Transformational leadership in the South African public sector

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ABSTRACT

In today's fast changing world, countries and organisations need to have a sense of urgency to change in order to be competitive. There have been numerous dramatic changes in social, political, economic, environmental and technological areas. Notwithstanding these changes being mostly at international level, they also affected the national systems. These changes often blindsided the countries which especially failed in strategic planning and transformational leadership. The South African public sector is not spared. The public service is under considerable pressure to improve service delivery to meet this challenge and the ever increasing expectations of stakeholders and customers who are increasingly aware of new technologies, governance possibilities and practices. There is an urgent need for public sector transformation to deliver public goods meeting expectations and spearhead the country to achieve vision 2025 and possibly, to start charting the way forward beyond 2025 to meet even greater political, economic, technical and social challenges of the future.

It is undoubtedly that the anticipation of these changes and taking the necessary precautions are closely intertwined with a public administration system. The variety, frequency and intensity of these changes and developments suggest that the detection of the problems and providing solutions for them are not as easy as it used to be. Principles such as public participation, transparency and accountability are now a part of our daily lives. The purpose of this article is to explore the complexity of the public sector and the variety of leadership challenges within the South African public service. Taking cognisance of the significance of transformational leadership in the realisation of public sector transformation, a thorough investigation of the strategic issues is urgently needed in order to provide a co-ordinated and comprehensive strategic approach to address the issues of poor service delivery. The article concludes by arguing that bold, decisive and transformational initiatives by the public sector and its leaders are necessary to meet the complex current and future challenges of the country.

INTRODUCTION

The current business environment is changing tremendously due to economic forces that result in the design of systems to decrease cost, the need to speed up product development and focus attention on satisfying customers. Countries and organisation need to have a sense of urgency in order to be competitive. An evaluation of the factors impacting on the global market environment in the past few years indicates that South Africa has witnessed irreversible changes. The public service is under considerable pressure to improve service delivery to meet this challenge and the ever increasing expectations of stakeholders and customers who are increasingly aware of new technological and government possibilities and practice. There is an urgent need for public sector transformation to deliver public goods meeting society's expectations and spearhead the country to achieve vision 2025 and possible, to start charting the way forward beyond 2025 to meet even greater political, economic, technical and social challenges of the future.

Leadership has long been identified as a key determinant of the success of organisations. Research indicates that creating the appropriate climate within a team can account for approximately 30% of the variation in its performance. The leader has a critical influence on this environment. About 70% of organisational environment is influenced by the style a leader employs in relating to others within the team (Performance and Innovation Unit 2001). It is often taken as self-evident that public service leaders are responsible for public service transformation. To lead the transformation process, undoubtedly, transformational leaders are needed who can inspire the employees, strategise and galvanise the resources to navigate and give effect to the changes needed. However, such leadership is rare in the public sector, not only in the South African public service, but also in most countries. The complexity of the public sector, the variety of leadership challenges within, and the many competing views of leadership mean that extensive evidence is difficult to obtain. Nonetheless, it is evident that issues of leadership have to be effectively addressed if the country is to enhance its competitiveness (Noor 2011:18).

The purpose of this article is to explore the complexity of the public sector and the variety of leadership challenges facing the South African public service. Taking cognisance of the significance of transformational leadership in the realisation of public sector transformation, a thorough investigation of the strategic issues is urgently needed in order to propose a co-ordinated and comprehensive strategic approach to address the issues of poor service delivery. The article concludes by arguing that bold, decisive and transformational initiatives by the public sector and its leaders are necessary to meet the complex current and future challenges of the country.

TRAITS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The 1980s and 1990s experienced the wide acceptance of the need for transformational leadership. The theory hinges on motivational leaders articulating vision and direction, valuing and nurturing their staff, which it assumes will generate commitment, strengthening culture, thereby improving performance. It is an enabling process causing followers to accept responsibility and accountability for themselves and the processes to which they

are assigned (Bass and Avolio 1994:17; Podsakoff 1996:260). Its premise is to increase followership effectiveness. Critics argue that this only captures part of the leadership task in effective organisations.

Burns (1978:37) describes transformational leadership as a process that motivates followers by appealing to higher ideals and moral values. According to Trofino (1992:ix), "transformational leaders have the ability to clearly articulate a vision of the future…they are the myth-makers, like story tellers they capture our imagination with the vivid descriptions of the wonderful future we will build together". Tichy and Devanna (1990:43) argue that transformational leaders engage in a process. This results in a sequence of phases that include recognising the need for change, creating a new vision and institutionalising the change. House (1995:270), in a review of the orientated or outstanding leadership literature, states that the

> majority of the approaches share the common perspective that by articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and providing individualized support, effective leaders change the basic values, beliefs and attitudes of followers so that they are willing to perform beyond the minimum levels specified by the organisation.

Bass and Avolio (1994:35), developers of the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ), theorise that transformational leadership comprises four dimensions the *Four I's*. These comprise:

- *Idealised influence:* Transformational leaders behave in ways that result in their being role models for their followers. The leaders are admired, respected, and trusted. Followers identify with the leaders and want to emulate them. Among the actions required of the leader is considering the needs of others over his/her own personal needs.

- *Inspirational motivation:* Transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work. Team spirit is aroused. Enthusiasm and optimism are displayed. The leader obtains followers involved in envisioning attractive future states. The leader creates clearly communicated expectations that followers want to meet and also demonstrate commitment to goals and the shared vision.

- *Intellectual stimulation:* Transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. Creativity is encouraged. There is no public criticism of individual members' mistakes. New ideas and creative problem solutions are solicited from followers. Who are included in the process of addressing problems and finding solutions. Followers are encouraged to try new approaches and their ideas are not criticised because they differ from the leader's ideas.

- *Individualised consideration:* Transformational leaders pay special attention to each individual's needs for achievement and growth by acting as coach or mentor. Followers and colleagues are developed to successively higher levels of potential. Individualised consideration is practised as follows: New learning opportunities are created along with a supportive climate. Individual differences in terms of needs and desires are recognised.

Transformational leaders are visionary leaders of potentially historical significance who react to a crisis with great vision and great ideas, and possess a willingness to foster grand experiments in solving great problems of the day. They are charismatic and imbued with passion, enthusiasm and energy. Transformational leaders also consider a problem as an opportunity to transform society and leave their legacies behind. They are unlike what James Burns terms *transactional leaders* who are often mere managers – not true leaders – putting band aids on problems that merit more radical treatment (Polelle 2008:xvi). They are also role models and reveal their presence by their attitudes and actions on how everyone else should behave. Overall, they balance their attention between actions that create progress and the mental state of their followers. They are essentially people-oriented and believe that success comes first and foremost through deep and sustained commitment. Putting it simply, transformational leaders are those who can transform themselves, their followers and their organisations to greater heights. They are the architects of an organisation's future (Noor 2011:19).

Characteristics

For the past three decades, transformational leadership has become one of the most prominent theories of organisational behaviour. In contrast to leadership based on individual gain and the exchange of rewards for effort, transformational leaders direct and inspire employees' efforts by raising their awareness of the importance of organisational values and outcomes. In doing so, such leaders activate the higher-order needs of their employees and encourage them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organisation and its clientele. Research not only has validated the existence of transformational leadership, but has also consistently linked the practice of these transformational leadership behaviours with employee performance and satisfaction (Bass and Riggio 2006:5; Dumdum, Lowe and Avolio 2002:44; Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam 1996:396; Trottier, Van Wart and Wang 2008:327).

Given its emphasis on the importance of an organisation's mission and outcomes, transformational leadership may be particularly useful in the public sector and non-profit organisations. As such organisations have strong service and community oriented missions. In fact, consistent with transformational leadership's emphasis on the motivating potential of the organisation's mission, a key tenet of the literature on public employee motivation (Paarlberg and Perry 2007:394; Perry and Porter 1982:85; Perry and Wise 1990:369; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999:14; Wright 2007:56) is that "the more engaging, attractive and worthwhile the mission is to people, the more the agency will be able to attract support from those people, to attract some of them to join the agency, and to motivate them to perform well in the agency" (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999:16).

Leaders who transform their followers' attitudes and commitment to the organisation's mission typically exhibit certain characteristics or behaviour (Bass and Riggio 2006:11; Paarlberg and Lavigna 2010; Trottier, Van Wart and Wang 2008). For example, *firstly* transformational leaders inspirationally motivate employees by clearly articulating an appealing vision of the organisation's mission and future. Creating a vision, however, is not sufficient. Transformational leaders must also encourage and facilitate their followers to work toward that vision. Thus, *secondly* but closely related characteristic of transformational leaders is that they serve as a source of idealised influence, functioning as role model (modelling behaviours consistent with the stated vision) and building employee confidence and pride in the organisation. A *third*

characteristic of transformational leaders is that they help followers achieve the mission by intellectually stimulating them to challenge old assumptions about organisational problems and practices. Thus, the very descriptions of these transformational behaviours or characteristics suggest that a large part of the effectiveness of transformational leaders is attributable to their ability to increase employee mission valence through the articulation of clear and attractive visions of the organisation's mission. Thus, transformational leaders alter employee perceptions of goal importance and clarity (Wright, Moynihan and Pandey 2011).

Personal characteristics

Transformational leaders demonstrate self confidence and are dominant in their strong conviction of the moral righteousness of their beliefs. They are articulate in goal setting, and able to build exciting future images of what can be achieved. Through this image-building they arouse followers' emotions and commitment. Consider the burning passion and righteous beliefs in the souls and minds of transformational leaders such as Florence Nightingale, George Washington, Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Each of these famous transformational leaders faced enormous challenges from a world that was less than willing to accept their vision of a more perfect society (Trofino 2000:236).

Transformational leaders are charismatic and passionate. Senge (2010:63) identify that personal power is insufficient to influence transformational change. Rather, what is needed to succeed is individual charisma combined with an engaging vision, as well as an unbounded passion to serve as coach and mentor.

Hinkin and Tracey (1999:113) indicate that their research of the MLQ developed by Bass and Avolio (1994:35) demonstrates empirical support for three behaviourally oriented dimensions of transformational leadership that are consistent with theoretical propositions. However, idealised (charisma) may not be relevant for managers in stable organisations. Crisis situations may be a necessary precondition for a truly charismatic leader to emerge. Clearly, studying the usefulness of transformational leadership in the turbulent times associated with paradigm shifts, the charismatic dimension will no doubt add the necessary ingredient to make the public sector to be more responsive to needs of the people. Transformational leaders support uncensored communication with employees, even during the uncertain times associated with budget adjustments or downsizing. By forming focus groups for employees and clients, making rounds on all shifts and installing hotlines to answer questions, they offer truthful, open and candid responses for employee and client concerns (Trofino 2000:236).

Transformational vs transactional best practice

It is over three decades since Burns (1978:31) published his seminal work introducing the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership. The interests of the public sector and its members need to be aligned in order to improve service delivery. Such is a task for the transformational leader. Whereas transformational leaders uplift the morale, motivation, and morals of their followers, transactional leaders cater to their follower's immediate self-interests. The transformational leader emphasises what you can do for your country; the transactional leader emphasises what your country can do for you. A considerable amount of empirical research has been completed since then, supporting the utility of the distinction.

Changes in the marketplace and workforce over the three decades have resulted in the need for leaders to become more transformational and less transactional if they were to remain effective. Leaders are encouraged to empower their followers by developing them into high involvement individuals and team focused on quality, service, cost-effectiveness, and quantity of output of production.

Responsibility shifts downward in the flattening organisational hierarchy. Teams of educated professionals become commonplace. Increasingly, professionals see themselves as colleagues rather than in superior – subordinate relationships. Transformational leaders, which foster autonomy and challenging work, become increasingly important to followers' job satisfaction. The concept of job security and loyalty to the organisation for one's entire career is disappearing. Steady pay, secure benefits, and lifetime employment are no longer guaranteed for meritorious performance. At the same time, transactional leadership alone cannot provide job satisfaction.

SERVICE DELIVERY PROTESTS

The subject of discussion in local government circles in the last eight years has been the issue of service delivery. Since 2005, service delivery in democratic South Africa has been characterised by mass protests, demonstrations, petitions and violent confrontations. The turnaround strategies put in place to improve service delivery are yet to produce results. These costly and difficult responses of communities resorting to protests have become a characteristic feature of ordinary people's response when municipalities fail to take action regarding community challenges. There are a number of reasons offered for these protests. The main reason, it would appear, is dissatisfaction with the delivery of basic municipal services such as running water, electricity and sanitation services, especially in informal settlements. The unemployment rate which is high at about 23%; high levels of poverty; poor infrastructure; and the lack of houses add to the growing dissatisfaction in the dwellers in informal settlements and other poor communities. Other reasons include the poor responsiveness of municipalities to citizens' grievances and the unethical practice developing as a culture of self-enrichment on the part of municipal councillors and staff (Burger 2009:2; Atkinson 2007:53). At this stage it would probably be accurate to describe the fairly extensive scope of current service delivery protests in South Africa as symptoms of socio-political instability. However, it would be fair to conclude that if this situation is allowed to continue over a long period it has the potential to spread and develop into a fully-fledged revolt. Therefore, public officials need to be transformational and provide speedy solutions to the socio-economic conditions that prevail in many communities. Urgent interventions in relation to the conditions that bedevil the efficient and effective functioning and service delivery of municipalities are crucial.

CONCLUSION

Bold, decisive and transformational initiatives by the public sector and its leaders are necessary to meet the complex current and future challenges of the country. The environment

within which the public sector operates has changed. Thus it would be insufficient for the leaders to maintain the conventional style of leadership. The public sector and its leaders need to transform themselves and be visionary enough to aspire to greatness and bring about sustainable transformational changes to achieve vision 2025. Critical at this juncture is the preparation of the mindset of the people and the shaping of the environment, culture, structure and system to embark on a much more far-sighted enduring vision to achieve a *great nation* status in the future. Great and transformational leaders must always dream big and beyond the ordinary and create a great civilisation. They must have a strong belief that their dreams can come true even though they know full well these dreams can only be realised by the future generation. The challenge for public service is therefore to recruit, nurture and develop transformational and great leaders who are iconoclasts and the architects of our future.

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