"The African Public Service in the Twenty-First Century- New Initiatives in Performance Management"

LEADERSHIP ISSUES- EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Can a country, government or public service achieve its vision and core strategic objectives without Leadership? The answer is NO. Leadership is central to everything we wish to gain for our country and its peoples, both in the short and long term. Now Leadership implies a following and a relationship with followers. And the relationship is only achieved through effective communication. And it is effective communication on which to focus today as a powerful platform through which performance management can be achieved.

The introduction of Performance Management System (PMS) in the public service is perceived as an important change in the public service business conduct. It is geared towards bringing about a business change in ethics and conduct for the delivery in performance. The change will most likely meet with resistance from employees who have enjoyed the status quo, like it is with all new changes. It will therefore require the commitment of the authorities in the public service to ensure that effective communication is given a strategic role in Government Ministries, Departments, Private Sector to help both to achieve a culture shift in the employees and improve performance.

Firstly I need to define what is meant by Leadership, both good and bad. Then I will place it in the context of the performance management system. Finally, I will demonstrate how critical steps will lead to effective communication that in turn will contribute to delivery on performance at the workplace, in the civil service, based on the PMS.

2. LEADERSHIP IS……

Good Leadership ensures active participation of stakeholders, facilitates transparency and must be about accountability at all times.

Active participation is achieved through effective communication with employees. In the Public service this would mean communicating the corporate direction both at national level and at the Departmental level and observing congruency of the directions. The alignment of strategies happens at intra- and inter-department. This helps in enhancing essential information dissemination to stakeholders and the public at large from a wider information base.
Leadership engages in and facilitates transparency. Facilitating transparency is achieved through introduction of business plans and related action plans. The drafting of business plans ensures that employees are in full knowledge of their own part of the work portion, the boundary as dictated through terms of reference or position description as well as the financial scope or budget allocation. It ensures that they assume responsibility for their actions and that they are fully accountable for the actions.

Accountability is synonymous with performance appraisal and involves a joint undertaking by the employee and employer/supervisor in assessing overall performance. Firstly, the employer will perform a self-assessment on assigned duty over a agreed and specified period. The Supervisor will in turn, perform her/his rating. A meeting will then be convened to discuss the final score, itself a joint exercise. Discussions shall then ensue on the outcome of the ratings and comments given to support decisions taken. The process could go to the highest level of Authority until a conclusive agreement is reached for everyone involved. This is indicative of the process being transparency and accountable.

The process ensures that milestones are achieved, and on time. It is also inspiring and it helps to unleash hidden talents in the employees. It breeds a culture of going that extra mile during execution of duties.

On the other hand, bad Leadership hand believes in holding on to information because "it is power and a privilege for leaders". Often this type of Leadership creates walls between themselves and employees. The prevailing work environment becomes stifling. Delivery is often compromised.

We are all aware that Public Service has over the years remained stagnant and has continued to operate under the same principles that have been established since time immemorial. Performance was assessed at the end of each year and was not even all inclusive. The prerogative simply lay with Leadership on how the business was to be conducted, who got promoted/demoted or re-deployed. Knowledge about the activities of the place were only known to Leadership. Information was power and the more one was informed the more she/he continued to stay in power/leadership. What ensued was a rather dictatorship style of management that does not augur well with the present day democratic environment.

Present-day Leadership must engage in information and knowledge sharing. It is not enough that Leadership thinks it is right; it is not enough that it is right; what matters is that employees, the public, the people agree that it is right. This is a fundamental reality of democracy. Responsible Leadership will take trouble to sound out public opinion, listen to concerns raised even when they may not be correct. This is demonstrative of effective communication.
3. WHO IS ENTITLED TO BENEFIT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE's EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN LESOTHO AND HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT?

Public Service is about serving the public at large. It is about rendering essential services to the public regardless of political affiliations, religious beliefs, social and economic status, adult and/ or youth. The public comprises of civil servants, parastatals, business people/private sector, school children, teachers, print and electronic media, Non-government organisations, trade unions and communities in general. The stakeholder for public service is the Basotho nation.

Like any other country Lesotho, has a populace of foreign origin which must also be addressed and served by the Public Service. This sector is equally an important stakeholder. So is the larger international community, which must be served with information through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Appropriate communication channels must be available and known for each sector for effective communication (to and back) to happen. The starting point must be to empower the civil servants with information to enable them to implement effective communication. The performance management systems allows for this empowerment, as illustrated above (transparency and accountability).

4. WHAT HAS GONE WRONG WITH THE PREVIOUS COMMUNICATION?

Government Ministries, Departments and Institutions, Parastatals, Houses of Parliament, Office of the King, are primary contributors of news for the public. They inform of developments and progress on issues and projects within the entire Government machinery. The Ministry of Communications is charged with disseminating such information from Government Ministries, Department and Institutions to the public.

Parastatals often have Public Relations/Communication Units that are charged with disseminating information to the public. The Private Sector is also an important source of information yet it is not often that they have Communication Units.

Although the Communication function is given some recognition, it still does not enjoy much support from the Authorities. Firstly it is not positioned strategically within organisations and little importance is attached to related staff development. The situation on the ground is such that there is an urgent need for Leaders in both the private and public sectors to realize the contribution that communication can make towards achieving business goals.
4.1 Communication Challenges Encountered

4.1.1 Internal Communication challenges within a Ministry

It is not uncommon in the Public Service to find that within one Ministry knowledge of activities or business direction, is confined only to Leadership, and the rest of staff is in the dark of what is happening and what should be happening. Employees are often concerned about not being informed and Leadership is far too busy to devise ways of communication strategies with them. The result on inadequate internal communication is that the employees, who are far larger in numbers than Leadership itself, usually resort to despondency which in turn leads to poor service delivery, exhorbitant costs of electricity bills (where heaters are left on throughout all winter and autumn seasons), telephone bills, stationery, absenteeism, incessant sick leaves, theft, rumour mongering and playing truancy. The performance indicator for this state of affairs is usually a loud cry from the general public.

4.1.2 External Communication challenges between Ministries, Parastatals and Private Sector

There seems to be no co-ordination of activities from Ministry to Ministry, Ministries to Parastatals and Private Sectors. In this case also when the parties do meet, information is confined only to Leadership across Ministries, Departments, Institutions, Parastatals and Private Organisations. Because there are no effective communication mechanisms in place, the information will not be communicated down to employees at their respective parent Ministries. Often again this situation leads to duplication of efforts, hence resources which could have otherwise been re-deployed elsewhere more profitably.

4.1.3 Communication challenges faced by District administration

There are Government employees based in the ten districts under the Leadership of District Secretaries. It is quite a challenge to inform them, in time, about developments happening at the Central Government. They are in places where resources are limited, infrastructure inadequate and unreliable to facilitate provision of information and services needed by the public. These remote employees rely on direct communication from their immediate management at the district level, but when information is not available or clear, the 'grapevine' often takes over. Often some of them incur costs and travel to headquarters to seek information and clarification. This practice eats on resources and slows down the pace of service delivery in the districts business centres.
4.1.4 Communication challenges faced by Public Service during changes in Government administration

When there is a change in political administration, information on how the new Leadership wishes to conduct its business is not effectively communicated to the rest of the employees. Indeed there would be initial rounds where Leadership would be introduced to staff but there would be no further interactions to empower the employees with any new business directions of the new administration. This often results in employees perpetuating the status quo and friction ensues.

4.1.5 Communication challenges faced by the Public Service during difficult economic times

When there are difficult economic times such as the prevailing agricultural failures that have resulted in the Prime Minister declaring a State of Famine, Stock theft endemic, HIV/AIDS pandemic, State of Poverty, Job Creation, retrenchments, privatisation, political mis-understanding, etc, Leadership in the Public Service is often faced with a challenge to inform employees about the position of Government. Communication here involves disseminating tough messages and Leadership may be unwilling to be completely open and transparent to employees about strategies that must be adopted for fear of repercussions in terms of employee retention and productivity. Instead, many choose to undertake little or no communication at all.

The result of the unwillingness to communicate these issues may result in employees having perceptions about Government/Company Parastatals. The employees, may, in turn, without a deliberate effort on their part, influence the wider public negatively as they feel the uncertainty of situations regarding issues.

4.1.6 Communication challenges faced by the Public Service to preserve its integrity

Often Leadership is faced with the challenge of communicating the standpoint of Government to employees when there are controversial and sensitive issues such as perceived quality of services rendered to the public, decision-making on certain public issues, restructuring exercises and business performance. Disclosure of facts must be carefully considered to avoid, at best, creating a morale problem or at worst, creating panic in the ranks of the employees.
5. HOW IMPORTANT IS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

The Public Service is usually the biggest employer in African Continent and Lesotho is no exception. Effective Communication is important to enhance the integrity of the country through its Government/governance. It is important to maintain stability, to build trust and to improve relations both for the internal (employees) as well as external stakeholders. This kind of environment is the conducive for successful implementation of development initiatives.

There is need to reassess Governments' communication policy to ensure that it is a valued management function, contributing to sound departmental and Government decision-making for the following objectives:

i) to foster a corporate approach to communication across departments and across the entire public service

ii) to create departmental communication functions that foresee and adapt to emerging trends and changes and most importantly

iii) to ensure that organisational capacity of the communication functions is suitable and is able to fully respond to the needs and expectations of the public, government Ministers, and is able to contribute to the advancement of government priorities.

This need comes as a result of increasing demand for communication support across all departments. The national media through its phone-in programmes bears testimony to this need. It is apparent that communication function in public service needs to be enhanced through improving capacity and collective competency of the workforce. A review of the communication strategy is a major transformation exercise across the public service, one that needs to be guided to have a collective direction, and whose Leadership has to be greatly empowered.

The following strategies could be adopted and modified according to the needs of each Ministry:

5.1 Investing in the Internal Communicators

This can be achieved through establishing internal communication teams within Ministries/Departments/Institutions and establishing a communications training programme for Leadership. The training programme could be expanded to include middle managers and individual learners. The main objective of the training programme would be to increase staff understanding of the importance of good communication and how they can use it both strategically and tactically, the result of which can bring out positive impacts on the individual and the public service.
Internal Communication teams serve to improve communication between Leadership and employees. Therefore, a Performance Management System becomes useful in pursuing the interest of effective communication as it will state what the team will provide to the business and also what Leadership can expect (output) from the exercise. It is therefore important for Leadership to integrate Internal Communicators as part of planning process.

Hitherto, communicators had been perceived to be providing support at the end of the planning process, as can be illustrated by writing a news article after all had been discussed. Here at home the Lesotho News Agency (LENA) and Lentsoe la Basotho reporters in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting come right at the end of the process. This would then require that internal communicators should take lead of issues emanating from their respective areas during broadcasting, and they would then do so with competence and confidence.

The duty of Internal Communicators could be seen as providing advice and consultancy to Leadership on content, timeliness and best methods of communicating with employees.

5.2 To establish and expand/improve communication tools within Ministries.

5.2.1 Publication of a Newsletters

One way of achieving the above would be through establishing internal weekly, bi-weekly, monthly newsletters within each Ministry, which could serve as the communication backbone. The mechanism is less costly; it can be trusted and is easily accessible to all employees. The timing of newsletters should be such that even those employees at district level are kept appraised of developments at more or less the same time as those at the headquarters, to address the concern which has been raised earlier.

5.2.2 Using face-to-face communication for more impact

A performance Management System requires that business plans are drafted to capture the business objectives and strategies that Leadership wishes to action for implementation. Internal communicators could help Leadership to deliver key business plans to employees. Leadership could be advised to meet with employees at regular intervals to deliver a business briefing to managers who, in turn, would cascade the information to their working teams within the Ministry. Instead of issuing out pamphlets and memos, a face-to-face interaction could be adopted to improve the impact.

These kind of communicative interactions need to be brief as plans need to be translated into monetary presentation, the budget, which is time bound. The
mechanism could bring good results as staff would be motivated by the personal attention they would receive from their Leaders. They would provide information (positive and/or negative) needed to improve and enhance integrity of the company/public service, relationships between employees and Leadership, performance and delivery and, furthermore there would be ownership, of adopted business direction.

5.2.3 Electronic communication channels (E-mail, Intranet, Internet)

Electronic channels could be effectively used to pass on messages/information for effective communication. It is however incumbent upon Leadership to package/integrate messages or parts of them, for communication through each channel to avoid unnecessary duplication of all details of the message in each source. For instance a print channel can be used to communicate the big picture about a company goal, a face-to-face meeting can provide localised two-way discussion on how a goal affects a particular work group and progress against goals can be provided in timely electronic updates.

6. MEASURING SUCCESS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

6.1 Conducting a Communication Audit

Periodic communication audit is necessary within Government Ministries to ensure that communication has been effective both vertically, horizontally and as far as the district employees are concerned.

Colin Beggs, CEO of Price Water Coopers says that there is a world-wide crisis in corporate reporting/communication which has been hastened by the Enron bankruptcy and a swift shattering of a major global accountancy firm. Other collapses of substantial magnitude have followed. Beggs continues to say that the corporate crisis has nevertheless provided an opportunity for solutions. It has been an opportunity to improve on the quality and transparent reporting and the rebuild of the public's trust and confidence.

There has been a spotlight on the role of auditors in Enron for example where they were elevated to the star of the show. But as matters have widened and with more reflection on new failures occurring, attention has now been drawn to the role of others in the corporate chain such as governance boards, management, company executives, information distributors, Investors and other stakeholders.

We learn from the King II report on corporate governance in the Republic of South Africa for example that the quality of reporting/communicating can enhance the public confidence of organisations and governments. If brought into action properly it could significantly elevate the quality of the company's and
public service and how they interact with controls, risks and governance in ethical and accountable manner.

6.2 Conducting stakeholder conferences

The importance of actively involving stakeholders for effective communication in organisations cannot be overemphasised. Stakeholders usually include the employees, customers, community groups, local authorities, the media, Local and International NGOs, Foreign missions and Institutions in Lesotho, Schools and Institutes of Learning, etc. Leadership should be in knowledge of what are the expectations of each group. These groups are useful in providing information that can be used to identify the effectiveness and perceived value of government's and/or private sector activities. This could result in refocusing or restrategising on priority areas of concern instead of dwelling on issues that are of no particular interest to the majority of stakeholders.

Involving stakeholders also reveals any reality gaps between how organisations perceive themselves and how people outside the organisation see them. It is usually fairly easier to identify strengths and weaknesses based on internal data, but it can be very enlightening to go and talk openly to stakeholders and this exercises could be an important part of the planning process in the public/private sectors.

Leadership should however package messages and establish a hierarchy of stakeholder criteria. This type of communication also provides information about relationships between stakeholders and government. It also helps to track attitudes as people graduate from being aware to the following stages:

- Trust - having a favourable disposition
- Transaction - from a personal or professional contact
- Satisfaction - how satisfied they were with the contact
- Commitment - whether or not they would speak highly of the government/company if asked
- Advocacy - how likely they would be to speak highly of government/company without being asked

This feedback is important in identifying opportunities to strengthen relationships through effective communication.
6.3 Conducting Staff Satisfaction Survey

In addition to the external stakeholder research, internal stakeholder survey is a useful tool to measure the success of the communication. The survey often reveals how people feel about their leadership. It gives information on their attitudes towards customer service. They provide information on the support they are receiving on both their performance and development. They will give information on how competitive their pay and benefit package is, how effective is internal communication and generally how they feel about their specific jobs.

The information from both the external stakeholder and staff can then be analysed simultaneously by category or by region. This will help identify trends, hot spots, areas of erosion or improvement and key strengths. The information/data can be benchmarked against other Governments or Private Sector.

(A model of The Communication Plan as a continuos cycle and aligning with business objectives.)

i) Review Relevant Information
ii) Identify business objectives
iii) Identify Stakeholder Groups
iv) Identify Issues
v) Develop programmes, identify messages and channels
vi) Communicate internally
vii) Implement
viii) Evaluate. go back to i)

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I wish to draw the attention of Leadership as a whole to the following competencies for effective communication that could lead to improved performance in the daily discharge of duties in the public service and private sector.

7.1 Communication is about strategic thinking

Communication function management in the respective work departments, must be made of strategic thinkers. They (Leadership), should therefore be prepared to invest a great deal in the human resource to get the dividends. Strategic thinking capabilities include an understanding of the direction and business of government and department; the history and evolution of the department; the contextual environment in which it operates, the life cycle of issues and issues of management; the history, mandate and modus operandi of all stakeholder groups; the relationship-building methods and action/reaction type of scenario planning of the strategising process.
7.2 **Communication is a function, not a branch**

It should also be noted that Communication is a function and not a branch. It should be recognised and operate as a unified cross-organisational management function. It should not be operated as monolithic, centralised, vertically-structured organisational unit but should be organised as a matrix within the public service and organisations.

7.3 **Communication requires strong Leadership**

The Head of communication is herself/himself required to be a strong leader whose role should be:

a) to initiate and mobilise change,
b) to attract and develop talent, gather intelligence, capturing knowledge and transfer learning, attract resources, build cross-functional working teams
c) to motivate and inspire staff; manage interference, build strong partnerships and continually position and reposition the function, in line with the strategic direction of the Ministry or department.

7.4 **Communication is about multi-skilled teams**

For the communication function to be really effective, it has to consist of multi-skilled teams supported by small group of specialists in areas such as advertising, media monitoring, e-communication, publishing, research and evaluation.

7.5 **Communication is a one, all-encompassing function**

Resources for communication should be identified, pooled, prioritised and employed efficiently through a one, all-encompassing communication budget.

7.6 **Communication must be integral to governments business planning**

Communication plan must be an integral part of the government's/organisation's plan and not a bolt-on. It should be produced in collaboration with other branches and units in other parts of the Department or Ministry. It should be focused on supporting the objectives of the business.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION**
REFERENCES

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5. Strategic Communication Management documents (Volumes 6, Issues 5 and 6, 2002)