service from 2010 to 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically, ILOD was set up:

- a. to increase the depth of leadership capabilities and breadth of perspectives **across the public service** to meet the increased complexity in the changing leadership landscape,
- b. to build capacity and capability **in our leaders** for leading change and transformation, and supporting them in their transformation efforts, and
- c. to develop and strengthen **organisational capacity** for ongoing change and transformation. Taken as a whole, CSC ILOD's intentions were to intervene

at multiple levels of our system for a more multi-faceted, multi-pronged and coordinated approach, which would maximise the efficacy of each supporting intervention beyond what it could have achieved in isolation.<sup>8</sup>

The merger widened the lens of leader and leadership development. Leadership development moved from the individual leader to collective leadership, and from intrapersonal and interpersonal work to groups, teams, systems and cross-boundary work. It also moved the work off CSC's own premises: ILOD began consulting with agencies in their contexts, using diagnosis, design and dialogue to strengthen organisational effectiveness and the ongoing capacity to change. The practical consequence was a change of unit — the group or the team, rather than the individual leader, became the basic unit of analysis for diagnosis and intervention.

Much of the inspiration — for this expansion of work from a single leader to a community of leaders, and the elevation to a higher system level for impact — could be attributed to the strategic thrusts of the Public Sector Transformation (PST) initiative<sup>9</sup> steered by Mr Peter Ong,<sup>10</sup> of which he had laid the structural conditions (PST, One Public Service, WOG leadership) for whole system work and collective leadership to

take shape while Mr Leo Yip, the former Head of Civil Service from 2017 to 2026, explicitly named<sup>11</sup> and institutionalised those developments with a coherent leadership identity under the banner of “collective leadership”.<sup>12</sup>

ILOD had also looked outward by bringing in global thought leaders for systematic capacity building. One of the most influential thought leaders that ILOD had successfully forged a strong partnership with was the late Dr Mee-Yan Cheung Judge, a Senior Visiting Fellow of CSC beginning in 2012. A pioneer of the “Self as Instrument” and also OD, she was pivotal in supporting the first phase of the Singapore Public Sector transformation, and also in inspiring ILOD in fulfilling its mandate and in cohering the two disciplines. The cross-pollination between the two disciplines created the conditions for the practitioners to work more integratively, and consequently set off a run of innovations. As a microcosm, ILOD was mirroring the first thrust of PST, which was “To deliver seamlessly as One Public Service”, because future, complex challenges require separate entities to work beyond organisational boundaries.

The most instructive of one such innovation began as a problem to

be solved. In 2016, ILOD offered a Leaders Building Leaders (LBL) initiative to the Ministry of Social and Family Development, largely to relieve over-subscribed demand for CSC’s leadership programmes for first-time managers by developing the agency’s own capability. It worked — but not in the way that ILOD had intended. The people who grew most were not the first-time managers being developed. They were the experienced middle managers (MMs) who had facilitated others’ development. In helping others to learn, the MMs had become students of their own leadership. By 2022, under the leadership of Mr Leo Yip, LBL had been adopted as a whole-of-government movement across the Public Service.

The same years asked something harder of senior leaders. In 2020, ILOD worked with the Public Service Division (PSD) to raise awareness of mental health across the Service, training leaders and supervisors to notice officers at risk and to route them to support. What moved the needle was not the training. At a public service forum, two senior leaders spoke candidly about their own mental health struggles. They broke a vulnerability threshold — and made it possible for the rest of us to hear that it was “ok to be not ok”.

***The next chapter of CSC’s work is to preserve the inner capacities that make leadership human, multiply the relationships through which leadership becomes collective, and to renew the institutional conditions that make continual adaptation possible.***



## The COVID Effect: A Season of Experiments

Following Singapore's Covid-19 restrictions in April 2020, CSC moved its leadership milestone programmes online within months. It was a season of experiments. Leaders were working from home and needed perspectives quickly.

CSC ILOD ran everything from theme-based webinars to an inaugural virtual conference on Leadership and Organisation Development, reaching more leaders than our physical infrastructure ever could prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Experimentation became hallmark qualities of officers and leaders through the pandemic years: making quick adjustments, testing out new ways of working in the virtual spaces, being comfortable with not knowing, and learning from failure (e.g. programmes came to momentary halt when internet outage happened). There was also uncertainty as the nation adjusted to the pandemic, adapting to various permutations of hybrid work arrangements. It was an opportunity for learning, experimenting and adapting to evolving circumstances for CSC.

Then the rules relaxed, and leaders came back to their workplaces. The pivot back to in-person was as swift as the pivot away had been — it signalled to CSC that in-person connections really mattered to leaders, or rather, connections really mattered to humans. The work of convening both online and in-person communities took a different shape and emphasis as Covid-19 illuminated for us what public service officers, including leaders, missed about being together.



## Tending to and Strengthening the Conditions

The years following the Covid-19 pandemic tested the Public Service with a markedly different leadership landscape — heightened concerns about mental well-being and resilience, the shift to hybrid and flexible work, growing societal complexity, and the need to sustain organisational cohesion despite greater uncertainty. The then Head of Civil Service Mr Leo Yip reinforced and deepened an already evolving leadership development agenda — one that treated leadership not simply as individual capability, but as a shared condition for organisational health and renewal. The Leadership Competency Framework (LCF) and the 360-degree feedback gained sharper relevance as leaders needed clearer expectations, stronger self-awareness, and more transparent feedback for their impact on people and systems. The LBL movement became even more critical in a dispersed and demanding workplace, strengthening a culture where leaders coach, mentor, and grow one another rather than leave development to formal HR processes. The emphasis on one integrated Public Service leadership community also took on renewed urgency, calling leaders to work across boundaries, steward talent collectively, and build organisations capable of learning, adapting, and



***Boundaries management may need to become a more salient skill for leaders to develop. Leaders who constantly put others' needs ahead of their own risk neglecting their own responsibilities and becoming overwhelmed.***

caring for people in a more complex post-pandemic world. Together, these shifts moved leadership development beyond building capable individual leaders towards cultivating a learning-oriented leadership system.<sup>13</sup>

These shifts also sharpened CSC's role in translating the PublicService's leadership agenda into lived developmental experiences. If leadership was increasingly understood as a condition for organisational health and whole-system capacity, then development could no longer be confined to formal programmes for a select few. CSC's task was to make leadership development more accessible, more relational, and more responsive to the realities leaders were carrying in a more emotionally complex workplace.

Democratising leadership development has been a CSC leadership philosophy since 2012. From 2021, it became a significantly more achievable endeavour. Virtual learning, thrust upon us by the pandemic, transformed not only the modality of leadership development, but also the scale, range and reach of what CSC could offer.

The proliferation of virtual offerings had widened CSC's intellectual and global reach, connecting it with a more diverse

range of disciplines and thought leaders, opening new avenues for cross-border collaborations in leadership development. One noteworthy exploration in 2022, which eventually led to a formalised partnership, was CSC's introduction of the Clear Leadership Course to the Singapore Public Service. Based on the seminal work of Dr Gervase Bushe,<sup>14</sup> the Clear Leadership workshops have consistently been over-subscribed since its inaugural run in April 2024. The hike in demand for the course has also signalled the growing interest in leadership transformation in the context of partnerships and collaborations, the desire of leaders to lead learning while performing, to elevate their communication skills and to achieve relational mastery.<sup>15</sup>

Since the pandemic, loneliness and mental health have moved from the margins to the centre of concern, in the Service and beyond it. Leaders name these struggles more readily now, and mental health support has become part of the employment relationship rather than the exceptional provisions made for a few. CSC intentionally incorporates well-being components into its leadership development experiences including personal retreats, walks and energy management segments — to

support leaders to become more aware of their mental and psychological states.

Beyond the programmes, CSC has also elevated leaders and practitioners thinking on mental health from a deficit-based lens to a more strengths-based lens. ILOD organised the biennial Leadership and Organisation Development conference in April 2024, focusing on the theme of “Flourishing Organisations: Moving Beyond Performance”, as part of its ongoing efforts to signal the importance of mental health and well-being in the larger public service, by paying attention to how we can support leaders in creating the conditions for a flourishing workforce.

As part of supporting the Public Service's emphasis on developing collective leadership, CSC began to consolidate its team-based interventions in 2025, focusing on the health and effectiveness of top or senior leadership teams and on the conditions that support such teams

to flourish. It has also piloted its first team-coaching support in its apex senior leadership milestone programmes, with plans to extend it to other senior leaders in 2026. Team development is not a new offering; what is new is a coherent set of research-based frameworks to guide it.<sup>16,17</sup>

As the LBL movement grows, it also offers experienced public service leaders to contribute and find meaning without conventional vertical progression. With PSD's support, CSC has piloted a Directors Leadership Series for experienced Directors of six to twelve years' standing in end 2025 — to refresh their leadership journey, and to look at what else their careers might hold. Forward planning of this kind gives leaders in midlife a longer runway to be more choiceful about strengthening their career fitness: time and space to consider their next vocation, invest in new interests, and widen their choices before they need them.



## Leadership Development Challenges Ahead



### Isolation, Loneliness and Leader Fatigue

Isolation, loneliness and leader fatigue are growing concerns. Rising expectations to do more with less will deepen everyone's dependence on digital tools for efficiency, leaving leaders increasingly alone with their decisions rather than sense-making as a collective.<sup>18</sup>



### An Ageing Workforce

An ageing workforce brings its own challenges. Younger officers hold different expectations of work, and a different psychological contract with employment. Organisations may find themselves in a leadership succession double bind: an ageing leadership tier on one hand, and younger high-potential officers quietly declining to step up on the other, having seen the fatigue and isolation of their seniors.



### The Rise of AI

AI presents both challenge and opportunity for leadership development, and the temptation is to see it through a productivity lens rather than a human one. Beyond the skills and instincts to use it well, there are ethical questions, the enduring need for empathy and connection, and the risk of over-relying on generative tools for cognitive work. The deeper responsibility of practitioners and policymakers is to ensure that our leaders are not progressively deskilled, cognitively and affectively, in the process.



**In the face of such challenges, what shape and texture might the next phase of leadership development look like?**

## Charting the Next Frontier for Leadership Development

The next chapter of CSC's work is to preserve the inner capacities that make leadership human, multiply the relationships through which leadership becomes collective, and to renew the institutional conditions that make continual adaptation possible.

Seen through an OD lens, the work ahead is not a choice between developing individual leaders and transforming systems. It is a nested task: to preserve the inner capacities that allow leaders to learn, discern and remain human; to multiply the relationships through which leadership and collective intelligence can emerge; and to renew the institutional conditions that make adaptation possible. These capacities are mutually reinforcing.



### Preserve the Inner Ground: Forming Leaders' Interior Worlds

**Enabling leaders to journey inward** will continue to be a foundational practice in leader development work. Leaders' attentiveness to their inner life, their identity, thoughts, emotions, motivation and purpose will remain a core part of developmental work. Self-knowledge or awareness intelligence is what gives their leadership weight. Habits that support

leaders in their emotional regulation (e.g. nature walk), reflective practices, journalling, energy management, and the courage to ask for feedback, will continue to be embedded in various leader development offerings to develop more whole leaders.

Leaders will need more than an expanding repertoire of competencies. **Before leaders can hold the complexity around them, they must become more capable of noticing and working with the complexity within them.** They need the capacity to examine the assumptions from which they act, make meaning of experience and remain open when familiar identities or solutions no longer suffice. It is the capacity to stay present to discomfort, resist the impulse to defend one's stands, and to make responsible choices without full certainty. Vertical-development approaches similarly emphasise challenge, exposure to different perspectives, and structured reflection as conditions for developing more complex ways of making sense of the world (Kegan, 1980).<sup>19</sup>

"During times of unprecedented change, learning becomes the best option for leadership...Both leading and learning are adaptive processes (Rainey and Hanafin, 2023).<sup>20</sup> **Strengthening leaders' capacity** to learn will be an imperative adaptive quality, especially in times of transitions or complexity. CSC's leader development efforts focused on where the need is greatest and the window to learn is widest — which is why leadership transitions will remain

*In an accelerated and chaotic world, our impact and significance may be how faithfully we protect what it means to remain human.*



central to our work, and attentiveness to how leaders learn (e.g. David Kolb's experiential learning theory) will remain a priority in leadership development. To support leaders to focus on learning rather than only on performing, it would be key to raise leaders' awareness and management of their competence compulsion,<sup>21</sup> a tendency for people to want to see themselves as competent, and for others to see them as competent. Such tendencies can cause people to react towards information or feedback that they need for learning, instead of staying in the zone of curiosity.

**Boundaries management** may need to become a more salient skill for leaders to develop. Leaders who constantly put others' needs ahead of their own risk neglecting their own responsibilities and becoming overwhelmed. Rituals and practices that promote inner spaciousness such as personal retreats, short sabbaticals, should stay part of the work. At a public service level, we will need to help leaders manage their energy and their boundaries, not just their workload.<sup>22</sup>

While not new, CSC will continue to keep developing leaders in two key aspects, for more whole leader development – helping leaders to be in touch with their emotions

and have greater somatic awareness. Growing in one's capacity to identify one's emotions is a precursor to emotional expressiveness (e.g. "I feel"). This has been associated with demonstrated empathy, a key tenet of relationship management. Being in touch with one's emotions opens up new ways of being that could support a leader's effectiveness.

Somatic awareness in leader development recognises that leadership is not exercised through cognition alone, but through presence, emotional regulation, attention, posture, breath, and the capacity to stay grounded under pressure. This matters because leaders do not only communicate through what they say; they shape trust, safety and connection through how they show up. In complex and emotionally demanding environments, somatic practices help leaders move from reactivity to more conscious responses, strengthening their self-awareness, resilience and relational impact.

The use of AI will make our leaders faster. It may also relieve them of the struggle through which wisdom is formed — the difficulty that builds resilience, the ambiguity that sharpens judgement, the connection that deepens empathy, the responsibility that shapes moral agency. We will need to contend with

the risk that our leaders could become more efficient, but less discerning; more connected, and less humanly present. Our task is to make sure that **the leaders we develop are not quietly deskilled of their judgement, empathy, resilience and moral agency along the way.**

As we step into the age of not knowing, awareness intelligence, and the capacity to experiment, learn and change, as well as the courage and discernment to make responsible choices, will become increasingly critical. In an accelerated and chaotic world, our impact and significance may not be how fully leaders extract the productivity gains from the latest tech tools or how well leaders keep pace. It may be how faithfully we protect what it means to remain human.



### **Multiply Leadership: Growing Collective Capacity through Building Relationships**

Individual leader development strengthens intrapersonal capacity, while leadership development strengthens the social capital and interpersonal conditions through which people can act together (Day, 2000). Leadership becomes something generated through trust, mutual responsibility, dialogue, coordination and shared meaning – not something possessed only by a few people in senior positions.

Leaders of the future do not lead from position or intellect alone, but create conditions where the intelligence of the collective can multiply. What we need are not more heroes, nor more leaders who align through compliance and conformance. We need a more diverse cadre who are willing to come together in service of a purpose greater than their own — for the Public Service, and for the nation.

The intentional sharing of power — as a generative act of growing more leaders, in groups and teams — will need to take centre stage. It does require leaders to exercise generosity and open up opportunities for other incumbents to step into leadership roles, implicitly acknowledging that another person may have the better set of skills or capabilities to be able to exercise leadership more effectively at any given point in time.

CSC's task is no longer only to form capable leaders, but to strengthen the relationships through which effective leadership can emerge among them. **The purpose of connection** is not to create easy alignment. It is to create relationships strong enough to hold disagreements, differentiation and collective learning.

As a neutral entity, CSC is strategically placed to convene gatherings that are human-centric and purposeful— within a system and across systems. How we show up with one another is the one thing AI has not learnt to replicate: AI can map a network, but it cannot

form a community where there is love, care and friendship. Communities and friendships can also serve as human-centric strategies against isolation and loneliness, and against over-dependence on generative AI as a thinking partner.<sup>23</sup>



### **Renew Institutional Capacity: Building Institutions to Sense, Experiment, Learn and Adapt**

Leaders are developed not only to perform within existing structures, but to anticipate change and to steward the conditions that let teams and institutions flourish over time — which is to say, to renew institutional capacity rather than rely on individual heroics.<sup>24</sup> CSC has a responsibility to support the design of leadership systems rather than to allow for dependence on exceptional individuals.

CSC has been introducing organisation agility to senior leaders through round tables, executive masterclasses and dialogue sessions through the expertise of its Senior Visiting Fellow Dr Christopher Worley and is working at introducing the work to the public service to strengthen

our capacity for change. According to Dr Worley and colleagues, agility is not merely a quality of individual leaders. It is an institutional capability that leaders help to build and sustain: the collective capacity to sense-make, test possible responses, learn quickly, implement or act coherently and repeat the process over time, while remaining anchored in public purpose. The desired outcome is sustained public value, institutional effectiveness and trust.

The future of leadership development needs a new narrative, one that is collectively created and imagined by a system of leaders and policymakers, rather than by a few positional leaders. Dialogic OD<sup>25</sup> treats organisations as meaning-making systems in which multiple realities need to be surfaced and explored. Change occurs not merely because people have a good conversation, but because prevailing assumptions are disrupted, core narratives change, or a compelling new image of what is possible emerges. (Bushe and Marshak, 2009). What are the assumptions and core narratives that need to give way to this new narrative?

The next season may require practitioners to partner policymakers and stakeholders to convene a whole system dialogic

**Communities and friendships can also serve as human-centric strategies against isolation and loneliness, and against over-dependence on generative AI as a thinking partner.**





process, to co-create a new image of what leadership in public service could look like, and co-construct a value proposition that draws capable officers to desire the responsibility and privilege of senior leadership, in service of the nation.

CSC's contribution to the leadership development work in the Singapore Public Service has palpably evolved in the last two decades. The enduring

contribution of leadership development may therefore lie not in any particular programme, method or technology, but in the cultivation of three forms of capacity: **discerning leaders, generative relationships and agile institutions.** At its heart, this journey reflects CSC's passion and commitment to the work beneath the work: developing leaders and leadership for stewardship, renewal, and a more human Public Service. ■

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# Career Fitness

## Developing Resilient and Agile Public Officers

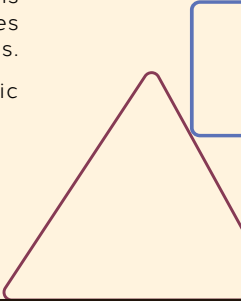
by **Lim Dun Lin**

Careers are no longer linear or predictable: longevity, changing life needs and shifting job demands call for public officers to stay fit, agile and adaptable across different seasons of life. CSC's research examines how career fitness can be built as a shared responsibility among officers, supervisors and organisations.



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This article was written with input from the Workforce Development Department, Public Service Division.







**T**he landscape of careers is changing. Longer lifespans mean longer careers. Job demands are changing with technological advancements accelerating, greater citizen expectations and a world order subject to unpredictable geo-economic dynamics.

In this environment, career development planning can no longer assume a singular, predictable linear path. With the skills and competencies required to excel in our existing roles constantly evolving, we should commit to continually upskilling and reskilling ourselves to stay relevant.

The challenge is how to equip people to stay “fit for their careers”, whatever circumstances they face. This calls for a more deliberate, continual, and shared effort between officers, supervisors, and organisations. Like physical health, “career fitness” demands regular attention, continual investment, and a proactive approach to staying strong and adaptable over time.

To address this challenge, the Singapore Public Service launched a Career Fitness Movement (CFM) in July 2025. Spearheaded by the Public Service Division (PSD), the movement helps public agencies and their officers unlock the opportunities of career longevity and meet evolving skill needs. It offers public officers a wide range of opportunities to move across functions and agencies, picking up new skillsets

to adapt to different contexts. Through the CFM, the Public Service promotes proactive career ownership among public officers. The CFM also creates conditions for continual learning, career mobility and renewal – strengthening both individual career resilience as well as the agility of the public service workforce as a whole.

Anchored in the Public Service’s move towards Competency-Driven Growth,<sup>1</sup> the CFM brings together a broader ecosystem of workforce development initiatives under a single, unifying movement. These initiatives include:



#### **Expanding development opportunities**

for officers, such as gigs, Short-Term Immersion Programmes (STIPs), Talent Attachment Programmes (TAPs), and learning programmes through CSC to help officers deepen and diversify their skills.



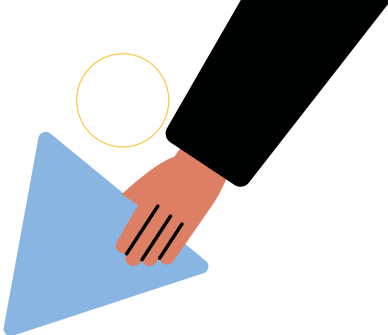
#### **An opportunities marketplace** via the One Talent Gateway (OTG)<sup>2</sup>

platform, where officers can easily access cross-agency growth and development opportunities, and plan their career development journey.



#### **Personalised career guidance and support** via supervisors and the Public Service Career Coach Network (PSCCN), to support officers in their Career Fitness journey.

*Career fitness does not depend on any single individual. It is a shared responsibility between officers, supervisors, and organisations.*



Within the CFM ecosystem, the Civil Service College partners PSD to develop frameworks, tools, and learning interventions that equip officers, supervisors, and organisations to build career fitness.

career fitness is how responsibility for career development is understood and shared.

**Career Development Is a Shared Responsibility**

To design the right approach, CSC first examined what career fitness requires in practice. CSC’s research found that while several conditions matter, the most significant factor underlining

Career fitness does not depend on any single individual. It is a shared responsibility between officers, supervisors, and organisations. Each of these three actors has a distinct and important role to play.

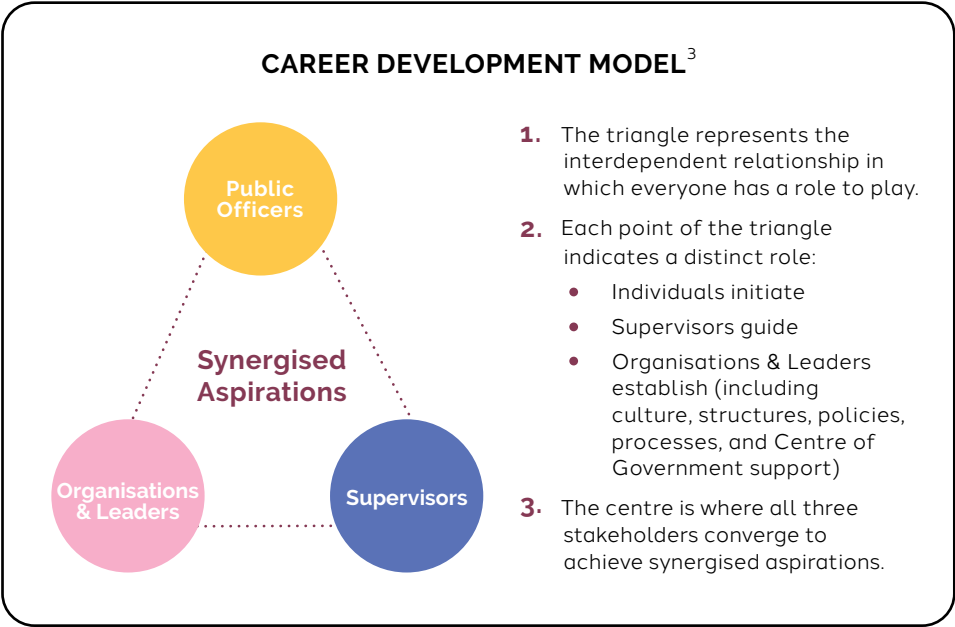


**Figure 1.** This triangle model of shared responsibility highlights that sustainable career fitness emerges when officers initiate, supervisors guide, and leaders enable, all working toward aspirations aligned with the needs of the public service.

*While performance conversations focus on delivering results today, career conversations focus on preparing officers for tomorrow.*



**Individual officers must take ownership of their career development.**

This means proactively reflecting on their career goals and development needs at different seasons of life and taking action to develop their careers. This may include identifying learning opportunities to build new skills or deepen existing expertise. For example, officers may attend courses to strengthen competencies for future roles, volunteer for stretch assignments to gain new experiences, or take on job rotations to broaden their perspectives and prepare for new career opportunities.



**Supervisors must guide and support their officers' growth as part of leadership investment**

**in a sustainable workforce development.** Beyond managing performance, supervisors play an important role in guiding, encouraging, and opening up conversations about growth, movement, and possibility. While performance conversations focus on delivering results today, career conversations focus on preparing officers for tomorrow. For example, beyond discussing an officer's performance in their current role, supervisors should also explore their aspirations, potential career pathways, and development opportunities. This requires dedicated time and attention through regular career conversations.



**Organisations must create conditions and opportunities for officers to grow and develop.**

This includes creating pathways, shaping supportive processes, building a culture that values development, and ensuring that leaders model the importance of career growth. Practically, this would mean among other things: fostering a growth mindset, enabling flexible work arrangements across different life stages, creating psychologically safe environments for career conversations, and encouraging lateral and cross-agency mobility. Together, these help officers grow, explore new opportunities, and build diverse career experiences.

## From Framework to Action

Understanding who is responsible for the different aspects of career fitness is only the first step. CSC's research reveals six Career Development Principles that spell out what shared responsibility looks like in practice. It has also identified a set of Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSAs), across individual officers, supervisors, and organisations. Underpinning the principles of career fitness, these KSAs guide the design of a principle-aligned curriculum and learning roadmap, grounding CSC programmes and resources to foster career fitness deliberately.



## Six Principles for Career Fitness



### 1. Steer Your Career Path

Officers should exercise agency over their career journey and actively shape its direction. This includes reflecting regularly on career goals, reassessing them as circumstances change, and developing the self-awareness needed to make informed career decisions.



### 2. Embrace Continuous Growth

Officers should cultivate learning agility and engage in lifelong learning to respond to the evolving needs of public service. They actively seek and create opportunities to deepen their skills, expand their knowledge, and remain open to new ways of contributing.



### 3. Adapt Career Priorities to Seasons of Life

Officers should view career development as an integral part of overall personal and professional wellbeing. They pursue both career development and personal fulfilment by adapting their career priorities to suit the different seasons of life, while continuing to grow over the long term.



### 4. Enable Career Pathways and Mobility

Supervisors should provide clearer communication about expectations, opportunities, and possible career pathways, within and beyond agencies. They support informed decision-making by pointing officers to relevant resources and engaging in regular career conversations with genuine interest and empathy.



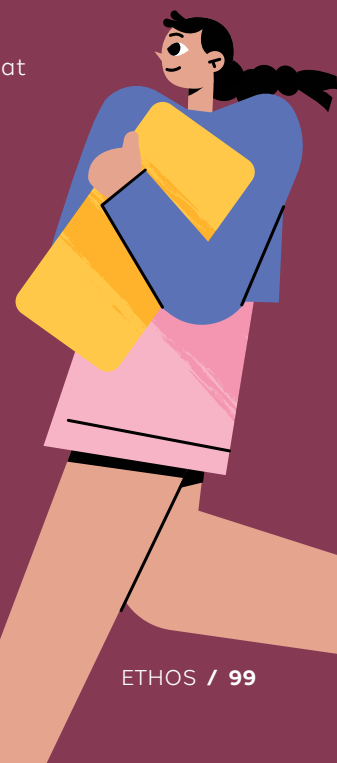
### 5. Establish Alternate Career Pathways

Organisations and leaders should foster a growth mindset that recognises multiple ways to grow and contribute. We should recognise that employees' capacity can vary temporarily but grow over time. This includes supporting diverse work arrangements across life stages, creating psychologically safe spaces for career conversations, and encouraging lateral and cross-agency movement.



### 6. Synergised Aspirations

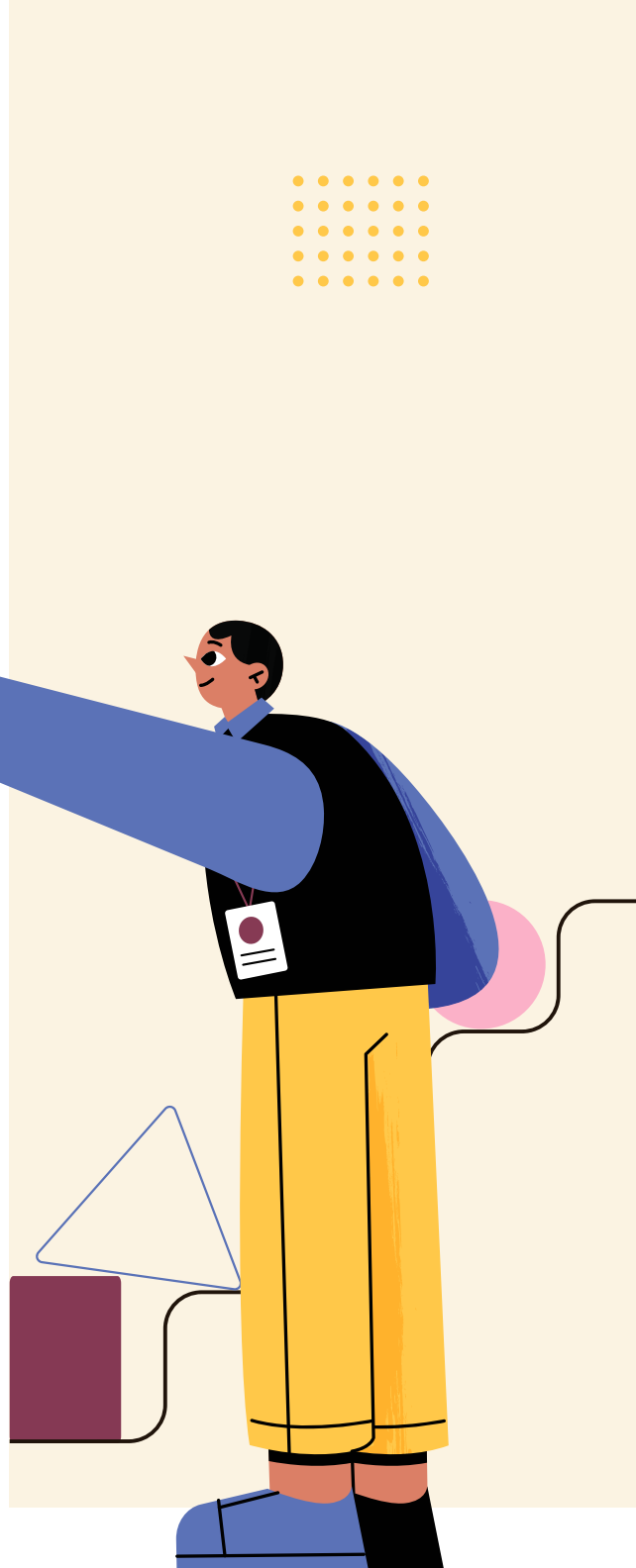
Career development should create win-win outcomes for both the individual and the Public Service. Officers' aspirations and organisational needs are not competing interests, but complementary forces that can be strategically aligned. When there is strong alignment between officers' aspirations and organisational needs, the result is both meaningful careers and exceptional public outcomes.



The career fitness principles represent a tangible shift away from traditional notions in career development. For example, the third principle recognises that career priorities shift meaningfully across the seasons of life. CSC's programmes<sup>4</sup> for individual officers are hence designed around four life stages:

- 1 Exploration and skill-building
- 2 Deepening expertise and professional identity
- 3 Recalibrating priorities
- 4 Sustaining meaningful career engagement

This contrasts with traditional career development philosophy, which considers only the professional sphere, almost as if work were a person's only consideration. Career trajectories are influenced by both professional aspirations and the realities of an individual's life circumstances. While some may seek accelerated growth and advancement, factors such as health, caregiving obligations, and personal commitments can shape the opportunities and choices available to them. Career development decisions therefore emerge from the intersection of professional ambition and personal circumstances.



Extending beyond individual support, supervisors are central to the Career Fitness ecosystem. The fourth principle recognises that meaningful career growth relies on regular, empathetic conversations, with supervisors playing a pivotal role. CSC offers dedicated programmes<sup>5</sup> to equip supervisors with the skills and confidence to engage meaningfully with their officers on career development.

Similarly, leaders and human resource leaders play a crucial role in enabling Career Fitness across their organisations. The Career Fitness Playbook,<sup>6</sup> developed by CSC, offers practical guidance, tools, and frameworks to translate the principles of Career Fitness into everyday practice in the organisation. It supports leaders and HR practitioners in fostering more effective career conversations, identifying development opportunities, and designing systems and initiatives that make career growth more visible, supported, and actionable.

## Building a More Resilient Public Service

Like physical fitness, career fitness is something we must continually maintain, build on, and return to across the course of our career. What the CFM offers is not just a set of programmes or tools, but a shared understanding of what it takes for officers, supervisors, and organisations to grow together.

By fostering a shared commitment to career development, the CFM creates an ecosystem in which officers are empowered to learn, supervisors actively support growth, and organisations provide opportunities for mobility and development. Such alignment enables our precious human capability to be continually renewed and redeployed, strengthening the Public Service's capacity to adapt, evolve, and meet future challenges with confidence. ■

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### Notes

1. Competency-Driven Growth gives the Public Service a common language that brings greater clarity for officers to grow the competencies they need to perform at their jobs and build their careers, while strengthening recruitment and deployment across government — including internal rotations and secondments — so agencies stay agile and resilient amid the shifts ahead.
2. The *One Talent Gateway* (OTG) can be accessed via <https://www.go.gov.sg/otg>.
3. CSC's Career Development Principles were developed through foundation research and stakeholder validation, including a survey of more than 1,100 Whole-of-Government officers, focus group discussions, and interviews.
4. An example of a programme available is *Career Fitness for Mid-career Officers*. It is available to public officers at: <https://www.learn.gov.sg/Learning/BrowseDetails?ProgCode=CR-P21CFR>
5. Public officers can access programmes like *Navigating Career Fitness for Your Staff* via <https://www.learn.gov.sg/Learning/BrowseDetails?ProgCode=CR-V21NCS> and *Wayfinding Career Fitness for Your Team* via <https://www.learn.gov.sg/Learning/BrowseDetails?ProgCode=CR-V21WCT>
6. The Career Fitness Playbook is currently in development and will be launched in FY2027.





# Memory, Momentum, Meaning

An Interview with Jocelyne Bourgon

The former head of Canada's Public Service has been a Fellow of the Civil Service College (CSC) since its inception as a statutory board. In conversation with ETHOS, she reflects on the role of public-sector learning institutions in uncertain times.



**Madame Jocelyne Bourgon** is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Civil Service College, and she has authored several works on public administration, including *The New Synthesis of Public Administration Fieldbook* (2017) and *A Public Servant's Voice: Through the Words of the First Woman Clerk for the Privy Council of Canada* (2026). She is also the Founding President of Public Governance International and President Emeritus of the Canada School of Public Service. She served as Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet during her time in the Canadian Public Service, where she led significant government reforms.

Madame Bourgon met with *ETHOS* Editor-in-Chief Dr Alvin Pang during her last Fellowship visit to Singapore in April 2026.

## As governance grows more complex with the times, what do institutions such as the Civil Service College contribute to the work of public service?

Countries that have organisations dedicated to supporting their civil service in thinking, learning and disseminating knowledge are very fortunate. Such institutions internalise public service values, principles and practices. This cannot be learned from the private sector or provided from academia in the same way. Some countries, like the UK, have shut down their internal civil service college, only to reinvent it years later, because they realised there was no substitute.

These organisations — including CSC and the Canada School of Public Service which I created — are platforms for learning in real time, helping to accelerate how we serve, improve the quality of public service, and propel society forward.

A learning platform does several things. It brings practitioners together to extract knowledge, improve practice,

and accelerate change. It facilitates a rendezvous of practitioners facing problems in real time to exchange with one another: “This is what I’m facing. What can I learn from you? What can I teach you?” This accelerates learning. Some of this knowledge can be deployed at scale across the public service.

Another purpose is to inculcate foundational knowledge; the core elements of being a public service professional. The faster the change process, the more important the foundational ideas — in terms of principles, values, ethics and ethos. This includes learning about public institutions: the role of the executive, legislature and judiciary and how it all fits together. What does it mean to govern and to serve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What does it mean to be a citizen of this country now and in the future?

A learning platform can bring the best minds from anywhere in the world to accelerate public service learning, in real time.

Another precious contribution of such institutions is to build institutional memory; the capacity to extract ideas and insights from past experiences and

*The faster the change process, the more important the foundational ideas — in terms of principles, values, ethics and ethos.*





*Building on what came before gives momentum. It is about using the past to invent a better future: understanding the essence of what was done before so that it can be operationalised faster and better to invent solutions for today's challenges.*

to operationalise them when they are most needed. Institutional memory helps us gain momentum, speed, and avoid amnesia. This is a vital part of institutional capacity building to face the complex issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **In an environment of rapid and often disruptive change, what is the role of institutional memory?**

I challenge the idea that everything has changed suddenly and become radically different in a very short time. In preparing my last book, *A Public Servant's Voice*<sup>1</sup>, I had to gather documents I wrote over 50 years. What struck me was how much we already knew — 10, 15, 20 years ago — about some of the problems we are facing today: from geopolitical, economic and demographic trends to technology and climate changes. Many of the challenges we are facing today were in the making for a long time: we chose to ignore them.

Institutional memory helps to recognise the signals we missed, the problems we neglected, and the issues that were allowed to fester until it was too

late or costly to correct them. It takes time to reveal the damage caused by institutional forgetting.

In a world where things move fast, institutional memory — remembering what was once known — provides a country with a comparative advantage. Amnesia slows down progress by repeating the same mistakes or reinventing the wheel rather than making use of what is already known. Building on what came before gives momentum. It is about using the past to invent a better future: understanding the essence of what was done before so that it can be operationalised faster and better to invent solutions for today's challenges.

Institutional memory must be nurtured. There is a need to deliberately capture and record knowledge and insights in different forms. This creates multiple layers of institutional memory.

### **How can a learning institution ready a public service for the future?**

In Singapore, CSC has been a pioneer in getting the Public Service ready for

*Public administration transforms ideas about life in society into a reality citizens experience collectively.*



technological innovation: it was a pioneer in embracing computerisation and digitalisation to increase productivity and improve service, long before many other countries did so. The next generation of public service leaders does not need to be experts in every single technological innovation that comes along. They need to know and understand what technology can do. In public sector organisations, some small AI applications may reap significant benefits quickly.

At the senior levels, Permanent Secretary or equivalent, the need is to think about the philosophical ramifications of technological changes. How does it transform the economic space, the social fabric, human nature or the environment. Instead of focusing on their technical competence, there is a need to develop their institutional capacity to build public organisations fit for the times.

Public administration transforms ideas about life in society into a reality citizens experience collectively. This requires an understanding of philosophical and ethical dilemmas, and an understanding of risk. This is not technical expertise, but about how technologies transform life in society; it is existential. It calls for a

multidisciplinary way of thinking and an appreciation of how multiple systems interact together. At CSC, I have seen this take shape ahead of many other places; I am sure this has contributed to the high level of performance of the Singapore Public Service.

Generalists may need an understanding of the science of their age, and to develop an instinct or feel for what technology has the potential to achieve and the risks it might create. The 21<sup>st</sup> century presents us with a whole family of technological innovations that will challenge governments. This is not just about AI but also geoengineering, bioengineering, pharmaceuticals, robotics, transhumanism and so on. Are we going to train leaders in each of these technological domains? Or to ensure they can think about how to optimise benefits, set constraints, limits, and manage risks? This will not be achieved by serial technological training.

So how might a learning institution do this? Often the learning is in the doing — provided we make the doing itself a source of collective learning.

Every day significant events happen. If we turn these events into learning

moments and bring together events, responses, public administration, public institutions and public sector values — we can learn faster, gain momentum and improve the institutional capacity to adapt to a fast-changing landscape.

### **As we strive to deepen the capability of the public service, what must we not forget?**

The role of the public service is to generate results of high public value, but to do so in a way that builds society's collective capacity to produce better results over time at a reasonable overall cost to society. The public outcomes we want to achieve are not only about what government can do; it is about what "we" can achieve collectively.

This means it is sometimes wise not to optimise short-term results if this gets in the way of achieving better collective results over time. For instance, it may be wise to invest time and resources in helping others to gain the capacity to act independently, even if it means slower immediate results.

Performance is contextual and in relation to society. The question for every public servant is: from where you stand, in the position you hold, with the team and resources currently available to you,

what can you do to make things better for society and the people you serve?

Starting from a societal perspective helps to clarify team performance, individual performance, and institutional performance. Without a societal perspective, it is possible to meet performance targets with no real benefit for society.

To govern means making choices, setting priorities, moving resources, and building public support. Governments need to anticipate, innovate, try new things, and experiment. They need to build resilient systems and a resilient society, because no matter how smart we are, shocks and disruptions will happen, and communities, societies, and individuals will need to absorb shocks and prosper in unpredictable circumstances.

Looking ahead, we need to prepare people who will be managing at the intersection of multiple dimensions where complexity, technology, economy, geography, ecology, and demography converge. This is a time to rethink, reinvent, and reframe public policy challenges from a broader perspective. In such times, the role of government becomes even more important than before.

This is a most meaningful time to be in public service. ■

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#### **Notes**

1. Bourgon, Jocelyne. "A Public Servant's Voice: Through the Words of the First Woman Clerk of the Privy Council for Canada" (2026) <https://utppublishing.com/doi/10.3138/9781487574758>





