

## **Can the public service mandarins raise their hands?**

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Pity the dearth of a robust debate on the possibility of creating a new public service culture and cadre. Regrettable, this vacuity creates an impression that the promise of creating public service excellence remains a distant possibility when in fact mounting evidence point to the contrary.

On several occasions before and after the general elections, President Jacob Zuma has instructed: “we need public servants that will always uphold the interests of the people they are employed to serve... we want to build an administration that knows where people live, which knows what they think, and which acts fast, efficiently and effectively on the issues they raise.”

He asked further: “... how will we make the public service more caring, responsible, effective and interactive” (sic).

There have been limited attempts at problematising this presidential challenge and gauging its imminence.

In an endeavour to bolster the thesis that what the president has called for is achievable in the short to medium-term, this treatise spends time exploring features of public service excellence with the “public service mandarins” at the helm. It then concludes by positing that possibilities abound to achieve this goal given the political milieu and direction, the public agency for a professional and accountable public service, as well as emerging professional development opportunities available to senior managers in government.

As a point of departure, what should inspire these mandarins (an advanced detachment of public servants) is a conviction that public service is a revolutionary practice; a vocation of not only interpreting problems facing society and finding tranquilizers for such. It is but a practice that expresses itself in the

search for and curing of the root causes of problems facing society. They are a cadre that envision their mandate beyond mundane implementation of strategic plans and annual programmes.

Society expects them to 'push the envelope' in a manner that permanently alters the socio-political economy and propels the nation into a greater development trajectory.

In pedestrian terms, this means they ought to see their work without the lenses and domain of daily routine and the meeting of targets.

Public service mandarins should constantly worry about why poverty and inequality persists; why our rates of growth and social cohesion perform unspectacularly when at political level, a mandate, resources and support is provided to aid efforts to alter these insidious challenges. They should constantly ask "what can we do to achieve even better outcomes" instead of being satisfied with the cliché – "there is improvement". They do so believing that it is a feature of advanced detachments to do and achieve more instead of being content with routine.

As a revolutionary act, public service by its very nature negates the notion that a government and even society can ever meet targets since social advancement is a moving target. The day such absolutes as "we have met the targets" obtains will mark the end of history and a reversal of the inalienable human endeavour – learning.

At the very least, a professional public service that the president has called for should evince the following virtues (in no particular order):

*Political competence:* this means full appreciation of the mandate of the governing party as well as the country's eminent objectives. Serving is always

pleasurable when one comprehends the genesis, object and expected outcomes of such policy priorities as improved education and health standards, creation of decent work, accelerating rural development as well as fighting crime and corruption among others. The desire to build a developmental state must be embraced by the public service as a call to action and not just a grand intellectual project.

This is not blind loyalty as some who doubts the mandating party's intentions have observed. It is about deploying Catholics as altar boys and barristers as jurists.

Unfortunately many people have ignored the fact that in *Ready to Govern*, the mandating party actually committed to deploying competent people to the public service. There is no crime in the mandating party deploying its competent cadres to government; just as there should be acknowledgement that there are 'non-cadres' who serve the state in various capacities.

In all these cases, the qualifying criterion is competence and a commitment to the ideals of reconstruction and development i.e., to building a caring, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa.

One would find it hard to employ a Green Peace activist in a uranium enrichment plant unless his scope is to help improve its environmental friendliness. The same goes for government.

*Technical competence*: this talk to the ideal of employing one's technical skills to the extent that the service we provide is according to specification and is delivered on time and on budget. There are many technically competent people in the public service. We must aspire to efficiently use their skills in right positions and under enabling conditions.

They also require management since many of them wonder and under-serve because of poor management. The public service also pays better now with OSD and so forth; so there is no excuse for poor performance. The home affairs deputy minister has correctly stated that the majority of contemporary public servants cannot blame apartheid for poor performance since they have tertiary qualifications, have advanced tools of trade at their disposal and professional development opportunities are available to them.

What about those with poor occupational competencies? The president has said they should be retrained and or redeployed to positions where there is fit-for-purpose. Indeed there are many such people in government. However, failure to accurately cost a construction project is different from manipulating this project for selfish purposes. This distinction is critical so that the public service and society in general separate (and up-skill) under-qualified public servants from the corrupt ones who must be purged.

In my limited time in government I have observed that here we have some of the best brains in the land. The challenge is often application i.e. people fail to apply themselves to the fullness of their capacities. This immediately cheats the public of a timely and quality service. In the long-term these colleagues rob themselves learning and professional development opportunities. Hence we have doctors who ill-prescribe, quantity surveyors who overspend and accountants who under-budget.

So, technical competence and professional excellence are the most vital virtues all public servants should strive for. The bulk of government training budget should go to technical training.

*Discipline, commitment and excellence* are qualities that the mandarins must aspire for and personify. This requires of us to exercise diligence in the application of public resources (money, time, infrastructure etc.) and striving for

superior outcomes of the work we do. Such basics as teachers being at school on time teaching will go a long way in improving the quality of life of all South Africans.

It's a pity that a culture of entitlement among us is often divorced from the culture and aspirations of discipline and excellence. We often accommodate mediocrity without necessarily counting its social and material costs to the nation.

Besides, middle and senior management service pay is now nearly on par, if not better, with comparable positions in the private sector. So the expectation of the 'protestant ethic' is not unreasonable. Let's do what we're paid to do!

An hour we steal from work, a miscalculated housing project, an overdose we prescribe to a patient ultimately delays South Africa's prosperity aspirations.

*Trust, honesty and integrity* are the other important virtues of the public service mandarins. We must be truthful to our work taking into account the mission, vision and mandate of the employer – the state. Trustworthy people act honestly and with integrity. They are honest with themselves (they know what they can and cannot do and therefore seek necessary remedies) and in their dealings with others.

A grievance with one's employer should not translate into a grievance with the public whose trust we betray by providing sub-standard services.

Finally, and especially to those among us fast-becoming common denominators in government corridors, we should serve with *humility* and be *self-critical*. We hold no monopoly over the answer to the question: "how to do things in government". If we did society will be far ahead!

Our vantage point is that the state has invested in us and so we should humbly pay our dues through excellence and efficiency. We must avoid what one Duke University public values professor call “delusions of grandeur and delusions of adequacy” which can be so pervasive among those who declare: “I’ve been here for too long so I know what I am doing.” This contradicts a natural phenomenon of the continuity of change.

Examples abound of disciplined, productive and humble public servants who go beyond the call of duty. Conscientious observers of the evolution of the South African public service can affirm this. There is therefore a firm foundation from which generations of public service mandarins can flourish. The environment is pregnant with possibility.

Government is rolling out measures to capacitate the public service. There are all sorts of training programmes on offer. The culture of accountability is being emphasised. The work and deliverables of each department are being sharpened. There are deliberate attempts to build a professional civil service insulated from the after-shocks of political cycles. The service is expanding which opens up career advancement opportunities for many. There are incentives such as rural and occupational specific allowances.

Under this political ecology and a commitment to build a democratic developmental state, a platform is created for the mandarins to raise their hands higher.

Therefore, the narrative of equating public service with corruption, laziness, dishonesty and incompetence will be changed by the manner in which we conduct ourselves, execute our tasks and strive for continuous improvement. The social compact regulating our relationship with the public requires that, at all material times, we should act ethically, professionally, consistently and diligently.

This has cumulative effects. It will eventually impact positively on other layers of the system including middle managers and functionaries.

For the black managers in government, this is the only way we can deal with the residual resentment derived from fear of the supposed preponderance of blacks in government. This historical phenomenon of swart gevaar is currently typified by statements such as “these blacks are running this country down”.

The majority of public servants don't do corruption because they know it is morally, politically, economically and culturally distasteful.

With the hope of inspiring colleagues and bringing intellectual credence to this project, let me end with a food for thought from a Cuban revolutionary, Manuel 'Barbarroja' Pineiro who challenged public officials to act differently:

“Let us increase our vigilance against complacency and arrogance - which may appear like weeds in our work and, if we don't uproot them in time, wind up by invading everything. Let us oppose them with revolutionary unpretentiousness... Let us oppose this with the careful administration of resources, systemisation, planning, and the most intelligent use of all human and technical resources we have.”

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