

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

WORKING IN THE DARK

In many countries the public service is the major or a highly significant employer. The economic pressures of the Eighties have led to public and political demands for transparent, cost-effective, customer-focused government management and services. In the Nineties an intense climate of government reform continues.

Historically, public service employment has exhibited two unique characteristics: it often has a 'welfare' component and it offers a degree of security unmatched in other sectors. It has often been used by government as a buffer against unemployment and has been a source of secure 'cradle to grave' employment in which employees have traded high salaries in exchange for security of employment and good, stable conditions. These factors have frequently resulted in overstaffing and workplace inertia. In the worst cases, oversized, inefficient public service organisations have become breeding grounds for corruption, completing the cycle of poor management and demotivation.

Many public service organisations find they have no vision of the future that is shared across the organisation, few strategic goals and no systems in place for reviewing targets or for planning their achievement. There is often a lack of clarity on what the overall objectives of the organisation are, what work tasks are to be carried out and what quality of work is expected.

Others have a range of unconnected performance improvement programmes in place: corporate planning that does not flow down into group and individual plans throughout the organisation; rigid work design and job evaluation schemes that lack the broad approach and flexibility necessary to allow changing goals and priorities to be resourced; training and development programmes that are ad hoc and fail to identify, prioritise, and provide the skills needed by individual employees to meet the current and future requirements of the public service.

DISCREDITED APPRAISAL SYSTEMS

Where individual review or appraisal systems exist in public service organisations, they lack the links to organisational objectives that performance management requires. They are often not results-focused and do not consider what the employee has achieved. Many systems also involve highly subjective assessment of personal characteristics. In some cases employees are not told the results of assessments, thereby denying them the opportunity to bring overlooked achievements to notice or to be motivated by the awareness of a positive assessment. Often, in

consequence, many of these systems have fallen into disuse or have lost their legitimacy within the organisation.

In summary, many public services find their individual review or appraisal systems to be costly, time-wasting, bureaucratic exercises in form-filling and paper storage which supply neither management nor employee with useful information or assistance. At worst, such systems provide justification for biased management decisions and the allocation of promotion and other job opportunities on the basis of nepotism and patronage. They act in many public sector organisations to perpetuate a culture of demotivation and mistrust.

Improved performance management is as important for employees as it is for public service organisations. Public servants are seeking employment which offers reasonable remuneration, the improved lifestyle that flexible employment conditions allow, and a learning environment that provides them with the opportunity to remain skilled and competitive in the job market of an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Performance management underpins these developments.

Overall, improved performance management offers a win/win situation for public service organisations and public servants. Performance management, clarifying organisational expectations of employees, more fully utilising and developing their skills and knowledge and encouraging their full participation in the enhanced achievement of organisational goals, is the foundation on which all public service improvements rest.

A new system of performance appraisal has been introduced into the Public Service of Trinidad and Tobago on a pilot basis in the Ministry of Agriculture. The features of the system are:

- linking of individual job tasks to the section's mission;
- the establishment of performance standards at the start of the appraisal process;
- a process of continuous monitoring, appraisal and feedback, designed to guide the employee during the appraisal process;
- joint completion of the appraisal form by supervisor and employee.

A series of training sessions is under way to facilitate understanding of the new system, the performance management concepts that guide it and the relevant procedures. As a precursor to identifying individual objectives and standards of performance, the training course is also designed to help supervisors in developing departmental objectives and standards.