

CHANGING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

ACCOUNTABILITY

Strengthening accountability has been rendered all the more important in the context of greater devolution and flexibility. A wide-ranging and controversial debate has arisen about the concept and practice of accountability and the interdependence between the administrative and political system. The issue is who is responsible to whom, for what and when.

Concepts of accountability reflect the overall organisation of, and interfaces between, the political and administrative systems and encompass three perspectives: accountability within the administrative system, accountability at the interface of the administrative and political system, and accountability within the political system.

- Since 1979 the UK Government has used parliamentary Select Committees to investigate the affairs of each government department or agency. These compliment the work of the Public Accounts Committee in scrutinising policy implementation and ensuring probity in the use of public money.
- The New Zealand Government recognised that crucial to enhancing departmental performance as part of civil service reform was the clarification of lines of accountability between the bureaucracy and the political executive. The relationship between ministers and departmental chief executives was singled out as the critical link in the accountability chain. The minister's role is to set the policy agenda, determine priorities, specify desired outcomes and output levels and then monitor the department's performance relative to them. The task of the chief executive was to satisfy these requirements and to take responsibility for any shortcomings in quality or quantity of output.

Efforts to ensure accountability are frustrated, however, by the number of different constituencies the public service is expected to satisfy. More recently, with the emphasis on quality service delivery and effective citizen orientation within the public sector, there has been a shift, in countries such as New Zealand and Canada, away from the traditional compliance with spending authorities to focus on direct accountability for results and performance. Innovations such as customer surveys and public reporting mean that public servants are accountable to their clients as well as management and political bosses.

In 1995, the Government of British Columbia identified three key elements of accountability information:

- *Organisational performance* – are government departments achieving what they set out to achieve at reasonable cost?
- *Financial performance* – is the public service fiscally responsible?
- *Behavioural performance* – Are government affairs conducted in a manner that complies with legislation and expected standards of conduct?

Furthermore, the primary thrust of accountability should not just be to explain what was intended to happen and what actually happened, but also to explain why the results were as they were. In this, what lessons can be learned and, if necessary, changes made for the future.

Many countries try to ensure accountability within the administrative system by developing performance measurement and costing mechanisms with more systematic feedback to the public concerning the cost and quality of services. Difficulty arises when the political level is taken into account. Politicians may be reluctant to set goals precisely enough for success or failure to be accurately assessed. Public reporting exposes poor performance by senior officials, agencies, departments or other institutions, including that caused by corrupt practices.

Another important aspect is ethical accountability reflecting primarily the general principles of right and wrong behaviour according to the norms of society and reflects the overall culture of a public service. The organisational culture is developed through strengthened employee involvement, transparency in the change process, rewards for team work, recognition of individual effort, and consultation with clients and users.

Competitive behaviour, the use of bonuses and performance-related pay, the tactics required to acquire contracts are all areas where ‘traditional’ values of impartiality and equity may fit poorly with business values of success.

If enhanced accountability is to act as a pressure for performance improvement, it must be matched by enhanced managerial authority. Devolving responsibility to senior managers allows them the financial and procedural latitude necessary to deliver the outputs for which they are held responsible. However, it must be clear to whom they are accountable, when, and for what. Modernising the role of the bureaucracy represents a particular aspect of this necessary devolution to managers or agency chief executives.

The nature of accountability is increasingly affected by the changing relationship between the public sector and the community. There has been a shift towards formalised and specified contractual relationships, capable of being monitored and, where necessary, enforced. While this increased formality enhances accountability

by offering rights of redress not previously available, some accountability is increasingly legalistic rather than co-operative.

PUBLIC SERVICE ETHOS

Instilling a public service ethos is more than a series of injunctions, listing attitudes or behaviours which are not allowed. It is a positive climate in which staff identify with the organisational goals and have a willingness to take a longer-term view of responsibilities. The traditional values of the public service emphasise merit, equity, probity, integrity, ethical conduct and political independence. The values of the new culture must also include leadership, quality, productivity and openness. Creating a working culture which incorporates this set of values must involve a strong partnership between management, employees and the public in the change process. It not easy to train public servants in the adoption of new values, but value change is a key factor in improving the quality and efficiency of service delivery.

Creating a culture of reform

Trinidad and Tobago recognised that the critical element for successful implementation of civil service reforms is focusing on the process that will ensure successful change. As a result, the government has developed processes that identify 'Change Sponsors' (usually a cabinet minister) and 'Change Agents*' (usually form within the public service) and emphasise that members of the public service organisations should feel a sense of involvement in the process, share the new vision and own the change.

Values also assume a special importance in modern working environments which are less prescribed by rules and regulations. Clearly set out service values can help public servants exercise discretion in decision-making and respond creatively to changing conditions.

- The Australian Public Service (APS) values are now properly articulated within the legislative framework. Employees and agency heads are obliged to ensure that the APS:
 - is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner;
 - is a public service in which employment decisions are based on merit;
 - provides a workplace which is free from discrimination and which recognises the diverse backgrounds of APS employees;

- has the highest ethical standards;
- is accountable for its actions, within the framework of ministerial responsibility, to the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public;
- is responsive to the Government in providing frank, honest, comprehensive, accurate and timely advice and implementing the Government's policies and programmes;
- delivers services fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously to the Australian public;
- has leadership of the highest quality;
- establishes co-operative workplace relations based on consultation and communication;
- provides a fair, flexible, safe and rewarding workplace; and
- focuses on achieving results and managing performance.

Public service reforms are aimed at developing the organisational culture through strengthened employee involvement; clarity of employee responsibilities; transparency in the change process; rewards for teamwork; recognition of individual effort; and consultation with clients and users. These factors can be equally as effective as higher salaries in improving levels of motivation and professionalism within public service.

- The Malaysian programme for inculcating positive attitudes, including training courses, lectures, explanatory sessions, and provision of reading materials, provides a successful example of a practical approach to the establishment of appropriate values within an increasingly entrepreneurial public sector.

The formal development of codes of ethics within government marks a significant step in moves towards codifying public sector values at a time of rapid change within the culture and practice of the public sector.