

Devolution and the new role of senior executive managers

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Introduction

The public service worldwide has experienced some sweeping and dramatic changes over the last two decades. Undoubtedly, changes in administrative procedures, functional structures and systems during the late eighties and throughout the nineties under the broad banner of reforms have shifted the paradigms and culture of public service fundamentally. These global changes do affect the Samoan public service as well. To survive under such circumstances, the real test for a country like ours is to understand these changes and strategies on how to adjust our practices, systems and policies yet mindful of our socio-cultural imperatives. Our geographical isolation and vulnerability to global changes because of our economic insignificant internationally give us very little option but to act decisively

In our own public service, one of the most debatable issue for several years now is the devolution of Human Resource (HR) operational functions, usually centralised in the Public Service Commission (PSC), to line departments. For those who are familiar with the government's reform agenda, this is one of the many milestones of the Public Service Commission Institutional Strengthening Programme (PSCISP) and we, are very close to implementing the process. But the process is not straight forward as it appears and the PSC will be grossly irresponsible if such a complex and far reaching policy decision occurs without instituting a capacity building programme for Heads of Departments (HODs) and senior managers, not to mention the need to strengthen departments through legislating an appropriate procedural framework and corresponding systems. There is no contestability regarding the issue of devolution, the PSC will devolve the management of human resources and HODs will be accountable for taking action and making decisions about their own personnel. Subsequently, HODs and senior managers will be responsible for the proper implementation of HR related actions and appropriate decisions. Thus the essence of this paper is to discuss devolution specifically in relation to the new role of senior executive managers (SEMs) (refer to in this context to HODs and senior managers).

The road to articulating, creating and sustaining a new system or initiative is laboriously longer and much more complicated than the path of undoing it, and undoing some of the PSC's functions will be much easier than nurturing and cultivating the new public service environment of today's SEMs.

The environment of devolution

The overarching philosophy of public sector reform is to simplify cumbersome bureaucratic procedures in order for service delivery to be more efficient and effective as required by customers. If that basic component of the equation is achieved then it follows that the overhead cost to produce that service shall diminish in the future years. In the case of human resources management, the popular slogan in this age is to "allow the manager to manage" albeit a demand for greater flexibility with regards to people and financial procedures, processes and systems. We have seen this to a certain degree in our budget framework

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whereby Treasury has given managers greater flexibility to manage their respective budgets. Furthermore, the new budget framework has encouraged the active participation of divisional heads being output manager and having a better understanding of divisional operations and expectations. The ball is now in the PSC's court to engineer the same degree of flexibility so that SEMs and the next level down are given the mandate to manage their human resources efficiently and effectively

The devolution of some of the PSC functions to SEMs means shifting the accountability for HR management to departmental levels who are also accountable for performing these work activities. With this paradigm shift, it means that the senior executive managers' future role will include both the exciting and simple functions as well as the not so exciting and difficult functions. Paradoxically, the devolution of the PSC's operational functions provides SEMs with the authority to hire and discipline employees. Similarly, since the senior executive officers will be responsible for training needs analysis of staff, the often neglected function of performance counselling will need to be conducted vigorously and honestly. Another function which will be devolved is the determination of appropriate departmental structure to facilitate the delivering of stated outputs for each financial year. Some of these functions are currently performed by SEMs in their preliminary stage but the difficult decisions such as dismissing an employee and in other disciplinary related matters which create conflicts between heads and/or senior officers and employees are usually referred to the PSC.

Inevitably, the new public service environment demands that SEMs be made responsible for the effective and efficient management of HR. This responsibility includes a multitude of HR managerial function any manager whether in private or public sector is expected to carry out thus:

Planning how to use people to get the best results with broad guidelines provided in:

- corporate planning of HR,
- management planning for HR,
- action planning for HR, and
- organising the work so that outputs are delivered as planned.

Associated with this responsibility is the necessity to carry out:

- work analysis,
- job analysis,
- structural realignment, and
- supervising people in doing the work required such as: - choosing the best people for the job, -motivating them to achieve the best results, -directing, communicating, listening, working with people, -developing people to do the work, on the job training, and -counselling and discipline.

Monitoring and evaluating of work activities such as:

- performance appraisal and management,
- problem analysis, and
- output achievements.

It has been mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs that it is always harder to cultivate and sustain a new initiative than undoing it. Similarly, it is easier for SEMs to demand that the hiring and firing of employees be devolved and one would hope they manage the process professionally rather than personally. The roadblocks in ensuring the transition happens with minimum disruption to the service are numerous but the most critical one is a real test on managers' abilities to change their behaviours and mindsets and adjust their preferred management practices and approaches. The second critical element is the ability of managers to manage people professionally as required by the new procedures and legislation and this is a major concern expressed by the Public Service Association Council.

The concern expressed by employees expressed by the Public Service Association Council about fair and equitable treatment is real given our socio-cultural imperatives and as such, the PSC and the PSCISP steering committee must take account of it. In that regard, the PSC will need to formulate and implement appropriate training programmes on human resources management for SEMs, focussing on critical elements of the new framework and working environment. There is also a need to carry out frequently, workshops/seminars with assistance from the Attorney General's Office to make sure senior executive managers have a common understanding/perception of HR procedures and legislation. With the acquisition of new responsibilities training programmes should include characteristics required of the new managers.

Characteristics of the new SEMs

Operating under the new public service culture and having to perform some of the new managerial functions, it must be spelt out that the senior executive managers will take responsibility for their action. In the prevailing circumstance managers tend to blame the PSC and Treasury for delays in recruitment and procurement or any personnel and financial related activities. Such leverage will be history, gone and buried, as senior executive managers become accountable for their decisions. If a manager does not perform up to standard, then necessary sanctions and decisions should be taken by the Cabinet upon the advice of the PSC. Accordingly, SEMs will be required to implement principles of good people management. In this case it refers to the following characteristics: •transparency, •merit, •fairness or equity, •independence, •loyalty, •respect, •efficiency, •effectiveness, •accountability, and •ethical conduct

It is expected that these characteristics will form part of the main legislation, and professional code of ethic requires to be followed and observed by managers and every employee of the public service. This is one of the many core milestones of the PSCISP thus the provision of appropriate legislation and procedures which work to consolidate and sustain the new public service culture and work environment. One may well ask, what strategies do we have in place to ensure all these will happen?

The road to change

We all know that an introduction of a new system, process or policy must be considered with the outmost sensitivity because there will always be some corresponding down side somewhere, be it resources, procedural and/or political. We have discussed the complex array of responsibilities, which the new managers will require to perform. In order for the new managers to efficiently and effectively perform these new responsibilities, they will have to undergo some intensive training in the real meaning of training, hopefully to acquire the appropriate skills, knowledge, attitude and competencies. In short, there is a dire need to fit the new managers into new and appealing outfits where they are expected to behave accordingly as executives of today, not executives of yesteryears. But in order for the process to be successful and effective in achieving its outcomes, the government must be ready to satisfy requirements demanded by the new environment. These include the willingness of our political leaders to support the following:

- Recognise the new responsibilities and enhance the new environment by providing supportive policy decisions;
- Review and develop capacity of senior managers to take up the responsibilities, and/or finding new people who can;
- Relating rewards and sanctions to achievement of responsibilities; and

- Recognise the need for continued improvement and implementing performance management systems to achieve improvements.

Having presented this new vision, the bottom line is are we as managers ready to take on the challenge?

Conclusion

The paper tries to highlight the shift in the Samoan public service culture and in particular the role SEMs will be expected to play in managing human resources. It generally discusses the justifications for devolving the management of human resources to Line agencies and benefits to be gained if the process is successful. The success of the process requires a revamping of current systems, procedures and practices to a large extent but the most significant contribution to the success of such reform directly challenge the managers abilities to adapt to these changes. Given the complexities of the reform programme, SEMs will need to be multi-skilled, leaders who recognise the diverse characteristics of good governance if they are to become effective in people management. It is a challenging role and therefore the government should acknowledge and match the new demands put on SEMs by providing supportive policy decisions through skills enrichment programmes, determining appropriate remuneration and sanctions to achievement and engineering continuous improvement programmes.

Suggested readings

- Hon. Tuilaepa S. Malielegaoi, Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Government of Samoa, July (1999) "Opening Address", Third Forum Economic Ministers Meeting, Apia, Samoa.
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