



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

POWER TO THE MINISTRIES: DECENTRALIZATION IN BOTSWANA'S CIVIL SERVICE, 1999-2001

SYNOPSIS

Between 1999 and 2001, the powerful Directorate of Public Service Management in Botswana decentralized personnel authority to line ministries. This process was critical in enabling ministries to be more efficient while also allowing the directorate to focus on more substantive issues concerning the public service. The Botswana case demonstrates three components that contributed to the successful devolving of responsibility from a central public service ministry: 1) the training for and establishment of new human resource mechanisms within the line ministries, 2) the creation of new accountability mechanisms to ensure that new powers were not abused, and 3) the creation of a new role and identity for the relatively disenfranchised central public service ministry.

Daniel Scher drafted this policy note on the basis of interviews conducted in Gaborone, Botswana, in July 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Festina Bakwena, director of Botswana's Directorate of Public Service Management (DPSM), arrived at her office one morning in early 1999 to find anxious members of her staff clustered outside her door. They wanted answers to troubling questions: If she continued with the decentralization of her directorate's personnel responsibilities, wouldn't she disempower herself and, by extension, her employees as well?

Bakwena calmed their nerves as best she could. She restated that the process of decentralizing authority from the DPSM to the various ministries of government was a critical

component of the government's vision for a productive public service, one that could deliver the services needed to continue Botswana's development. Looking back, Bakwena remembered this as one of the hardest parts of her long and challenging career.

The DPSM was the nerve center of the public service and was the central unit to which all line ministries—such as Health, Public Works and Education—reported. Bakwena and her colleagues led a strategy developed by the permanent secretaries of the Botswana government. Permanent secretaries were the administrative heads of ministries, serving directly beneath presidentially appointed

ministers. In 1995, the permanent secretaries went on a retreat to Kasane, a small town in northern Botswana, where they deliberated over the future of the public service. The president at the time, Quett Masire, had recently returned from a trip to Singapore and had been impressed with the comparative productivity of the city-state's public sector. While the Botswana civil service was not in any serious crisis, the president and permanent secretaries thought that the public service could do better.

At Kasane, the permanent secretaries proposed a strategy that envisaged a complete overhaul of the way the public sector conducted business. Two pillars of the reform, which went hand in hand, were decentralization of personnel authority from the DPSM and the introduction of a new performance management system. The decentralization process was a critical first step before the all-encompassing performance management system could be introduced. While Botswana was an unusual case, the process of decentralization presented lessons for other countries considering such processes. It offered particular insight into management strategies and the importance of effective high-level leadership.

In 2009, Botswana was a stable, democratic country that had attained upper-middle-income status while neighboring countries in its region of Africa grappled with instability. Botswana was lauded for its prudent economic policies and the capable handling of its mineral resources. A 2008 report by the Council on Foreign Relations, a U.S.-based think tank, described the country this way: "Botswana ... had the highest per-capita growth rate in the world for more than three decades after its independence in 1966. The bulk of this growth was fueled by diamonds, which were discovered in the early 1970s. Unlike many resource-rich African states, Botswana implemented prudent policies to manage its resources."¹

Powered by its resource wealth, Botswana developed a strong education system that produced one of the highest literacy rates on the continent.² The public sector thus enjoyed a strong supply of educated individual to become civil servants. The government also spent large sums on educating students to a tertiary level, even sending them to top institutions overseas to further their studies. According to Bakwena, over 90% of tertiary-level students received some form of government funding. One of her first jobs was heading up the Scholarship Office in the Ministry of Education.

As in many other African countries, Botswana's public sector was the backbone of the country. The government was by far the largest employer in the country, while the private sector was nascent. The centrality of the public sector was starkly evidenced by urban architecture. Huge, modern government buildings dominated the center of the capital, Gaborone, while small, private-sector offices were relegated to low-key office parks outside the city center. While remaining an island of comparative success in its region, Botswana was not immune to some of the problems faced by its neighbors. According to UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Botswana in 2009 had an HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of 23.9% among adults aged 15 to 49, one of the highest rates in the world.³

THE CHALLENGE

The deep involvement of the DPSM in all aspects of personnel management was a burden on the smooth and efficient functioning of the civil service. The DPSM handled all personnel decisions for all the ministries, including actions on hiring, firing and promotion. Ministries could not handle even minor issues such as requests for leave.

Routing everything through the DPSM led to significant delays and was a source of

frustration and resentment for public sector employees. Convinced that this disgruntlement led to poor performance and poor service of the public, the permanent secretaries viewed decentralization of authority from the DPSM to the ministries as the way to reduce delays and improve efficiency. By relieving the directorate of mundane human-resources issues, decentralization also would free the DPSM for its strategic role: long-term planning and capacity building for the ministries.

The permanent secretaries perceived another problem: They had too little authority within their own ministries. The DPSM was the final arbiter of personnel decisions, no matter how small. The delays in getting approvals for personnel decisions created inefficiencies within the ministries. Empowering individual ministries to take on these tasks was one way, as Bakwena put it, to “minimize ... internal discomfort.” Only after dealing with this pressing internal issue could civil servants focus on improving the services they offered to the public.

As Bakwena’s own office staff would attest, DPSM staffers were not enthralled by the idea of losing authority. Much of the drive for reform was coming from the highest echelons of the government. President Masire knew that improving the public service would require significant and difficult changes. He appointed his vice president, Ian Khama (who later became president), to provide high-level leadership for the reform process. This high-level backing lent legitimacy to the effort.

Although civil service reforms had been undertaken more or less nonstop since Botswana gained independence from Britain in 1966, decentralization never was attempted. The central role of the DPSM had been workable while the service remained fairly limited in size and scope. But as the government grew, the

directorate’s handling of all major personnel decisions became an impediment.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

In 1999 Bakwena took over as director of the DPSM to oversee the implementation of the performance management system. An educator by training, she began her career as a secondary-school teacher of history and English. Later, she earned a master’s degree in educational management at the University of Pittsburgh and returned to work for Botswana’s Ministry of Education. After a stint in the Office of the President, she was transferred back to the Ministry of Education at the level of deputy permanent secretary. She then technically retired, but the government decided she was the right person to implement the new performance management system. Bakwena accepted and was brought on board with a five-year contract. As she later commented, her first undertaking in this role, decentralization, was a “frightening thing.”

Bakwena was in a difficult position. She had been hired to implement a series of policies decided on by the permanent secretaries and approved by the government. Her initial task of removing so many responsibilities from the DPSM was made more difficult by the fact that she was an outsider. However she quickly assumed the mantle of reform leader, assisted by her deputy, Taboka Nkhwa, and by Elias Magosi of the Reforms Coordination Unit, a unit then housed within the DPSM.

Bakwena understood that her immediate task was to win support by selling the reform concept. During the two years that it took to decentralize the service, members of Parliament would occasionally raise concerns about how long the process was taking. Bakwena recalled, “I remember that my response to that was that if government had decided that this was a

revolutionary effort ... I would have recommended all the skeptics and all the resistant people to be removed from the team. Then I would just remain with the motivated people that wanted to come to the party.”

In order to enlist skeptics and others who resisted the changes, Bakwena worked to bolster the support of ministry leaders. Although the permanent secretaries had initiated the reform process at the Kasane conference, some had started to become concerned about the extra responsibility and work that would result from decentralization. As Magosi put it, there was some resistance “when the rubber had to meet the road.”

Consequently, Bakwena and her lieutenants allotted significant time and effort to persuade the secretaries about the advantages of decentralization. Magosi recalled that he had to take a hard line during meetings with some secretaries, waving the reform document that had been signed at Kasane and saying, “Is this your name?... Were you part of this exercise?... Did you endorse this thing?... Now what are you saying?” This was tough talk in the context of the traditionally formal and deferential Botswana professional culture.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

The decentralization process had three components. The first was to train staff and create new mechanisms within the ministries that could handle those functions previously served by the DPSM. The second was to create new accountability processes, and the third was to create a new role for the DPSM.

Staff from the various line ministries needed to be trained for their new roles. In addition to standard forms of training such as workshops, Bakwena initiated an attachment system. Ministry staff charged with executing the new human-resources roles could shadow DPSM staff to learn from them and, as

Bakwena put it, “get hands-on experience of what needed to be done.”

Bakwena used an implementation structure that had been put in place during previous reforms, using what were known as Performance Improvement Coordinating teams. This structure was essentially a three-tiered system of committees that facilitated communication about reform processes. The top level, called the PIC Force, comprised the permanent secretaries of all ministries and was chaired by the permanent secretary to the president, the head of the civil service. This team discussed and presented reforms.

Below the PIC Force were the Ministerial Performance Improvement Committees, or MPICs. One of these groups was in each line ministry, headed by the permanent secretary of the ministry and comprising heads of the departments within the ministry. Below the MPICs were the Departmental Performance Improvement Committees, or DPICs, chaired by department heads. This three-tier structure streamlined communication of reform priorities among the permanent secretaries, department heads and rank-and-file workers.

Bakwena made extensive use of the PIC Force to disseminate information. She saw this as a two-pronged attack. At the operating level, she was ensuring that workers in the ministries received training through attachments at the DPSM and through workshops. At the other end of the spectrum, she was disseminating information about the reforms at the highest levels of the service. She sought to use the PIC structures to ensure that information was traveling in both directions, from the upper echelons down and from the operating level up. In this way, employees would hear about the reforms being put into place from both their superiors and those below them. Bakwena felt that the more information the upper-level leadership had, the better. She knew she could

not rely on those at the operational level to drive the process because, she recalled, these “operatives ... were very reluctant and maybe were a little hesitant to embrace change.”

Hiring and promotion

The handover of responsibility raised concerns about hiring and promotion. Bakwena would frequently face questions on this issue from her DPSM staff. She recalled being asked, “Are you sure there won't be mistakes? What if there are very many mistakes? How are you going to control it?” As a first step, Bakwena developed clear guidelines on promotions and hiring for the ministries. As she recalled, “Apart from just teaching, informing and attaching people, we also came up with guidelines of how to do some of these promotions, what do you look for and so on and so forth.” The guidelines were disseminated throughout the ministries.

Line ministries set up their own promotion and hiring boards. The promotion boards comprised senior officers within the ministry, and, for an initial period, the boards included members of the DPSM, acting as support officers. The promotion boards reviewed all appointments to ensure that the established guidelines had been followed. The guidelines established that all positions should be advertised internally or externally. If heads of departments or other senior-level civil servants wanted to promote a candidate internally and without advertising, they had to present a strong case to the appropriate board.

Bakwena said it was important that high-level civil servants retained some autonomy in the hiring and promotion process within their departments. “Now if you haven't advertised, you have to come and convince [the promotions boards] that this person is the right person for you. In fact, you must say what this person has done that makes you think that they can perform at that level,” she said. “We did that knowing that we could be wrong, even about

people. But at least there was an attempt to make sure there was transparency and objectivity.”

In mid-2009, the permanent secretary to the president, Eric Molale, instituted psychometric tests for positions at the director's level and above. The tests measured candidates' aptitude and leadership potential. Candidates who fell short on the psychometric tests did have some recourse, however. If gaps in aptitude were revealed and candidates were not eligible for a particular position, their immediate supervisors were responsible for ensuring that they would receive the necessary training to fill these gaps.

After staff had been trained to assume new human-resources functions and new boards had been created within each line ministry, a central question remained: How would oversight be maintained? While the line ministries' new personnel authority allowed them to operate more efficiently, Bakwena and her staff wanted to ensure that these powers were not abused.

The addition of a DPSM staff member to the promotions boards to serve as an in-house adviser had the added advantage of a built-in means of monitoring adherence to policy. In addition to having this representation “on the inside,” the DPSM also carried out regular spot-checks and audits to make sure that rules were being followed and to eliminate the persistent threat that so-called ghost workers might be created. While these measures helped in the short term, the DPSM wanted a more coherent long-term strategy for ensuring policy consistency.

Computerizing records

To address this issue, and in keeping with other goals of the civil service reform program, Bakwena and her staff undertook a project to computerize all personnel records. The goals were two-fold. First, the paper filing system in use by the DPSM did not allow managers to get

a clear overall picture of the civil service at any particular time. By computerizing the records, at the touch of the button it was possible to gain an accurate idea of the state of the service. Bakwena said, “You know what staff and human resources you have, how many people want training, how many people are due for retirement, around what time ...” and so on.

Second, the computerization of records enabled a high level of oversight of the actions of the civil service. While the line ministries were required to make changes in the database and update entries, the main computer was at the DPSM. The directorate was thus able to continue to undertake audits and maintain a significant degree of oversight, all from within the core ministry.

Bakwena also instituted a system that copied all communication related to recruitment or promotions to various high-level managers across the public service. Communications had to be copied to the minister of finance and development planning, to the auditor general and to the accountant general: “So already you see this counterbalancing and checks and balances there, because information now will exist at the different systems,” explained Bakwena.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Despite substantial oversight, the handover of responsibility encountered problems. The head of the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime, Rose Seretse, recalled that after the line ministries assumed control of personnel decisions, complaints rose sharply about corrupt and unfair hiring practices, especially regarding new graduates. The directorate handed most of these off to the ombudsman, who was more suited to handling complaints about maladministration.

These complaints appeared to have been handled with some sympathy, as Seretse recalled: “If you read some of the reports, you

can see that this was a situation where an aunt was trying to employ a niece, or ... an uncle was trying to employ a nephew. ... Just that, ‘My niece is not working and I have to find employment for her, and since now I’m the employment authority, I can be able to do that.’ ... I think it was just the opportunity that presented itself. ... Initially when it started, it was a bit high, but with time it just sort of normalized.”

The gradual removal of authority from the DPSM created personnel problems that could have become a major obstacle in the decentralization process. Across the board, DPSM staffers were asked to assist with aiding and overseeing a process that was depriving them of their own job responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, there was skepticism from DPSM staffers who were assigned responsibility for assisting in this change. The resistance manifested itself in the complaints and queries about disempowerment that Bakwena often had to field. Underscoring the grumblings from her own staff was the key question of what the purpose of the DPSM was now that its core functions had been outsourced to the line ministries.

Bakwena recalled this question of the future role of the DPSM as one of the most stressful parts of the process. In 2001, toward the end of the decentralization process, she took her upper-level staff on a retreat specifically to deal with the issue of the future of DPSM. “It was one of the most difficult meetings that I’ve ever had ... because I didn’t have any answers myself,” she said.

At the retreat, Bakwena’s staff was initially despondent as they considered the future of the DPSM. But she encouraged them to think of the situation as a complex challenge, a tough “nut to crack,” as she put it. She assembled teams using a work-improvement team model to contemplate the most useful role the DPSM could fill in a new, more efficient public service.

After much discussion, the DPSM staff began to look closely at what they had been doing in the past. Bakwena laughed as she recalled that all they had been accustomed to handling nothing but “hiring and firing.” Bakwena and her staff identified key issues that had been neglected while the DPSM had focused on mundane personnel issues. As she described it, “We were not doing what we were supposed to have done. ... So issues like human-resources development policy, [and,] really, where we should be going as the public service—we were not doing things like that.”

With a new appreciation of how they could contribute, and the time to work on deeper problems within the service, DPSM staffers turned their attention to big-picture issues. These included undertakings like building a comprehensive skills inventory in the public service and initiating processes to bridge identified skills gaps. With the new computerized personnel system, the DPSM was also able to study in detail the needs of the service and undertake new and more thorough succession-planning initiatives. Technically, the DPSM had always been responsible for succession planning, but, Bakwena said, “This time it is being done much more adequately than it was done when we were busy with files and writing letters and people’s leave and things like that.” The DPSM undertook research into ways of measuring and rewarding personnel for good performance, and worked on the establishing a new civil service college. Staffers also focused on implementing other reforms such as the performance management system.

Auditing for compliance

The DPSM also continued with its auditing role, ensuring adherence and compliance with standards and procedures. This was especially important as other reforms, such as the performance management system, were introduced. The directorate continued to

monitor vacancies and vacancy management, and required all ministries to report on their personnel standards. In addition, DPSM staffers provided advice on ways in which the ministries could better handle their various responsibilities.

Bakwena also emphasized the importance of the support role that the DPSM played. When her staff asked what would happen when they made mistakes, she would respond by encouraging them to think back to their early days at DPSM, all the mistakes they made as new employees, and how much they learned from that process. She emphasized that the directorate’s support role included helping the ministries to avoid making critical errors.

Consequently the DPSM developed a number of core responsibilities, including planning for the future, continued auditing of the ministries, and supporting and advising ministries as they adapted to their new responsibilities. “They have a bird’s eye view now instead of being in the forest,” Bakwena said.

ASSESSING RESULTS

The result of the decentralization process, according to Bakwena, was a more responsive public service that was able to handle personnel issues without having to deal with the DPSM bottleneck. “Very quickly we saw ... quite a lot of improvement where the permanent secretaries were empowered,” she said.

Still, despite having initially pushed for more authority, line ministries initially were reluctant to assume the responsibility of decision making. When the ministries continued to ask the DPSM to rule on personnel matters, the directorate returned the requests and emphasized that the ministries had the responsibility in these cases. The line ministries soon became more accustomed to the process, and Bakwena recalled, “After the initial uncertainty, the ministers became comfortable, and they really did feel empowered.”

On the other end of the spectrum, the DPSM adjusted to its new role. Staffers were able to focus their attention on rolling out increasingly ambitious reform programs to the public service, and concentrating on improving the long-term prospects of the service.

Bakwena in mid-2009 said that the DPSM was “very, very proactive. They are coming up with very interesting programs.” Despite the initial discomfort, Bakwena said, “We very quickly got out of that, and no one is complaining about disempowerment. ... We still feel very, very empowered in the Directorate of Public Service Management to do what [we] need to do to help the president.”

REFLECTIONS

The process of decentralizing Botswana’s Directorate of Public Service Management demonstrates how a ministry with sweeping powers gradually gave up some key roles in order to create a more effective public service that was

less prone to delays over basic personnel decisions. Careful handling and solid planning helped ensure the success of efforts to redistribute authority, create oversight boards and re-tool the DPSM with a new vision of itself. Much must be attributed to the personal leadership style of DPSM Director Festina Bakwena. A compelling and respected member of the civil service, Bakwena was notable for her personal style with her staff.

While at the Ministry of Education, she insisted that all her staff have not only their own career-development plans, but also their own life plans, with a clear understanding of how their current job fit into both. Bakwena’s emphasis on extensive consultation and distribution of information at the highest levels helped pave the way for the process. With the decentralization accomplished, she was able to turn her attention to the complex challenge of instituting the performance management system.

¹ Hanson, Stephanie, “Botswana: An African Success Story Begins to Show Strain,” January 10, 2008 <<http://www.cfr.org/publication/15108/>> Accessed 4 November 2009,

² UNDP Human Development Report 2009, United Nations Development Program, 2009, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2009_EN_Complete.pdf> Accessed 4 November 2009.

³ UNAIDS, Botswana Country Profile 2009, United Nations, <<http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Countries/botswana.asp>> Accessed 4 November 2009

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