

“Management of employee performance in the South African Public Service: the case of the National Department of Rural Development and Land Reform in the Western Cape”

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SECTION 1. Macroeconomic processes and regional economies management

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Management of employee performance in the South African Public Service: the case of the National Department of Rural Development and Land Reform in the Western Cape

Abstract

This article assesses the challenges encountered in the application of the Employee Performance Management System (EPMS) in the National Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) in South Africa. The 1999 major restructuring of the South African public service was adopted in line with the New Public Management (NPM) initiatives, in terms of which all departments were guided by public service regulations to develop and implement their departmental performance management systems. Employee performance management provides an integrated framework for the managing of employee performance through continuous improvement and development. In an effort to make public agencies work, governments in various countries have attempted to introduce diverse appraisal tools that are capable of measuring employee performance effectively. In order to be able to draw results from the study, a qualitative approach was employed using mainly interviews and literature review as instruments for data collection. The literature review and findings from this study revealed gaps in the understanding of the employee performance resources allocated to apply the EPMS at the DRDLR, and insufficient compliance and commitment from staff during the performance cycle. Findings from this study can contribute towards improving the management and evaluation of employee performance.

Keywords: performance management, evaluation, public service, performance targets, bonus, performance agreement.

JEL Classification: A14, A19.

Introduction

The aim of the study, on which the article is based, was to find a deeper understanding of the performance management system as it was being implemented within the public sector at the time of the research, by assessing the challenges experienced by the national Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) during the implementation of the Employee Performance Management System (EPMS). The emergence of a democratic form of governance in South Africa in 1994 ushered in new forms of public service transformation characterized by structural changes that were adopted in line with the principles of New Public Management (NPM). While 21 years of South African democracy are being celebrated at the time of publication of the findings of this study, there are still gaps existing in the managing of public service performance, in as far as their mandate to achieve set goals and objectives, which are linked to the broader national objectives, is concerned.

Performance management has been widely used in the field of management studies to improve productivity since the early 1980s, while objective-setting, assessment review and performance-related

remuneration preceded the agenda for performance management in the public sector. Since then, organizations have tended to place an increasing amount of emphasis on the holistic management of individual performance (Armstrong & Baron, 2005). Performance management in South Africa has long existed as one of the knowledge areas within the human resource management discipline, with much emphasis being placed on the productivity of human resources. Productivity in the public sector is an important aspect of the economic development of a country, in terms of the delivery of goods and services. Therefore, changes in such productivity have significant implications for the public. Performance management is a tool that is used to ensure that production takes place, and that work is performed to its maximum efficiency.

The EPMS is currently applied in a changing environment as a tool for achieving an organization's vision and mission; however, it can also result in both positive and negative effects. The organization's vision and mission can be broken down into distinct programs and projects that are geared towards achieving its goals. According to Zwane (2009), performance management is an advanced form of investment that enables managers to achieve their required output through the successful harnessing of their employees' abilities. Even though change in the public service has been managed in a professional manner, there is always

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bound to be some resistance to it, along with fears of job insecurity and low morale. With such factors in mind, the current study employed a qualitative case study methodology for collecting the required data. A purposive sample was also used, representing the population of public managers and employees from the DRDLR in the Western Cape. After introducing the topic, the study presents a discussion of the methodology employed for the data collection, an overview of performance management in South Africa, and, finally, the findings and conclusion of the study.

1. Theoretical framework

The implementation of public service reform in South Africa necessitated the making of a paradigm shift that required the adopting of the principles of New Public Management (NPM), with the intention of reinventing the wheel. Sebola and Manyaka (2013) assert that the establishment of the basic foundations of NPM within the public service have been driven by the use of the market economic model to restructure the service in such a way as to allow for greater recognition of the role played by political and administrative relationships in driving efficiency. Notably, NPM is an approach that is applied to transform and to reinvent the way in which the government works within the ambit of the public management tradition. Cameron (2009) asserts that, as NPM is a marriage between the public sector and the private sector, the process involves the compromising of related values and interests. The logic behind the steps that were taken to implement the NPM system embraced the development of a vision encompassing the conducting of a comprehensive performance audit involving the undertaking of businesslike operations in the public sector.

Proponents of change tend to express a belief that organizations are inclined to evolve in the form of a changing life cycle that is exposed to different paradigms that require their ongoing adaptation (Van Tonder, 2004). Change is driven by environmental factors that influence performance that is aimed at result-, mission- and customer-driven, as well as competitive, public agencies. As part of the paradigm shift in government performance in South Africa, the reinventing of the government movement began after 1994, and endured the Mandela and the Mbeki administrations.

Performance management can also be informed by the results-based management (RBM) approach. RBM is regarded as a reliable method of measuring performance that is concerned with employee improvement, motivation and retention (Nel et al., 2008). It can be aligned with the EPMS, since it allows the employees to devise clear goals and objectives.

When employees create their own work plans, they become responsible and committed to achieving them. In terms of such an approach, the employees are also rewarded and recognized for superior performance, with the approach focusing on results, rather than on processes. Similarly, Nel et al. (2008) recognize that goals can be attained through the provision of continuous motivation at work. The importance of goal-setting and goal attainment in terms of performance management can also reinforce particular behavior patterns of employees. Similarly, management by objectives, as a management technique, can foster employee participation in goal-setting, decision-making, and feedback. Therefore, when an employee is aware that they are continuously working towards a goal, they can direct their efforts towards achieving the goal, even when the situation concerned is difficult for them to handle.

Shafritz et al. (2012) link performance management with productivity in noting that the ultimate aim of performance management efforts is increased productivity. Productivity is involved with the measuring of the relationship between the quantity (and quality) of results that were produced and the quantity of resources that are required for the production of goods or services. Munzhedzi (2011) notes that, although the EPMS plays a significant role in the improvement of productivity, it had not contributed to the improvement of productivity in the department under review. Productivity is not regarded as being desirable by some employees in the public service due to the fact that it can lead to budget cuts and to the downsizing of the organizational structure.

2. Performance management in the South African Public Service

With effect from 1 April 2010, the DRDLR changed their performance management system from the Performance Personnel Management System that was in place at the time to the Employee Performance Management System. Public Service Regulations serve as a primary guide to government departments to develop and implement their departmental EPMS. The regulations require of each executive authority to determine a system of performance management and development for employees in the department. The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) provides guidance in how to implement such a system through the EPMS handbook and learning sessions. One of the sister departments of the DRDLR, namely the previous South African Management and Development Institute (SAMDI), which is now the School of Governance, was tasked to provide the training of public servants in order for them to understand the purpose and the implications of the new performance management system.

Numerous policy documents are currently in place to guide the process of performance management in South Africa, so as to ensure that the objectives to manage performance are achieved. The South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) provides for the management of performance, as it clearly indicates the roles and functions of the Public Service Commission (PSC). The PSC is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that there is effective and efficient performance in the public service, by means of investigating, monitoring and evaluating the organization and administration, as well as the personnel practices, of the public service. The Public Service Act of 2007, which provides for the organization and administration of the South African Public Service, regulates: the conditions of employment; the terms of office; disciplinary matters; the retirement and discharge of members of the Public Service; and matters connected to the South Africa (DPSA, 2007). As indicated by the department in question in the above-mentioned source, an employee of a department may be dismissed on account of their incapacity owing to poor work performance.

Similarly, according to Part VIII: Performance Management and Development of the 2001 Public Service Regulation, the executive authority is required to determine the performance management and development of any official in their department. The authority concerned may also establish a separate performance assessment instrument for the different occupational categories, or levels of work, involved (South Africa. DPSA, 2001). According to Cardy & Leonard (2014) performance management is a critical and necessary component for individual and organizational effectiveness and efficiency. For any organization to determine whether they are on the right track the performance management tool is an essential tool to measure this.

Performance management should start at the foundation of an employee's career. However, the assessment panel should be composed of well-skilled mentors and supervisors in order to determine what skills the individual has so as to align the employee goals with the organization goals. In many organizations performance remediation is done after performance assessment. The performance management system process should start way before employees perform and managers provide feedback (Cardy & Leonard, 2014). An effective and well run performance management system can also provide valuable feedback to employees, remediate action to improve performance, and provide legal documentation in disciplinary and in court. Organizations and individuals can score better benefits after

performance interventions have been implemented. As cited by Harvard Business School (2013) numerous organizations make mistakes in setting targets: (one) organizations fail to create performance metrics, (two) they fail to align rewards with the organization vision and mission, and (three) the targets are set too low.

The Department of Performance Monitoring, Evaluation and Administration (DPMEA) was established in the Presidency in January 2010 to oversee the monitoring and evaluation of employee performance. The establishing of the DPMEA was intended to improve service delivery by means of enabling the promulgation of the Policy on the National Evaluation Framework (2010). The intention of the Policy in question is to clarify the roles and functions of the various units that are tasked with monitoring and evaluating the South African public service.

3. Research methodology

This study employed deductive reasoning, whereby the qualitative research instruments that were used for data collection included mainly interviews, observations and a literature review. Qualitative research is orientated towards analyzing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity, starting from people's expressions and activities, as seen within their local contexts. Therefore, the use of qualitative research suited the current study that is positioned within the field of social science. Brynard, Hanekom and Brynard (2014) note the relevance of a qualitative research methodology to a study such as this, due to its commitment to providing insight into perceptions of the world from the point of view of an actor or participant. Consequently, in terms of the application of such a methodology, the actors and participants who are involved in the situation studied can be seen as they are, and empathy can be gained regarding their daily experience.

The use of this methodology, hence, enabled the researchers to interpret, and to describe, the actions of the participants involved. In the current study, the primary data were collected from unstructured interviews and observations made by the researcher as a participant observer. In contrast, the secondary data were collected from government reports, policy documents, and articles from accredited journals in the field of public affairs and related management disciplines, as well as related books. A purposive sample was comprised of representatives of both senior and middle management, union representatives, and human resource practitioners within the DRLR. Access to the research site, as well as the participation of the employees concerned, was requested and obtained from the DRDLR.

4. Analysis and interpretation of results

The primary objectives of this study were to assess the challenges experienced by the DRDLR during the implementation of its EPMS. A purposive sample was employed as an aggregate of the employees working in the DRDLR, who consisted of 65% men and 45% women. The participants were comprised of managers, deputy directors and directors, and employees from the lower levels of the department. Only the responses to specifically relevant questions were used in the analysis of the results concerned.

4.1. Understanding the nature of performance management. The majority of the respondents understood a performance management system to be a tool/mechanism for assisting a department in identifying their shortcomings and in finding appropriate mechanisms for overcoming any shortcomings encountered. A total of 90% of the interviewees indicated their understanding of the EPMS by noting that it rewards performing employees, while assisting underperforming employees to strive more effectively towards achieving the department's goals. A few managers indicated that the EPMS assists a department to achieve its overall objectives by ensuring that a pool of skilled employees are available at any time. The participants understood the EPMS to be a process whereby employees who perform exceptionally well are rewarded for so doing. In response to the questions, one of the employees said:

The performance management system is to ensure officials meet their targets they outset to do. Agreed that the performance management system is a measuring tool, to ensure the department achieve their goals they set out to do. Performance management is to reward excelling employees and to find [an] appropriate measure to ensure employees achieve their targets. Indicated that the performance management system is [a] tool to identify the skills shortage within the department.

Performance management was, accordingly, seen as a process whereby the department could establish a working interactive relationship between the employees and their supervisors in relation to the planning of work performance. Furthermore, the department concerned was expected by its employees to establish a driving force for creating a participative and performance culture that fostered recognition of their efforts. However, the participants had mixed feelings about their involvement in the planning of performance reviews. Some of them stated that they were not encouraged to participate in the planning of such reviews, and that they did not have enough information about the process prior to the appraisal period.

4.2. Mechanisms for reporting, and the lines of authority. As indicated by the South African DRDLR (2010), the Director of Human Resource Development is entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that all employees and senior managers in a department understand and comply with the EPMS policy. However, in reality, the Director of Human Resource Development does not ensure that all senior managers and employees adhere to the policy, or not enough is done to ensure that they adhere to it. It has been noted that some employees do not, indeed, comply with the policy. According to the participants in the study, the Directorate of Human Resource Development does not do enough to follow up on ensuring that the end-user understands the policy in such a way as to be able to respond both effectively and efficiently.

A few of the participants indicated that the requirements of the EPMS policy are too complex, especially in relation to certain unskilled categories of employees, such as messengers and drivers. In addition, the lack of consistency regarding the presentation of reports, especially in terms of the desired templates and outputs, was noted. The participants' responses indicated the lack of a healthy relationship between the employees and the managers. In this respect, Teckchandani and Pinchler (2015) assertion that managers and employees should seek common ground so that they might come to understand each other better through holding informal conversations to learn about the employees' backgrounds, hobbies and interests is noted. In the view of the two researchers mentioned, doing so could serve to build up a relationship that is based on trust and that enhances the understanding of, and participation in, performance management sessions.

4.3. Performance monitoring, reviews and annual assessments. The participants in the current study indicated that performing employees were rewarded as per the performance rating scale. In terms of the scale, a percentage was calculated according to the employees' package. Some of the participants indicated that poorly performing employees are remediated either by retraining or mentoring, among a number of other methods used. The responses that were made to this question revealed that the EPMS policy reward for performing employees was rewarded by means of the granting of a 'performance bonus', which took the form of a percentage of the employees' total cost to the company. The application of the policy served to remediate poorly performing employees by reskilling them. The policy was seen to reward employees either through incentives or reskilling. For performing employees, there are two types of rewards, namely the pay progression and the performance bonus. One of the respondents indicated the following:

The Department achieved its success with the implementation of the EPMS. Prior to implementation, the components functioned individually. However, the policy was not implemented effectively (14 November 2014).

As indicated by the DRDLR (2010), employees on salary levels 1 to 12 qualify for a pay progression to the maximum notch of the salary level in their posts, provided that they have continuous service and that have at least a fully effective performance. The pay progression, which is linked to the financial year, but which becomes effective from 1 July is a 1% annual progression to the next notch within the relevant level. This means that employees with a satisfactory rating above 100%, and with a minimum of twelve calendar months of service, namely one full financial year's service, qualify for a pay progression. Accordingly, it was said:

The Department achieved its success with the implementation of the EPMS. Prior to implementation, the components functioned individually. However, the policy was not implemented effectively (14 November 2014).

4.4. Challenges to the implementation of the EPMS.

The DRDLR has not proved to be immune to challenges while it has been implementing its EPMS. The participants indicated that the Department had approved the EPMS policy, which could be seen as having been successfully implemented, yet they still experienced structural challenges. They further indicated that one of the developing areas entailed ensuring that the deadlines were met during the EPMS cycle. The participants agreed that the implementation of the approved policy had made a difference to the Department as, prior to the establishment of the policy, the Department had functioned in silos. The participants also revealed that a performance development plan had not yet been effectively implemented. Certain supervisors appeared to misuse the EPMS policy as a punitive measure, which left the policy open for interpretation. Some participants also expressed their feeling that the managers lacked sufficient courage to respond to complex questions raised by employees about the EPMS. A participant, in alluding to the challenges encountered with the system, noted:

Managers are not evaluated on the management of EPMS. Therefore, they do not take it too seriously (14 November 2014).

Approximately 30% of the respondents indicated that the policy should be revamped, due to noncompliance with the policy by the employees. According to the DRDLR (2010), the EPMS was implemented on 1 April 2010. Numerous employees

were not yet fully effective with the policy, which prevented them from being able to motivate why they deserved a good rating during their assessments. According to the participants, performance management tends to be viewed as a human resources exercise instead of as a strategic approach towards organizational development through goal attainment.

Despite the Director General having instructed Human Resource Management to finalize the EPMS cycle by December 2011, delays had been encountered in completing the cycle in the preceding three years. According to the policy, the performance management cycle needed to be concluded by 30 June, 2014 while employee representatives had taken the Department to task for noncompliance. The date that had been set was in line with the Department's strategic/operational plan and budget, which runs from 1 April to 31 March of the following year.

4.5. Corrective measures for poor performance.

When the participants in the current study were asked whether corrective measures had been implemented in the Department to improve employee performance, a manager indicated that poorly performing staff were incorporated into a performance development plan that prioritized training, retraining, mentoring, and counseling. However, if no improvement was seen in the performance of the staff member concerned, they were redeployed to perform a function that suited them better than did their previous function. Performing employees were, in contrast, financially rewarded with a percentage of their package (see section 4.2. above).

Although corrective measures were in place, one participant noted that they were not monitored efficiently and effectively. As a result, no one monitored whether the poorly performing employee had come back on path with the rest of the staff. Employees who had concluded their performance development plan could not be measured or benchmarked in reference to the other employees. As indicated by the DRDLR (2010, p. 20), poor performance should be dealt with appropriately and the supervisor concerned, together with their employees, should deal with poor performance. The DRDLR indicated that it assisted nonperformers through: counseling, mentoring and coaching, (re)training, on-the-job training, restating of the PA and performance requirements, and the provision of enabling working facilities and resources; and the conducting work environment audits. By so doing, it was possible for the Department to establish which factors were negatively affecting the employee's performance. Supervisors are required to ensure that

employees are monitored, and that feedback is continuously given in sufficient time to allow them to improve, and to enable them to benefit from further coaching that is directed at enhancing their development. Bophela and Govender (2015) suggest that employees require accommodating for the sustenance of optimal workplace performance, productivity and business goals, including the maximization of quality and the maintenance of low costs. This study also notes the need for employees to strike a balance between their work and family life, in order that they might be of value to both public and private organizations.

Conclusions

The main aim of the current article was to analyze the management of the EPMS in the DRDLR. The rationale for implementing performance management in government departments is to direct the performance of employees in the departments concerned in order to ensure effective and efficient service delivery to the public. In managing performance, it is important both for managers to understand the process involved, and to ensure that the system is implemented fairly and consistently. The study upon which this article is based revealed that subordinates view performance management differently to how their managers view it. Employees who are at the lowest level of the hierarchy tend to view performance management as a means of increasing their income per annum, which they regard as their entitlement.

Challenges that were encountered in implementing the EPMS in the DRDLR were found to be: noncompliance with the policy; employees' understanding of performance management being biased towards the awarding of rewards and benefits; and the exclusion of subordinates during planning for performance measurement. The managers appeared to be reluctant to deal with complex issues related to EPMS, and delays in the turnaround times indicated inaccuracies and the incoherent nature of the EPMS. The managers might have assumed that positive results would be achieved if the measurement instruments were accurate. Taneja et al. (2015) concur with this idea in asserting that an appraisal system is likely to produce work-related positive outcomes when is perceived as being fair and accurate. According to the researchers concerned, accurate appraisals are defined as:

Those that are accepted by employees and [that] allow the identification of relative contribution to organizational effectiveness within the context of organization and the constraints imposed by the regulatory environment in which it operates.

In the current study, the employees compared themselves with one another and made judgements

relating to who should receive a bonus, and who should not. Recognition was given to the fact that the application of the EPMS could be improved when constant training was offered during the conducting of performance reviews. High performance was seen as entailing the reaching and exceeding of targets related to the delivery of productivity, quality, customer service, growth, profits, and shareholder value. The results of this study are likely to open up a broader platform than in the past for public organizations to take the EPMS seriously in order to enhance growth in the organization, especially in terms of articulating employees' career paths. Findings from this study also contribute to the existing literature on performance management in the public sector.

Recommendations

1. This article recommends that the payment of performance bonuses should be balanced with training interventions for both managers and subordinates. Any negative attitudes that are held by employees can be transformed only if there is consistent implementation of a performance management system, coupled with training, and provided that there is a balance between bonus and human resource development programs.
2. Employees should be involved in the planning of performance management reviews so as to balance the institutional goals with employee needs. That performance is not about being awarded bonuses, but that it is rather about enhancing institutional effectiveness and service delivery through human resource development programs should be stressed. Ultimately, the focus should shift from financial reward to performance. Currently, the only benefit that employees realize is financial gain.
3. The DRDLR should treat the EPMS as a separate project that is independent of the Human Resources Directorate, so that its goals are achieved, and so that the associated improvement enhances employee capacity.
4. The DRDLR must introduce a balanced score card in order to improve the overall performance of the Department. The balanced score card, when developed as part of a strategic plan and management system, can help to align an organization behind a shared vision of success, and it can help people to work on the right issues and to focus on the obtaining of appropriate results. A score card, which is more than a way of keeping score, basically is a system consisting of people, strategy, processes, and technology.
5. There is a need for the Public Administration fraternity to embrace knowledge of monitoring and evaluation, by expanding the debates on performance evaluation through research in order to develop the niche area involved.

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