Leadership excellence

Meeting the challenge of good governance in public service

David Waung (CEO) and David Menyah (Manager, Programme Development), CAPAM

Quandary of the implementation gap

At the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Trinidad and Tobago, Commonwealth presidents, prime ministers and senior politicians reiterated their commitment to a set of core values that articulates the strategic objectives of governments and defines their covenant with the citizens that they serve. The core values of the Commonwealth include: international peace and security, democracy, human rights, tolerance, respect and understanding, separation of powers, rule of law, freedom of expression, development, gender equality, access to health and education, good governance and a civil society. Achieving these values requires bold policy initiatives, imaginative programme strategies and, most importantly, effective policy and strategy implementation. Transforming government policies into results for citizens is the fundamental role of the public service.

However, despite the greatest of intentions and formidable efforts, many important policy objectives remain unfulfilled. Whether these are national commitments for poverty reduction or local concerns for health care and education, citizens have been repeatedly disappointed by unfulfilled promises and the snails pace of progress. Reminiscent of the old English proverb: 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip', there is a troubling 'implementation gap' between policy pronouncements and delivering results for citizens. While this gap has often been attributed to a failure of governance systems and processes, the reality is much more complex

In this article, we argue that effective leadership at all levels of government is the core element needed to bridge the implementation gap and to transform the core values of the Commonwealth into reality and to attain results for citizens. Leadership clarifies objectives, consolidates strengths, defines strategies, rallies support, galvanises efforts and achieves results. It is the catalyst that transforms visions into reality.

Complexities of the public service environment

Today's public sector is beset with challenges and complexities borne out of both local and global conditions. Public sector leaders face perpetual challenges of considerable citizen expectations, limited resources and conflicting priorities. These challenges are further complicated by structural complexities within the public sector that makes achieving objectives difficult. The notable factors that contribute to the complexities of the public service include:

Issue complexities: Challenges facing governments are increasingly multi-dimensional, multifaceted and complex. It is difficult enough to define policy objectives, devise strategies and implement programmes when all the factors are well defined and constrained, seeking solutions to challenges that emerge from global forces requires the collaboration of nations, segments of societies and multiple organisations, in both the private and public sector. As noted by Dr Godwin Grima, Head of the Public Service and Cabinet Secretary in Malta, when he addressed the 2010 Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) Biennial Conference: 'The interconnections that are the reality of our world today make the jobs of public administrators more complex. Good governance has become a shared concern. Countries can no longer be isolated because nobody is exempt from global challenges.' Achieving results under these circumstances will require significant organisational flexibility and individual skills.

Competing objectives: Public servants often view with envy the seemingly single-minded objective of private firms to achieve financial results. In contrast, public service organisations have to satisfy multiple 'bottom lines'. For example, governments are expected to: stimulate economic growth while reducing the impact of industries on the environment; improve social service while reducing government expenditures; and respond to the views of the majority without undermining the rights of minority groups. With these competing objectives, it is easy to be trapped in endless cycles of consultations and studies. The ensuing 'paralysis through analysis' will generate a frenzy of activity while achieving no meaningful results.

Multiple accountabilities: There is a perception that public service organisations are single-minded vertical silos with tiered hierarchies that never cross organisational boundaries. While this may be true from an operational perspective, programme accountabilities cut across various tiers of hierarchy and span multiple organisations. Professor Richard Heeks (1998) from Manchester University asked 'to whom should public servants be accountable?' and suggested that public servants have at least four lines of accountability:

A meeting of Caribbean Cabinet Secretaries and Heads of Public Service in Trinidad and Tobago, 2009

1. Managerial accountability: to senior managers within the organisation.

2. Political accountability: to those institutions that provide the political legitimacy of the organisation.

3. Financial accountability: to those institutions that provide the financing for the organisation.

4. Public accountability: to citizens outside the organisation.

Satisfying these multiple accountabilities places extra constraints on policy options and implementation strategies.

Process complexities: The provision of government services is often the largest 'business activity' in many countries. Government is frequently the largest employer, with offices that span across the country from urban centres to remote locations. It is also responsible for administering the largest budget and is accountable for the efficient collection of taxes and prudent allocation of this revenue. It is therefore not surprising that government also presides over the most complex and arduous management processes. While these processes are demanding, they are necessary to ensure that the required checks and balances are in place for the management of public resources. However, navigating this complex web of rules, policies and processes can consume a

significant amount of time and effort. Governments have tried to simplify organisational complexities and adopt private sector models for management and administrations. The 'New Public Management' (NPM) model is marked by the creation of semi-autonomous agencies for service delivery and by negotiated employment contracts for senior officials responsible for their administration. Although results of the NPM did show early signs of success, over the longer term only marginal financial savings and service level improvements were achieved. The effectiveness of the NPM was even less marked in developing countries (Manning, 2001).

Leading for results

Within this complex environment, the performance of any organisation is inextricably linked with the quality of its leaders. Strong, effective and ethical leaders are needed to set priorities, clarify objectives, investigate opportunities and threats, formulate strategies, amass resources, consolidate support, galvanise commitments, implement strategies, assess results and refine strategies for better outcomes.

While many leaders occupy positions of authority, this is not a prerequisite for effective leadership. Throughout history, notable leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma

Gandhi have transformed nations and influenced world events without any official authority. On the other hand, we can also think of individuals endowed with great authority that have failed miserably as leaders. While it is an important element, authority alone cannot be used as a proxy for strong, effective and ethical leadership.

Within our hierarchical public service organisations, it is natural that we look to the top for leadership guidance. However, organisations are made up of many components, teams and individuals. All of these components must achieve their respective results if the organisation as a whole is to be successful. Achieving this multitude of results requires a multitude of leaders. Across the Commonwealth, it is estimated that close to one million public servants occupy positions with significant leadership responsibilities.

The art of leadership

Through the centuries, the art and science of leadership has been the subject of intense scrutiny, debate and study. As early as the 6th century BC, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote that 'A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, they will say: we did it ourselves.' This sentiment was echoed centuries later by Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said 'Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.' There is no doubt that effective leaders have the aptitude to motivate their fellow workers to achieve the intended results. While simple in concept, translating this into reality can be a lifelong quest. To aid in this process, organisations have identified core leadership competencies that are critical in their operating environment. Although details differ, leadership competencies identified by public service organisations have a number of common themes.

Defining visions: In a complex environment with multiple objectives and multifaceted challenges, it is imperative that objectives and expectations are clearly defined. Effective leaders can articulate visions that cut through these complexities. They are also able to clearly reflect the aspirations of their community and, in the process, set priorities, identify deliverables, manage expectations and mobilise support. While the process may seem effortless, it requires great skill in understanding the underlying driving forces, identifying key stakeholder expectations, and assessing opportunities and threats. Clear, ambitious and achievable vision statements are the rallying cry for action. Such visions serve to coalesce efforts and galvanise resolve to achieve a common goal. However, as important as visions are, they are only statements of intent. Leaders are judged not on their intentions, but on their ability to achieve results. After all, a vision that cannot be achieved is but a hallucination!

Delivering results: There is great truth in Peter Drucker's assertion that: 'Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes.' Within the public service, the effective leader must have the ability to navigate the complex processes and organisational structures of government. This is where the line delineating leadership from management is blurred, as effective leaders must also be excellent managers. They must be sensitive to political imperatives and be able to navigate the web of policies, rules and regulations that guide all public service activities. They must also have the wisdom to decide what and how to delegate responsibilities.

Collaboration: In government, no organisational unit, agency or department works alone; no activity service or programme is self-sufficient (Bourgon, 2009). Achieving major policy objectives would often require the collaboration of multiple government agencies, support from civil society organisations and assistance of private sector firms. This requires the sharing of resources, co-ordination of efforts and the shouldering of joint accountabilities for programme outcomes. Leading such endeavours is especially challenging as relationships are not based on formal lines of authority, but on a foundation of mutual trust and a sense of common purpose. Establishing and cultivating such alliances requires exceptional leadership skills to cement relationships, establish commitment, resolve differences and co-ordinate activities.

Communications: Great leaders must be able to communicate ideas and visions of the future with clarity and conviction. Whether this is through speech or writing, the ability of the leader to influence, inspire and motivate is paramount. However, it is often overlooked that communications is a two-way street and that great leaders must also be great listeners. It is through active listening that leaders learn the intricacies of the environment, appreciate the concerns and aspirations of the community, and identify the threats and opportunities of the endeavour.

Values and ethics: To be effective in achieving results, public service leaders must earn the respect and gain the trust of the community. Leaders should have a combination of personal qualities, the strength of character and the ability to operate in a well-enabled environment (Sidek Hassan, 2009). Of particular concern in some governments is the control and elimination of corruption that inevitably infiltrates government operations. Corruption undermines government accountability and erodes political, economic and social trust (Ashimi, 2010). Respect and trust cannot be imposed or demanded. They must be earned through the demonstration of strong ethics and impeccable character in the personal and professional activities of the leader.

Building public service leadership capacity

Since 2008, CAPAM has undertaken extensive consultations, deliberations and research to understand the need for, and the challenges of, leadership development

Nelson Mandela in London,1962. Notable leaders have influenced world events without official authority

across the Commonwealth. This work culminated in a two-day symposium in May 2011, in Nairobi, Kenya. It was organised in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat and brought together a guiding coalition of stakeholders agreed on the Commonwealth Leadership for Development Initiative to strengthen the leadership capacity of Commonwealth nations.

A compelling combination of factors defines the need for the Commonwealth Leadership for Development Initiative. These include:

- Translating national visions, policies and strategies into reality requires effective, accountable and ethical leadership, at all levels of government, to consolidate commitments, co-ordinate activities and motivate excellence.

- Over one million public servants across the Commonwealth occupy positions of leadership and are in need of support and development to strengthen their capacity to lead.

- National Public Service Training and Development Institutes (PSTDIs) are best positioned to provide leadership development programmes because:

  – Effective leadership is inseparable from cultural norms. PSTDIs can customise leadership development programmes to reflect individual contexts and circumstances.

  – Leadership development at all levels requires continuous support that only in-country institutions can provide. PSTDIs can offer an integrated curriculum that responds to professional career paths and succession planning.

- Designing and delivering effective leadership development programmes can be challenging. PSTDIs would benefit from expert assistance to strengthen their institutional capacity in this area.

- While PSTDIs can address the leadership challenges at most levels of the public service, senior leaders have more stringent developmental needs that may exceed the capabilities of some PSTDIs.

- The Commonwealth Secretariat has experienced a concomitant rise in demand for advice on state-building at the centre of government. This is focused mostly on facilitating leadership and teamwork in the political-administrative interface during government transitions, and in planning for the succession and exit of leaders.

In light of the context and challenges for leadership development across the Commonwealth, an initiative is being developed with three fundamental objectives:

1. To strengthen the institutional capacity of national public service training and development institutes so that they can design and deliver leadership development programmes to meet national needs.

2. To co-ordinate and deliver collaborative leadership development programmes for senior public service executives where it is ineffective and impractical for individual PSTDIs to do so on their own.

3. To integrate with ongoing Commonwealth work in facilitating state-building at the centre of government, where leadership plays an instrumental role in the political-administrative interface supporting national development.

The leadership journey

Unlike academic achievements where degrees and titles are conferred at the end of much study, the cultivation and refinement of leadership is a lifelong endeavour. The journey starts with the appreciation of the discipline of leadership and the acquisition of its foundation competencies. The journey continues with the application, refinement and honing of these skills through the development of leadership behaviours. An important element during this stage is the cultivation of a keen awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses. It is through this awareness that the leader starts to build 'emotional intelligence' that guides his/her transactions with others and develops insight of situations and contexts. As the journey progresses, leadership skills and behaviours are refined, and experiences, whether successful or not, form the foundation for the wisdom to lead.

Through this journey, the scope of leadership will grow from the leader of individuals, to the leader of teams and finally to the leader of leaders. While the leadership journey can be exhilarating, it will also include moments of uncertainty, doubt and disappointment. To not only survive this journey, but to excel in the process, leaders require a robust network of peers and mentors to provide support and guidance. The sharing of experiences with fellow leaders and the continual appreciation of emerging leadership concepts are essential components of the

leadership journey. CAPAM's mission is to provide opportunities for this sharing and learning. It lives up to its motto of 'Building Networks for Better Governance' by organising conferences, workshops and expert forums for public service professionals.

Public service organisations are tasked with transforming national visions into reality. National visions are long-term goals, informed by the history of respective nations, the environment and the main objective of that nation's transformation programmes (Baloyi, 2011). History has shown that achieving results for these programmes is a daunting undertaking that is fraught with challenges and complexities. Strong, effective and ethical leadership is needed at all levels of government to cut through these complexities, consolidate support and motivate co-ordinated action. Leadership excellence is the essential catalyst in our collective quest to achieve results for citizens.

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