



Passion for Learning:

KEY TO EXCELLENCE

Passion equals excellence. Especially when one's passion is for lifelong learning, as in the case of YB Datu Wilson Baya Dandot, newly-appointed State Secretary of the Sarawak Civil Service.

A Colombo Plan scholar who graduated from the University of Western Australia, YB Datu Wilson credits his passion for learning for his success in his civil service career. The defining moments in his life almost always centre on those experiences when he had the opportunity to get involved in something new and unfamiliar, thus affording him a chance to gain new insights, fresh perspectives and advanced competencies.

The new State Secretary thrived on fulfilling pioneering roles right from the start of his civil service career. He joined the Sarawak Civil Service as an Assistant Secretary with the newly-set up State Planning Unit (SPU) in March 1973.

YB Datu Wilson recalls the challenging tasks that they had back then as the SPU, being a new entity, was charting new territories for Sarawak.

"Having been trained as an economist, the SPU was the right place for me to start my career. My first few years at the Unit honed my analytical skills and ability to see things far ahead into the future and the need to see the big picture. It was exciting to be able to craft development plans for the whole state, and seeing these plans become reality over the years. It was rewarding to have worked with people who also have a pioneering spirit and are visionaries."

This desire to conquer the unfamiliar and become an expert in it is what keeps him motivated, no matter what assignment is given him.

For instance, he looks back with pride when he was given an opportunity to work in Jakarta, Indonesia with a team of international experts in economics, development, agriculture and commodity for the International Pepper Commodity Secretariat under the auspices of UNESCAP for six years.

He applied the same zeal for learning new things when he was given the opportunity to pursue his Master's degree in Development Economics from the University of Sussex, United Kingdom, shortly after he resumed his duties with the Sarawak Civil Service.

His love for books on any topic, and his ability to read with ease and speed, further demonstrates his passion for learning. He doesn't treat books as passive objects, but as repositories of ideas and thoughts that he constantly interacts and challenges his mind with.

As he casually puts it, "That's why I never have any day that is dull or unrewarding. I constantly test, explore and apply certain ideas, and I am always fascinated by the results, whether they come out the way I predicted they would or not. Either way, I learn something which, of course, helps me advance higher in my thinking and reasoning as well as in practical decision-making".

Ask him about significant moves in his life that helped propel him to become the top civil servant in the State and he will be hard-pressed to answer.

"I have never deliberately set out to do any task or assignment because I was aiming for some kind of personal goal such as a job promotion or money or public acclaim. In everything that I do, all that I would be aiming for was to do an excellent job, to deliver the results expected of me and as much as possible, try to exceed peoples' expectations. When I manage to do that, that is reward enough for me," the State Secretary said.

If there's anything that he would like to see in each and every civil servant in Sarawak, be they from Federal or State departments and agencies, is that they continue to uphold the value and dignity of the civil service institution.

"We have confidently emerged from the shadow of our colonial predecessors. We have evolved into a strong, resilient and dynamic institution, able to meet the demands of the changing times. The civil service institution is an important pillar in our country's vision of becoming a fully-developed country by the year 2020. If we fail to do our tasks well, we will derail the whole country's journey towards Vision 2020. A lot rests on our shoulders. All of the States within the federation must be moving in tandem, with not one being left behind, if we are to achieve that goal".

He enjoins all civil servants in Sarawak, both from Federal or State agencies, to internalize and actualize the idea and reality of "unity in purpose". Datu Wilson stresses the importance of regular consultations and dialogues among civil servants in the State and Federal agencies and departments, something that he is committed to bring about as he plans to regularly visit and interact with Federal agencies here in Sarawak.

Excerpt from RAKAN Sarawak's interview with the State Secretary:

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *Was there ever any conscious thought or effort on your part to pursue the highest position in the civil service?*

YB DATU WILSON BAYA DANDOT (STATE SECRETARY):

I never consciously or deliberately aspired to occupy any particular position in the civil service. When I first joined the civil service, I was prepared to be sent to the remotest part of Sarawak because I knew that that was what being a civil servant entails. I was always prepared to learn and acquire new skills, competencies, knowledge in whatever tasks or position I was given. I've always looked at it this way: whatever exposure, experience, knowledge you acquire from a previous position will equip you for the next assignment. So, if you look at it that way, no job will surprise you. You will always be prepared or equipped, and the new task or assignment can only add value to what you already have, and not take away from it. If, on the other hand, you set out to pursue a particular job or position, and you were given an entirely different task from what you expected, you may end up struggling to cope with your unexpected assignment, and may end up frustrated and demoralised. Especially in the context of the civil service, we cannot look at our work targeting a certain position in mind. The only target we must have is to serve the people, to add value to the peoples' lives. The only objective we must strive for is to do well in whatever task we are given, to satisfy the customers' needs and fulfil their expectations.

When I personally assess a civil servant's performance, I do not look at the position that he has occupied. If I ask them to tell me about their work experience, I will be disappointed if they tell me about their position and the job descriptions of that position. What I would like to hear from them is the actual impact of any projects that they were involved that transformed or added value to the lives of the people that they serve.

For instance, I don't want to hear from an officer that he worked as ADO in Julau, Kanowit, Mukah and Lawas. I would want to know what he actually did, what did he learn and what projects did he contribute.

This is what I call applying leadership in your work. Each of our civil servants has leadership opportunities in the course of doing his or her job. In whatever task we are given, we must be aware of the opportunities

to lead. Leadership is not just about holding the highest position in an organisation; it is also about being an "authority" in the area that you are assigned in. Authority is accorded to someone by the breadth of his or her knowledge or the extent of his or her competence in executing his or her task.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *Can you share with us your career journey in the Sarawak civil service? When and how did your civil service career begin?*

STATE SECRETARY: I joined the Sarawak civil service in March 1973 as a daily paid staff after completing my economics degree from the University of Western Australia. I was confirmed as permanent staff on July 1973. My first appointment was as an Assistant Secretary with the State Planning Unit. I was one of the pioneer staff of the State Planning Unit, which was just set up in late 1972. Looking back into my civil service history, my stint with the SPU was a key step. SPU was mandated to plan and coordinate the development of Sarawak. At that time, we introduced a relatively new concept of planning for development and coordinating the development programmes that are being implemented throughout Sarawak. With the setting up of the SPU, we started to move towards managing development through planning and monitoring, rather than just merely providing administrative services in the execution of development programmes for the State.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *How did your early years in the civil service shaped your work values and culture?*

STATE SECRETARY: Those early years made me realize that the ability to articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and systematically was crucial in order to convince others, especially our immediate superiors, to support our ideas. We had a lot of opportunities to explore and introduce new ideas and approaches that required creativity and the ability to express these clearly. I was privileged to have worked with a group of people who were able to articulate and express ideas clearly, especially in our reports or proposals. My colleagues at SPU at that time - Tan Sri Hamid Bugo, Datuk Amar Aziz Hussain, Datu Dr Hatta, Datu Chin Jew Bui and Teo Tien Hiong - I must say, all had inquisitive minds, and we were always excited to share and explore new ideas for developing the State, and improving the delivery mechanisms of the Sarawak civil service.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *What was the work environment then?*

STATE SECRETARY: The situation then was not like today because almost everything we had to do was relatively new in Sarawak.

In the early 1980s, economic development gathered momentum and development administration was in vogue. We implemented the Integrated Agriculture Development Project (IADP) which was a new approach adopted by the government to address rural poverty. I was the first Project Director and the task was to implement



SS courtesy call to Chief Minister of Sarawak



From left : Datu Abdul Ghafur Shariff, Datuk Haji Mohd. Morshidi bin Abdul Ghani, Datu Wilson Baya Dandot, Tan Sri Mohammad Sidek bin Hassan, Datuk J.C. Fong & En. Liaw Soon Eng

the RM200 million ADB-financed project in 7 years. It was an experience to set up the new office in a remote area like Saratok then, where co-ordination takes place. I learnt and practice development communication at the grass root level talking to Temenggongs, Penghulus and the local populace. And through this programme, we had the opportunity to work with international organizations such as Asian Development Bank, among others. It was exciting to be able to relate Sarawak's rural development in the context of, say, international markets for commodities and how we should be able to tap trends in commodities production so that we can reap economic benefits for the State. We had to help our farmers, who were then mostly surviving on small farm landholdings, to realize more economic benefits by convincing them to adopt better production techniques so that they can take advantage of international marketing trends for their crops.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *What other work experiences further enhanced your confidence and competencies?*

STATE SECRETARY: I was privileged to be seconded to the International Pepper Commodity Secretariat based in Jakarta, Indonesia for six years. I was still attached with the SPU but was seconded there. This experience was what I consider my "living university". I had the opportunity to travel to India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil, Hong Kong, London and many other places to attend inter-governmental meetings. It was during this time that I honed my skills to write proposals and minutes of meetings and reports that conform to international standards, both in the quality of the report as well as in the use of the English language. We had to write those reports then in a matter of a few hours!

This was the time when I found myself

matching wits with my counterparts from the civil service organizations of India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil and other countries. It was a very challenging and rewarding experience for the young civil servant that I was at that time. Looking back, I credit that stint as the one work experience that really built my confidence to tackle the unfamiliar and not to be afraid of the unknown. I learned that if you come prepared to learn, then you will come out of the experience a more confident person, able to tackle an even more difficult assignment or task.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *After your Jakarta stint, what was the next step in your career?*

STATE SECRETARY: When I came back to SPU, I realized that I needed to acquire more knowledge and exposure in the area of development studies and planning. So I pursued my Masters degree in Development Economics in Sussex. The British education system encourages a student to pursue learning that is limited only by his/her enthusiasm or interest. They give you a lot of reading, and the topics are practically limitless. That way, you keep discovering fresh knowledge, new insights on any topic.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *Was this the beginning of your passion for books?*

STATE SECRETARY: Not really. Reading has always been my hobby and passion. I love books. Reading is one of the most accessible means of lifelong learning. I am not a passive reader. I engage myself in whatever I read, noting down, digesting, challenging, refuting, agreeing with the ideas presented by the author. It's sort of a mental conversation that I engage in, and out of this process, I come up with ideas that I am challenged to apply in my work or personal situations.

RS RAKAN Sarawak: *How do you view your position as the State Secretary?*

STATE SECRETARY: It is such a privilege and an honour to be entrusted with such a challenging task. I am grateful to our Chief Minister, I am very proud of what the Sarawak civil service has achieved thus far, under his leadership and my predecessors who served as State Secretary under his administration - Tan Sri Bujang Nor, Tan Sri Hamid Bugo and Datuk Amar Hj Aziz Husain. I will bring my skills, expertise, tenacity, drive, and the passion to continue and enhance the tradition of innovation and excellence and dynamism in our civil service. The results I am expected to deliver, together with all the other civil servants here in Sarawak, is essentially to add value to peoples' lives and transform their lives for the better. We can do a thousand and one tasks but if our efforts do not transform the peoples' lives for the better, then it becomes meaningless.

The position I hold legitimizes my authority but it does not give me actual power. The power comes from the sense of purpose and commitment that I bring into my job, when I choose to apply my will, heart and soul with passion to helping transform society and our communities. No matter what our station in life is, we are powerful only if we are changing peoples' lives for the better.