

### III. CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE OF ASIAN MUNICIPALITIES

Every organization has a unique culture, which is the result of doing things in a certain way over a long period of time. However, with rapid changes in the external environment of the organization, its traditional role or modalities need to be changed. Whenever someone tries to introduce reforms, there is considerable resistance from within the organization.

Mayors face the same dilemma. Although they want to improve the quality of life of their citizens, they will often discover that their very municipal organization has become a major barrier to improved service delivery. The organization may be bureaucratic and hampered by regulations, and thus have become unresponsive to the need for reform.

How can mayors change the existing organizational culture so that it supports rather than hampers their objectives to improve the city and its services? Mr. Deshabandu Karu Jayasuriya shares the practical steps he undertook to change the work and service culture of the Colombo Municipal Council, which resulted in improved services and quality of performance of its workforce.

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## THE COLOMBO MUNICIPAL COUNCIL EXPERIENCE

### **Deshabandu Karu Jayasuriya**

Former Mayor, Colombo City, and  
Leader of the Opposition  
Western Provincial Council

Since the inauguration of the Colombo Municipal Council 134 years ago, the city population has increased from 80,000 to 800,000 with a floating population of yet another half a million. Urban migration has brought in a large number of citizens who are left without proper shelter and without access to basic amenities such as safe water and sanitation. The density and increase in commercial and industrial activity have also brought greater pressure on the functions of the Council. Unplanned patterns of urban growth have caused economic inefficiency, environmental degradation, and human misery.

Planning mechanisms had failed to address this dramatic increase and the mass migration into the city. The delivery of municipal services did not meet the expectations of the community. City sprawl and the demand for transport had far outstripped road capacity. The administration was not very successful in trying to improve the lot of the urban poor, constituting nearly 45% of the city population.

Urban financing had collapsed under severe pressure and was incapable of maintaining infrastructure services. Funding that used to come from higher levels of government was shrinking as the latter also faced a resource crunch. Central government debts continued to be unpaid. The financial base remained narrow and stagnant. Yet, over the years, this city has steadily progressed to become a modern city throbbing with activity and struggling to contain itself within its boundaries. It

has enjoyed the blessings as well as the strains of being the commercial capital of the country.

When I was elected in April 1997, this was the environment into which the new administration entered, quite unknowingly. It was the first time that I entered the political arena and I had no doubt that the people elected us convincingly because they needed a change. We assumed office and realized that if our vision of a livable, clean, and sustainable city was to be a reality, a change was imperative.

I have been thoroughly involved in the growth of the private sector in this country, held office in a number of companies, institutions, and Chamber of Commerce, and had the opportunity of steering Sri Lanka's first privatized enterprise to become a leading and successful business institution in this country. We were associated with the flexible market-based management system. Success depended on the achievement of the designed objectives. We measured performance by outcomes not inputs. We were driven by goals, visions, and missions, not by rules and regulations. Our clients were customers and we offered them choices. Our effort was on earning and not simply on spending. Above all, we focused on catalyzing all sectors—public, private, and volunteer—into action to solve their needs.

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It was not a surprise to discover that the Colombo Municipal Council was no different from other public institutions. The rigid, hierarchical bureaucratic form was the traditional model of public administration. Officials adhered to rules and regulations and were mainly concerned with doing things correctly. Often we heard of the poor performance of public bureaucracies, cumbersome red tape, unpleasant officials, poor services, and corrupt or irregular practices. There was a demoralized staff with over 35% vacancies, no overtime, lack of machinery and equipment, and

no decision making. Most of the staff believed that “no work means no problems.”

We looked for change in a profession that had seen little change over a long period. A society that is changing fast requires systems of government that can keep pace with the growing needs of people. We realized that such major changes required good leadership and team spirit. There was a need for better management rather than mere administration. There had been no attempt to seek best practices, despite potential for innovation and improved efficiency. There was a need to shift from the traditional form of public administration to public management.

Before our term, power was seen to reside within the Town Hall. Politicians spent a considerable amount of time trying to gain power there. Chief officers were running the departments and provided services to different groups of people. The services were generally initiated, developed, and delivered within the Town Hall, which was considered a direct way to solve social problems in the locality. Politicization was at its peak, which resulted in a significant decline in the performance of the Council.

Several steps were taken to overcome this issue. First, prior to the elections, every effort was made to include several professionals as candidates while allowing for grass-root politicians. I selected my likely successor before the election. This enabled me to work with a strong team representing diverse interests. I also accepted the position for a limited period of one to two years over the full term of four years.

Second, all policies set out by the councilors were based on the needs of the electorate. The executive handled the implementation. There was a very high degree of delegation to the deputy mayor who coordinated the link between the elected representatives and the officials.

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Third, we changed the old idea that democracy is equated to elections by minimizing wasteful interparty conflict and political confrontation. Members of the opposition political parties in the Council were elected as chairpersons of 5 of the 15 statutory standing committees. Together they formed my inner cabinet. This was a new concept, with 33% of my inner cabinet appointed from the opposition. Looking back, we are happy that we were able to draw up the four-year development plan for the City of Colombo with the participation of all political parties.

Fourth, we increased the power and accountability of managers. Empowerment was implemented by delegation. Rather than being controlled administrators they became empowered managers so that they could exercise their own initiatives in responding to customer needs. This gave them managerial freedom, due recognition and responsibility, and above all an opportunity for a pluralism of service-delivery mechanisms.

The Council used to have a rather dominant, closed, secretive, and anxious relationship with the public, especially when criticisms were made. By undertaking innovative measures, we changed the image of the Council and how local authorities viewed the public.

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### **100-Day Program**

A 100-day program was developed to create an impact in the community of the overall services of the Council with particular emphasis on

- providing better amenities to the poor;
- giving a facelift to the city;
- involving the private sector; and
- creating awareness among the people so that they would join hands in providing an effective service to the city.

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The response was great and all sections of the community including foreign ambassadors joined us to make this program a success. Following are the elements of the Program.

- **A Directory of Services**, which was produced during the time of my predecessor, was distributed to households. This book gave the citizens an insight into the roles and activities of the Council and how best to contact local officials when in need.
- **A 24-hour Information Center and Complaint Desk** was opened to help the citizens. Complaints were taken, recorded, and a scheme to follow-up introduced. We institutionalized a Public Day every Wednesday. The mayor, deputy mayor, municipal commissioner and all heads of departments are accessible to the public at one place on this day. In this way the public can have their problems resolved directly and quickly. Usually, 200-300 people are present on a Public Day.
- **Advisory Committees** were established, comprising leading citizens recognized for their expertise, experience, and reputation in the relevant fields who contribute voluntarily to the development of the city. Fifteen such committees, covering activities ranging from public health, sports, markets, and planning to finance, were formed.
- Similarly, a **City Watch Committee**, consisting of civic leaders and professionals, was formed to initiate and maintain regular dialogue with the Council on matters pertaining to the city. These committees have made and continue to make a most useful contribution to the city.

Through these efforts we were able to win the confidence of the people. The citizens saw what was happening and felt that they were wanted. They realized that the Council was working with a purpose.

This was also the beginning of a number of partnerships that we built. Through partnerships with NGOs and the private sector we were able to join hands in maintaining dispensaries, roundabouts, a traffic lighting system, common amenities to the poor, street name boards, etc.

Partnerships with professional groups such as the Institute of Architects, the Organization of Professional Associations, and the Institution of Engineers resulted in the formulation of "Vision for the City of Colombo—Year 2000." Partnerships with the business sector were also initiated and I am happy to state that the present mayor has already inaugurated a Colombo Business Partnership Programme.

The international community also showed a tremendous interest and responded favorably towards our efforts to develop the city. The governments of the Netherlands, Norway, Great Britain, and Australia helped us in many projects directly while the governments of Germany and Japan have made commitments to major development projects. In addition to this, donor agencies, particularly the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and Friedrich Naumann Foundation, have been working with us very closely in many activities.

Partnerships with other local authorities have also been formed. We are the largest local authority in Sri Lanka and it was our responsibility to give leadership to the other local authorities. We did this by forming the National Chapter of Mayors of Sri Lanka, a body comprising the 14 mayors representing the 14 municipal councils in Sri Lanka. Today, this is an established forum where the mayors

meet irrespective of different political ideologies. This body has not only initiated collective action but also made possible a study tour to Singapore for the mayors and deputy mayors, municipal commissioners, and leaders of the opposition.

Private contract of some services was a new introduction by the Council. Conventionally, it was believed that public services were not as effective and efficient as the private sector in terms of wastage, supervision, and value for money. Although there were initial criticisms and objections, it proved to be a successful venture. Today many services, such as janitorial, security, and garbage collection, are carried out on contract by the private sector.

To ensure that this participatory approach is sustainable, there was a need to make every employee conscious of the fact that the customer is the most important person for the Council. An effective public-relations and customer-focus training program was introduced covering all sections of the Council. This brought about the much-desired attitude of staff toward their customers and created a new atmosphere in the Council. Training became an important part of the Council agenda, in fact, every year at least one officer is undergoing specialized training somewhere. As part of this program, we arranged for most of the municipal councilors and key officials to visit Singapore as a model city. These were sponsored visits not using public funds.

Developing a vision, mission, and a plan for the Council was essential for city management. I had a vision, but a truly viable vision is a confluence of ideas from all stakeholders. We developed a mission statement defining how we would get there. We determined a sense of direction with a valid corporate plan in order to know what was required in the management of the city and whether we were meeting our goals. This was the first time that a

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corporate plan was made public by a local authority in Sri Lanka.

One of the important aspects of this plan is to meet the needs of the young people for the next millennium. They are our future leaders and it is our responsibility to direct them to meet the challenges ahead. For this we initiated intensive, job-oriented training programs, a career development center, and a millennium park giving the opportunity for the poor to keep abreast with information technology. We have plans to train about 5,000 youths annually.

Societies throughout the world will continue to change rapidly during the foreseeable future. They will be driven by changes in values, changes in technology, and changes brought about by global trade. Councils that are structured and motivated to change and recognize the need for it are those that will succeed and be seen as useful and necessary by the public.

Looking back at the 26 months of the new administration, we have every reason to be satisfied. Although the City of Colombo was not turned upside down during this short period, we were able to achieve quite a lot through team effort. The credit of our achievements and the bouquets were given to our team. I took criticism and brickbats. We yet have a long journey but I feel that we will reach our goal. We have the right team and the right approach.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to extend my deep appreciation and gratitude to the ADB Institute, ADB, and all the sponsors for inviting me to deliver this keynote address. For us in Colombo, it is a great honor and privilege to have such a distinguished gathering. Your presence is indeed an encouragement to all of us. I wish all the visiting participants a very pleasant and memorable stay in Sri Lanka and in the City of Colombo.