Public Sector Human Resource Managers and the promotion of professionalism and the implementation of the African Charter on the Values\principles of Public Service and Administration at National Level.

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Introduction

The African Charter on the values and principles of public service and the administration was adopted by the Pan African Conference of Ministers of Public Service in February 2001[1]. The Charter was later revised and then adopted by the African Union in January 2011. The Charter seeks to promote professionalism in public administration, as well as effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness, among others. However, the successful implementation of the Charter relies on the collective action of a range of critical role players – some institutional, some national and others regional as well as international. This paper focuses specifically on the role of Human Resource (HR) Managers. The paper assesses the factors that facilitate and those that inhibit the effective execution of this role, and it also proposes key strategic actions for consideration. Given that the author is South African, most of the examples used to illustrate the issues are from the South African Public Service.

Defining the Role of HR Managers in the Implementation of the Charter

Human Resource Management as a field has developed over many years in response to evolving workplace dynamics and growing demands for a capable and valued work force that can help deliver on organisational objectives. In this process, the role of HR managers has continued to be redefined to ensure that it remains relevant and responsive to the work of organisations. For example, while HR managers have traditionally been required to focus primarily on technical and administrative functions involving the enforcement of organisational rules and regulations among employees in such areas as selection, training and compensation[2], they are now required to play a more strategic role. Such a role would to seek to ensure that HRM practices support the strategic operations of the organisation.[3] This rethinking of the role of HR managers and the parameters of HRM has also been accompanied by changes in the designations used in the field, such as 'personnel management', 'HRM', 'Strategic HRM', 'People Management', and 'Human Capital Management'. In the area of public administration, these changes in how HRM is conceived of have also been looked at within the context of the evolving paradigms in this field, from traditional public administration (which was mainly rule and procedure-based), through public management (which was influenced by private sector practices and prioritised efficiency and results), to responsive governance (which promotes a focus on the creation of public value).[4]

It should, however, be noted that while all these concepts and paradigms (and the management tools that accompany them) are useful for considering the role of HR managers in the promotion of professionalism and the implementation of the African Charter on the values and principles of Public Service and the Administration, they are not necessarily uncontested. A key issue is to take

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[1] African Union. *Draft African Charter on the Values and Principles of Public Service and the Administration*.
[2] See, for example, Gerber PD, Nel PS and van Dyk PS, *Human Resources Management*. Third Edition. International Thomson Publishing (Southern Africa)(Pty)(Ltd). Johannesburg. 1987
[3] Huselid, M et al. "Technical and Strategic Human Resource Management Effectiveness as Determinants of Firm Performance", in *Academy of Management Journal*, 1997. Vol 40 (1)
[4] United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Unlocking the Human Potential for Public Sector Performance. World Public Sector Report*. New York. 2005

advantage of those management tools which one finds valuable for a specific context, but in the process avoiding a blind and uncritical adoption thereof.

Having noted the above considerations, and taking into account the content and purpose of the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Public Service and the Administration, this paper proposes three critical roles for HR Managers.

Raising Awareness on the Charter

One of the most critical steps in promoting the implementation of the Charter is to ensure that public officials know about it and what it seeks to achieve. While this may be seen by some as obvious and perhaps as common sense, it would be a fatal mistake to assume that public officials are generally knowledgeable about the Charter. Indeed, if a survey were to be conducted to assess the extent to which public officials in the Continent are aware of the Charter, one cannot rule out the possibility that the results may turn out to be rather unflattering, if not simply embarrassing.

However, the good news is that all is not lost. In some countries, the Charter already resonates with or has been infused into national policy frameworks and instruments. For example, Chapter 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa contains nine values and principles of public administration which all organs of state are required to adhere to[5].

Box 1: The South African Constitutional Values and Principles governing public administration

- A high standard of professional ethics must be maintained
- Efficient, economic and effective use of resources must be promoted
- Public administration must be development-oriented
- Services must be provided impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias
- People's needs must be responded to , and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy making
- Public administration must be accountable
- Transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information
- Good human resource management practices must be cultivated
- Public administration must be broadly representative of the South African people, with employment practices based on ability, objectivity, fairness and the need to redress past imbalances

Taken together with a range of other instruments such as the Code of Conduct for Public Servants and the Financial Disclosures Framework[6], it can be argued that what the Charter advocates is part of existing national policy frameworks, and this is, to varying degrees, probably the case with other

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[5] Republic of South Africa. *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Act 108 of 1996
[6] Republic of South Africa. Department of Public Service and Administration. *Public Service Regulations*. Gazette No 1, Vol 427, No 21951

countries in the Continent. HR managers, therefore, do not have to promote the values and principles of the Charter in a vacuum.

But the question may be asked: in what way can HR managers help raise awareness around the Charter? In most organisations, HR managers are central to the induction and training programmes that are offered. They should, therefore, exploit this vantage position to ensure that every employee is knowledgeable about the Charter and its alignment with national frameworks.

Mainstreaming the Charter into Departmental Accountability/Planning Processes

While raising awareness about the Charter is an important step, it would, however, on its own, not be enough. Officials may know the contents of the Charter back to front (and even have copies thereof proudly displayed in their offices), but unless the values and principles are translated into action, their potential impact will remain compromised. Firstly, HR managers have a responsibility to 'walk the talk' by implementing these values and principles within their own units. For example, they should themselves "respect the integrity and dignity of others"(Article 4:1), "take administrative decisions that comply with the laws and regulations in force" (Article 4:3), "carry out their duties with diligence and professionalism" (Article 9:1), and "promote labour relations conducive to dialogue and consultation" (Article 15:^), among others. In other words, HR managers should have the willingness, commitment and confidence to visibly be the embodiment of these values and principles, and demonstrate this through their own work and conduct.

Secondly, because HR components play a transversal advisory role in organisations, they have the unique advantage of interfacing with all the other sections and employees. Once again, they should take advantage of this interface and influence their counterparts in line function. While acknowledging that HR managers do not always occupy executive positions in their organisations, it is still necessary to ensure that in their interaction with other senior managers, they play an influential leadership role where HR matters are concerned. In this regard, it useful to think of leadership not only as a <u>position</u> which certain people in the organisation occupy, but rather as a <u>role</u> which one can play regardless of the level they occupy.[7] One of the ways in which to play such a role is to exert influence through the power of the specialist and strategic knowledge which HR managers possess. From this assertion, it should be realised that, for HR managers to play such a role, they should possess the necessary specialist knowledge. They should not expect to be listened to just because of the positions they occupy, whether these are high or low positions. Instead, they should continuously equip themselves with the necessary cutting edge knowledge which can make their inputs compelling.

However, knowledge alone is never enough to influence important processes such as policy-making. As Weiss reminds us, 'There is an old saying that knowledge is power. Not in policy making. In policy making power is power. Knowledge is an adjunct. It is not the star of the show, it is only a supporting actor – sometimes only a bit player'.[8] The manner in which HR managers approach other senior

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[7] Diphofa, M. "Contemporary Ideas on Leadership: Sound Advice or Empty Slogans", in *Service Delivery Review. A Learning Journal for Public Service Managers*. Vol 2(1),2003.
[8] Weiss, C. "Exploring Research Utilisation", in *Research Utilisation Seminar. How Research and Information are Used*. Hofmeyr J and Muller J (eds). University of the Witwatersrand. Centre for Continuing Education. 1988.

managers in an attempt to influence policy and decision-making is thus just as important as the knowledge which they will be drawing from when they offer their advice.

Thirdly, as custodians of the Performance Management and Development Systems in their departments, they can ensure that the Charter finds expression in the manner in which employees are held accountable for and are supported to improve their performance. Of course, the temptation to avoid here is to simply require the Charter to be appended to the performance agreements of officials. Such an approach may not only encourage 'malicious compliance', but it may also have the unintended consequence of trivialising the Charter. The important thing is to ensure that what the Charter represents and promotes is infused into the planning, implementation and accountability processes of the department. This is because these are among the most important mainstream processes in any department, and they effectively reflect the choices a department has made, and they tell a story about what a department regards as important. If employees are not being held accountable for ensuring "accessible services to users" (Article 5:1) and for "respecting deadlines in the delivery of services" (Article 7:3), then it cannot be argued that these are regarded as priorities.

Fourthly, HR managers need to ensure that the compliance aspects of professionalism are adhered to, and this is a matter within their sphere of influence. They are better positioned to advise their organisations on effective ways of dealing with, for example, acts of misconduct and disciplinary matters. Unacceptable ethical conduct flourishes in environments where people believe that there will be no consequences if you do not comply. Promoting professionalism requires that firm steps be taken where there is misconduct, and with some managers often being reluctant to take such unpopular decisions, HR sections can step in and stand up for what is right.

The above suggestions are key to building a culture of professionalism and a positive collective 'conscience' in organisations.

Monitoring

An organisation may put in place and implement solid plans that seek to give effect to the Charter, but unless these are accompanied by consistent monitoring, we may not know if we are still on the right course. We may for example, be investing in induction and training programmes as proposed above, but are these really helping officials to understand and apply the values and principles contained in the Charter? Is the content of our induction programmes proving to be solid enough? What about the induction methodologies which we are using? Are our recruitment and selection practices credible? What else should the organisation be doing to further deepen implementation? These and other related questions need to be asked and addressed on an on-going basis. HR mangers may not have the answers to all these questions, but that is where it becomes important for them to also facilitate collective organisational learning through a sharing of ideas and experiences. In fact such learning can even be reinforced by interfacing with other institutions nationally, regionally and internationally.

Facilitating Factors

As pointed out above, some countries already have in place a range of enabling policy instruments and frameworks covering such areas as Performance Management and Development, Financial Management, Supply Chain Management, the Combating of Corruption , Codes of Conduct, and the development of and adherence to service standards. Depending on the extent to which these are in tandem with the spirit of the Charter, they will give some local content to the Charter and thus facilitate its institutionalisation. Of course, these existing frameworks are themselves not always implemented effectively, but the fact that they exist and are implemented (even if it can be partially so) suggests that what the Charter represents features among the key priorities in these countries.

Secondly, the necessary space is increasingly being created for HR managers to play more than just an administrative role. In fact, in some cases it is not just a matter of creating the space but even requiring HR managers to occupy this space. For example, in 2008 Cabinet in South Africa approved a set of interventions proposed by the Department of Public Service and Administration which seek to improve the HRM function in the Public Service. One of these interventions is the introduction of a tool which departments are expected to use to review their HR components in order to ensure that they are well positioned "… to not only manage the personnel administration function, but … also…to strategically assist their departments to reach service delivery goals".[9]A draft manual was also developed and provided to departments to assist them in this process.[10]

Thirdly, there is increasingly a young generation of HR officials joining the public service who bring with them the necessary academic training which sought to position them to play the kind of strategic role this paper has suggested. Because most of what they have learned and the ideas they bring may not necessarily be backed up my many years of workplace experience, they may of course be prone to making the wrong assumptions about the workplace. However, they are the hope and future of effective strategic HRM in the public service, and they should be afforded the support they need.

Fourthly, there are also a number of learning platforms and networks nationally, regionally and internationally which HR managers can leverage to share experiences and in turn deepen the implementation of the Charter in their own institutions. The African Public Sector Human Resource \management Network (APS-HRMnet) is clearly one such platform.

Inhibiting Factors

Values and principles are often easier to talk about and advocate, but much more challenging to uphold and implement. For example, it may be easy to put in place systems to ensure that "public service employees shall be subject to a performance evaluation system based on clear criteria and quantifiable objectives"(Article 19:2). However, ensuring that the System is implemented effectively and in a consistent and credible manner is a much more involved undertaking requiring commitment and persistence on the part of implementers and decision-makers. In its many oversight studies on the implementation of performance management and development systems in government, the South African Public Service Commission has found that while there is clear evidence that the

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[9] Republic of South Africa. Department of Public Service and Administration. *Interventions to Improve the Human Resource Management Function in the Public Service: A Manual for Use by Departments*. Circular 14/1/1. 26 November 2009

[10] Republic of South Africa. Department of Public Service and Administration. *Implementing Strategic Human Resource Management in the Public Service: A Manual for use by Departments*. (undated)

systems are being implemented, there remain other critical areas where improvements are still necessary.[11] These include the timely conclusion of performance agreements, and ensuring that performance reviews are carried out consistently.

A further inhibiting factor is that some of our current public service systems have inherited HR managers who, whether consciously or not, have largely remained stuck in their old ways of traditional technical personnel management. For some of them, this is in part because their training and many years of experience have not prepared them to play a more strategic role, and they thus prefer to stick to what they know and are comfortable with. This cohort of HR managers needs to be taken along the transformation path, because they can otherwise frustrate any efforts towards entrenching the values and principles of the Charter.

While this paper has recognised that organisations are increasingly opening up the necessary space for HR managers to play a strategic role, one cannot rule out the possibility that there may still those that, for various reasons, have not as yet made the switch. In such organisations, HR managers are unlikely to be seen as a critical resource beyond just handling personnel matters, and attempts by these managers to play the kinds of roles suggested above may not be supported.

Linked to the above concern is the tendency of line managers to conveniently disregard their own responsibilities relating to HRM in their own sections. HR managers cannot be effective in organisations if line managers do not ensure that they deal with their part of the HRM value chain meaningfully. For example, the whole of Chapter 5 of the Charter deals with HR principles and values, but each manager (whether in HR sections or line functions) have a role in upholding them. If, for example, line managers do not find it necessary to ensure that "public service employees shall be recruited on the basis of equal access to public employment"(Article 18:2), they can quite easily frustrate the efforts of HR managers who are trying to uphold this principle. In fact, this often leads to HR managers having to 'clean up ' after line managers who had not done their part properly in managing their subordinates, and in the process HR managers end up not having the space they need to pay attention to their strategic role. In a study that focused specifically on Labour Relations Officer, the Public Service Commission found that one of their main concerns was that line managers often did not do their part in promoting sound labour relations in the workplace, and seemed to erroneously believe that this was a role to be played by the Labour Relations Officers.[12]

A further potential limiting factor is resource limitations. The realisation of the objectives of the Charter will, in certain instances, require the provision of dedicated resources. For example, the building of an integrity-driven Public Service would require the creation of both preventative and combative capacity to deal with corruption. The latter is most likely to require the injection of resources so that skilled investigators, for example, can be sourced since they are often not readily available in the Public Service.[13]

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[11] See, for example, Republic of South Africa. Public Service Commission. *State of the Public Service Report.* 2010.

[12] Republic of South Africa. Public Service Commission. *The Role of Labour Relations Officers in the Public Service.* 2005

[13] Republic of South Africa. Public Service Commission. *Measuring of the Effectiveness of the National Anti-Corruption Hotline*. Second Biennial Report. December 2008.

A final issue to raise pertains to the potentially disempowering impact of jargon and 'flavour-of-the month' tools and techniques. There are so many 'experts' throwing around all sorts of ideas on HRM, some of which only help to confuse and distract managers. In fact, it is critical to note that "a sizeable proportion of what goes on under the name management training, particularly in the short course area, comprises a dubious cocktail of wishful thinking, anecdotal experience, with an admixture of flavour of the month opportunism".[14]

HR managers may be vulnerable to the seductive power of the nice concepts, tools and methodologies, in the process sacrificing practical implementation and common-sense at the altar of jargon and misdirected sophistication.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the effective implementation of the Charter will require conscious efforts on the part of key players in each country to make sure that it finds expression in their mainstream institutional and national processes and practices. A practical step each country should start with is to conduct an honest self- assessment, looking at how well they are doing in terms of what the Charter espouses. In this process, each country would have to establish if they have in place the kinds of facilitating factors suggested in this paper, and if the examples of inhibiting factors that have been discussed are a reality in their context. Emanating from such assessment should be a clear implementation plan which identifies what should be done to ensure that the Charter is implemented. There cannot be any one-size-fits-all solution on this matter, and each country will just have to do the necessary spade-work to drive this process.

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[14] Quoted in Blunt P and Jones M. *Managing Organisations in Africa*. De Gruyter. 1992