

Give public servants the tools to create a high-performance culture in government

by Sandra Burmeister, CEO, Landelahni Business Leaders



Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahni Recruitment Group

As service delivery remains in the spotlight, it's opportune to ask whether the country's public service has the management tools required to develop a high-performance culture.

Management tools include the ability to hire people, reward them for good performance by way of remuneration, bonuses or promotion, and to fire them – having followed due process – when they under-perform. Unfortunately public service institutional processes make it difficult for managers to hold employees accountable for performance.

Service non-delivery is not only about having good 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 to carry out their responsibilities. Managers in government do not have the same level of authority as their private sector counterparts. The time is ripe for a review of the legislation and policies currently in place.

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 who, in the private sector, would be equivalent to the board of directors. The executive authority may delegate employment matters up to mid-management level to the "accounting officer", namely a director-general or city manager, the equivalent of a CEO in the private sector.

In practice, only the president or a minister may hire or fire members of the executive and senior management team. In effect this means that no senior executive in government can hire or fire the people immediately reporting to him. This system cascades throughout all three tiers of government. While the Act does make provision for some delegation of power, in practice this seldom happens.

Imagine if CEO Cynthia Carroll was the only person in Anglo American who could hire and fire staff up to mid-management level, with no authority to make employment decisions above that level. The organisation would cease to function effectively.

Public service institutional processes do not support good leadership. While the public service legislation was forward-thinking in its attempt to create equality in the workplace, it fails to recognise that equality should be tempered with sound global management practices, focused on the desired outcome of the organisation.

Unlike the broad remuneration frameworks and clear delegation of authority that are standard in the private sector, the Public Service Act dictates all conditions of employment by job level across the entire public service, with no provision for any deviation whether for exceptional performers or for the payment of scarce resources, resulting in the loss of skilled people, which in turn must impact on service delivery.

The question we should be asking ourselves is whether, in our search for equality, we have in fact settled for mediocrity?

Managers need both the authority and the appropriate 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 such as funding further education or travel and promotions for high performers. The stick would typically include performance counselling, demotions and dismissal for poor or non-performance.

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.

Moreover, it is not possible to reward outstanding performance with a promotion, since every position must be advertised and anyone has the opportunity to apply. This makes it impossible to create a long-term career path for people in government.

In addition, managers may only recommend a bonus. A panel made up of managers, most of whom have no contact with the individual, 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. The executive authority must sanction this recommendation, which may take months to action, while the employee is enjoying full pay and benefits.

Before entering any poor performance process, non-performing staff must be

► **From page 42** – *Give public servants . . .*

put through a training and development programme. The manager needs to identify where they are not performing, what the gap is, train them, and allow them time to put training into action. Then only may he initiate a poor performance process. In the private sector, it is a given that you hire employees for their skill and should not have to train them, especially at senior or specialist levels.

Since there is no direct link between an employees' 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 by paying them large settlements to leave, if they leave at all.

One of the core leadership competencies is the ability to exercise sound judgement and make appropriate decisions. In the civil service, we demand these competencies, but managers

are not given the opportunity to exercise it. We are not providing the basic management tools to drive a high-performance culture throughout government. Accountability without the requisite authority and discretion will continue to hamper service delivery.

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. ■