

A NEW OUTLOOK FOCUSING ON SOLUTIONS

All governments would like to be more efficient, more cost-conscious, more responsive and more accountable. The difficulty is that although failure flaunts itself and is easily spotted, success is more modest. It is easier to identify what the public service must escape from than to point out exactly where it must go.

Public service reform programmes in Commonwealth countries have identified several themes which are key to the international quest for a new role and style of government. There is no single solution which will lead to success. There is, however, a new managerial approach without which success is unlikely.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SERVICE

The reforms introduced into the public service over the last two decades have seen a very different role for the public service. With national economic and competitive success increasingly determined by fast moving open markets, dynamic enterprises and highly skilled workforces, the public service has entered the equation as an active player, proactively developing and managing regulatory frameworks, and responding to growing expectations of service quality.

Reform programmes have reflected the two broad aims of increased efficiency and effectiveness. While the public service must produce more from fewer resources, it must also ensure that those products are the right ones. Through their focus on efficiency and effectiveness, successful reform programmes have broken the perceived linkage of recent years between public ownership on the one hand, and an equilibrium of under-achievement and stubborn resistance to change on the other. Within increasingly sophisticated managerial frameworks, public ownership can provide a sound framework for cost-effective services.

Above all else, recent public service reforms have indicated the degree to which the public service has become a dynamic variable in the equation of successful government. In an era when competitive success relied significantly on primary production, managed markets and secure industrial capacity, the public service represented a force for encouraging stability. Its role was, above all else, that of managing stable regulatory frameworks in the context of relatively low public expectations of government services.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT SERVICE-USERS

Successful reform programmes are powered by a determination to make public services more responsive to the needs of the people who use them. A re-conceptualisation of service-users as consumers of public services has meant that passive recipients of services are increasingly seen as active customers, and serious attempts are being made to find out what those customers expect.

Most fundamentally, this new outlook provides the outline of the virtuous circle which is driving many reform programmes. As customers, service-users are encouraged to demand more as governments increasingly believe that it is the pressure from its customers which will force improvements from the public service.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES

The administrative reforms being adopted in many countries emphasise the significance of distinguishing between political and managerial responsibilities within the new structures. To some degree, this identification of responsibilities and the separation of policy formulation from implementation is a necessary precursor to strengthening accountability. In most situations this is a broad movement rather than a precise surgical operation. Policy formulation is not that readily separated from implementation, political responsibilities for policy definition are not easily defined, and managerial responsibilities for implementation rapidly become political when problems loom. However, most reform programmes are underpinned by some clarification of these boundaries.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT STAFF

The Commonwealth experience has indicated clearly that successful reforms are built on a foundation of balanced organisational and attitudinal changes. For example the comprehensive revision of traditional public service personnel management policies, supported by tight monitoring of total staff numbers and costs, is accompanied by a conscious process of re-orientation for staff in which both quality of service and accountability to the public are being emphasised. Such a deliberate process of changing attitudes, in step with reforming structures, highlights the central role of staff commitment to change. The process of reform must capture the imagination of existing staff if they are to lead to sustainable service improvements.

CHANGING VALUES AND ATTITUDES

Increasing concern with the quality of service provided to the public is acting as a particular catalyst in developing an organisational culture where outputs are the overriding preoccupation. Recent developments are linking such attitude shifts with a renewed focus on commitment to the organisation and flexibility.

Recent reforms within the public service have represented a major challenge to the traditions and values of the public service. At worst, the increasing interchangeability of public and private sector staff at senior levels raises the possibility that neutrality within the public sector can no longer be taken for granted. More subtly, the less tangible products of the public sector, regulation and law enforcement, might arguably take second place to a preoccupation with concrete service delivery.

At best, however, the move from a climate of administration towards one of management has offered an opportunity to tighten up roles and responsibilities at all levels. The concern for quality and the increasing identification with the public requesting service are important aspects of the new culture. This gives rise to the possibility that a new public service value system is emerging in which quality, like probity more traditionally, is taken as a moral as much as a regulatory issue.

HARNESS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Strengthened accountability fits with a broader concern to adopt a more managerial approach, with tighter definition of tasks, measurement of performance, devolution of resource control, improved monitoring, and clarified incentives. Such moves are underpinned by a broadening in the scope of information technology applications. Accompanying the traditional payroll and other mass computing applications, governments are implementing new systems for information retrieval, electronic data interchange, executive information, and work-flow automation.

These information technology developments are contributing towards increased efficiency in the public service in two ways. First, they are directly contributing towards service improvements and effective resource utilisation. Second, developments in information management are allowing the development of a broader range of organisational structures. Flatter structures, emphasising team working but simultaneously allowing for tighter monitoring of service outputs, are a key development here. The debate about business process re-engineering has been very largely driven by the development of more effective management information systems.

CREATE SYNERGY BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

Recent reform programmes fully recognise the interdependency between the public and private sectors. On the one hand, the public sector is dependent on the services of the private sector. On the other, it is ultimately responsible for the climate in which that sector thrives or otherwise. Public service reforms are clarifying the boundary between the two, with clearer models for government purchasing of externally produced services and for specifying the government's intended outcome in strengthening the capacity of the private sector.

Within the more pragmatic management culture increasingly adopted by governments, a broader range of choices is available for the intervention in, and withdrawal from, areas of social and economic activity. The public/private 'synergy' is maintained by a flexible and frequently tactical choice of strategies and actions.

RESPOND TO CORRUPTION

Corruption, in varying degrees, is a reality in all areas of government. While perceptions of its nature and extent vary, it provides a strong impetus for reform on two levels. First, concern exists in some countries that independence left a residue of endemic corruption. Fundamental reform was seen as necessary to change the value base and the procedures that sustained this state of affairs. By contrast, other countries have more recent concerns regarding the growing number of public sector scandals, which could be related to the fast pace of change.

In both situations, the response of government has been to introduce widespread reform programmes with the broad aim of reversing any perception that corruption is a 'low risk – high reward' activity.

USE THE FULL MENU OF ORGANISATIONAL OPTIONS

The new thinking about systems and structures recognises that to maintain an effective capacity for strategic intervention in all areas of socio-economic activities, governments must no longer restrict their selection of structures and methods to those traditionally employed within the public service. Increasingly, governments are selecting the most effective organisational option from an increasingly broad portfolio, from corporatisation through to contracting out, dispassionately drawing on models which have their origin in both the public and private sectors. Such responses imply a managerial style which facilitates a rapid response capable of driving through change.

The new responsibilities for the centre concern change. The context for the public service is that of fast-changing labour markets, rising consumer expectations, and rapid developments in technology. Managing stability is no longer the key task for the public service.

Thinking differently about systems and structures requires a determination to make space at the centre of the public service for the long-term visioning and for the nurturing of future excellence. Active management of the regulatory frameworks are the key to this. Determining, imposing and policing a fixed array of regulatory frameworks, whether in financial or personnel management, is no longer the priority of the central co-ordination and control agencies. Monitoring the impact of the regulatory frameworks, and guiding the development of new arrangements which will guide the service towards its long-term goals confronts the centre with a more dynamic and substantially more challenging set of tasks.