

Policies, processes stand in way of good service

WORKPLACE STAFF

IN his ANC roadmap address President Jacob Zuma emphasised that bolstering local government is a priority.

He admitted that systems in many municipalities are characterised by “ineffective professional administration” and “weak performance management”.

To build a new public sector culture for effective service delivery, he said: “Where people are found to be incapable of performing the tasks assigned to them, we must work with speed to either capacitate such people or replace them with more capable people.” He vowed to ensure “that there are consequences for incompetence, corruption and lack of accountability”.

“These sentiments must be applauded,” says Sandra Burmeister, CEO of Landelahni Business Leaders. “However, before they can be implemented, one must first ask: Is the public service equipped with the management tools required to

develop a high-performance culture? Unfortunately, at present, the answer is a resounding, ‘no.’”

Management tools include the ability to hire people, reward them for good performance, and to fire them – having followed due process – when they under-perform.

“However,” says Burmeister, “public service institutional processes make it difficult for managers to hold employees accountable for performance.

“Service non-delivery is not only about people. It’s often about structures, policies and processes that are not conducive to delivery. Often competent public sector employees are hamstrung because they don’t have the tools and necessary authority. Managers in government do not have the same level of authority as their private sector counterparts. The time is ripe for a review of legislation and policies.”

The Public Service Act of 1994, states that the “executive authority” is responsible for all employment decisions. The executive authority is defined as

the state president, a member of parliament, member of executive council or mayor. The executive authority may delegate employment matters up to mid-management level to the “accounting officer”, a director-general or city manager.

“In practice,” says Burmeister, “only the president or a minister may hire or fire members of the executive and senior management team. No senior executive in government can hire or fire the people immediately reporting to him.”

This system cascades throughout all three tiers of government.

“Public service institutional processes do not support good leadership. The public service legislation, while it attempts to create equality in the workplace, fails to recognise that equality should be tempered with sound global management practices, focused on the desired outcomes.”

The Public Service Act dictates all conditions of employment by job level across the entire public service, with no provision for any

deviation for exceptional performers or scarce resources, resulting in the loss of skilled people.

According to Burmeister, “The question we should be asking is whether, in our search for equality, we have settled for mediocrity?”

“Managers need both the authority and the management tools to do their jobs. They must be able to use the carrot and stick approach. The carrot typically would include performance bonuses or non-cash rewards for high performers. The stick would typically include performance counselling, demotions and dismissals.

“However, the public service not only dictates an overall annual increase, but has rigid bands for remuneration at each level, so it is almost impossible for managers to reward good performers above average performers.

“It’s not possible to reward outstanding performance with a promotion, since every position must be advertised and anyone has the opportunity to apply.

“And managers may only recommend a bonus. A panel then reviews the suggestion and makes a decision. Often a bonus is paid for simply showing up and doing a job, and no provision is made for stretch targets. Similarly a manager may only recommend a dismissal.

“Since there is no direct link between an employee’s performance and the reward or remuneration they receive, high performers become discouraged and often exit government. Poor performers, on the other hand, flourish for long periods of time, without any direct consequence and, in some cases, are rewarded handsomely via settlements, if they leave at all.

“It’s time to give leaders and managers in government the authority that goes with responsibility. Then they can be held unequivocally accountable for the consequences of their actions. Only in that way will the state public service be able to deliver on President Zuma’s declared commitment to service delivery.”

