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***A critical element in the service delivery process, is the monitoring of performance***

***Peer review is an external monitoring mechanism that prevents biased assessments***

***This guide will assist you in setting up a review***

## **INTRODUCTION TO PEER REVIEWS**

This guide provides a simple overview of what is meant by peer review. It will highlight key issues, provide examples of peer reviews and assist you in a practical way by providing you with a step-by-step process to plan and conduct your own reviews.

One of the most critical elements or steps in the service delivery process is the monitoring of performance. If we do not know how well or poorly we are shaping up against our objectives and customer expectations, we will not know which aspects of our service delivery are working well and which need attention.

There are several monitoring mechanisms and all of them measure performance against standards. Many of these mechanisms are internal in the sense that the provider of the service measures how well he or she or the team or the component, etc is faring, using an approved assessment instrument. The danger here is that subjective aspects may cloud or skew the results of the assessment.

One of the best ways of counteracting this tendency is to use an external assessment as a control mechanism. Peer review is such a mechanism.

## **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

The aim of this guide is to introduce you to the concept of peer review and to provide you with a frame of reference for setting up a review.

This guide will give you:

- ❑ A definition of peer review
- ❑ Explains how peer review can be used as a learning opportunity;
- ❑ Provides you with guidelines and best practices on peer review;
- ❑ Outlines the objectives, outcomes and key performance indicators of peer review;
- ❑ Illustrates the links to legislation and the *Batho Pele* White Paper;
- ❑ Suggests possible challenges and responses to these;

- ❑ Takes you through a step-by-step guide on how to conduct a peer review;
- ❑ Offers some key considerations to think about during the process;
- ❑ Refers you to additional resources that are available in this field.

## WHAT IS PEER REVIEW?

***Peers with expertise are invited to give you an independent and unbiased perspective***

Very simply, peer review means that you invite people who are at a similar level of expertise and hands-on experience and who have the required knowledge to assist you in your attempts to improve service delivery by:

- ❑ giving you an independent and unbiased perspective;
- ❑ checking progress following self-assessments you have made to identify areas of improvement;
- ❑ sharing experiences and good practices relating to your work;
- ❑ providing support and mentoring; and

Peer review is voluntary, it is by no means compulsory. The voluntary nature of the process sets the tone for, and encourages managers to exercise openness and transparency, which stems from an internal commitment towards change.

Peer review is not a survey or an audit, but instead it allows for deeper probing than surveys by helping to pick up nuances and to develop ways of improvement. It is neither a means to “police people” or to enforce compliance since peers are not in a position to apply sanctions to one another

## PEER REVIEW AS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Peer review affords managers an opportunity to:

- ❑ benchmark against excellence in service delivery, this includes the private sector and the broader public sector;
- ❑ improve work ethos through “shoulder-to-shoulder or horizontal learning”
- ❑ use this versatile tool to review a broad range of issues at different levels; and
- ❑ to learn good practice from peers.

## **G**UIDELINES FOR PEER REVIEW

The following guidelines need to be borne in mind when undertaking a peer review:

- ❑ the people who should participate in the review;
- ❑ make it a voluntary process;
- ❑ integrate with other processes;
- ❑ use peer review for deep probing.

Each of these will be discussed in detail.

### ***Peer review requires input from various role-players***

#### **Who should participate in a review?**

Peer review requires the input of various role-players, namely:

- ❑ Peers are people that can be identified from:
  - outside the organisation, within the public service, the wider public sector, the private sector, academia and may also include political office bearers;
  - someone in a parallel job within the same organisation; or
  - different organisations that are reviewing one another.
- ❑ Officials who are directly responsible for the area of work concerned and who would benefit from direct and structured interaction with their peers in a learning environment.

#### **Make it a voluntary process**

As previously mentioned, peer review stems from an internal commitment and should be a voluntary process. It is not to “police” or enforce compliance.

### ***Integrate with existing policy and programme management processes***

#### **Integrate with other processes**

Peer review can be a separate process on its own, it can however also be used to compliment other forms of review like the Excellence Model, Investors in People and functional reviews. It must be pointed out that peer review does not substitute any of the abovementioned forms of review. Reviews need not run as a separate process, but can be integrated with existing policy and programme management processes.

#### **Use peer review for deep probing**

Use peer review for deep probing that helps pick up nuances and develop ways of improvement.

***The ultimate aim of peer review is to improve service delivery***

## **T**HE OBJECTIVE OF PEER REVIEW

The ultimate, broad objective of peer review is to improve service delivery. The immediate objective is to assess how successfully we are meeting agreed standards.

The two specific objectives of conducting a peer review are:

- ❑ To obtain an independent, external assessment of performance against set standards – “another set of eyes” adds objectivity so that the ‘gap’ in performance can be addressed by implementing appropriate developmental plans.
- ❑ To benchmark against best practices – benchmarking being a process of measuring performance of leaders/best practices in a field to determine the extent to which practices/processes/strategies may be adapted by the organisation to achieve superior job performance

***Peer review is a common practice in both the public and private sectors to review a broad range of issues***

## **D**IFFERENT FORMS OF PEER REVIEW

In South Africa, peer review has mainly been used as a tool to assess the performance of individuals. However, it has broader applications around the world and in many countries it is used as a common practice in the public and private sectors to review a broad range of issues at any level, transversally across sectors or institutionally, at a corporate-wide level.

For the purposes of this guide, we shall restrict the meaning and application of peer review to the review of:

- ❑ policy implementation and compliance with mandates;
- ❑ projects and programmes aligned to strategic objectives;
- ❑ components, both within and across the entire department; and
- ❑ institutional performance.

Peer reviews should be conducted in a place and environment that are non-threatening and which are conducive to learning and growth.

**PEER REVIEW**

***It is necessary to evaluate policy implementation to ensure Government's strategic objectives are achieved***

### **Review of Policy Issues**

Peer review has been used extensively in some countries as a means of informing legislation and public debate. Since 1994 South Africa has undergone extensive legislative reform, in line with the constitutional principles. Much work has been done regarding policy and legislative change. However, in order to ensure that the transformation process leads to the desired results and achieves government's strategic objectives, it is necessary to evaluate policy implementation to ensure that:

- ❑ it is in line with the Regulatory Framework;
- ❑ it leads to improved service delivery;
- ❑ it provides value for money;
- ❑ there is coherence between related policies;
- ❑ policies serve as a framework for management functions;
- ❑ policy objectives are met; and
- ❑ policies serve as a guiding principle and that the "right things" are done for the "right reasons";

Peer reviews can be employed as a means of reviewing such policy issues.

### **Review of Projects and Programmes**

Several departments are currently conducting assessments of their priority projects and/or programmes, either on an ongoing basis or as once-off exercises. They:

- ❑ identify emerging issues and trends;
- ❑ evaluate the progress and success of their programmes against the relevant standards; and
- ❑ evaluate overall project/programme management in relation to the set objectives and work plans.

Peer review is a useful method of assisting with these assessments and reviews. However, it should be noted that it is not the only method and should be used in conjunction with other assessment methodologies, such as Self-Assessments.

## EXAMPLE OF A PEER REVIEW

The following is an example of a peer review used to assess a project or programme:

Some departments have successfully introduced elements of peer review into their programme evaluations. A good example of this is the “Working for Water Programme”, led by the Department of Water Affairs.

This programme involves several departments, all working towards a common objective in line with a national priority.

It cuts across various spheres of government and includes 300 projects throughout the country.

### ***Method adopted for the review process***

Project managers assess themselves in relation to the set standards and objectives. They compile monthly reports and submit them to their peers for review. Periodically the reviews are complimented by external research of a specialist nature to enhance the validity of the review.

### ***Outcomes of the review process***

Peer reviews have assisted the programme to:

- ☐ standardise operations nationally;
- ☐ give structure to research projects;
- ☐ improve programme performance; and
- ☐ refine criteria and measurement standards.

### **Institutional Reviews**

Peer reviews can be used at an institutional level to assess aspects such as:

- ☐ leadership/management style
  - ☐ capacity to deliver services;
  - ☐ basic administration practices; etc,
- against predetermined benchmarks or standards.

The results of the assessment can be used to identify the gaps that exist and to institute developmental programmes that will lead to organisational effectiveness.



At local government level, an example would be, when a city council judges or measures itself against a benchmark of what an ideal local authority should like. The practice has already been introduced at local government level in South Africa.

## **E**XAMPLE OF AN INSTITUTIONAL PEER REVIEW –

### **JOHANNESBURG CITY COUNCIL**

#### **Background Information**

A peer review was conducted in the Johannesburg City Council.

#### **Objective**

- ❑ To evaluate the council by focussing on selected areas of institutional performance, including management as well as frontline service delivery issues.
- ❑ To develop a benchmark for an “ideal” municipality.

#### **Composition of the peer review panel**

The panel consisted of:

- ❑ politicians;
- ❑ managers;
- ❑ two councillors from different city councils;
- ❑ three senior officials, including a CEO, a head of corporate services and a senior manager from other city councils; and
- ❑ one senior manager from a non-municipal sector.

The panel was drawn from diverse backgrounds and had different expectations. They appointed a review manager from among the panel.

#### **Methodology used**

A customised and very simple model of peer review that combined self-assessment and peer review in the form of interactive interviews, was chosen.

The review panel conducted an intensive, one-week programme that included interviews, workshops and visits. In the interest of time, they split up and met with the executive leadership, senior management, middle management, councillors, ward committees and labour, NGOs and organised business.

In addition, they had ongoing discussions with the CEO throughout the week.

After the interviews, the peer panel met to share their respective findings, to discuss weaknesses and strengths as well as gaps between the performance and the benchmark.

On the final day of the review the panel met with the council to present their recommendations followed by a briefing session with the broader stakeholder group.

A month later a review report was finalised and a follow-up visit was conducted six weeks later to determine the impact of the review.

#### **Outcomes of the review process**

- ❑ The review was found to be very successful.
- ❑ It had gone some way to developing a benchmark for a South African city council.
- ❑ Precise and valid conclusions were generated from the review.
- ❑ A guideline has been developed to assist departments in the council as well as other city councils to undertake peer reviews.

## **LINKS TO BATHO PELE**

Measuring performance against agreed standards is an essential tool to track service delivery against the strategic objectives of the department and/or the component. It is impossible to measure anything unless there are clear standards against which to measure it. For example, if someone should ask how long it will take to process an application for a new ID document, they need to be told that it will take 10 days, two weeks or three months, whatever the case may be. The time given in the answer, namely, ten days, two weeks and three months is a standard of service delivery.

***Set and publish clear standards in consultation with customers***

The most important link that peer reviews have with *Batho Pele* is the need to set and publish clear **standards** in **consultation** with the customers in order to ensure efficient and effective service delivery that represents **value for money**.

## LINKS TO LEGISLATION

Conducting an assessment of progress and evaluating the success of a programme is an integral part of the service delivery chain and is an effective means of complying with the mandates emanating from the following pieces of legislation that form part of the Regulatory Framework:

- ❑ The Constitution
- ❑ The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act
- ❑ The Public Service Regulations
- ❑ The White Paper on Transforming the Public Service
- ❑ The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (*Batho Pele*)

### The Constitution

The principles governing public administration, listed in Section 195 of the Constitution underline the importance of providing appropriate and quality services, effectively and efficiently. One of the best ways of complying with this fundamental mandate is to monitor performance by way of peer reviews.

### The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act

This Act offers members of the public protection against administrative actions that adversely affect their rights. One of the most common areas of the rights infringements of the public is the perceived lack of compliance with expectations. If clear standards for service delivery are set and publicised and then carefully monitored, there will be less chance of not meeting public expectations. Again, the process of peer review is one of the best ways of monitoring compliance with advertised standards.

### The Public Service Regulations

Part C of the Regulations states that an executing authority shall establish and sustain a service delivery improvement programme for his/her department that must include:

- a) an identification of the type of actual and potential customers and the main services to be provided to them;
- b) the existing and future arrangements with the department's actual and potential customers;
- c) the customer's means of access to the services, the

barriers to increased access and the mechanisms or strategies to be utilised progressively to remove the barriers so that access can be increased;

- d) the existing and future service standards for the main services to be provided;
- e) the existing and future arrangements on how information about the department's services are provided; and
- f) the current and future complaints system or mechanisms.

***It is essential to maintain standards if we do not want to fall fowl of the Public Service Regulations***

It is clear that monitoring service delivery and the maintenance of standards is essential if we do not want to fall fowl of the Public Service Regulations.

### **The White Paper on Transforming the Public Service**

As we have mentioned elsewhere, the main objective of transforming the Public Service is to transform it from a rules-bound entity to a results driven organisation, committed to improve service delivery to all the people of South Africa. The White Paper on Transforming the Public Service provides the policy framework within this transformation must take place. The only way relevant and appropriate service delivery will take place is if it is constantly monitored against the agreed standards. Peer review is one way of monitoring service delivery.

### **The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (*Batho Pele*)**

We have already dealt with this policy framework in the previous section.

## **KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

The following are key performance indicators to show that the review is going ahead:

- ☐ Feedback – especially informal feedback on performance
- ☐ Interim and final reports on the peer review.
- ☐ Improvement plans emanating from the results of the peer review.

## OUTCOMES OF PEER REVIEWS

- ❑ Improved service delivery.
- ❑ Greater job satisfaction and improved staff morale.
- ❑ Departments/components would be able to conduct some form of self-assessment using the results of an independent/external survey.
- ❑ Benchmarking can drive cultural change – it allows staff closest to the processes to see that comparable organisations are achieving different and perhaps better results.
- ❑ A results-based approach could be used for continuous improvement – yield a strong sense of direction and clarity into improvement initiatives.
- ❑ It leads to questions about whether processes can be streamlined, whether activities are still effective or necessary and why organisations with similar goals are able to achieve better results.
- ❑ Allows for deeper probing of performance - helps to pick up nuances and develop new ways of improving service delivery.
- ❑ Allows for a focus on where progress must be made in order to improve services.
- ❑ Improved learning through “shoulder-to-shoulder” or horizontal learning.
- ❑ Improved communication and networking – more opportunities for interaction and networking with a focus on improving public services.
- ❑ Peer reviews can be fun and an interesting part of organisational effectiveness.
- ❑ Provide a means of positive reinforcement for those areas that work well in an organisation.

## CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

### **Risk:**

#### **Criticism may be taken personally.**

The review may not reveal the results you envisage. People often tend to take criticism personally and then become defensive. They tend to conceal information for fear of victimisation. This will no doubt prevent the implementation of effective developmental plans, which could hamper the progress of the project or programme.

**Contingencies:**

- ❑ Maintain professionalism – take the opinion, comments and suggestions as advice that will help to improve services.
- ❑ Commit to the process and instil a culture of review and evaluation in the team.
- ❑ Peer review should be voluntary. You should be willing to be open and honest about your work, to share failures and you should be sincere about wanting to learn and improve.
- ❑ Acknowledge that there will always be an element of sensitivity and resistance and build measures to manage change.

**Risk****Lack of co-operation by team members.**

Data and information provided to the reviewers may be inaccurate.

**Contingencies**

- ❑ Get buy-in and commitment from all team members to the review process. People should understand that ultimately the review is meant to improve service delivery and that it is an opportunity for growth and learning.

**Risk:****Standards that are not clear or S.M.A.R.T.**

Standards should be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**imebound.

**Contingencies:**

Ensure that all standards are S.M.A.R.T by consulting with all the role players and define the measurement approach at the outset.

## STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CONDUCTING PEER REVIEW

**STEP 1****PREPARING FOR THE REVIEW**

Step 1 comprises the following actions:

- ☐ Appoint a team leader
- ☐ Appoint team and allocate responsibilities
- ☐ Compile the terms of reference of the review
- ☐ Structure the review

**Appoint a team leader**

Two notions are critical to the success of the peer review:

- ☐ a team leader must be appointed to manage and set the direction for the peer review;
- ☐ he/she must maintain leadership through all phases of this initiative – to ensure that results emanating from the review process culminate in service improvement plans.

**Appoint support teams and allocate responsibilities**

It isn't enough to have a great strategy to measure performance.

People have to want to follow it. To achieve that, you have to bring the beliefs of staff in line with the "outside-in" approach of peer reviews.

They must see the advantage of an external perspective and recognise that it contributes to learning, with the ultimate aim of improving services.

The support of teams/support groups listed below is essential to ensure buy-in and that there are sufficient resources to assist with the process, from the gathering of data to implementation and monitoring of improvement plans.

**Reference group**

A reference group of representatives from a cross section of staff in the component/unit needs to be appointed to work closely with the peer panel. The reference group's function is to:

- ☐ assist with the planning of the review;
- ☐ agree on evaluation criteria/ questions;
- ☐ agree on the deliverables of the review; and
- ☐ identify key informants who can contribute to the evaluation

Depending on how you structure or approach the review, the reference



group may or may not form part of the self-assessment team and may represent the people to whom the peer panel will report.

### **The self-assessment team**

The team should consist of key people from the policy, programme or institutional environment. They must be in position to make strategic decisions and to take decisions in initiating service improvements. They could also serve as the reference group, depending on how the review is structured.

### **The peer review panel**

The panel should consist of a group of people from the external environment, who can add an independent perspective to the assessment. The panel could include representatives from the private and academic sectors as well as voluntary workers, government officials and political office bearers. The panel should include a manager to lead the panel.

### **The support secretariat**

A secretariat is required to provide administrative support to the review process.

### **Compile the terms of reference for the review**

The way you design and conduct your review should be guided by:

- ☐ what you want to review;
- ☐ the objective(s) of the review;
- ☐ what you want the outcome of the review to be;
- ☐ the nature and scope of your work;
- ☐ the environment you work in;
- ☐ time frames and reporting arrangements; and
- ☐ the resources at your disposal.

A review that does not have a framework of clear objectives, expected outputs and standards could become unnecessarily complex and “fuzzy”. Thus, at the outset the team must compile the terms of reference for the review, which should include:

- ☐ background information;
- ☐ clear objectives of the review;
- ☐ the scope of work;
- ☐ the extent of research that may be required;
- ☐ the deliverables expected from the review;

- ❑ measurement criteria – a set of key questions or criteria to guide the review process;
- ❑ performance indicators;
- ❑ time frames for deliverables;
- ❑ reporting arrangements, including to whom the peer review panel will report.

### **Structure the review**

The structure of the review may vary from adopting a relatively simple and informal approach to a highly complex and structured model that is linked to other evaluation processes and requires advanced project management.

## **STEP 2**

### **CONDUCTING THE REVIEW**

This step explains the various elements that could be used to compliment peer reviews; namely:

- ❑ self-assessments;
- ❑ independent assessments by peers; and
- ❑ external research (if it is required to compliment the review)

### **Self assessments**

Self-assessments should be done before the independent peer assessment is done.

The self-assessment team should have a thorough understanding of the purpose and expected outcome of the review and should be familiar with the criteria and standards that will be used.

After the self-assessment the team should compile reports and assist in collecting relevant documentation for submission to their peers to assist the independent assessment by the peer review panel.

### **Independent assessment by peers**

The purpose of the peer assessment is to provide an unbiased and independent assessment, taking into account the environment or circumstances in which people are working and what they can be expected to achieve under those circumstances.

Self-assessments on their own tend to have a strong internal focus and

the peer panel should therefore have sufficient knowledge of the subject of review before they start the review, to assist them in maintaining an independent perspective.

The peer panel needs to agree on assessment criteria and a set of monitoring and evaluation indicators before beginning their review.

Thereafter they should conduct a desktop review of all available information, including information from the self-assessments as well as other empirical information. The review may include face-to-face and/or telephonic interviews as well as focus groups with informants.

Finally, as the review progresses, the interim findings should be shared in the form of presentations or interim reports. Keep in mind that people must feel good about the outcomes of the review process. So you should recognise achievements through positive re-enforcement.

### **External research**

If an external research team is commissioned to conduct specialist research to compliment the peer review, terms of reference will be required to direct their work. The findings of their research will also be subject to review by the peer panel.

## **STEP 3**

### **ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS AND FINAL REPORTS**

Once the assessments have been done, all the information emanating from the various reviews and research must be analysed, synthesised and integrated in a concise evaluation report. A consultant may be appointed to assist the peer panel.

The findings must be discussed with the host of the review or head of the component. It is for the host/head of component to approve the way forward after the review and to decide on matters of disclosure and the distribution of reports. It is advisable that all key stakeholders be informed of the results of the review.

**AN EXAMPLE OF A SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT PLAN:**

## **SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS TO PEER REVIEWS**

Peer reviews should be initiated when a programme is working well, but where some alignment to best practices may be needed. Work areas that are dysfunctional or not making appreciable progress may benefit more from an internal assessment or an externally imposed compliance or forensic audit. The same applies where there is a lack of leadership coherence.

## **USEFUL REFERENCES**

- ❑ Centre for Management and Policy Studies; United Kingdom
- ❑ I&DeaA Improvement and Development Agency ; United Kingdom

### **Acknowledgements**

- ❑ Report from Working for Water Project and Johannesburg City Council – Peer Reviews;
  - ❑ National government departments; including National Treasury and Water Affairs;
- Best practices in OECD countries, United Kingdom and Germany