

The Need for Institutional Strengthening In the Public Service

by Miss Marva Howell, Assistant Manager, Human Resources, Queen Elizabeth Hospital

Now more than ever there is a need for public sector managers across Barbados to examine their human resource requirements and take the necessary steps with respect to institutional strengthening to ensure that organizations are well equipped to handle the pressures and challenges that will certainly be encountered as Barbados fully embraces the opportunities and threats of globalization, regionalization and trading blocks such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the CARICOM Single Market And Economy (CSME).

Institutional strengthening, or capacity building as it is sometimes referred to, requires management to critically examine the existing systems, practices, processes and human resources found in their respective organizations and to conduct an assessment of how effective the systems and processes are, especially with regards to effectively and efficiently attaining the organizations goals and objectives.

One of the major tasks that the Public sector is embarking on is institutional strengthening; it involves the assessment of the skill and knowledge base of public officers and determines whether they have the desired behaviors and attitudes. Whenever a skills gap, a behavioral gap or a defective system or process is discovered that can seriously hamper the effectiveness of the organization, there is a need to implement capacity building strategies.

Any proposal to conduct an institutional strengthening exercise, be it organizational wide, or just a particular section or unit of an organization, must involve the total commitment of all the parties involved. **Capacity building does not involve displacing persons or putting persons out to pasture, neither does it involve criticizing or ridiculing employees for their efforts.**

Institutional strengthening practices can range from the simple to the complex and can be undertaken to address the immediate, medium and long term needs of the organization. Every organization should be equipped to conduct a SWOT analysis, which examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and challenges. Management needs to know what it is doing better than its closest competitors and how satisfied or dissatisfied its stakeholders and clients are with its operations, products and services.

A market survey can be undertaken to ascertain the public's perception of the services being provided. Management must also determine where the organization is, and where it should be, keeping in mind its vision. It is also necessary for management to determine what needs to be done to accomplish what is desired. By designing and utilizing a strategic direction management allows the organization to capitalize on any existing opportunities, and deal

effectively with any possible threats that will impact on the survivability of the organization. If the identified weaknesses and threats are not addressed, this will result in the organization existing in a state of inertia and ultimately place a strain on the Government's already limited resources.

Over the last decade, **the Public Service has undergone a myriad of changes** with the initiatives of administrative reform. In many instances, the public at large, and a number of public officers are still waiting expectantly to experience the benefits of these reforms. The stark reality has been that in some cases, the reform initiatives were never explained to employees who were expected to deliver better services to customers (both external and internal customers). Thus, today there still remains a culture of poor communication between ministry's, departments and units. There is also a high level of distrust and mistrust amongst persons from 'outside' the ministry's domain. This is exemplified at all levels, between management and labour, supervisors and subordinates. Initiatives such as PROMALCO (the Promotion of Management-Labour Cooperation in the Caribbean) seek to foster better labour management relations. However this programme is still in its early stages, so very little gains have been realized to date.

If Barbados is to compete in a global market and indeed have a competitive advantage, the services that are being offered must be at the top end of the scale with respect to cost effectiveness, efficiency and timeliness.

If it is argued and accepted that our greatest resource is indeed the human resource, a little more attention must be paid to human resource development. Overall national development will not be sustainable unless economic, social, political and human development occurs simultaneously.

Appropriate human resource development interventions are also an integral part of any institutional strengthening strategy. One such intervention is training. Training, however, can be costly. It is therefore essential to select the right type of training and trainer that will facilitate the transfer of learning. It is equally important to ensure that the acquired new skills, and knowledge be fully utilized by the department on the completion of the training.

There are other means by which Public Sector organizations can embrace institutional strengthening strategies, some of which are relatively simple, such as the hosting of lecture discussions series, involving prominent Key-note speakers to sensitize employees on critical issues that would impact on productivity and national development. Another interesting initiative is the development of employee social and recreational clubs. This allows employees to build camaraderie and to bolster morale through the sharing of ideas, thus exposing and developing hidden talents, especially in soft skill areas, in addition to traditional areas such as sports and craft.

The list is by no means exhaustive, the implementation of Work Improvement Teams (WITS); the development and circulation of Operational and Procedural manuals, as well as efforts to improve communication channels and the provision of appropriate and timely feedback also facilitates institutional strengthening.

The present global environment necessitates that every public sector agency undertake institutional strengthening as a matter of urgency for capacity building is a benefit to all. It indirectly makes for a better utilization of skills and resources and ensures that Barbados is well equipped to offer excellent service to its clients and satisfy all its stakeholders.