

Full Length Research Paper

Understanding the impact of human resource management practices on municipal service delivery in South Africa: An organizational justice approach

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Municipal service delivery is a major concern in South Africa. Proper management of employees is crucial for service organisations like municipalities precisely because employees interface directly with customers who make evaluative judgement of the quality of service delivered by employees. Therefore, it is extremely important for municipalities to comprehend specific organisational factors that influence employee attitudes and behaviours that may in turn influence how customers evaluate service quality. Drawing on organisational justice and other management theories, we present a model and a set of hypotheses regarding the relationships among political interference, employee justice perceptions of HRM practices, employee commitment and citizenship behaviour, and service quality of South African Municipalities. The aim is to assist in identifying desirable HRM practices that municipalities should seek and engage in and undesirable ones to avoid in order to create and maintain high levels of employee commitment and citizenship behaviour necessary for delivering quality service to communities. The paper is “theoretical” but has practical applications for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. It extends the literature on service delivery to include justice theory perspective.

Key words: Organisational justice, employee fairness perception, organisational citizenship behaviour, South African municipalities.

INTRODUCTION

Provision of quality service by all spheres of government to citizens of South Africa is a constitutional mandate. In terms of the constitution of South Africa (Act 106 of 1996), municipalities are responsible for delivery of services such as water, sanitation, electricity, refuse removal, and sometimes housing, municipal roads, storm water, primary health care, child care facilities, local tourism, municipal planning, and municipal by-laws (Portfolio, 2008). Recent escalation of public protests concerning service delivery is an indictment on municipalities’ ability to provide services that meet citizens’ expectations. This occurs despite government’s

clear intention about quality service delivery as encapsulated in the White Paper on Human Resource Management in the public Service (1997:2) which reads:

“Human resource management in the Public Service will result in a diverse competent and well-managed workforce capable of and committed to delivering high quality services to the people of South Africa...and human resource management in the Public Service should become a model of excellence, in which service to society stems from individual commitment instead of compulsion.”

Clearly, quality service delivery in municipalities is an important agenda for the South African government and it views proper HRM and employee commitment as critical

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to achieving service excellence. The extent to which the lowest level of government - municipalities share in this vision and are committed to delivering on it is however doubtful. Honestly, municipalities seem to be losing the service delivery "war". Not surprisingly Portfolio (2008:74) observed "service delivery by South African municipalities rank highest on citizens list of irritations". The importance of HRM to service delivery does not seem to be well understood by municipalities as their HRM practices continue to be subject of much criticism without any end in sight. There seems to be a general perception that employees of municipalities are recruited in compliance with narrow political interests rather than due to competence. Similarly, others believe promotions, pay packages etc are mainly done on partisan basis. Admittedly, HRM in post 1994 South Africa is not a simple matter as it is heavily regulated. While most of the legislations are well intended and designed to correct some of the wrongs of the apartheid past, the same have turned out to be misused or abused.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996); the Labour Relations Act (Act 66 of 1995 as amended in 2002); the Basic Condition of Employment Act (Act 75 of 1997 as amended in 2002); the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998); the Public Service Act (Act 103 of 1994); the Skills Development Act (Act 97 of 1998); and many others that are too numerous to list here are legislation meant to ensure justice, equity, and fairness - all that guarantee fundamental human rights. These legislations also specify the rights and responsibilities of employees and employers and are aimed at advancing justice, fairness, and democratisation of the workplace. Specifically, they deal with unfair labour practices like unfair dismissals (Clarke, 2004:5). Municipalities are expected to conduct their HRM in accordance with these legislations. However, it is often alleged that municipalities hide behind the same to appoint people into positions due to political consideration and who are of such low calibre that service delivery is eventually adversely affected. Many municipal workers and sometimes very senior personnel have lost their positions which the press and fellow workers have often claimed to be politically motivated. It is also often alleged that the employment equity Act (Act 55 of 1998) is often manipulated to suit political whims of the dominant political parties in municipalities. Thus, while it is evident that South Africa is not short of legislation for promoting justice and fair play at the workplace, regrettably, HRM practices of municipalities appear not to be meeting public expectations.

Organisational performance is said to depend on its people (Senyucel, 2009; Van Der Westhuizen; Clarke, 2004; Muldrow, Buckley and Schay, 2002) and more so for service organisations like municipalities. The point is that in service organisations, employees are the ones who link the organisation with customers (Beatson et al., 2008; Babin and Boles, 1998) and customers make

evaluative judgement of the quality of service delivered by employees (Beatson et al., 2008).

Given the critical role of employees in service organisations, South African municipalities cannot ignore the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of its employees and their likely impact on service delivery. Municipalities need to take their HRM activities like compensation, promotion, training etc seriously. The fact is, performing these tasks often lead to people interacting with others in ways that ultimately affect their justice perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. Moreover, municipalities need to realise the potential impact of political interference on employee justice/fairness perception, commitment, service behaviour and their ultimate individual and/or collective impact on service delivery. Based on the above, we boldly propose that organisational justice theory, HRM practices, employee behaviour and attitudes (citizenship behaviour and commitment) and quality service delivery in municipalities are inextricably related. In other words, poor quality of service delivery raises questions about justice perceptions of HRM practices in South African municipalities. In this study, political interference is viewed as a major antecedent to employee justice perception of the HRM practices of municipalities whilst employee citizenship behaviour and commitment are regarded as moderating variables in the HRM practice/service quality relationship.

PURPOSE/AIM OF THE STUDY

Drawing on organisational justice theory we develop a novel framework and a set of hypotheses regarding the relationships among perceived political interference, employee justice perceptions of HRM practices, employee commitment and service behaviour, and the direct and indirect effects of these variables on the quality of service delivery in South African Municipalities. The aim is to assist in identifying desirable HRM practices that municipalities should seek and engage in and undesirable ones to avoid for creating and maintaining high levels of employee commitment and service behaviour culture necessary for delivering quality service to communities.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Justice and fairness are important values in public HRM and are fundamental goals of traditional civil service system (Brewer and Kellough, 2008:4). There is growing concern that the politically polarised municipality environment in South Africa lends to political interference in HRM practices. The problem is that any interference in HRM practices whether real or perceived could make employees form negative justice perceptions of their

municipalities. Such perceptions may lead to the development of counter productive attitudes and behaviours-low commitment and/or anti-citizenship behaviour-all of which could lead to poor quality of service delivery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HRM: Definition and scope

What actually constitutes HRM is controversial as the concept has attracted numerous definitions. Senyucel's (2009) sees HRM as a combination of people-centred management practices that recognises employees as assets and geared to creating and maintaining skilful and committed workforce for achieving organisational goals. On the other hand, Beardwell, Holden, and Claydon (2004) regard HRM as the philosophy, policies, procedures, and practices related to the management of people within an organisation. Monody and Noe (2005) simply see HRM as the utilisation of employees to achieve organisational goals. In this study, we do not adopt any particular definition. However, we are interested in the individual activities related to the management of people at the workplace. HRM consist of a number of basic tasks/activities (Kamoche, 1997). The HRM literature identifies the following activities as common to all HRM systems of organisations: recruitment, selection, compensation, performance rewards, rewards, training, development, promotion, performance management, grievance handling, and overtime management. Our concern is on how well these activities are carried out in South African municipalities so that the outcomes can lead to quality service delivery. This means hiring (recruiting and selecting) the right person; appropriate compensation; appropriate remuneration; appropriate rewards for performance; opportunities for training, development, and promotion; proper performance management; and appropriate grievance handling. The task is however not easy for municipalities.

Hiring the right person for example requires linking recruiting strategies to organisational needs (Hendon, 2000) on the other hand legislation like employment equity must be fulfilled. Yet still is the question of "redeployment". Whatever the case, municipalities cannot go about hiring without taking organisational needs into primary consideration. The oft accusation that municipalities hire inappropriate workers because of political considerations suggests that municipalities do not know or do not believe, or just do not care about the negative ramifications of such practices. Similarly, remuneration has to be appropriate. However, appropriate remuneration seems a perennial problem for municipalities as it is often alleged that certain "privileged" employees of municipalities are overpaid

whilst the more deserving are underpaid. Such practices if indeed true are likely to cause discontent among employees with obvious detrimental consequences for service delivery.

Even if the right people are hired, and even if employees are appropriately remunerated, they still need to be developed (van Dijk, 2005) to realise their full potential. It is obvious that developmental opportunities need to be available to all employees if they are to feel fairly treated. The same line of argument holds for all other HRM activities. Municipalities must therefore be prudent in their HRM practices starting with recruitment up to training and development in order to motivate employees to contribute more towards delivering quality service to citizens.

It is quite clear from the discussion so far that delivering quality services is an important objective of HRM for service organisations. However, the extent to which this objective is being achieved in South African municipalities is suspicious due to the numerous complaints about service delivery throughout the country.

Employee motivation: Equity theory

Although motivation does not feature directly in our model, there has never been a discourse on managing people without the mention of the subject. Besides, commitment, a key component of the model is closely related to the concept of motivation to the point that both are sometimes regarded as referring to the same thing. For these reasons, we deem it important to discuss the concept no matter how briefly. To begin with, what actually motivates people to work remains an elusive concept mainly because there are many theories about motivation. For example, McClelland (1962) - learned needs theory; Adams (1965) - equity theory; Vroom (1964; 1970) - expectancy theory; Herzberg (1966) - two factor theory; Porter-Lawler (1968) - model of motivation; Maslow (1970) - hierarchy of needs; Alderfer (1972) - ERG theory; and Locke and Latham (1990) - goal-setting are just some of the many theories that have explored the concept. While each of these and other theories contribute something, Adams (1963) equity theory which compares employees' job inputs with rewards they receive appears the most relevant to this study.

Generally, equity theory of motivation attempts to explain how people strive for fairness and justice in social or give-and-take relationship. And as a process theory, it explains how a person's motivation to act in a certain way is propelled by feelings of inequity. It attempts to explain the social comparisons that people make when they compare their inputs such as work efforts, time spent on work, qualifications and skills with outputs such as pay, recognition, promotion, etc they receive (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008:217). Simply put, Adams (1963) equity theory states that an employee assesses his or her work

inputs against what he or she receives (outputs) and makes comparisons with another employee's ratio of inputs and outputs. The problem arises when comparison is made and there is perception of unfairness (inequity). One of the ways in which employees will seek to restore equity in event of perceived inequity is to change own inputs - that is behaviour or attitudes (Bagrami, 2007:88). Thus, employees of municipalities who might perceive inequity in say pay, promotion, reward or other outputs may for example change their attitude towards customers they serve. It is therefore important for managers of municipalities to fully comprehend this important theory and be aware of its implications when they make decisions concerning such things such as pay, bonus, fringe benefits, promotions etc. Unfortunately, the prognosis for South African municipalities does not look good as accusations about favouritism and nepotism abound concerning recruitment, pay, promotion and other HRM related matters. From equity theory viewpoint alone, this must be worrying.

Organisational justice (employee fairness perception)

A promising approach to understanding municipal service delivery problem is through the lens of organisational justice. Organisational justice theory focuses on people's perceptions about fairness in the workplace (Greenberg, 1987; Saunders et al., 2002; Kang, 2007). Organisational justice research is seen as a direct expansion of the concept of equity theory (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008). It is about commitment to ethical principle of fairness in the workplace. According to this perspective, individual work attitudes including commitment (Lowe and Vondanovich, 1995; Kang, 2007) and citizenship/service behaviour (Organ 1990; Moorman 1991; Kang, 2007) are associated with perceptions of fairness in the workplace. Various studies have shown that employees evaluate HRM practices in terms of justice (Gilliland 1993; Jones et al., 1999; Fischer, 2004). Therefore, it will be interesting to see how organisational justice theory can help explain the service dilemma of South African municipalities.

Organisational justice theories are usually partitioned into three components namely distributive, procedural, and interactional. Distributive justice focuses on the extent to which individuals perceive an outcome received in return for effort as fair and is linked to equity theory of motivation (Greenberg, 1987; Kang, 2007). As indicated earlier, should employees of municipalities experience inequity in terms of their organisations HRM practices, this could result in behavioural and attitudinal changes that may be detrimental to service delivery. While distributive justice reflects the perceived fairness in the allocation of outcomes (resources and rewards), procedural justice is concerned with the perceived fairness of the procedures or processes used in arriving

at and administering decisions (Kang, 2007; Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008) . Procedural fairness will be important to employees of municipalities because it will offer them some assurance of fairness of HRM practices such as promotion, performance evaluation, grievance handling, etc. Research shows that positive perceptions of both procedural and distributive justice can be enhanced by involving employees in decision making (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008) . It seems reasonable then to assume that municipalities can enhance perceptions of both procedural and distributive justice by involving employees in HRM decision making regardless of political affiliation.

The third component, interactional justice is about the quality of interpersonal treatment in the implementation of organisational decisions (Bies and Moag, 1986; Khang, 2007) - that is, whether or not people feel they are treated fairly in the implementation of decision (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008). With the politically polarised nature of South Africa's municipal environment in mind, the potential for employees to complain about interpersonal treatment is real. In fact, it is reasonable to expect employees to complain about treatment they receive from officials who belong to rival political parties.

Researchers including (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996; van den Bos et al., 1998) have called for integrated studies involving all three forms of organisational justice. Acting on the evidence of a meta-analysis of numerous empirical research, Kreitner and Kinicki (2008) added to this call by coming to the important conclusion that all three forms of justice correlate with among others, organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour. On the basis of the above, we find it necessary to include all three forms of justice in our model.

Employee goal commitment (EGC)

Although there are several definitions of commitment partly because of the numerous studies on the subject, Senyucel (2009) believes the issue boils down to loyalty to the organisation. For example, Robbins, et al., (2007: 73) define commitment as a state in which an employee identifies with a particular organisation and its goals, and wishes to maintain membership in the organisation. Kreitner and Kinicki (2008: 22) define it as the extent to which an individual is personally dedicated to achieving a goal. Mowday, Porter and Steer (1982) view it as attachment and loyalty to the organisation and consisting of three components: (i) identification with goals and values of the organisation; (ii) a desire to belong to the organisation; and (iii) willingness to display efforts on behalf of the organisation. However, the most comprehensive and easily the most enduring definition provided by Porter et al. (1974) sees employee commitment as the strength of an employee's identification and involvement in an organisation that is characterised by

three factors namely: (i) a strong belief and acceptance of the organisation's goals; (ii) a willingness to exert a lot of effort on behalf of the organisation; and (iii) a definite desire to maintain organisational membership (Maxell and Steel, 2003).

While loyalty no doubt recurs in these definitions, the common thread that seems to run through all of them is the reference to identification with and devotion to organisational goal. Therefore, commitment as used in this study refers to the extent of employees' identification with, devotion to, and the willingness to exert extraordinary effort towards the attainment of organisational goals regardless of intended or actual duration of stay in the organisation. One thing clear from all the definitions including our very own is that commitment is an attitudinal issue.

Commitment ranks amongst the most important types of employee attitudes in response to what happens to them at the workplace (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008). It is believed that maintaining high levels of commitment in employees is critical for organisational success because it is believed that committed employees will act in the best interest of an organisation (Fischer, 2004). In fact, employee commitment has been found to have profound influence on organisational outcome in many ways. For example employee commitment has been found to predict the critical employee behaviour, organisational citizenship behaviour (Sanders et al., 2008; Vandyne and Ang, 1998).

There is little doubt municipalities in South African would want to create and maintain committed employees. This requires identification of antecedents to their employees' commitment. Although there are a host of possible preconditions to employee commitment, employee work experiences (HRM practices) is considered a key one (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008; Maxwell and Steele, 2003). Kreitner and Kinicki, (2008) argue from a psychological contract point of view in stating that "employees expect to receive what they think they are entitled to in return for what they provide to the organisation". This argument aligns well with Adams (1963) equity theory which states that "employees usually make comparisons about job effort (input) and rewards (outcome) and expect equity in terms of efforts and rewards. Common to both situations, when there is perception of inequity (unfairness), employees usually seek to restore equity by changing among other attitudes, their organisational commitment. Therefore, as rightly observed by Senyucel (2009), employee commitment could be increased by maximising HRM practices. Maxwell and Steele (2003) agree with this point by stating that HRM practices is the most important factor to consider in encouraging organisational commitment more so because senior managers usually have considerable influence over HRM practices. Therefore, senior managers of municipalities can use this influence over HRM practices to enhance their employees' commitment to delivering quality service to citizens.

Organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB)

"Organizational citizenship behaviour" (OCB) also sometimes referred to as "employee citizenship behaviour" is a relatively new concept. The term was coined by Organ and his associates in the early 1980s which they defined as "behaviour that: goes beyond the basic requirements of the job; is to a large extent discretionary; and is of benefit to the organization" (Lambert, 2006: 503). OCB can also be defined as individual behaviour that is beneficial to the organization; is discretionary and not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system; is rather a matter of personal choice, such that its omission is not punishable (Wikipedia, 2008). In this study, we adopt Kreitner and Kinicki's simple yet all encompassing definition which sees OCB as employee behaviour that exceed work-role requirement. Naturally, employees can decide to exceed work-role requirement or not or even engage in anti-citizenship behaviour - behaviour that harms the organisation. There is no doubt that South African municipalities would want employees to exceed their work role requirement. This would require some motivating to achieve. According to Coyle-Shapiro et al. (2004), individuals engage in OCB as a form of reciprocity based on how well they have been treated by the organisation. We contend that employees are just as likely to engage in OCB (exceed work-role requirement), not to, or engage in *anti-citizenship behaviour*, depending upon their perceptions of fairness in HRM practices.

Five dominant dimensions of OCB have since emerged and received a lot of research attention. These include:

(a) *altruism* or *selflessness* - a voluntary action that helps a specific other person with an organisationally related task or activity, or an attitude or way of behaving marked by unselfish concern for the welfare of others or the belief that acting for the benefit of others is right and good; (b) *conscientiousness* - a discretionary behaviour that goes well beyond minimal role and task requirements, or showing great care, attention, and industriousness in carrying out a task or role especially towards customers or doing things according to a sense of right and wrong especially towards customers; (c) *sportsmanship* - any behaviour that demonstrates willingness to tolerate less than ideal circumstances or inconveniences without complaining, or observance of the rules of fair play, respect, and graciousness in losing towards customers; (d) *courtesy* - a discretionary behaviour or effort to prevent work-related problems with others; and (e) *civic virtue* - behaviour that shows willingness to responsibly participate in the life of the organisation and in the best interest of the organisation and customers (Morrison, 1996; Organ, 1988; Potgieter, 2007). From the discussion so far in the various sections it becomes increasingly reasonable to expect employees of municipalities with lower PPI report more positive PHF, higher levels of OCB and EOC and for such municipalities to be ranked higher by citizens on QSD than those with higher levels of

perceived political interference.

METHOD

As in every research, investigating organisational issues to gain a better understanding for the purpose of appropriate decision making is only possible when it is done in a scientific - that is, in a systematic manner. In this method section, we surmise the research process (steps) followed in developing the framework.

To begin with, it needs to be understood that the paper is theoretical as opposed to applied research. A research can be said to be theoretical when: "it aims to increase understanding of phenomena and the relationships among key components of phenomena; and to accomplish these goals, researchers develop and test models reflecting the properties of the phenomena, the relationships among various aspects of the phenomena, and the relevant external factors" (Van Scotter and Culligan, 2003). In contrast to applied research that emphasises short-term fixes, theoretical research aims at long-term improvements (Van Scotter and Culligan, 2003). In this study, we have developed a model depicting human resource management practices, organisational justice theory and service quality phenomena with the key components being, employee justice perceptions of HRM practices, employee commitment and citizenship behaviour, and service quality whilst the external factor is political interference. It is hoped that in the end, testing the model could lead to identification of best-practices that municipal managers could use in the present-day HRM decision making which can lead to long-term solution-quality service delivery. Thus, although the paper is said to be theoretical it nonetheless has practical applications for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers because testing the model could lead to identification of HRM best-practices that can be used in solving the real organisational problem of municipal service delivery.

In developing the model, we started with an extensive literature review aimed at among others identifying relevant variables and comprehending their interconnected. In this respect, we utilised Sekaran's (1992:152) method (Figure 1) that involves identifying the dimensions (key variables) relating to a problem under investigation and then the decomposing the dimensions (variables) into measurable elements. Through the review of the related literature we identified political interference; employee justice perceptions of HRM practices; employee commitment and citizenship behaviour as the key variables related to the problem of quality service delivery in South African municipalities (Figure 1). Following on this, we decomposed each of these dimension (variables) into measurable elements (Figure 1). We then linked the variables together to form an integrated model (Figure 1). Based on the model, we developed a set of hypotheses regarding the relationships among political interference, employee justice perceptions of HRM practices, employee commitment and citizenship behaviour, and service quality of South African Municipalities. The schema presented in Figure 1 is a summary of key concepts and relationships among variables that represents the overarching framework of this paper.

We justify the model, statements, and the proposed hypotheses with concrete evidence from the literature by taking into consideration extant management thoughts on the relationships between identified variables.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The thesis for the current study is that: politically polarised municipality environments make their HRM

practices very vulnerable to political interference. From organisational justice perspective, interferences in HRM practices (PPI) could lower the justice perceptions of their organisation's HRM practices (PHF). This could in turn lower commitment (EOC) and citizenship behaviour (OCB) among employees which could impact on municipalities' quality of service delivery (QSD). Thus the underlying assumption for the study is that the politically polarised nature of municipal environments makes political interference in HRM practices a reality. The only doubt is the extent to which this occurs and the impact thereof on service delivery.

Typical HRM activities of all organisations including municipalities consist of: recruitment, selection, compensation, training, development, promotion, attendance management, performance management, grievance handling, and overtime management. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any of these activities that cannot be influenced by political interference. In South Africa, officials of municipalities are usually accused of sometimes unsanctioned self-serving but most often politically motivated HRM practices that can be divisive, dysfunctional, and counter productive.

Recent events however show government's awareness of the problem and willingness to take corrective measures. Of note, government recently acknowledged the detrimental effects of its infamous "redeployment" policy on municipal service delivery and has called for its review. Also, the October 18th 2009 edition of the Sunday Times released extracts from a draft report of a government sponsored audit on local government that admits to nepotism and unqualified staff as major impediments to service delivery in municipalities. These admissions show evidence of improper HRM practices in municipalities and suggest possible political interference. The schema (model) presented in Figure 1 is a summary of key concepts and relationships among variables that represents the overarching framework of this paper.

The role of perceived political interference in employee justice perceptions of HRM practices of municipalities

It has been alluded to earlier that effective HRM is essential to quality service delivery. However, effective HRM depends very much on the conditions that an organisational setting provides (Senyucel, 2009: 14). One such critical environmental factor for municipalities discussed earlier is political polarisation. We have clearly pointed out that political polarisation makes political interference a real threat to employee fairness perceptions of HRM practices in municipalities. This danger seems real in South African municipalities where there have been numerous reports and accusations of "jobs for pals", "undeserved promotions", etc based on political considerations rather than on competence. From organisational justice point of view, municipal employees

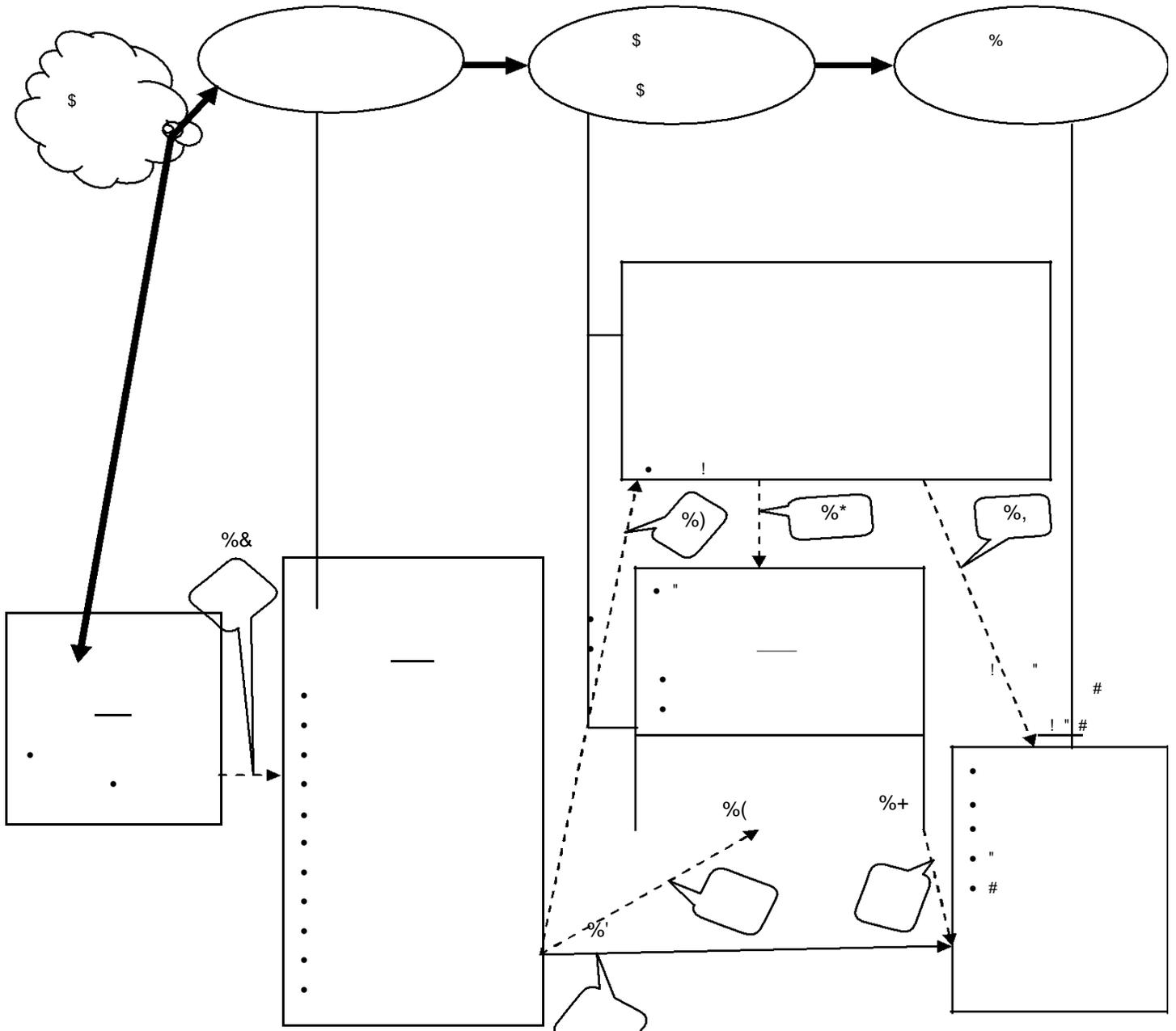


Figure 1. The hypothesised relationships between Political interference (PPI), HRM fairness (PHF), employee goal commitment (EGC), employee citizenship behaviour (ECB), and quality of service delivery (QSD) by municipalities.

would naturally be expected to feel unfairly treated or injustices being done to them if they detect or suspect any of the above practices have taken place. In other words, employees who perceive political interference in HRM activities of municipalities will in line with justice theory form negative justice perception of their organisation. As a result we propose that employee justice perceptions of HRM practices of municipalities is partly a function of perceived political interference in

HRM practices. This proposition may help explain why some municipalities have better justice perception of their organisation than others.

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions about fairness of HRM practices (PHF) will be negatively related to perceptions of political interference in HRM practices (PPI). In other words, the higher the overall perceived political interference, the lower will be the overall justice perception

perception of HRM practices.

The model (Figure 1) shows that redeployment of party loyalists and nepotism/ favouritism are avenues for political interference in HRM activities. These channels can be used to interfere in recruitment, selection, remuneration, rewards for performance, opportunities for training and development, promotion, performance appraisal, disciplinary procedures and grievance handling etc.

The role of employee justice perceptions of HRM practices in ensuring quality service delivery in municipalities

Organisational performance is said to depend on its people. For example, Clarke (2004) emphasised that HRM plays a critical role in maintaining business success. Muldrow, Buckley, and Schay (2002) concur and state that employee behaviour and attitudes can determine the success or failure of organisational plans no matter how well constructed. Bowen et al. (1999) as well as Blancero and Johnson (2001) have highlighted the important role of employees in service delivery and the importance of treating them fairly pointing out that there is considerable evidence of a strong correlation between employee perception of fairness and organisational performance. Van der Westhuizen (2005) also agrees and states that proper HRM is essential to deliver services successfully. This author went on to make the important point that without a proper HRM, a situation could arise where among others, inappropriate persons are employed and unfair salaries are paid. Senyucel (2009) then concludes that effective people management in organisations is a prerequisite for quality service.

Fairness perceptions therefore seem a promising explanatory mechanism for quality of service delivery in municipalities. It is therefore proposed that variances in service quality across municipalities are partly a function of the level of employee perceptions of fairness of HRM practices. This hypothesis may help explain why some municipalities are so much better of than others with respect to service delivery. Because several studies have in the past examined and provided evidence of the direct relationship between HRM and QSD (e.g. Schneider and Bowen, 1993; Clark, 1999; Peccei and Rosenthal 2001; Weech-Maldonado et al, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2003), the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 2: Quality of service delivery (QSD) will be positively related to the overall level of perceptions of fairness of HRM practices (PHF).

Figure 1 shows that fairness perceptions of HRM practices (PHF) that result from perceived political interference can influence quality of service delivery (QSD). Palmer (2001) argues that customers are the best

judges of service quality. For the purpose of this study, we suggest that the enduring SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) or any other suitable measure could be used to judge customers rating of service quality of municipalities.

The role of perceived fairness of HRM practices (PHF) in ensuring employee commitment (EOC) and employee citizenship behaviour (ECB)

Fairness perceptions also seem a promising explanatory mechanism for quality of service delivery in municipalities because as Blancero and Johnson (2001) observe, it can be engendered by factors within the organisation and can lead to enhancement of ECB. Studies by researchers such as (Huselid, 1995; Delaney, 1996; Ramsay et al., 2000) suggest that the relationship between HRM practices and QSD may be mediated by employee behaviours and attitudes. We have earlier noted that based on Adams (1963) equity theory, employees of municipalities who perceive inequity in say pay, promotion, reward or other outputs may change their attitude towards customers they serve. Similarly, we argued that from organisational justice perspective, if municipal employees compare their input/output ratios in terms of HRM practices and perceive unfairness, this could lower both EOC and ECB. Thus we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: The level of service behaviour (ESB) of employees within municipalities will be positively related to perceptions of fairness of the human resource management practices (PHF) in the municipality.

Hypothesis 4: The level of organisational commitment (EOC) of employees of municipalities will be positively related to perceptions of fairness of the human resource management practices (PHF).

Employee commitment has been found to predict the critical employee behaviour, organisational citizenship behaviour (Sanders et al., 2008; Vandyne and Ang, 1998; Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008: 160; Sanders et al., 2006; Vandyne and Ang, 1998). Because of this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: The service behaviour (ESB) of employees of municipalities will be positively related to their level of organisational commitment (EOC).

The role of employee commitment (EOC) and employee citizenship behaviour (ECB) in ensuring quality service delivery (QSD) in municipalities

We have argued that employee justice perceptions could

influence employee commitment (EOC) and citizenship behaviour (OCB) and this could impact quality of service delivery (QSD) in municipalities. We draw our belief from Fischer (2004) who argued that high level of employee commitment is critical for organisational success and from Morrison (1996) identified OCB as the missing link between HRM practices and quality of service delivery (QSD). We therefore contend that organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and employee organisational commitment (EOC) of employees would impact on the quality of municipal service delivery (QSD) - the key outcome that municipalities are judged by (Figure 1). Thus we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6: The quality of service delivery (QSD) in municipalities will be positively related to the level of service behaviour (ESB) of employees.

Hypothesis 7: The quality of service delivery (QSD) in municipalities will be positively related to the level of employee commitment (EOC).

In other words, perceptions about fairness of HRM practices (PHF) could indirectly influence quality of service delivery (QSD) through employee organisational commitment (EOC) or employee service behaviour (ECB).

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, VALUE AND LIMITATIONS

Summary

In this study we have presented a model and a set of hypotheses that show organisational behaviour theory in general and organisational justice theories in particular as providing a theoretical framework within which to gain more insight into South Africa's municipal service delivery problem. The thesis for the study is that: South Africa's politically polarised municipality environment lends to political interference in HRM activities. From organisational justice point of view, such interferences could be viewed by employees as unfair/unjust leading to the development of the negative attitudes and behaviours such as low commitment, and poor or anti-citizenship behaviour, which could ultimately impact negatively on the quality of municipal service delivery. Through the literature review we provided justification for the framework and the proposed hypotheses.

Conclusion

The literature review that preceded the study established that indeed, perceptions of fairness of HRM practices of municipalities can influence service quality directly. The literature review also indicates that perceptions of fairness

of HRM practices of municipalities can indirectly influence service quality through employee commitment and service behaviour. These are indications that organisational justice theories can provide the theoretical platform for understanding municipal service delivery. It also seems that because of the politically polarised environment, the chances are high for political interference (perceived or real) in HRM practices of municipalities. This leads us to the conclusion that municipalities with lower levels of perceived political interference in HRM practices will report higher levels of employee justice perception of HRM practices, higher employee commitment, better employee citizenship behaviour and consequently, better service quality than those with higher levels of perceived political interference in HRM practices.

Recommendations

First, while political polarisation is the nature of municipal administration, politicians need to be aware of the dangers posed by policies such as the redeployment of politically connected to municipalities without due consideration for competence. Second, municipalities can foster quality service delivery by engaging in HRM practices that employees can view as fair with the belief that positive justice perceptions will lead to employee commitment and citizenship behaviour which will make them contribute more to service delivery. Third, it seems the best way to manage job behaviour is to adequately understand underlying cognitive processes (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008) . It is therefore important for managers of municipalities to fully comprehend organisational justice and equity theories and be aware of their implications when they make decisions concerning HRM such as pay, bonus, fringe benefits, promotions etc. Fourth, it seems that people are motivated to correct unfairness and injustice perceptions by changing attitudes and behaviours (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008). Therefore municipalities should expect their employees to change their attitudes and behaviours for the worse when they perceive unfairness and injustice in HRM decisions that affect them. Fifth, no matter how fair or just management thinks organisational policies procedures and practices are, it seems that what matters most is employee perception of equity (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2008). Accordingly, Kreitner and Kinicki (2008) advice managers to make their hiring decisions on merit-based and job related information. Municipalities will do well to heed this advice. Sixth, as Kreitner and Kinicki (2008) further advice, managers in municipalities need to pay attention to organisation's climate for justice because research evidence shows that organisation's climate for justice significantly influences employee's organisational commitment and customer service behaviour. Seventh, as again pointed out by Kreitner and Kinicki (2008)

managers in municipalities can accomplish all the above recommendations by monitoring equity and justice perceptions through informal conversations, interviews, or attitude surveys. South African municipalities have no other option than to heed this valuable advice.

Every research endeavour opens up follow-on research possibilities. Firstly, there are possibilities of generating more hypotheses from the framework. For example, hypotheses can be generated linking the various HRM activities and the dimensions of EOC, ECB and of course QSD. There is also the possibility of integrating motivation into the framework. Thirdly, assuming the model indicates correlation between variables; causal relationships could then be explored.

Value and limitations of the study

The study is important for numerous reasons but the most important can be linked to organisational performance. Beatson, Lings, and Gudergan (2008) have argued that: strongly held attitudes can predict behaviour hence, service orientated attitude of employees who are in contact with customers can predict their service orientated behaviours; and these service behaviours impact customers' evaluation of service quality. Therefore, the study is important because it highlights HRM issues that can lead to employee attitudes and behaviours detrimental to quality service delivery. Secondly, quality service delivery is a constitutional mandate that municipalities are struggling to provide. This model provides a systematic yet simple guide to achieving it. Third, to solve any problem, one needs to first understand it. The study provides a straightforward framework and model for exploring hence understanding service delivery in South African municipalities. Fourth, poor service delivery by municipalities has led to dire consequences. From a management perspective, any strategy that can help improve service delivery would be important and welcome. Five, it seems logical that for service organisations, there would be a link between HRM practices and service quality. However, there is a lack of a framework and model to guide empirical research regarding the relationship between political interference in HRM practices, employees' justice/fairness perceptions, employee commitment, employee citizenship behaviour and quality of service delivery in South African municipalities. The study extends/enriches the literature on municipal service delivery to include organisational justice perspective.

The greatest limitation is that the model is yet to be tested hence validity has not been assured. This will be done in due course as part of the bigger study for a Doctoral thesis that one of the authors is engaged in. Collecting data from employees for validating the model may be problematic for fear of victimisation. This problem can however be overcome by seeking permission from top level management. It is assumed that municipalities

are serious about solving the service delivery problem hence would co-operate. Participating employees would be guaranteed anonymity. There may be other factors that impinge on service delivery other than the identified variable. However, it is impossible to include all possible variables in any single study/framework.

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