

The Pacific public servant: Serving three masters?

Kabini Sanga, PhD.
Victoria University of Wellington

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1. The Pacific Islands region constitutes close to twenty nation states and territories. Diverse people groups are scattered unevenly in these Island countries. In the western part of the Pacific, Papua New Guinea and its Melanesian neighbours have populations that are culturally diverse. In the eastern and northern Pacific, the people groupings (popularly called Micronesians and Polynesians) are relatively more homogenous within national boundaries. As modern states, these countries are at different stages of development and performance levels. From a public service perspective, all nation states have public services which often are the single largest employer in the country.
2. In this presentation, I argue that leadership development programmes for senior Pacific public servants often neglect to recognize that there are three competing 'masters' which are contextually rooted in Pacific societies. These are the domains of Culture, Church and Formalized Institutions. The three are masters because each is legitimate and often demands the allegiance of the senior Pacific public servant. Specifically, I call for a fair scrutiny of and an acknowledged validity of the domain of culture (master 1). When just attention is given to these contextual domains, the complexities facing the Pacific public servant will be understood more clearly. In this way, leadership development programmes can be more appropriately designed and delivered.
3. In talking about Pacific public servants, I am referring here to senior officers within national public services in the independent countries of the Pacific Islands region. There are also Pacific public servants in regional organizations but they do not necessarily share the same competing demands from the three masters. The senior officers I am referring to here are generally at the levels of Directors, Under Secretaries and Permanent Secretaries and their equivalents in State Services authorities/agencies.
4. Generally, the senior Pacific public servant would have participated in leadership development programmes of one sort or another in recent years. In the past 10 or so years, numerous national and regional workshops and meetings have been held; often aimed to up-skill participants for their changing work environments. As part of structural adjustment and or reform programmes, international agencies, aid organizations, national governments and not-for-profit institutions have run leadership development programmes.
5. Despite the decade or so of professional development attention, the general verdict on the performance of the Pacific public servant is not very positive. Commonly, concerns expressed include the following: indecisiveness, poor time management, inability to follow rules, poor budgetary management and more.

Sadly, however, such concerns are not new. The concerns have also been the bases for intervention programmed a decade or so earlier. How might such persistence of concerns be fully explained? We shall return to this disturbing question later.

6. As earlier stated, currently there is much interest in and attention given to the professional development of the senior Pacific public servant by international donors, regional organizations and national governments. Combined, providers spend considerable resources. Where training programmes are offered, generally these are designed by people who are external to the contexts and also offered out-of-context.
7. In two such programmes that I have been associated with, the contents covered were similar. In the first programme, the contents included cultural briefings, public manager constraints, project management, public value, and the authorization environment, understanding relationships with ministers, public service rules, policy logic and more. In the second programme, the topics included effective governance, public sector change, result-based management, and collaborations across government, networks, policy strategy and more.
8. Such leadership development programmes reflected well, the environments of reforms that many Pacific Islands countries have been through. Hence, the topics and contents delivered seemed appropriate. Yet, Pacific participants have not expressed complete satisfaction about the content, delivery or presentations of the programmes. Why? Why not?
9. Moreover, national Pacific governments, donors and programme deliverers have also expressed dissatisfaction about programme outcomes. Often stakeholders seem unhappy that programmes have not met needs, without identifying the reasons for this state of affairs. These questions can then be legitimately asked: In a decade of leadership programmes, why are the same skills, knowledge and competencies still taught to Pacific public servants? What are the in-context experiences of implementation, following the delivery of training programmes? Why, despite the training, are highly educated senior public servants finding their institutional roles challenging?
10. To find satisfactory answers to such questions requires an appreciation for the influences of culture and context on the roles and performance of senior Pacific public servants. It can therefore be said that unless cultural dictates, influences and motivations are taken into account in the design and delivery of leadership programmes for senior public servants, the programmes are not likely to meet their needs adequately when implemented.
11. As earlier stated, there are three main domains of societal relationships and influence in Pacific societies. These are (1) the domain of culture/*kastom* (2) the domain of the church and (3) the domain of formalized institutions. These, in my view, are the real masters that demand the hearts and minds of the senior Pacific public servant.
12. It would seem that often, leadership programmes for Pacific public servants target the institutionalized domain (master 3) in isolation of the other two. When this is done, important default behaviour by senior public servants are not properly understood, and instead are incorrectly assumed or explained. As well, the linkages and relationships between domains are not properly explained in their variations and or similarities between contexts.
13. Now for some examples of the challenges facing the senior public servant as a leader. In playing his/her roles in service of master 3, the public leader often has to contend with the demands of master 1 and or master 2.

In Solomon Islands, within South, North or East Malaita societies, the metaphor of a canoe (baru, iora, ola) is used as a framework for describing leadership. In a traditional canoe, the sitting arrangements are as follows: front paddlers (clan A), middle paddlers (clan B) and back paddlers (clan C). Within a tribe, clans play different roles in diverse situations. From a leadership perspective, key roles and powers are associated with their sitting positions in the metaphorical canoe. Within the domain of culture (master 1), often these roles and their associated responsibilities will trump roles in the church (master 2) or institutional (master 3) domains.

14. The potential implications are considerably challenging. For instance, a Permanent Secretary of a government department may be quite powerful in domain 3, but as a back paddler in domain 1, a junior officer of front paddler status can usurp influence over the more senior officer, even within domain 3. In another situation, a middle paddler in domain 1, who is a senior officer in domain 3, if he/she chooses to, can deny a service to a front paddler in 3, who is considered, an enemy. In another, two officers within domain 3 who are from different Church denominations in domain 2, may not necessarily or readily seek or receive advice from each other or work co-operate with each other.
15. Without clearly understanding the domains of influence and social relationships within Pacific national and community contexts, it is difficult to appreciate the complexities of the above scenarios. Consequently, leadership scholars of indigenous Fiji must study the three confederations of the country, and the hierarchy and relationships between and within *mataqali* communities. For Tonga, the hierarchies of status as well as the strata of achievement need to be clearly understood. Throughout the Pacific, different contexts have their own different configurations of social relationships which will impact public behaviour.
16. To restate, Pacific cultures (master 1) should not be ignored in leadership programmes for senior public servants. Nor should culture be blamed for the leadership failures of public servants. Instead, programmes should embrace clear and insightful understanding of Pacific cultures. As yet, there is widespread need for clear understandings of culture in national, sub-national and community contexts, throughout the Pacific region.
17. In my view, any 'difficulty' that Pacific public servants seem to have in playing their institutional (master 3) roles better is not due to a lack of knowledge (about democracy or administration). Rather, the challenge for these officers has more to do with their allegiance to master 1. If this is the case, the need is for programme designers to appreciate better, the tensions between understanding of roles, rules and knowledge in domain 3 and commitments to these, as against the demands of domain 1.
18. For the student researcher or scholar of public policy, there seems to be a need to carefully study indigenous framings of leadership and social relationships and how "public service" may be delivered within these frameworks. The indigenous student and scholar in particular needs to take initiative in looking within their own societies, as without their leadership, it is difficult for non-indigenous people to access some of the context.

19. The work (for leadership builders, scholars, governments etc.) needs to go on. Hence, team work on the basis of trust is essential for important work to proceed. Presently, donors and international financiers are driving leadership intervention programmes for Pacific public servants. This situation is the case only because of their budgetary powers; not because they know better or are more concerned. It must be said that donors and their agents cannot continue to work in this way. They must give up power over other stakeholders. They need to work collaboratively with policy students, scholars, the wider community and Pacific public servants themselves. Without such an approach, service to people will continue to be compromised due to the serving of three masters.
20. Thank you for your attention.