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# STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING POOR PERFORMANCE IN THE BOTSWANA PUBLIC SERVICE

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## ABSTRACT

*The work performance of the Botswana public service has been a major concern to the government, civil society, development partners and the nation at large. The prevailing situation in the work-place has been that of low work performance, poor service delivery and high labour turnover (Tshukudu: 2006: & Tshukudu: 2009). The poor work performance has led to a decline in the economic growth from an average GDP of 8 per cent to 7.1 per cent between 1990 and 2003 (World Bank Report 2003: 40). This article presents 15 strategies for the effective management of poor performance in the Botswana Public Service. One crucial aspect of improving performance is eradicating poor performance through strategies that will assist public service managers in effectively improving poor performance in their organisations, departments and ministries.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Botswana public service has grown by leaps and bounds since independence in 1966. The public service sector accounts for about a third of the total employment and central government is the single largest employer in the country. According to recent statistics, total employment in the Botswana Public Service stands at around 100 000 (Department of Central Statistics 1998:97). The statistics indicate that government employs about 82 000 and local authorities employ about 18 000 people. According to Mogalakwe (2004: 21), the public service has grown tremendously compared with the 9,000 employed at independence. He further poses the question of whether the management style is changing or whether it is still that of 1968. This refusal to change the style in turn impacts on the quality of service delivery in the public service. While the public service has expanded steadily over the years the following problems have emerged: absenteeism and lack of punctuality to work, and poor performance in most public sector organisations, departments and ministries (Tshukudu: 2006). This scenario has led to outright public criticisms leveled against permanent secretaries and their deputies in the Botswana Public Service. This trend has affected the government's efforts to improve the economic and social well-being of the public. The National Economic Development does not only depend on natural resources, but the quality of the public services rendered is also equally important and can, therefore, not be over-emphasized. There is, therefore, a need to improve productivity in the Botswana Public Service through effective strategies for the management of poor performance in the Botswana public service sector.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON POOR PERFORMANCE

According to Weightman (1999:206), to improve poor performance, managers must establish whether a gap between required and actual performances exists. Required performance can be communicated to individuals in several ways, which include the following: contracts of employment that provide the outline of duties, formal rule books, job descriptions, training manuals, lists of standards, procedures, briefing meetings, training sessions, meetings, individual conversations, and professional training and monitoring, as well as personal files. The following information can indicate whether an employee is performing: time sheets, sickness and absence records, record cards, customer complaints, inaccurate work, mistakes, colleagues, comparison with other people's work, and incomplete work (Briscoe, 2001: 40). Before addressing poor performance, the reasons for poor performance should be investigated. These include among others, individual, personal and organisational factors.

## DEFINING POOR PERFORMANCE

Poor performance is any one of the following: low standard of work; for example frequent mistakes, not following a task through, an inability to cope with given instructions. It can also include inability to handle a reasonable amount of work, unacceptable attitudes towards customers and any poor work ethics, or unacceptable attitude towards colleagues, for example, uncooperative behaviour or poor communication,

inability to acknowledge the contribution of others, poor work and lack of commitment and drive etc. ((Botswana Public Service Act of 2008:34). Having defined poor performance, the next step is to understanding the various reasons for poor performance.

Table 1 Examples of Poor Performance

	EXAMPLES OF POOR PERFORMANCE
1	Making frequent mistakes
2	Failing to complete the work
3	Failing to follow instructions
4	Being unable to do reasonable amounts of work to required standards
5	Displaying unacceptable attitudes to customers
6	Displaying unacceptable attitudes towards colleagues
7	Being late or having unexplained absences
8	Lacking skill or awareness of standards
9	Failing to achieve objectives
10	Acting outside levels of competence
11	Poor supervision of others
12	Having recurring bad behaviours that impact on the image of the department or organisation.

*Adapted from Department of Health, Canada: 2006*

## REASONS FOR POOR PERFORMANCE

Employee performance issues affect the workplace in a number of ways. Poor performance impacts negatively on an organisation's ability to reach its optimal performance. This in turn and this leads to the following: failure to realize business strategic goals, decreases in profitability in the case of a business and decline service delivery (in the case of public service organization), increases turnover rates, and results in low employee morale and job satisfaction (Tshukudu:2006 & Hope:1995). Although employees have a contractual obligation to perform to a satisfactory level, it will be the identification of these underlying reasons, which will determine how poor performance should be managed and dealt with. It is therefore critical that managers come up with a flexible procedure to deal with substandard performance, the cornerstone of which should be that the matter has to be investigated in terms of gathering all the necessary information to deal with the alleged poor performance (Thomas: 2010:67). It is paramount for performance managers to appreciate reasons for poor performance so that they may deal with the root-cause of the problem and not the symptoms. There are various reasons for poor performance which should be considered before action is taken. These reasons are related to individual, personal and organisational factors.

**Table 2: Contributory Factors for Poor Performance**

<b>Individual/personal factors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The effect of major life events such as bereavement or divorce</li> <li>▪ Poor health</li> <li>▪ The effects of substance abuse</li> </ul>
<b>Situational factors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Team issues such as personality clashes</li> <li>▪ The effects of bullying</li> <li>▪ Poor management</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational factors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inadequate education and training</li> <li>▪ Lack of understanding or competencies</li> <li>▪ Changes in work or technology</li> </ul>

*Source: Nursing Management Vol. 15 No1 April 2008*

As highlighted in Table 2 above, personal factors that can affect performance arise from the individual not fitting in with the organisation. Individual factors include the following: inability to adjust to work, personality clashes sense of unfair treatment, conflicts of religion or moral values, inappropriate levels of confidence, poor motivation, and poor understanding of the job requirements (Werther & Davis 1996:31). Secondly, personal factors arise from the person's domestic and individual circumstances. These factors are outside the organisation's control. The main focus must be dealing with personal problems before they affect employee performance. Personal factors include the following: intellectual inability due to poor selection; lack of emotional stability due to poor selection, poor physical ability, health problems, and domestic circumstances related to child care, parents or partner/ family break-up. Thirdly, organisational factors are those related to poor management in an organisation. These factors include the following: Unclear standards, lack of planning; unplanned job changes, low pay and poor administration thereof, poor investment in equipment; inadequate training, inconsistency when disciplining employee either excessively or too leniently, poor management due to an individual manager or a poor management system, physical conditions which distract employees, for example, noisy conditions, excessive heat, poor air-conditioning or high pollution, and group dynamics, where someone does not fit in and is excluded or prevented from fitting in (Werther & Davis, 1996:34). Weightman (1999:209) states that having established a gap in performance and finding the reasons for it, managers are in a better position to solve the problem. However, there are numerous barriers to improving performance that public sector managers have to contend with in improving poor performance in their respective organisations, departments and ministries (Tshukudu:2009). The following are some of the barriers encountered by these managers in improving poor performance.

**Table 3: Barriers to improving employee performance**

<b>Barriers to Improving Poor Performance</b>
▪ Lack of time
▪ Documentation
▪ Seriousness of the consequences
▪ Morale
▪ Job stress
▪ Service quality
▪ Lack of staffing
Organisational culture
▪ Lack of training

*Source: Primary Health Care. Volume 23 No 4 of 2013*

### **2.3 BARRIERS TO IMPROVING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE**

The success of a public sector organisation's ability to deter poor performance and boost effective performance amongst employees depends upon the critical role played by line managers. Most public service managers have no time for improving poor performance in their respective departments or ministries. The biggest challenge that comes with this barrier is that if poor performance is not adequately dealt with, it can compound and eventually lead to low morale amongst colleagues in the department and can, ultimately, result in dire consequences such as absenteeism and eventually high turnover. Public sector managers must be on their toes when it comes to dealing with poor performance and the most effective way of dealing with poor performance is creating time to manage this undesirable aspect. Failure by managers to deal with poor performance at its infancy stages may prove costly and difficult to overcome. The other barrier to the effective management of poor performance, relates to lack of documentation on employee performance records. It is difficult for managers to effectively manage poor performance in the absence of good record keeping. The general observation about documenting employee performance is that the problem is often excused due to lack of time to file records pertaining to employee performance because of an ineffective appraisal system. Records are the basis for the management of poor performance and it is, therefore, important that managers keep performance records for all employees under their supervision. Poor performance has dire consequences for both employee and the organization. Firstly, employees also get tired of bearing extra loads and this led to serious disengagement, which in turn leads to the gradual decline in the overall departmental performance. Secondly, poor performance affects public servants. It affects their morale. Employees within the same department may be affected by poor performance of their colleagues to an extent that they too end up disgusted to a point where they too join the underperformers, particularly when they feel line managers are not taking appropriate actions to adequately deal with poor performers in their department or section. Overworked employees are generally stressed employees. Poor performance can lead to work-related stress particularly when no action is taken against under-performance in the workstation. If other employees are working hard but at the same time some of their colleagues are forever trawling the internet for six to eight hours daily, this can lead to occupational stress. Every public service employee has an important role to play in public service provision. Good organisational performance is the result of high quality functioning by individuals within the organisation. One of the consequences of failure to manage employee performance effectively

leads to poor quality service provision. Poor performance, therefore, compromises the quality of service provision and has a bearing on the public image of the organisation. When quality is compromised due to poor performance, customer complaints increase and, ultimately, impact on the reputation of the entire public service.

It is meaningful to ensure quality service at all times for the sake of the department and that of the customers. Public sector organisations are mandated to provide resources for the effective service delivery. Lack of resources may lead to poor performance by individual employees, teams and the organization as a whole. A shortage of skilled employees is one of the major barriers to effective management of poor performance in the organisation. It is then the responsibility of public service managers to ensure that their organisations are fully resourced with adequate staffing. A department which is poorly staffed will struggle to bring about the necessary results and, hence the impact on service delivery. Organisational culture is built by behaviours of individual members in the organization, and poor performance culture can affect all levels of the organizational structure, particularly those in the lowest level of the organizational pyramid. Abusive and clueless top or middle managers can create a culture of negativism and poor performance that extends to the bottom of the organizational structure. Culture, therefore, can impede the effective management of performance in the organisation and if not addressed, negative organizational culture can lead to a legacy of wide organisational under-performance. Cultural change or improvement is critical for the success of any public sector organization. Failure to train supervisors on performance management and performance appraisal is that it renders employee performance management irrelevant and impossible. If line managers are to be up to the task of effectively improving performance, they need to be trained and developed to discharge their responsibilities. Appropriate training is the necessary skill, the bedrock of support. The training interventions may include the following: appraisals, general management of training and how the performance management system is implemented (Suff, 2011). It can, therefore, be concluded that the various barriers to effective employee performance management have great impact on all stakeholders' perception of the quality of service delivery.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The methodology used to compile this paper was mainly through secondary data, primarily because this method offered ample research material in which was adequate for the researcher to use in his area of research. It was also due to the fact that collecting data is simple and convenient for the researcher, given the amount of time required to collect such data (Struwig & Stead, 2001). The author further notes the importance of internet as a source of data in that it is faster and allows the researcher to access varied yet complementing information. The collected data ideally helps the researcher to make an informed perspective on the issue or debate they are researching on. Over and above the internet, data was also collected from the Botswana Public Service documents such as directives, manuals, policy documents, regulatory handbooks and through various government reports and existing literature in books.

## **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING POOR PERFORMANCE**

This model introduces 15 strategies for improving poor performance in the Botswana Public service and or in any organization, be it private or public. This model highlights the various phases that have to be adhered to for the effective management of poor performance. These phases include the following: diagnose poor performance, deal with poor performance, encourage, gather initial evidence, organize private one on one meeting, present employee with evidence, explain why their performance is deemed poor, find out if there are mitigating factors, establish employee perception of his/her performance, create action plan and set review dates, implement the plan, deal with contributing factors, keep the review dates and log progress, document meetings, stay calm, keep senior management appraised.

**STRATEGY 1: Diagnose poor performance**

The first strategy deals with poor performance immediately. In order to adequately deal with poor performance, managers need to understand its cause, whether it came from lack of employee ability or low motivation. Incorrect diagnoses can lead to many problems later on. Poor performance must be dealt with immediately. If the line manager realizes that an employee is not making enough effort on their work, it is natural that the manager must put pressure on the employee to perform. In case of employee inability, enhance their ability through the following:

- Resupply,
- Retrain,
- Refit,
- Reassign and release.

**STRATEGY 2: Deal with poor performance**

The second strategy entails how to deal with poor performance:

- Discuss key performance areas with employees,
- Discuss the responsibilities which employees must focus on, and
- Tie key performance areas to the overall organizational goals.

**STRATEGY 3: Encourage improvement and prevent escalation**

The third strategy deals with how to encourage the improvement of good performance and prevent the escalation of poor performance. Where employees excel, they must be commended, and recognition of good performance is important for the promotion of high employee morale in the organization. Reinforcing good behaviour in terms of employee performance sends a clear message to their colleagues so that they can emulate the good performer. Similarly, where poor performance has been identified, corrective measures must be taken to rectify the poor employee performance.

**STRATEGY 4: Gather initial evidence**

Gathering of initial evidence with a view to establishing whether indeed there is poor performance is critical. In this respect, managers/supervisors should:

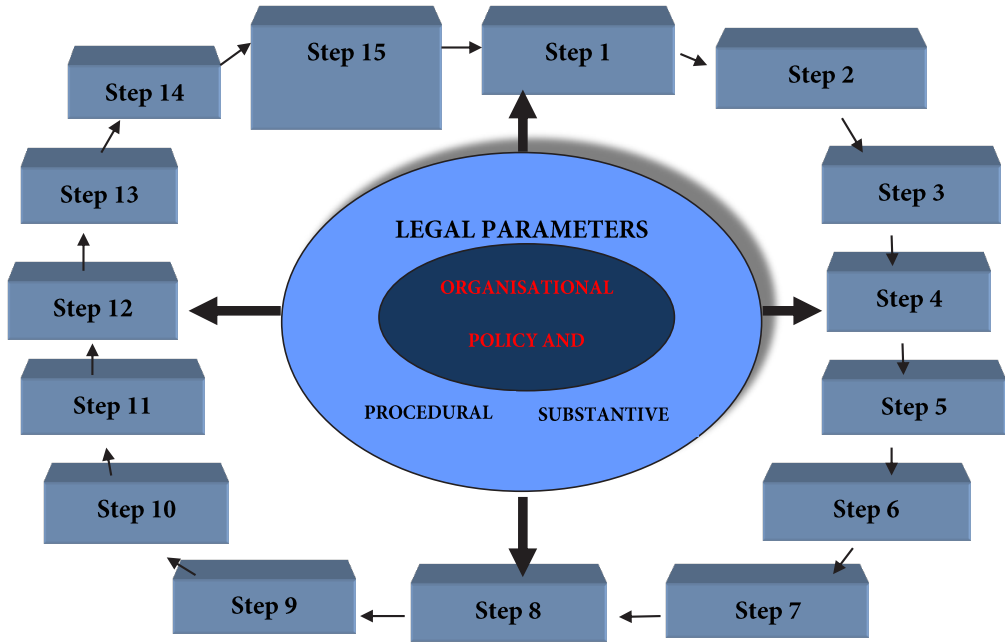
- Provide performance records that show the continual decline in employee performance,
- Performance appraisal completed forms from the previous appraisal sessions may be used,
- Demonstration of incidents that indicate poor performance must be collected, and
- Past performance agreements must also be used as evidence for poor performance;

**STRATEGY 5: Organize a private one-on-one meeting**

In this strategy the manager/supervisor should discuss the following:

- The number of errors committed and omissions made by the employee attributable to poor performance,
- If it is the case of employee behaviour, how specific behaviour was measured, and that the employee was made aware of these measurements, and
- Specific ways in which the quantity and quality of work was measured.

Figure 1: An Integrated Model for Improving Poor Performance in the Botswana Public Service



#### STRATEGY 6: Present employee with evidence

The 5th Strategy dictates that all the necessary information gathered in Strategy 3 must be shared with employees, regarding their poor performance. The manager will provide the employees with the necessary information indicating how he or she as the manager arrived at the point where they concluded that employee performance was unacceptable. The managers should examine the employee's performance according to the following:

- The objectives and key deliverables
- Time scales within which each objective must be delivered, and
- The knowledge, skills, competencies and performance standards.

#### STRATEGY 7: Explain why their performance is deemed poor

This strategy involves explaining why this employee performance is perceived to be poor. In this respect, the manager should:

- Assist the employee realize how they should have performed and in which areas should improve, and
- Discuss in good faith and ensure that throughout the session, they should remain calm throughout the meeting in the event the employee loses their cool.



**STRATEGY 8: Employee's perception of his/her performance**

This strategy involves providing information to the employee about how they perceive their performance as per the performance records presented before them by their supervisor or manager. The employee should have had knowledge of their performance prior to this stage and, therefore at this stage, the employee's responsibility is to affirm or deny the fact that their performance is below the required standards. Most importantly, the employee must provide mitigating factors that may have led to his or her low standard performance.

**STRATEGY 9: Create action plan and review dates**

The most important part of improving poor performance is the ability by managers to come up with a realistic plan in terms of rectifying the individual's performance. Managers together with the employee must create an action plan in terms of improving the individual employee's performance. The set goals must be specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic with time lines attached to each goal. It is the responsibility of the manager to set up review dates and the employee must be aware of these dates from the onset.

**STRATEGY 10: Implement the plan**

Having dealt with contributory factor to poor performance, the next stage is implementation of performance improvement strategy. For implementation to be effective, the managers must consider the outcome of the plan and visualize the good that the plan would bring to the overall performance of an individual employee and that of the organization. It is important for managers to continue review the plan as the implementation process continues with a view to closing any gap that may have not been envisaged the planning phase.

**STRATEGY 11: Deal with contributing factors**

This strategy involves recognising and rewarding excellent performance. Managers and supervisors should:

- Tell employees when they have performed well,
- Show appreciation for the employee's effort ,and
- Reward employees who perform well in an appropriate manner.

For performance management to be successful, all the strategies should receive adequate attention. In the next section, the critical organisational factors which affect performance management are briefly presented. As can be seen from Figure 1, these factors are central to an overall strategy for the improvement of performance in an organisation.

**STRATEGY 12: keep the review dates and log progress**

Generally, a performance improvement plan is agreed upon during a meeting to discuss specific areas where the supervisor observes room for improvement. The time frame is also another point the two discuss. When the employee successfully completes the agreement form, any employment actions, such as wage increases put on hold are now implemented.

**STRATEGY 13: Document all meetings**

It is imperative for the manager to document all meetings not to use it negatively against the employee in future, but rather to use it as evidence of improved employee performance. The agreement between manager and employee becomes a guiding document going forward. "The most important reason for fully documenting performance reviews is to protect oneself in the event that the employee must be fired later. You will have clear and objective information on which to base your decision." In addition to formal performance reviews, regular and informal feedback is a strategy for ensuring employees are meeting job expectations and performance standards.

**STRATEGY 14: Stay calm**

Where the employee becomes agitated by the negative feedback from their manager and becomes hostile in the way they conduct themselves, it is critical that the manager remains calm throughout the meeting. The responsibility of the manager is to demonstrate that it is the employee's performance that is being criticized and not him/her as a person. Failure to handle this situation carefully may lead to an emotionally charged atmosphere that would not be helpful to both parties.

**STRATEGY 15: Keep senior management apprised of progress**

Having gone through all the 14 strategies, it is important that senior managers are briefed on the developments regarding the organizational role in dealing with improving poor performance in the department or section. Update on performance management is in the best in management. Managers need to understand the root of a problem before they can fully address it. Ability and motivation go together to impact performance and the most successful performance improvement efforts combines strategies for improving each. This creates a positive environment where people feel supported to reach their performance potential, and feel valued, knowing that the organization wants to find a good fit for their abilities. At times, your interventions may not be enough to salvage the situation. As long as you have given performance enhancement your best effort, and you have reasonably exhausted all your options, then you can feel confident that you are making the right decision if you do need to let someone go. Before going down that route, however, try the strategies discussed here and create a great work environment for your employees – one where their abilities are used to their full potential, and where good motivational techniques are used on a regular basis.

**Legal parameters for dealing with poor performance**

Organisations have had to take cognisance of the legal considerations when dealing with poor performance (Performance Management Manual: 2005). The Labour Relations Act, (Number 187 of 1995), recognises three separate grounds for dealing with poor performance and the consequences thereof. According to the Labour Relations Act, poor performance may result in dismissal for incapacity or misconduct. The code of good practice distinguishes between incapacity due to poor work performance and incapacity due to ill health or injury. Despite the LRA recognising incapacity for poor work performance as separate grounds for dismissal (which is distinct from misconduct), some employers tend to regard poor work performance as a form of misconduct and, consequently, deal with poor performance in accordance with the organisation's disciplinary code and procedure. Du Plessis et al (2001:277) acknowledge that it is difficult to distinguish poor work performance as a form of misconduct. There may be occasions where an employee fails to perform part of their duties. This may amount to poor performance or could also be categorised as misconduct. According to du Plessis et al (2001:277), factors to consider when dismissing an employee for incapacity or poor performance include the following:

- The status of the employee, his service record and length of service,
- The cause of poor performance or incapacity, and
- The possibility of a transfer to another job. In a place of poor performance, an assessment of appraisal will be required.

Du Plessis et. al (2001:279) provide guidelines for how to deal with poor performance or incapacity. These are discussed below.

### **Substantive Fairness**

The test for substantive fairness is whether the employer can fairly be expected to continue with the employment relationship, bearing in mind the merits of the case. Factors to be considered when dealing with substantive fairness include the following:

- Nature of the incapacity,
- The extent or degree of the employee's inability to perform,
- The likelihood of recovery or improvement,
- The possible effect on the employer's operation,
- The effect on the welfare, safety and morale of the employees,
- A period of absence in the case of incapacity; and the cause of poor performance.

### **Procedural Fairness**

The following factors have to be taken into consideration when dealing with procedural fairness:

- The onus is on the employer to ensure that reasonable steps have been taken to assist the employee;
- The employer should consult with the employee about his/her poor performance;
- Inform the employee of their poor performance and the possible consequences for non-improvement; and
- Provide training or consider placement elsewhere (du Plessis et al, 2001:280).

Before the employee is dismissed, a proper hearing should be conducted in order to afford him/her an opportunity to state his/her case. According to du Plessis et al (2001:280), the code of good practice must be borne in mind when dealing with capacity or poor performance. The authors further explain that dismissal for incapacity or poor performance must be substantive and procedurally fair as per the Labour Relations Act of 1995. Jackson (2000:87) states that before dismissal is considered, counseling should be used to bring the employee's performance to the required standard. He further argues that dismissal should be a last alternative after counseling. Counseling is concerned with a situation where the employer establishes the reasons for poor performance, and advises the employee how to overcome the identified problems (du Plessis et al 2001:278). In a case where an employee refuses assistance, the employer is not obliged to give such a person another chance. Such refusal then places the onus for performance improvement upon the employee (Dorherty & Horne, 2004:256). Du Plessis et al (2001:278) add that, if necessary, the supervisor or line manager, with the consent of the employee, should participate in the counseling to clarify mistakes and ensure that the employee understands where he/she falls short in his/her performance. It could be concluded that, when dealing with poor performance, managers should take cognisance of the legislation requirements (Labour Relations Act of 1995).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, an integrated model for the management of poor performance, based on the literature study, is presented. This model consists of 15 main strategies for the management of poor performance, and legal parameters such substantive and procedural fairness are deemed critical to the effective management of poor performance in the Public Service. According to du Plessis et al (2001:280), the code of good practice must be borne in mind when dealing with capacity or poor performance.

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