

The Six poisons of Government Service

An Article by Derek Hendrikz © 2003

URL: www.derekhendrikz.com
E-mail: hello@derekhendrikz.com
(T) +27 82 781 4049



In most countries, most citizens complain that Government Service is poor and ineffective. If this is the case, we need to find the reasons. In my fourteen years of experience in working with the Public Sector, I've come up with six reasons, six pointers, on why service excellence is lacking in the Government Sector. I call these the 'Six Poisons of Government Service'.

The first poison relates to internal focus. There tends to be a much bigger focus on what's going on inside the organization than on what's going on in the outside. Life in the Government is all about promotions, and internal politics. You need to impress a lot of people, have lots of 'Highly Confidential' files on you table, and attend lots of meetings. If you want to climb the ladder of status and importance, you need to play the game right. To do this you need to move in the right circles, and say the right things to the right people. The playing field is set in the world of strategic sessions, task teams and work-groups - a sure recipe to get nothing done. But then again, it's not about getting something done or about client service, these things simply don't add to the employee's importance. Being important is at the core of Government employee needs. How many times have we become frustrated with the front desk attendant who puts up the 'CLOSED' sign at exactly 5 seconds to 10 "I'm sorry its teatime, you have to come back at 10:30". My frustration becomes her delight. One cannot help to wonder if her senior manager had to request a specific service, if she would have put up the 'CLOSED' sign in his face. Highly unlikely! You see her future is dependant on the way she treats her superiors and not the way she treats her customers. With us, the customers, her importance is derived from the power of demonstrating her control. In the private sector customers have the power to kill a company. In the public sector a specific Departments claim to a higher budget is often determined by the helplessness and dependency of it customers. This leads us to the second 'poison' of Government Service.

The greatest difference between Public and Private Sector is located in one word, SURVIVAL. We, the customers, are the lifeblood of the private enterprise. If the private sector does not meet our every specific need, they will not survive. The private sector has no official protection, if they don't deliver, their competition will kill them. The public sector on the other hand has no competition and their sponsorship is guaranteed. This condition also applies within Departments where sections are rarely closed down, even long after their reason for existence has expired. These sections are often artificially kept alive, like a brain-dead patient on a heart and lung machine. The higher the intensity of competition, the more effective organizations become. With the addition of Cell C to the Cellular triad in South Africa, we've seen a tremendous up-heal in special offers and promises to do more for the customer. There is literally a battle going on within the cellular industry to keep customers happy.

Competition forces them to be highly effective. On the other hand TELCOM is the sole supplier of landlines within South Africa, leaving the customer with very little bargaining power for a better or more effective service.

The third 'poison' of Government Service relates to the internal benefits of not delivering. In other words, it pays to be ineffective. I will use a hypothetical example to illustrate my point. Mr. M has recently been appointed to distribute toilette paper throughout the XYZ Department. His job is simple. He needs to get three quotations and then make the necessary arrangements with the cheapest supplier. The arrangements will include the delivering of toilette rolls to the various departments, where the store clerk will issue them to the different toilettes. For Mr. M to be effective is easy. However, the question is not whether he can be effective, but rather what's in it for him! In which ways will Mr. M benefit from the effective distribution of toilette paper? The answer: not very much. On the contrary, if he continuous doing his work in this manner, chances are good that he will stay a clerk for life. The secret of climbing the bureaucratic ladder is to create an empire. Success in the government sector does not lie in the deliverance of Service Excellence, but rather in your ability to create internal dependency. The first step in this process is to complicate communication, since this will enhance the level of dependency on a specific individual. Lots of people within the Department now have to interact with Mr. M. From now on it's not just a matter of ordering toilette paper. The various departments need to place an order on form GOV6660PK. This form then needs to be sent to the authorization office where form GOV837494K09JL will be issued. Once signed by two clearance clerks, the order can go through to the final approval office where a GOV854758J00ML form will be issued and stamped by the senior approval clerk (who is in meetings most of the time). I think at this point you will agree that Mr. M cannot cope anymore. What he needs is staff, lots of them. Once he has staff he will need to appoint managers and get a personal assistant. Soon Mr. M will be appointed as the Director of toilet paper, and before long he will be running a toilet paper head office. His reason of existence will be entirely based on functional incompetence. You might think of this as an outrageous example, but the reality is that this is happening on a daily basis within the Public Service. I remember just a few years back; a news announcement was made, reporting that Police Officials were to be given extra allowance for working in high crime areas. The question that one needs to ask here is, why would these Police Officials want to reduce crime especially if, high crime equals better pay. The examples are endless.

The fourth 'poison' of Government Service relates to the power that complicating things hold for the public sector employee. This is called 'skills monopoly'. Complicating things to the extent that only one person knows how to deal with it, makes the organization incredibly dependent on that individual. The power that this dependency holds is highly seductive. We often hear people boasting about the fact that the whole place will fall apart in their absence. These are the bureaucratic knights of the Government Service. They love to invent official forms, and create protocols and structures that nobody understands. They demonstrate their superiority through quoting policies and procedures off by heart. Of course we need people to ensure that the rules and regulations are met. The problem lies in the focus. The focus of the above examples lies in the creation of dependency, with the aim of becoming indispensable, and not on service excellence. After all, service excellence is what we're aiming at.

The fifth 'poison' of Government Service is its inability to motivate employees to provide customer delight. There is simply no reason for providing customers with an excellent service. Management tries their best by sending out letters, providing customer service training, and putting up glossy service excellence posters all over the Department. The truth is that it's not posters, training and correspondence that will enhance service excellence within a department. What's needed is a reason for employees to provide service excellence. The questions remain 'What's in it for the employee?' and 'How do you plan to reward service excellence?' Statements such as "It's our Department and we should be proud of it" or "We all need to build a better South Africa" simply do not work. Evidence can be found in current public service employee behavior. If you want someone to be more effective, you need to make it worth his or her while. Will providing service excellence assist the employee in being promoted, will the employee become more important, will he/she get more money, or will he/she have more benefits?

The last and most potent 'poison' of all, is giving employees authority without power. Directors earning more than R600000 per year can't even authorize the purchase of a date stamp. Government Departments have lots of positions and posts, but when it comes to making decisions the buck stops nowhere. The power to authorize is usually shifted from office to office, using every trick in the book to avoid responsibility. To get the simplest thing done can take months, or sometimes even never. Various psychological studies have indicated that giving employee's authority without power leads to a demoralized workforce. If we demand results and service excellence from our employees, we need to empower them, and most of all we need to trust them.

Lest recap on the Six Poisons of Government Service:

1. Internal Focus,
2. No Competition,
3. Rewarding Incompetence,
4. Rewarding Complication,
5. No reason for providing customer delight, and
6. Giving employees authority without power.

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