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AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMME FOR SENIOR AND MIDDLE MANAGEMENT OF THE NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL DEPARTMENTS OF SOCIAL WELFARE

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Welfare has received much adverse publicity about the non-delivery of services and its inability to distribute welfare grants. Welfare Director-General, Angela Bester, told the Welfare Portfolio Committee that the reason for the Department's failure to distribute funds and, where it had, to check they were properly used, was it they did not have the capacity, in particular skilled staff, to do the job (*Business Day* 2 March 2000). The New Minister of Welfare, Zola Skweyiya, has also complained about organisational deficiencies in the department.

It can be seen that the issue of capacity is a burning problem within the Department of Welfare. This article is about this issue of capacity. More specifically, it looks at a recent capacity building programme for senior and middle managers of departments of welfare at both provincial and national level. The objective of this article is to provide a critical overview of the programme and look at how it contributed to capacity building within the national and provincial departments of welfare. Recommendations on how to improve capacity within the departments are also made in the final section of the article.

BACKGROUND

The Department of Welfare published its White Paper for Social Welfare in 1996. It made provision for *inter alia*:

- Human resource development and the reorientation of personnel where this is necessary towards establishing a development social welfare framework;
- Developing a financially sustainable welfare system;
- Developing strategies and mechanisms to translate the aims, objectives and programmes of the Reconstruction and Development programme into action in the welfare field.

In view of the above the Department of Welfare embarked on a programme to equip all senior and middle managements in the national and provincial departments to drive the transformation process (Department of Welfare 1997a, 1997b). This programme was entirely funded from outside sources via a donor agency.

The Western Cape Public Administration and Management Trust (The Trust), a consortium consisting of public management trainers and academics from tertiary institutions in the Western Cape, was awarded the tender. The author of this article was the co-ordinator of the Trust for the programme.

OBJECTIVES OF PROGRAMME

Two discrete modules were covered in the capacity building programme. The objective of the first module was to provide middle and senior management with an in-depth knowledge and understanding of various government policy Acts, documents and regulations. This entailed looking at a number of policy documents, including the South African Constitution, the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service, the White Paper on Transforming Service Delivery (Batho Pele), the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the White Paper on Social Welfare and the new financing policy for Social Welfare departments in the country.

The objective of the second manual was to provide middle and senior management with the knowledge and skills to develop, implement and review policy as well to develop the skills to pose policy questions, evaluate alternatives and anticipate the unintended consequences of favoured policy initiatives. This module covered areas such as policy analysis, predicting policy outcomes, examining policy options, understanding policy contexts and building policy skills and capacity (Department of Welfare 1998a, 1998b). The content specified in the modules was based on a needs analysis undertaken by the national department in 1997.

Originally, the Department advertised for two separate tenders. The Trust indicated in its tender proposal that it would be more cost effective and make more conceptual sense to run the two modules as an integrated management programme. This proposal was accepted by the Tender Board.

COURSE MANUALS

The first part of the programme involved the design of course manuals. The content of the course manuals reflected the tender specifications of the departments. Manuals were designed for a 5-day programme. They were designed as both background material for the course and supplementary take-home reading. The content was as follows:

- Manual 1:** Context of Management (Constitution, White Papers, legislation, RDP/Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) debate).
- Manual 2:** Human Resources Administration and Leadership Skills (Public Management Model, Leadership Skills, Affirmative Action, Diversity Management, Transformation).
- Manual 3:** Social Welfare Policy and Legislation (Welfare Policies, Probation Practices, New Financing Policies).
- Manual 4:** Policy Formulation (Policy Content, Values and Principles, Policy Change, Policy Process, Guidelines).
- Manual 5:** Policy Implementation, Evaluation (Implementation, Evaluation)

A key component of the manuals was learning outcomes. In line with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) policy of recognising prior learning, the content of the course had to be linked to learner outcomes. Thus in order to enhance capacity building it was necessary to identify key competencies which learners are expected to acquire from the course.

THE PROGRAMME

The training course must be considered a pioneering programme. It was the first management course designed for national office as well as all the provinces. Some social welfare managers

had been trained as part of more general public management courses, such as in the Western Cape Province, but other provinces had no executive training programmes for their managers. Bouquets must be given to the Human Resources Directorate of the national department for taking the initiative in this regard.

Thirteen courses were offered country-wide between May and November 1999. Provincial courses were held in Bellville (x2), East London, Bloemfontein (x2) Pinetown, Johannesburg (x2), Mafikeng, Nelspruit (x2), Pietersburg and Kimberley, and the course for the national department was held in Pretoria. For the most part courses were attended by provincial officials from the province in which they were held. There were, however, a few provincially mixed courses. The second Nelspruit course had officials from the Eastern Cape, the Kimberley course had officials from NorthWest and the second Bloemfontein course had officials from both the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

A wide network of trainers was utilised for the course. The Trust attempted to use local trainers in the provinces as far as possible for facilitation. This was deemed cost effective and it was also felt that local resource people would know local conditions better. This did, however, create problems, particularly around standardisation. This issue will be picked up later in the article.

294 participants attended the course. The number of participants per course varied from 11 to 30. There were a few reasons advanced for the fluctuation in the number of participants nominated for the course. Firstly, the separation of Welfare Departments from the Department of Health in some provinces reduced the numbers, especially administrative officers at middle management level. Secondly, due to the lead time between the formulation of the programme and commencement of training, a large number of the target group had received relevant management training from other sources (Department of Welfare 1999). Thirdly, planning problems in some provinces had led to nominees being withdrawn from the course after confirmation of attendance. Also, while some provinces had a dedicated person ensuring that there were "bums on seats", in other provinces there was lack of clear responsibility for this function. This contributed to a less than satisfactory turn-out in some provinces. This lack of responsibility in some provinces also led to people being nominated for the course at the last moment, which led to these participants being unprepared for the course.

Most of the participants were officials at deputy and assistant level.

With a few notable exceptions, senior management did not attend the course.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

The programme used a variety of teaching methodologies in its course, including formal lecturing, role play, case studies and group work. In line with contemporary thinking the Trust tried to minimise traditional "chalk and talk" lecturing.

There was a conscious attempt by many (although not all) of the facilitators to move away from the traditional teacher-centred approach of education where the expert (the teacher) transmits information to the novices (the students) in a top-down fashion. There is limited interaction between teachers and students (besides brief question-and-answer sessions), and virtually no interaction amongst students (Garvin 1991). This form of teaching is often referred to as "chalk and talk".

Problems with this approach include concerns whether students can retain information when lecturing is the dominant mode of teaching; it floods students with facts rather than enhancing learning opportunities; and it is often found boring by students (Garvin 1991:4).

The active learning (or discussion-based) model has as its basic philosophy that students should be actively involved in the learning process. It focuses on skill development, the integration and use of knowledge and the promotion of life-long learning. The role of the presenter is to facilitate learning and encourage discussion. (Garvin 1991:5-8, 11). Students become active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Schutte 1995). The class is a partnership in which students and instructor share the responsibilities and power of teaching (Christianson 1991).

The active learning model is not without flaws. Comments such as "pooling one's ignorance" and "the blind leading the blind" are sometimes used as criticisms of this approach. Experience suggests that the interactive discussion cannot be too open-ended otherwise meaningless discussion will occur. As Leonard (1991:144) puts it:

"But, if everything goes, bad observations will drive out the good, and there won't be anything worth listening to".

This is not to say that there is no room for traditional approaches to teaching - there may be instances where the teacher-centred approach may be more appropriate. My own view is that, without leading the discussion in a preordained direction, the facilitator should throw in his/her "pearls of wisdom" at the end of a session so that themes and threads are pulled together in a coherent way.

The active learning approach was generally well received by participants on the course. It is interesting to note that facilitators who used primarily a teacher-centred approach were generally graded less favourably than those who encouraged an active learning approach. Also, the first few sessions on the RDP/GEAR were, owing to the highly technical nature of the work, found to be a bit abstract by some participants. In the later courses this topic was run in a more active-learning way and was generally better received.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME

This section of the paper presents an overview of the programme, focusing on the key issues that came out of both group discussions and pre-course assignments. A qualitative rather than quantitative assessment is undertaken in this regard.

Day 1 dealt with the macro-environment which, because of the subject material, tended to be slightly more conceptual than the rest of the week. The section on the Constitution focused on its administrative and constitutional implications for public servants. While some provinces had workshopped the Constitution, officials from other provinces were blissfully unaware of its implications. In fact, one manager remarked (upon receipt of the Constitution) that this was the first time she had ever seen a Constitution! Much of the session on policy focused on the White Paper on Service Delivery (Batho Pele). Once again there was a contrast between provinces who had tried to incorporate Batho Pele principles into their service delivery strategy (such as NorthWest) and those provinces that had done little to incorporate these principles. Day 1 also dealt with development issues, in particular the extent to which Social Welfare departments have become more development-orientated as required by the White Paper on Social Welfare. What this session revealed is that there were mixed feelings around this issue. Some participants felt that this "quantum leap" to a more development-orientated approach has been made, while others felt that the organisational structure was not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the new development paradigm, nor had social workers been given the necessary skills to implement the new system.

Day 2 dealt with Human Resources (HR) and Transformation issues. What was particularly striking was that most provinces lacked a dedicated HR office. This was partly due to welfare departments in many provinces being new creations, having recently hived off from the Department of Health. The problem then was that in many provinces there was no promotion of human resource capacity and development, no employee assistant programmes (EAPs), inappropriate levels of staffing (although this is a budgetary rather than human resources issue) and no induction programmes.

Day 3 examined social welfare management and policy issues. In most of the provinces the facilitating tended to focus on the new financing policy and probation policy. The new financing policy was highly controversial, with some provinces feeling that this system had been imposed upon them. There was the feeling in some provinces that officials lacked the resources and capacity to implement the new policy. In particular it was felt by many participants that they did not have the skills to implement the new policy. It was also felt that more personnel would be required to implement the new policy (Graser 2000). The sessions on probation revealed mixed feelings about the subject. Participants either loved or hated probation, which presumably reflected two different views about the role of alternative probation policies in society.

Days 4 and 5 dealt with public policy. Day 4 dealt with policy formulation and Day 5 dealt with policy implementation and evaluation. In many ways Days 4 and 5 were the hub of the course. The needs analysis had identified a dire need to build policy skills and capacity and this is precisely what these days attempted to do.

The key area was undoubtedly policy implementation. This was hardly a surprise. The Presidential Review Commission (1998) had identified the poor state of policy implementation in many areas of the public service. A common problem was that new policy documents were thrust upon staff without prior knowledge or proper guidelines for implementation. Lack of resources, particularly in poorer provinces was also an issue. Lack of equipment such as computers, cars, furniture, office accommodation, fax and photocopying machines were identified as obstacles in this regard. Poor communication both between senior management and middle management and from provincial head offices and regional offices was another problem that was discussed.

An allied problem was that some provincial departments had put a number of programmes in place without considering their impact upon existing resources. Various implementation techniques were taught including cost benefit analysis which is a quantitative technique that compares the costs and benefits of potential programmes in order to determine whether they are worthwhile.

ASSIGNMENTS

Learners were expected to do assignments for the course. Firstly, there was the pre-course assignment which was distributed with the course manuals. The aim of the pre-course assignment was two-fold. Firstly, it was intended to stimulate interest in the course. Secondly, and more importantly, it was intended to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Mindful of the criticism from the "real world" that academic training is too theoretical, the pre-course assignment was designed in such a way that participants could write about their practical experience. This assignment focused largely on capacity issues - elements that favoured learners to be optimally effective in the department they are managing or in which they work, and the obstacles that prevented them from doing so.

The next step was to integrate the assignment with the course material. Learners were expected to bring their assignments on the Monday, when they were graded by a Trust representative. In addition, the issues that favoured and obstacles that prevented effective management in the workplace were identified by the representative and made available to the facilitator of either the Thursday or Friday session.

This facilitator in turn used the material as a basis for one of the sessions. This, in most cases, led to structured discussions around practical management problems.

The pre-course assignment tended to work relatively well in that it highlighted pertinent management issues in the training sessions. In some cases learners were brutally frank about some of the management practices in their organisation. However, this was largely done in a constructive manner. The fact that there was an acute level of concern in some provinces by participants that these assignments should not find their way back to their department and managers is perhaps indicative of organisational deficiencies.

The second assignment was a group project which in some provinces took the form of a detailed presentation discussing recommendations to improve service delivery and management capacity. There were two reasons for having group-based assignments. Firstly, the Department had identified the promotion of team building as a major aim of the course. Groups were carefully selected taking race, gender and region into account. What was particularly striking was the degree of animosity that existed between regions and head office in some provinces. In some cases it was more of a problem than "old vs. new South Africa" issues. The groups were mixed with the view to breaking down rather than enhancing existing divisions. Working through common problems and finding common solutions in the groups undoubtedly contributed to better understanding of issues. A second and related issue was the notion of learning from common experience. Group work allowed learners to pool knowledge about similar public management and policy problems. For some participants the value of training of this sort was the interactive experience of learning from one's colleagues in different directorates, regions and provinces rather than the formal training material.

Group work generally worked well in that it forced learners to address real-life management problems and think creatively about solutions. The small group environment also encouraged learners who were reticent in the full session to contribute to the discussions.

LEARNER EVALUATION

Uniform evaluation forms were filled in by participants at the end of the course. Learners were asked to grade the course on a five-scale continuum. 76 participants (27.6%) rated the course "excellent", 148 (53.8%) "very good", 48 (17.5%) "satisfactory", 3 (1.1%) "needs improvement", and 0 (0%) "poor". Overall 81.4% rated the course "excellent" or "very good", which is useful feedback.

The one problem that the Trust picked up was the role of the consultants employed by the Department of Welfare to, *inter alia*, monitor the course. While it is the right of the department to monitor its programme, the problem arose because the consultant completed an independent qualitative report at the end of the course. This report was sometimes more negative than the learners' quantitative evaluation form. While some legitimate issues around standardisation were raised, too often criticisms were made of a small section of the course at the expense of the majority of the programme that worked very well. Even the issue of standardisation was sometimes overplayed. Given the low level of skills of some learners, any learning was arguably a bonus - whether a participant in Northern Province learned about policy in a slightly different

way than one in the Eastern Cape hardly seemed the most important issue. Evaluation meetings, at least in the Trust's view (given our 81.4% "excellent" or "very good" rating), tended to magnify problems. When it came to evaluation, the relationship between the Trust and the department's consultants was ill-defined (although it was generally good in other spheres). Consultants monitoring consultants is not an ideal structural relationship. Monitoring of this sort should in future be done by the department itself.

Of course, evaluation forms have to be put into perspective. They measure how effective a course has been in transmitting and sharing knowledge during a course. They do not necessarily tell you how effective the course has been in transmitting skills back to the workplace. To test the effectiveness of the programme, one needs to evaluate performance in the workplace sometime after the course and then ascertain whether positive changes in an employee's workplace are due to the course itself or some other change in the environment. This has been recognised by the department, which has called for tenderers to submit proposals for an impact assessment.

POST-TRAINING SUPPORT

One of the tender specifications was that the training provider had to provide all trainees with post-training support. The training provider had to indicate the form and nature of post-support training.

The Trust made a variety of post-training support available for learners. The course organisers made themselves available by telephone, Internet, e-mail, fax or in person (where practical) after the conclusion of the course to help answer any enquiry or problem arising from the course. Post-training support was also available for more general management issues. This post-training support package stretched for 6 months after the completion of the participant's relevant module.

What was particularly innovative was the post-training support chat-room, which offered learners the opportunity to discuss public management and public policy issues "live" with their facilitators and other participants by means of the Internet. The chat-room was available for specified times.

To our knowledge this was the first nation-wide programme of this sort to provide a chat-room facility as a way of enhancing capacity. However, this facility only had mixed success with the "hit rate" for the site being lower than expected. The major reason for this was the lack of computer facilities generally (never mind the Internet) amongst social welfare managers. Outside of the metropolitan provinces, very few managers had access to the Internet. In rural areas of some provinces officials did not even have offices, let alone computers!

EVALUATION

The final section of this article will take a brief look at the lessons of the programme and how similar training programmes should be conducted in the future with the view to enhancing capacity building.

The first point is that the lead time between the needs analysis and the programme presentation needs to be shortened. This delay is partly due to time-consuming tender procedures. This problem manifested itself in a couple of ways. Firstly, a 2-year gap between the needs analysis and the programme led to a number of new needs arising which were not catered for, such as programme management and financial skills. Secondly, the high turnover in staff within the senior echelons of various social welfare departments meant that a number of managers were

not around when the original needs analysis was undertaken. This led to some of these newer breed of managers questioning aspects of the needs analysis and suggesting other needs just before the programme was launched.

The second issue arose out of the innovative national focus of the course. The question was how to balance national uniformity with that of provincial differentiation. This played itself out in a number of ways. The original intention was to have a broad framework course which could be tailored to the specific needs of the provinces. This system operated for the first 5 courses. However, the Department indicated that it was concerned that some of the courses were too varied, even in terms of a framework approach. For example, probation was handled comprehensively in some provinces, but only received cursory attention in others. The usual facilitator for this course was a specialist in this field, but in provinces where he was not used this subject was hardly touched upon.

What the department wanted was uniform transferrable skills - for example, an official trained in the Northern Province should acquire the same competencies as one trained in NorthWest so that if he/she was transferred to the latter province, he/she would have compatible skills. From course 6 onwards there was much greater emphasis on a national course and less emphasis on provincial differentiation. This is not to say that there was no examination of province-specific issues. What it meant was that discussion around such issues took place within a national curriculum.

A related issue was the question of the standardisation of facilitators. The Trust originally outsourced training to universities, technikons and trainers based in provinces/regions where the training was scheduled to take success. This approach had mixed success. While some provinces had experienced facilitators with extensive public experience, other provinces did not have sufficiently trained facilitators to provide systematic training for 5 days. While there was no course that was rated poorly overall, there was the occasional poor day during the first 5 courses.

This led to a change of strategy. From course 6 onwards there was a move towards a core set of facilitators who jetted around the country and less involvement from local facilitators. This was more costly for the service providers but ultimately led to a better product. Not only were top-graded trainers used on the courses, but the concerns around standardisation raised in the previous point were largely resolved. The lesson learned is that any future training courses of this nature conducted by the department should ensure that the service provider should have the capacity to fly a core team of facilitators throughout the country to provide at least part of the course.

The third issue is the question of post-training support. This programme had mixed success. The idea of post-training support was avant-garde in many aspects, but it was therefore to some extent ahead of its time. While there was a reasonable "hit-rate" from officials in the metropolitan provinces, there was virtually no take-up from some of the poorer, disadvantaged provinces. The reasons for this have been discussed in the text, namely the general lack of infrastructure in some regions. Given the centrality of information technology in modern management, the provision of computers and training of officials in computer literacy must be a key priority of provincial social welfare offices.

Fourthly, there was a lack of an appropriate framework for the nomination of officials to attend the course in some provinces. It was clear in some cases that none of the background material provided about the course was made available to officials, which led to some participants arriving at the course on the first day with little idea of the aims and objectives of the course.

Part of the problem was that in some provinces there was no clear identifiable person taking responsibility for the course. This was symptomatic of a broader problem, namely the lack of a proper human resources function in many provinces. In many cases welfare departments had recently broken away from health departments and were still in the process of establishing themselves institutionally. In some provinces there is no clearly defined HR function, which manifests itself in one of two ways. Either human resources is effectively ignored, which means, amongst other things, that issues like career development are ignored. Alternatively, human resources is a collective responsibility, which means that although HR issues are being looked at, given officials' functional responsibilities, this tends to be done in a rather cursory way. This does not mean to say that all HR issues should be dealt with by an HR department. Modern management theory and practice suggests that many HR issues such as appointment, promotion and discipline are best handled by line management. The role of an HR department should be a strategic one focusing on broad policy and guidelines.

There also needs to be clear political commitment to capacity building programmes of this sort. In one particular province the welfare minister withdrew a number of participants from the course for the ostensible reason that the capacity of the province would be denuded if too many senior managers went on the course (which misses the point of why the course was held). The result was an extremely poorly attended programme and a lost opportunity for officials. There also needs to be greater senior management (from directors upwards) commitment. Only a few provinces had senior management on their courses. There was a general reluctance on the part of senior management to expose themselves to possible criticism from subordinates on training courses. The problem was that many senior managers themselves needed skills training. A number of participants remarked that the absence of senior managers meant that it would be difficult to integrate the skills they have learned in the workplace. This was because the people whose support they need to implement change were not exposed to new management ideas and in many cases were not open to new ideas.

This leads us to the fifth point, namely the issue of impact assessment. While an impact assessment is certainly a useful exercise and should be part of any major training programme, its results must sometimes be tempered. Training is not a panacea for institutional ills. The fundamental question that needs to be asked is: "Is the organisation geared to incorporating new management ideas into its system?" If the answer to this question is 'No', then the inability to integrate skills into the workplace would seem to lie in the organisation rather than with the training. Without pre-empting the results of the impact assessment, the capacity problems of the national department have been well documented in recent press exposes, while those of some provincial departments have been highlighted by this article.

Finally, there needs to be a vigorous commitment to training, not only of management, but all levels within the organisation. The problem is that insufficient resources are allocated to training in many provinces (this programme being a notable exception because it was funded from overseas sources). Paradoxically, this lack of resources often contributed to training funds being returned at the end of the financial year, because they were insufficient for even one person to go on a worthwhile course. In addition, whatever future training does occur must not occur within a vacuum. Training must be linked with competencies and career development.

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