FROM COMPLIANCE TO PERFORMANCE: A LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

The South African public service is faced with challenges from different fronts to deliver services. Much has been achieved in the fourteen years of democracy in South Africa, but more could have been achieved, especially in the area of policy implementation and performance improvement. The major challenge is that, despite intense endeavors directed at improving service delivery, lack of, or mediocre delivery continues to plague the public service. While the availability of solid public policy indicates the beginning of the process of delivery, on its own is insufficient if not supported by effective systems and processes for actual delivery. Part of this problem can be attributed to leaders' inability not only to just comply with the requirements of policy, but to also ensure that compliance is accompanied by and lead to expected performance. In this era of management, little emphasis needs to be placed on compliance but rather what compliance requires. This article considers why, despite compliance, public service delivery is not improving. It also considers the role of leadership in the public service and reasons for its inability to move beyond compliance.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders, whether political, managerial or administrative are facing a challenge of effectively implementing public policy and improving service delivery in the South African public service. General agreement on the existence of first world, well thought through, deliberated on by the different stakeholders within democratic structures public policies exist while implementation is a problem. Public perception of lack of service delivery among communities is on the increase and this is evidenced by the upsurge of

the number of public protests especially concerning municipal service delivery. Reasons for this mediocre or lack of delivery range from attitudes of public servants to skills shortage while the role of leadership has received little attention or analysis. Leadership in the public service is not only about the occupation of the high office but include, *inter alia,* visioning ability, risk taking, innovation, empowerment, promoting teamwork, quality and continuous improvement. Most public policies are about transformation and change, however, they do not provide a clear understanding of how to introduce and sustain accompanying initiatives. Efforts directed at converting the public service to a post-bureaucratic organisation and introducing managerialism have not thoroughly taken root. The outcome has been an uneven pace of change. Different government departments are currently at different stages of development and transformation and this negatively affects the quality of services, perpetuates hierarchy and rigid separation of responsibility in other departments, and, except for few departments, restrain to the public service remaining in the experimentation mode.

Citizens and taxpayers, who are the financiers of government, increasingly want to know how their money is utilised, they also are interested in knowing how well public services are being delivered. They generally believe that they are already paying too much for the services they receive and as long as no one is measuring public service performance this belief is unlikely to disappear.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE AND MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Leadership

Defining leadership depends on the situation and the purpose for providing such a definition. Although the subject of leadership has been extensively studied, the leadership phenomenon, in general, still escapes scientific understanding and remains an elusive concept. Stodgill (1974), for example, claimed to have reviewed 72 different definitions of leadership without coming to some agreement on an appropriate or acceptable definition while Bennis and Nanus (1985: 4) considered definitions in excess of 350. Until now the concept of leadership continues to be something everyone knows exists but nobody is able to define. While scientific development has generally been about altering or modifying the last known phenomenon, with leadership the case has been different because each new finding does not necessarily alter the last but add to it. It is for this reason that the contention that most of the definitions of leadership are not only acceptable today but also relevant, is able to stand. In this synthesis of leadership literature and a discussion of the concept of leadership, Parry's (1996) definition of leadership (the presentation by a leader of some identifiable goal, vision or future state that people can desire; and the generation of a willingness within those people to follow the leader along a socially responsible and mutually beneficial course of action, towards a goal) is satisfying and acceptable.

Management, leadership and administrative efficiency

In the public sector leaders and managers are more clearly defined with management being organisationally based while leadership is confined to the political level (Bouckaert, 1992). There may be grey areas, but this division is more pronounced in this sector. However, Lungu (1983) and Mainzer (1973) disagree and view the line separating politics from public management as too fine to be visible. Bolugan (2003) further postulates that the authority, which originates from the power of mandate, that career officials exercise in their own right also offer career officials a wide political latitude. Despite these differences in views, roles between the two, public manager and politician continue to be defined by the weaknesses existing in each which allow the other to occupy the resultant vacuum. It may be for this reason that the direction of management development programmes tends to be biased more towards making public managers leaders as well. The advantage in this approach is that when managers become leaders their skills of playing the influence game is sharpened. Cascio (1991:318) calls this influence game the *Leadership Motive Pattern*. Being skilled in both leadership and management in a balanced manner obviously benefits public service delivery. However, public managers will have to guard against the danger of over-management and under-leading or *vice versa*. Lack of maintaining this balance may result in, for instance, a manager excelling in daily routine and sometimes questioning whether the function needs to be done at all.

Creating stability through sustained change

Leadership is important in the public service because of the *power* leaders have or "the basic energy to initiate and sustain action and translating intention into reality" (Bennis and Nanus, 1985: 15). Leadership that is driven by vision and able to create a link between advocacy and delivery is a prerequisite. This visionarism will ensure that change, an important aspect of service delivery, is sustained. This sustenance will enable programmes to move beyond the experimentation stage.

ORGANISATIONAL READINESS TO DELIVER SERVICES

Organisational readiness and resource mobilisation

Normally organisational readiness is assumed when policy reaches the implementation stage (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Organisational readiness involves the availability and readiness for use of all resources including systems, people's attitudes and ability, and finances. In generally terms, policy implementation involves a single government department, but when such policy is in the form of a programme it requires multiple organizations for implementation to succeed and it is at this stage that problems of coordination come into play. Without access to and control of the other's processes, better performing departments within the programme may be demotivated. Territorial politics, different priorities and even organisational jealousy may impair progress.

Service delivery and organisational readiness refers to the ability of the public institutions to convert policies into actions and viable field operations (Startling, 1998: 413), something that is not easy, because of the conversion requirements. The conversion process entails bargaining and the realisation that some functions are based on the success of others and the management of intergovernmental relations.

Governance as implementation tool

Co-operative government and governance provide a platform for mobilising resources from multiple stakeholders driven by the need to deliver quality services. The South African public services' version of co-government is the cluster system through which different departments co-operate for the purposes of delivering a common service. Witnessed in situations of co-operative actions are new models of governing (Bouckaert and Halachmi, 1995: 11) among which is the Emmandish Collective Management Model where co-leadership is a core attribute of collective management (Tshikwatamba, 2003, 308). These models make frequent use of the prefix *co-* which includes co-management, co-production, co-allocation, all trying to manoeuvre through the increasing complexity, dynamism and diversity (Kooiman, 1993) which are part of current governing systems. Readiness under these circumstances is organisational flexibility and readiness to accept that not only are internal structures responsible but, also the need to accept external stakeholder and the provision of space for them to function in their own terrain.

Pre-implementation assessment and visioning

Pre-implementation planning and visioning should provide a starting point in the organizational readiness process, the implementation of government programmes. However, in most instances, the formulation-implementation gap that a strategic plan is supposed to bridge, remains despite numerous annual compliance based on planning processes and plans. Pre-implementation assessment of organisational capacity and integration of all organisational processes and resources towards the accomplishment of goals are to be undertaken for service delivery to succeed. This organisational capacity assessment includes the capacity and assessment of the ability to learn and overcome structural inertia (Sepic, 1996), ability to provide performance feedback and measure performance through ends and not means (Behn, 1995: 314).

Innovation, culture and service delivery in the public service

Public service managers need to be motivated towards being innovative and able to take risks if service delivery is to move beyond experimentation. Understandably, innovation and risk taking are expensive to implement and more so when initiatives fail because consequences for failure are sometimes serious and may include punishment. Balk (1995: 327) refers to the existence of limits to energetic leadership, empowerment and employee

training making innovation the next available remedy for organisational improvement. Organisational innovations can be untidy as they mostly involve changes in policies and behaviour of employees including adjustment to new circumstances.

Stifling innovation in the public service is due to *inter alia* the lack of space to express ideas because of the existence of traditional hierarchical norms of loyalty and trust which engender fear and silence. Cultures of fear, according to Bardwick's (1995: 30) are those in which employees experience high levels of stress, fear over job security, rewards, cynicism, caution and resentments that are also often caused by fear. Strong pressures to keep what may be perceived as creating turbulence within a public organisation drives this suppression of innovation, idea generation and avoidance of actions with high uncertainty. Bureaucracy and hierarchy perpetuate isolation and specialisation both of which are elements that do not promote innovation. For a public organisation to be innovative, a serious cultural re-orientation will have to be undertaken.

Taking advantage of the opportunity space

Opportunity space is a unique set of opportunities that an institution can potentially identify or create (Simmons, 2000: 7) at a point and time, given its competencies and resources. Within this space, individuals can augment an exogenously determined set of opportunities by creating opportunities for themselves and the institution. This takes place provided there is organisational attention, and or information processing capacity is allowed as a critical element for creating value. Simons (2000) elevates attention to the level of a scarcity. It is this attention that needs to be utilised by organisations since it cannot attend to all its goals simultaneously, and therefore needs to pay attention to particular goals. In policy implementation, identification of areas to pay attention to and concentrate on will present a unique opportunity for innovation and the operationalisation of policy.

COMPLYING FOR PERFORMANCE IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Compliance does not result in and is not equal to implementation. It may be argued that it is the first step in the implementation chain, but never implementation. Aspects of compliance include government departments crafting policies whose only value is to be sent to National Treasury, the departments of Public Service and Administration and of Provincial and Local Government or for responding to the Public Service Commission's monitoring and evaluation requirements. These documents tend to get ignored. This may be understandable, given delivery pressures, though unnecessary when implementation time frames are not stated in policy documents. Such behaviour goes beyond this and exists even in situations where implementation is a legal requirement. While some legitimacy in terms of reasons including requirements being part of unfunded mandates, the bulk of this behaviour is driven by or hide behind organisational autonomy, management prerogative and a lack of a definition of monitoring and an authority to which implementation milestones are to be reported. Reporting mechanisms, where they exist,

need to include not just compliance requirements but also implementation and milestones to be reached.

ROLE OF PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IN IMPROVING SERVICE DELIVERY

Public productivity improvement and its potential impact in the economy

Measuring performance and service delivery will improve productivity (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) in the public service (the largest employer in the country). This may be a good starting point in increasing the country's output capabilities. Actually if this were to be attained, the result would not only release resources for other purposes, but will lead to a contribution towards a nationwide culture of commitment, the results of which are unimaginable. International competitive rating will most likely improve leading to an improvement of investment opportunity. It is surprising that those productivity efforts in the country could by-pass the public sector and where and when it does; it is not with the same rigour as applied in the private sector. Resulting from this, a need exists for revisiting the role of productivity in South Africa. A public organization tasked with improving productivity efforts in the country to explore possible areas of intervention in the public service should be considered.

Productivity and the nature of public goods

Public services are public goods. An important factor to consider when considering public service performance is the nature of public goods. They are characterised by non-excludability and non-rivalry in consumption. This public good condition applies because the interests are shared by a large number of citizens whose consumption is replaced to efficiency levels where the consumption of services do not diminish the ability to provide the same services (Kuper and Kuper, (1985: 672). A public organisation therefore mostly differs from a commercial operation. Such an organisation would typically have:
- a monopoly of the services it provides;
- a statutory authority to provide specific services;
- responsibility for delivery of services, where either the service provision itself or the resultant outcome of the service provision have significant characteristics of public goods; and
- the power to raise funds from taxation or to be subsidized from tax sources.

The above indicates that an important incentive to efficiency is missing which means that at any given time inefficiency can be passed on to the public in the form of higher taxes, charges or poorer services. In the absence of a mechanism that is able to determine the true value of a public service, turnaround time in delivery becomes of essence.

Programmes that have no specific milestones based on time and deliverables may take long to implement and indirectly cost more than they are supposed to.

Performance measurement framework for the public service

The need for performance improvement and measurement in the public service was realised from the beginning of the democratic era, and mechanisms to deal with it put into place. *Firstly*, a performance vision was codified through the enactment of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,* 1996 (s195), and the various supportive policies and legislation (Msengana-Ndlela, 2004). Secondly, a number of policies, namely, the *White Paper on Reconstruction and Development* (RDP)(1994: s5.7) which visualised an introduction of a performance measurement system, the *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery* (WPTPSD) (1997: s1.1.2), which requires that service standards to which government departments will be held accountable be set. These were followed by the *Public Service Regulations* (1999) and the *Performance Management and Development Framework* (DPSA, 2001) both of which require the creation of a link between individuals and agreed to performance outputs while the *Public Finance Management Act,* 1999 PFMA (1999) deal with the organisational part of performance from a finance perspective.

Role of National Treasury in performance measurement

The regulation of performance in the public service is *ad hoc* and mostly dealt with through financially driven Treasury Regulations and requirements. The National Treasury's Medium Term Expenditure Framework emphasises, as part of the budgetary process, the establishment of measurable performance goals to which actual results can be compared (National Treasury, 2001). This review mirror approach is unable to ensure timeous correction of whatever performance related problems the system might have. Municipalities, through the *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act* 2000, took performance measurement a step further by making it mandatory for municipalities to introduce performance measurement as part of the Integrated Development Plan (IDPs). It is not clear why this was not extended to the public service as well. To note is that despite the existence in municipalities, of the performance measurement and management system in the form of IDPs, this has not been translated into improved delivery. This is a clear case of compliance without performance.

Performance measurement as an instrument of management accountability

Management is being accountable and able to achieve the required or expected performance. While measurement is much clearer in private organisations, public accountability forces public organisations to be more accountable if not more than their private counterparts because of a lack of the in-built profit incentive. According

to Bouckaert (1995: 383) the role of management is concerned with how performance standards are set and whether the way they are set, leads to commitment within the management process. The importance of having a performance management system lies in its ability to ensure that there is organisational alignment of effort from the vision and mission, including policy and strategy to organisational and individual performance.

Performance management and measurement as a management function, means setting goals, defining strategies and programmes and achieving those goals and establishing systems to evaluate progress. This conceptual simplicity is one of the greatest strengths of performance measurement and management systems.

Leadership, performance measurement and incentives

Performance measurement is likely to have consequences on the salary and incentive payment structures resulting from the achievement of positive results, senior employees become eligible for bonuses. In the light of enronism, the public is unlikely to accept the efficiency bonuses paid to public sector executives and managers as has been the case with ESKOM after the discovery that the performance of the electricity utility has not been efficient. The credibility and legitimacy of the public servants can be doubted. Incentives result from a prior agreement on what the agreed to exchange will entail. This exchange or transaction, which requires management, involves an incentive for the delivery of an agreed to level of performance.

The transactional leadership approach is based on the exchange theory according to which negotiation, a minimum positive level, where reward becomes greater than the cost of an outcome must exist in order for attraction or affiliation to take place (Luthans, 1981: 320). While the kind of deliberations taking place within a group that has different views on an issue seem simple, it is in actual sense a complex exchange and bargaining. Gardner (1995) in support, views leadership as a transaction between the leader, the followers and the goal or dream.

MANAGING CONFLICT FOR OPTIMAL SERVICE DELIVERY

Performance management and productivity is an area that has been found to lead to more conflict when compared to other areas related to employment. Conflict normally involves two or more people over values, competition for status, power and scarce resources (Moore, 1986: 16). Conflict results from communication, which according to Fox, Schwella and Wissink (1991) may either be too much, too little or does not exist at all. Not all conflict is disruptive and certain levels of conflict should be maintained in an organisation for it to maintain its innovativeness. The public service, due to its size and possible resultant complexities could be a breeding ground for conflict that is disruptive especially during transformation. It, therefore, becomes imperative for leaders in the public service to understand how to deal with conflict situations.

CONCLUSION

The perception of government incompetence is something that government would have to address before this perception becomes a reality. The unfortunate part is that perceptions cannot easily be reversed through the use of normal organisational change methods, incremental change or public relations exercises but require radical change intervention. The longer this problem is left unattended the more difficult the cure becomes. Part of leadership challenge in the public service is to ensure the control of this perception.

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