The Role of Human Resource Managers in Transforming the Public Service in Africa

5.0 Transformative Roles of HR Managers’ in the Public Service

The roles of HR Managers in transforming the public services should be informed by the key defining features of the HRM model. The transformation of the public service in Africa and other developing countries, among other things, requires HR managers who are very much aware of the “nuts and bolts” of the HRM model which is fundamentally different from its predecessor the ‘personnel management’ approach to staff management in organizations. A classificatory matrix of 27 points of difference between personnel and industrial relations practices and HRM has been developed and it is available in the mainstream HRM literature. The managers in the public service who play the strategic staff management roles consonant with the HRM model will need to be specialists, advisers and consultants and in our own context government business partners.

5.1 Strategic Role of HR Manager in the Public Service

The HR managers must play the role of formulating the Vision, Mission and Values (VMV) and strategic goals and objectives for the public service. They must serve the public service as proactive partners or strategists in the strategy formulation process. The HR managers must be part of the hierarchy which is vested with the authority and responsibility to devise the public service strategy and ensuing strategic plans.

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1 The information is an excerpt from the article “The Role of Human Resource Managers in Transforming the Public Service in Africa” by Dr. Benson A. Bana. The paper was presented at the “Workshop on Capacity Building for Human Resource Development Policy and Strategy in the Public Service in Africa” in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania, 23rd – 27th February 2009. The full version can be found at www.unpan.org

The word strategy is of Greek origin and has always had military connotations, including maneuvering in order to execute plans for conducting offensive and defensive campaigns against the enemy. The following definition appears to shed much light to understanding the concept strategy. Thus strategy denotes

A decision or series of decisions made by or on behalf of an organization or organizational sub-unit which determines its medium to long-term objectives, priorities and overall direction; and which, repositions the organization in relation to its changing external environment, including competitive pressures and the Availability of key resources.

In our context strategy denotes a conscious plan or course of action directed toward definite goal. It is a sense of what the organization such as the public service is trying to achieve over the long term that will direct its actions. It is a process adopted for getting the public service from here to there. Strategy can, therefore, be seen as a link between what the organization wants to achieve-its objectives and the policies adopted to guide its activities.

The involvement of professional HR managers in the strategic formulating forum permits them to ensure that people management issues feature predominantly in the public service strategy. Moreover, HR managers should play the role of formulating specific HR-VMV and strategy for the public service which should be derived from, and nested into the overall strategic objectives of the service.

Human Resource Managers in the public services should play a critical role in all stages of the strategy development process and subsequent activities (Figure 1.1). This includes taking a leading role right from the articulation of the public service VMV and those of the HR department; delivery of the strategies as well as evaluation and review or reformulation.

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of the strategies. In this process the HR Manager must ensure that the HRM objectives and goals are derived from the overall the strategic objectives of the public service, hence achieving what we refer to as vertical integration. The strategy plan of the HR function in the department or ministry with HRM portfolios must be strategically derived from the overall strategy of the public service.

Moreover, the HR managers must ensure that strategies are developed for various key practice areas in HRM. They must lead the team of line managers in the public service to develop the human resource planning strategy, recruitment and selection strategy; training and development strategy; remuneration strategy; performance management strategy (including performance appraisal), employees relations strategy; etc. In addition they must ensure that various the key levers in HRM are implemented strategically in order to realize the overall strategic goals and objectives of the public service.

5.2 Professional Role of HRM Managers in Public Service

Human resource management is a profession function because it meets the essential requirements of the interpretive criteria attached to the concept profession. The HRM as a profession performs an essential function in organizations, including the public service. Moreover, HRM is founded on a systematic body of knowledge which is acquired through a lengthy period of prescribed academic training and practical experience.

It is important to recognize that HRM as an occupation has an accreditation system and professional associations\(^5\); codes of ethical conduct; mechanisms and structures for enforcing ethics; and it is a function which is held in high esteem by informed organizational management. The role of HR managers in the public service is to perform their duties and

\(^5\) In other countries such as the UK there are HRM professional associations such as the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), International Personnel Management Association (IPMA), Society for Human Resource Management, etc. These are professional bodies for HR Practitioners.
responsibilities in a professionally acceptable manner, which entails to abiding by the code of HRM professional conduct as well as promoting and enforcing ethical behavior in HR work.

They have also a role of making sure that their professional role deserves respect, and it is as important as other professional cadres in the public service. They must enhance the image of the HR profession not only in the public service but also to the public in its entirety.

5.3 Consultant Role of HRM Managers in the Public Service

Human resource managers need to serve as consultants in their respective public service institutions. They have the responsibility of offering professional expertise and advisory services to the line managers, to whom the HR work is devolved on how well to implement a plethora of human resource management activities including strategic selection, strategic training, strategic performance appraisal, handling of grievances, disciplinary matters, etc. They must serve as organizational experts and champions of change in the transformation processes of the public service into a continuous learning organizations and result-focused entity. All in all they must empower the line managers so as to enable them take ownership of the HR strategy, implementation of the key practice areas in HRM and related activities.

5.4 Research Role of HR Managers in the Public Service

Research is one of the most important but often the most neglected component in the management of staff in the public service. One of the major roles of HR managers is to conduct research in order to generate useful information which facilitates rational and informed decisions for effective implementation of the public service strategic goals and HR strategy. Some writers argue convincingly that models of HRM developed elsewhere have little or no value in the African organizations, including the public service. It is through research that alternative HRM models for the public service could be designed. Anecdotal
evidence reveals that organizations which regularly carry out employees’ attitude surveys are dynamic, proactive and responsive to the HR needs and interests. HR managers should conduct regular surveys of attitudes of the employees toward the public service and its management.

Moreover, through research organizations are in a position to create harmonious relationships because the surveys generate information on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for both management and staff. The HR Managers must conduct regularly such useful surveys in the public service. The findings of surveys should be used, on the one hand as basis for formulating new HR policies and practices or revising the existing ones. On the other hand the HR research findings should be used to advise on the need to change the legal regime, including the law, regulations, rules and standing orders governing the management of staff in the public service.

5.5 Innovative Role of HR Managers in the Public Service

The public service is not a static organization. The public servants, specifically HR Managers should play an innovative role in order to enable the public service introduce good and dynamic people management practices which are most likely to enhance performance. Research evidence reveals that the implementation of specific bundles of HR practices has a positive correlation with the performance levels of the organization. The role of HR managers is to identify a set of bundles, which are sometimes referred to as High Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) which, if implemented appropriately, they may pave the way for enhanced and superior performance in the public service.

Thus, HR Managers are valuable sources of innovation in the public service. Through research they must identify areas which need to be transformed and, consequently initiate appropriate reforms and champion them for the betterment of the public service. HR
Managers by virtue of their duties and responsibilities should be change initiators or triggers in the public service and champions of the reform cause. They must play a pivotal role in the management of change.

5.6 HR Managers’ Developmental Role in the Public Service

There is a consensus in the HR literature and, indeed on the fact that employees in organizations including the public service must be viewed as valuable assets rather than costs. HR managers have a noble role of identifying competency gaps in the public services and devising appropriate ways and strategies for reducing competency (skills and knowledge) gaps among the public servants. HR managers should serve as agents of continuous development; they must act as advisors and consultants on matters pertaining to development of staff, management and leadership competencies. They should ensure that both the non-professional and non-managerial public servants access training and development opportunities to meet the needs of the public service. They should also serve as advisers on organizational development matters; including making sure that the public service has appropriate structures for implementing its strategies, including the HRM strategy. By creating opportunities for employee training and development, HR Managers will gradually transform the public service into a continuously learning organization.

5.7 HR Managers’ Monitoring and Evaluation Role in Public Service

The HR function in the public service must be planned in such a way that it adds value in terms of enabling the public service meet its strategic goals and objectives. The HR strategy must be implemented in manner that is cost-effective and demonstrably justifying the concept of “value for money”. As such, HR managers must continuously monitor and evaluate the efficacy and contribution of the HR function to the overall public service strategic goals and objectives. They must monitor the implementation processes of the HR strategy, ensuring that different components of HRM are mutually supportive and
structurally reinforcing each other in order to attain synergy. Moreover they must ensure that the HR strategy is aligned to, and supports the overall public service strategic goals and objectives.