

# Preface

“Why do you want to write a book on the civil service?” We were asked this question at the start of practically every interview that we did for this book. Our curiosity was initially piqued by the typical response from business managers in the classroom to case studies that one of us had done on Singapore institutions such as TradeNet, the port, the national library, the national computerization effort and even the tax department — amazement that government agencies were capable of more than just being efficient — that innovation was possible and that organizational transformation actually took place in public agencies. There was a sense that the Singapore experience could have lessons for the business world. Its experience certainly appears to have learning value for other countries, if interest in Singapore-style industrial parks, housing estates and e-government systems is anything to go by.

But what exactly is this “Singapore model” that business managers and overseas officials seemed so keen to understand and apply? Many observers attribute Singapore’s success to the strength of its political leadership. But there is an entire administrative body working quietly behind the scenes to create, develop, review and translate policies from perception to paper to practice. What is it about the way it manages its people and processes that others find interesting to understand and worthy to emulate? What are the principles behind the Singapore public sector system that made it work? Is the system good because it has perfected a set of “how-to’s”, or is there something more? Are these principles and practices unique to Singapore? How can the principles and practices be applied effectively beyond the public sector and beyond Singapore?

These ideas intrigued us but we did not seriously start developing them until 2005, after both of us completed our terms as Dean and Vice Dean in the Nanyang Business School at the Nanyang Technological

University. A chance conversation along the corridors as we were basking in our newfound peace and freedom reignited interest and focused thinking. An email to Peter Ho, the Head of the Singapore Civil Service and Lim Siong Guan, former Head of the Civil Service and then the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance with a go-ahead given two days later, set things in motion.

As we began sifting through the published material, it struck us that much of the work on Singapore focused either on its policies, or on its political landscape. Other than a handful of studies of specific institutions such as the Economic Development Board, the Port of Singapore and the National Library Board, remarkably little is known about an institution that has been the vanguard of Singapore's economic and social transformation. As we conducted our interviews and combed through internal data and documents, a picture slowly emerged of the civil service's role in governance and the workings of its underlying system of institutional culture and organizational capabilities.

We did not find simple explanations for the effectiveness of Singapore's public service. Its performance cannot be directly attributed to any single individual leader or any one particular cause or policy. Instead we found a working system with multiple interactions and interdependencies. Its unique historical and political contexts were important but so were the ambition and active efforts to create and secure its future. Leadership was crucial but so were the systems and processes that were institutionalized. There were deeply-held beliefs and assumptions but there were also openness to abandon past practices and experiment with new ideas. Social stability was desired but there were also strong commitments and capabilities to change. Agencies operate quite autonomously and yet there were some coherence in overall direction. There were many policy ideas that were learnt from others but there were also significant innovations. Policies were executed efficiently but were also adapted in the process of implementation. There were strong values and principles of governance that officials seemed to have internalized and yet these were mostly transmitted socially rather than formally. What we

found is a remarkably resilient civil service that has been constantly learning, continually changing, quietly improving and innovating, a civil service that has grown and evolved in tandem with the demands and expectations of the society which it serves.

This is the story behind the Singapore story.