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INTRODUCTION TO SETTING SERVICE STANDARDS

Why should one set service standards? The simple answer is, because if there are no standards, it is impossible to measure whether one is succeeding in one's endeavours or not. Standards help one to measure the extent to which one is meeting one's set objectives. And if the standards are made public, as they should be, they allow others to judge our performance. If one does not make one's standards public, then others are not able to assess one's performance and there is there real danger of being subjective and acting as both judge and jury in determining one's own progress and achievements. Success is empty, if it is not acknowledged by others.

Setting standards for service delivery is in fact a fairly meaningless exercise unless it goes hand-in-glove with transparency. The other side of the transparency coin is consultation. If one is prepared to nail one's colours to the mast, in terms of setting standards and making them public, one must accept that the public have the right to comment on those standards, especially if the standards relate to the services they receive.

Thus, in setting service standards for the Public Service, one must accept the need to consult the end-users on their expectations and needs. And this attitude of empathy with the predicament of one's customers epitomises the very spirit of *Batho Pele*. It is the very essence of respecting the dignity of the people we serve and acknowledging their rights to those services. At the core of *Batho Pele* lies a deep understanding of the fact that the needs and expectations of our customers give meaning to our lives as public servants. Our customers are the reason we exist as public servants, they are our *raison d'être*.

Prior to 1994 this mindset of placing the citizen firmly at the centre of government was entirely lacking in the Public Service. It is the mindset that has to drive the transformation of the Public Service. Without it, our transformation efforts will be little more than papering over the cracks of past lacks in service delivery and as futile as rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic would have been in attempting to change its course and avoid the fatal iceberg.

The analogy with the Titanic is quite apt because, if we are not prepared to embrace *Batho Pele* in the fullest sense by setting and publishing service standards, we shall not succeed in transforming government and the dream of a new, free and united south Africa will disappear under the waves of underdevelopment and poverty, just as surely as the Titanic sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Service providers have both a legal and a moral responsibility to deliver the best possible services to the public, within a realistic and feasible framework. It is a legal responsibility because

it emanates from the mandates contained in the Regulatory Framework. The moral aspect of their responsibility is underpinned by the eight principles of *Batho Pele*.

In both senses they are accountable for the delivery of appropriate services and, being accountable, means that they need to demonstrate that they are providing the services required by the end-users, both in terms of quantity and quality. This means the services must be visible and measurable. The only way one can measure anything successfully is to have recognisable standards and by recognisable standards we mean standards that other people understand and accept.

Within the context of *Batho Pele* providing quality services means putting in place a service delivery system that meets the needs of the people it serves. Quality assurance is a way of ensuring that a system is as good as it can be within the constraints of available resources, both physical and human. While physical resources such as money, can impose very definite limitations on service delivery, there is no reason why the human element should be lacking in terms of the quality of services provided. And this is precisely what the *Batho Pele* initiative wishes to emphasise by “putting people first”. No matter how meagre our physical resources may be, there is no reason why we should not accord our customers their proper dignity and give them our very best efforts. In fact, the less we have to give in a material sense, the more we have to give of ourselves.

Batho Pele demands from each public servant that he or she gives of himself or herself in rendering services to their customers. Only in this way will we overcome the legacies of the past and shed the intolerable burdens of poverty and underdevelopment and rise to the challenge of being globally competitive.

The quality of our service delivery depends on the extent we are able to internalise the spirit of *Batho Pele*. Quality refers to characteristics associated with excellence. These characteristics are the criteria for evaluating the quality of a specific service. Quality is associated with the following dimensions:

- ❑ Appropriateness – refers to the service the individual/community needs and expects;
- ❑ Equity – citizens expect a fair share;
- ❑ Accessibility – means services are not compromised by undue limits of time or distance;
- ❑ Effectiveness – the intended benefit is felt by the community/individual;
- ❑ Acceptable – when they are provided to satisfy the reasonable expectations of the client, community, taxpayer;

- ❑ Efficiency – means that resources are not wasted on one service or client to the detriment of another.

In order to receive the quality and quantity of services described in the service standards, customers or end-users must understand that service delivery is a two-way street. In other words, they must be made aware of their responsibilities e.g. they must provide information accurately, explain their situations honestly and undertake to behave courteously and respectfully towards the service providers, etc.

The process of developing service standards is evolutionary. It is part of a continuous improvement strategy and standards should be continuously reviewed and revised, as service becomes more efficient.

Standards should be set in the name of the Minister or MEC. In practice officials propose standards and seek approval from relevant Ministers or MECs, who take final responsibility.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The aim of this guide is to explain the importance of setting standards as a means to improve service delivery and to provide you with a frame of reference for formulating service standards.

This guide will give you an understanding of:

- ❑ what a standard is;
- ❑ the key guidelines to follow when setting service standards;
- ❑ pre-requisites for setting standards;
- ❑ the levels of standards;
- ❑ the levels of standard formulation;
- ❑ the approaches to adopt when setting standards;
- ❑ the importance of setting service standards and measuring your performance against targets;

WHAT ARE SERVICE STANDARDS?

Before we consider Service Standards, we must understand what is meant by a standard. The dictionary defines a standard as “a basis of measurement” and “a definite level of excellence”. For example, a metre is an accepted unit of measure, so when someone says that the standard length of a particular object, say a soccer field is 75 metres, we make sure that when we build a soccer field it complies with the standard and is 75 metres long.

Another example of applying standards is to define a distinction in a subject at school or university as a mark of 75% or better. All students then know that in order to achieve a level of excellence they have to get a distinction, which means they must get a mark of at least 75%.

The above examples illustrate two important characteristics of standards, namely that they must be:

- ❑ specific and measurable. The statement that a soccer field must be 75 metres in length and not 73 or 78 metres, is specific and it is measurable; and
- ❑ agreed by all users of the standard, for example, everyone must agree that a soccer field must be 75 metres in length and not 1000 yards or 2580 feet. If there is no agreement or consensus, the standard cannot be applied because the result of the measurement will not be accepted by all parties.

Other characteristics of standards are that they must be achievable, realistic and time-bound. In other words it is no use setting standards that cannot be achieved. For example, stating that in order to qualify for the South African Olympic team sprinters must record three times of under 9,5 seconds for the 100 metre sprint in the past three months. As no one has ever run the 100 metres in under 9,5 seconds, the standard would not be “achievable” and, in fact, it would not even be realistic, even if it is “time-bound”.

A simple guide in setting standards is to remember that they must be S.M.A.R.T. In other words they must be:

- ❑ **S**pecific;
- ❑ **M**easurable;
- ❑ **A**chievable;
- ❑ **R**ealistic; and
- ❑ **T**ime-bound.

What we have said above about standards in general applies equally to Service Standards.

Service standards are specific, measurable statements of the level of performance required and promised, containing characteristics associated with excellence. These characteristics are used for measuring or evaluating actual performance or service delivered. This enables customers to judge whether or not they are receiving the standard of service that was promised.

Fundamentally there are four basic categories or types of standards, namely:

- ❑ Quantity;
- ❑ Quality;

- ❑ Time; and
- ❑ Cost.

In other words: “How much has to be done or how many have to be produced, complying with what quality standard, for example SABS compliant or in accordance with the specifications of the Public Service Regulations, etc, by when and at what cost or within what budgetary constraints.

The eight *Batho Pele* principles are sometimes regarded as being values that describe a desired attitude to service delivery, rather than standards. While we would not want to take issue with this point of view, we prefer to regard the *Batho Pele* principles as a “Quality” standard. We believe one of the essential tests of good service delivery should be whether it complies with the eight principles of *Batho Pele*.

CRITERION

SERVICE DELIVERY CHARTER

The service standards should be published in the Service Delivery Charter (SDC) of the relevant department/component/institution (see guide on Service Delivery Charter). The SDC should contain the following information:

- ❑ The name and address of the department/component/institution.
- ❑ A description of the services to be provided, at what level the services will be provided and the perceived benefit to customers.
- ❑ A clear statement of the standards of service delivery customers can expect to receive, focusing on Quantity, Quality, Time and Costs.
- ❑ In addition to other possible “Quality” standards, a statement to the effect that the services will be rendered in accordance with the *Batho Pele* principles.
- ❑ Specific service delivery targets for key aspects of service such as timeliness, access and accuracy.
- ❑ The cost to the customer for receiving the service, if any.
- ❑ The complaint and redress mechanisms that customers may use if they feel that standards are not met.

PRE-REQUISITES FOR SETTING STANDARDS

To set standards successfully managers and staff must:

- ❑ believe that standards are desirable and useful – that they will improve service delivery;
- ❑ have the knowledge to develop standards;
- ❑ have the resources to develop, implement and maintain them;
- ❑ promote standards once established and educate potential customers; and
- ❑ recognise that standards must be “tailor-made” for the specific organisation for which they are intended.

The number of standards set will depend on the type and complexity of the service, e.g. customers applying for a passport will want to know how long they will have to wait to receive one. As a general rule it is better to focus on a few, hard-edged, deliverable standards for major aspects of the service than a large number covering trivial matters. For example, it would be better to set a quality standard related to the *Batho Pele* principles, as suggested above, than to proclaim that telephones must not ring more than three times before they are answered. If the attitude is right, the service will be delivered professionally, courteously, with care and empathy, even if under pressure, the telephone sometimes has to ring four or five times before it is answered.

SETTING SERVICE STANDARDS AS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Setting service standards offers you the opportunity to learn a lot about yourself and your customers. The learning opportunities include finding out:

- ☐ What competencies you have.
- ☐ What competencies you need to acquire.
- ☐ What your department's shortcomings are.
- ☐ The strengths and weaknesses of the various team members.
- ☐ What is realistic and affordable in terms of service delivery.
- ☐ What being accountable means.
- ☐ How to deliver against customer expectations.
- ☐ How to move from "knowing" to "doing".
- ☐ Who your customers are and who are the most important customers.
- ☐ How you perceive your customers.
- ☐ How your customers perceive you.
- ☐ What your customers need and expect.
- ☐ What your capacity for service delivery is.

An honest appreciation of your own limitations is a fundamental requirement for improved service delivery, because once you know what you don't know, you can start acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and attributes to deliver against your customers' needs and expectations. And you will quickly learn how to implement action plans, because setting standards is tantamount to making a promise to deliver certain services and once you have made a promise you have to honour it.

SETTING STANDARDS

Meaningful to users/customers

Standards should be:

- ❑ responsive to customers' needs;
- ❑ meaningful to customers using the service;
- ❑ relate to things or aspects customers find important; and
- ❑ expressed in terms customers can understand.

Standards that matter most to customers should be set, not those that are easiest for the provider to set.

Comply with national standards

Service standards should comply with national and provincial norms and standards and relevant legislation. Two of the key elements in successful service delivery are uniformity and predictability and this can only be achieved if standards are aligned throughout the Public Service.

It would be counterproductive and in fact could destabilise the entire service delivery environment, if some departments set standards that had no bearing on or relation to national standards.

Based on consultation

If end-users are not consulted on the nature, quantity and quality of the services provided, there can be no guarantee that the services we provide do in fact meet the needs and expectations of our customers. The only sure way of providing appropriate and relevant services is to consult with all the stakeholders. This ensures their buy-in and entrenches the process of continual review and improvement of service delivery. For more information on consultation, please refer to the guide on "How to consult".

Attainable yet challenging

As mentioned earlier, standards should be S.M.A.R.T. This means that, among other things they must be **achievable** and **realistic**. However, we should be wary of setting them too low or making them too easy to achieve, as this could begin a downward spiral in the levels of service delivery, where staff do not feel challenged or get sufficient job satisfaction in delivering the relevant services. To obviate this scenario and encourage an evolutionary or incremental approach to lifting standards and improving service delivery, care should be taken to ensure that, while standards are attainable, they are nevertheless challenging.

Affordable

Service standards should be **attainable** or **achievable** and sustainable within available resources. This means standards must be aligned to the departmental strategic plan and objectives and there must be a provision for setting, implementing and monitoring standards in the departmental budget, which must be linked to the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF).

It is pointless and counterproductive setting standards that will be too costly to implement. For example, if setting a standard to increase productivity means that we have to acquire an expensive, computer-based system to produce and monitor timesheets and, in addition, staff would need to be trained and acquire the discipline to use the programme, it may not be worth it. A simpler and more affordable standard may simply be to agree specific targets with each staff member and get him or her to submit a progress report each week.

As in most things relating to service delivery, the key is to keep things simple. Adhere to the KIS (Keep It Simple) principle, and you won't go far wrong.

Owned by managers

Service standards are an essential management tool for effective and efficient service delivery. Managers and front-line staff should take ownership of them and use them as a means to improve service standards on a continuous basis.

If management and staff do not take service standards seriously, customers will soon sense the lack of commitment to standards and the whole process will be counterproductive, resulting in a decline in the levels of service delivery and staff morale.

Successful departments are easy to spot; they are full of happy, motivated individuals who take their service standards seriously and who are proud of their achievements. These are the true ambassadors of *Batho Pele*.

Communicated/Published in the Service Delivery Charter

Once service standards have been agreed and set, they should be communicated as widely as possible, inside and outside the Public Service, especially to current and potential end-user communities.

A clearly worded Service Delivery Charter should be displayed at service delivery end points and staff should be trained and capable of answering questions related to the standards.

Performance measured and reported

The performance of the department/component/institution should be monitored against the set standards and surveys should be conducted at regular intervals to establish the level of customer satisfaction. The results of these monitoring exercises must be made known to customers.

In cases where service delivery has fallen short of the set standards, apologies should be offered to the end-users and plans implemented to review the standards and to upgrade the levels of service delivery, always in consultation with all the stakeholders.

Reviewed and updated

Standards should be progressive and reviewed annually, in the light of performance and of customers' views, with the aim of raising the standards to keep improving service delivery.

LEVELS AND TYPES OF STANDARDS

It may help operational managers and frontline staff, tasked with setting standards, to differentiate between the different levels and types of standards. There are two basic levels of standards, namely minimum and optimum standards. For our purposes these may be defined as follows:

- ❑ minimum standards represent the lowest acceptable levels of service delivery; and
- ❑ optimum standards represent the highest achievable levels of service delivery.

When starting out to improve service delivery, we must ensure that we set at least minimum standards and aim to progress these over time closer to the optimum standards. It is useful to understand the framework or parameters within which we need to set standards and helps in the consultation process by preventing people from having expectations that are either too high or too low.

Within the framework of minimum and optimum standards there are three different types or categories of standards, namely:

- ❑ Structure standards;
- ❑ Process standards; and
- ❑ Outcome standards.

The first two deal with standards set for back office re-engineering initiatives to improve service delivery, while the last one deals with the standards set for the actual services experienced by our customers. To achieve sustainable improved service delivery it is necessary to set standards in all three areas.

Structure standards

Structure standards refer to the support system required for public services to be delivered. They apply to the resources we use to deliver the services, for example human, financial and physical resources. These standards specify the level of resource provision needed to achieve a particular level of service delivery. They may refer to personnel, equipment, supplies, buildings, systems, finance, supplies, facilities, etc.

Process standards

Process standards specify the level of activities that must be undertaken to achieve the specified level of service delivery. Process standards describe how specific actions should be performed. Like structure standards, process standards pertain to back office re-engineering to ensure that a certain level of service delivery is achieved.

Outcome standards

These standards specify the end results of service delivery and relate to front office activities. Outcome standards relate to the objectives of service delivery and address the results of what we do with the things we have

Outcome standards dictate the levels of structure and process standards, because once we confirm what our customers need and expect, we will know what structures and processes need to be put in place to deliver against these standards.

It is very important to understand that we cannot simply consult with customers and agree on S.M.A.R.T. standards, without accepting that there are definite ramifications for the re-engineering of back office structures and processes to make sure that we can deliver what we have promised. And naturally, this all has direct bearing on affordability and we must ensure that the necessary budgets, linked to the MTEF, are put in place to make it all happen.

SCORECARD

The scorecard works as follows:

- ❑ **1st Quadrant:** In consultation with all stakeholders, especially customers, translate vision into service delivery objectives, with appropriate standards, to provide customer satisfaction.
- ❑ **2nd Quadrant:** Put structures, systems and processes in place, with relevant standards, to facilitate delivery against service delivery objectives.
- ❑ **3rd Quadrant:** Recruit/develop human resources with the relevant competencies to man the structures and drive the systems and processes to deliver the agreed services at the required levels.
- ❑ **4th Quadrant:** Provide the necessary financial resources within approved budgets, linked to the MTEF, to fund the process of service delivery.

Setting service standards is virtually the very first thing that has to happen. Without standards, the whole system of service delivery will quickly degenerate into a chaotic, uncoordinated set of actions that all tend to be ends in themselves, vying among one another for prominence and recognition, instead of important and related means to achieving the set service delivery ends.

What frequently happens is that, if service standards are not defined at the outset, financial considerations tend to dominate activities and what is affordable in the eyes of the bookkeepers and accountants is what gets done, rather than what is necessary in the eyes of the customers.

LEVELS OF STANDARDS

There are two levels at which standards are formulated, namely:

- ❑ a generic/provincial level, also referred to as the macro level; and
- ❑ a domain specific level, also referred to as the micro level.

For our purposes it is sufficient to note that, as has been said repeatedly, all standards must be formulated in consultation with all stakeholders and the domain specific standards, that is, the standards at institutional or component level must be aligned to the provincial or generic standards.

One cannot simply go out and negotiate standards with customers, ignoring the broader standards that have been set at departmental, provincial and even national levels. It is good to remember that the system of service delivery must be integrated. It is not a stand-alone system, but gets its direction from the broader strategic objectives of government at national and provincial levels.

OBJECTIVES

It should be clear by now that the main objective of setting service standards is to improve the quantity and quality of public services, against a backdrop of transformational priorities, and to address the growing demand for public services in which customers can have confidence and of which all public servants can be justly proud.

In more detail, the objectives of setting service standards are:

- ❑ To improve service delivery by promoting high quality, high value public services that are vital to the well being of citizens.
- ❑ To provide value for money to taxpayers by ensuring that services are cost efficient.
- ❑ To articulate the commitment of public servants to the transformation process by delivering a high standard of service.
- ❑ To meet the growing expectations of the public for more information and active consultative processes.
- ❑ To ensure integrated service delivery by aligning departmental/domain specific standards with national norms and standards.
- ❑ To ensure a progressive and evolutionary, incremental approach to the quality of public service delivery.

LINKS TO LEGISLATION

Public Service Regulations

Part C 1 of the Public Service Regulations states that an executing authority shall establish and sustain a service delivery improvement programme for his/her department, including amongst others;

- ❑ standards for the main services to be provided.

Departments are expected to publish their service delivery standards in an annual report or statement so that citizens will know what they can expect. The reports should indicate how departments will meet each of their service standards.

While the executing authority is accountable for publishing standards in the service commitment charter, all employees have a responsibility to implement and continually strive to improve service delivery.

LINKS TO *BATHO PELE*

The links of setting service standards to *Batho Pele* are self-evident. The second principle deals with service standards and states that citizens should be told what level and quality of public

services they will receive so that they are aware of what to expect. This comes straight after the principle that urges us to consult with customers on their needs and expectations, so there can be no doubt that, within the spirit of *Batho Pele* setting and communicating service standards is critically important.

At a deeper level perhaps, as mentioned in the introduction to this guide, setting and publishing service standards is fundamental to the transformation process to move the Public Service away from autocratic complacency to being accountable to the people for the services it delivers. It is this notion of accountability that sets the new Public Service apart from the old, pre-1994 dispensation. And accountability has its roots in openness and transparency regarding the nature and quality of services that people can expect.

If we truly wish to “put people first”, we have an undeniable obligation to ask them what they need and then tell them what level of service delivery they can expect. And, as we have mentioned, if we respect their dignity, we have to keep our promises. This is what *Batho Pele* demands of all public servants.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The following indicators will show how successful we have been in setting and communicating S.M.A.R.T. service standards:

- ☐ The publication of a Service Delivery Charter.
- ☐ Service delivery targets are met within the predetermined turnaround times.
- ☐ High levels of customer satisfaction are recorded.
- ☐ High morale and levels of job satisfaction among staff.
- ☐ Incremental improvement in service delivery standards.
- ☐ Increased participation involving external stakeholders.
- ☐ Service awards achieved for excellent service delivery.
- ☐ More effective implementation of action plans.
- ☐ Improved ratings in individual and team performance assessments.

OUTCOMES

The outcomes of successfully setting service standards will include:

- ☐ Public Service departments and institutions are aligned with the strategic direction of provincial and national government.
- ☐ Service standards progressively improve each year. As standards are met and achieved each year, new targets are set and improving service delivery becomes a continuous, progressive

process. Power is pushed out from the hub to the spokes of the wheel, so that better services are delivered on the ground.

- ❑ Citizens are well informed about the services that they should expect – when people have more information they have more control.
- ❑ Customers will have realistic expectations of services to be provided.
- ❑ There is balanced development within departments, coupled with the efficient and effective delivery of public services within available resources – optimal utilisation of resources.
- ❑ There is greater end-user participation in the service delivery system and a growing recognition that user's rights should be balanced by their responsibilities.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Challenge: Unrealistic expectations on the part of customers

Customers may have unrealistic expectations regarding the nature and quality of services to be provided.

Response:

When consulting customers help them understand the bigger picture of the transformation process. Make them aware of the available resources and the long-term plans for improved service delivery. Guard against making excuses for poor service delivery. Set realistic standards and targets and get their buy-in to the process of incremental service delivery.

Challenge: Cost of developing standards

Setting standards cannot happen over night. Consultation takes time and resources. Certain communities may have very specific and unique needs. Sometimes it may be necessary to run costly pilot projects. Communicating the standards can be expensive and one may need to make use of media and communication experts to communicate effectively with all stakeholders.

Response:

Keep in close contact with end-user communities at all times. Get them involved in the process of developing and communicating standards. Consider the cost implications carefully and work all phases into the costing – from scanning the environment to communicating the standards. A good rule of thumb here is to rather do a few things well and progress slowly than to try and do it all at once.

APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING SERVICE STANDARDS

People sometimes have a problem when it comes to the actual development of standards. Often meetings with end-users will help to define their needs and expectations and appropriate standards will flow from this process. However, it may be useful to operational managers to understand that there are basically two approaches to developing service standards, namely an empirical approach and a normative approach.

For our purposes we may summarise these two approaches as follows: the empirical approach looks at what standards are currently regarded as good practice in similar circumstances and takes it lead from there, while the normative approach adopts a more theoretical stance and, using the benefit of “experts”, attempts to determine what standards should be set.

Often a combination of these two approaches works best. The best approach is possibly to engage end-users and other stakeholders in an open and frank debate, interrogating all relevant issues and interests with the guiding principle being that we want to do the best we can at the moment and improve it over time.

Whatever approach is used it is always important to ensure that the standards that are developed are S.M.A.R.T.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO SETTING SERVICE STANDARDS

STEP 1**KNOW YOUR BUSINESS**

Knowing your business entails:

- ☐ knowing who your customers are;
- ☐ knowing who your stakeholders are;
- ☐ knowing what services or products you provide;
- ☐ knowing what standards and levels of service are currently being provided;
- ☐ knowing what partnerships with other services providers need to be established; and
- ☐ knowing what is affordable

Know your customers

Public service institutions are accountable to internal and external customers. There are basically three types or categories of external customers, namely:

- ☐ the direct customer, who receives the output of the service;
- ☐ the general public, which receives the collective benefit from government services; and
- ☐ the taxpayer, who pays for government services.

In addition there are the internal customers, namely other departments within the Public Service with which the department or union has relationships in order to deliver its services. For example, a Department of Health will need to establish relationships with Departments of Welfare (for frail care for the aged) and Education (for AIDS education).

Each of these categories of customers has different perspectives and expectations. Managers are faced with the challenge of responding to all these expectations when setting service standards and balancing their different needs within an integrated service delivery system. Thus they all need to be represented or involved in the consultation process when service standards are being debated and developed.

Know your stakeholders

Apart from the internal and external customers, there are other stakeholders who have direct and indirect interests in the service standards provided by a service delivery unit. Stakeholders can be divided into two groups, namely, Direct stakeholders and Pressure or Indirect stakeholders.

As the name suggest, direct stakeholders are individuals or groups of people who can have a direct and immediate effect on an organisation. The most important direct stakeholders are:

- ☐ All staff and employees.
- ☐ All customers.

- ❑ National departments, in the case of provincial departments.
- ❑ The particular departmental structures in the case of units/components/institutions within departments.
- ❑ Shareholders and investors.

While the indirect stakeholders may not be able to have a direct impact on the organisation's service delivery, they are able to bring pressure to bear on the organisation. The main pressure or indirect stakeholders are:

- ❑ Other departments/institutions/components in government at a national and provincial level.
- ❑ Labour unions.
- ❑ Special interest groups and pressure groups, such as environmental organisations, etc.
- ❑ NGOs and CBOs.
- ❑ Community leaders.
- ❑ Local government structures.
- ❑ Schools and institutions of higher learning.

All of these stakeholder groups should be included in the consultation process when setting standards.

Know your services

A service is provided every time a customer deals with a public service department or component, be it receiving a social grant, issuing a birth, marriage or death certificate, providing identity documents and passports, granting a housing subsidy, being attended to at a hospital or clinic, attending school or simply responding to a customer's queries in face-to-face situations or telephonically or in writing, etc. In all cases there is some form of interaction or transaction between the service provider and the customer.

Always remember that customers have the right to services and to a certain quality standard. For example, they have a right to the quality treatment specified by the *Batho Pele* principles and they have a right to be addressed in one of the official languages that they can understand.

The key to identifying your services is to identify the various interactions or transactions you have with the public. The list of these is the list of services you provide and shows you where you should develop service standards.

When defining your services, you should bear in mind that, as mentioned above, public service departments also provide services to their own staff, to management and to other public service

departments. The same service standards should generally apply internally and externally, otherwise one could be accused of discrimination.

Know what standards and levels of service are currently being provided

Before one is able to develop and set new service standards, one needs to know what the current levels of service delivery are. To determine your current level of service delivery, appropriate performance measurement and monitoring systems must be employed, for example, Peer Review, Self Assessment and customer surveys by way of discussion forums, focus groups and postal surveys. (See guides on Peer Review, Self-Assessment and How to consult.)

Setting service delivery standards may involve re-engineering certain aspects of your service delivery system or machinery, such as the systems and processes employed to deliver the services. This may involve costs and could take time to implement, however it can produce significant savings in the long term.

Know what partnerships with other service providers need to be established

Often public services are or have to be delivered in partnership with other public service departments or agencies from the private sector. The objectives of identifying partnerships are to increase the efficiency of service delivery and to provide more comprehensive services to customers. Where such joint or shared delivery exists, you will want to arrive at mutually agreed service standards.

The best and most effective way of doing this is to involve the “partners” in the whole process of setting service standards, especially when consulting with customers and other stakeholders.

Know what is affordable

Before consulting with customers on improving service delivery, it is useful to know both the costs of existing service levels and the major cost drivers. This knowledge will enable you to provide a reasoned response when consulting with your customer, but remember, as we said under the Balanced Scorecard above, financial considerations should not dominate the process of service delivery and setting service standards. In other words, the tail should not wag the dog.

However, having said that, financial constraints are clearly important and one has to operate within them. As suggested previously, one needs to plan over a longer period to achieve optimum standards and grow standards incrementally over a period of years. Planning must be integrated and linked to the MTEF.

STEP 2

CONSULT WITH YOUR STAFF AND CUSTOMERS

This is perhaps the most important or critical step in setting service standards and you will find it useful to refer to the guide on How to Consult.

The main stakeholder groups have been identified above under “Know your stakeholders” and full details on how to consult are provided in the guide on consultation. Here we shall restrict our comments to a few remarks on the most important aspects of consultation to set service standards.

All stakeholders must be invited to participate in the consultation process and those who decline must be kept informed of the progress and outcomes at all times. The most important stakeholders to consult in setting service standards are:

- ☐ Customers;
- ☐ Staff;
- ☐ Partners; and
- ☐ Labour.

Consulting with customers

Consult customers to find out what is important, how satisfied they are with current service delivery, what is working well and what needs to be improved. By consulting customers about the services they receive, making them aware of the ramifications and costs of delivering those services and inviting them to suggest service delivery standards and approaches, it will be much easier to match their expectations with what is achievable and affordable.

Consulting customers is important for two main reasons:

- ☐ it puts you in touch with what actually matters to customers; and
- ☐ it allows you to modify unrealistic expectations.

As mentioned in the guide on consulting, customer satisfaction can be assessed in various ways, including by:

- ☐ providing suggestions boxes;
- ☐ monitoring the volume and the nature of complaints;
- ☐ conducting surveys;
- ☐ holding focus groups; and
- ☐ appointing customers to boards, for example, a hospital board; etc.

Consult with your front-line staff

Consult with you front-line staff to find out how they think services can be improved within existing resource levels. They interact with customers on a daily basis at the point of service delivery and are well positioned to generate innovative ideas for improving service delivery and setting service standards based on customer needs. Through open, honest consultations, such suggestions from staff can be aired and examined. In addition, consulting staff has the advantage of gaining their commitment and buy-in to any new processes and to the service standards.

Front-line staff should see their jobs as providing quality service to clients – service standards must enable them to do so.

Consulting with Partners

Clearly, where partners are part of the service delivery chain, they must be consulted on the standards of service delivery expected from them

Consulting with Labour

It is very important to ensure that organised labour buys in to the service standards to prevent later disputes.

STEP 3

SET CUSTOMER-SENSITIVE SERVICE STANDARDS

The statement of standards, as contained in the Service Delivery Charter, is the hub around which all the other elements of service delivery revolve.

Earlier in this guide we mentioned that the basic standards are those of:

- ☐ time;
- ☐ quantity;
- ☐ quality; and
- ☐ cost.

We strongly recommend that operational managers and frontline staff stick to these basic standards. This will prevent confusion and keep things simple and ensure that the standards are easy to monitor.

Research has shown that customers regard the following factors as critical to good service:

- ☐ **Responsiveness** – how quickly and effectively one is able to respond to a customer's request or enquiry – this can normally be accommodated with a time standard, for example,

“we shall process passport applications within three weeks” provided one has competent and friendly staff dealing with the matter (see Step 4 below). Punctuality is also a time standard.

- ❑ **Competence** – the level of expertise of frontline staff – this can be set in terms of relevant competencies. Competencies are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attributes and can be measured against specific competency profiles. Competence is a quality standard as it deals with the quality of staff. (See also Step 4, below.)
- ❑ **Ease of access** – this is part of wayfinding and signage (see guide on Wayfinding and Signage) and again, this is a quality standard.
- ❑ **Courtesy** – is part of *Batho Pele* and the whole of *Batho Pele* may be regarded as a system that deals with the quality of services. Thus, courtesy is a quality standard.
- ❑ good communication – may be one of the “competencies” required (see above). It is a quality standard, but can be a quantity standard, if for example, we are required to communicate specific information twice a week or four times a year, etc.
- ❑ **Credibility** – compliance with acknowledged quality standards such as ISO 9002 or SABS requirements promote the credibility of an organisation and/or service.
- ❑ **Reliability and accuracy** – These elements are often a combination of quality and quantity standards. For example, an internal standard requiring 70% accuracy in performing a certain task would be a standard of quality, but having to do something, say every week, which would be quantity standard, would inspire a sense of reliability.
- ❑ **Security** – if to provide a secure environment for customers we have to ensure that three security guards patrol the area every 15 minutes, from six in the morning to six at night, this would be a quantity standard, whereas, from the customer’s point of view, a secure environment would add to the quality of the service he or she experiences.
- ❑ **Appearance of staff** – dress codes can be clearly spelled out. This and personal hygiene are quality standards.
- ❑ **User friendly environments** – this normally includes things such as good wayfinding and signage systems, secure environments, competent staff, responsiveness, punctuality, etc, which have been dealt with above. This is basically a quality standard from the customer’s point of view, but to create it, we shall have to set standards of time and quantity as well. For example, the time taken to respond to customers’ requests and the number of files/dockets that have to be processed each day (quantity standard) to be able to deliver against this time standard. Thus time and quantity standards can combine to provide a quality standard, such as a user-friendly environment.

STEP 4**EMPOWER AND TRAIN STAFF**

Once the standards have been agreed and approved by all concerned, one needs to train staff, especially the frontline staff to deliver against these standards.

Staff competencies need to be assessed against the relevant competency profiles and appropriate development plans put in place or new staff recruited to meet the service delivery commitments of the department.

Staff cannot be responsive to customers, if they are overly restricted by rules and regulations, if the information they need in order to deliver good services is not readily available, or if they are not encouraged to be innovative and to take some measured risks.

STEP 5**COMMUNICATE SERVICE STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE TO CUSTOMERS**

Every effort should be made to ensure that all customers are aware of the services and standards provided by a service delivery unit. The best way of doing this is to produce a Service Delivery Charter for the unit/department and display it at all service delivery points. It can also be mailed to customers through the post or electronically and placed in local newspapers.

Departments/units may also wish to produce posters, featuring their services and standards, for display in high customer traffic areas. The services of public relations and/or communication experts may be used to help with the communication of service standards, although this may prove expensive. However, in instances where end-users need to be educated in a particular new service and how to apply for it, for example, how the housing subsidy system works, it is strongly advised that the services of professional be used to effect these communications optimally.

If the services of professional public relations/communication people are used, they will normally help you prepare a communication plan, containing a variety of communication tactics, that will ensure maximum exposure, with the added benefit of free editorial exposure in the media, which will greatly enhance the credibility of the unit/department.

STEP 6**MANAGE SERVICE STANDARDS AND DEVELOP A SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT PLANS**

Operational managers should be actively involved in managing quality service delivery, including service standards. The good management of service standards includes:

- ❑ implementing your standards;
- ❑ measuring your performance against your standards;
- ❑ striving for continuous improvement; and
- ❑ developing a service delivery improvement plan.

Implementing service standards

Establishing service standards and making them an integral part of management will take time. Rather than wait until perfect and complete standards have been developed, standards should be developed progressively. We have recommended this incremental approach to setting service standards several times in this guide. Initially standards may be incomplete or embryonic in some aspects, as you gain experience you can improve these standards and extend the range of services they cover.

Measure performance

If the standards that have been set are S.M.A.R.T. as suggested, it will be relatively easy to measure performance against these standards. Performance against standards should be measured and monitored constantly. Measurement should identify any problem areas for which solutions can be found.

Continually improve service delivery

As standards are set and implemented and performance against them measured, shortfalls in performance and opportunities for improving service delivery will become evident. As a result it will be possible to develop and implement a service delivery improvement plan, linked to strategic objectives. Continuous improvement will allow you to set higher service standards and maximise client satisfaction.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The following summary covers the key considerations in setting service standards:

- ❑ Service standards should be viewed as a means to achieving customer satisfaction, not as an end in themselves.
- ❑ Service standards must be S.M.A.R.T.

- ❑ Service standards should target those service features that are most important to the customers, based on consultation with customers.
- ❑ Customer expectations need to be reviewed regularly as needs and perceptions change.
- ❑ Communicating service standards to customers is very important.
- ❑ Service standards must be supported by performance measurement and continuous improvement systems.

USEFUL REFERENCES

Batho Pele White Paper

Public Service Regulations