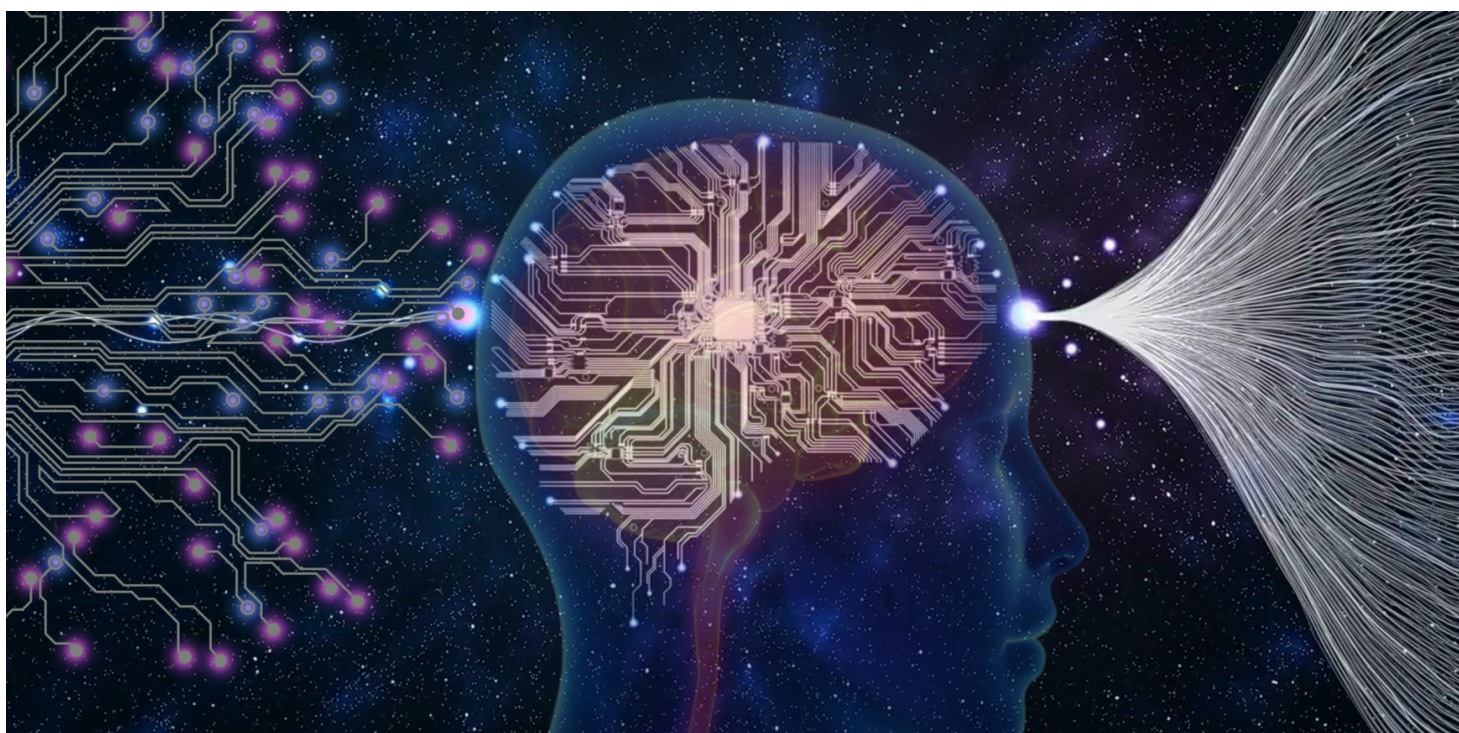




RSOG BYTES

A monthly digest of insights, thought leadership and knowledge from across the RSOG ecosystem

REWIRING PUBLIC SERVICE: WHY NEUROLEADERSHIP IS CHANGING GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP?



A government can have strong policies, systems, and procedures, yet still struggle when pressure rises. Why? Because public service does not run on rules alone. It runs on people.

Think of leadership like driving a car. Policies are the road signs, procedures are the map, and reporting systems are the dashboard. But the brain is the engine. If the engine does not respond well under pressure, even the best map will not get the organisation where it needs to go.

This is where neuroleadership comes in. Neuroleadership uses insights from neuroscience to help leaders understand how people think, respond to stress, deal with change, receive feedback, learn, and make decisions.

For government leaders, this can offer a practical way to improve how they lead people, especially in environments where pressure, uncertainty, and change are common.

How the Brain Works at Work

The brain is constantly processing information and deciding how to respond. When people feel safe, respected, and clear about what is expected of them, they are generally in a better state to think, plan, solve problems, and make decisions. The prefrontal cortex plays an important role in these functions.

But the brain is also sensitive to possible threats. At work, a threat does not have to be physical. Criticism, uncertainty, unfair treatment, loss of control, or feeling excluded can also affect how a person responds.

Under pressure, the amygdala can become more active while the prefrontal cortex, which supports judgement and problem-solving, works less effectively.

The result can be seen in everyday behaviour. People may become defensive. They may stop sharing ideas, resist change, avoid risks, or return to familiar routines. This is not always a skills problem. Sometimes, the working environment itself makes clear thinking harder.

So, How Does Neuroleadership Work?

Neuroleadership takes this understanding of the brain and applies it to everyday leadership. Instead of asking only, “What should my employees do?”, a neuroleadership approach also asks, “What conditions will help them think and perform effectively?” This changes how a leader approaches communication, change, feedback, decision-making, and learning.

For example, imagine a government department introducing a new digital system. Employees are told that the system will change how they work, but they are not told when it will happen, what will happen to their current roles, or what support they will receive. Uncertainty rises. Some employees may resist the new system, even if the system itself is useful.

A leader using neuroleadership would handle the situation differently. The leader would explain what is changing, what is not changing, what is still being decided, and what employees should expect next. Where possible, employees could also be given some choice in how they adapt their work.

The system has not changed. But the way the change is led has. That is neuroleadership in practice: understanding how the brain is likely to respond and creating conditions that support clearer thinking and better behaviour.

Small Changes, Better Responses

One useful framework is the SCARF model, which describes five needs that can shape behaviour: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness. Consider autonomy.

Government employees must work within laws, policies, and procedures. But leaders can still give employees some choice in how they organise tasks, solve problems, or improve a process.

This sense of ownership can increase trust and engagement. Certainty also matters, particularly during change. Employees may resist because they simply do not know what happens next.

Leaders can reduce this uncertainty by explaining what is known, what is still being decided, and the next step. People do not need every answer. They need enough clarity to move forward. The same principle applies to fairness, status, and relatedness. How leaders communicate, involve employees, recognise contributions, and make decisions can influence whether people experience the workplace as supportive or threatening.



Better Decisions Need a Pause

Neuroleadership is also useful for decision making. Government decisions can affect communities, budgets, healthcare, education, and public services. Yet the brain often relies on mental shortcuts. These shortcuts save time but can also create bias.

Under pressure, it becomes even easier to react automatically instead of examining assumptions. Good leadership training can teach leaders to interrupt this automatic thinking. A short pause before a major decision can help. So can asking someone with a different view to challenge assumptions.

Another method is a pre-mortem: imagine that the project has failed, then ask what caused it. It is like checking the route before driving into heavy traffic. A brief pause can prevent a much bigger mistake later.

Innovation Needs Safety

Neuroleadership also helps explain why some teams speak openly while others remain silent. Innovation depends on people being willing to question old methods, suggest ideas, raise concerns, and admit mistakes.

But when employees fear embarrassment or punishment, they may stay quiet. When they feel respected and fairly treated, they are more likely to contribute openly. This is where psychological safety matters.

Leaders can build psychological safety by listening, acknowledging ideas, inviting different views, and treating mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than automatically looking for someone to blame.

This can help teams share information, solve problems faster, and work better across departments. For government organisations, this is especially useful because problems are often complex and cannot always be solved by one person or one department.

Training That Stays

Neuroleadership also changes how we think about leadership development. Neuroplasticity shows that the brain can continue changing throughout life. Experienced public servants can still develop new habits, skills, and ways of thinking. But knowing something once does not automatically change behaviour.

Leadership development should therefore not depend on a one-off seminar. Learning works better when it is repeated, practised in real situations, supported by feedback, and strengthened through reflection.

For example, teaching a leader about psychological safety in a workshop creates awareness. Asking that leader to practise inviting different views during meetings, receive feedback, reflect on the experience, and repeat the behaviour helps turn the idea into a habit.

Training should be less like downloading a file and more like building a muscle. One session creates awareness. Repeated practice creates lasting change.

Participant's Feedback on the Programme

"To sustain our competitive edge and continue fostering exceptional talent, we recommend the ongoing implementation of the "Leading the Brain" programme. This excellent initiative does more than just train, it empowers our people with the cognitive tools necessary to lead confidently and communicate effectively. Continuing this journey ensures every employee is equipped to drive our organisation's future success."

JAMES ANAK MATHEW LIDI
Administrative and Diplomatic Officer
Ministry of Digital



Understanding the Brain to Better Leadership

The value of neuroleadership is therefore quite practical. A leader facing organisational change can create more certainty. A leader managing a team can provide appropriate autonomy and fairness. A leader making a difficult decision can pause and challenge assumptions. A leader seeking innovation can create an environment where people feel safe enough to speak. And a leader developing employees can use repeated practice and feedback to help new behaviours become habits.

These actions do not remove pressure, rules, or accountability. Government will always have all three. Neuroscience will not replace policy, ethics, accountability, or public trust. But it can help leaders better understand the people responsible for delivering them.

For government, neuroleadership offers a practical way to connect how the brain works with how people are led. When leaders understand what helps people think clearly, adapt, learn, and contribute, they can create healthier workplaces, stronger teams, and better public services.

This article is contributed by YBhg. Dato' Dr. Rizal Abu Bakar, an internationally acclaimed brain coach, clinical psychologist, and transformative leader. He is the Chief Vision Officer of Brain Story (Malaysia) and CEO of MyAsia (Saudi Arabia), and recently partnered with RSOG to deliver *Leading the Brain: How Power, Pressure & People Really Work* for senior public sector leaders.

EXPANDING AI HORIZONS: SHAPING THE FUTURE THROUGH PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS (PPP)

Why AI Matters

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a future possibility. It is already changing how governments make decisions, deliver services and engage with citizens. In line with **Dasar AI Negara (AI Nation 2030)**, which aims to transform Malaysia from an AI user into an AI creator and innovator through 28 national initiatives, public sector leaders must understand not only the technology itself, but also how to harness it responsibly to deliver meaningful outcomes for society.

Recognising the growing importance of AI in the public sector, the Razak School of Government (RSOG), in collaboration with the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) and Telekom Malaysia (TM), organised the Expanding AI Horizons to Shape the Future programme on 25 – 26 July 2026 at the TM Digital Academy, Multimedia University (MMU).

Key Insights

Opening the programme, YBhg. Prof Dato' Ts. Dr. Mazliham Mohd Su'ud, President of MMU, underscored the growing role of AI in public sector leadership. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in governance and service delivery, participants were encouraged to embrace continuous learning and innovation.

A recurring theme throughout the programme was that AI success extends beyond technology. Real impact depends on strong leadership, trusted data, sound governance, and a clear understanding of organisational priorities. Reinforcing this direction, YBhg. Datuk Fabian Bigar, Secretary General, Ministry of Digital in his Opening Speech outlined practical, immediate priorities for ministry leaders:

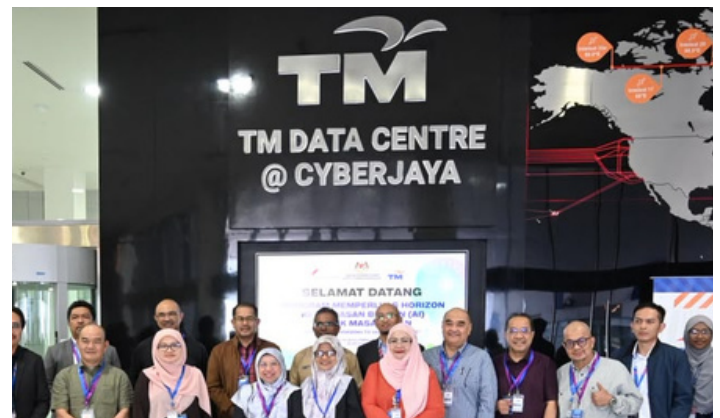
"Every programme participant must identify the Chief Digital Officer (CDO) within their respective ministries and understand the available AI initiatives and data assets. Additionally, participants need to be aware of and leverage readily accessible AI platforms, including MYGovUC, Gemini, and AlaaS."



Industry Insights

During the Industry Sharing Talk, experts from Telekom Malaysia shared practical examples of how AI is being used to improve efficiency, strengthen decision-making and create value across organisations.

Participants also explored emerging AI trends, real-world applications, and Malaysia's evolving digital landscape, with particular emphasis on the role of trusted data in enabling informed decision making and successful AI implementation.



The programme also examined responsible AI practices, including ethical governance, data stewardship, and accountability. These discussions reinforced the importance of balancing innovation with public trust while preparing leaders to navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by AI.

A programme highlight was the visit to Telekom Malaysia's Data Centre, where participants gained firsthand exposure to the digital infrastructure powering modern services. The visit also highlighted the critical role of secure data management, cybersecurity, and digital infrastructure in supporting reliable public services and AI-enabled operations.

Power of Public-Private Partnership

The partnership between TM, RSOG and JPA exemplified the power of cross-sector collaboration in advancing AI readiness within the public service. By combining industry expertise, leadership development, and public sector priorities, the programme provided participants with a practical and well-rounded understanding of AI adoption. More importantly, it demonstrated how partnerships can accelerate knowledge sharing, strengthen capabilities, and foster innovation in support of better public sector outcomes.

Putting AI into Action : RSOG's role

The programme called on participants to translate insights into tangible actions across their ministries, supported by robust data governance and cross-sector collaboration. In his closing address, YBhg. Tan Sri Dr. Wan Ahmad Dahlan bin Haji Abdul Aziz, Director General of Public Service, stressed the vital role of leadership in driving sustainable transformation.



To turn this vision into reality, RSOG actively equips senior leaders—primarily Deputy Secretary-Generals (TKSU)—to bridge national strategy with ministry execution:

- **AI-First Mindset:** Shifts leaders from awareness to implementation through experimentation and continuous learning.

- **Execution Focus:** Translates Malaysia Digital 2030 into actionable plans with clear KPIs, budgets, and governance.
- **Talent Fluency:** Advances public sector teams from basic literacy to applied tool proficiency.
- **Agency Synergy:** Partners with key stakeholders, including Kementerian Digital and Jabatan Penjara Malaysia, to drive unified public sector adoption.

Leadership Reflection

As AI integrates into government operations, success hinges on how leaders adopt it responsibly, strategically, and ethically. The leaders who thrive will be those who balance innovation with trust, and ambition with public accountability.

Programme Participant's Feedback

"This programme provides essential knowledge on AI and opens avenues for ministries to explore practical implementation opportunities."



Byte-sized Takeaways

- **Leadership-Driven:** Successful AI transformation demands strategic mindset shifts over pure tech adoption.
- **Trusted Foundations:** Robust data governance and security are essential for public trust.
- **Actionable Execution:** Leveraging readily accessible tools like MYGovUC, Gemini, and AlaaS across agencies.
- **Public Value:** Translating cross-sector synergy into tangible, citizen-centric impact.

RSOG IN ACTION: JULY – AUGUST 2026



- 1. Collaboration with Institut Perkhidmatan Awam Brunei (20 – 21 July 2026):** RSOG contributed to the delivery of the Public Sector Leadership and Management programme organised by Institut Perkhidmatan Awam, Negara Brunei Darussalam, sharing insights and expertise with public sector leaders from Negara Brunei Darussalam.



- 2. RSOG Executive Education Programme (20 – 24 July 2026):** As part of the Advanced Leadership Development Programme 2026 (ALDP) - Strategic Leadership for Innovative Growth, RSOG and 20 emerging public sector leaders engaged with Ms. Yenny Wahid, Director of the Wahid Foundation, during an enriching session in Bandung, Indonesia.



- 3. RSOG Open Programme 'Negaraku Malaysia' (22 – 23 July 2026):** RSOG successfully organised the Negaraku Malaysia programme, which brought together 20 participants from various public and private sector organisations. Over the two-day programme, participants gained deeper insights into Malaysia's system of government, democratic principles, public administration framework, and judicial functions through engaging discussions and interactive learning sessions.

OUR UPCOMING PROGRAMMES



26 – 27 SEPTEMBER 2026



28 SEPTEMBER –
2 OCTOBER 2026



7 – 8 OCTOBER 2026



- 4. Collaboration with Telekom Malaysia (TM) (25 – 26 July 2026):** RSOG, in collaboration with Telekom Malaysia (TM) organised the Expanding AI Horizons to Shape the Future programme to strengthen senior civil servants' understanding of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with a focus on emerging technologies, governance, and public sector applications.



- 5. Collaboration with PETRONAS Leadership Centre (4 & 11 August 2026):** RSOG contributed sessions on Interacting with the Public Sector as part of four Stakeholder Engagement Programmes organised by PETRONAS Leadership Centre at its campus in Bangi, Selangor.



- 6. Collaboration with Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore (11 – 13 August 2026):** RSOG delivered a three-day learning journey in Kuala Lumpur for senior government officials from Negara Brunei Darussalam and guest countries as part of the Executive Development Programme for Senior Government Officials led by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

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