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INTRODUCTION TO TRANSLATING STRATEGIC PLANS INTO OPERATIONAL PLANS

One of the most frustrating aspects of government's commitment to the transformation of the public service from a rules-bound bureaucracy, concerned with the administration of rules and regulations, to a results orientated organisation, focused on effective and efficient service delivery to all citizens, has been the seeming inability to move from strategic planning to implementation, or to move from "knowing" to "doing".

This problem is by no means unique to the public service. It is prevalent wherever there is change. People, by nature, are reluctant to change and are much happier to remain in environments that are familiar to them and which do not pose a threat. They do not enjoy having their comfort zones disrupted. And this is precisely what happens when an existing dispensation has to be transformed.

Having to do something means exposing oneself to scrutiny and possible criticism and most people do not enjoy criticism. They tend to take it personally, instead of seeing it as a learning opportunity. They do not seem to understand that criticism of a piece of work they have produced does not necessarily reflect on their persons. People are scared to expose their ignorance or inability to do the things that will make the transformation of the public service a reality; not realising that learning begins with the statement "I don't know".

In an organisation as large as the public service, transformation is a massive exercise and will tend to be slow and ponderous. Government has established a body of enabling legislation, known as the Regulatory Framework, supported by a powerful set of management operations in the form of the Public Service Management Framework, to try and speed up the transformation process. However, until such time as all the individuals in the public service take ownership of the transformation process and embrace the need to provide appropriate services to all citizens, the transformation of the public service will happen in fits and starts.

When Louis Gerstner took over the leadership of IBM in the United States, many people predicted that he would not be able to turn the company around because it was too large and cumbersome and that IBM would remain a monolith in testimony to outworn "first wave" thinking that basically said bigger is better and that the company, not the customer, is king. This was translated by some pundits into the phrase: "elephants can't dance" meaning IBM was too large to respond effectively to the fast-changing business environment.

However, Gerstner disagreed and turned the phrase into a challenge by asking: "Who said elephants can't dance?" and today IBM is one of the most successful and competitive IT companies in the world and Gerstner gives all the credit to the people at IBM, whom he calls

IBMers. With remarkable humility he states that: “In the end an organisation is nothing more than the capacity of its people to create value.”

The trick is to get people to “create value”. But how? How does one get people to act or to do things that they have not done before? How does one move people from “knowing” to “doing”? The answer lies in helping them create meaning in their lives. Every one of us acts or behaves in ways to create meaning. We are constantly in search of meaning. Once people perceive certain actions as adding meaning or value to their lives, they will pursue them.

This is precisely what the *Batho Pele* Handbook on Service Delivery aims to achieve. Its main purpose is to inculcate a deeper understanding of *Batho Pele* among public servants and encourage them to embrace the transformation process and commit to improved service delivery to all citizens. This will help them discover meaning in delivering services to their customers and once this happens, they will be motivated to keep adding value, to their own lives as well as to the lives of their customers. Thus the value chain of service delivery will constantly be strengthened.

To make improved service delivery a reality, one of the very first things that has to happen is the translation of strategic plans into operational plans. If one cannot develop workable action plans, aligned to the strategic objectives, with clear activities and measurable standards, there is very little chance of significant change happening.

An example that may help to illustrate the need to perform a series of specific tasks in order to achieve an overall objective is that of changing the direction of an oil tanker. In order to achieve this, the captain must plan the new direction carefully and well in advance of the time he actually wants to be heading in a new direction, because it takes time for a vessel as large as an oil tanker to change course.

He has to spell out exactly what must be done, when it must be done and by whom it must be done. And it will involve every member of the crew, from the captain himself and the navigators and the pilot at the wheel on the bridge of the ship to the engineers in the engine room and the deckhands. All their actions must be integrated and aligned to the same objective of changing the ship’s course, otherwise the tanker will not veer from its present course.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

A strategic plan interprets an organisation’s vision and maps out the direction in which the organisation will move in pursuit of its vision. It defines the organisation’s strategic objectives and is subject to continual review based on the feedback received from the operational areas.

Unless the strategic plans are operationalised, strategic objectives cannot be achieved and there can be no forward movement and, despite the best intentions, service delivery will not happen. Strategic and operational plans are interdependent and are both critically important links in the value chain. However, as we have said before, any chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Thus it is not a case of either being more important than the other, but rather that they have to be equally strong to ensure powerful service delivery.

The aim of this guide is to explain the importance of operational plan as a means of achieving strategic objectives and to provide you with a frame of reference for formulating operational plans.

This guide will:

- ❑ explain what an operational plan is;
- ❑ give you guidelines for translating strategic plans into operational plans;
- ❑ highlight the objectives, outcomes and key performance indicators of operational plans;
- ❑ elaborate the links to legislation and to *Batho Pele*;
- ❑ identify some of the challenges to developing operational plans and the responses to these challenges;
- ❑ take you through a step-by-step guide on how to develop and implement an operational plan;
- ❑ offer some key considerations to think about during the process; and
- ❑ refer you to additional resources and training opportunities that are available in this field.

It is advisable to read this guide in conjunction with Chapter One of the *Batho Pele Handbook*.

WHAT IS AN OPERATIONAL PLAN?

Operational plans provide definitions and guidance on specific issues that everyone in the organisation can understand and relate to. An operational plan gives life to a strategic plan by translating the strategic objectives identified in the strategic plan into:

- ❑ key result areas; and
- ❑ activities with measurable standards;

In addition it identifies:

- ❑ key performance indicators; and the
- ❑ persons responsible for performing the activities.

Operational plans must be monitored constantly to ensure that they remain aligned to the strategic plan's objectives.

Both the strategic and operational planning process should be integrated with all other organisational processes.

TRANSLATING STRATEGIC GOALS TO OPERATIONAL PLANS AS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Translating strategic plans into operational plans offers you the opportunity to learn about service delivery and what needs to be done to make it a reality. The learning opportunities include finding out:

- ❑ About the context of transformation and aligning key result areas to strategic objectives.
- ❑ How to move from “knowing” to “doing”.
- ❑ What being accountable and responsible means.
- ❑ How to deliver against customer expectations.
- ❑ How to meet expected standards of service delivery.
- ❑ What competencies you need to acquire.
- ❑ What your department’s shortcomings are.
- ❑ The capacity and strengths and weaknesses of the various team members to deliver against expected outcomes.
- ❑ What is realistic and affordable in terms of service delivery.
- ❑ Who your customers are and who the most important customers are.

GUIDELINES TO TRANSLATING STRATEGIC GOALS TO OPERATIONAL PLANS

The following guidelines will help to ensure that operational plans are effective and implementable:

- ❑ Ensure that the Key Result Areas (KRAs) identified in the operational plan are aligned to the component’s and the organisational/departmental strategic objectives. People at the coalface sometimes lose sight of the strategic objectives and, when frustrated by a seeming lack of progress, can sometimes adopt the attitude that any action is better than no action and changing their KRAs to suit the situation. This could result in them doing things that have nothing to do with achieving organisational strategic objectives or that retard or even prevent the achievement of the strategic objectives.

Thus, care should be taken to ensure that mechanisms are in place to monitor that KRAs remain aligned to the strategic objectives.

- ❑ Make sure that KRAs are tangible and “doable” and that they do not simply refer to vague areas of responsibility. For example, in a hospital or office complex, “Having responsibility for safety and security” is not a KRA. It is a responsibility. The related KRA may be something like: “To identify and implement a security system that will ensure the safety of staff.”
- ❑ Avoid the temptation of being too ambitious when identifying KRAs. As mentioned, KRAs should be realistic and achievable and should be limited to not more than five for any one person. One or two modest achievements are far better than failing to achieve some grand plan. The “small steps” approach is highly recommended when defining KRAs. Seeing progress is a great motivator, whereas failure will destroy staff morale.

- ❑ Set realistic timeframes. Avoid forcing staff to work under undue pressure. Clearly there will be emergencies and crisis situations when you and other members of the team will have to work under pressure, but this should be the exception rather than the norm.
- ❑ Set S.M.A.R.T. standards for each KRA. In other words, the standards must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. Refer to the guide on Setting Service Standards for more information on how to set service standards.
- ❑ Delegate effectively by ensuring that the people to whom tasks or KRAs are delegated have the necessary competencies and personality traits or potential to handle the job. Where you believe that they might not have the necessary competencies, but that they have the potential to do the job, ensure that appropriate development plans are put in place, in consultation with the people concerned, to ensure that they acquire the relevant skills, knowledge and attributes.
- ❑ Communicate effectively when developing the operational plan and ensure that everyone understands it and how it will help achieve organisational strategic objectives. This will ensure their buy-in to the plan and gain their commitment to service delivery. Communication is key to the success of operational plans. By involving everyone and listening carefully to their inputs, they will feel important and take ownership of the process. Once they perceive meaning for themselves in the implementation of the plan, their commitment will be unwavering.

THE OBJECTIVE OF TRANSLATING STRATEGIC GOALS TO OPERATIONAL PLANS

The main objective of translating strategic to operational plans is to improve service delivery by achieving the organisational strategic objectives. Other objectives are to:

- ❑ deliver on organisational mandates – to move from “knowing to doing”;
- ❑ identify areas that will have the greatest impact on improving service delivery;
- ❑ align daily activities with strategic objectives;
- ❑ institutionalise an accountability framework so that managers and staff are held accountable for service delivery;
- ❑ facilitate performance management by ensuring that all staff have agreed tasks with measurable standards;
- ❑ promote staff development to ensure that they have the capacity to achieve their delegated tasks;
- ❑ evaluate performance against strategic objectives and to publish these in annual reports; and
- ❑ ensure value for money and the optimal utilisation of resources.

LINKS TO LEGISLATION

The Public Service Regulations, 2001

The Minister for the Public Service and Administration has in terms of the Public Service Act, made the Public Service Regulations. In order to give practical effect to the Constitutional principles all employees are expected to comply with the terms provided for in the Regulations and expected to perform him/her duties to the best of ability.

Part 111 of the Public Service Regulations stipulate that an executing authority shall and implement a strategic plan for his/her department.

The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service

“The White Paper on the Transformation of the public service (WPTPS), published on 24 November 1995, sets out eight transformation priorities, amongst which Transforming Service Delivery is the key. This is because a transformed South African public service will be judged on one criterion above all: its effectiveness in delivering services which meet the basic needs of all South African citizens.”

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LINKS TO *BATHO PELE*

The purpose of the *Batho Pele* White Paper is to provide a policy framework and a practical implementation strategy for the transformation of public service delivery. It focuses on “how” public services are provided, rather than on “which” services are provided and its main intent is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the way in which the services are delivered.

One of the salient points emphasised in the *Batho Pele* White Paper is that public services are not a privilege in a civilised, democratic society. They are the right and legitimate expectation of every citizen.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The following tangible evidence will indicate that strategic plans have been translated into effective operational plans:

- performance agreements are in place;
- job descriptions are in place;
- an affective performance management system is implemented;

- ❑ S.M.A.R.T. standards are implemented;
- ❑ customer complaints decrease; and
- ❑ customer satisfaction levels increase.

OUTCOMES

The effective implementation of operational plans will have the following outcomes:

- ❑ the achievement of organisational, provincial and national strategic objectives;
- ❑ strategy will be turned into action;
- ❑ improved service delivery;
- ❑ incremental improvement in service delivery standards;
- ❑ service awards achieved for excellent service delivery;
- ❑ greater commitment by all staff at all levels in the organisation;
- ❑ high levels of customer satisfaction are recorded;
- ❑ improved job satisfaction and staff morale; and
- ❑ better and more effective staff.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Any intervention to improve service delivery will have its risks and challenges. Rather than seeing these as deterrents to action, they should be viewed as opportunities to enhance performance. Developing operational plans from strategic plans may present the following challenges:

Challenge:

Operational plans often entail a change in the way things are done, which can lead to uncertainty and even resistance amongst staff.

Response:

Clarify the operational plan and explain how it relates to the organisational, provincial and national strategic objectives. Help people see the “big picture” and discover meaning in their roles. They will then tend to perceive the change as an exciting challenge and opportunity to add value, rather than as a daunting prospect that should be resisted.

Challenge:

An associated risk is that people may change Key Result Areas if they are not achievable or unrealistic.

Response:

Set realistic targets and make sure that people have the level of competence of to carry out the tasks. Remember the need for good, clear communication and the “small steps” approach.

Challenge:

People may feel that their mistakes will be very visible and that their incompetencies revealed through the tasks delegated to them in the operational plan.

Response:

Ensure that developmental plans are put in place where needed and encourage staff to see this as a growth opportunity that could enrich their lives and enhance their jobs and career prospects.

OPERATIONAL PLANS

STEP 1**CONFIRM THE STRATEGIC PLAN**

An organisations strategic plan provides the direction for all components, teams and individuals within the organisation. As a starting point, ensure that the component's or institution's strategic plan is sound and addresses customer needs and is aligned to the departmental strategic objectives.

A strategic plan is a high level, integrated plan that forms the basis for all other planning. It describes the organisational vision and sets its strategic direction. It states the values and guiding principles, which support the organisational culture. It identifies the fundamental strategic objectives that the organisation seeks to achieve.

The responsibility to ensure that the strategic objectives are achieved rests with all staff within the department.

STEP 2**DEVELOP A PERFORMANCE/ACTION PLAN (OPERATIONAL PLAN)**

The attached diagram, "From Strategy to Action" illustrates how strategic objectives are cascaded down to lower levels in terms of Key Result Areas (KRAs) and activities that will give effect to the strategic plan.

The second diagram, "Performance/Action Plan" illustrates how the KRAs and duties are incorporated in a performance or action plan. It is important here to notice that each KRA is broken down into activities and that each activity has four S.M.A.R.T. standards in terms of quantity, quality, time and costs. In addition the person responsible for the activity must be identified as must be the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) so that there is a mechanism for monitoring progress.

The last column in the performance/action plans makes provision for comments, mainly related to possible risks and contingencies related to that particular activity. It is important that the responsible person and the person delegating the task manage the risks. The best way to do this is to identify risks in advance and develop strategies of coping with these risks

ACTION

ACTION PLAN

Strategic objectives should be translated into KRAs for managers - KRAs are the “must achieve” tangible objectives. They focus on the organisation’s output – on improving service delivery. As mentioned, each KRA must in turn be broken down into related activities that have to be undertaken to achieve the KRA.

For example, a hospital manager may have as a KRA to identify and develop a system that will guarantee the safety and security of staff and patients. This could be broken down into the following activities:

- Gate and perimeter security.
- Parking attendants.
- Night guards.
- Fire drills and extinguishers.
- Crisis communications.
- Building maintenance.

Standards have to be allocated for each of these activities. For example, if we take the activity related to appointing parking attendants, the standards might be:

- Quantity: Appoint two shifts of five parking attendants/car guards.
- Quality: They must comply with national norms in terms of qualifications and experience.
- Time: They must be appointed by the end of January 2003.
- Cost: The cost must be within the budgetary provision for this item.

Prioritise the KRAs

KRAs should be prioritised in order of the impact that each will have on service delivery.

Set standards

Standards should be set for each activity under each KRA. They should be:

- S.M.A.R.T; and
- aligned to the standards specified in the Service Delivery Charter.

See guides on Developing a Service Delivery Charter and Setting Service Standards

Define Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Each KRA must have at least one performance indicator, which is a specific measure that helps to determine how well one is performing in a given KRA. It is the measure for that particular KRA.

The question one may need to ask here is:

- “What tangible evidence will demonstrate that the particular KRA has been achieved?”

Institute risk management measures

Identify possible risks that may be associated with KRAs and build contingencies to deal with those appropriately. In some instances risks may result from changes in the environment (an external locus of control) and this can affect achievement of KRAs.

Enter into performance agreements

Once KRAs have been set and agreed with managers (Senior Management Service), they are required to enter into Performance Agreements. The Performance Agreement serves as an instrument for monitoring individual performance. In addition it identifies training and developmental needs.

STEP 3**TRANSLATE KEY RESULT AREAS INTO ACTIVITIES FOR LOWER LEVEL STAFF**

Once managers have identified their KRAs and related activities and agreed on their Performance Agreements, they need to delegate the activities their subordinates. In this way their KRAs are cascaded to lower levels in the organisation and everyone works towards achieving the organisational strategic objectives.

STEP 4**DELEGATE ACTIVITIES** (refer to guide on How to delegate)

In the process of delegating activities, the persons to whom tasks are delegated must be consulted and the relevance of the task in the larger scheme of things must be carefully explained, to ensure buy-in and commitment, but more importantly to ensure job satisfaction and service delivery in the spirit of *Batho Pele*.

When delegating ensure that staff have the required competencies or show potential so that relevant training and development can be instituted. (See also the guide on How to delegate.)

STEP 5**IMPLEMENT – “DO”**

Once the action plans have been developed, it is advisable to have them agreed on and signed off with the immediate supervisor. What remains is critical – you have spent much time and energy in both the strategic and operational planning processes – now work to the plan and “make it happen”

As mentioned, if you have explained to each person their significance in the larger scheme of things and helped them to discover meaning in what they have undertaken to do, they will be enthusiastic and will want to do it. This is the best way of ensuring action. All you, as the manager or supervisor will need to do is monitor performance.

STEP 6**MONITOR AND EVALUATE**

Monitor performance against plans the agreed plans.

Performance management is key to successful implementation.

(Refer also to the guides on Self Assessment and Peer Review.)

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- ❑ Sound strategic plans need to be in place before they can be translated into effective operational plans.
- ❑ Establishing baseline performance standards will help you to focus on targets.
- ❑ Help people discover meaning in their tasks by helping them to see the significance of their roles in the bigger picture.
- ❑ When allocating key result areas consider and use the strengths of teams that would contribute towards the achievement of the strategic objectives.
- ❑ KRAs are critical – they are the “must achieve” elements of operational plans.
- ❑ It is critical to have performance indicators.
- ❑ Link operational plans to total quality management – see it as an opportunity to focus on service delivery issues that have an impact on customers.
- ❑ Communicate carefully and clearly.
- ❑ Give constant constructive feedback and reinforcement.
- ❑ Take “small steps”, especially at the beginning.
- ❑ Adopt an incremental approach to improving service delivery.

USEFUL REFERENCES

You may find the following references useful for further reading on *Batho Pele* and service delivery improvement:

- ❑ The South African Constitution, 1996
- ❑ The Public Service Act, No 103 of 1994 as amended
- ❑ The Public Service Regulations, 2001 as amended
- ❑ The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, No 3 of 2000
- ❑ The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service, 1995
- ❑ The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (*Batho Pele*), 1997
- ❑ Measuring organisational improvement impact; R.Y. Chang; 1997