

ADMINISTRATION VS. TALENT: THE ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The war for talent rages! This statement has echoed through public and private organisations worldwide and the end is not in sight. Contemporary public organisations have been plagued by its inability to attract, develop and retain those truly talented employees. But how is talent defined in the public organisation? In this article the context of talent management in the public organisation will be described. The assumption is that public sector organisations should be able to implement successful talent management strategies, but only if they are clear regarding the intent of their talent management strategies. The statement presupposes that a public administrative structure and system exists to support talent management. The features of the contemporary public administration will be examined and placed in relationship to the enabling legislative framework that supports talent management. The article explores the context of talent and talent management. The reciprocal relationship that sustains talent management is elaborated upon and inference is drawn from the development of administrative theory and its emphasis on talent management. The article argues for a third dimension to the contemporary conceptualisation of talent management, namely for a supportive public organisation. In conceptualising talent management as based on a reciprocal relationship to sustain employee/employer ability, motivation and opportunity, the administration should be seen as an active enabler for the attraction, development and retention of talent. The article concludes with a call towards using talent management as an approach to organisational structuring and functioning, and not merely as a strategy to fulfil current human resource development gaps or skills shortages.

INTRODUCTION

Can talent be managed in a public sector organisation? Does the administration allow for talent to be attracted, developed and retained? Popular belief is that public sector organisations cannot retain talent. Nor can the organisation attract the truly talented people. However, traditional talent management approaches might not be relevant to a public organisation. This does not mean that talent is not found in the public sector.

The article will explore the relationship between the employer and employee, which characterises talent management. The impact of the relationship on the administration of the public sector organisation will be discussed.

WHY TALENT MANAGEMENT?

Talent is the resource that includes the potential and realised capacities of individuals and groups and how they are organised, including those within the organisation and those who might join the organisation (Boudreau and Ramstad 2007:2). A talent is a measure of weight or value, according to Ancient civilisations, while the Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary (2008) terms it as to '*describe skill, abilities, wealth, riches, abundance, aptitude, attitude and disposition*'. Talent has been used broadly to describe an individual's skill, aptitude and achievement. Joubert (2007) states that talent is '*a person's ability to repeatedly inspire and arouse emotion in others*'. Talent is perceived emotionally and reacted to emotionally. Talent is seen, felt and heard and seems to be an important ingredient for greatness.

The nature of talent management as a reciprocal relationship between the employer and employee is emphasised in Glen's (2007) definition, which states that talent is the product of ability (competence, education, training and experience), coupled with motivation (engagement, satisfaction, challenge and wellness) and opportunity (created by both employer and employee). Talent is not just offered and used, but is also developed and nurtured, if it is to be retained. Talent management can be defined as "*the strategic integrated approach to managing a career from attracting, retaining, and developing to transitioning the organisations' human resources*" (TalentAlign 2007).

According to Cunningham (2007) talent management can be contextualised by taking into account two main strategic choices, namely "*aligning people with roles and aligning roles with people*". Aligning people with roles implies a preference towards recruiting talent, learning and development while aligning roles with people focuses on utilising talent through an enabling work environment. Aligning people with roles can be equated with Senge's (1994) principle of *personal branding*, while aligning roles with people could be compared to what Reed (2004:18) terms "*employer brandig*". The main purpose of both is to establish an emotional bond between the employer and the employee. The emotional bond is strengthened by employee commitment and employer support. It should be borne in mind that these two strategic choices cannot be implemented in

isolation but should be seen as the two sides of the same coin. The identification of opportunity becomes a key element in sustaining the reciprocal relationship between personal branding and employer branding. This is the reason why McCauley and Wakefield (2006) state that talent management should become more strategic, connected and broad-based.

Boudreau and Ramstad (2007:13-15) provide for four approaches to talent management decision making, namely:

- deciding on talent for the sake of compliance – thus, enforcing equity requirements when talent decisions need to be made;
- deciding on talent for the sake of fashion – thus, doing what the other is doing, irrespective of whether it applies to the organisation or not;
- deciding on talent for the sake of equality – thus, treating all as talented because it is unfair to focus on some and not offer the same to others, but fairness and equality are not similar and should not be approached without differentiating between the basis for both; and
- deciding on talent for the sake of strategic logic – thus, making talent decisions based on the strategic link between organisational effectiveness and strategic success.

Although the fourth approach seems to be the most inclusive, it does presuppose that both organisational effectiveness and strategic success have been qualified and quantified – a process which is both difficult and challenging in a public sector organisation. The importance of the fourth approach lies in its strategic intent. Talent management could be used as the organisational strategy that finally links the people (human capital) to the organisation they work for.

The organisations able to manage their talent place a high emphasis on retention and development. Reed (2004:6) stated that *“individuals whose skills are in high demand and for whom a change of employer is always an option are exercising control over the wealth they create”*.

Reed (2004:xii) coined the concept *“peoplism”* which is defined as *“the economic state where individuals own and control the most important factor of production: their human ability”*. The argument can be made that organisations that keep the above in mind will also heed its call and be receptive, flexible, accommodating and innovative – all concepts not normally attributed to government organisations.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT

In 1887 Woodrow Wilson wrote that *“the functions of government are every day becoming more complex and difficult... Administration is everywhere”*. He wrote that all government administrations are alike in structure and should, also, be alike in structure. He stated that these structures should be filled with technically trained employees, educated in public administration. According to Wilson, perfection in administration was achieved through a hierarchically structured and professionally trained public service (Ostrom and Ostrom 1968). Waldo (1955) elaborated on the concept by stating that

administration is “a type of cooperative human effort that has a high degree of rationality”. From the definition the following should be evident:

- administration should serve a purpose;
- administration is collective action;
- administration is done by people; and
- administration is the product of rational decision-making.

Waldo (1955) further stated that administration subsumes the concepts organisation and management. Where organisation is the structure of administration, management would be its functioning. In this context, Waldo (1955) defines organisation as “the structure of authoritative and habitual personal interrelations in an administrative system”. The definition highlights specific characteristics evident of government organisations, namely authority and control, formalism (since relationships are habitual) and interdependent functioning. Management, as the functioning of administration, is the “action intended to achieve rational cooperation in an administrative system” (Waldo 1955). From the above, a clearer picture of the public sector organisation emerges, namely:

- an organisation created for a purpose and displaying a specific direction; and
- an organisation characterised by clear interrelationships.

The question should be asked as to what the relevance of the above would be to the contemporary management of talent? If talent is to be based on a reciprocal relationship, then the notion of interdependent interrelationships aimed at achieving an organisational purpose, is reinforced. The concept of decision-making as rational and directional means that talent management should not be seen as an added-on strategy, but as an integral part of organisational success. Even though the concept of people as a strategic resource was not mentioned or focused upon in classical organisation theory, the framework for people as an integral part of organisational success certainly was.

The administrative structure depicted in the definitions presented coincides with the classical view of organisational theorists such as Frederick Taylor, Max Weber, Gulick and Urwick. The argument could be made that the modern public sector organisation no longer represents the characteristics identified in the previous century. The administrative function is much more complex and the administration much more chaotic. This might be true, however, the public sector organisation is still guided by a strategic intent and if its employees’ relationship with the strategic intent is unclear, then the organisation will be unable to attract, develop or retain its talent.

It was Herbert Simon’s critique of traditional administration, as well as subsequent neo-classical theorists such as Chester Barnard, Douglas McGregor and Chris Argyris that created a platform for talent management to exist within a public organisation. Simon stated that the individual engages with the administration after considering both *facts* and *values* before making his or her decision (Ostrom and Ostrom 1968). The facts represent the opportunity, expressed by both employer and employee, for the need and use of talent, and the values represent the perception of both employee’s and employer’s ability to create opportunity, nurture, develop and retain talent. Thus, the reciprocal engagement

between the employer and the employee is nothing new – rather it builds on the concept of the sustaining the psychological talent contract between the employer and employee.

As administrative theory developed from its neo-classical approach to more contemporary approaches, such as New Public Administration, conceptualised in 1968 during the Syracuse University's Minnowbrook Conference, to Osborne and Gaebler's New Public Management in the 1990s, to Denhardt and Denhardt's New Public Service, the focus on the strategic use of employees remained undeniable (Denhardt 2008). Creating better public organisations requires a balance between remaining responsive to societal needs (as reflected in its strategic intent or direction) and reinforcing employer branding to attract, develop and retain competent public servants.

TALENT AS MANIFESTED IN LEGISLATION

The assumption that a public organisation can attract, develop and retain talent can only be made if the appropriate legislative measures are in place to support this. In South Africa, public administration is guided by Section 195 of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996, which states, *inter alia*:

- public administration must be development-oriented;
- public administration must be career-oriented; and
- public administration must support effective human resource management practices.

Taking the above into consideration, the administration is required to implement strategies that would ensure the development, career and effective human resource practices of and for its employees. Creating the opportunity for development and career lends itself to a talent focus for its human resource management practices. Should the opportunity present itself, the employee and employer will have the ability and motivation to grab that opportunity.

During 1997, the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) published the *White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service*, detailing a paradigm shift from personnel administration to human resource management. The subsequent shift would ultimately culminate in the adoption of the new human resource management framework in 1999, which decentralises the function to line managers, while placing emphasis on the ability of the public administration to develop its human resources as a key strategic partner to organisational success.

Van Dijk (2008:385-287) argued that through the promulgation of the *White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service*, 1997, public organisations were compelled to conceptualise human resource management practices that will enable the creation of competence and well-managed employees. These employees will be able (competent) and motivated to provide a committed service to its public. The human resource management mission entails that (*White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service*, 1997):

Human resource management in the Public Service should become a model of excellence, in which service to society stems from individual

commitment instead of compulsion. The management of people should be regarded as a significant task for those who have been charged with the responsibility and should be conducted in a professional manner.

The notion of individual commitment towards service delivery adds a very specific dimension to the manner in which talent is conceptualised. The ability of the employee to provide a specific talent should include the motivation of the employee to deliver that talent for its community. In the same manner, the employer will be required to create the opportunity through which commitment to service delivery is an inherent competency (ability) coupled with the motivation to deliver a service. From the above, it can further be concluded that since 1997, the emphasis in the Public Service has been on creating a Public Service that would, not only be responsive, but also well equipped to handle the added pressures of an ever-increasing population with increasing demands. Thus, human resource development becomes instrumental to organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Identifying the strategic link between appropriate individual placements and realising organisational priorities becomes an important duty of all public service managers (Van Dijk 2008:393).

The relationship between talent and career management brings about another important dimension to the conceptualisation of talent management in a public sector organisation. Employees committed to a career in the public sector should be given every opportunity to develop themselves and broaden their skills to benefit both themselves, their organisation and the community they serve. Current talent management theory, however, suggests that organisations should attract talent for a very specific purpose and a very specific time (more contractual than career-oriented). However, should career management practices become an integral part of a talent management strategy, then the impact on the administration will reveal itself in the following:

- an administration able to create the opportunity for development of talent;
- an employee motivated to commit himself/herself towards development; and
- an employer (line manager) able and motivated to sustain/retain his/her talented employees.

Effective career management will enable employees to maximise their career potential by supporting themselves through job opportunities, skills training and development while also enabling employers to develop their human resource capacity through supporting, as much as possible, the career aspirations of the individual employee (Paragraph 5.10.1 of the *White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service*, 1997).

Effective career management, as a component in a talent management strategy, could be enhanced through the implementation of the lifelong learning principle. The *Public Service Review Report*, 1999-2000 (2000:64) affirms that the key challenge facing the Public Service is the need to attract, develop and sustain capable managers. The *State of the Public Service Review Report* (2009:66) states that “*consistency in the application of critical norms and standards for human resource management is still unsatisfactory*”. There is inconsistency in the recruitment and selection procedures between departments.

In some departments recruitment leads to rapid promotion and employees move to where requirements, specifically for skills, are less stringent. The *Report* (2009:66) further highlighted that retaining public servants is dependent on appointing the appropriate people, developing and motivating them through consistent application of good human resource practices. The Report makes no mention of approaching its human resources as talent investments, but rather focuses on compliance of the function to adhered rules and regulations. It becomes difficult to manage talent if an organisation is deemed to act as a watchdog and not an enabler.

As part of a more effective and efficient human resource management effort the DPSA places importance on increasing morale and motivation within the Public Service. The following measures are outlined to ensure that the human resource practices support the development objectives of the organisation. The measures include, inter alia (*Public Service Review Report 1999-2000:68-69*):

- automatic promotions should be replaced with an appropriate career-pathing and pay progression system linked to performance;
- greater flexibility in employment practices should be introduced such as extended use of the fixed-term contracts for senior management;
- appropriate measures to reward performance should be developed and organisations should be given flexibility to determine the relevant levels for rewarding performance;
- skills development and empowering public employees should be intensified in order to fulfil the development nature of Public Service delivery.

It is important to note that in the nine years since the above recommendations were made, little has been done to implement them. Career pathing remains a challenge, since most public servants do not see a career in the broader public service, but rather as a stepping stone to bigger and better things. The organisational structure does not support career pathing, flexibility in employment practices, integrated skills development or performance rewards. Taking the above into consideration, a clearer picture of the context for talent management in the public organisation emerges. Referring to the approaches towards talent management, mentioned earlier in the article, using talent management for the sake of equity, equality or fad becomes irrelevant. However, the focus on talent management as strategy for linking the individual to organisational success is reinforced.

By drafting a competency framework, the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALaMA) intended to identify which senior, middle and feeder management competencies are required to create a pool of talented public service managers. The creation of this talented pool of managers is done through the recruitment and development of public servants. Thus, even though talent management was not officially introduced in public organisations, the competency frameworks functioned as guideline for identifying and developing talented public servants.

The argument can be made that the public organisation is regulated by legislation that would support talent management. However, to what extent does the administrative structure comply with these regulations – or rather, to what extent is the structure organised to support these regulations?

According to Cappelli (2008:27-37) talent becomes a focus when the complexity of the organisation increases. The single-unit, family-run operation focuses on its one function and excels therein. But as the organisation succeeds, grows and becomes more complex, their single function now becomes the core competency required from its talent. Where talent, in the first half of the 20th century, was developed internally, the focus of traditional talent management shifted in the 1970s and 1980s. It became known as the '*shopping model*' for talent (Capelli 2008:96). However, by focusing on the external market as sole source of talent, organisations neglected their internal development and retention strategies. The consequence meant a renewed focus on developing talent from within, while balancing it with the external supply.

TALENT MANAGEMENT: A CALL FOR ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM?

What does the public organisation look like that would support a more complex conceptualisation of talent management? High-performance organisations are characterised as living their vision, implementing strategic and business plans, writing and evaluating scorecards, setting benchmarks and using enforced ranking as part of their performance culture. A culture of achievement emanates from strong values and beliefs. A culture of achievement supports instruments of motivation and measurement of individual, group and organisational performance. High-performance organisations will have the following practices in place for managing talent, namely (Joubert 2007):

- creating talent by planning the future talent supply, being employer of choice, sourcing young talent, tutor coaching, exposing young professionals, hiring for behavioural skills, referral recruitment and sharing best practices;
- calibrating talent by measuring it according to specifications, building equity through forced ranking, deploying the best talent to critical positions and proposing creative assignments;
- cultivating talent through mentor development, holding management accountable, firing poor managers, enforcing high standards and rewarding achievement, forced ranking and career planning;
- leveraging talent through motivation, employee involvement, breakout achievement and sharing the credit;
- caring for talent through personal wellness, employee engagement, inspiration, building vital inner circles and talent retention; and
- talent coaching through personal mastery, sharing the philosophy of life as a journey and creating circuits of personal success.

Does the above imply administrative reform of the current public organisation? It does seem that public organisations although governed by legislation that would permit the implementation of talent management, does not view talent management as an approach for the successful integration of employees and organisation. The reality is that talent management is only perceived as a strategy to address a specific skills shortage, seen out of administrative context and, thus, the organisation becomes unable to develop and

retain the initially recruited talent. Rothwell and Kazanas (2003:220) identify specific steps in the creation of a talent management strategy that would successfully link individual competence to organisational success. The steps are:

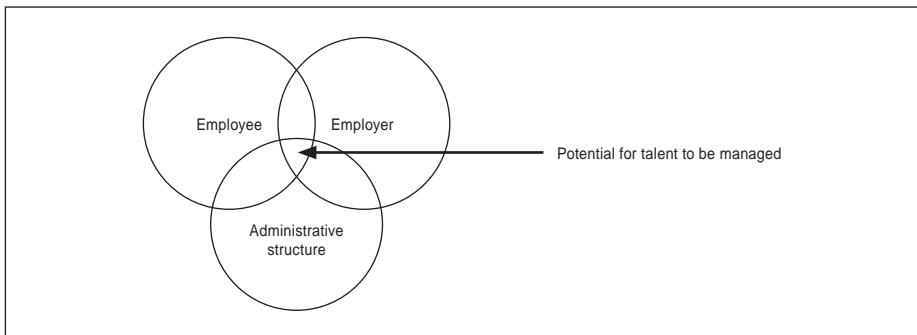
- formulate the talent objectives, including a review of current talent initiatives;
- examine the leadership of the organisation to determine its commitment towards talent management (and the extent to which intention towards talent development and retention is reflected in all administrative structures and processes);
- review the organisational structure to determine whether talent will be supported;
- review performance and reward systems to determine whether talent will be encouraged;
- budget for resources to implement the talent strategy;
- communicate organisational intent towards talent attraction, development and retention; and
- develop functional objectives for talent implementation.

Although the above is mentioned as a strategy towards talent management, using its steps to ensure that talent becomes the approach towards organisational structuring and functioning is essential. The importance of talent management in the public organisation lies in its ability to be conceptualised as integral part of its administration to ensure organisational success in the delivery of its services.

REDEFINING TALENT AND TALENT MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The traditional definition of the reciprocal relationship that characterises talent management should include a third dimension, its administration. Thus, talent management is, not only, creating the balance between the employee's ability and motivation vs. the employer's opportunity, but also the interaction with the administration and the extent to which the organisation can sustain the employee/employer's ability, motivation and opportunity. The redefinition is illustrated in the figure presented below.

Figure 1: Talent management in the public sector



Rothwell and Kazanas (2003:28) describe the strategic intent towards talent management as the “*process of changing an organization, stakeholders outside it, groups inside it, and people employed by it through planned and unplanned learning so that they possess the competencies needed to help the organization achieve and sustain competitive advantage at present and in the future*”. The importance of the definition means that public administration will need to:

- determine the content and context of its internal and external talent supply;
- strategically plan for its talent context; and
- focus on planned and unplanned learning to sustain its talent context, based on key competency areas.

The strategic success of talent management in the public sector lies in its ability to reconcile public administrative realities with contemporary definitions of talent management.

CONCLUSION

In answering the initial question posed in the article as to whether public organisations can attract, develop and retain its talent, the answer is yes. Unfortunately, the contemporary theories on talent management cannot be implemented in a public sector organisation without taking into account the impact of administration in supporting the talent approach. It seems as though the understanding that talent is a reciprocal relationship between the employer and employee is evident, but the response of the organisation lacks.

It should be borne in mind that even though organisational theory has developed beyond its initial classical roots, the same principles still guide the public organisations, namely:

- that organisations are created for a specific purpose;
- are staffed by people responsible for delivering on that purpose; and
- that the delivery thereof can only be achieved if the interrelationships between employees and employers are built on the principles of creating opportunity to show ability and providing motivation for commitment towards service delivery.

This article highlighted the importance of including a third dimension in the conceptualisation of talent management, namely administration. The reciprocal relationship between employee and employer can only be sustained in a supportive administrative context. Let us not forget, administration is everywhere and only through effective administration can an organisation attract, develop and retain its truly talented employees.

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