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WHEN EMOTIONS INTERFERE WITH DUTY: WHY PROFESSIONALISM MATTERS

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In Malaysia, the public service has always been described as the backbone of the nation. With more than one and a half million civil servants, civil service plays a pivotal role in shaping how government policies are experienced by citizens and businesses. Whether it involves applying for a business license, seeking student financial aid, or dealing with local councils, the interaction between the citizen and government officers forms the foundation of public trust. Yet, one recurring challenge continues to emerge: the influence of personal emotion during professional duty.



Civil servants are, after all, human beings with emotions, preferences, and frustrations. Research in psychology and organizational behavior has shown that emotions influence judgment by shaping attention, memory, and risk perception (McConnell, 2024). A polite applicant may receive warmer treatment than one perceived as rude, while a worker's bad day can inadvertently result in dismissive communication.

In the Malaysian context, where the slogan of customer friendly and efficiency are constantly emphasized, such lapses create discontent and erode trust in the system.

The tension between personal feelings and professional obligations is not unique to Malaysia. Globally, studies in healthcare, policing, and journalism reveal how emotions shape professional decision-making. In healthcare, unmanaged negative emotions toward “difficult” patients can pose bias diagnostic accuracy and treatment decisions (McConnell, 2024). In policing, research demonstrates that anger and frustration can escalate conflicts instead of promoting de-escalation, whereas emotional regulation leads to better professional outcomes, and stronger community relations (Larney, 2022). Journalists reporting on traumatic events often struggle between human empathy and the need for objectivity, with emotional suppression sometimes reducing their effectiveness in the long run (Knight, 2020). These findings illustrate that emotional interference is not confined to one sector but is a widespread professional challenge.

For Malaysia, the issue is particularly critical because professionalism in the civil service has direct implications for national competitiveness. Investors and entrepreneurs often judge ease of doing business not only by regulations but also by the efficiency and fairness of government agencies.

If outcomes appear to depend on personal biases or interpersonal relationships, it discourages innovation and investment. This aligns with research showing that emotional biases in organizational contexts can reduce efficiency and compromise ethical decision-making (McManus, 2021).

Professionalism provides the safeguard. Instead of requiring officers to suppress emotions completely, professionalism emphasizes integrity, fairness, accountability, and respect. In practice, this means treating every citizen equally, communicating courteously, and ensuring that procedures, rather than moods, determine outcomes. Professionalism does not demand emotional detachment, but rather emotional discipline. Studies have shown that when organizations cultivate emotional intelligence through structured training, supervision, and reflection, professionals are better able to manage emotional interference while preserving empathy (Korkut & Sinclair, 2020; McIntosh, Antes & DuBois, 2021).



This balance between emotion and duty is especially important in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. Public officers often deal with citizens from different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Research on emotional ambivalence indicates that conflicting feelings, if not managed, can contribute to burnout and withdrawal (Alawwiyah, Sugma & Hasanati, 2025). Such outcomes reduce productivity and harm the very institutions meant to serve the public. However, environments that provide structured support, such as peer consultation and organizational cultures that acknowledge emotional challenges, tend to achieve better results (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Emerging technology brings new complexities. Artificial intelligence systems that monitor employee emotions are already being tested in some workplaces worldwide. While these tools may promise efficiency, they raise concerns about emotional privacy and could compel workers to hide authentic feelings, creating additional stress (Roemmich, Schaub & Andalibi, 2023). Malaysia must be cautious in adopting such practices, ensuring that any innovation respects human dignity and professional autonomy. Ultimately, professionalism matters because it sustains the trust that binds citizens and government. Emotional regulation should not strip officers of humanity, but help them harness empathy while remaining fair and consistent. This requires continuous professional education, leadership that models integrity, and policies that reward professionalism rather than tolerating bias.

In Malaysia's journey toward a high-income nation, the credibility of the civil service is as important as policy itself. When emotions interfere with duty, the citizen perceives injustice, efficiency declines, and trust erodes. On the contrary, when professionalism prevails, citizens feel respected, businesses thrive, and national progress accelerates. The challenge lies not in eliminating emotion from public service but in ensuring that it is wisely managed in the service of integrity, fairness, and accountability.

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