2009

Executive development: learning from effective practices in the Papua New Guinea public service

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ABSTRACT

Human resource development is vital to the capacity building of developing nations, and the development of an effective Public Service (PS) is one of the key building blocks for nationhood. The Papua New Guinea Public Service (PNGPS) has undertaken a number of activities that focus on ED. This paper reports on research undertaken into the nature and effectiveness of such Executive Development (ED) interventions. In-depth interviews were conducted with the most senior executives in the PNGPS to gauge their views of ED in their respective organizations. This study is the first of its kind. The paper focuses on the effective practices that are used to contribute to ED and makes suggestions for further improvements.

Keywords: Management Education and Development – executive training, human resource development.

BACKGROUND

Organizations are increasingly using Executive Development (ED) initiatives as a means of enhancing their capability to realize their business goals (Kim, 2007). Therefore, executives are a critical resource of the organization and companies invest substantial time, money and effort in ED programmes (Brown, 2006). However, success will only occur if ED strategies are adapted and implemented in ways that are congruent with the changing needs and expectations of organizations.

A key challenge for the Papua New Guinea Public Service (NGPS) is to ensure that the basic public services are delivered to the rural majority in a timely and effective manner. Most of PNG's population lives in rural communities based on the traditional village structure and dependent on subsistence farming supplemented by cash cropping. Less than 15% of Papua New Guineans live in urban areas

Heads of departments and agencies and their senior staff are required to manage their departments and produce results expected by the Government and citizens. Development of executives in the PNGPS is thus a critical area. Efficient and effective delivery of government services as a result of ED means better services for the broader community thus fostering sustainable improvements in the quality of life of Papua New Guineans. The question then is, 'How do PNGPS organizations create executive development strategies and programmes that have real impact and contribute to capacity building at individual, organization and national level?' This study investigated the ED interventions and their effectiveness in contributing to capacity building in the PNG Public Service. In particular, whether ED is building the executive capabilities needed to achieve the organizations' strategic objectives and

whether these can be improved. The study reports on interviews with some of the most senior staff in the PNGPS.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PNG PUBLIC SERVICE

Papua New Guinea practises a Constitutional Parliamentary System of Government, which follows the Westminster System. The three arms of government under the Westminster Model are: legislative, executive and judiciary. The Public Service exists within the Executive to put into effect the decisions of the Parliament.

The Public Sector of PNG, like any other public sector in other countries, is charged with an enormous task to manage. It is the largest employer in the country. Currently, there are 30 national departments and agencies, 56 statutory bodies and 20 provincial administrations including the national capital district.

The latest figure from Alesco/Concept Government Payroll (DoF, 2009) shows that there are 81,081 public servants within central government and provincial administration as of June, 2009. Out of this total figure, at least 1,948 are holding contracts on Grade 13 and above which could be classified as senior public servants or executives (Dept. of Finance, 2009). However, this does not portray the exact number of those constituting the roles of executives, as the contract officers in the PNGPS also includes those holding supervisory roles which are not classified as executives in this study.

Capacity building has come to dominate the Public Sector Reform movement in PNG. It has been purported that the PNG Public Sector reforms are being implemented to achieve excellence in the performance and delivery of government services to the people of PNG within the resources (human and financial) capacity of the nation (PSRMU, 2003:11). Hence, the Government of PNG (GoPNG) has now taken HRD as one of its priority areas and has now invested more money and time in developing its public servants. The development partners such as Australia and New Zealand also support and fund other capacity building activities in the PNGPS that complement the programmes funded by GoPNG. The Government of Australia (GoA) is by far the biggest donor of aid programmes in PNG. Among other programmes supported by GoA, the Australian Development Scholarships (ADS) are an example where many PNG public servants are awarded scholarships annually to undertake various long-term programmes in Australia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'executive' is used here in preference to 'manager', as the key subjects of this study involves those senior officers or public servants in the top level of management, who are involved with more strategic and conceptual matters with less attention to day-to-day details. These people direct the management of the organization or a major division/department of the organization, set policies and goals, and have extensive discretionary decision-making authority. Their development is critical to their performance and the effectiveness of their work unit.

Executive development thus refers to the activities involved in enhancing senior staff ability to carry out top-level roles in the organization. Some key skills for executives to have include understanding the external environment of the organization, leadership, strategic planning, financial forecasting and analysis, organizing, program planning and human resource management (McNamara, 2008).

Executive Development rapidly moved up corporate agendas as a factor that may create competitive advantage in the late 1990s (Goodge, 1998; Luoma, 2005). ED is concerned with improving a senior manager's performance in their present roles and preparing them for greater responsibilities in the future (Armstrong, 2006: 591). It has been described by Mumford and Gold (2004) as 'an attempt to improve managerial effectiveness through a learning process'.

Theoretical models of ED which focus on the linkage between strategic management and management development are relatively few. The three most notable are: Mumford's (1993) Approaches to management development; Burgoyne's (1988) Levels of maturity of organizational management development; and Luoma's (2005) three-stage management development model. Mumford's (1993) model and Burgoyne's (1988) model clarify the anatomy of the strategic linkage.

However, for any ED programme to be effective, organizations need to adopt a systematic approach to developing not only the current executive but senior potential managers. It follows that organizations need to create custom-designed ED strategies, systems and programmes that build the executive capabilities needed to achieve their strategic objectives. The question then is: How do organizations create executive development strategies and programmes that have real impact that contribute to capacity building at individual, organization and national level?

A recent study by Suutari and Viitala (2008) on Management Development of Senior Executives, found that dominance of traditional short-term management development activities continues, while more longitudinal methods emphasizing experience-based learning were reported to be more effective in supporting the development of senior managers. But a systemic approach to development of executives must also mean that the organizations must best target the right development interventions

to the right individuals or executives. Bhatta (2002), in reviewing practices of senior management development across the upper echelons of the public services of major jurisdictions, found that while the need to develop leaders is universally recognized by governments, there are still considerable gaps in the development function. The gaps relate to identification and targeting of individuals for the right interventions.

D'Netto, Bakas and Bordia (2008), in their study to assess the current state of management in Australia identified and used variables which focus on what happens before and after learning occurs, specially issues which deal with pre-programme phase and, and post-programme components which deal with follow-up activities. The antecedent components included organizational learning culture, individual initiative, top management support and link to corporate strategy. Post-programme components included post-program evaluation, line manager support and opportunities for skill utilization. Kirkpatrick's (1994) four-level training evaluation model and Phillip's (1991) five-level return-on-investment (ROI) model was used. The study found that link to corporate strategy and opportunities for skill utilization were the two variables most closely associated with management development effectiveness.

A systematic and an extensive review of the literature on best practice organizations was conducted by Leskiw and Singh (2007). Their aim was to propose a series of steps or practices that can be used in developing and assessing their leadership and management development strategies and programmes. Six key factors were found to be vital for effective leadership or management development. These factors are:

    I. a thorough needs assessment;
   II. the selection of a suitable audience;
 III. the design of an appropriate infrastructure to support the initiative;
 IV. the design and implementation of an entire learning system;
  V. and evaluation system; and
 VI. corresponding actions toward success and improve on deficiencies.

Most of the findings in the literature on preferred executive development programmes, the factors associated with executive development effectiveness and practices, appear to be related to the effective practices that have emerged from the interviews in the PNGPS. The findings of the interviews will be discussed later in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The target group for the in-depth interviews in this study were those at the top executive level in all sectors of the PNG Public Service. The interviews sought very senior executives' views on ED within their respective organizations with particular emphasis on the type of interventions and their impact on the organization. In other words, to seek whether these interventions were effective in contributing to capacity building of the executives, the organization and the Public Service as a whole.

The sample of the study for in-depth interviews consisted of nineteen Public Sector organizations in Papua New Guinea, all based in Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea, as identified in the Government and Statutory Body Listings of the White Pages of the 2008 PNG Telephone Directory. The contact information was also gained from the same source. Of the twenty participants interviewed, three were females while remaining seventeen were male. The range of positions held by the participants include: Department Heads (DHs) or their deputies, Chief executive Officers (CEOs), Managing Directors (MDs) or their deputies, Human Resource (HR) executives. They represented all sectors of the government, namely Administration, Social, Law and Order, Economic and Infrastructure, and Provincial.

The review of literature on strategic human resource development (SHRD), more specifically on ED, helped inform the development of the interview questions which were reviewed by an expert panel of methodologists. The questions were designed to help the interviewees express their views on ED, organizational support for ED and the impacts of ED interventions on the executives, the organization and the PS and involved questions about their own development experiences and perceptions of development opportunities currently available in the PNGPS, including on and off the job development, short and long courses and donor-funded capacity building activities such as aid-funded study overseas. They were also asked to volunteer suggestions on any improvement in policy and practice on SHRD of executives in the PS. Most interviews were tape-recorded and the interviewer also took field notes.

All interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. Transcriptions were read to obtain an overall flavour of the interviewees' responses. Next to each line or paragraph, labels were generated to reflect the initial coding and general category schemes were developed. NVivo 8 was used to explore the themes by creating tree nodes. Cases were created to gather demographic information pertaining to each respective organization, which included attributes such as type of organization, sector and location. Attributes were also developed to compare cases using demographic information. Further research with human resources professionals and others in the PNGPS will triangulate their perceptions in relation to the contribution of ED to the factors identified by Leskiw and Singh (2007) as vital to effective leadership and management development and to broader organisational effectiveness and capacity building.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Although several themes emerged this paper focuses on the *Effective Practices* that contribute to ED. The five common categories under effective practices as identified the senior executives were: Retreat Training and Workshops, the Graduate Development Scheme, a stringent selection process and criteria, review of terms and conditions, and supporting infrastructure.

Retreat training and workshop: Almost all participants identified that having annual Retreat training or workshops away from their work sites for a few days, were a way forward for their executives and the organization. They adopted this intervention as opposed to having the workshop in the work location for various reasons: so that they could concentrate and not be disturbed by telephone calls or unscheduled appointments; the length or duration of the workshop is shorter hence does not cause major setbacks on work demand; and they are able to learn new skills or knowledge from external or internal resource persons brought in to run workshops on topics of importance.

> '…well, we don't want to be disturbed by the ongoing telephone calls, and people such as politicians, *wantoks (a word used in one of the national languages of PNG – New Guinea Pidgin which denotes anyone who is a relative, who speaks the same language as you, and who comes from the same region or province)*, friends unexpectedly calling in for a casual chat……we want to concentrate and see whether we've achieved our objectives for the year, and work on our annual plans from the lessons learnt… good to have consultants coming in to impart new knowledge to us…have learnt a lot from these workshops… have implemented changes at work. ..the impacts are immediate , so we're grateful.' (Organization O).

> 'The timing and location of retreat workshops are perfect for us….we are logical in our thinking, and more strategic.. able to think analytically on ways to improve our divisions and the departments…yes, a lot better than if we were having the workshop within the work premises and if the workshop was for a much longer period of time…..cannot afford to send our executives away for a longer periods of time….especially for long term studies which would cause a lot of staffing setbacks.' (Oranization E).

Graduate Development Programme (GDP): this programme has recently been introduced in the PNGPS in 2008 therefore not all departments and agencies have introduced it. However, for those that have implemented the programme and even for those who have yet to adopt the programme, have spoken highly of it. They see that it prepares the graduates to be better personnel through career development into executive positions. They go through on-the-job training which includes job

rotation in all the units of the organization thus giving them the advantage of understanding how the organization and the Public Service functions (DPM, 2007).

'We have the GDP programme in place now ….a similar programme was adopted before independence (1975) but abolished shortly after independence … produced some of PNG's top bureaucrats, politicians, diplomats and academics portrayed as role models, mentors and ambassadors of PNG … good to see it reintroduced but departments and agencies must have good Exit Policies and their manpower ceiling within budget. ' (Organization N).

'…first batch of graduates almost coming to the end of their probationary period … can proudly say they're exceptionally good … can already see them as high-growth potential executives. They have been put on job rotation in all units within headquarters and provincial offices…. only problem is that we do not lose them to our competitors .. so must retain them by offering them good incentives - a concern in the PNGPS because incentives are not competitive to their counterparts in private sector….if the PNGPS wants to retain these high-growth potential executives, then it must review the terms and conditions. ' (Organization L)

Stringent selection process and criteria: All the participants indicated that a systematic approach to HRD was a very crucial factor in that the right executives were identified for the right type of ED intervention. However, thy also identified anomalies that could be improved.

'I make it my business to ensure that every process - training or recruitment, is strategic… no 'wantok' system involved….a thorough Training Needs Analysis (TNA) is conducted to identify areas of strength and weaknesses – and whether training and development is the solution to the weaknesses…. setback in post-program evaluation …no evaluation method to measure effectiveness of ED intervention…we simply rely on Staff Performance Appraisal (SPA) to measure performance of staff and take it from there.' (Organization P)

'..PNGPS should have competency framework for executives to guide departments and agencies in identifying relevant programmes of training….currently no policy framework for ED and no competency framework.…inconsistencies in the job descriptions for the executives…managerial and leadership capabilities and requirements of executives different from each others…so we devise our own policy to suit our organization.' (Organization G).

'…PNGPS should review its policies on overseas training - ADS awards… a lot of good public servants, former awardees of ADS, with a wealth of knowledge and skills resigned due to reasons such as: not given the opportunity to utilize the skills, made redundant or displaced while on studies, lack of proper facilities to utilize skills etc.…so I'm beginning to wonder and

ask: is the current selection process and criteria for long-term formal training (overseas and in-country) strategic?' (Organization R)

'..Public Services General Order (PSGO) 5 on Training outlines selection procedures and criteria for short term and long term training, that training be relevant to the job requirements of an officer and be aligned to organization's goals and objectives but doesn't specify procedures after training – career path, future employability etc…only requires training evaluation at reaction level…so. what good is the training if they cannot utilize their skills and they leave the organization….no return on investment… so here we have our own policy addressing post-programme issues.' (Organization B)

Review of terms and conditions: This was raised by almost all participants as having an impact on ED. The issue was also raised in the discussions on other factors. Those participants from the statutory bodies and authorities use this practice as well as rewarding bonus for success, as they have a different policy on terms and conditions and have the mandatory to do so, unlike the national departments and agencies where terms and conditions are standard and fixed.

'…if the PNGPS wants to attract, develop and motivate its current and future executives, it must change its culture and mentality…must review terms and conditions for public servants – more importantly, the executives…because the executives have the 'bird's eye view' of the organization. They hold the organization in their hands – they know where it has gone wrong and where it is heading, and how to make it a better organization.' (Organization A)

Supporting infrastructure: Most participants identified that there are systems and structures in place to facilitate individual and collective growth and development. There is continuous upskilling and nurturing of executives who are given the opportunity to utilize their new skills and knowledge. A very few admitted that there was very little or no upskilling and nurturing of executives. Most executives are left to fend for themselves, learn by observation and experience

A policy framework for ED is necessary, as it will determine the objects, composition and structure, operation, mobility and management of the executives. The main governing legislation of the PNGPS is the Public Services Management Act (PSMA) 1995 (GoPNG, 1995). The PSGO 9 (DPM, 2002) – specifies the provision of executives and their appointments, (although it does not specify their development) denotes the important roles they play in the PNGPS.   The PSGO derives its laws and provisions from the main legislation, the PSMA. Therefore, if there is an indicative description of executives in the PSGO, then a policy framework should be drawn up to guide the PS organizations in managing ED.

Because of the absence of such coherent policy framework on the notion of ED, there is a lot of inconsistency in how the PS organizations manage their executives and ED interventions are done on ad-hoc basis – put simply, there are no policies or procedures for the nurturing and progression of executives. This is a crucial area because where PS executives are already trained and have the necessary skills and competencies, the issue is not one of lack of capacity but rather it is one of harnessing the capacity.

It was found that although long-term formal training is a prevalent way of development, most senior officers preferred short-term interventions. About 50% of those senior officers obtained their postgraduate qualifications from overseas institutions through various scholarships but mostly under the ADS awards. However, they now have a different view to this intervention. For instance, the PNGPS has evolved from a simple organization to a more complex organization. It was possible to send away executives for longer duration of time without having any major setbacks on staffing, but it is not impossible to do so now due to more complex work demands and other budgetary implications. However, other modes of study were recommended. In fact, four of the participants had obtained Australian postgraduate qualifications (MBA) through distance mode via offshore centres.

There is lack of an evaluation system in the PNGPS to monitor and evaluate if the ED interventions are effective. Relying on the normal SPA is not sufficient enough to say that the training was effective. Improvement on performance could be due to other factors and not merely on training. More so, it would be difficult to assess if the officer has undertaken more than one type of ED intervention. The ADS awards continue to be the main HRD programme by GoA, who spends millions of dollars on these programmes. However, there still remains to be setbacks in these activities in terms of coordination, monitoring and evaluation. Previous tracer studies and surveys carried out on the former Australian Development Scholarship (ADS) awardees highlighted gaps on their employability and transfer of skills upon return to their organizations, absence of relevant HR Policies, training not linked to organization objectives, and the performance of the ADS schemes especially in the Pubic Sector training and development arena of PNG (PATTAF, 2006).

The perceptions of the senior executives in this study show a relationship with the findings from previous studies on ED effectiveness. For instance, the preference for short-term interventions than long-term formal training, a systematic approach to HRD where right individuals are identified for the right interventions, aligning training to department's goals and objectives and supporting infrastructures in place.

Thus, In terms of Liskiw and Singh's (2007) key factors contributing to successful executive development programs, there appears to be little or no needs assessment, issues with the selection of the most suitable candidates, a less than holistic approach to development and little evaluation to inform improvements. However, infrastructure appears adequate at this stage. Further research may support or disconfirm these findings.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Due to financial, logistical, time and practical reasons, interviews were only conducted in Port Moresby, the capital city of PNG. Accessibility to reach the Provincial Administrators in the provinces is difficult and many do not have internet/e-mail access; telephone is costly and mail is slow.

A further possible limitation concerns the small size of the group of informants involved in the investigation. Though it is not the intention of the interpretivist researcher to seek to generalize beyond the sample group being studied, it is valuable if the sample group is large enough to be broadly representative of a range of other settings. However, it must be noted that the heads of organizations in the PNGPS only represent a small percentage of the total Public Servants in the country. Hence, the small number in the study population and the sample size.

The most important implication in this paper is practical in nature because the PS organizations can use the effective practices identified in this paper to guide them in developing and implementing policies on SHRD of their executives. These can also be applied in PS organizations in other smaller Pacific Island nations who share common structures and systems, cultures etc. as PNG since there is no other study conducted in this research area elsewhere in the smaller Pacific Island nations (PINs). To the development partners, they can focus on programmes that would address the skills and competency gaps of executives in the PNG Public Service rather than focusing on professional development only.

Further research could emanate from this study. Rather than combining all sectors of the government in one study, each sector should be studied separately. For example, a comparative analysis study should be carried out to compare the common themes or effective practices between the three sectors of the PS structure, i. e. the national departments, statutory bodies and authorities and the provincial administrations. Furthermore, another comparative analysis study could be conducted on the effective practices adopted by PS organizations in smaller PINs such as Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands to compare the common themes and practices. Another area of interest could be finding out the motivational factors in the retention of PS executives in the PNGPS.

CONCLUSION

Executive development will continue to be a key organizational issue in the PNGPS. Developing the executives is a critical issue in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Within the national departments, statutory bodies/authorities and provincial administrations, the heads of the organizations and their executives are required to manage their organizations and produce results expected by the Government and citizens.

Developing executive competence is one thing, but if the enabling structures, systems, political and socio-economic environment does not support it, then all will be lost and efforts invested in it cannot be sustained and nurtured in the long term. If the PNGPS wants to attract, develop and motivate its current and future leaders, then it must change its culture and mentality, and review the terms and conditions for executives. It must do so without delay before losing the potential leaders to the private sector.

Governments of PNG and Australia should review their policies on ADS awards and focus on programmes that would address the skills and competency gaps of executives in the PNG Public Service rather than focusing on professional development only, or consider other modes of study such as flexible learning through distance mode via offshore campuses. This would alleviate the problem of prolonged staff absence from work, which causes staffing setbacks. Therefore, for any ED intervention to be effective, the PNGPS need to take stock of its current practices, policies, systems, and political and socio-economic environment.

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