

A new public service cadre can do things differently

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Lately, a question has arisen seeking to establish how the President's call to 'do things differently' implicates the public sector manager. Understandably, this pertinent enquiry invokes assorted feelings of doubt, flux, excitement, hope and pride. In conversations, public sector managers doubt whether they indeed can 'do things differently'. Some feel the very same question result in volatility. But more encouraging is noticeable rise in energies and patriotism when prospects of a new way of doing things are explored.

All in all, indications point to a public service pregnant with possibilities of efficiency, responsibility, caring, and responsiveness.

Developing a 'new public service cadre' should not be mistaken for winning a lottery – for it's neither a gamble nor an instant gain. It is a long haul. First, there must be appreciation of the President's call:

“...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.”

This ought to develop out of a meta-consciousness premised on normative values from which our democratic society and government stand for: a united, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous society.

Understanding the volcanic effects of accumulated disabilities of apartheid on the majority of the population is what should inspire public servants to hanker to do more, faster, responsible and efficiency.

In the pilot issue of this groundbreaking magazine, a treatise was offered on the concept of 'public service mandarins'; the advanced detachment of public sector managers who constitute the nucleus of a democratic developmental state.

Let's add that possibilities of such a cadre abound largely because the political, policy and material space permits. Apart from political interventions, the emergence of public service mandarins will be a cumulative outcome of individual and collective effort of senior managers through deliberate interventions of training and development, performance management, mentorship and talent retention, waste reduction, improved coordination, better planning, monitoring, evaluation, professionalism and better communication.

What informs this conviction, you may ask. South Africa's success in delivering the single biggest project does. The successful hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup can safely be attributed to a growing culture of delivery among public sector managers. How did they do it?

- They elaborated and worked towards meeting the targets set by the leadership. Various project teams were organised to tackle each guarantee which had a defined specification and timeline. No game could not be televised since broadcast and telephony infrastructure was specific and functional before kickoff. Event visas we issued, passengers swiftly processed, cargo was facilitated and emergency services were deployed.
- Delivery was against clearly defined timelines albeit tight schedules and in some instances, lost labour hours. Project teams were never at a loss about when they were expected to deliver, on each guarantee and more. For example, it is now history that no soccer fan sat on wet cement since stadiums were completed on time.
- Project teams coordinated efforts across sectors, disciplines and spheres of governance i.e. national, provincial and local government departments.

- They organised themselves in project teams with defined roles and responsibilities. Except for few instances where major deliverables organically grew into a 'guarantee', roles and responsibilities were clear thus making it possible to deploy resources and hold people accountable.
- Governance structures and reporting protocols were in place and respected. From local coordinating structures to the 2010 Inter-Ministerial Committee at national level, the message was consistent – monitoring reports had to be delivered in order to appraise the leadership, facilitate decision and debottleneck where necessary. In principle, no task was too small to asphyxiate from the leadership. Again, it is now history that public sector managers are perfectly capable of better coordination.
- Contrary to many other projects, perhaps even less complicated, managers were able to recruit and retain talent. Speculating about this development some argued that perhaps the knowledge of what was at stake (delivery, on time, according to specifications, within limited budgets) pushed managers to employ right people in correct positions. With the world eyes on South Africa, there was pressure to do things right.

As the country continues to bask in the glory of a successful world cup, so should public service mandarins be inspired their contribution to this achievement – the most decisive evidence to-date of gravity towards 'doing things differently'.

The stage is set; cast selected; script rehearsed; enter the new public service cadre and do things differently! We must aspire for excellence and save ourselves from the 'chorus' when the theatre of our developmental state is so rococo.

South Africans deserve better!

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