Private-to-Public TRANSITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The launch of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 in 2016 and the associated restructuring of government institutions have led to a number of dramatic shifts in public sector institutions. A notable phenomenon in the context of these developments has been the recruitment of private sector executives for leadership positions in the public sector, which reflects strategic objectives to promote a new mindset in public sector leadership and enhance public-private networks and partnerships. This transition, however, undoubtedly requires a good deal of adjustment by former private sector leaders as they confront various organizational, cultural and personal challenges that may differ dramatically in nature and scope from what they were accustomed to in the private sector. This publication sets out to investigate those challenges and understand the lessons learned from those who have successfully navigated that journey. The aim is to benefit both current and recent private sector recruits who are about to embark on similar journeys and to enrich leadership research in the Saudi context.

For this research, representatives of MISK Foundation and the Center for Creative Leadership conducted one-hour in-depth interviews in December 2019 and January 2020 with 21 leaders who had transitioned from the private to the public sector. We then used a survey to confirm what we heard in the interviews. The responses of 176 leaders who made the private-to-public transition supplement what we heard from the interviews. We also examined differences between those leaders who joined the public service prior to 2016 (n=70) and after that year (n=100) when the transformation program began, as well as men (n=132) and women (n=44).

Following a brief discussion of the Saudi public sector in light of Vision 2030, we will examine some of the key challenges leaders in the interviews and survey faced in their transition from the private to the public sector. Next we consider the key skill-sets current leaders recommended for incoming leaders to focus on during their first 100 days in office. This is followed by the factors that typically caused leaders to derail in this transition based on their own experience or through their observation of others. Finally, we conclude with recommendations around the support leaders require before and after the transition.

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THE SAUDI PUBLIC SECTOR IN LIGHT OF SAUDI VISION 2030

Public Sector in Transformation

A number of programs and institutional mechanisms were introduced as part of the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016 such as the National Transformation Program (NTP), the establishment of Vision Realization Offices (VROs) in Ministries as well as merging various government institutions to support their efficiency and capability of delivering change. These changes did not happen overnight, but went through a number of iterations (such as NTP 2.0 in 2017) as the government was undertaking an unprecedented scope of transformation with great urgency that required a certain level of risk-taking and a more agile 'learning by doing' approach. Most importantly, such dramatic shifts, especially managing organizational change and achieving the ambitious goals of Vision 2030 require leaders to adopt and model a 'change' mindset and an impact-driven skillset that is very different from the stereotypical image one might have of 'civil servants'. Transformation is impossible to sustain without the required leadership, especially in the public sector where the stakes are high and the impact is national.

> *The leadership of the Crown Prince – he is a magnet. People want to be a part of it. The fact that youth are being called upon to take big responsibilities – this wasn't an option in the past. You had to be 50+ in the past to be promoted."*
>
> – **Hosam Almadani,** Executive Director, IC&E, G20 Saudi Secretariat

Realizing this, the Saudi government actively recruited leaders from the private sector to implement the necessary transformation change across the ministries, commissions and newly-created Vision Realization Programs (VRPs). The fact that HRH the Crown Prince was himself 30 years old when he conceived the Vision 2030 program, has empowered and inspired a new younger breed of leaders in key government positions. This has led to palpable cultural changes over the past five years in the way government conducts its work, most notably at the executive level where most of the private sector recruitment takes place.

Increasing Diversity of Opportunities

Before considering motivations for transitioning to the public sector, it is important to recognize the diversity of that sector. While conducting the interviews across the different public institutions, it became clear that there was no single common culture across these organizations. Aside from the expected functional differences and mandates in each ministry or commission, there were noticeable differences due primarily to the recency of their inception. For example, institutions such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development[1] are all key players in the Kingdom's Vision programs, requiring them to implement not only national transformation initiatives but also internal restructuring and organizational change. The organizational culture in these older and larger institutions is rather different from more recently established entities, especially the Authorities and Commissions born from the Vision 2030 programs such as the National Center for Performance Measurement (Adaa), General Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises (Monshaat), and General Entertainment Authority. The latter tend to be less

[1]At the time the study was conducted, this was still the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and it had not yet been merged with the Ministry of Civil Service (MCS), which was the entity responsible for public employees. We also interviewed an MCS leader for this study. By the time the data analysis had been completed, the merger had taken place, which is another indication of the fast pace of change and restructuring the Kingdom has been witnessing in the public sector.

bureaucratic and characterized by younger teams, often handpicked from scratch from the private sector. This diversity between public sector entities means that there will be some differences between the challenges faced and the way in which skillsets need to be applied by new leaders, just as there are differences between the private and public sectors.

REASONS FOR MAKING THE MOVE TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR

We began our interviews by exploring the reasons that each leader made the transition from the private to the public sector. This section of the report identifies the two main reasons – or drivers – that led leaders to make the move.

1 VISION 2030 – The Key Driver for Moving to the Public Sector

The vast majority of the leaders we interviewed confirmed that Vision 2030 is, indeed, the main driver that propelled them from private to public service. In Vision 2030, they saw the opportunity to be part of the transformation that will have impact on the country and the region. They want to be part of the history-making journey and be part of a team that is building a future for new generations. They are excited that people under 50 years of age are invited to be part of the transformation. They see significant opportunities to learn and grow by being a part of a government that is, itself, developing and raising the bar for what public sectors can achieve. And they want to lead change from within the government versus outside of it. Some also expressed excitement about giving back to their country by being a part of Vision 2030.

2 More Autonomy, Growth Opportunity, and Work-Life Balance

Most leaders are clear that joining the government is no longer about stability and working short days. Indeed, Vision 2030 creates the demand for governmental leaders to work long hours on a regular basis. Some leaders see the government as a place where they can have an opportunity to demonstrate their ambition, while others placed a priority on working in an context where they would see a project or initiative through from start to finish – an opportunity not allowed for those working as consultants who are only involved until recommendations are made. Still others chose a public service role because it allowed them to prioritize family needs and desires – including the pride of parents when a family member takes a prominent role in the government - and the opportunity to learn and develop.

CHALLENGES WHEN PREPARING FOR THE TRANSITION TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR

I discovered that bureaucracy still exists in government, but they are using the term governance instead, and our role now as leaders with deep experience from the private sector is to have positive impact by applying best practice in governance, which will enable us to achieve Vision 2030 goals"

– Osama Al Zamil, Vice Minister, Ministry of Industry & Mineral Resources

Bureaucracy is a set of policies and procedures. It is not a negative thing unless it's executed in a negative way"

– Ali Kurdi, General Director Ministry of Commerce & Investment

2/3

of the total respondents cited bureaucracy as one of the top five challenges they faced

One of the key inflection points for new public sector leaders is to understand and anticipate the challenges they may encounter as they make the transition from private to public sector leadership**.** The leaders we spoke with shared surprises that they encountered in moving from private to public service. Several showed up as challenges, while one was a pleasant realization.

Higher Level of Bureaucracy

Many of the leaders we interviewed shared that the biggest surprise they encountered was the complexity presented by government laws, policies, and procedures. They cited the extensive processes, policies, and procedures required to get anything done in the public sector – one person shared that the amount of time spent dealing with bureaucracy sometimes exceeded the time dedicated to doing the work itself. Many learned that they needed to learn or re-learn formal Arabic for writing memos and other documents given the formality of communication in the government structure. They needed to learn the procedures for getting approvals through multiple levels of government hierarchy. The survey responses confirmed that this was a significant challenge for the majority of leaders making the transition. Two-thirds of the total respondents cited bureaucracy as one of the top five challenges they faced. This was true regardless of when someone joined the public sector (prior to or after 2016) and regardless of gender.

More Complex Stakeholder Environments

Another common set of challenges were framed as "greater complexity" and included aspects such as: the extensive set of stakeholders that one must work with, get buy-in from, and negotiate with when trying to implement change; and the prevalence of large projects involving deep organizational levels. In terms of policies and processes, some specific examples included how complex it is to hire someone and the challenge in obtaining necessary data and information both internally and from other public agencies. The scale of projects crossing deep organizational levels was seen as a challenge by over 40% of men surveyed, but by less than 20% of the women.

Differences in Organizational Culture

Some of the challenges related to the different organizational cultures that are found in the private versus the public sector, such as high caution and risk aversion in the government, where 'no decision' is often preferable to 'wrong decision'; the merits of an idea are sometimes trumped by *mujamala* (accepting something out of politeness), and a tendency by some long-term 'legacy' government employees to adopt an 'us versus them' attitude towards private sector recruits.

Indeed, this was confirmed by survey respondents. **A culture of caution or risk aversion was seen as a challenge by almost half of the total respondents, and was especially noticeable to almost two-thirds of those who joined prior to 2016, and half of the women surveyed.**
And a culture of *mujamala* was seen as a challenge by almost half of overall respondents. Resistance from 'legacy' government employees was seen as a key challenge by over a third of the leaders surveyed.

Leaders joining the public service at this time have a great opportunity to empower government employees – many of whom are excited about the changes and possibilities – by giving them meaningful work to do, appropriate levels of decision-making authority over their work, and reinforcing when employees take risks that benefit the organization. Indeed, some of the leaders we interviewed are seeing a positive side to the new organizational culture in the public service, where leaders coming from the private sector are actually succeeding in bringing in more agile mindsets that are shifting existing culture in positive ways.

41.7% Male

50% Female
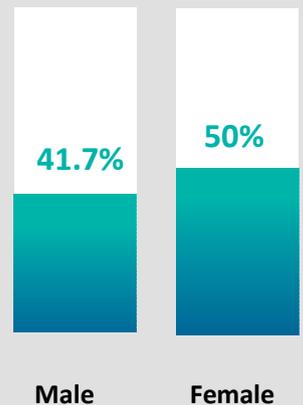
A culture of caution or risk aversion was seen as a challenge

> I thought I would face a very rigid ministry with classic government. I was very surprised. Everything is moving fast."
>
> **– Hind Alzahid,**
> Deputy Minister of Women's Empowerment
> Ministry of Human Resources & Social Development

Shifting Priorities of Leadership

A factor that is more common in public institutions is the amount of flux and turbulence created whenever there is turnover in the minister role for any given ministry. Some new ministers change a significant portion of the ministry's agenda. On the one hand, this may constitute a welcome refresh that advances institutional change and impact. On the other, it may result in discontinuity and hampering institutional development. In any case, this contrasts with private organizations that tend to have a consistent set of core capabilities that sustain the ongoing work from one transition to the next. This challenge was seen as significant by over a third of leaders surveyed overall, especially by those who joined the public service during or after 2016 and the women surveyed. A related challenge we heard was that the specific job a leader is tasked with can be ambiguous and changing, usually due to the impact on leaders and employees when senior leadership changes result in a shift in strategic priorities. This challenge was identified by over a third of all survey respondents, including every subgroup except for women.

Competing Over Talent

In previous times, public sector jobs were considered attractive for their shorter working hours, lighter work load, and job security (civil service regulations make it very difficult to fire employees). In addition, obtaining a job in the public sector was (and remains) something that families take pride in. On the other hand, the private sector was seen previously as the place to be for professional development. Therefore dynamic and ambitious talent often chose private sector roles.

Today, that equation has changed considerably, at least at the executive level, as the leaders we spoke with noted the public sector had developed into a much more attractive proposition than the private sector. Public sector entities are attracting people with agile mindsets and practices, resulting in some government entities becoming more sophisticated and agile organizations than even the private sector. According to one leader we interviewed, new (younger) leaders are not as concerned with job security as their predecessors; they are rather looking for motivating
work and are comfortable with moving around to different jobs and employers across their careers. They are finding it in the public sector.
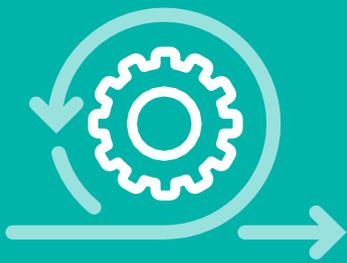
KEY TRANSITIONAL CHALLENGES FOR NEW PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERS

GOVERNMENT BY-LAWS, POLICIES, PROCESSES, AND PROCEDURES

69.5%

RESISTANCE FROM LONG-TERM PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES

37.5%

AMBIGUITY IN MY JOB DESCRIPTION/RESPONSIBILITIES

36.9%
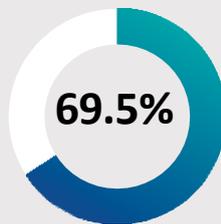
CULTURE OF CAUTION/RISK AVERSION

43.8%

SHIFTING PRIORITIES OF LEADERSHIP

35.8%

MUJAMALA

40.9%
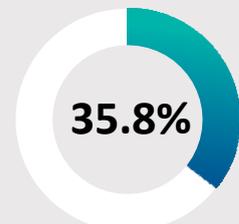
KEY SKILLSETS FOR THE FIRST 100 DAYS

In this section, we will highlight the key skillsets and knowledge that leaders new to the private sector need to build in their first 100 days (or sooner) on the job**.** Two points are worth keeping in mind here. First – the skillsets we discuss below are important in most sectors – they are not necessarily unique to the public service in the Kingdom. However, leaders transitioning from the private to the public sector need to build awareness quickly of the differences in the context in which they apply these skills – it will require that they apply some of the same skills *differently* in the public sector than they did in the private sector. Second, leaders are expected to adapt and deliver quickly in the public service. They do not have the luxury of time to find their footing before demonstrating results. They are expected to set the tone for their leadership early, hence the need to focus on these skillsets as soon as they hit the ground in their new roles.

> "Prepare before joining – this is my #1. I need to know the mandates of my role. What are the resources available for me to do that? What are the expectations of me? What is the psychological preparation I need to do?"
>
> – **Osama Al Zamil,** Vice Minister, Ministry of Industry & Mineral Resources

Before sharing the skillsets themselves, most of the leaders we interviewed made it clear that the most important imperative for leaders transitioning from the private to public sector is to understand the way the government works, especially its procedures. There were many calls for an orientation program that would familiarize new leaders regarding multiple aspects of the government: the history and current state of the ministry/commission they are joining; drafting official letters and other communication methods; the difference between royal decrees, royal orders, high orders, and council of ministers decrees, etc.; and generally the policies and procedures of operating within the government.

After understanding the context of leading and operating in the Saudi government, we heard that leaders need to ensure that they have developed several core skillsets required for effective leadership. Based on the 26 key themes we heard in the interviews, we used the survey to ask leaders to indicate the 5 most important skillsets. The eight skillset categories emerging as most important are expanded upon below.

CHANGE **MANAGEMENT**

Many of the leaders we interviewed spoke of the need to be skilled in change management, which is not surprising considering the mandate of transformation that is expected in most government entities. They spoke of the combination of skills needed, in terms of vision, influence, organizational skills, and business acumen. For example, one leader described putting a roadmap together that started with a clear corporate strategy and continued through requirements. He focused on "*people, procedures, policies, culture, governance, systems, and business solutions*" (Abdullah Abu Dawood, Advisor, Government Sector). Another said *"I think change management is one of the key things that you will need to understand as a process. How to really identify the people who will help you change and how to deal with each type of person"* (Rasheed AlKibsy, GM sector localization, Ministry to Human Resources) and Social Development).

DIRECTION-SETTING

Leaders need to be able to influence across their peers, across silos, and across various entities. This is particularly true with stakeholder management. Leaders should be able to ensure that everyone understands the "why" behind changes that are needed, ideally by articulating values. Because leaders will encounter a broad range of stakeholder groups in their work in the public sector, and the needs of those stakeholder groups will differ, leaders need agility in their ability to set direction with these groups. It should be noted that this agility is needed in communication, as well, because the different stakeholder groups may have conflicting or differing views about the direction being set and will need to understand the direction in relation to their beliefs and needs. Almost one-third of the total group of respondents surveyed indicated that this is a critical skillset for leaders to build, regardless of when they joined the public sector and regardless of their gender.

STRATEGY EXECUTION

Leaders need the ability to execute strategy in the public sector, through building processes, systems, policies and procedures in addition to developing capability in people. Leaders should institutionalize these processes so that they may continue after the leader moves on. Part of successfully doing so requires understanding existing political structures and practices – e.g., understanding how to navigate the hierarchy to obtain approvals. One leader suggested that leaders need to be pragmatic – disrupting existing structures and processes gently. Of the leaders responding to the survey, almost one-third of both men and women and over one-third of those joining the public service after 2016, indicated that leaders need to implement sustainable processes, systems, policies and procedures that continue after the leader leaves the organization. In addition, women were the only sub-group to indicate that *taking actions that implement strategic goals or priorities* was also among the top five critical skillsets for leaders.
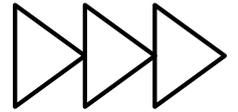
COMMUNICATION

One of the most frequently mentioned skillsets was the ability to communicate effectively. In particular, communicating transparently and in a way that speaks to the specific needs of the listener is critical. Context is important here. This is not just general strong communication skills but learning how to communicate effectively within the KSA government and with senior leaders. For example, leaders need to understand the importance of face-to-face communication, rather than relying on email as a primary method. One rule of thumb was to precede each email with a brief face-to-face chat, at least when it comes to new non-operational matters. Two sub-groups indicated that an important skillset is understanding when to use face-to-face communication versus email: those who joined prior to 2016 and men. Transparent communication was among the top five most important skillsets for over one-third of the leaders we surveyed, regardless of when they joined the public service or their gender. In addition, all leaders indicated that it is important to communicate with stakeholders in a way that speaks to their specific needs (e.g. talking about the issues of importance to each individual stakeholder).

DECISION-MAKING

Leaders need to be able to make decisions effectively in unstructured environments. They also need to be agile in making decisions and executing – leaders should decide fast, fail fast, and react fast. When faced with an overwhelming list of initiatives the ministry is aiming to launch, decide first which ones to cancel or postpone. Leaders need to hold this mindset even before starting – one leader suggested the need to "start before you start." Those joining the public service prior to 2016 and women were the two sub-groups that specifically indicated the importance of this skillset.

LEADING A TEAM

Leaders we interviewed cautioned that civil service employees should not be underestimated (especially juniors) but integrated into teams – many of today's civil servants are agile, hardworking and patient. One leader suggested that leaders should try to create teams, not committees – she said "*I don't form teams, I announce them and see who wants to join*." Leaders should manage potential resistance to change by keeping team members at arm's length until operations are up and running, then involve them in everything. And
as it relates to women employees, leaders of today need to understand that women in government may be accustomed to a more conservative environment than women in the private sector – they will need to adjust to a more contemporary environment of men and women working together. Leaders should also hold regular (e.g. bi-weekly) meetings with their employees to maintain accountability and discover new and emerging talent.

Finally, leaders are cautioned about hiring superstars who tend not to last long in government jobs, but instead to hire hardworking people who are eager to learn. It is important for leaders to consider how team members complement one another as well – no one leader or one employee will possess all of the skills critical for the team's success. Indeed, almost one-third of those surveyed believed that developing
capability in people was one of the five most important skillsets for leaders. It is also interesting that almost one-third of the group that joined the public service in 2016 or later indicated that leading with honesty, authenticity, and sincerity was one of the top skills needed.

POLITICAL SAVVY

Leaders need to manage the changes to strategy that accompany the turnover of ministers. They should understand both the official and unofficial authority matrix and accept some of the formalities as part of the organization's culture. Leveraging social media has become critical for learning about key players and developments in the public service. Leaders who are new to the public service need to understand ministers' priorities and the KPIs they value. Because ministers are pulled in many different directions simultaneously, leaders should also determine how best to communicate their recommendations most effectively. One leader suggested that such influence is better achieved by working top-down rather than bottom-up.
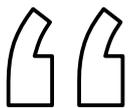
> *A common mistake for newcomers is to start changing from the first day. The changes should come incrementally not radically especially when dealing with government employees. A lot of them are very good and have years of experience. Learn how to utilize their knowledge. Use diplomacy so that you can get them to participate in achieving the changes"*
>
> **– Ali Kurdi,** General Director, Ministry of Commerce & Investment
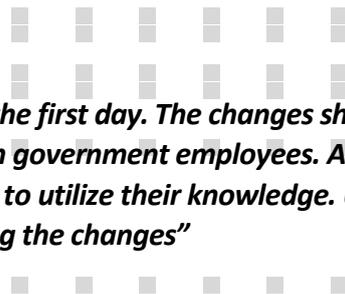
INTERPERSONAL SAVVY

Leaders need high levels of emotional intelligence and social intelligence (being able to understand the fears and drivers of others). Investing in relationships enables leaders to get things done. They should be honest, sincere, and authentic. They should balance humility and authority in a way that comes across as fair, friendly, yet firm. They should listen fully and understand who to include in their inner circle of trust. Leaders should have curiosity – learning by observing others and not shying away from asking a lot of questions. They should also have patience – understanding how and when to follow-up with others in a way that does not come across as micromanaging yet holds others accountable.

> *Demonstrate emotional intelligence, be vulnerable and ask for help, balance humility and authority, and communicate effectively."*
>
> **– Najla AlSaif,** Chief Human Resources Officer, Tanmiah Food Group
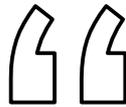
> *In terms of leadership style, I want my team to know I have empathy toward them. I talk with them about their families, their kids. I help them understand I am here to help them – not to make use of them. We are in it together."*
>
> **– Hind Al-Zahid,** Deputy Minister of Women's Empowerment Ministry of Human Resources & Social Development

US Public Service Comparison

By comparison, a study by CCL in 2016 of 5000 government civilian leaders found that the five most important leadership challenges (framed as capabilities or skillsets) included Personal Leadership, Managing/Motivating Subordinates, Organizational Operations/Performance, Talent Management, and Boundary Spanning. There is some similarity between the two populations' critical skillsets: Personal Leadership includes both Communication and Decision-making, Talent Management includes Leading a Team, and Boundary Spanning requires Alignment. Yet Saudi leaders who have transitioned from private to public sector differ in the importance of the skillsets Strategy Execution, Interpersonal Savvy, Political Savvy, and Change Management.

Singaporean Public Service Comparison

At a recent speech at the Public Services Leadership Dinner, the head of Singapore's civil service, Leo Yip said *"The new leadership competencies reflect the more diverse capabilities that leaders need, including the ability to influence a wider range of stakeholders, the ability to effectively operationalise and not just develop policies,"* Yip said. The competencies form part of an updated framework which includes a list of 'red flags' – "behaviours and actions that can render a leader ineffective" such as lacking the courage to make tough decisions or "prioritising agency's mission over collective outcomes". Again, there is some overlap with key skillsets needed by Saudi public service leaders – particularly Alignment, Strategy Execution, and Decision-Making.

DERAILMENT FACTORS: WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Global research by CCL has identified five key reasons that cause leaders to derail or fail to achieve their potential in a role or organization. We heard all of these reasons from the interviews, as well as one additional reason – lack of patience. In the section below, we present the derailment factors from the most prevalent factor (Patience) to the least (Failure to Meet Business Objectives) according to the leaders surveyed in this study.

⊖ **Lack of Patience**: Inability to persevere due to procedures that slow things down, repeated setbacks and/or apparent lack of progress.

A key aspect that drives departure from the public sector back to the private sector is not having the patience to deal with the slow process of creating change. The amount of time one must spend managing the 'political' aspects of change and transformation versus doing the work itself is a key reason. Many leaders expressed frustration at the imbalance of time spent managing politics versus doing the actual work.

Another factor that contributes to a lack of patience is when leaders are accustomed to praise and become disappointed when it is not forthcoming. This is seen as a significant derailment factor by a majority of those who joined the public service before 2016 or later. In addition, a majority of both men and women indicated this had affected either them or someone they have known as well.

> "The biggest thing I realized is that a high achiever is used to getting accolades. You have to discipline yourself not to be used to that frequency of praise, but you do question 'what am I not doing right?' I had to recalibrate for myself what achievement looks like and channel that need into building the next generation of leaders."
>
> – **Hazim AlHazmi,** Chief Strategy Officer, Saudi Tourism Authority

⊖ **Difficulty Changing and Adapting:** shows resistance to change and resistance to learning and developing in response to mistakes.

The biggest challenge related to this issue is the perceived lack of organization that people experience when they come to the government compared to their private sector jobs. We heard from one person that he was accustomed to most systems being organized in the private sector, but found very little organization when he joined the public sector.

Others were not really prepared for the environment they were entering. We heard new public leaders described as "they are not resilient. They don't have the drive for a sense of achievement and are coming for the job only." The problem may be exacerbated when the person believes he/she was recruited from the private sector because their experience and expertise is superior to that of their civil service colleagues, making them unwilling to learn and adapt. This stumble was experienced or seen by two thirds of leaders regardless of when they joined the public sector, as well as by two thirds of the women respondent.

> "Be humble, be a servant. You might come from the private sector with the attitude that you have been successful, but you are there to serve in the government now."
>
> – **Hosam Almadani,** Executive Director, IC&E, G20 Saudi Secretariat

> "Make sure you are doing it for the right reason – not money or title. If you aren't joining for the mission, it is not the right place for you. You have to believe in the mission and the chance to have national impact."
>
> – **H.E. Haitham Al-Ohali,** Vice Minister of the Ministry of Communications & Information Technology
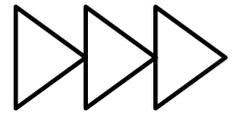
⊖ **Problems with Interpersonal Relationships:** Difficulties in developing good working relationships with others.

There is a challenge when a leader and his or her boss have very different ways of approaching the work. One leader described a colleague's experience in this way: *"He was working with the wrong boss."* There was a generation gap in their thinking and their skills. The boss wanted to take the organization in one direction – anchoring the organization in the 1940s and 1950s. There was no way they could work together, so my friend quit.

Of survey respondents, half of those joining the public service before 2016 and half of the men indicated that they had stumbled due to problems with interpersonal relationships or seen others stumble.

⊖ **Difficulty Building and Leading a Team:** Inability to select, develop, and motivate an effective team.

This challenge came up quite frequently when leaders were describing the surprises they encountered when joining the public sector. Some of the reasons behind this stumbling block were related to the challenge of motivating a team consisting of legacy public service employees and newer employees from the private sector. Of our survey respondents, over half of the women indicated that either they or someone they knew had stumbled in their leadership because of this challenge.

⊖ **Failure to Meet Business Objectives:** Difficulties in following up on promises and completing goals.

One of the reasons cited for failing to meet business objectives was when the person hired was not qualified for the job in the first place, usually because the hiring process did not properly flag a poor fit. One of the reasons that this type of mis-hiring happens includes: *"A complex hiring process hinders attracting necessary talents"* – Ahmed Alsuhaili, Director of industrial policies department, Ministry of Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources.

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SUPPORTING LEADERS IN TRANSITION

The research produced several recommendations for ways that government organizations can help new public service leaders make a smooth transition from the private sector, as well as skillsets and practices new leaders should consider and apply in their own practice.

Based on our research, organizations may want to:

- Bring new government joiners from different entities together to build relationships and networks.

- Give new leaders an onboarding package that includes the ministry's strategy, vision and mission, regulations such as civil service, financial, authority map, and delegation process; and what is in or out of their authority.

- Provide guidance to help new leaders understand the ecosystem within the government. They should be able to build a network and skills to move across the government and not feel they must remain in one ministry only.

- Create a shadowing and mentoring program where leaders can attend committee meetings and board meetings with a minister. The leader can see how things work without having the expectation to get something done under pressure. Allow them a safe space to ask questions.

- Provide sufficient orientation, including technical onboarding that helps them understand how to operate in the government. This includes official protocols, government laws (royal decree vs. royal order, high order, council of ministers' decree), and policies and procedures.

- Create better systems to support leaders in assessing talent for succession and development purposes.

Specific skillsets and practices for leaders entering the public sector:

1   Communicating Effectively

- Communicate with different stakeholders in a way that speaks to that particular individual's or group's needs.

- Aim to meet in person first. Avoid starting a non-conventional request with an email. Avoid sending a lot of emails. Follow up may be necessary, even for routine requests. Become comfortable with viewing such requests as being a 'favor'.

- Learn how to present something to your minister convincingly in 5 minutes. Ministers have no time to read long reports or sit through elaborate presentations.

2 Leading and Developing Employees

- Actively recognize and never underestimate the value of so-called 'legacy' employees or civil servants. Many of them possess talent that has not been allocated in the right place. Build effective relationships with team members and colleagues. Try to get to know them as individuals.

- Disrupt gently while respecting the organizational culture.

- Avoid criticizing another employee who may have a longer history and possible relationships you are not aware of.

- Think twice before replacing people in leadership positions. In the absence of systematic data and knowledge management, they are often an indispensable source of experience and connections to get things done.

- For challenging projects, do not start by selecting the team members. Instead, announce the project and see who wants to join. Recognize and show appreciation for your team members. Build a tight circle of trusted colleagues and get to know people by listening.

- Be disciplined about bi-weekly department meetings. This helps discover talent and maintain accountability.

- Involve civil service juniors in meetings to accelerate their development and promote transparency. Allow them to present reports to senior leadership.

- Hiring 'superstars' is not always the best recruitment strategy – they are more likely to derail. Try finding hardworking people that are hungry to learn and develop – they tend to be more resilient.

3 Manage Change Effectively

- Make sure to master your change management skills – both from a business process perspective and from the perspective of helping other people move through change and transformation. Learn how to identify your key stakeholders, and how to work with them.

- Be prepared to build processes. Involve change-resistant employees once operations are up and running. Try to institutionalize these processes to ensure their continuity once you leave the organization.

- Become comfortable with decision-making in unstructured environments.

- Do your homework to understand the authority matrix, culture of the organization, priorities of the Minister –identify the 'real' KPIs.

4 Invest in the Long Term

- Avoid perfectionism. Find the right balance between pragmatism and ensuring quality. Turn a blind eye to shortcomings. You have been hired to fix things but do it diplomatically.

- Pace yourself to avoid burnout. It is a marathon, not a sprint. Impact in the in the government sector takes much longer to materialize due its complexity and scale. Patience and perseverance are key.

- Leading transformation is inherently difficult but incredibly rewarding work. When faced with adversity, remember that your mission is to serve an entire nation and your achievements will impact generations to come.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: WHAT NEXT?

The Saudi public sector is changing rapidly in the context of national reforms driven by Vision 2030. What was once perceived as a secure, but maybe unambitious career option has become a magnet for ambitious private sector leaders who want to contribute to the country's transformation from within the public sector. While on the surface the differences in leadership and management styles appear to have decreased, it is the nuances, habits, and unwritten rules of the public sector that make the transition of leaders from the private sector a sometimes challenging one.

A key takeaway from this preliminary research seems to be the need for a program that supports private sector leaders make a smoother transition to the public. The majority of interviewees mentioned this need, often lamenting that such a program might have spared them some of the hardships of transition and expressly supporting the implementation of such an initiative. Leaders we interviewed revealed a number of lessons and insights that other leaders about to make the same transition would surely find helpful. Some of the skills, such as selecting the right mode of communication, are relatively simple but may go a long way in accelerating work and avoiding frustrations. Other skills, such as change management and political savvy, are more complex and need to be calibrated differently in public sector contexts. A program focusing on these challenges with specific reference to the Saudi government context and case studies from Vision 2030 leadership would be an important enabler for success.

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