

# **The Challenges of Training the Public Service during Transition and in an Unstable Environment**

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## **Introduction**

Countries in transition have to adapt their public service to a new environment, which has emerged as a result of changes in the political and economic system, new expectations and demands of citizens, and requirements to comply with European standards.

This fundamental change from one system to another has forced governments in Central and Eastern Europe to reform their structures of government, redesign and reform the institutional framework, and to create and adapt a legal framework.

Governments are deconcentrating and decentralising their tasks; new regional structures have been developed, and local authorities have been given more responsibility. Many governments have undertaken great efforts to privatise and have also taken various other steps to reduce government to its core functions.

These changes which were often initiated following recommendations of the donor society, were not always made with a clear understanding of their possible impact (in particular their impact on the budget and on staffing) as all these changes brought about new needs for control and monitoring mechanisms. In general, they also call for more highly qualified staff.

Moreover, institutions which were required to make a market economy work, were created. Enormous efforts are being made in all CEE countries to adapt their existing legal frameworks to EU requirements.

At the same time, governments face the problem of discontinuity in personnel, resulting on the one hand from the increased attractiveness to

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civil servants to work in the private sector and on the other from the practice – not necessarily in line with the legal provisions – of incoming governments replacing large areas of the public administration leadership. A staff turnover of 30% is not unusual.

In fact, it has been proven over and over again that, in order to implement such fundamental changes, it is necessary to be in possession of a public service workforce which is highly qualified, devoted to its task and which ensures continuity.

It is therefore crucial not only to hire well qualified staff but more importantly, to adapt the existing staff to the new requirements.

Public service staff should acquire as quickly as possible the necessary new skills and qualifications. More often than not this also includes a fundamental change in attitudes.

Qualified and motivated staff are a very scarce commodity. Unfortunately, it can be observed – not only in central and eastern European countries but all over the world – that the importance of "human capital" in implementing reforms is often underestimated.

Sufficient funds for training are not always readily available and the need for training is not always recognised. Personnel development is crucial to change and its absence can lead to a bottleneck in the reform process.

As mentioned previously, there are several reasons for difficult staffing situations in the public service, including low salaries and almost non-existent performance incentives.

Training is a major pillar for the implementation of reforms. An efficient training system, which includes initial and adaptational training, can ensure, as part of a functioning human resources management system based on merit, the implementation of reforms.

### **What are the challenges of training?**

As has already been pointed out, the objectives of initial training and in-service training ("formation continue", "perfectionnement") are not always the same.

Initial training is designed to add the skills and qualifications required to function within the public service, to a general educational background. It should include such topics as legal and procedural framework, specific

working techniques, financial management and public service culture, including deontology.

In-service training is designed to acquire and/or update the specific skills which are necessary to efficiently fulfil a specific function within the public service.

In explicit situations, e.g. in times of transition or when implementing major reform projects, in-service training is extremely important. It has to be much more comprehensive as it must adapt the already present skills, qualifications and behavioural patterns of the existing public service personnel to the reform objectives, thus making implementation of the reform possible. It therefore partially takes on the role of initial training.

On the subject of training during transition periods I would like to point out the differences between the two different sorts.

In the context of transition the training challenges can be defined as follows:

- to ensure the implementation of the Government reform programme,
  - to enable staff to design and implement the regulatory and institutional framework required to implement the reform programme, including the execution of the monitoring and control function;
- to ensure the rule of law (“état de droit”),
  - i.e. stability, predictability, and transparency, all of which are crucially important for economic development;
- to ensure continuity,
  - high staff turnover tends to have a detrimental effect on the predictability of government action; moreover it is costly (new training may be needed) and slows the reform process down (time required to become acquainted with the task and with the other players);
- to ensure responsiveness to the public,
  - better communication with citizens and the business community, including the provision of data and other information which helps to create public support for the reforms.

## **What can training achieve?**

Training cannot do everything. It cannot carry out the reform, nor undertake the restructuring or provide policy decisions. It can, however, support and foster administrative reform by providing teaching methods and techniques necessary for the following:

- restructuring
- improving decision-making
- improving law drafting
- improving human resources management.

Overall, training can create a coherent public service, professionalism and an esprit de corps.

It is not without good reason that the private sector has become such a hallowed example for its efficiency (if it really is efficient) by investing so much in staff development and all other forms of training.

## **What are the crucial points?**

### **Sequencing**

In certain countries undergoing transition towards market economy, governments have been changing more often than normal. This is often coupled with fundamental changes in policies or with significant changes in government priorities resulting in significant changes in the reform agenda.

However, it is of crucial importance to keep training in line with the administrative reform agenda. Proper sequencing of training measures is of the utmost importance if training funds are not to be wasted. Unfortunately, the temptation to offer and demand extravagant training measures is great but the training content cannot be applied as it has nothing in common with the reality of the situation. Acquiring new skills and then not being able to apply them may easily lead to frustration.

To ensure proper sequencing the following is required:

- a training strategy which has been developed in co-operation with all concerned, including staff;
- training measures based on a needs assessment, i.e. demand-driven training;
- what is learnt must be applied;
- no learning to be put on hold until the new skills can be applied and the trainee has fallen back into the old routine.

## **Financing**

Training is costly and bulk training is difficult to handle in times of serious budget constraints. There is a temptation to use funds which are allocated to training, in other areas.

- To avoid misuse of budget allocations for training, these funds should not be transferable.
- The annual funding of training should not be at the discretion of each ministry or agency. A formula used in France and other countries, may be worth considering, namely to allocate a given percentage (2% to 3%) of the total wage bill to training.
- Whether the funds should be allocated to the “training demander” (ministries, agencies etc.) or to the “training supplier” is another question which requires serious consideration.

Moreover, it may be worthwhile to look more seriously into the possibilities offered by distance learning schemes. The public service in Western Europe has experience of these schemes. There are central institutions, for example in France, Germany and Britain which do respective research, prepare material and train specialised trainers. Perhaps they can be of assistance in Central and eastern Europe.

## **Institutional structure of training**

Training can be organised in a variety of ways: centralised and decentralised; as part of the public service or as an agency or some kind of “private enterprise” on a cost recovery basis.

There is no ideal solution. There are advantages and disadvantages in every model. However, experience seems to have proved that “privatised training” tends to be more expensive and forgets about training of staff in the lower categories. Moreover, general training should be centralised as it fosters the creation of networks across the borderlines of ministries which is crucial to create a civil service common culture and deontology.

## **Trainers**

The selection of trainers is another crucial point. Ideally most trainers should be well qualified practitioners, working on a short term contract basis. However, in some countries this may still be impossible and should more be seen as a strategic objective.

Training institutions with a large number of permanent trainers tend to become establishments which provide academic knowledge but which

have lost touch with day to day reality. Thus the content of training may become less and less applicable. Of course, there will always be subjects which are best covered by academics, private consultants or even foreign consultants, but these topics should become less and less.

Not only have I not offered many solutions during my presentation, but I think I may also have added to the existing questions. Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions or a blueprint to fit every country. On the other hand, I hope I have provided some points which are worth discussing.

Some additional but important prerequisites for efficient training are:

- the reform programme has to be supported by the political leaders and top management; lip service is not enough
- there has to be monitoring and incentives for applying new skills and implementing new behavioural patterns
- training has to be available to all staff

It is a well known fact that a boss is more efficient with a well trained secretary but most countries all over the world still neglect this fact when it comes to training.