

Chapter 4

Service orientation in the public service sector

In this context the public service sector covers the broad activity field embracing government departments, municipalities, local government authorities and quasi-government business enterprises. The political and legislative arm of government has been discussed extensively already, which restricts this discussion to the executive function of government including related bodies influenced by it. This is the sphere which has the most influence on the economic, social and political lives of people in all African countries since public service and parastatals are by far the biggest formal employers. This makes them the fulcrum around which societal values, work ethic and quality of life perception revolve.

CHRONICLE OF SERVICE HIJACK EVENTS

To bring the point home here are real-life cases, some of which are current in countries in West, East and Central Africa. Zambia is one of the countries that was rich in copper, which it exploited to the full with no reinvestment for diversification of the economy. A large consortium of quasi-government organisations was established which controlled all the mining companies and was managed by political nominees. It had a workforce of 29 000 people in a small country of under 7 million population. Because of operational inefficiencies the mammoth entity died a natural death within a decade, dragging its subsidiaries down with it. The national airline, once one of the best on the continent, ground to a halt with an embarrassing diplomatic incident involving the head of state. He had flown to England with the last plane in the fleet and it was attached by

creditors. He was stranded until diplomatic shuttles led to the temporary release of the plane.

The second event concerns the national airline in Zimbabwe, where the tradition was to appoint chief executives on the strength of their political connections, disregarding business leadership experience and expertise. Consequently, successive incumbents did their part to run down the organisation. In the process one incumbent was dismissed for flagrantly bad management breaching the fundamentals of business ethics. The board of directors, who were also politically appointed and thus just as ineffective, bungled the dismissal by flouting legal procedures. Paradoxically, the chair was a lawyer of many years' experience. The dismissal remained abortive for three years while the individual earned his very generous package. In that period another CEO was appointed to run the firm. In effect, this small, loss-making airline had two chief executives for over two years. It demands these questions: Could the airline afford it? Why was such an inept board not fired immediately? How badly has service to the end customer been affected by this unprofessional managerial dysfunction? The answer to the last question is glaringly evident in poor staff morale, substandard airline service and low patronage with customers fleeing to competitors.

Yet another incident in the same country involved a chief executive of a national grain-marketing corporation who was dismissed for poor food security planning. He allegedly exported maize during a period of drought, resulting in the country importing maize in the end. The paradox of the situation was that he reported to a board and to the relevant government minister. A few months later, the incumbent was paid a severance sum of nearly two million in the local currency, which was a comfortable figure.

Who has suffered in all these cases of poor service? The list is endless, embracing the defenceless ordinary person, the already overburdened taxpayer and generally all the millions of customers whose needs would have been satisfied directly or indirectly if these parastatals had performed at optimum level and not collapsed.

As an integral aspect of the African Renaissance there are feasible moves towards privatisation of parastatals in several countries. This is a significant effort to convert the dinosaurs into manageable, transparent and efficient business units. Without the guaranteed funds from national coffers these right-sized organisations quickly learn to identify their customers, their needs and work to satisfy them. In this process the customer is much more likely to receive good service, which may be unknown in a parastatal environment.

Success stories of privatisation are often related about Ghana, Uganda and Zambia, while South Africa had also made good progress. These countries have made a bold move to sell off government ownership of parastatal organisations either wholly or through majority equity. The motivation is to release state assets into private business, which will maximise their profitability and minimise the need for government subsidies to sustain failing enterprises. The rationale is simply that government must be preoccupied with governing and leave business in the hands of expert business people. This way a win-win formula prevails for the benefit of the country.

A few countries such as Zimbabwe have been half-hearted about it by first becoming commercialised as a stopgap measure before privatisation. This entails floating enterprises on the stock exchange to open them up to the public in part while government is still in control. This tends to yield suboptimal results which will not relieve the national fiscus of the burden of subsidy if performance is negative. In essence, the enterprise remains public oriented in culture with a poor customer-care approach. Thus, it cannot compete effectively with a completely private business.

ABSOLUTE POWER NEGATES SERVICE EXCELLENCE

The history of most African countries is such that when they gained political independence they inherited large public service structures and

limited private sector infrastructure. In the majority of cases public service had been used as an instrument for indoctrination and oppression of the society. Therefore, when revolution took place and overturned the power balance, the new regimes used the same infrastructure to effect change in the lives of the ordinary people. Thus, instead of less, it became more government, with total control on society. This is not the platform to weigh the pros and cons, but merely to emphasise the vital role played by the public sector in shaping its society positively or negatively. Indeed it is its role to dispense government service to the populace, which makes it a crucial instrument for customer service, or lack of it.

In nations where poverty is rampant and earning capacity limited, there is tremendous pressure on the public sector to be the provider for the nation. This turns it into a political vanguard by default as employees become subjected to political direction. They also seek to create their own wealth by exploiting the situation of scarcity. Society in general ceases to view the public servant as its servant but as an exalted provider of badly needed service. This breeds corruption as the public official now seeks to become elitist in line with societal expectations when in fact his or her income level is much lower. There are many countries on the continent where most brand-new cars are owned by politicians and public servants because they are the only ones with the means. This is a dangerous precedent because it spells economic disaster. Public service should only be a dispenser of service and not a creator of wealth. When the latter prevails, it means national resources are being channelled to the non-productive sector at the expense of productive investment. Among other follies this means service excellence to the people has been undermined by corruption and self-enrichment.

The following chronicle of events should illustrate the deep-seated culture of poor service and confusion between politics and public service. In private enterprise, service excellence is ensured by systematic coordination of all departments to fulfil one mission. This cohesion does not always exist in the public sector.

In our cities the institution of the mayor was inherited from the Western colonial powers but has been modified in different countries. Originally, it symbolised the city father who sought to upgrade the civic life of ratepayers. He was elected at set intervals and earned a nominal allowance for civic representation. The position was an elected one to ensure the incumbent had the mandate of his constituency and was fully knowledgeable of the needs of the community, which is his customer base.

In a few countries the position has become an executive and permanent one. This has created a host of problems. In Zimbabwe the mayoral elections became so politicised that only well-connected political parrots ever came into office. If an independent won the elections, they would have been rigged to the desired result. It needs no imagination to see that it was not the most competent candidate who got the job. Furthermore, by making the position permanent, sensitivity to customer needs was eliminated. The incumbent became his or her own master with no need for a mandate from the community. This was a recipe for corruption and inefficiency. In this particular case this has been fulfilled. The mayor became an extension of a corrupt political system and made the city insolvent within three years. A serious shortage of critical services prevailed in all parts of the city. The community became helpless because it could not kick him out. Paradoxically, the same community, under political direction, had voted for this candidate. Together with his councillors, he draws a huge monthly salary instead of the nominal allowance which symbolised only civic commitment. Gone is the orientation towards serving customers. In 1999 the government succumbed to societal pressure and dismissed the mayor with his entire executive management in a bid to salvage the pieces.

In Kenya a shameless débâcle about a radio licence took place, involving a private media company and officials of the Ministry of Communications. The media firm applied to the ministry for a radio broadcasting licence. The officials, acting under direction from the President's Office, did not respond for four years. The company proceeded

to buy a 90% shareholding from an individual who had been granted a licence, but had no money to realise the project, which required millions of dollars. One may ask what business plan he had presented to the ministry to obtain a licence for national coverage without even start-up capital. When the ministry saw the transaction had been concluded, it unilaterally withdrew the licence. However, the company was now under different ownership with legal protection. A protracted legal battle ensued which the company won. As if that was not enough, the ministry then refused to grant it radio frequency authority. Another legal wrangle followed whose verdict is yet to be known.

Let us analyse this incident from the standpoint of service excellence. It became clear that government did not want to issue a radio licence to this firm for fear of it becoming too strong a critical machine against government as the company also owned a major newspaper. Instead, it felt comfortable about granting numerous regional licences to small applicants who were not likely to make them operational in a meaningful way. This was a ploy to deflect criticism by the citizens that government refused to grant licences. Public servants in the Ministry of Communication were serving only themselves and their political masters. You cannot give differential treatment to a range of customers seeking the same service. In this instance the public service machinery was turned from a service provider to a service regulator. Needless to say, this runs completely against the grain of service excellence. Yet it is prevalent in many countries.

Another example of the institutionalised practice of self-service by public servants, which can be construed as corruption at its worst, occurred in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and other countries in Central Africa. Several financial donors, including governments from the West, pledged educational scholarships to those African countries which had previously been their colonies or were seen as being in dire need. The aid funds were and still are administered by government ministries. An open system of selection of beneficiaries is supposed to take place where the most deserving or the best student should obtain a scholarship to study

outside the home country. Invariably, applications have been manipulated to the extent that mainly the children of the public servants and their immediate relatives obtained them. In one country the majority of students who went to study overseas shared only two surnames, those of leading families in society. Even more distressingly, the selected candidates are not the most academically gifted, which means they have to repeat several years, consuming more money in the process and still returning home as mediocre performers. Through such practice the public service has short-changed its society and compromised future national performance. Should access to service depend on whom you know in the system?

High-profile cases of abuse of power for personal gain are commonplace in many of our countries. A synopsis of some of them may help to show the disturbing prevalence of such underhand behaviour among those in leadership. In the late 1980s four Zimbabwean Cabinet Ministers were compelled to leave in disgrace over a scandal of buying motor cars from a government-controlled assembly plant and re-selling at exorbitant prices, taking advantage of the chronic mid-nineties shortage of cars in the country. In the mid-nineties Zambia also witnessed embarrassing cases of corruption at Cabinet level. The first democratic government of South Africa was embarrassed when a Cabinet Minister was prosecuted for irregularities in disbursing social welfare funds for pensioners. He had to resign under a cloud. Most recently a director-general in the Department of Home Affairs was relieved of his post for gross misconduct involving issuing false identity documents and citizenship to foreigners for personal gain, running a private business from a government office, paying own domestic staff with state funds, and abuse of state vehicles for private business errands. In Swaziland a state-owned financial institution had to be rescued from bankruptcy by the government when the chief executive overexposed its lending to politicians and members of the royal clan. He sacrificed the business for his personal political ambitions, as he shortly afterwards campaigned for a parliamentary seat. Also in 1999 the head of the Lesotho Highlands Water Authority faced public accusations of

corruption in awarding tenders to suppliers of materials during the construction of the multi-million dollar project. The negative publicity which ensued caused international embarrassment as names of certain financiers and donor countries were dragged into the fray. Most recently, newspapers carried an embarrassing story of a top ministerial official in Nigeria who sold state land to the government, claiming it was his. The newly elected president, Obasanjo, has vowed to eradicate corruption, which is widely regarded as a cancer eating into the entire fabric of the business and economic society of this most populous country in Africa.

The parastatals are vital components of public service. These are business institutions which are supposed to add to and not deplete the national fiscus. Originally established to safeguard and ensure equitable distribution of strategic national services such as electricity, railways, airways, information broadcasting and agricultural marketing, they have been turned into political weaponry operated by public servants manipulated by politicians.

In many countries, chief executives of these parastatals are failed civil servants or politicians dumped there as rewards for loyalty. It is believed that they will be less embarrassing in that position. On the contrary, they tend to cost the nation dearly because of mismanagement. Quite often the board of directors is composed of hand-picked sycophants of the ruling party whose knowledge of business is dangerous. As a result, many airlines have closed down, railways are permanently subsidised, agricultural marketing authorities have increased starvation because of lack of planning, and the taxpayer always pays the price.

In Zimbabwe a public servant was appointed to head a reasonably strong bank in which government has majority equity. Within three years the bank was on the brink of bankruptcy because of mismanagement. Another quasi-government body had a fascinating case of a board of directors who voted themselves huge salaries while the parastatal was bleeding with losses. They were asked to stand down to give way to a privatisation programme, but they refused until legal force was used. In

South Africa, directors individually and collectively instructed the payroll department of their employer parastatal to award them twice the bonus passed by board resolution. They just felt they needed more. By the way, some of these boards comprised people of all races, which proves that misdemeanours know no colour.

What observations can be made in all these cases? First, management is a profession in its own right that takes years to master. A good politician or public servant does not necessarily become a good business manager. The entire society would receive the service it deserved if good politicians remained in politics and public service, while competent business managers were left to run the parastatals unhindered. Second, all those involved in these incidents were serving only themselves. Public servants must be given to a measure of selflessness. They must be trained to exhibit an attitude of doing something good in the national interest and not personal appeasement. Third, politicians breed corruption in public service by interfering with administration. Politics should remain in the legislature and the constituency (local or national), while public service is the executive arm of government run professionally to implement the statutes of the land without fear or favour. Only then can the ordinary person begin to receive service excellence.

Customer service training works wonders in the private sector. It should be implemented with the same vigour in the public sector. Although a tremendous amount of training occurs in this sector, it is designed mainly to upgrade technical and administrative skills. It hardly ever attends to behavioural competences which improve understanding of people, managing personal behaviour and inculcating passion for giving service in the line of duty.

It is some consolation that lack of service orientation in public service is not confined to Africa. I and many others have suffered humiliation at the hands of immigration and customs officials at airports in Britain, USA and New Zealand. You would be pulled out of the line of passengers arriving from Africa. As you are asked to put your bags on a table you

realise that all the others at the table are mainly African people (and orientals in USA), which immediately tells you that the public servant manning that gate has been indoctrinated to assume fault in any person of colour. The humiliation and frustration are often aggravated because the official will unceremoniously empty your suitcase, leaving all your personal belongings scattered on the workbench. When inevitably they do not find what they are looking for, they move off without a word and you must re-pack your bags.

Ingrained bias in the staff against people of a certain description causes them not to wish to serve them as equal customers. Instead they are viewed as mere numbers passing through the terminal. Airports are the gateways into a country and impressions formed by a visitor there will shape his or her attitude towards the country for a long time in future. Therefore, some of this behaviour has probably damaged national images irreparably.

On a positive note there are abundant cases of service excellence to be cited from public institutions at home and abroad. Even more customer-oriented are some African government departments which have formulated mission statements which are displayed boldly in the offices. I recall that a couple of years ago in South Africa, I received a phone call from a government clerical official to follow up on a problem that I had presented to his department the week before. He wanted to know if I had received help from where his office referred me to. This gave me a lot of hope that society may still receive efficient service from the public service with no strings attached. I will continue to support the efforts to create service excellence awareness by our public servants.

Some governments have taken the bold step of drawing skills from the private into public sector. With increasing frequency one sees political leaders co-opting eminent business people or academics to senior Cabinet posts in their areas of expertise. Such developments help to create a business climate with a service culture brought by the leader from his or her experience. An added advantage is that professional managers are not susceptible to nepotism and they have a strategic view of the business.

To monitor service levels rendered to society by the public sector, some governments, such as South Africa, have established temporary or permanent watchdog agencies. These include police complaints directorates, public service commissions, government-funded consumer protection councils, anti-corruption units and the office of the public protector. In an effort to satisfy foreign investment customers, several countries have established national investment centres as integrated sources of ready information for potential investors. This can be a most positive and effective way of meeting the needs of several categories of customers as well as raising the international profile of the country. In Uganda I was delighted to see a clearly business-oriented attitude in public servants. They met me at my hotel over a weekend to supply me with investment information. Similarly, I found it much easier to meet with heads of government in Uganda, Swaziland and Lesotho than in some countries. There seems to be some correlation between government openness and service excellence.

Let us close with some international parallels. One that comes to mind immediately is the Singapore Immigration and Tourism Department. If you pass through Changhi International Airport in transit you are permitted to go into the city without a visa. You leave your passport at immigration, embark on a free bus supplied for the purpose, and you are taken on a three-hour guided tour of Singapore. You collect your passport on return, and you are invariably full of praise for their beautiful and clean city. This is an example of a public service sector making an additional effort to please customers who are passing through, with the ultimate goal of promoting the city image for tourism. With good leadership training and commitment the public sector can become a most effective dispenser of service excellence.

SERVICE THROUGH VALUE-ADDING

The preceding critical analysis of lack of customer sensitivity in the public sector was not intended as a blanket damning report. There are ample opportunities for making tangible improvements in all aspects of public

activity. However, it entails a whole paradigm shift for leadership, employees and the recipients of the service.

The business sector is fundamentally different from other endeavours because of the profit motive, or the aim to multiply whatever commodity was initially invested. The same concept can be introduced in the public sector, with modifications. Let us take a typical government department staffed by typical civil servants. How can the profit motive be implemented? I believe that if politicians removed themselves from managing the operating departments and left this to the principal secretary as chief executive, that would be a good beginning. The latter would be asked to produce an operating annual business plan to the treasury to motivate for funds. Once granted, it becomes his or her total responsibility to utilise those funds correctly, and prove this in an annual report to the public. If he or she fails to meet the objectives for which money was granted, he or she should bear the same consequences as the chief executive in the private sector – be fired.

By the same token, if the department utilises its funds so well that it meets its operational plan and still retains savings which have not arisen from starving the public of needed services, it should be allowed to keep this money for further utilisation, including rewarding high-performing staff. Once staff see that there is a rigorous performance management system which sets goals in terms of quality and quantity of service dispensed, and consistently measures it, as a result of which reward and punishment are meted out, they would find reason to meet the needs of their customers.

For instance, why should public offices all open and close at the same time throughout the country although public requirements may be different. Imagine the positive impact it would make if government departments worked shifts, so that even after work one could still go to the nearest office and get the required service. The same principle can be applied to local authorities and municipal offices. In this way public servants would be adding value to their ordinary efforts to give their customer the advantage of availability, utility and applicability of service.

Recently I was most frustrated by lack of service when I made a long cross-border trip and went with my father to the local district government office to transfer land ownership from him to me. Only one person deals with that and he was on holiday. I now have to wait for another year to find the time to make such a trip again.

In the same way, municipal and parastatal workers can be mobilised to believe that they are running their own strategic business unit from whose success they benefit and whose failure results in material deprivation. Salary increases and promotion should not be based on how long one has been in the organisation but how well one performs. Similarly, the infamous thirteenth cheque bonus should be replaced by a performance-related bonus which separates poor and high performers. Quite often in hotels and other public-oriented enterprises we are given service questionnaires to complete which are scrutinised by relevant authorities to effect service improvements. Public sector departments should have such performance measures to give us the opportunity to evaluate the service received from an organisation or even an individual employee. If I can report a vehicle driver who is driving recklessly to his superior through a phone number on the back of the vehicle, why should I not be able to do the same with an employee who is paid with my tax money and who denies me service?

In simplistic terms it has been demonstrated that if public sector departments were to be incentivised to increase their accountability to the public they would feel compelled to give impeccable service. If there is something in it for employees they would go the extra mile to please their customers. Such extra effort draws a distinction between service excellence and poor careless inaction from those whose behaviour influences society enormously.

A DOZEN TECHNIQUES FOR CULTURE CHANGE

What is required to infuse a new way of behaving and managing into quasi-public organisations? A complete about-turn is imperative in all

involved including the political players who pull the power strings. In practice a new culture should prevail to influence new thinking, introduce new leadership practices and inspire high organisational productivity. To drive this point home let us familiarise ourselves with the dozen techniques of building a new service-oriented culture in an organisation.

- **Clarity:** *The change facilitators must be absolutely clear about what needs to be changed. It should be clear whether it is the structure or systems or strategy for service delivery. The time frame and deadlines for change should be delineated as well as the way in which it will be achieved. This should be simply expressed in words such as competitive threat, cost escalation and such-like business jargon, which all can understand. The modalities of doing it and necessary resources should be spelt out. Make it come alive! Use metaphors, symbols, slogans and pictures. Do not confuse the message, but create a picture or vision of how things will be after the change. In other words, all involved must be made to share the vision of the ultimate cathedral to be built by the sum total of the incremental efforts of each of them.*
- **Consistency:** *There should be perseverance and focus towards the goal. Stick to it and do not succumb to inconsistency. A big ship takes time to turn, and this holds true of culture change. It took three years to effect a turnaround in Jaguar's quality, some five years for complete culture change in British Airways, and Citicorp took three years for a full market repositioning.*
- **Context:** *Change does not occur in a vacuum but within an established context of time and space. There should be no need for zero-based change. Instead, it should be formulated to fit into the existing context. Exploit strategic synergies by connecting what you want to achieve with things that others want to achieve. Position it optimally to decide which existing aspects fit into the new order. This requires an astute scanning of the total environment in which change will take place.*
- **Teamwork:** *You cannot change an organisation alone, so it is advisable to marshal the support and commitment of all relevant people. Coordinate your*

efforts with other team members to gain critical mass for change. Remember: 'Lone hero innovators are usually martyred.'

- **Opinion leaders:** Identify real champions of the idea of change, whom others will follow. These can be drawn from people in powerful positions and those with demonstrable energy. Champions have the tenacity to cope with ambiguity, uncertain circumstances, complexity and change.
- **Planned communication:** Tell the world about success stories and the runner-up processes followed. It is more advantageous to use multifaceted communication media including the grapevine machinery. Each stage of change must be surrounded by ample communication about it.
- **Dedication and passion:** Do not embark on change if people at the top only display lukewarm support. They should show total commitment to change – psychologically, physically and intellectually. Transformational leaders such as Lee Iacocca of Chrysler, Welch of General Electric, Egan of Jaguar, Marshall of British Airways and Harvey-Jones of ICI believed in what they were doing and worked tirelessly to achieve it. They had vision and a passion for service excellence.
- **Orchestration of good news:** Use every opportunity and excuse to celebrate small successes. The process of change should radiate a spirit of fun to attract others to join and help. Celebrations are sources of motivation for those in the firing line who may succumb to fatigue.
- **Smart partnerships:** Build coalitions with other groups and departments who aspire to the same future state of change. It is immaterial what their reasons are as long as they share a similar desire for change in the same area. There is both wisdom and safety from risk in a group approach.
- **Consequences:** Have some built-in assessment process which will detect the consequences and knock-on effects of your change efforts. Change in one area tends to have ripple effects on a distant part of the system. These consequences need to be managed carefully.
- **Consolidate:** Cement the change into the fabric of the organisation to make it a normal part of life. Once it is institutionalised, move onto the next stage

to a permanent state of affairs. Disband the ad hoc arrangements originally set up to implement the change.

- **Enduring courage:** The boldness of the leader of the top team to drive the initiative through is vital for lasting success. Transformational leadership which is dedicated to a values-driven fundamental change is more lasting than transactional leadership in which the daily transactions of the business are well managed but subject to blowing with the corporate wind.

The common thread running through this entire culture change strategy is 'people', especially those who manage the customer's experience. They are key assets who either make the change initiative succeed or fail to make a positive impact on the external customer.

Chapter 5

Service or not in the professions

A working definition of the field of professions would be a good start for our discussion. This term is used to collectively describe those fields of work in which performers are guided by a code of behaviour and knowledge resulting from a defined international qualification. The code of behaviour also denotes internationally recognised ethics and expectations. The most commonly known professions are the following:

- *the accounting profession, which is guided by GAAP (generally accepted accounting principles)*
- *the medical profession, which is bound by a very stringent code of ethics embodied in the medical professional councils of various countries*
- *the psychological profession, which has a code of behaviour centred on confidentiality*
- *social work, whose five fundamental principles emphasise the helping nature of the endeavour*
- *the legal profession, which also has a stringent code of ethics espoused by various law societies*
- *the educational profession, which follows similar trends*
- *management in general, one of the most pervasive professions in our daily lives*
- *a host of technical professions including engineering, architecture and the whole range of scientific professions.*

It is indisputable that together the professions control societal behaviour to the extent that right and wrong are based on them as a frame of reference. Similarly, it follows that they play a pivotal role in customer service or lack of it within society as a whole and its sectional groupings. This is more so because most professions have assembled into large

collective bodies such as the Law Society, Medical Professions Council, and educationists' associations.

THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICE VILLAINS

The next chronicle of events represents neglect or total lack of service orientation on the part of the professional people involved.

Anecdote 1

This happened to me a couple of years ago in South Africa and to three other people I know in Swaziland, Zimbabwe and South Africa in the last ten years. It is now mandatory to be tested for the HIV virus if you approach a financial institution to borrow a large sum of money for investment in a project such as house purchase, for which insurance cover is required. A strict procedural code has been sanctioned by the World Health Organisation to regulate the conducting of tests. Its fundamental tenet is that before the test the incumbent must be counselled by a qualified professional or doctor on the implications of the test and possible repercussions. This is designed to pre-empt trauma in the event of the test proving positive. In none of the above cases did this happen. I recall being given a laboratory form to complete at reception where I was given the test form to take to the laboratory. On arriving at the laboratory where I expected a semblance of counselling, a blood sample was taken and I was told the results will be given to me by the doctor within two days. This did not happen and after three weeks I called my bank. Only then did I learn that all had gone well and the insurance policy had been granted. My other two colleagues had similar experiences elsewhere. Here is a simple analysis of the service sabotage action. First, failure to prepare the incumbent for possible devastating results is very unprofessional. Second, not advising of the results at all when a feedback time frame of two days had been given is almost criminal.

Anecdote 2

Two years ago a friend had to go into one of the top private hospitals in South Africa for some medical scanning. She was asked to undress and wear a hospital gown. For some 45 minutes she stood in the wide corridor without being attended to. This was in the middle of winter. Then she was ushered into the room where the scanning was conducted swiftly and she was left alone without a word as to what to do next. After nearly one hour she came out and found that all the staff for that section had gone home. She had to phone the following morning to find out the results. The nurse answered thus: 'It seems something was found, you may need to come back.' The patient wrote a strong complaint letter to the managing director of the hospital group but received no answer.

It can correctly be pointed out that the entire private hospital was anti-customer service, including the managing director, as he saw no need to reply to the letter. This happens so frequently that society now subconsciously accepts it and hence perpetuates the malpractice.

Anecdote 3

Another patient went into a reputable hospital in South Africa for a major operation. He had been admitted by a surgeon of some standing who did not prepare him with professional advance care, except to tell him the place, the date and time of hospitalisation. When the patient arrived to check into the ward, only then was he told that the costs for the first three days were to be paid in cash up-front and not as part of the medical aid bill. Here was a severely sick person, covered by medical aid, but being told at the last minute that he must pay up thousands of rands at his bedside. Fortunately a friend who had taken him paid by credit card and the operation went ahead.

The gripe here is not that inhuman treatment was meted out to this patient. It is simply a matter of customer care on the part of the surgeon. He should have a simple advisory system in place to brief would-be patients well enough for them to be prepared. A person in emotional

trauma needs that so much more than I do when I go to buy a used car. Yet in the latter case the salesman spends time explaining the features of the car to the customer.

Anecdote 4

Before the same patient checked into the ward, he had asked about house rules regarding personal care items. The answer was 'Just pack an overnight bag.' The patient specifically asked whether soap and towels were to be included but was told they were. He went into the ward only to experience the opposite and had to start calling for help from friends. That is not easy when you are in intensive care. Again, this is a simple matter of supplying a customer with relevant information. Surely, this is not too much to ask of any professional who trained for years at college.

Anecdote 5

Sexually biased management

For many years I heard about carpet interviews but never took them seriously, probably because I was in the field of employment and could not imagine interviewing in any way other than the professional four-stage procedure. One day a friend rang me up almost speechless with anger. She had been called for an interview at an agency for a professional position. On arrival she was ushered into the office of this big man (in size). He came round the desk to sit on the same side. She did not panic because this falls within the ambit of modern-day interviewing without formal barriers. The interview degenerated into a probe into her social life and she became uneasy, but decided to be patient. But the man began explicitly flirting with her, at which stage she stormed out in disgust. Her first question to me was: 'Is this what you do all the time?' Obviously it took me time and effort to explain that this style does not exist in textbooks on professional interviewing.

This behaviour falls into the categories of sexual harassment and so-called carpet interviews. A job applicant comes for an interview with high expectations of a fair discussion, information on the firm and, it is hoped, a

job at the end. If he or she is suddenly confronted with other personal demands, that person obviously feels devastated and let down by lack of professionalism. To show how revolting it can be I asked one colleague who I knew was prone to such behaviour what he would do if the same was done to his wife or sister. The answer was quick and unequivocal: 'I will kill somebody.' One of the principles of service excellence is the biblical adage that 'You do unto others what you wish done unto you'. My colleague obviously needs to read the Old Testament again to learn excellent customer service.

Anecdote 6

Management by bottom power

The preceding observation dwelt on the seemingly helpless female species being harassed by shameless male predators. Let us look at the flip side of the coin where some women wield tremendous power over their male counterparts by virtue of sexual blackmail. In one Central African country a powerful female business executive got what she wanted in every respect from any of her male subordinates, superiors and counterparts through her unique power of overnight persuasion. She would order a male subordinate to come to her house at night for some work which was never publicly defined. The end result was a polarisation of relations between male and female staff that seriously hampered its delivery of service to the customers. Staff promotions were based on arbitrary sexual grounds instead of merit, which led to inefficiency and disgruntlement among the more able staff who were bypassed.

Thus service excellence was undermined by this bottom power behaviour to very far-reaching proportions. Think how many times this has happened in situations you know about. The answer probably will be 'many times over'. Then ask yourself: 'Is it possible to display both favouritism and fairness at the same time?' This type of arbitrary behaviour militates against service excellence from every angle. You cannot have your cake and eat it.

Anecdote 7

One of the most gruesome cases in the medical profession happened a few years ago in Zimbabwe, resulting in a jail sentence for an anaesthetist on two counts of manslaughter. He had indulged in the diabolical malpractice of experimenting on black patients with different concoctions of anaesthetic drugs. As a result, two people died, causing a major public outrage, which quickly took on racial overtones of unimaginable proportions. A protracted legal suit ensued which culminated in imprisonment, which is seen by some public observers as too light for the crime. Apart from the heinous crime of racial discrimination, this person had betrayed the sanctity of the medical profession. Professionals cannot subject their customers to dangerous experiments, particularly without their consent. In this case these patients were customers in a commercial and in a professional sense. He failed to uphold either of these service principles.

THE SERVICE GAP

This denotes the discord that prevails when the expectations or perceptions of delivery action fall short of what the recipient actually experiences in the relative context. The latter qualifying phrase emphasises the reasonableness and relevance of the expectations. For instance, it would be sheer folly for one to expect the same smooth ride in a Volkswagen Beetle as in a Mercedes Benz. Therefore if because of circumstances only the former vehicle is available, this does not ipso facto constitute poor service, provided all care is accorded to the customer. Every time that you left a place disgruntled, picked a squabble with the taxi driver, disagreed with your boss, or signed a petition against your local community leader, you were reacting against a service gap which you experienced. The question is 'How does one fill the gap?' However, effective cure follows good diagnosis of the cause of symptoms of the disease manifested by the service gap. The following is a short list of

variables which sometimes impact on service providers in the various professions analysed earlier.

- **Level of sophistication:** *Some professionals tend to become too sophisticated to really understand their customers. Consequently they will not stop to understand their needs, but only see their own aspirations as the key drivers for action. You cannot effectively serve people to whom you have a condescending attitude. No service excellence can be given to the slave by the master, only benevolent dictatorship.*
- **Present and historical understanding:** *If someone does not have in-depth knowledge and understanding of service circumstances, he or she is likely to render tardy service. Most environmental and demographic trends change in quantum leaps in Africa because of the technological influence of the donor super powers. Some professionals fail to keep abreast of changes, which compounds lack of understanding.*
- **Learning capacity:** *It is forgivable to give poor service because of genuine ignorance but unforgivable to do so deliberately. This is often the cardinal error of the ostrich mentality where one believes that by burying one's head in the sand the challenges of the surroundings will disappear. Some professional people cease to learn from the day they finish training and cannot see the wood for the trees throughout their working life thereafter.*
- **Stigma attached to the situation:** *Those who believe their professional status is high tend to become class conscious about those they deal with. Similarly those of lower achievement, but who mistakenly believe they have arrived, will tend to lack customer care and professional approach.*
- **Clash of professional values and business expediency:** *In the early eighties I had two acquaintances who qualified as medical doctors in a country with a dire shortage of such skills. They had hardly practised in public hospitals when they opened several private practices, which they openly referred to as 'shops'. Clearly, professional care for patients was compromised for business expediency.*

- **Inherent mediocrity in society:** *The public, who are on the receiving end of service, should be the most potent watchdog against substandard treatment by the professions. Unfortunately, the African spirit of respect bequeathed us a legacy of docile acceptance of mediocre standards without rejection or complaint. As a result, poor service becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. By the way, this shortfall seems to affect everyone who lives in Africa, irrespective of colour.*

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE

More than other members of society, professionals are judged very strictly by on-lookers and recipients of their service. This is understandable since their behaviour impacts on the soul of the society more than other walks of life. Second, it is easier to measure professional conduct against international benchmarks. In the wake of such high expectations there ought to be a generic frame of reference for all professional service providers. To initiate the debate, I outline ten non-negotiable commandments which apply across the spectrum.

- 1 *All professionals and their lieutenants should be adequately service-oriented to realise that a customer is the most important visitor they receive at any time in their work period. Some professions do not even have defined work periods, which makes service alertness a round-the-clock phenomenon. Often one visits firms of lawyers, doctors' surgeries, architects' offices and many other professionals to be confronted with a prominent sign which reads 'Business hours 08h00 to 13h00; 13h00 to 14h00 lunch; 14h00 to 16h30'. This lunchtime is designed for the convenience of the person who is supposed to attend to customers and not for the latter. In plain language the message is 'Customer, wait. I will help you when it is convenient to me'. By implication, the customer is viewed as a disturbance of peace, whose nuisance value is considerable.*

- 2 The customer comes first at all times. Professionals have to inculcate the six skills represented by the following acronym (adapted from Hopson & Scally 1989) to facilitate rote memory. 'Comes first' stands for:

C = clear messages

O = OK attitude

M = making people feel special

E = energy

S = service under pressure

First = the first four minutes and last two minutes

To render professional service in any discipline one must have the above basic people skills. These refer to communicating clear messages; demonstrating a positive attitude at all times, making everyone feel special, showing high energy and giving consistent service under pressure. Remember that customers are not idiots, they always know when they are not welcome, no matter how well disguised the behaviour is.

- 3 The customer is not dependent on you. You are dependent on the customer, whether he or she is a patient, a legal client, a prisoner, a school pupil or a passenger in transit. In everyday life we have seen schools close down because there were no pupils to make them sustainable. Therefore, teachers have lost employment or been re-deployed to where there is a need for their services. Similarly, there have been occasions when public offices closed down because of lack of patronage by people who require the services rendered there. In the private sector the equation is extremely straightforward – no customers, no business.
- 4 A customer is not an interruption to your work; he or she is the cause of it. Customers are evaluating your performance in handling them. From this evaluation strong opinions arise that can be positive or negative towards the professional person. When you are serving a customer, whether as a teacher, doctor, nurse, policeman, lawyer, business manager,

banker or any other profession, you are on stage. The questions you should answer upfront are: Are you dressed for the part? Do you know your lines? Do you understand the play?

- 5 The customer is not an outsider in your organisation but an important partner. Those organisations which have constant open communication with their customers are the market leaders because they know what their customers want, and when and how they want it before producing it. During hard times customers stick to those businesses which gave them respect by asking their opinion and shared consumer plans with them.
- 6 Remember that when a customer calls on your services you are not doing him or her a favour, although the opposite is true. By seeking your services the customer is giving you a vote of confidence which you should seize eagerly to prove your ounce of gold. The logic is simple and straightforward if the professional views it this way – if this individual, and many others, did not seek your services as a doctor, lawyer, policeman, accountant, manager, nurse and so forth, you would be redundant.
- 7 The corollary to this principle is that customers do not owe you anything by seeking your services. They can go elsewhere if they are not satisfied with you. When resources are scarce, short-sighted service providers foolishly believe that they are the only ones capable of meeting the customers' needs and they have no alternative. This is tantamount to shooting oneself in the foot because once an option presents itself, even second rate in service, customers will change allegiance overnight, if only out of spite. Many enterprises have gone bust unexpectedly through this invincible power of consumers.
- 8 Every person who renders service to others, at whatever level this may be, must remember that the first four minutes of the encounter are critical and the last two minutes are crucial for a sustainable service relationship.

In the first four minutes you are the organisation you work for. When customers interact with you they are doing so with the full conviction that you are the organisation. If you captivate customers by radiating understanding of other needs, willingness to satisfy them and taking an appropriate timely action you have created a memorable customer experience. That will become your individual credit, which will ensure they do not go to competition.

The last two minutes are crucial because the first impression lingers longest after the event. Your concluding behaviour sets the tone for the moment of truth that you have just had with the customer. Create a professional but warm and personal image capped by a definite indication of action.

It is important to remember that at every moment of truth there are three possible customer behaviours:

- Customers will get less than they expect and be disappointed or angry (ie the service is memorable because it is horrible)
- Customers will get exactly what they expect and therefore it is 'no big deal' (ie forgettable because it is natural!)
- Customers get service of a higher quality than they expect and are delighted (ie it is memorable because it's magic!) This is the eternal aim of service excellence.

- 9 In whatever capacity you may be operating, always remember the customer's bill of rights. Rule 1 is that the customer is always right, regardless of the circumstances. The onus is on professionals to navigate around potential conflict with the customer because they cannot win the argument. Rule 2 is that if you should find the customer wrong, return immediately to rule 1. Ultimately the customer is king. He or she is the reason for your being in the profession that you took.
- 10 Foster a relationship of mutual benefit which enables you to profit through service. The 80/20 rule dictates that under normal circumstances in a

market situation, professions included, 80% of business comes from 20% of the client base. This means people relationships are fundamental to success in service, which has led to conversion of the order of business' critical success factors. The traditional business approach was dominated by the pursuit of profit. Therefore the business philosophy was in this order:

- profit
- product
- people

The product came a natural second, being the chief source of profit. People came at the bottom of the scale because their only relevance and value was in terms of the first two elements. In organisations oriented towards service, the order has been turned:

- people
- product
- profit

The people who manage the customer's experience are key assets. They should be developed, encouraged, inspired and supported to empower them to deliver the service excellence, the quality product, which will make you profitable. All professional service providers should be convinced that investment in people is a central quality service requirement; it is not optional.

PROFIT THROUGH SERVICE

A comprehensive diagnosis of the service gap disease has been made. Can we now prescribe the medicine, whether in the form of a Western scientific prescription or an African spiritually inspired herbal medicine? Perhaps a combination would more effectively treat our cosmopolitan service providers.

First, our service-dispensing professionals should not view the call for world-class service as implying everything Western and nothing home-grown. A happy medium is the panacea which should be sought all the time. Technology per se does not render service excellence, but it facilitates that state if it is blended appropriately with the human element.

Second, dispensing good service to anyone must take some personal sacrifice or thought. If service is dished out in a mechanical fashion it will not pass the test of time. The concept of indoctrination is not far-fetched in this context. McDonalds does not export hamburgers around the world, but indoctrinates service dispensers with the philosophy of quality, service, cleanliness and value. In the same vein Japanese with their 'kaizen' (incremental improvement) imply the belief that every little step builds up to a quantum leap.

Finally, service excellence does not occur in a vacuum but must be predicated upon a strong supportive system. Part of it is teamwork, starting with as few people as two, such as a boss and secretary or a doctor and nurse. A supportive macro system is essential as well. An efficient political system gives rise to an effective public service which meets the society's needs.

THE WIN/WIN/WIN/WIN FORMULA

Customer service training equips people to add value to the products they sell. Irrespective of their level of sophistication and station in life, one needs to develop relationships with those in the capacity of customers of any form, beyond just selling a product or service. This applies equally within and outside the organisational entity. It starts from the premise that 'You don't have to be unwell to get better'. It encourages people to be more skilled and aware that they can enhance their jobs, their professional contribution and the customer's experience. It results in WIN/WIN/WIN/WIN outcomes. Who wins?

First, customers or clients win because they enjoy quality treatment. Second, service providers win by getting satisfaction from a job well done.

Third, the business wins as customers indulge in repeat-buys of the product/service and they advertise to others. The fourth winner is society! If quality treatment of people is to become the great concern of the business world, if it can be re-emphasised in the caring professions, in our education systems, in health and community services, in political movements, then there really must be hope for greater quality of life for us all.

SOME PROFESSIONAL SERVICE HEROES

A year ago I was spending some leisure time on the central beaches of Durban when I saw a man lying slumped on the ground not far from a food court which included some bars. It was clear the man was in a drunken stupor in the mid-afternoon. Outside one of the restaurants were two members of the police force sipping soft drinks. They saw the man simultaneously, finished their drinks in a hurry and approached him. On discovering his problem, they lifted him respectfully and helped him into the shade a hundred metres away, where he could sober up. This incident impressed me because the officers had no obligation to prop up inebriated beachcombers.

The second admirable story of professionalism before commercialism involves a medical doctor who has looked after me and my family for some years. I told him that my father was suffering from acute arthritis for which he needed relief. I described the symptoms to him as my father was several hundreds of kilometres away. He quickly identified the medicine, which is rather pricey. As he knew I was travelling to see my father he gave me a packet of tablets to give him. I asked how much they cost and his reply was: 'Let's see if they work well first.'

Yet another doctor friend of mine earned a sterling reputation amongst older patients. He did this by taking time to explain in detail what the person was suffering from, how it had been contracted and the possible cures. He would go as far as to explain how the prescribed medicine

worked. The paradox was that even those who could not understand the scientific causality of ailments came out of his surgery beaming with new knowledge and seemingly got better. It was well-deserved reward for my friend when he was appointed to a top post for Africa in the World Health Organisation.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE IS ORDAINED OF GOD

In the Gospel of John chapter 13 the Lord Jesus sets a heavenly example of service excellence which has guided mankind for two millennia. After the Last Supper, before his betrayal and crucifixion, the teaching says: 'Jesus ... rose from supper and laid aside his garments, took a towel and girded himself. After that he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded ... If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.'

This teaching is highly symbolic in both the spiritual and customer service sense. Jesus wanted to leave his disciples with an unequivocal example of rendering service to others. He wanted them to create a multiplier effect of such service orientation from this lesson. It achieved tremendous success, as his teaching dominates the Christian faith today throughout the world. Even some professions with the basic tenet of caring for society, such as medicine and statecraft, include in their oath of practice something to do with carrying out the will of God. Hence the phrase 'So help me, God' at the end of the oath. Thus, the Lord himself ordained the act and philosophy of service excellence.

Chapter 6

Necessity for service-oriented community leadership

A community is a neighbourhood with certain common interests or concerns, although it does not necessarily have to be homogeneous. Examples include a municipal ward, district or rural council, political cell, village and localised associations such as those for employees or employers, church congregation and sporting and special interest groups. Similarly, community leadership refers to the elected or appointed torchbearers such as city mayors and councillors, political stewards, church and union officials. These leaders play a critical role in shaping society's opinion and definition of service excellence or disservice, since the larger society is an aggregate sum of the constituent communities.

The concept of community in certain African contexts presents some real challenges to the leadership. These range from historical economic imbalances, deprivation and the need to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots through redistribution of resources. This emanates from the racially based geographical distribution of populations which was legally instituted when the countries were first settled by the white people. Consequently, you find that in many African cities the well-served low-density suburbs were demarcated for whites and the deprived and overcrowded high-density townships were for black people. Similarly, life outside the cities was divided racially into commercial areas with land title deeds for whites and national land or tribal trust land for blacks. These demarcations were enshrined in such laws as Group Areas Act in South Africa, and Land Apportionment Act and Land Tenure Act in most former British colonies on the continent. The imbalances emanating from such artificial settlements became an economic reality in that the one side was affluent while the other was deprived of resources. In these

circumstances the community leaders in the latter areas battle to serve their customers without the adequate facilities to do this. Consequently, it may be difficult for customers to experience satisfaction most of the time.

Be that as it may, reality dictates that unequal circumstances are a fact of life irrespective of whether it is in the eurocentric or afrocentric environment. Therefore, evaluation of service effectiveness must be relative to the community concerned. However, a service-oriented attitude in all leaders is a prerequisite. For this reason I enumerate the leadership qualities that are vital for effective community service.

- **Selflessness and commitment:** *An effective leader must display a notable element of sacrifice of something important to him or her and others. This could be forfeiting personal time, freedom, comfort and so forth. The motivation for sacrifice is rooted in commitment to a cause which may be elusive in the minds of the community folk. A case in point is that of most political leaders in pre-independence African countries who risked being imprisoned or having to live in exile for the cause of freedom for their nation. In most cases the freedom was very elusive but their spirit of sacrifice made it a reality in the end. A real leader does things for the common good without saying 'What's in it for me?' Satisfaction should come from winning the war and not a series of battles.*
- **Conceptualisation of reality:** *Community needs often involve blurred definitions of an aggregate of problems ranging from basic infrastructure to sophisticated state-of-the-art electronic equipment of any form. A good leader has the ability to conceptualise reality from an imperfect state of affairs to delineate the possible from the ideal. This includes prioritising community problems, separating necessities from the nice-to-haves.*
- **Motivation and mobilisation of masses:** *Having conceptualised reality, a leader must then define a superordinate common goal with which every community member will identify. This becomes the source of motivation to spur all and sundry into action. This requires sharpened skills of*

perceptiveness and decisiveness. One must be relentless in pursuit of the goal and lead prominently by encouraging participation of all members. This is why demonstrations and mass rallies play an important role in our communities in pursuit of change. Effective leadership is really about turning intangibles to tangibles that can be appreciated by many beneficiaries.

- **Effective communication:** The best-defined goals are not achievable if they are not effectively communicated. A leader selects a range of multi-purpose communication styles to deliver the message. He must be seen to be non-partisan in attitude and communicate candidly in every situation. Closely associated with this quality is the flair for networking and coordinating among diverse personalities. Some communities are more advanced than others in their openness to communication. This demands a multifaceted approach using various methods that have proved effective in the circumstances. It would be foolhardy to use print media for disseminating crucial matters through a community where illiteracy is predominant. Perhaps verbal consultation is more suitable in that situation. Thus a good leader understands these nuances.
- **Organisational excellence:** Good leadership entails astute planning of tactics and processes of dealing with perceived problems. The uniqueness of leadership is the ability to make that extra effort to see what the populace cannot easily see and put it into a problem-solving structure.

I recall as a child how my father and a friend mobilised a small rural community to build a primary school. This was a pioneering farming community. There were no roads or developed infrastructure of any form. These two men mobilised the community to prioritise their needs. Building a school was top of the list. The community made its own bricks, cut grass for thatching, cut poles from the forest and built the first two classrooms. Aware that the government of the day was not keen to educate blacks, the leaders approached an evangelical missionary group to give financial support for books and teachers. This venture was so successful that a prominent school

was born which has since produced many eminent citizens. Incidentally, I was among its first products and have since contributed much to its upgrading. On a larger scale there are many self-help schemes across Africa such as Masakhane in South Africa, Ujamaa in Tanzania, Mushandirapamwe in Zimbabwe. These are products of excellent leaders who convinced the masses of their worthiness.

- **Selective non-conformism:** Effective community leaders should adhere to professional management art and science but should sometimes be maverick in their behaviour. Unpredictable non-conformity can be an effective vanguard for effecting change in society. On our continent there are ample success stories of trade union leaders becoming political and community stalwarts for change. This meant breaking out of the mould of legislative dictates to take an unexpected stance. By so doing, many of the leaders risked their freedom and lives in pursuit of change and in most cases won the battle. Conformity is predictable and boring to the extent of arousing cynicism sometimes, instead of mobilising community support. But non-conformism does not mean ultra vires action which disregards the basic laws of humanity. Instead it means observing the rule of law as regards the fundamentals of society but highlighting the incongruencies which affect that community with respect to selected issues. So it follows that criminals and law-breakers cannot be community leaders. Non-conformity means electing to handle an ordinary situation differently for optimal results under different circumstances.
- **Lateral thinking:** This trait is akin to non-conformism except that it does not imply doing the unexpected. Instead, it refers to an active cognitive process that scans the environment for cues for solutions to problems. An effective leader must consider all the ramifications to a situation in searching for the right way to handle it. This implies challenging the status quo to see things in a different light and perceive the obvious before others do. If this is done well, that person attains such authority (respect due to expertise) that community members defer to him or her for solutions to serious problems. A

lateral thinker is often a visionary and innovator who acts as the torchbearer for followers. Thus one-track-minded bigots who propound the same doctrine year in year out are not real community leaders.

- **Dramatic moves:** Good leadership also calls for the ability to make dramatic moves with speed. Speed refers to decision making, selecting appropriate courses of action and choosing lieutenants to assist with the community work. The first action is to discuss the problems to deepen understanding and facilitate consensual action. Once that general predisposition has been created the leader should take over and act swiftly. It is unrealistic to expect total agreement to every situation, hence the virtue of the principle of consensus which ignores the few dissenting voices. It is more honourable for a leader to be accused of making a hasty decision rather than not making a decision at all.
- **Positive aggressiveness for success:** There is an age-old debate on whether leaders are born or made. Certainly leadership calls for a personality structure different from the ordinary. Much of this can be the result of conscious or subliminal learning from role models (living or dead) and the environment. The fuel that propels a good leader to success is consistent aggressiveness, which becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy of 'The harder I work, the more successful I become'.

The road to success is strewn with thorns – particularly when unpopular decisions have to be made which isolate the leader from sycophants. At that stage only the internally generated need for achievement remains the fuel for success. This brings to the fore another vital component of this quality which relates to the paradox of popularity and leadership. A good leader does not always score 100% in popularity polls. The sheer nature of leadership decisions breeds unpopularity. However, as long as the decision is based on factual grounds, and passes the four-way test of truth, correctness, rightness and helpfulness, a leader should press on without regard to popularity. Thus, a leader must have the guts to succeed.

Strategic visionary: *Effective leadership requires a strategic match between hindsight and foresight. Without being ruled by precedent, it is vital to know the cause-effect relationship of previous events and use the knowledge to minimise the margin of error in future predictions. This is the ethos of scenario planning. The subtle difference between leaders and the led is that leaders see solutions and opportunities which others miss. Strategic visionaries blend human strengths and opportunities to eliminate weaknesses and achieve communal goals to the satisfaction of all concerned. That is the contribution of visionary leadership to customer service in the community context.*

Over the last decade I have observed with admiration a top trade unionist in the national labour movement of Zimbabwe. The country has slid into economic desperation due to bad political leadership at national, provincial and community levels, leading to harsh living conditions for the ordinary person. The worker's movement has become the only formidable agency for change. Consequently, this trade unionist has led millions of workers into real resistance against corruption and abuse of power. He has maintained clear focus of who his customers are and what mandate they gave him. He is aware of his career anchor lying not in politics but in labour issues.

COMMUNITY WITH NO LEADERSHIP?

Perhaps the logical question is whether it is necessary to have community leaders, considering the mammoth problems they sometimes bring entailing nepotism, corruption, greed and lack of performance. Fortunately the answer seems to be in the affirmative. Leaders accomplish more good than the bad attributed to them. Even in a near-classless society like Switzerland there are discernible leadership structures which serve as the glue that sticks communities together.

Communities are the building blocks which make up the whole society. Ideally the structure should be so well synchronised that community leaders should sit at the top of the pyramid as a management team creating

an enabling environment for all the community members to have their needs met with respect to transport, security, social activities, sport, civic administration and education. Like typical customers, the populace should have direct and easy access to the leaders as providers of service, to complain against poor service or absence of it. Good community leadership gives a constructive and accommodating character to society as a whole.

An example is Uganda in East Africa, which slid into lawlessness as a result of political dictatorship in the 1970s. The new democratic leadership has since made marvellous achievements in restoring the rule of law and human dignity. Today community leadership structures exist where villagers and city dwellers elect their own leaders responsible for security, development, health, education and so forth. The results have been remarkable with crime declining to negligible levels. These communities have succeeded because of good leadership. The great challenge is to instil meaningful leadership skills across the community in the family, church, school, workplace and public arena. Such inculcation must impart the virtues of honesty, management integrity and rule of law, and define the superordinate goal which transcends ethnic and colour lines. Community leadership does not have to be politically correct all the time. Political leadership customers must be viewed differently from community level customers. Often the two are erroneously interchanged, and service standards suffer.

COMPREHENSIVE SOCIETAL REORIENTATION

An integral part of handling the affairs of the public is an underlying set of principles such as transparency, public accountability, hierarchy and participative leadership. It means the whole community should have a common perception of right and wrong as well as a service standards benchmark. Significant and long-term commitment to quality service requires a comprehensive approach built on a new understanding of the world around it. Here are some of the principles.

OWNERSHIP

Whenever a community improvement programme is introduced in a locality, there ought to be the full conviction that it is owned by all the inhabitants. If there is an impression that the programme or project has been imposed on the community by leaders or external agents the likelihood of it being sabotaged or boycotted is high. Many examples can be cited from all over Africa during the colonial period and, sadly, even afterwards in some isolated cases. In rural areas provincial or district development councils were responsible for the construction of essential infrastructure such as roads, dip tanks for cattle, business growth points, bridges, community halls and schools. On the surface they were self-governing entities which set their priorities for which funds were allocated by central government for development. In practice the provincial commissioner and district commissioner were the ultimate adjudicators over the disbursement of funds. Instead of consulting the grassroots community members on their desired priority projects, tailored within the available funds, they decided for them. Worse still, the doctrine of separate development of different racial groups was prevalent in most countries which led to more funds being channelled towards the white communities while blacks were left impoverished and encouraged to mount self-help projects for fund raising.

The social consequences of this lack of ownership by the respective communities were drastic. In periods of political or community uprisings the first targets for destruction were cattle dip tanks, bridges and similar structures that the community clearly saw as belonging to the government and not to themselves. In the cities community halls, market places and schools were frequently targeted for the same reasons.

BUSINESS-LINKED

Communities are crucial parts of the cosmos of society, and their prosperity is dependent on the general growth of business enterprise in that society.

In Africa development is concentrated in isolated towns and cities, which results in major rural to urban migration in search of improved social facilities. That migration puts unbearable pressure on the limited social services in the cities, causing them to become mediocre services which do not satisfy their original customers.

Many communities are good at generating life skills for growing food and providing the basics of life. However, these village economies do not lead to sustained prosperity if they are not linked to external, more progressive, business activities. An ideal community development model should be one where each demarcated small society exports from its area the products most needed elsewhere and buys from outside what it requires. This miniature balance of payments would ensure equal development of social services for the various communities making up one nation.

LEADERSHIP

Human beings are inherently amenable to leadership. In a family they are subjected to parental leadership. At school they are subjected to the teachers' leadership, which instils the values of life. For the rest of their lives people have to yield at different times to different forces of leadership, such as an employer or work superior, civic and business organisation leaders and political leaders.

This analogy goes some way towards proving that leadership is the driving force that determines the direction and pace of community growth. In some countries in our region central government services have been successfully developed down to small communities, to the extent that each village has a health worker trained to dispense minor, common treatment, and a judicial committee which hears small cases of community disagreements and refers to the magistrates' court what it cannot resolve. These activities and many other developmental efforts are coordinated by a chairperson or committee. These leaders must be fully trained to be able

to steer the community and keep pace with developments in the outer society.

Service orientation is the critical quality in key players in this community service network. Volunteer or elected officials have taken it upon themselves to serve others. In most of these communities poverty is pronounced and only subsistence farming sustains them. Compare the service spirit of a villager who is called while hoeing his crops by someone who wants some medicine from the village medicine chest to a qualified nurse in an established hospital. The villager is sacrificing earning his living in the fields yet he does it gladly, while the professional nurse sometimes sulks and complains of being overworked. Who is the real service hero? Undoubtedly the villager who incurs considerable opportunity cost and yet loves serving others. These are the frontliners who make a difference in society. That is service excellence in the community setting.

COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

The task of leading community effort must be viewed in the same light as business management. Indeed it is as crucial, for it impacts on hundreds of lives, apart from the absence of the profit motive. In private business 85% of what happens is attributable to the management. The same equation should apply without pre-qualification to the community setting. To this end it is necessary for those playing a management role to be given the tools and training to establish the guiding service quality criteria.

TOTAL QUALITY

Any community service effort must involve everybody with the understanding that quality is not optional but is part of everybody's responsibility. It must not be left to uninterested individuals who wish to pursue their own interests. The pursuit of quality must link the present minds of the community to the future challenges, building on present strengths.

It must promote the philosophy of continuous improvement, considering that the journey to excellence is a journey, not a destination. Therefore, the need is for a sustained, structured programme that is managed and developed as a central part of community activities. Quality service orientation must lead to the development of service standards for every part of the community, recognising that quality for the external customer must be built on quality service between individuals and groups within the community and standards must be visible at all times.

REWARD FOR DELIVERY

Communities must mete out sanctions and reward quality delivery where evidence exists. An old adage goes thus: 'What gets measured and what gets rewarded is what gets done.' For the most part, community leadership, like many public positions, is a thankless job. It invites more criticism than praise. However, reward can be given to excellent community leadership through public accolade or re-election to the same or higher office. While I believe that local community structures should remain apolitical, I see merit in community leaders being elected as a reward for good performance to higher national political leadership posts. After all, they have proven themselves in public accountability and transparency.