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Written statement by the University of the Philippines National College of Public Administration and Governance (UP NCPAG)

Agenda item 8: Strategies for changing mindsets in the public sector, retaining talent, and attracting younger workers

Public Service at a Crossroads: Shifting Mindsets, Sustaining Talent

Public administration is not only about managing people and programs—it must cultivate a shared sense of purpose, responsibility, and responsiveness. In an era marked by polycrisis, rapid technological advancements, and demographic transitions, the resilience of public institutions depends not only on systems but on mindsets.

As the employer of 11% of the world's labour per ILO's estimates, the public sector is responsible for fostering inclusive governance while navigating a highly competitive talent landscape. Strategies for attracting, retaining, and empowering public servants, especially younger workers, must address deeper cultural questions: What does public service mean today? What kind of public sector do we want to build for tomorrow?

In answering these questions, we must focus not only on modernizing human resource (HR) systems and practices but also on transforming public sector values, workplace environments, and leadership styles. The task is not simply technical; it is profoundly human.

Redefining Public Service for the New Generation

New Public Service and New Public Governance both provide a perspective that the public sector must adopt collaborative, networked, and citizen-centric approaches.

Studies have shown that leadership, vision, participation, and communication are key components of successful organizational change. Leaders must have a vision that offers hope and relief from stress, discomfort, or even dissatisfaction from the current state. A vision must relate to sound courses of action that provide clarity on what needs to be done. Champions and coalitions are needed. And, when new patterns of behaviour emerge, they must be institutionalized to dislodge old behaviours by modifying structures, policies, procedures, practices, diffusing innovation, engaging employees, and ensuring comprehensive change.

An encouraging leadership that can act as change agents and the use of a choice architecture can help in redefining public service. For example, Thaler and Sunstein explained in their

book “Nudge” that governments can use identity-based cognition that appeals to influences and norms that people trust.

Bureaucratic inertia has always been a challenge. It is mainly because of its reverence for and maintenance of a compliance-driven culture. In the public sector, there needs to be a shift to a culture emphasizing innovation, agility, and service orientation.

Reimagining Recruitment and Career Development

Modernizing the recruitment process is essential. Many public sector hiring practices remain rigid, slow, and opaque, deterring high-potential applicants. Studies show that excessive bureaucratic hurdles, unclear qualification standards, and a lack of feedback can undermine trust in meritocracy.

Governments must simplify and digitize application systems, embed behavioural and values-based assessments, and proactively recruit from underrepresented groups. Recruitment must also go beyond credentials and assess public service motivation—what Perry and Wise described in 1990 as the intrinsic drive to serve the public interest.

Once hired, public servants need pathways for growth. Career stagnation is a common concern, especially among younger employees. This underscores the need for professional development opportunities, clear promotion criteria, and systems for lateral mobility across agencies and levels of government.

Globally, innovation units within government have been gaining ground, anchored on strong partnerships with the private sector, civil society, and the academe. In the Philippines, the University of the Philippines National College of Public Administration and Governance has launched the Governance Reform, Innovation, and Transformation Research Laboratories (GRIT Labs) in 2024 with funding from the national appropriations to provide a platform for transdisciplinary collaboration with government agencies. This has opened spaces for policy and capacity building reform through the use of data, technology, collaboration, creativity, and common sense. Other notable academe-government initiatives include the enhanced work immersion program of the Department of Education and the Private Sector Advisory Council, the Government-Academe-Industry Network that has worked to elevate Filipino talent. Such platforms provide both developmental and motivational value, especially when linked to capacity-building programs.

Creating Enabling and Inclusive Work Environments

Attracting and retaining talent also requires improving the day-to-day work experience. Beyond pay and job security, studies would point to such factors as organizational culture, psychological safety, and flexibility influence public servants’ motivation and well-being.

Governments must promote work-life balance and mental wellness. This includes flexible work arrangements—especially relevant in the post-pandemic context—as well as physical workplace improvements, childcare support, and inclusive leave policies. Such benefits disproportionately affect women’s leadership and participation (E/C.16/2025/6, para. 32).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion must also be institutionalized. From gender parity to racial and generational inclusion, public institutions must actively dismantle biases and create environments where everyone can thrive. The voluntary adoption of a “Sustainable Development Goal 18” on ethnic and racial equality in Brazil (E/C. 16/2025/6, para. 62) provides an innovative model that others may follow.

Rethinking Rightsizing: Bringing the Human Back into Human Resources

Rightsizing is often viewed as a solution to institutional inefficiency, but in practice, it too often prioritizes budget cuts over strategic and human considerations. This leads to what Ruslan, et al. called in 2022 as “wrong-sizing”—shrinking the workforce without aligning skills to public needs—undermining service delivery and deepening inequities. Indiscriminate downsizing especially weakens frontline services, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities.

The 2024 UN Economic and Social Council reframes rightsizing as a strategic imperative, calling for alignment of workforce capacity with national goals like climate action and digital transformation. This demands a shift from cost-cutting to human-centred planning. Initiatives such as skills gap analysis, targeted hiring, and mentorship programs for retiring employees are key steps that not only fill critical roles but also preserve institutional knowledge. Such reforms are vital to engaging younger workers, who seek purpose, growth, and innovation—not just stability. Replacing outdated seniority systems with merit-based career pathways, coupled with mentorship and innovation sabbaticals, can revitalize engagement and bridge generational divides.

However, these changes face real barriers: bureaucratic inertia, funding gaps, and resistance to transparency. Overcoming them requires anchoring reforms to shared values like the Sustainable Development Goals. Public-private partnerships can support upskilling, while Human Resource Information Systems enable data-driven decisions, helping track diversity, retention, and performance—ensuring reforms are adaptive, inclusive, and fair.

Ultimately, rightsizing and HR modernization are not just technical tasks but moral imperatives. As the 2024 Pact for the Future affirms, investing in people is essential to inclusive governance. By restoring empathy, equity, and purpose to workforce planning, governments can build agile institutions where public service thrives because of its people.

Rebuilding Trust through Ethical Leadership and Public Engagement

Retention is also about trust—trust in the institutions, their leaders, and their vision. Public sector environments characterized by political volatility, nepotism, or corruption repel both junior and senior talent. Governments must therefore embed ethics, transparency, and responsiveness as foundational values.

Leadership matters. Senior public servants are more likely to stay when they are empowered, heard, and supported in driving change. Yet, as Baxendale found in a 2014 study, many report burnout, frustration, or political interference. Leadership development programs, peer exchanges, and succession planning can help address this attrition risk while mentoring the next generation.

Through inspiring leadership, young government workers may be encouraged to spontaneously organize themselves and form a community of kindred spirits who are open to working together and supporting each other, as was the case in the Philippines.

By and large, public sector branding needs rethinking. The image of government work must shift from that of a slow-moving bureaucracy to one of a purpose-driven, innovative, and people-centered institution. Effective communication strategies and public narratives that are backed by performance data are critical in this regard.

Promoting Social Dialogue and Whole-of-Society Approaches

Public sector transformation cannot happen in isolation. Governments must engage in sustained, inclusive social dialogue, especially at the subnational level, where policy implementation and citizen engagement intersect most closely.

Social dialogue, as defined by the ILO, includes negotiation, consultation, and information exchange between governments, workers, and civil society (E/C. 16/2025/6, paras. 63-66). These mechanisms are essential for co-creating policies, managing change, and ensuring that reforms are equitable and grounded in lived experience.

In the Philippines, structures such as the Local Development Councils and Civil Society Organizations provide institutional entry points for social dialogue. Strengthening their mandate and capacity, while encouraging cross-sector collaboration, can enhance public trust and ownership.

Reclaiming the Ethos of *Lingkod-Bayani*: Inspiring Purpose-Driven Public Service

In the Philippine context, the aspiration to attract and retain a qualified public workforce is deeply intertwined with the ideal of the *Lingkod-Bayani*—the public servant as both a worker

and a hero. This heroic-servant ethos recognizes that public service is not merely a profession, but a vocation rooted in integrity, compassion, and a deep sense of duty to the people.

By fostering this identity early in the careers of public servants and embedding it in the institutional culture of government, we can inspire purpose-driven leadership and cultivate resilience in the face of challenges. Strategies to change mindsets in the public sector must therefore go beyond administrative reforms and reawaken the core values of *Lingkod-Bayani*, encouraging young workers to see government service as a meaningful path toward nation-building and social transformation. In an informal survey conducted by the University of the Philippines National College of Public Administration and Governance's GRIT Labs, foremost among these are the public service values of integrity, courage, and compassion.

The public sector must be both a reflection and a driver of the future we hope to build. Attracting and retaining talent, especially younger workers, is not just a question of policy, but of vision. It requires changing how governments see their workforce: not as cost centres, but as value creators. Not as administrative bodies, but as catalysts for collective transformation.