

Close to the hearts of the people



Zainal Rahim: 'Now it can be one person doing one thing. We need people who can multitask.'

A Felda boy at heart, PSD director-general Datuk Seri Zainal Rahim Seman upholds the civil service tradition with a wide world view.

OLD school civil servant. That's the first impression you get when you meet Public Services Department (PSD) director-general Datuk Seri Zainal Rahim Seman. But only old school in the good sense – you know, the no-nonsense, incorruptible public official who selflessly serves the nation and people.

This is, after all, someone who has made a public apology to his wife – in a local Chinese daily, no less – for working too much and not spending enough time with her. And when asked about how he de-stresses from work, he could only say that after more than 30 years in the public sector, he has learnt how to cope with the challenges and pressure.

If anything, the 59-year-old who was appointed the new D-G in January seems to be as forward thinking as they come.

The future improvement of the civil service was very much the main topic of discussion at a recent press event marking Zainal Rahim's 100 days at the helm of the PSD.

The department has been busy formulating policies to upgrade the management and development of human resources not only to meet the complex needs of today's world, but also to meet the needs of the Transformasi Nasional 2050 (TN50) vision, he shares at his office in Putrajaya.

"We are currently drafting the Management and Human Resource Development Master Plan 2050, which outlines the expertise and skills needed to achieve TN50.

"In the future, we might also see certain PSD service schemes as no longer relevant or we might need to improve these schemes by encompassing new fields.

"For example, we have come up with Digital Government (e-gov), so we have to have services that support this. This means we need experts like big data analysts."

Other plans include the setting up of a Talent Management Unit, or Supreme, and creating groups of subject matter experts as well as further empowering the Program Laluan Pantas (Fast Track Promotion Programme) for high performing officers.

Even personally, he has been upgrading his own ICT know-how to contend with the new technologies, he says.

"This is the future of the civil service as they have to deal with the complex effects of globalisation, social diversity and new technologies.

"Now, it can't be one person doing one thing, a person needs to be versatile and multitask. We need people who can perform various comprehensive functions in the organisation, so you need to be multi-talented and multi-skilled."

With some 33 years of service, Zainal Rahim has had a multifold experience in the public sector, ranging from land and district administration, human resource development to project management.

Before taking over the pole position at the PSD, he served as director-general of the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (Mampu).



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"When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure."

He also had prior stints as secretary-general of the Human Resources Ministry and Penang state secretary.

He says his years at the state level, especially his 11 years as Penang state secretary – eight years under Gerakan Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and three years under DAP Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng – have taught him most about what it means to work for the people.



So much so that when faced with a baptism of fire of sorts in his new post – the civil service came under attack from the perennial criticisms of being “bloated” and unproductive a few weeks after he took office while high-profiled corruption cases continued to tarnish the image of the government servants, and just last month, the PSD had to deal with the (annual) censure of angry scholarship applicants and their parents – Zainal Rahim remained unflustered.

“I’ve always believed that the basis of the civil service is to be close to the hearts of the people, and I understand these matters are sensitive and serious for many, so we need to face them with courage,” he says, before quipping, “There are more challenges working at the state level.”

No, he’s not talking about working under an Opposition state government, the ever-professional official quickly clarifies, “As a civil servant, you need to have principles, and do your work with integrity, transparency and dedication while being loyal to the government of the day.

“The main thing is to give service to the people, and working on the ground has given me a rich insight to what the people want,” Zainal Rahim notes, relaying his experience of dealing with squatter home and illegal stall issues, trying to find

solutions to help people, as well as working around the clock at ground zero during floods and landslides.

He says he will never forget the tsunami that hit Penang in 2004.

“The horror of the dead bodies strewn on the beach will forever be etched in my memory. But it is in times of such challenge that you learn to be strong.”

Now with a few months left before his mandatory retirement from the civil service – unless he is offered a contract to stay on – Zainal Rahim says he has no regrets over joining the public sector.

“I was offered work at a public university after graduation but I decided to join the civil service instead. I have never regretted my decision.

“I’ve always wanted to serve the Government as I feel that I have benefited a lot from the Government, from primary school to university and higher,” says the Felda son who is proud of his humble roots in the rubber plantations of Sungai Behrang in Slim River, Perak.

His dream is to see more young people, especially those from humble roots, to strive to serve the nation and elevate its civil service.

On the graft that seems to be blighting the public sector, Zainal Rahim believes it is not due to a weakness in the system or in the hiring process.

“It is the weakness of the individual. We have rules and regulations, and civil servants must not stray from what they are supposed to be doing, that is serving the country and people and not put their interests first.”

He adds that he holds fast to the “carrot and stick” principle.

“For those who perform, deliver results fast and are ethical, they will be rewarded among others under the Excellent Service Awards initiative.

“As for those who fail to perform, we have the Exit Policy (where they will be given a year of rehabilitation to improve themselves). After that, if they still don’t show any improvement, I think they do not deserve to be in the civil service...”

Reminding the 1.6 million-strong civil servants in the country to uphold strong integrity and good work ethics, Zainal Rahim says his focus now is to look for an alternative delivery solution that will make the civil service not only more efficient and effective but also more caring.

“It goes back to how we do our work – be transparent and do it with integrity.”

“We are public servants and serving the rakyat is our biggest responsibility. Those who do not feel up to serving the rakyat should just quit.”

Next week: *Sunday Star* looks at how “bloated” the civil service is.

TAGS / KEYWORDS:

Government, Politics, civil service