

The pro's & Cons of Batho Pele

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In 1994 South Africa held its first democratic election. Nationally this was an historic event. Internationally, this was the point where South Africa became an international role model for change and transformation. It was shortly after the election that Government started working with the concept of Service Excellence in the Public Sector. This initiative was brought to life in the 1997 White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, called the Batho Pele document. Batho Pele is a Sesotho phrase, meaning 'People First'.

A customer centered Government Service – what a revolutionary thought. Imagine living in a world where Government Departments treat civilians as customers, a world where our needs and priorities shape the structures and policies of Government Departments. In this world there is no corruption, all citizens have equal access to Government Services, and we are treated with courtesy and consideration. There is no crime since the police are highly effective, our children go to schools where there are only 12 students in a class, and if a promised standard of service is not delivered, we are offered an apology, a full explanation and effective remedy. When having to follow a Government prescribed process, we don't have to stand in incredibly long queue's, being shifted from this counter to that office, only to find out that were in the wrong department. In this world we are blessed with Government Departments that operate outside the usual hours of 8 to 4, and employees take lunch and tea breaks during different hours so that we never have to face a closed door. This is the world of Batho Pele, where Government puts People First.

The Batho Pele White Paper is based on 8 principles. These principles form the core of a Government strategy to put people first. The hypothesis is that if Government Departments put these principles to practice, tax-paying citizens will get the best possible value for money.

The principles are:

1. **Consultation**

All relevant role players, especially citizens, should be consulted on how service delivery should be taking place, and whenever possible, should be given a choice about the services that are offered.

2. **Service Standards**

This refers to the creation of a culture where there is consistency in the delivery of Government Service, in other words, what you get in Cape Town, is what you get in Pretoria.

3. **Access**

All citizens should be able to access Government Services in an equal way.

4. **Courtesy**

Serving citizens in a friendly and respectful way.

5. **Information**

Citizens should be able to access information on how and what Government Departments are planning and doing.

6. **Openness and Transparency**

This is the policy of 'no secrets in Government Service'.

7. **Redress**

We need to fix the things that we've done wrong. In terms of fixing, Batho Pele refers to the offering of an apology, a full explanation, and a speedy and effective remedy.

8. **Value for Money**

This principle moves us to the realization that our services are sponsored by tax paying citizens, and that we need to give them return on their investment.

Well, we're in the year 2003 and were still standing in long queues, filling in numerous long and incomprehensible forms, and being shuffled from this counter to that office. We find that most police stations are still situated in up-town neighborhoods, while the poor have to walk miles to lodge a complaint. Every now and again we hear of reports in Kwa-Zulu natal where children have been killed and eaten by crocodiles, primarily because there is no water supply in the village.

Please don't get me wrong, a lot has happened since 1994, probably more than in most other countries around the world during the same period of time. Nevertheless, the Government has chosen to call me a customer. Six years ago there was a strategy put in place that aims to treat me as a valued customer, somebody who is the primary focus of Government functioning. And as you very well know, customers just don't like lip service in advertising. If a promise is made we want it kept, and more than that, we want the supplier to excel on its promise of delivery. As customers we are not satisfied with anything but service excellence. If our supplier promises things that cannot be delivered, we stop trusting him, we feel done-in, and dismiss any future advertising or promises as 'O my God, here we go again'. As customers we always want more, so be careful what you promise.

I believe that there exists enough ground to criticize the initiative as an example of over promising and under delivering. Nevertheless, one cannot but commend the South African Government for having the courage to stimulate such an initiative. More than that, the Government's perseverance of not giving up on this initiative is absolutely remarkable. In the field of human dynamics it has been proven that persistence prevails. In my seminars on Batho Pele, and the conferences, that we hold on this subject, I've seen more than enough evidence on the commitment that Government employees have for this extraordinary initiative. I've also witnessed remarkable improvement in the Service Delivery of the various Government Departments that I work with on consultation and training projects. Taken this into account, I truly believe that South Africa will become one of the world leaders in the field of Service Excellence in the Government Sector.

Lastly it is important to note that key dimensions for successful implementation of the Batho Pele philosophy, would mean absolute commitment, focus and sense of purpose.

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