Trinidad and Tobago Public Sector Reform

Public Sector Reform initiatives in general and Performance Management Systems in particular – The country’s experience

Historical Perspectives

Since the mid-1970’s governments the world over have been constantly looking for new ways of renewing the Public Service. The term “Public Sector Reform” therefore can be termed Public Sector Renewal. The tense of this term reflects an ongoing process, and as such it involves ongoing improvement of the Public Service so as to ensure that this institution is capable of responding to the contemporary needs of society.

Post the 1970’s witnessed the concept of globalization. As the concept spread and globalisation began to take form over time, it became quite clear that globalisation was galloping in front of global governance. This situation resulted in countries and more so Public Services not being able to respond to the demands of their respective countries. Trinidad and Tobago was no exception for the situation-generated pressures for change within and outside of the government. There was greater demand from the public on the timely delivery of goods and services and the population was prepared to respond via unorthodox means to achieve their end.

One of governments’ response to such a dilemma was the need to reform or renew the public service, the need to instill new values and breathe new life into the organisation, the need to develop new structures, the need to be more flexible in the delivery of goods and services, the need to be more efficient and effective and the need to be more productivity

As early as the 1980’s, these needs were translated to mean improved performance in the public service and were at the heart of public sector reform. The emphasis then was on the nature of the reform, the process of reform, the importance of the change methodology and issues relating to the management of change. It was also noted that the reform process was at least as important as the reform measures proposed.

A great deal was heard about Public Service Reform in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1980’s when Reginald Dumas as head of the Public Service was involved in one such exercise for nearly three years, that was between May 1984 and January 1987, in his capacity as chairman of the Public Service Review Task Force appointed by the then previous government. Dumas noted that many reports were written on public sector reform and many recommendations were made, but the impression persisted that precious little had actually been implemented."

In August 1987 this committee was appointed by Cabinet to review the large number of proposals on administrative reform made over the years. The mandate of the committee

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1 Dumas J.R.P: In the Service of the Public Articles and Speeches 1963-1993. P. 251
was to make recommendations where applicable for their immediate implementation. In September of 1988 the Cabinet accepted the recommendations of the committee and established an Administrative Reform Programme, including a number of mechanism designed to enable the programme to work smoothly.³

Under this reform initiative, two task forces were set up – one on administrative reform, the other on financial management.

The overall objective of the programme was to improve performance on the part of all agencies of the central government, and especially those who were critical to the restructuring process and to broad economic social development. The focal concept was Performance and Programme Management.⁴

Another aspect of the reform initiative was the fact that it was part of the wider society, it being a public sector initiative, and therefore had to be seen within the framework of the wider structural and institutional reform taking place at the national level.

Performance issues therefore, were viewed from the proper rationalization of services, structures and staff etc. This eventually led to the Voluntary Termination of Employment Plan (VTEP) in the public service. The administrative reform initiative did on the one hand reduce the size of the Trinidad and Tobago Public Service while on the other created an awareness within the Public Service for the need to improve performance system wide if the service is to become efficient and be seen as a productive entity in the interest of the national community.

Achieving its original objective is a moot point, but one thing is certain and that is, it created an awareness within the national community and more so among public officers for the need to change, the need to perform, the need to be productive and the need to increase productivity in the public service at a time of low financial resources and structural adjustment.

This initiative, while not strategic in focus paved the way (like the many that went before) and laid the foundation for a major strategic intervention on Public Sector Reform in the early 1990’s – and what I like to refer to as the ‘Draper initiative.’

This intervention took a holistic approach to Public Sector Reform and was introduced in early 1992 via a Strategic Planning Process. The theme of this exercise was “Transforming the Public Service: Making Plans, Dreams, Vision and Mission happen with the maximum use of the people within the service.”

Placed in the context of the Public Service Reform initiative, “Strategic Planning must be the vehicle for the process of consultation and consensus that Government has firmly established as a priority, in its commitment to a philosophy of care, caring and participatory democracy for nation building.”

³ Ibid
⁴ Ibid
Apart from the major elements identified in the plan and the process to be adopted, it was pointed out that “the Public Service of Trinidad and Tobago would blaze a trail of efficiency, effectiveness, competence, performance and the results such that the delivery of goods and services would in the long run ensure:
- greater responsiveness to the needs of the citizen
- improved quality service
- speedier delivery of services
- elimination of archaic systems which results in wastage
- increased financial and human resources
- greater efficiency in revenue collection
- greater accountability

The strategic planning process was system-wide in scope in the public service where every government ministry during the first six months of 1992 held retreats with all staff and which culminated in the formulation of strategic plans for the respective ministries. The elements of the plan in general included but were not limited to the following areas:
- a vision,
- a mission statement,
- core values
- strategic direction
- the general environment,
- a SWOT analysis
- critical success factors
- strategic objectives,
- strategic choices
- programmes and
- programme implementation.

Government also focused inter alia on customer care, the transmogrification of the Personnel Division into Human Resource Management Divisions, Performance Management and a review of the existing performance appraisal system. Emphasis was also placed on new leadership and management strategies, change, and managing the change process.

Within the context of Human Resource Management, “there was need to both intensify and consolidate programmes and activities that target the efficient management of the human resource in the Public Service.” These include among others a new performance management and appraisal system to be formally introduced and executed in all Ministries and Department with productivity and performance excellence as the focus. In this regard, the Central Training Unit, Training Division, Personnel Department designed a booklet “Discussing Performance.” This booklet outlined a performance management process that included: planning performance via defining job responsibilities (Job Clarification) and setting standards of performance, supporting performance which included monitoring progress, problem solving, coaching and
feedback; reviewing performance which included performance results versus expectations, and the cycle continues.

The Training Division provided support to the various line Ministries and Departments. However, its model and process were simplistic and isolated. Isolated because it lacked a strategic integrated approach for performance issues and targets were not aligned to the Ministry’s vision, mission, and strategic objectives and in keeping with the strategic intervention of the organisation. It was simplistic because of its generalization and process limitation.

Over the next three years the performance management process continued in government Ministries in a haphazard manner—trial and error, trial and success. Even the legislation that governs performance issues in the Public Service was not considered in the initial stages of the exercise. This to a great extent hampered the process given a unionised environment.

In January 1995, there was a renewed approach to public sector reform—old wine in new bottles—“Shaping Performance.” It was stated that the new Performance Management System to be introduced in the Public Service then would take the form of a single, integrated process. The integrated cycle included:

- development of the employee
- task accomplishment and related standards
- management/Supervisory support
- equity and employee participation

The integrated cycle alluded to seem to be a few of the traditional performance issues one would consider anyway.

This renewed effort came with a change of government. Governments in power in Trinidad and Tobago do not seem to have the intelligence of following through on initiatives (in it’s pure state) of previous governments even if those initiatives are noble and are in the best interest of the population. So the renewed exercise had to be disguised, packaged and sold as a better product. This in itself causes much delay and frustration among public officers who are responsible for the programmes.

However, this initiative witnessed the redesign of the Public Service Performance appraisal form (report). This renewed initiative emanated from government’s policy—“The public service organization must establish and maintain standards of job performance and determine on an annual basis the extent to which the employee, while striving to achieve agreed goals, attained, exceeded or deviated from these standards. The public Service organisations must use the information gleaned from that exercise to determine levels of rewards for contributions above the level of performance and to devise strategies to deal with unacceptable performance, to identify employee development needs and to make predictions about the employee’s capacity to make future contributions to the achievement of Government’s objective.”
Government’s guiding philosophy was at the time- “The government of Trinidad and Tobago believes that the realization of its objectives is a function of the extent to which individual employees achieve their work goal within the context of prevailing circumstances. The value of the employee to the Public Service organisation is therefore a measure of the appropriateness of his or her performance and his/her levels of proficiency at any given point in his/her tenure with the Public Service.”

Given the noble ideals of philosophy, policy and public service reform initiative, from an administrative intervention to a strategic intervention, Performance Management in the Public Service of Trinidad and Tobago has a long way to go. To date we cannot boast of an efficient, effective and productive performance management system. There are still too many views on how this very important exercise should be organized and executed. One thing was changed and that was the appraisal form.

The time has come for the Trinidad and Tobago Public Service to take a serious- yes a serious and strategic integrated approach to performance management in keeping with Ministries strategic plans and aligning and integrating Performance Management with all the other human resource management practices and functions.

The good news is that to date there is a high awareness among public officers on the issue of public sector reform and the importance of an efficient and effective performance management system. The challenge for the public service and for the Government of any day is to be committed to the task, build capacity and capability, deepen the process and ensure that the dedication, the will, the commitment and the stick-to-itiveness are all present to ensure the success of this very important exercise.

The jury is still out on whether these initiatives have achieved the desired objectives. More importantly, we are not sure that we can boast about the benefits derived to date on this costly exercise. Probably, as Dumas indicated earlier “the impression persists that precious little has actually been implemented and achieved.