

The Study of Best Practice in Civil Service Reforms

By:James Katorobo

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1. Introduction

The concept of "best practice" is widely used to distinguish exemplary or improved performance in organizations. While the concept of "best" can evoke the notion of a contest, the popular use of the word in management practice is focused on stimulating improvement in organizational performance. That is, managers and executive officers search current experience with an eye to identifying organizations and their practices that are most effective in leading to high-level performance. Within the business context, where companies compete for customers, the notion of a contest and "survival of the fittest" seems appropriate. Within the context of public management, where few organizations are threatened with demise, the concept of "best practice" is usually a matter of pride for the public managers, the politicians, and the citizens of the territory.

Inventing or following an appropriate "best practice" can also lead to the best use of public resources for development; that is productivity as measured by efficiency and effectiveness. "Best" could be measured by increase in GDP, or by an equilibrium between development and environmental conservation. UNDP has especially enriched the measurement of national "best practice" by introducing significant social development indicators into the measurement of "national success". Furthermore, best practices can be identified by the extent to which the activities embody the highest standard or value. Taking into account both economic growth and social development indicators, statisticians can identify significant progress outcomes, and then other social scientists work backward to identify those "practices" which have contributed to successful results.

Increasingly, awards programmes have been developed to recognize "best practices" in public and private management. A recent example developed through the vehicle of Habitat's 1995 Conference in Istanbul was the designation of 40 cities as "best practices" in municipal management. Chosen through an application and juried procedure, these 40 cities exemplified jurisdictions that faced and overcame significant challenges. These cases have been made available on the HABITAT web site and serve as a stimulus for intensification of efforts to improve municipal management.

Significant in the application of best practice information is the concept of the "learning organization". The full use of best practice information depends on the receptiveness of the organization to incorporate new ideas in an open, non-defensive manner. In the "learning organization", there is a process of continuous scanning of the environment for new, better methods and emerging opportunities to adapt and apply those methods to achieve improved organizational performance.

2. The Best Practice Approach and Research

Best practice research (BPR) has been defined as *"the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories of management"*. The focus of analyses is on "success stories" in order to discover the chain of practices, ways of doing things, that achieve results. The fundamental objective of BPR is to discover best practices that can be adapted by other organizations where the level of achievement is low. For example, civil service

reforms are being undertaken in many countries. One government may achieve "best practice" in overall civil service reform or in the reform of a particular component of the civil service system, such as human resource development. Levels of civil service reform performance differ from country to country: some doing well, others poorly. Some ministries may be managing change effectively; while in others, reforms are stagnant. Successful cases of reform in one part of the country (or organization) may be emulated and lead to best practices in other parts of the country (or organization). Whereas focusing on problems and difficulties may encourage negativism and promote organizational paralysis; focusing on success stories and best practices may encourage a positive outlook and promote diffusion of best practices.

Best practice research is typified by a focus on successful cases. It is also typified by the objective of discovering the "causes" of that success, not merely to explain and understand (academic), but to guide action (pragmatic). Best practice researchers identify factors, or variables, that combine to account for the success. The assumption is that if these variables are replicated in other organizations, then similar success might be achieved. What kind of variables has been identified by the best practice studies?

The best practice approach has a long established and recognized track record in the history of management development. Frederick Taylor believed that there must be a "one best way" to do any activity. He developed tools and methods of discovering and promoting the "best way". These tools and methods (time and motion studies) became the foundation of the scientific management movement. The best practice approach was used in the famous Hawthorne studies to observe factory workers assembling telephone relays. These studies revealed the importance of motives and other psychological factors in productivity and became the foundation of the human relations movement. Peters and Waterman used the best practice approach to study 62 most successful companies and were able to determine 8 characteristics of excellence in management of private enterprises. Osborne and Gaebler used best practice approach to study management success stories in the public sector and were able to derive 10 principles of effective management in the public sector. It is these principles that are currently driving civil service reforms in many countries. Ole Ingstrup and Poul Crookall have undertaken best practice research in what they call Government At Its Best. International institutions have also been concerned with identifying best practices. The commonwealth secretariat has produced a series of best practice studies. The UNDP supported a review of best practices in Reconceptualizing Governance.

Peters and Waterman in their survey of best practices in a sample of 62 companies identified 8 variables (attributes) characteristic of the excellent companies. Osborne and Gaebler identified 10 variables. Ingstrup and Crookall sent a best practice questionnaire to civil servants in various countries. They received responses from 40 agencies in 14 countries. The analysis revealed that *"managers of well performing organizations pay attention to all nine elements"*. In a workshop organized by UNDP 14 characteristics of good governance were identified. These 14 variables have recently been grouped into nine variables and adopted as the basis of UNDP governance promotion policy.

It is clear from Table 1, *Factors in best practice case studies (see at end of paper)*, that there is a high level of consensus on the key variables that influence effective management. Because these studies have influenced the content of civil service reforms worldwide, it is useful to use their key concepts as a starting point in the search for best practice in civil service reform. The proposed factors that relate to best practice in civil service reforms are a synthesis of this accumulated knowledge of management best practices.

3. *What is "Best" as an Order (Measure) of Magnitude?*

The concept of "best" implies an ability to evaluate several practices and their impact and to conclude that one or more practices are more successful; that is, these "best" practices lead to more desirable results. Underlying this evaluation is the notion that the practices can be graded on a scale of measurement. "Best" also refers to one of three ordered positions on a scale of measurement from good, to better, to best. In technical jargon, the objects, or activities, are being measured at the ordinal level of measurement. While the ordinal level of measurement permits comparison by rank ordering, the measures do not permit an assessment of "how much better or worse is one practice than another. Despite this weakness, pragmatic managers can "see" the difference in results of various practices and can use "best" practice information to improve their organizations.

Indeed, "best practice" methodology is sufficiently robust and powerful to provide insights to practicing managers and to assist managers to deliver high quality results.

4. *What is The Meaning of "Practices" in "Best Practices" Methodology*

Webster's dictionary defines to practice as "*repeated performance or systematic exercise for the purpose of acquiring proficiency*" and "*the action or process of doing something or carrying something out: to put a scheme into practice*". Finally, a body of repeated systematic activities may become a profession such as law, medicine, finance, or management. Practice in the sense of repetition or rehearsal, enables acquisition of skills through reflective experience, which overtime increases the level of skill or proficiency.

In the case of this paper, interest is focused on the set of repeatable, rehearsable, and systematic operations that underlie most civil service reforms. For example, a recent attempt to sort out effective organizational performance is Ove Bjerregaard, **Draft Approach on Best Practice.**

For a set of practices to be useful, it should be holistic, or archetypal, not a confusing swamp of detail, such as what Peter M. Senge has called "*detail complexity*". A plethora of details can create unmanageable complexity. Thus, most managers appreciate the representation of a "best practice" in a parsimonious manner, thereby using the power of a few principles to capture and summarize a diversity of detail. Several examples have been reviewed in table 1 above. **Peters, T. J, and Waterman, R. H.,** *In search Of Excellence* generated a set of 8 best practices, **Osborne, D., and Gaebler, T.** *Reinventing Government* generated a set of 10 best practices, **Ingstrup, O and Crookall, P.,** *Government At Its Best* generated a set of 9 best practices and

UNDP *Governance for Sustainable Development* generated a set of 9 best practices. In the proposed case studies we are anticipating 10 best practices.

5. *Why Study "Best" and Not "Bad" Practices*

Critics of the "best practices" approach often ask why not study the bad cases in order to identify and avoid problems. Alas, focusing exclusively on problems, mistakes and failures provides few lessons on what to do. By focusing on successes, a manager can learn how to overcome problems. And in as much as many managers face the same generic problems, albeit in different circumstances, it is useful to learn how some managers have been able to overcome these problems. Indeed, successful cases are a rich source of information for action and often provide a useful approaches to adapt." Equally valid is the concept that success breeds success, often through a self-fulfilling prophecy. Emphasis on bad cases tends to spread pessimism and negativism, which can sap energies, dampen action and cause organizational paralysis. Lack of self-confidence can become deep rooted and entrenched, leading to hopeless resignation and fatalism.

6. *The Link Between "Best Practices" and The Learning Organization Model.*

The increasing reference to "best practices" and the "learning organization" in UNDP is a most positive development. A learning organization is characterized by a shared vision, a clear perception of current reality, and creative tension in striving to bridge the gap between the current situation and the vision. This striving is represented by organizations following a set of scenarios or disciplines. At the highest level is shared visioning, at the lowest level is learning by best practice in the sense of repetition and rehearsal. It means that the activities of the organization are constantly subjected to analyses in order to discover the best practices. Best practices that are promoted by learning through practicing.

7. *Generic Best Practices and Benchmarking*

A generic best practice is one that is applicable irrespective of institutional and structural differences. In this spirit, in 1991, the Arthur Andersen firm established a database clearinghouse for global best practices for companies. Through this mechanism, 260 universal best practices have been identified and grouped into 13 broader best practice categories. Companies are not limited in their source of best practices; for example, a construction company can learn a management system from a banking firm, and a communications firm mechanized its billing process by copying and modifying best practice from the New York stock exchange. "A universal process approach to best practices eliminates the limitations inherent in an industry-or function-based perspective. Because universal process-based best practices are grounded in general rather than industry-specific terms, they are more flexible, more easily changed, and more readily adopted to a variety of business situations. With industry limitations swept away, the process view fosters a larger common playing field and opens the way to the widespread exchange of creative solutions".

The best practice is the target of conformance improvement. Managers seek to replace ineffective current practice with proven, benchmarked practices. Although dramatic

improvement is not achieved overnight, intermediate targets, such as milestones, can be met in the mid-term. Each achieved milestone becomes a new benchmark, thus benchmarks constantly moving towards the objective, namely, the best practice. The milestones can be called activities to achieve the best practice objective. Thus, action planning and scheduling are central to benchmarking for the achievement of best practices.

"Best practice" is not only a sophisticated concept that attempts to grade objects and activities on a scale of value, but also a useful concept to guide managerial action. The most valuable best practices are those that are generic and without limit to their applicability. The search for generic best practices should not be limited by consideration of industry or country specificity. When a best practice is identified, it becomes a tool to assist managers in improving organizational performance. Because best practices are constantly being introduced, introducing new best practices is a permanent feature of organizations that continuously learn from and adapt to their changing environment.