

STRENGTHENING SENIOR MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE: A RATIONALE FOR STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that managers in the South African public service require specific leadership skills to enhance service delivery. The slow pace of service delivery by many South African public service organisations suggests that such organisations have experienced crises due to the lack of leadership at the top, and at best the presence of only some elements of managerial leadership. The lack of strategic leadership and the prevalence of only some elements of managerial leadership are the most important issues facing the South African public service. The importance of strengthening leadership capability in the South African public service is highlighted. Thus, leadership training and development of managers should be a high priority in the South African public service. In this article it is suggested that management in the South African public service should be trained so that they incorporate strategic leadership, (which is defined herein as a synergistic combination of managerial and visionary leadership) in their managerial role. In relation to the need to improve service delivery, this article argues that leadership skills are deemed critical for managers and should, therefore, be part of the leadership development management framework in the South African public service.

INTRODUCTION

Given the increasing concern in the South African public service for improved service delivery, it is important for management to be trained in order to become more proficient to meet the increasing demands placed on them. Since the inception of

the Senior Management Service (SMS) in 2001, there are more than 7000 members in the South African public service who are highly qualified. However, Fraser-Moleketi (2007:3) suggests that this rich knowledge base has not translated into results-driven action, thus impacting on service delivery to members of the public.

This article proposes that management in the South African public service should build on strategic leadership skills. Rowe (2001:87) defines strategic leadership as a synergistic combination of managerial and visionary leadership skills, whereby management skills would also need to be built upon with training and development to meet the developmental challenges of the South African public service. The purpose of this article is to suggest ways of strengthening leadership development in the South African public service. In a study conducted by Miller (2005:125) it was found that training and development in the South African public service only focus on certain elements of managerial leadership. This article thus highlights the need for leadership training which provides an integrated approach to the development of the effectiveness of public service managers in South Africa.

Conventional wisdom in the field of public administration research suggests that it is impossible for managers to adopt a single leadership approach that effectively serves multiple, complex and mutually exclusive goals in a volatile and highly demanding public service environment. The effects of strategic leadership (a combination of visionary and managerial leadership) on public service institutions are well researched (Arjen & Tom 2008:271; Rowe 2001:87 & Hook 2008:411). Empirical accounts of public institutions continually identify a combination of managerial and visionary leadership as crucial explanatory variables for improved service delivery.

This article builds on a theoretical framework, depicting the key aspects of strategic, managerial and visionary leadership for improved service delivery in the South African public service. The article is primarily based on secondary research and its conclusions are derived from a more extensive treatment of this subject as conducted by the researcher.

WHAT IS MANAGERIAL, VISIONARY AND STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Managerial leadership is similar in many ways to transactional leadership. Managerial leaders are involved in day-to-day activities and are concerned with their functional area of responsibilities. They need order, not the chaos potentially inherent in human relations. They are regulators and conservators of the current state of their organisation's affairs, and personally identify with the existing order (Rowe, 2001:84). Managerial leaders influence only the actions and decisions of those with whom they work. These leaders engage in, and support activities, to enhance efficiency in the short-term. They focus on ensuring compliance to standard operating bureaucratic procedures. They typically spend a significant amount of time inspecting work, systems, processes and performance (Drucker, 1993:96). They use a linear thought process. Managerial leadership involves stability and order, and the preservation of the existing order. Managerial leadership is therefore more comfortable in handling day-

to-day activities, and is short-term oriented. Although managerial leadership is a valid concept, Rowe (2001:84) argues that managerial leaders do not promote above-average performance in an organisation.

Visionary leadership is also known as transformational leadership, charismatic or simply, new leadership and has grown in popularity since the 1980s (Lourens, 2001:36 & Ozaralli, 2003:335). This leadership approach is suggested as the cure for many of the ills pervading service delivery that affect current South African public service organisations (Naidoo, 2004:156). Visionary leadership covers a wide array of issues. It goes beyond managerial leadership, by emphasising the importance of vision in the leadership process (Northouse, 2001:141). The vision of the institution thus also occupies a central position in leadership (Freedman and Tregoe, 2003:1). The manager should be able to communicate this vision to others in the institution, and create a corporate culture that is in line with the vision (Bryman, 1992:44).

Strategic leadership, combining managerial and visionary leadership, is the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organisation (Rowe, 2001:81-82). Strategic leaders are thus concerned with the future viability and ongoing day-to-day stability of their organisations. They make decisions that promote organisational efficiency and above-average performance and, therefore, promote improvement of service delivery.

MANAGEMENT TRAINING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

The *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service*, (1995: 48-51) states that institution building and management are part of the creation of a strategic framework. In this respect, the White Paper indicates that it is necessary to empower, challenge and motivate managers at all levels to be visionaries, initiators, effective communicators and decision-makers, capable of responding pro-actively to the challenges of the change process, rather than acting as administrators of fixed rules and procedures. The current challenge being faced is the lack of skilled management (Miller, 2005:124). The training of public servants, including management, is necessary in order to equip public servants with the skills, knowledge and competencies to deliver quality services efficiently and effectively (White Paper on Public Service, 1995:64). Fraser-Moleketi (2007:3) stresses the importance of training management in appropriate leadership skills to improve organisational performance and thus capacity to deliver services. Training and development are thus seen as a leverage for change and, in this regard, the *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service* (1995:64) envisages that training should be strategic, based on need, linked to institutional transformation and building.

The importance of human resources development is emphasized in the *White Paper on Public Service Training and Education* (WPSTE) (1997). The objective of the WPSTE is to provide a policy framework for implementation of new procedures aimed at improving training and education in the public service. The purpose of the WPSTE is to enable departments to design and implement training programmes according to their strategic goals and needs.

Fraser-Moleketi (2007:3) points out that while a number of initiatives undertaken by the South African public service on management development had moved in the right direction, a number of challenges remained. In this regard, it is noteworthy to recall that Schacter (2000:77) criticised the lack of appropriate leadership training, the duplication of training in some departments, the poor quality training, and the *ad hoc* or crisis training which takes place in the South African public service. Moreover, Miller (2005:124) highlighted that a low priority is accorded to the education and training of managers. Also, many national and provincial departments have consistently failed to utilise their training budgets over time. Another challenge identified is the lack of co-ordination, as training needs are addressed by a wide variety of providers from local and international, public and private sectors.

Departments are confronted with the challenge of a shortage of management capacity in the South African public service. Directors-General, who were interviewed by the author, have stated that human resource issues, such as lack of capacity, skills and experience, and personnel conflicts were, and continue to, present problems. Many managers lack the ability to make effective strategic decisions, delegate and solve problems innovatively (Smit & Cronje, 2003:15). Related to the problem of human resources is the lack of performance. Fraser-Moleketi (2007:3) suggests that non-performance by public servants either took the form of not delivering services, poor service delivery, or goal displacement by complying with rules and regulations rather than achieving departmental goals. Occasionally, political sensitivities inhibited Director-Generals' decision-making, such as the reluctance to dismiss a non-performing public servant due to political considerations (Naidoo, 2006:257).

Most managers in the South African public service exercise some elements of managerial leadership. This is reiterated by Fraser-Moleketi (2007:2) who has exhorted that senior management should adopt a managerial leadership approach, outlining that "it is their responsibility to direct and lead the operational and the programmatic aspects of implementing the political mandate. The responsibility rests with this leadership to give policy advice, based on factual context that enables political leadership to take policy advice, and identify the appropriate outcomes in order that programmes can be developed and implemented to produce these required outcomes". Despite such exhortations, not all senior managers have a complete understanding of government priorities and are therefore unable to translate government policy into sustainable programmes that positively impact on the lives of citizens. Given these challenges, the South African public service needs leadership competence, in all spheres and at all levels, including senior management level. In terms of the *Draft Public Administration Management Bill* (2008:31), the head of a public service organisation must, through education and training of its employees, develop its human resource capacity to a level that enables it to perform its functions in a efficient, collaborative and accountable way. Directors-General have stated that they wanted to improve management and leadership capacity of their departments (Naidoo 2005:155). The challenge for the South African public service is to develop appropriate profiles of management competencies and design the necessary interventions, to ensure appropriate leadership development.

There is relative agreement amongst Directors-General that senior management ought to have a number of qualities, such as management skills, interpersonal skills, communication, creative co-operation, financial and human resource management skills. The ability to analyse policy has also been identified by Cloete *et al.*, (2000:210) as a critical skill for the senior management in the South African public service. Sensitivity to the political environment is another important quality. Senior management should become more cognisant of the political dynamics and environment in which it operates.

Fraser-Moleketi (2007:2) argues that there was a need to "build leadership, to produce critical thinkers at every level of the chain, who dare to be different, to look at problems with new eyes, to recognise problems where others see the situation as an indisputable way to do things." According to Schwella and Rossouw (2005:762), managers now need specific competencies to enable them to manage and lead their organizations effectively into the future, while maintaining and improving effectiveness and efficiency. The South African public service not only needs more than sound management, but also requires leadership at all levels of the service delivery chain. Rowe (2005:86) therefore argues that managers ought to be trained in strategic leadership (a synergistic combination of managerial and visionary leadership), so that they can become more effective managers. The South African public service ought to seek, train and develop management to become more effective.

UNDERSTANDING MANAGERIAL, VISIONARY AND STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a very broad topic, and has a somewhat tarnished reputation in some constituencies in the South African public service. However, research suggests that the type of leadership approach adopted makes a difference (Naidoo, 2006:264). Most managers in the South African public service exercise some elements of managerial leadership (Miller, 2005:125). The South African public service, implicitly and explicitly, trains public servants to be managerial leaders. The reason is that public managers must account for budgets. This factor leads to the imposition of budgetary control systems that utilise elements of managerial leadership but curtail strategic and visionary leadership. There are managers who prefer to exercise strategic and visionary leadership, but the bureaucratic nature of South African public service organisations discourages the exercise of such leadership and instead promotes elements of managerial leadership.

The key features of managerial and visionary leadership are summarised in Table 1

The key features of managerial and visionary leadership are discussed below.

Managerial leadership

According to Rowe (2001:86) managerial leaders adopt impersonal, passive attitude towards goals. In line with the managerial leadership approach, goals in the South African public service arise out of necessities rather than desires and dreams, are based on where the organisation has come from, and are deeply embedded in the history and

Table 1: Managerial and visionary leadership

MANAGERIAL LEADERS	VISIONARY LEADERS
Are reactive, adopt passive attitude towards goals. Goals arise out of necessities, not desires and dreams. Goals are based on past.	Are proactive, shape ideas, change the way people think about what is desirable, possible and necessary.
View work as an enabling process involving some combination of ideas and people interacting to establish strategies.	Work to develop choices, fresh approaches to long-standing problems, work from high-risk positions.
Relate to people according to their roles in the decision-making process.	Are concerned with ideas, relate to people in intuitive and empathetic ways.
Sense of who they are depends on their role in the organisation.	A sense of who they are does not depend on their work.
Influence actions and decisions of those with whom they work.	Influence attitudes and opinions of others within the organisation.
Involved in situations and day-to-day activities.	Concerned with insuring the future of organisation especially through development and management of people.
Concerned with and more comfortable in functional areas of responsibilities.	Engage in multifunctional integrative tasks.
Expert in their functional areas.	Know less than their functional area experts.
Less likely to make value-based decisions.	More likely to make decisions based on values.
Engage in, and support, short-term goals to enhance organisational performance.	More willing to invest in innovations, human capital, and creating and maintaining an effective culture to ensure long-term viability.
Focus on managing the exchange and combination of explicit knowledge and ensuring compliance to standard operating procedures.	Focus on tacit knowledge and develop strategies as communal forms of tacit knowledge that promote enactment of a vision.
Utilise linear thinking.	Utilise non-linear thinking.
Believe in determinism, that is, the choices they make are determined by their internal and external environments.	Believe in strategic choice, that is, their choices make a difference in their organisations and environment.

(Adapted from Rowe, 2001:87)

culture of the public service. A leader using managerial leadership will tend to intervene only after standards have not been met, or after problems have arisen (Northouse, 2001:140).

Rowe (2001:86) and Daft (1998:14) argue that managerial leaders will at best maintain the present level of performance and may even be a source of inefficiency and poor performance in the long-term if this is the predominant leadership type in their organisation. In view of prevailing service delivery backlogs, promoting organisational effectiveness and above-average performance is critical in the South African public service.

Northouse (2001:139) demonstrates that individuals who exhibited visionary leadership were perceived to be more effective leaders with improved work outcomes compared to individuals who exhibited only managerial leadership. A review of 30 studies on visionary leadership conducted by Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam (1996) concludes that findings were true for leaders in both public and private organisations (Lourens, 2001:35). Unfortunately, visionary leaders are not readily embraced in the public service in South Africa, unless they are supported by managerial leaders (Miller, 2005:125).

Visionary Leadership

According to Rowe (2001:82), visionary leadership creates an atmosphere of change, and has visionary ideas that excite, stimulate and drive other people to work even harder. Emphasis is placed on employee empowerment, commitment and achievement of results. This type of leadership stimulates employees to be creative and innovative. Visionary leaders motivate followers to do more than is expected, by (i) raising the levels of consciousness of followers to do more than is expected (ii) getting followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team or organisation (iii) motivating followers to address higher level needs (Bryman, 1992:14).

The downside of visionary leadership means putting power in the hands of one person which entails risk on several dimensions. Ultimately, visionary leadership requires the power to influence peoples' thoughts and actions. The leader should have the ability to create trust and confidence amongst co-workers. Without trust, it would be almost impossible to communicate the vision to co-workers (Lourens, 2001:35). However, there is the risk of equating power with the ability to achieve immediate results. There is also a risk of losing self-control in the desire to obtain power. And there is an attendant risk that the presence of visionary leaders may undermine the development of managerial leaders who become anxious in the relative disorder that visionary leaders tend to generate. More positively, under visionary leadership, organizational control is maintained through socialisation and the sharing of, and compliance with, a commonly held set of norms, values, and shared beliefs in the organisation. Visionary leadership is future-oriented and concerned with risk-taking. There are other beneficial features of visionary leadership such as going beyond traditional leadership approaches to include the growth of the followers, and the emphasis on morals and values. Nonetheless, visionary leadership is the hardest leadership approach to assess regarding performance. A study conducted by Rowe (2001:90) reflects that visionary leaders have the potential for a range of

performance implications, from below- average to above-normal. Rowe (2001:91) argues that the bigger danger is that visionaries may achieve below-normal performance much more quickly than managerial leaders.

Managerial and visionary leaders are however at opposite ends of a continuum. The adoption of both managerial and visionary leadership causes the individual leader to end up in the centre. Managerial leaders want stability and order, and to preserve the existing order, whereas visionary leaders want creativity, innovation, and to change the existing order. The environment in the South African public service is one of constant change and complexity demanding creativity and innovation of its managers. It can therefore be argued that the South African public service needs leaders to cope with change and managers to deal with such complexities. Both visionary and managerial leadership are vital for the long-term viability and short term stability of the South African public service. One solution for the South African public service could be a synergistic combination of managerial and visionary leadership (strategic leadership).

Strategic leadership

It could be argued that public managers should transform situations that seem impossible by adopting certain leadership approaches. According to Rowe (2001:81) the type of leadership approach that can best do this is strategic leadership (as defined previously, a synergistic combination of managerial and visionary leadership). Rowe, (2001:81-82) argues that the impact of a combination of managerial and visionary leadership on organisational effectiveness and above-average performance as well as improved public service delivery is far greater than only adopting one leadership approach.

Rowe (2001:86) argues that the public service will be more viable in the long-term and better able to maintain stability in the short-term, if strategic leadership is prevalent. A strategic leader will promote greater productivity than either a managerial leader or a visionary leader. Managerial leaders maintain the existing order but may not invest in innovations that will change the organisation and enhance organisational effectiveness in the long-term. However, visionary leaders may enhance the long-term viability of the organization. They want to change and be innovative to enhance organisational effectiveness in the long term. Combining these two leadership types to provide strategic leadership will promote organisational effectiveness and above-average performance in the long-term, as well as help maintain short-term stability.

Key features of strategic leadership are summarised below (see Table 2).

According to Rowe (2001:83) strategic leadership skills evolved to include managerial skills such as management and administrative skills. Strategic managers make decisions every day as they interact with each other and the public. They often ask a number of questions. For example, are their decisions in accord with the strategic direction of the organisation, while they enhance the future viability of the organisation? Will they enhance the future viability of the organisation as well as meet short-term goals? Managers should make decisions that benefit the organisation. This means that senior management will not have to expend as much effort on monitoring and controlling subordinates, and will

Table 2: Strategic leadership

STRATEGIC LEADERS
Synergistic combination of visionary and managerial leadership.
Emphasis on ethical behaviour and value-based decisions.
Operational oversee (day-to-day) and strategic (long-term) responsibilities.
Formulate and implement strategies for immediate impact and preservation of long-term goals to enhance organisational performance and long-term viability.
Have strong, positive expectations of the performance they expect from their superiors, peers, subordinates and themselves.
Use strategic control and financial controls, with an emphasis on strategic controls.
Use and interchange, tacit and explicit knowledge on individual and organisational levels.
Use linear and non-linear thinking patterns.
Believe in strategic choice, that is, their choices make a difference in their organisations and environment.

(Adapted from Rowe, 2001:82)

have more capacity to examine what the organisation needs to be, both in the short and long terms.

Strategic leaders emphasize ethical values and moral principles to complement the values of the Senior Management Service (SMS) which created a cadre of senior managers and senior professionals across institutions for the purpose of developing a management culture based on the values and principles enshrined in Section 195(1) of the South African Constitution. The *Draft Public Administration Management Bill* (2008), requires managerial, professional and strategic expertise across institutions.

Strategic leaders oversee both day-to-day operating and long-term strategic responsibilities. They formulate and implement strategies for immediate impact and the preservation of long-term goals to enhance organisational efficiency and viability. They can use strategic and financial controls (Freedman & Tregoe, 2003:18). Strategic leaders have strong, positive expectations of the performance that they expect from their managers, public servants and themselves. They utilise and interchange tacit and explicit knowledge on both the individual and organisational levels. They use both linear and nonlinear thinking patterns. They believe in strategic choice. They promote organisational effectiveness for enhancing future performance by using different approaches and models in their organisation. Strategic leaders therefore need to understand both managerial and visionary leadership, and utilise the skills and knowledge of both approaches.

The decisions voluntarily made and the actions voluntarily taken by managers and employees on a day-to-day basis eventually determine what strategy emerges in an organisation (Naidoo, 2004:156). Strategic leaders understand and use this process to ensure future viability of their organisations. Strategic leadership presumes a shared vision of what an organisation needs to be, so that the day-to-day decision-making, or emergent strategy process, is consistent with this vision (Ozaralli, 2003:335). It presumes agreement among senior management on opportunities that can be taken advantage of, and threats that can be neutralised, given the resources and capabilities of the organisation.

Rowe (2001:87) contends that the rewards of adopting strategic leadership are evident, as those with whom the leader works become energized and more productive, accomplishing more in less time. They come to enjoy work more, as they become more creative and innovative, and more prone to taking risks because they know this is what it takes to enhance long-term viability. Working through the paradox of leading and managing is demanding and difficult, but is achievable for a critical mass in public service organisations previously lacking strategic control. Managers in such organisations accept and merge the visionaries and managerial leaders in their organisations. They need to understand the concepts of explicit and tacit knowledge and linear and non-linear thinking and how to integrate them for the benefit of the organisation. The rewards will often be increased by organisational and above-average performance.

Influencing public servants to voluntarily make decisions that enhance the organisation is the most important part of strategic leadership (Freedman & Tregoe, 2003:24). The manager should be able to influence subordinates, peers, and superiors. Managers should also understand the emergent strategy planning process for organisational performance. Strategic leadership presumes a shared vision of what an organisation is to be, so that day-to-day decision-making, or emergent strategy process, is consistent with the vision. It focuses on the opportunities that can be taken advantage of, and the threats that can be neutralised, given the resources and capabilities of the organisation. Strategic leadership presumes visionary leadership on the part of those with a willingness to take risks. It presupposes managerial leadership on the part of those with a rational way of looking at the world. Strategic leadership suggests that managerial leadership and visionary leadership can coexist. Strategic leadership therefore synergistically combines the two types of leadership.

CONSTRAINTS ON DEVELOPING MANAGERS IN STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

The South African public service has a mandate to deliver services to society. This means that the public service is responsible for the achievement of a better standard of living for all South Africans. However, the South African public service does not present itself as a co-ordinated front, but as a myriad of national and provincial offices, each with a separate identity, each operating in its own silo. Amongst other challenges, the lack of co-ordination between the national and provincial spheres of government has hindered service delivery. It has also forced citizens to visit more than one office or make

multiple visits in respect of a single service. It is not just a burden on the citizen but also a duplication and bureaucratisation of resources (*Draft Public Administration Management Bill 2008:1*).

There is increased pressure on the public service to improve service delivery along with public accountability for every cent spent. This forces the South African government to use rigid control systems. This leads to managerial control and forces those with potential to be strategic leaders to either exercise elements of managerial leadership only, leave the public service, or work within the constraints of the system.

With respect to communication, much gets lost and re-interpreted along the way, and it is often a slow process. The public often complains about red tape and the bureaucracy that characterises the public service, a system not well suited to deal with change and complexity. If change is necessary, management prefers that it takes place at a modest pace under their control and direction. They are sceptical about, and resistant to, public servants that want to initiate significant change on a number of fronts within a short period of time. The premium is on reliability, steadfastness and loyalty to the government of the day, rather than on creativity, innovation, and critical thinking. People who do not fit the mould either stagnate, leave, or are forced out of service.

Despite these challenges, the critical question is: is strategic leadership possible in the South African public service? The answer is a qualified yes, given two very hard-to-impose conditions. If top management can give a departmental management team some autonomy, coupled with protection from stringent bureaucratic controls, strategic leadership may be possible.

CONCLUSION

There is evidence to indicate, on the one hand, that effective strategic leadership enhances service delivery in well established organisations and leads to above-average organisational performance. On the other hand, managerial leadership is likely to lead to mere average organisational performance at best. However, organisations led by visionary leaders who are supported by a strong management team may have an even more positive impact on outcomes than organisations only led by managerial style leaders. Without effective strategic leadership, the probability that public service organisations in South Africa can achieve above-average or even satisfactory performance when confronting the challenges of service delivery will be greatly reduced. Management in the South African public service should therefore be trained so that it places greater emphasis on implementing strategic leadership in their remit.

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