Improving Performance in the African Civil Service: Empirical Evidence from Zimbabwe.

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Abstract
Most African governments have attempted improving performance of their civil service through reforms. All ended up failing meeting the desired results because of a combination of internal and external factors. The Zimbabwean experience is a typical African reforms effort that failed because of both internal weaknesses and external pressures. This paper looks at the theoretical frameworks and the implementation of reform programmes in the Zimbabwean civil service.
Key words: Improving performance, performance management, corruption, change.

1. Introduction

Since Independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has tried a number of change programmes to improve performance among civil servants. Some of the major reform and revitalisation of the public service programmes attempted by the government are blackanisation, performance management and professionalisation. Yet, as shown by Bologun (2003) on African attempts at reforms, there is no evidence that the efforts had any positive significant impact on performance. The public service in Zimbabwe has been associated with poor management, corruption, nepotism, poor communication, and rude, frustrated and unsympathetic civil servants (PSC, 1998). A civil servant has been known to be slow in responding to demands and in decision-making.

This paper looks at the theoretical frameworks and the implementation of these reform programmes in the Zimbabwean civil service. First part looks at the theoretical underpinnings of performance management. Second part focuses on reforms in the African civil service since independence. Third part is about attempts at improving performance in the Zimbabwean civil service. Finally the paper looks at some of the lessons learnt from the Zimbabwean experiences with attempts on improving performance since 1980.

2. The concept of performance management

According to the public service commission (PSC) of Zimbabwe (1998), some authorities and organisations equate performance management to management by objectives, others to just another name for performance appraisal, some to an annual event associated with training and development, and yet others to a process relating to performance related pay, and so forth. These are, however, narrow definitions of performance management. The PSC acknowledges that performance management is a "holistic process, which can embrace all these elements-and more". It may be difficult to come up with a universally agreed definition of the concept, but as put forward by Mandishona, *etal* (2003), such a definition should meet the following criteria: objective setting; performance monitoring; support/coaching; appraisal/review; development plans; rewards and sanctions; dealing with underperformance; and linkage between individual and organisational goals

Bologun (2003) does not directly define the concept but says it is based on the premise that "the clarification of corporate objectives, the institution of measures in pursuit of the objectives, and the empowerment of managers are all it takes to energize organisations and orient them towards incremental productivity, cost reduction and customer satisfaction". The concept is defined by PSC (1998) as an on-going management control process in which the supervisor and the subordinate sit face-to-face at regular intervals in a given year to review progress towards agreed goals for the benefit of both the employee and the public service. Such goals are derived from the overall organisational goals and set by the subordinate in consultation with the supervisor. It is based on the principle of management by agreement rather than management by command (Armstrong, 2006). Its emphasis is on development

and the initiation of self managed learning plans and the integration of the individual and corporate objectives. The concept "is not a mere routine activity, but a dynamic, momentum geared, trouble shooting, and impact oriented process" (Bologun, 2003).

Armstrong (2006) believes that performance management is a means of getting better results from the organisation, teams and individuals by understanding and managing performance within an agreed framework of planned goals, standards and competence requirements. It is concerned with the interrelated processes of work, management, development and reward. He agues that performance management is not a package solution, but something that has to be developed specifically and individually for the particular organization. Performance management programmes should therefore be adapted to the demands of the target organisations within which they have to be implemented. Otherwise they fail to bring in the desired results. Unlike appraisal schemes that are retrospective any performance management programme focuses on future performance planning and improvement (Armstrong, Ibid). Performance management is a process, not an event. Neither is it a series of unrelated events. It is cyclical and done in steps as follows: plan, act, measure and review (Mandishona, *etal,* 2003). The process is repeated again and again.

The importance of performance management is echoed in Mandishona's (2003) argument that everything being equal, an organisation's success depends on how people are viewed and treated, and how they in turn view the organisation and behave towards it. Performance management is thus of great importance to business success. It is generally believed that performance management optimises the contribution of people to the organisation while at the same time meeting the individual needs of employees. The concept thus argues that individuals can contribute more if they have more expertise, more powerful tools, access to knowledge, and if a common area is found between their individual goals and those of the organisation. If people are going to be motivated to perform, there must be some clear benefit for them in the first place, before they respond positively to calls for more and better productivity (Mandishona, *etal,* 2003).

According to PSC (1998) benefits of performance management to the public service are as follows: clear work goals and responsibilities; greater commitment and motivation of staff at all levels; reliable method of measuring performance; focus on results; elimination of unnecessary activity; improved retention and attraction of staff; improved communications; greater managerial motivation through goal setting; more effective development of people; and can be linked with a variety of human resource systems like performance appraisal, performance related pay, training and development, transfer, promotion, demotion, etc. However, it is important to note that the concept has its own problems as well. As such, it has to be handled with care for organisations to meet the desired results.

2.1 Weaknesses of the concept of performance management
Performance management is currently believed to be "the tool which managers use to achieve organisational goals through other people" (Mandishona, *etal,* 2003). Reading between the lines of this statement one is justified to feel that there is an element of manipulation and exploitation. Although the concept claims equality between subordinates and their seniors, it becomes practically difficult when managers achieve goals through other people. The relationship is that of unequals, if not paternalistic.

Secondly, the writers quoted above agree that there is no universal definition of the concept. This means that the concept is subject to individual interpretation and subjectivity. In an African context where, "instead of applying a holistic and organic approach to public service reform, governments have settled for partial and mechanistic solutions" (Bologun, 2003), the concept can be maimed for personal gains.

Critics of performance management are further worried about the emphasis on results, the individual worker, SMART objectives, the seeming contradictory emphasis on individual performance and teamwork, and the authenticity of involving subordinates in goal setting among other things. Daniels and Daniels (1989) summarise the worries of the critics. Some of the arguments are summarised below.

The traditional performance management model puts a lot of emphasis on results at the expense of inputs and processes. It "makes sense…set goals, reach goals, and you get what is desired", but solely focusing on results

neglects organisational and system issues that need to be in place for the results to happen. The current management thinking dominated by the marketing concept and total quality management is that inputs and processes are as good and important as the results or the end product itself. They can even be more important than the end product.

Employees may feel great that they have "input into and ownership of their objectives and standards of performance". But still their involvement does not get them far as they are not involved in the setting of strategic organisational goals that determine their personal objectives. Daniels and Daniels (1989) write "If the overall goals make no sense to the employee, management is only offering a choice of doing one stupid thing or another stupid thing". Employees thus have control over smaller tasks but not the overall direction or decision. If the decision seems arbitrary, no amount of choice about tasks will convince an employee that they are in control, or contributing to a worthwhile task.

It is difficult to set meaningful standards of performance that are measurable and observable. The precise and the more the standard, the likely it is to seem silly, especially when dealing with the public. Daniels and Daniels (1989) gave an example of processing license renewals. The discussion between supervisor and subordinate may result in the following: "Process license renewal at an average rate of 20 per hour, with no errors." But the supervisor soon realizes that this standard does not account for customer satisfaction. Further discussion may result in adding a "no complaints" clause. This complicates the issue. Irate customers will complain despite the best efforts of the employee and therefore the subordinate is bound to refuse to have his evaluation based on things that are uncontrollable. The result is likely to be a compromise and the standard may now be as follows: Process license renewal applications at an average rate of 20 per hour, with no errors and generate no legitimate customer complaints regarding rudeness, uncooperativeness or poor service. Already there is subjectivity. The supervisor is now required to judge whether a complaint is "legitimate" or not. The point is the more quantifiable or measurable a standard is, the less relevant it becomes, especially when dealing with the public. It is easy to measure the trivial, but it is very difficult to measure what is important in an objective way.

Thus, obviously, there are problems in accepting and implementing performance management. But what model or philosophy does not have its own peculiar problems or weaknesses? Discussing these problems or making practitioners aware of them is not meant to discredit the concept. Being aware of the weaknesses is a step towards successfully implementing the concept. The concept should not be taken as a Bible. Neither should it be taken as a rigid "best way" of dealing with the management of people at work issue. Acknowledging some of the approach's problems is the first step in improvising and improving its application, though, of course, with some sacrificing of some of its traditional tenets. Daniels and Daniels (1989) write 'Make standards measurable, and waste time on the trivial. Make standards more subjective and you can't use them for disciplinary purposes. The more you stress individual responsibility the more you reduce collective responsibility'.

In conclusion therefore, performance management should be seen as a flexible and dynamic management tool, which, if implemented by competent managers, distinguishes successful organisations from failures. It can give organisations their competitive edge, supporting Mandishona, *etal*'s (2003) claim that everything being equal, an organisation's success depends on how people are viewed and treated, and how they in turn view the organisation and behave towards it.

Lastly, the philosophical and theoretical arguments may be sound, but what is happening on the ground? Butterick (1997), as quoted in Mandishona, *etal* (2003) observes, "all organisations say that their most important asset is their people", but the question remains that "do they walk this talk?" Easier said than done!

3. Improving performance: The African experience

Many studies were, and are still being done on attempts at reforming the public service and making it performance oriented in Africa. Some of these notable studies are the Ndengwa commission (1971) and the Udoji commission (1972). General terms of reference of these commissions were job evaluation and grading, salaries and conditions of service, staff training, accounting and budgeting systems, plan formulation and implementation machinery, etc. Both commissions found the civil service in the two countries (Kenya and Nigeria) wanting in terms of performance and productivity. The Ndengwa commission noted that the structure of the Kenya civil service constituted a serious

barrier to efficient and effective performance. By failing to focus on objectives and results, the structure encouraged the following negative tendencies, among others: defective utilisation of hours; little/no delegation of operational responsibilities; misunderstanding by some junior officers of their job purpose; poor communication and lack of coordination; and over centralisation of authority at the Ministry headquarters in Nairobi. This was in 1971, and the situation has not registered any significant changes today (Bologun, 2003). The Nigerian Udoji review commission report (1972) proposed the introduction of a "unified" grading and salary system, the abolition of permanent secretaries and their replacement with director generals/general managers, programme and performance budgeting, management by objectives, organisation development, planned and preventive management, and so forth. Nothing of significance was practically done.

According to Bologun (2003), failure to implement the changes in the above cases and many others in Africa were and are still mainly due to dependence of reform initiatives on external push and inspiration; the disconnection between the reform programmes' performance, productivity, and efficiency thrusts, on the one hand, and the leaders' preoccupation with the capture and retention of power and authority, on the other; and failure to construct a performance and productivity management infrastructure to support and sustain reform efforts. For Adedeji (1972) reform measures in the 1970s were not locally inspired, but a reflection of the international demonstration effect of the Fulton report, a wish to be seen copying "best practices". Britain had embarked on a comprehensive reform of its civil service signaling that the administrative systems it left in its former colonies were not perfect.

Commenting on the failure of improvement efforts in the African civil service, Bologun (2003) states "Africa's diversity poses a tremendous challenge to the unity of purpose required in embarking on and sustaining, a comprehensive and impact-oriented programme of reform". It is also important to note that the problem is not with diversity per se but with what the various actors make with it in the public realm. Individuals with their own private agendas have capitalised on ethnic, religious, linguistic, cadre, gender differences, and so forth, to promote intra-organization tension. Consequently in place of the cooperative action for things to be done there is interpersonal and intergroup resistance and resentment.

4. Improving performance: The Zimbabwean experience

The euphoria of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980 brought with it many expectations among the blacks. It also instilled a lot of fear among the whites in the country. A combination of these two extremes resulted in radical changes in terms of personnel in the civil service. Although the new nationalist government preached reconciliation, there was also high emotional talk on such things as black empowerment, affirmative action, equal rights, indigenisation, socialism, Marxism-Leninism, and so forth. Most of the highly experienced white civil servants started deserting their posts for South Africa, Australia, Great Britain, and many other western countries. This "great trek" made it easier for the government to blackenise the civil service! But, the "great trek", also meant inexperienced and inefficient personnel in the public service!

The above change process was haphazard. Most blacks found themselves in professional and management posts with neither appropriate qualifications nor experience. Some boasted of their war credentials and as such a high office in the civil service was nothing but a well-deserved right. Some got into these offices just because they were related to a powerful political figure. Some, especially women, became officers because they were very generous with their thighs. Plus many more dubious reasons! Such a combination of personnel was a sure recipe for failure. As a result performance and productivity suffered.

Moyo (1997) observes that the early eighties saw a phenomenal growth in the provision of public services throughout the country. For example, the number of children served by the education system increased from approximately 885 801 in 1980 to approximately 3 245 140 in 1996. This meant the civil service had to grow as well. It increased from 10 570 established posts in 1980 (of which only 31% were held by blacks-almost exclusively in lower cadres) to a high of 193 000 in 1994.

Blackanisation of the civil service in Zimbabwe was meant to improve performance. Although most of the white civil servants voluntarily left their jobs for reasons given above, it was good riddance for the new nationalist

government. The government did not trust them anywhere, as they could have sabotaged government rebuilding and developmental efforts, it was thought. But, because of the manner blackanisation was administered, the change effort failed to improve performance in the civil service. Rather it destroyed the existing formal systems such that when performance management came in the 1990s people had already started talking of the need for making the civil service more formal and professional.

In fact the problems started to be seen in the mid 1980s; hence the establishment of the 1987 public service review commission. In 1989 (Moyo, 1997) the commission reported the following findings on the civil service: oversized and cumbersome; managed largely by inexperienced staff; characterised by overlap and duplication of functions; secretive, lacking transparency and with poor communication of decisions and problems; inaccessible to the general public; and suffered from over-complicated rules and elaborate procedures. Blackanisation per se was not enough. As a result, with the coming of the economic structural adjustment programme in the 1990s, the government decided to reform the civil service with the following objectives: to improve the mechanisms for policy formulation and coordination; to introduce performance management; to improve conditions of service; to improve resource management; to upgrade basic management systems through training; to reduce the size of the civil service; and to set-up and strengthen monitoring and support systems (Moyo, 1997).

Phase one
The first phase of the performance management programme was introduced in 1992/3 in selected ministries and among all managerial civil servants. By the beginning of the second phase in 1997 Moyo claims it had made the following achievements:

- By 1995 the government had downsized the civil service establishment by 23500. No reductions were done in the education and health ministries. The number of ministries had been reduced from 26 to 15. The total civil service workforce was now 169 500 workers.
- Results oriented performance management was introduced throughout the civil service, starting in 1994/5 with top managers and cascading to all civil servants in the second phase in 1997/8. New performance appraisal forms were introduced in 1995/6 and modified in 1997. The forms demanded that all supervisors should provide both positive and negative feedback to their subordinates.
- Surveys on civil servants attitudes, knowledge and behaviour to determine their training needs were done.
- A job evaluation that reduced the more than 3000 existing grades to only 18 grades in 17 categories was carried out.
- All personnel regulations and guidelines were reviewed and amended and a Human Resources Manual was prepared.
- A Directorate of training was established, and a National Training Policy was articulated
- Clients' charters were drafted by each ministry
- Human resources information and management information systems were in the process of being computerized

According to Moyo (1997) the following problems, challenges, and constraints had been well identified and articulated by the end of the first phase:

- Lack of effective communication between politicians and administrators about the reforms. This was evident when in 1996 Cabinet suspended the use of the new performance appraisal form because they felt that the system was not up to standard.
- Some senior civil servants were resisting change. They wanted appropriate training for everyone before implementation of the system. They also wanted increased powers over recruitment, firing and financial management controls so that they could truly be measured for work under their independent control.
- Human resources managers at ministerial level required training to understand their new functions and how to carry them out.
- There were complaints that some of the reforms had been driven more by donor concerns than by the government's perceived needs.

- Lack of financial resources, skilled personnel in performance management, brain drain/high staff turnover, inflexible financial regulations, and so forth
- Lack of commitment by recipient ministries, delays by the PSC in the appointment of the required staff.

As a result the following recommendations were made for the second phase:

- Civil servants pay should match industry market rate.
- A public awareness campaign through the media, NGO's and private sector be mounted to educate the public on its civic rights *vis a vis* the civil service.
- Inculcate a more business like and market oriented behaviour within the civil service.
- The Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare, together with the office of the President and Cabinet to resuscitate the workshop for ministers on the civil service reform programme.
- Performance management should be institutionalized and cascaded throughout the civil service through building internal capacity in ministries and the provision of further guidance as required by ministries.
- Provision of an awareness module to encourage acceptance, ownership and commitment by the recipient ministries.
- The capacity of national training institutions and the Zimbabwe Institute for Public Administration and Management should be strengthened so that there is continued support in training for the civil service reform programme and hence ensure its sustainability.
- Qualified indigenous Zimbabwean experts should be sought out through competitive tender and used whenever possible.
- Human resources and institution capacity building in the ministries and national training institutions to enhance the institutionalization of performance management into the civil service work culture.
- Creating an enabling environment in terms of enhancing the political will and commitment to the civil service reform programme, and assisting in the incorporation of performance management into the budgetary process of the Ministry of Finance to make it possible for ministries to budget the cost of introducing performance management.
- Professionalization of the civil service.

Phase two
Phase two began in 1997/8 with every civil servant involved. All civil servants attended workshops in performance management, though in most cases hurriedly and poorly done. It was therefore difficult for the average worker to understand the concepts.

An attempt to meet most of the recommendations made at the end of phase one was made. However, the implementation of these recommendations could not survive the economic turmoil that followed the land invasions after the National Constitutional Referendum No Vote of 1999.

An important aspect of the second phase was professionalization of the civil service. Professionalization meant that all administrative and professional offices were to be manned by professionally qualified personnel. For one to be a substantive accounting clerk, human resource clerk, or any other related post one should have at least a diploma in the area. Management posts were supposed to be manned by those with at least a first degree or a higher diploma in the area concerned. Those in these offices without the minimum qualifications were given a grace period of three years to study for the appropriate qualification.

Major problems were encountered when young men and women from colleges joined the civil service and got substantive posts ahead of the experienced underqualified personnel. The older experienced workers were supposed to orient and introduce the younger professionally qualified but inexperienced officers. Obviously there was automatic resistance and sabotage. One of the writers had experience with some of these underqualified experienced workers whom he took for part time private tuition for the Institute of People Management of Zimbabwe Diploma in Human Resource Management. They confessed that they were not happy with the change processes and as such they were sabotaging its efforts. This response by the underqualified experienced workers helped nothing but destabilising

the whole change process. It weakened performance and brought in further inefficiencies.

The professionalisation process, which should have been completed by the beginning of phase three in 2002/3, is still in progress because of the economic downturn that began in 2000 and resulted in rampant brain drain.

The second phase, though still in progress, was a complete flop because of the political and economic crisis that began after the *National Constitutional Referendum No Vote* of 1999. Government attention became more focused on political survival than performance improvement. Western NGOs that supported the initial stages of the programme withdrew from the country. The government failed to raise resources, commitment and will to ensure that the programme survives even after the withdrawal of the donor community. Although people still talked of performance management, nothing serious was/is in progress.

A study by Musingafi (2005) on the programme at Gweru Polytechnic, a government institution of higher learning, established that:

- there was serious shortage of financial resources and skilled personnel in performance management in the civil service;
- there was serious brain drain/high staff turnover at Gweru Polytechnic and the civil service in general;
- relatively low qualified and inexperienced young men and women manned Gweru Polytechnic;
- Gweru polytechnic staff understanding of the concept of performance management was limited;
- staff claimed that performance management was just formality; no one believed in it. Hence lack of commitment from everyone concerned, including ministers and managers of the programme;
- generally, staff believed that the programme was not serving its purpose;
- staff believed that the programme was not properly implemented;
- civil servants pay was far below industry market rate;
- they were not happy of what they called insensitive cumbersome over-complicated rules and procedures, especially with regards to grievance handling and study leave; and
- they complained of poor communication of decisions and problems, and lack of transparency, especially when it comes to career progression, promotion, staff development and study leave

The gains of the late 1990s were thus eroded. Attempts at improving performance through performance management in the Zimbabwean civil service failed in their second phase because of a combination of both external and internal factors. Dependence of reform initiatives on external push and inspiration made sure that the process failed when the external supporters withdrew. The leaders' preoccupation with the capture and retention of power and authority, also meant that the programme could not survive the 2000 and beyond economic turmoil and political mayhem. Today there is still talk on performance management, now in its fourth phase christened result based management, but there is nothing serious except confusing people and diverting their attention from the problems they are experiencing because of the economic turmoil.

5. Lessons Learnt from the Zimbabwean Experience
Management and working with people are not easy tasks. The experience with blackanisation shows that proper planning and formalising systems are very important in any reform or change process. Had the new nationalist government sat down and come up with a clearly spelt out policy document on blackanisation, it could have controlled some of the independence emotions, and avoided some of the problems it faced in performance management in the 1980s.

It should be noted that, however, plans and policy documents on their own are not solutions. They are just means to an end as demonstrated in the experiences with the Zimbabwean Civil Service Performance Management Programme since the 1990s. Well spelt out plans and policies were developed but the programme did not reach the desired destination. One of the reasons, as shown by Bologun (2003) , is that the local leaders of such reforms under-rated the significance of politics, at both the national and international level, in the process. When local political leaders sensed serious threat to their survival in the late 1990s and beyond they forgot about the importance of

improving performance and concentrated on the struggle for political power. Government energy and resources were mobilised to beat up people, silence divergent voices, and buy extra-ordinary war weapons among other controversial things. The international supporters of the programme also withdrew when government policies and actions were at loggerheads with what they believed or wanted in Zimbabwe.

For any change process to survive resistance top leadership commitment is a prerequisite. For top leadership to be committed to the change process, they must understand what it is all about and agree with its objectives. The above discussion shows that the political leadership was not very clear of what was happening, and sometimes suspended some of the activities because they felt the formalities/processes were not up to standard. Thus understanding and political will were lacking even without the disturbances of the 2000s. To them, Performance Management degenerated into a mere routine activity and something to be done just to keep people occupied. But, as put forward by Bologun, such attitudes are the surest way to failure.

Another important issue raised by professionals and scholars when the programme started was consideration of the general environment within which the programme was going to be implemented. The system and contingency theories summarised above say management approaches should be matched to their environmental forces. Simple imposition is the surest way to failure. Thus the programme should have been adapted to the situational dictates of the environment, especially after 1999.

fyTo round up this discussion, the following recommendations are adapted from Musingafi's (2005) study at Gweru Polytechnic:

- the Public Service Commission should ensure that it has enough resources (human, financial, equipment, etc) before embarking on any new programme;
- the Public Service Commission should get people at the top (politicians and senior civil servants) committed to the Programme for it to be well implemented. This means that people at the top have to understand and actively support the Programme before it is taken to the workers. Some serious senior management training and motivation programmes have to be embarked on before any form of implementation is even thought of;
- both the Commission and its implementing agencies like Gweru Polytechnic should ensure that all members are continuously trained in Performance Management. Such training should not be haphazard, but should be a well-planned and implemented formal training programme. Members should be trained in Performance Management at least once every year, especially at the beginning of the year when they come up with their performance targets; and
- the Commission should abide by the dictates of the Programme for it to be taken seriously. In this study respondents said human resources treatment was not based on their performance as per the dictates of the Programme.

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