

# Leading quality management for improved public service delivery

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## ABSTRACT

*If service delivery involves institutional performance, then it stands that the better the performance of government, the more likely actual service delivery will match expectations. The philosophy of quality management proposes that all aspects of an organisation have to be dedicated to the goal of achieving the highest standards of performance as required by customers. In so doing, quality management leads institutions to being committed to higher performance, thereby satisfying customers. Quality management provides the ideal foundation for the improvement of service delivery, as it is a philosophy of continuous improvement which can provide any institution with a set of practical tools for meeting and exceeding present and future customer needs, wants and expectations. This article addresses leading service delivery improvement efforts and quality management, with a view to achieving quality service delivery as outcome. It is not the intention of this article to propose that quality management is the answer to all challenges associated with the implementation of public service delivery improvement initiatives. Rather, it proposes that quality management is a natural progression from a service delivery focus and/or existing attempts to improve the products and services delivered by the public service to citizens as its customers, because the aims, philosophies and principles of service delivery improvement and quality management are so closely aligned. Even though quality management works horizontally across functions and departments, involves all staff members and extends backwards and forwards to include the supply chain and the customer chain, this article focuses on the role of the leader in the management of quality for the improvement of public service delivery.*

*“Quality is in direct proportion to commitment to excellence,  
no matter the chosen field of endeavour.”*

*~ Vince Lombardi*

## INTRODUCTION

Public service delivery is focused on making a larger impact on the quality of life of South Africans. Improved public service delivery requires the transformation of government functions with a view to service delivery which is citizen-oriented and citizen-centred. Quality management provides a methodology that can assist managers to address the challenges of transformation in (social) environments. Service delivery is a never-ending process which strives towards continuous improvement in terms of standards and products (services). Quality management leads institutions to being committed to higher performance, thereby satisfying customers. Its ability to provide insight, understanding, frameworks and tools from which managers can develop their own strategies for making public institutions dedicated to high performance quality and the satisfaction of citizens' expectations. This article establishes that leading quality management efforts efficiently will enable the public service to produce quality performance and improved service delivery in all spheres.

## UTILISING QUALITY MANAGEMENT TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The wide range of initiatives and programmes aimed at addressing the question of public service delivery in South Africa are based on premise that government should be able to function effectively, with a view of making a larger impact on the quality of life of South Africans (Dawson 1929:220). If the relationship between service delivery and institutional performance is recognised, then the implication is that the better the performance of government, the more likely actual service delivery will match customer expectations (Armstrong & Baron 1998:60).

The *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery*, or the *Batho Pele White Paper* of 1997 (Notice No. 1459 of 1997) (herein after referred to as the *Batho Pele White Paper*) sets the foundation that in efforts to transform public service delivery in South Africa, fulfilment on the Batho Pele intentions does not imply replacement or redesign of systems and procedures, or to change prevalent attitudes, but rather that systems, procedures and attitudes be re-oriented in favour of service delivery.

If improved public service delivery is thus defined as the transformation of government functions with a view to service delivery which is customer-oriented and customer-centred, quality management, as people-focussed management system that aims at the continual increase of customer satisfaction, provides a methodology that can assist leaders to cope with challenges of transformation. Quality management provides tools for making public institutions dedicated to high performance quality and the satisfaction of customers' expectations (Ovretveit 1992:2).

Quality service delivery requires that all aspects of an organisation to be dedicated to the goal of achieving the highest standards of performance as required by the customers. As quality service delivery affects every process, every job and every person, it requires continuous improvement in the entire system. It has been established that quality management is a philosophy and a set of guiding principles that intend to meet and exceed expectations of various external and internal customers (Oakland 1989:10). It can also be



defined as the acceptance and pursuit of continuous improvement on standards or goal of attaining quality through the participation of role players in public service delivery (Gaster & Squires 2003:176).

As stated, it is not the intention of this article to propose that quality management is the answer to all challenges associated with the implementation of public service delivery improvement initiatives, rather that quality management is a natural progression from a service delivery focus and/or existing attempts to improve services delivered by the public service to citizens as its customers, because the aims, philosophies and principles of service delivery improvement and quality management are so closely aligned.

## **DEVELOPMENTS IN SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT THINKING**

Some of the similarities between the philosophy of New Public Management (NPM) and the principles of improved public service delivery include (Ferlie 1996:19):

- emphasis on empowerment, sustainable development and sustainable/continued improvement;
- clear frameworks of accountability;
- explicit standards and measures of performance, clear definition of targets and indicators of success; and
- a greater emphasis on output control, that is emphasis on results, not processes.

Much in line with the vision of NPM, efforts to re-orientate public service delivery systems and processes, have been characterised (Dempster 2002:17):

- greater decentralisation of functions;
- greater demands for financial accountability;
- greater responsiveness to customer needs;
- a shift in focus on outcomes, rather than outputs;
- the exposure of institutional performance to public scrutiny; and
- the assessment of employee performance against defined competencies.

Whatever elements of NPM are employed they all have in common a strong dependence on effective leadership for their successful implementation, even if the understanding of effective leadership varies slightly from approach to approach. For example, for sustainability, effective leadership requires a solid grasp of economy and effectiveness for being an efficient manager of resources. The accountability element requires the leader to have expertise in performance management systems and relating results to performance, and for decentralisation effective leadership includes developing employees and building a collaborative culture.

*To reach a port,  
we must sail.  
Sail, not tie at anchor;  
sail, not drift.  
~ Franklin Roosevelt*

## LEADING QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Governance can be defined as the act of governing or exercising authority and leadership as having or exercising a determining influence (on the success of service delivery improvement efforts) (*The Universal Dictionary* 1961: 436, 642). One of the primary dimensions of quality management is leadership commitment to establish unity of purpose and to give direction for the attainment of the desired outcomes (Collier & Esteman 2000:209). It is leadership rather than management that is the essential factor in challenging times, for example, when implementing quality management in an institution.

When focusing on the management of quality, the leader should be directly involved and committed. Leadership should visibly demonstrate its commitment through action, personal involvement in quality management and by maintaining close contact with employees responsible for implementing quality service. Good leaders convey a sense of urgency that will reduce the resistance to change that may prevent an institution from taking the steps required to complete the process. An internal environment should be created where all employees become fully involved in achieving the institution's objectives. Leading quality management effectively requires commitment and encourages all employees to meet customer needs through continuous improvement. The leader should also play an active role in creating strategies, plans and systems for achieving superior quality, and should include quality in core institutional values and the institutional mission. The leader should inspire the effective and efficient use of resources and should guide the efforts of the institution towards excellence (Evans & Dean 2003:209).

Visionary leadership is necessary to orientate an institution to quality management and the long-term vision established for the institution, needs to be driven by (changing) customer needs, in order to keep fulfilling on the overarching public service vision of "a better life for all". The leader should serve as role model by reinforcing and communicating core values through words and actions (Pun & Hui 2002:374).

Leadership style is important in the quest for service delivery improvement through quality management, as some styles support quality management more than others. It is important to understand leadership styles and how styles relate to team efforts. Employees should be convinced of the advantages pursuing a quality management philosophy. Internal and external stakeholders need to be aligned to support quality service efforts. This should transpire as follows: leadership is responsible for developing vision and strategies, aligning relevant people behind these strategies and empowering employees to realise the vision, despite institutional weaknesses and environmental threats. Leaders are responsible for the creation of an atmosphere in which employees are able, supported by management decisions, to align their work with the institutional mandate and strategies (Pierce & Newstrom 2000:165). To achieve this, leaders should be dedicated to continuous improvement.

In contrast to Williams (1994:2) who mentions that quality management is a process, a technique, a management style, a goal and a tool, Peak (1995:15) emphasises that quality management is mostly a style of visionary leadership that creates a culture which helps achieve the goal of creating the highest possible quality product and services. Quality management is therefore a process of creating an environment (context) in which employees strive towards the continuous improvement of services (content). This requires visionary leadership that utilises participative management focused on continuous improvement.



According to (Barnett, McCormick & Conner 2001:4) leaders can achieve this by the adoption and implementation of quality management through communicating objectives and policies and by modelling commitment to an institutional culture of quality.

## LEADING TRANSFORMATION

In many public institutions, effectiveness in leading quality management, would initially require effectiveness in leading transformation. The premise is used as departure that successful leadership is 'contingent' to the unique contexts in which it finds itself and that leadership effects are usually largest where they are needed most. The leader (manager) need to distinguish between (A) leading changes with first-order implications, where change is an extension of the past and (B) leading changes with second-order implications, where change breaks with the past. The leader needs to realise that approach A may not be effective in situation B and that B (second-order change) may be difficult to fulfil by the leader alone. Distributed leadership thus distinguishes between (A) leading change within existing paradigms and implemented with existing knowledge and skills; and (B) leading change which is in conflict with existing perspectives and requires new knowledge and skills (Kanter 1985:136).

Elmore (2000:24) details selected principles that lay the foundation for a model of distributive leadership focused on quality improvement:

- the purpose of leadership is the improvement of performance;
- delivering quality requires continuous improvement;
- transformation requires modelling;
- the roles and activities of leadership should also flow from the expertise required for improvement, not only from the formal dictates of the institution; and
- the exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity.

Successful institutional change toward quality management only occurs through leading by example. Without this example, employees will doubt the sincerity of the quality management philosophy and goals. (Addey 2001:850). This requires leaders' willingness to examine their own behaviour and that they must be capable of personal change themselves. Even though leaders are responsible for creating a context for change, they realise that change requires the support of employees, customers and stakeholders. Effective leaders of change ensure that these groups network with each another, meet periodically to discuss progress, assess barriers to change and develop new responses.

Quality management requires continuous change in the way activities are carried out in institutions. Strategies to manage and cope with change should be adopted in order to maintain order. Change should be seen as inevitable, and should be planned to minimise the associated risks. Leaders should convey the message to employees that quality management is not just theoretical tools and techniques, but a change in the overall way of institutional functioning. In order to accomplish this, different leadership roles are needed at different stages of the transformation process towards quality management. For example, in the early stages, leaders need to act as animators, motivators and networkers, gradually being replaced by creators and conveners. In the mid stages of leading transformation integrators, drivers,

and sustainers are needed. The later stages require leaders to act as mentors and as agitators for continued change (Bass 1997:134).

As requirement for institutional transformation towards quality management, the important intervening variable between leadership, employee performance and customer outcomes is collective efficacy and involves three sequential development stages: a trusting and collaborative climate; a shared and monitored mission; and taking initiatives and risks (Elmore 2000:26).

## **COMPONENTS IN LEADING QUALITY SERVICE DELIVERY**

### **A climate of community**

As one of the fundamental factors of transformational leadership towards quality management, stands the component of community, implying how people are communicated with and treated. The principle of community is that success is more likely where people act rather than are always reacting; are empowered; involved in decision-making through a transparent, facilitative and supportive structure; and are trusted, respected, encouraged, and valued. Community is also referred to as personalisation through participation and a climate of professional community implies shared norms and values, a focus on continuous improvement, collaboration and accountability. A climate of community is one of learning, capacity for change and innovation, with the aim of moving from bureaucratic dependence to professionalism and then to collaborative networks. A climate of community established to support transformation to quality management, has the following characteristics (Silins & Mulford 2002:621):

- trusting and collaboration,
- a shared and monitored mission,
- initiative risk taking, and
- on-going, relevant professional development.

### **Employee involvement and empowerment**

The question needs to be asked constantly how service delivery can be improved. It is especially important that those who are closest to the point of service delivery be asked how to improve performance, (Mitchell 1991:72) whilst offering visible support and encouragement (Fourie 1998:231). In establishing a climate of community, one of the tools at a leader's disposal, is employee involvement. Employee involvement is also one of the best ways to create a positive culture wherein quality management can thrive. Involved and empowered employees encourage innovation and creativity on all institutional levels. Employees form the centre of quality management, as they are involved in managing and improving processes and in serving customers. Empowerment of all employees is thus necessary as a source for improved performance and participation. Public institutions should give employees the authority, responsibility, knowledge and skills they need to be effective in their roles, as a public institution can serve citizens only as well as it serves its own employees.



Unless leaders promote the establishment of an environment that encourages employee efforts toward institutional objectives, the barriers between institutional goals and employee efforts will not be bridged. In high-performing institutions, employees who do the work make most of the decisions about how the work is done (Oakland & Oakland 1998:187). Therefore, access to information and the development of appropriate skills are prerequisites for optimising employee contributions to the institution's efforts to improve service delivery.

Leaders (managers) must know that employees need strong direction and clear objectives on how to manage quality in an institution. Leaders should set standards and should invite people to make their unique contributions. An institution can only move as fast as it develops the people who will move it. This is why empowering people is critical in continuous improvement as part of quality management. Empowerment supports quality management, because employees at all levels have the responsibility and authority to make decisions that affect them and their work. However, institutions cannot effectively decentralise decision-making unless those doing the work have access to the necessary information (including information relevant to the performance of the institutions) and are skilled at making fact-based decisions. Empowerment is thus a crucial part of a culture change towards quality management, in that it situates the decision-making process at the point where problems are the most visible. Empowerment also supports quality management, in that delegation to empowered employees frees up management for additional tasks of equal or greater importance (Pycraft *et al.* 2000:157).

In most cases, employees are delighted to be empowered when empowerment is accompanied by training, job security, desire and a commitment to performance (Oschman *et al.* 2005:181). Employees who have been trained, empowered and recognised for their achievements are better able to align their individual objectives with those of the institution. When empowerment is effective, institutions will realise that the benefits of synergy and empowerment cannot work without a participative management structure. Commitment to empowerment has implications for virtually every area of leadership, as well as institutional work and therefore has to be implemented across all activities in an institution. Ultimately, involvement brings about greater commitment to end results. Sallis (1993:37) states that even though quality management is about ethos, observed behavioural regularities, norms and values, rules of the game, philosophy, management style and customer satisfaction, another dimension to the concept is minimising the control role of those in leadership positions while gaining energy from everybody's achievements and sense of ownership.

Empowerment is a natural output of well-implemented quality management. It promotes the freedom of employees to use their initiative in matters of customer care. Additionally, this freedom creates an environment of trust, which enables employees to participate fully in the institution's cultural transformation. Oakland (1998:25) supports this contention in the emphasis he places on commitment, understanding and the ability of leaders to motivate others towards the realisation of the vision and/or goals in the building of quality culture. According to him, leaders should, if they wish to build a successful organisation, be able to define the critical success factors that will make the achievement of the vision and mission possible; understand the processes and structures required for quality management; and understand the role of leadership in the development and motivation of employees.

## Teamwork

Teamwork is not only a useful tool in quality management; it is also a fundamental element in ensuring that the institutional climate encourages employees to use their skills towards continuous performance improvement. Teamwork provides an opportunity for employees to work together in pursuing quality in ways they have not worked together before. Through teams, employees are brought together with a common goal and quality improvement becomes easier to communicate over functional borders. Teamwork is a major part of quality management, because it enables employees in different parts of the institution to work together to meet customer needs in ways that cannot be done through individual job performance alone (Katzenbach & Smith 1993:209).

Persuading employees to implement service delivery improvement and quality management principles is closely related to teamwork. It is essential that every employee is committed to working as part of a team. Employees need to understand that when a team member performs well all the members of the team benefit. Leaders should motivate team members to aim for common goals and it is thus essential that each team member knows what the goals are. Every employee should be clear about his/her position on and importance to the team. Employees who understand the goals of their institutions and know where they fit in are more likely to be willing and able to make a greater contribution (KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Administration 2000:10).

Warner (1999:38) describes teamwork as a behavioural factor that must be part of the institution's culture that intends to pursue improved service quality, as teamwork is viewed as one of the ways in which public institutions could increase the speed, flexibility and methods with which they make decisions and solve problems. In support of this, one of the responsibilities of the leader is to nurture team cohesion. Teamwork forms a vital part of any service delivery improvement strategy and, together with people empowerment, forms the basis of optimal human resource utilisation for quality management.

## Communication

Effective communication with employees (internal), customers and stakeholders (external) is vital to the successful development and deployment of quality management in public institutions. Sound communication provides the means of raising quality awareness and involvement and reinforcing the quality management message within an institution (Kreitner & Kinicki 1998:167). Effective communication among employees should be emphasised and barriers that limit communication should be broken down. Leaders need to communicate down to the lowest level of the institution and should also solicit regular opportunities to communicate the quality management philosophy with the strategic intent to identify any problems in the workplace before developing corrective actions.

Communication should be used to focus employees on customer satisfaction in order to eliminate discrepancies between internal and external perceptions of quality. Leaders should effectively communicate the link between customer satisfaction and improved quality, which is that quality can be defined as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs Gilbert (2004:7). This definition can be summarised as consistent conformance to customers' expectations, as





opposed to fitness for purpose. Deming (1986: 34) draws the same distinction by considering quality as “delighting the customer”; establishing a direct link to personal experience, as opposed to conformance to specification.

Communicating positive feedback provides the fuel to energise on-going quality improvement. Employees will not automatically commit to quality management; they should be sold on it. This requires of the leader to successfully selling quality management principles through proven techniques. It is the customers and stakeholders of an institution who will ultimately judge how well it has achieved its goals and objectives. It is those within the institution entrusted with and expected to achieve quality management goals and objectives that should clearly understand how quality management success is defined and what their role is in achieving this success. Both internal and external customers need to be part of the development and deployment of the quality philosophy, an impossibility without effective communication (Ross 1994:514).

## Culture

To implement quality management in an institution requires the establishment of a (new) quality culture. Quality management is directed at re-orientating people’s behaviour. Instead of it being the concern of senior management or the “quality department”, all employees need to be involved in transforming to quality management. Institutions that do not use the talents of all employees, combined with the new quality techniques, will begin to falter and eventually fail (Claver *et al.* 2001:472).

The new culture that must be developed must promote and support quality management, as that will allow the institution to survive new challenges. All employees must assume ownership of their work processes and the quality of their deliverables. If cultural change is required for the adoption of quality management, it must be planned and must occur in a consistent and incremental manner, since if change is too great and unplanned, the institution will revert to the *status quo* (Wilton & Reavill 1995:154).

Leaders should keep employees informed of any institutional cultural changes required to implement quality management successfully. The leadership responsibility of culture-forming should address the values that determine group behaviour and support the performance objectives required to achieve service delivery improvement through customer satisfaction (Oschman *et al.* 2005:188).

## CONCLUSION

The successful implementation of quality management and thus the achievement of public service delivery improvement depend on the commitment of leadership. It is a leadership function of quality management to establish unity of purpose and direction. Leaders must create and maintain an environment in which people can become fully involved in achieving institutional objectives. One of the ways to do that is by being visibly involved in and committed to quality transformation.

Actually the real challenge facing most public institutions is no longer how to improve but more importantly, how to sustain improvement. Sustainability will depend upon the public

institution's capacity to maintain and support the development of employees and sustaining improvement requires effective leadership. Quality improvement efforts are advocated that are grounded in employees working collaboratively.

Commitment to public service delivery improvement through quality management might require initial investment in skills development and performance monitoring, but the empowerment of internal customers and the satisfaction of external customers can be expected as returns on this investment. Involvement, training and empowerment of employees are essential in the successful implementation of quality management. Resistance must be translated to positive feedback by the leader, so that it can direct the development process to establish a new quality culture.

Communication of service delivery successes through quality management and of progress is vital. Finding ways to disseminate information and to obtain feedback is a high priority leadership function.

Institutions, no matter which sector they belong to, all depend on their customers and must therefore understand current and future customer needs, meet customer requirements and strive to exceed customer expectations. A customer-orientated culture must be developed in which the needs of existing and potential customers are satisfied. For improved public service delivery, achievement of quality is important, not only in respect of the outputs of goods and services, but also regarding the inputs of time, people and information, as related to processes and the environment.

Finally, leaders need to drive the adoption and implementation of quality management for the improvement of public service delivery, by communicating quality goals and objectives clearly and regularly, but more importantly by modelling commitment to a culture of quality.

*"If you want to build a ship,  
don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work,  
but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."  
~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

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