

Reflections on the Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme: transforming women’s leadership in customs administrations

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‘This program is a turning point of my life and inspired me and boosted my confidence levels’
(CCP – WPDP participant, 2021).

Abstract

The Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme (CCP – WPDP) is a unique training program for women customs officers across the Asia-Pacific. The CCP – WPDP provided an opportunity to build participants’ leadership skills, bridge the gender gap and prepare themselves to be future customs leaders. The program featured various speakers from diverse agencies, leadership coaching and workshops. Participants said the program had a highly positive impact, the lessons learned will assist on their future leadership journey, and other officers would benefit from future CCP – WPDP programs. This paper advocates the CCP – WPDP as an excellent model for building the capacity and confidence of women in Customs, enabling them to actively pursue leadership opportunities at all levels of customs administrations. This paper recommends that similar training programs are implemented in all customs administrations and regular collaborative training programs between customs administrations established as a great way to build cooperation between countries, enhance international relationships and provide knowledge-sharing opportunities.

Keywords: Women, Customs, leadership, future, training, Asia-Pacific

1. Introduction

Women currently comprise just 37 per cent of the global customs workforce (World Customs Organization [WCO], 2020, p. 40). The proportion of women holding senior management roles in customs administrations is smaller still at 29 per cent and just 15 per cent of customs administrations are led by women (WCO, 2020, p. 40).

Recognising the critical role that women can perform in our customs administrations, the Australian Border Force (ABF), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), WCO and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University united to deliver The Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme (CCP – WPDP) in August 2021. Fifty-eight women officers from 11 customs administrations across the Asia-Pacific joined this

interactive, online opportunity to build their leadership skills, bridge the gender gap and prepare themselves to be future customs leaders. The four-week interactive program (conducted fully online due to the COVID-19 pandemic) featured speakers from diverse agencies and fields of practice from the region and beyond, along with weekly leadership coaching and online workshops with flexible timing to allow for time differences between countries.

At the conclusion of the CCP – WPDP, 100 per cent of participants said the program met or exceeded their expectations (91 per cent said it exceeded their expectations) and 98 per cent described themselves as feeling future-ready (RMIT University, 2021a). These figures provide a strong indicator that the CCP – WPDP has had a tremendous positive impact on the women participants. As graduates of the program, the authors of this paper recommend the CCP – WPDP as an excellent model for building the capacity and confidence of women in Customs enabling them to actively pursue leadership opportunities at all levels of customs administrations. We are proud to share our reflections on the CCP – WPDP in the hope that other partners and administrations adopt similar approaches to advance women in Customs.

2. Building our leadership toolkit and developing adaptive mindsets

The CCP – WPDP introduced the concept of developing an adaptive mindset as an essential tool in the leadership toolkit of emerging women customs leaders. An adaptive mindset is the ability of a person to assess a situation, adjust their thinking patterns and respond to changes (McGill, 2016). A leader with an adaptive mindset is not rigid and is able to grow, learn from mistakes and apply innovative approaches to problem-solving. The current COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that an adaptive mindset has become a critical leadership quality in a rapidly changing and uncertain operating environment.

Guest speakers delivered presentations on adaptive, effective and contemporary leadership and shared insights from their leadership journeys. Karolyn Salcedo, a Technical Officer from the WCO, spoke on how customs administrations can lead in challenging times, through the development of a crisis plan and crisis communication strategy to lead themselves, their personnel and other stakeholders. Former Vice Chancellor of RMIT University, Martin Bean, described the most important ingredient of great leadership as knowing your ‘North Star’ – your personal purpose and what you stand for. Leadership coach Helen Alm spoke about authentic, mindful and positive leadership, knowing ourselves and our values, developing self-trust and self-confidence, and leadership presence.

Participants explored how to cultivate an adaptive mindset, to learn from mistakes and experiences, as well as gaining insights into leadership innovation, critical thinking, leadership readiness, future thinking and preparing for the challenges of the so-called new normal. The program provided opportunities to reflect on our personal leadership journey and to consider our next steps. Almost all CCP – WPDP participants surveyed (98 per cent) believed themselves to be adaptive leaders and 70 per cent believed that their agencies currently operate with an adaptive mindset (RMIT, 2021b). Participants were also unanimous in their belief that women and men should have the same leadership opportunities and all committed to actively addressing gender inequality in their own workplace. Graduating from this program, we are confident that while we still have much to learn, we have the capacity, motivation and mindset to lead our customs administrations into the future.

3. Getting future-ready

The CCP – WPDP participants were largely optimistic about the future of the customs environment (77 per cent) (RMIT University, 2021c). Participants shared that they are preparing for changes by cultivating a new adaptive mindset, strengthening cooperation, utilising technology, being innovative leaders, managing risk, focusing on training of staff, being proactive and upholding personal integrity. On the theme of getting future-ready, guest speakers urged us to be curious and to critically examine the future customs landscape, and to reflect on how the pandemic has impacted our operations. The volume and velocity of international goods movement will undoubtedly increase in the future. Transnational crime threats will continue to evolve, and we must remain alert and be proactive to counter these threats. It is up to us, as customs officers and future leaders, to protect our countries' sovereignty, to safely reopen borders and to contribute to the maintenance of a prosperous and secure region.

Commander Lauren Monks of the ABF anticipated that intelligence sharing, inter-agency cooperation, technology utilisation and officer training will be crucial in the future. Participants learned how to prepare a future roadmap for themselves and their organisations, how to manage risk in the customs environment, how to use technology to improve efficiency, how to be innovative in times of uncertainty and how to achieve psychological safety in the workplace.

The consensus among participants was that the CCP – WPDP helped build awareness of the future customs landscape in terms of both threats and opportunities and consequently, participants feel better prepared to face the challenges of the future. Participants are committed to facilitating legitimate trade and stopping the illicit movement of goods and want to influence positive changes to improve safe trade flows and protect their nations.

4. Building our customs network

There is no doubt the future of Customs lies in the effective collaboration between customs administrations and other border agencies. The emerging challenges of the 21st century, especially post-pandemic, demand the conscious building and strengthening of customs networks and cooperation. The WCO Safe Framework of Standards relies on both Customs-to-Customs networks and Customs-to-Business partnerships. The establishment of programs that aim to bolster cooperation and facilitate dissemination of information such as the UNODC-WCO CCP Women's Network, the Global Customs Enforcement Network (CEN), the National Customs Enforcement Network (nCEN), and the Customs Enforcement Network Communication Platform (CENcomm) clearly illustrates that global customs leaders recognise the critical importance of building strong and effective customs networks.

Criminals are borderless, have no jurisdiction and have strong domestic and international networks (Amornvivat, 2021). To effectively combat transnational crime, we must strive to build our own strong relationships and networks.

The key to building and maintaining relationships is trust. Her Excellency Robyn Mudie, Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, shared how leadership skills can be used to build relationships of trust and influence. Being a leader is about building relationships with others – leading people to cooperate with others to achieve results. Trust, respect and communication are the base of all relationships. A leader should aim to have a diverse range of contacts, a strong network of relationships and must create opportunities for others to have the relationships they need to build effective partnerships.

All CCP – WPDP participants surveyed were committed to cooperation and to fight criminal networks by developing local, national and international partnerships and networks. As individuals we are ready to cooperate and the majority (88 per cent) of us believe our agency is ready and willing to

cooperate (RMIT, 2021d). Following the CCP – WPDP, several participants reported that, because of the program, they have begun to consciously build networks and relationships with colleagues and stakeholders. The program itself proved to be a valuable networking opportunity and provided an excellent platform to connect with colleagues around the region through working together on assignments or joining the casual Friday Café sessions for a chat. We are determined to stay connected, share our experience, skills and technical know-how, case studies, good practice and lessons learned, intelligence and information, data and research to build cooperation between our customs administrations (RMIT, 2021d). We wholeheartedly believe in our motto, ‘Together, We Are Stronger.’

5. Building confidence and realising our full potential

The CCP – WPDP provided a pathway for realising our full potential through personal growth, integrity and resilience. Participants learned about building our personal reputation (our personal brand), honing our communication skills to become better leaders, and the importance of having moral courage to do what is right. Women leaders from different countries, agencies, fields of practice and stages in their leadership journey, such as Madam Zuraidah Abdullah, the first woman to reach the rank of Senior Assistant Commissioner in the Singapore Police Force, and Deputy Director Nguyen Thi Viet Nga from Vietnamese Customs, generously shared tips and advice on leadership, overcoming gender biases and facing challenges in the workplace. Michelle Bond from ABF, who is also the Project Manager of the CCP – WPDP, highlighted the benefits of mentoring to aspiring women leaders. We also developed a strong appreciation of the importance of learning *with* each other while learning *from* each other.

A significant number of participants identified that the leadership coaching session on the issue of self-talk was particularly impactful. Self-talk was defined as our own internal dialogue and all too often we do not recognise our self-talk as being negative and consequently, detrimental to our leadership. As one participant shared:

The most important leadership tool that I learned during the CCP – WPDP would be positive self-talk [...] Too often I am defeated even before I start because I have convinced myself that I won't be able to do it. Now I have been taught to recognise negative self-talk and change it into a positive one. I have learned that I don't have to know everything or be perfect before I attempt to do something. (CCP – WPDP Participant, 2021)

One of the key lessons was about resilience and mental health. The vast majority (84 per cent) of participants said that mental health was a topic that is not sufficiently addressed in their respective agencies (RMIT, 2021e). Most also said that CCP – WPDP was the first program they had attended that discussed the issue of mental health. Grant Edwards, a retired Australian Federal Police Commander (and ‘Australia’s strongest man’ from 1996–2000), delivered a powerful speech and joined us in a live discussion about mental health and wellness, and that ‘it’s ok not to be ok.’ Tracey Varker from the University of Melbourne spoke about the importance of self-care and resilience in our personal leadership journey, and shared advice about the importance of taking care of our teams, particularly at times of uncertainty and crisis. One participant noted (RMIT University, 2021f) that ‘The future seems uncertain. But if we all work together and be resilient, we can overcome anything’ (CCP – WPDP Participant, 2021).

6. Conclusion

From our own perspectives and reflecting on the feedback and insights shared by our fellow participants, we believe the program has made an incredibly positive impact and has been extremely beneficial to emerging women leaders in Customs. The program provided practical lessons, powerful messages and insightful tips to significantly enhance our capacity and confidence to lead. The opportunity to network with women officers in other customs administrations around our region and beyond has been invaluable.

In reflection, 100 per cent of participants surveyed said that they believe the program positively changed their mindset, will assist them on their future leadership journey, and believe other officers in their countries will benefit from joining future CCP – WPDP opportunities. All participants indicated a strong interest in participating in future CCP – WPDP alumni activities and intend to stay in contact with the CCP – WPDP network (RMIT University, 2021a).

As inaugural members of the CCP – WPDP network, we are proud to serve our Customs administrations, ready to lead, committed to facilitating the safe and secure movement of goods across our borders, and ready to cooperate and influence positive change to combat criminal activity in the international supply chain. All participants agreed to abide by the CCP – WPDP Commitment Statement, which declares that we will change our mindset, strengthen our connections, advance women in Customs, build ourselves and our people, improve our procedures and systems and keep learning (RMIT University, 2021a).

Many participants have already begun implementing the lessons learned from the program in their workplaces and daily lives to positive effect. These reflections demonstrate the impact:

CCP – WPDP has encouraged me to believe in myself more and challenge myself to reach my goals. (CCP – WPDP Participant, 2021)

CCP – WPDP has changed my level of confidence as a leader, influencer and decision-maker [...] it has given me inspiration to improve my skills/myself to be more competitive, to learn and adapt new approaches and have the vision that working together as a team, we can develop a good result. (CCP – WPDP Participant, 2021)

Based on our experience, we believe every customs officer should have the opportunity to participate in similar training programs for self-improvement, to build leadership qualities and develop an adaptive mindset. We would highly recommend every customs administration implement similar training programs within their countries, especially for women in Customs, to nurture future leaders. We would also recommend collaborative training programs between customs administrations, as we believe it to be a great way to build cooperation between countries, enhance international relationships and provide knowledge-sharing opportunities. Finally, we also recommend the CCP – WPDP be continued as a regular training program in the customs calendar to benefit new cohorts of officers and provide an opportunity for alumni to connect and strengthen this important customs network.

We strongly believe that by investing in our future women customs leaders, we will build stronger customs administrations. After all, ‘Together We Are Stronger’.

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Dimuthu Dananjanie is an Assistant Superintendent of Sri Lanka Customs with 10 years' experience in her customs career. Dimuthu holds a Bachelor of Commerce and a master degree from the University of Colombo. She is keen to pursue further studies in international business, customs law, auditing and accountancy to advance her experience and to support her customs career.

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Hoang Thi Mai Lan has been working as a middle manager in the Customs Supervision and Inspection area within the Thua Thien Hue Customs Department of Vietnam Customs for 15 years. She graduated from Customs College and achieved her Master of Business Administration in 2012. She is interested in Customs Risk Management and hopes to expand her knowledge and experience in this area in the future.

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