

DEVELOPMENT OF CREATIVE CIVIL SERVANTS FOR A KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY: THE CASE OF SOUTH KOREA

Young Je Yoo¹

Abstract

Human resources development is a crucial factor among the many that have contributed to the national development of South Korea. As the premier public sector training institute in Korea responsible for enhancing the capabilities of public sector executives, COTI needs to provide appropriate education programs to cope with rapid changes in the global environment. As policymaking is a knowledge creation activity, critical thinking and creativity are fundamental to building government officials' competence. This article presents author's experience and thoughts, as the COTI's president, about the education for civil servants in Korea with a focus on the development of critical thinking and creativity.

Key Words: *human resources management, knowledge creation, civil servants' education, civil servants' competencies, creativity, critical thinking, Korea.*

I. Introduction

Korea, one of the poorest nations in the world only 50–60 years ago, has transformed itself from an aid recipient to a donor. It has now become the world's 10th largest economy with a GDP per capita 26,000 US dollars. However, there are some concerns over the sustainability of the growth – will Korea be able to keep growing and developing in this globalized world?

While Korea has so far achieved growth by following the footsteps of advanced countries, it now needs to become a driver in the global market. Will it be feasible, and how can Korea make it possible? Advanced countries are richer than Korea and have better infrastructure. Although Korea has made remarkable growth while turning from a poor nation to a world-leading economy, it still lacks wealth and infrastructure. Whether Korea can survive in this era of fierce global competition among the U.S., the EU, Japan, China, and other nations is the most important issue we face today.

¹ *Dr. Young Je Yoo is currently the President of the Central Officials Training Institute (COTI) and Professor at Seoul National University in the Republic of Korea. He was previously Vice Chancellor for Admissions in Seoul National University and director of Bio-Max Institute, a biotechnology research center based in Seoul National University. He also serves as a President of scientific organizations such as Scientists and Engineers without Borders and the Korea Bio-Economy Forum.*

Currently, Korea has approximately one million civil servants. The ratio of civil servants to the whole population is only half of that of other OECD countries, and is particularly small in numbers compared to the U.S. and China. In this situation, we need to develop every single Korean civil servant into a world-class talent. With the firm resolution to help them work as efficiently as possible, we need to educate our civil servants. Korea will be able to maintain growth on the global stage only when each and every one of our civil servants becomes world-class.

For this reason, it is crucial to define the direction of education for civil servants based on a clear understanding of how the world is changing in a high-paced globalization era. Taking into account that this wave of globalization is about the economy rather than simple politics, it should also be noted that globalization has also given birth to a knowledge-based society. In such a society, owners of global knowledge win. When a new era arises, we need to predict the changes in advance and adapt to the new environment. We should accept the changes.

II. Knowledge Creation

What matters in a knowledge-based society is who has the knowledge. However, more important question is who can create the knowledge. Accordingly, what is meant by “knowledge creation» and how is it created? In this regard, two main elements of knowledge creation should be understood – originality and significance.

A piece of art can be evaluated based on its originality and significance. An influential research or development idea should also possess originality and significance. But this criteria does not apply only to the science and technology sectors. They are well applicable to our daily lives. We face new challenges and problems every day that require new approaches to deal with them. Similarly, it is also relevant to civil servants in a way that they need to develop new and viable policies Rather than relying on the existing policies or referring to the practices of other countries, these new policies should fit to work in our culture and be efficiently implemented. As such, developing a policy is a knowledge-creating activity.

The next question is how can such creation occur? I think it is the curiosity that initiates the creation. As it is emphasized by the

Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel – “Curiosity is the start of everything”. Curiosity is the stepping stone on which science, technology or any other sector can be developed. Importance of critical thinking can be replaced by the one of curiosity. I believe curiosity along with critical thinking is the driver of every initiative.

III. Education Programs

Based on the discussion of the importance of curiosity and critical thinking, I consider that the primary goal of education for civil servants is to develop. At universities, students learn to think critically through reading books, writing reports and having discussions with other students. To develop their curiosity, students of the humanities or liberal arts classes are asked to think about questions such as “What does it mean to be human?”, “What is happiness?”, “How can we develop our society?”, “Is our society developing?” “How can science/technology contribute to social development?”, and “What values does art have?” By reading themed books, researching and discussing relevant topics with others, these students develop the habit of posing questions and searching for answers. In other words, curiosity or critical thinking becomes part of their daily lives.

For civil servants, critical thinking means answering such questions as “Is our country developing?”, “Is our ministry handling the missions efficiently?”, and “Am I working well?” When they ask themselves such questions and strive to answer them in the affirmative way, then, I believe, the public administration of this country will reach the higher level.

Yet, the education process is, of course, not limited to the curiosity or critical thinking only. Training is also a key in the process. In other words, training to develop creativity should be provided, so that curiosity can lead to the ideas that are the foundations of introducing new things. To stimulate creation, both the left and the right sides of brain are to be involved. The left brain is related to analytical and logical abilities, while the right brain is associated with artistic and intuitive abilities. How do both parts of the brain function to produce creative ideas? Let us briefly look at the results of a research conducted by educational specialists. If you have something in your mind and keep thinking about it, you may suddenly get inspired, and the inspiration is translated into tangible ideas. The process of getting inspiration is governed by the

intuitive right brain, while the process of organizing the inspiration and translating it into ideas is managed by the logical left brain. A balanced development of the left and the right brains is therefore very important.

What should be done to develop both parts of the brain? Through the study of literature, history, philosophy, and art we can develop the ability to think critically and, thus, develop the right brain. Developing the left brain, can be achieved by studying languages, mathematics and science. As such, we need to be trained to think logically and rationally.

With the aim of developing these skills, the Central Officials Training Institute (COTI) provides the Humanities/Science Convergence Program and the Creative Minds Program. We also offer long-term modularized education programmes, including book-reading and other relevant courses for newly-recruited officials and senior executive officials as follows:

- The Humanities/Science Convergence Program: A three-day course for understanding the concept of creativity in humanities and science, and for studying cases of humanities/science convergence;
- The Creative Minds Program: A three-day course for enhancing creativity and troubleshooting capabilities by developing the right part of the brain;
- The Global Creativity Academy: A four-day course for understanding the current government administration's philosophy and for developing global leadership skills and creativity;
- The New Leader Development Program: A 22-week program;
- The Senior Executive Program: A 10-month program.

IV. Schemes for Liberal Arts Education

The general public evaluates civil servants in various ways. One way is to judge whether civil servants are amateur or professional. If you are an amateur, you may be working hard but be content with the status quo, based on the belief that your employment is guaranteed. On the other hand, if you are a real professional, you must have appropriate expertise, just as professional athletes do, and competencies to succeed in this era of global competition. You will be recognized as a professional public servant once you have acquired and developed relevant world-class expertise in

public administration to make each and every Korean feel secure and happy. Thus, we have to think about the current status of the Korean public servants. In order for them to be professional and competent civil servants, we must ensure they receive the world's best education.

In this view, how does the bigger picture of education for civil servants look like? Education for civil servants does not differ from the general university education. The most important aspect is to have solid roots. Then there should be branches, and there should be fruits from those branches. With this in mind, we can conclude that the most fundamental element in every civil servant's education is liberal arts. The next step is to build relevant competencies and leadership, which represent branches. Then we can bear fruits, which are, for example, policies. To this end, specific courses such as policy planning should be provided. In this sense, the significance of liberal arts cannot be exaggerated.

Liberal arts education includes training in public service values, critical thinking and creativity. For the public service values' training, in particular, a prior research on how these values are understood and implemented by civil servants needs to be conducted. The following questions can be asked to assess to what extent civil servants recognise and practice each value: "Do you recognise this value?", "Do you agree with it?", "Are you willing to practice it?", and "Are you already practicing it?" The results of such evaluation should be taken into consideration upon designing the public service value-focused education programmes, so that the trainees receive a tailored training and can put their acquired knowledge into practice. In addition, courses should be segmented into such topics as perception of the country, the proper spirit for serving the people and ethics among others.

As previously discussed, critical thinking and curiosity are the starting point that requires a balanced development of the logical left brain and the intuitive right brain. I would like to add one more attribute – immersion. When Mozart, a musical genius, composed a musical work, it is known that he concentrated on it for several days without even eating or sleeping. In addition to the development of the left and the right brain, one needs to develop the ability to immerse oneself in his work. Working conditions in which one can concentrate and focus all his efforts on the work are prerequisite for this.

V. Discussion

Achievements of a government are determined primarily by the competencies of its civil servants and the quality of its personnel administration system. It is the education that nurtures competent civil servants, and it is the personnel administration system that enables civil servants to perform their work efficiently. Thus, it is important to ensure these two determinants are closely linked.

The next step is to establish an evaluation system to assess each civil servant's performance progress upon his completion of the educational programme and training. In addition, the results and feedback received from such evaluation system can be utilized to improve education programmes. Accordingly, this feedback system requires close communication and collaboration between education experts and administrative personnel.

Professional civil servants are at the heart of national competitiveness. Government leaders should work with the public to build a consensus that education should be prioritised in order to maximise the civil servants' competencies. When the importance of education is duly recognized and prioritised, we can accelerate national development.