Challenges in promoting accountability and feedback mechanisms through customer complaints in the South African public service

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ABSTRACT

The study examines whether the customer complaints management policy in the Department of Employment and Labour in the Free State province is effectively and efficiently implemented. Skilful and committed policy implementers are required to ensure that policies are implemented successfully. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed in this study using semi-structured online interviews, to gather data from 20 participants who were purposively selected. The major findings of the study reveals that a lack of clarity and accessibility of complaint channels, inadequate training of newly appointed officials in customer complaint management processes, and user-unfriendliness of the complaint processes flow are prohibiting factors of the implementation of the policy. Additionally, there was a lack of effective communication and coordination among both the internal and external stakeholders, and a noticeable absence of consequence management. The study recommend that the Department of Employment and Labour should consider to design a user-friendly customer complaints management processes flow as well as to incorporate customer complaints module during the induction of newly appointed employees.

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Introduction

The South African public service lacks a centralised framework for dealing with customer complaints. This makes monitoring and resolving customer complaints difficult, and it can also waste time and money. Another noticeable challenge facing South Africa's public service is responding to citizen complaints in an open, effective, and timely manner. In a landscape swarming with complaint channels, a lack of adequately trained staff threatens the potential for complaints to drive service improvements and upholds accountability. For instance, the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) Free State Province's Client Satisfaction Survey (2016–2017: 19), indicates that only 25% of respondents knew how to file a complaint when they were dissatisfied with DEL services, whereas 75% of respondents were unaware that they could even file one. Many administrative reforms have explicitly linked the need to improve public services, citizen satisfaction, and public trust in government (Walle 2018:2).

From a study conducted on the challenges facing development policy and project implementation in Malawi conducted by Hussein (2018:355), it is established that there are two major factors that lead to policy fragmentation which undermine the ability of the public bureaucracy to effectively implement and achieve desired policy objectives; those factors are political and bureaucratic leadership and weak institutional and individual capabilities. Firstly, under political and bureaucratic leadership, four reasons that undermine effective policy implementation were identified as:

i. ineffective leadership, communication, coordination, and collaboration.
ii. politicisation of the bureaucracy.
iii. discontinuing policies of the previous regime; and,
iv. rampant corruption.

Secondly, on the lack of institutional capacity, the following three reasons were cited:

i. a) inadequate material and skilled human resources.

ii. b) limited availability of finances; and,

iii. c) adverse disposition by bureaucrats.

The sections that follow outline the contextualisation of the complaints management policy, the theory for this study, key requirements for the successful implementation of the complaints management policy, the methodology followed in conducting the study, a presentation of the empirical results and the conclusion and recommendations.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Contextualisation**

By enhancing the government’s performance, accountability improves not only the government’s efficiency, but also the moral values and leadership skills of those who work for the common good. Furthermore, as good governance improves government, accountability plays a crucial role in supporting basic functions such as enforcing laws, maintaining order, providing leadership, promoting ethical practices, making decisions, and implementing policies, and delivering public services (Alam and Said: 2015).

It is a view of the researchers that accountability and transparency are the cornerstones of a well-functioning public sector, a fact amplified within the Southern African context. Yet, these ideals are often hampered by a series of daunting challenges. This paper investigates the intricacies of these obstacles, exploring issues like unclear and hard-to-reach complaint channels, insufficient coordination and communication strategies, the limitations of personnel handling complaints, the lack of effective orientation programs for new employees, and the intricate web of procedures surrounding customer complaints within the Department of Employment and Labour in the Free State province. By dissecting these barriers, the aim is to identify windows of opportunity for enhancement and the development of strategies to elevate accountability and transparency throughout South Africa’s public service.

According to Hadiyati (2014:108), any attempt to conceal an actual issue through defensive measures will cause all parties to veer away from a solution and corrective action. Honesty regarding issues will lead an organization to the best course of action (Larios: 2015). It is suggested that giving citizens equal access to complaint processes and procedures can raise the quality of service that public institutions provide to their citizens (South African Government: 2020).

For the above principles to be realised, skilful and committed policy implementers are required to ensure that the policy is implemented successfully. Gauri (2013: 109) states that when mistakes occur as a condition of basic fairness and reciprocity, it is important to facilitate the expression of complaints. This study explored the challenges facing the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) in the Free State province in their attempt to implement the customer complaints management policy and to promote accountability. Moreover, to determine the processes and procedures for effective implementation of the customer complaints management policy in the labour centres of the Free State Province.

**Key factors for the successful implementation of the customer complaints management policy**

Alemán, Gutiérrez-Sánchez, and Liébana-Cabanillas (2018) argue that although there has been a shortage of study on this subject to date, many nations are interested in assessing citizen satisfaction in order to enhance or develop public services. To put it another way, governments are becoming more and more interested in learning how satisfied their citizens are with the services they offer, but there is little empirical data on how to do so. Furthermore, the authors posit that this is a challenge because it suggests that governments might not be able to make wise choices regarding how to enhance their offerings (Alemán, Gutiérrez-Sánchez, and Liébana-Cabanillas 2018:108).

Tackie (2023:447) contends that “to ensure a better public sector, it is essential to understand how to enhance accountability. To respond to the public’s expectation of having a more accessible and accountable government, several governments have reformed their public sectors”. In addition, Kirsch asserts that “citizen dissatisfaction with public services has been a constant concern in public sector reform initiatives. Many administrative reform initiatives have explicitly made a connection between the need to reform public services, improving citizen satisfaction with public services, and maintaining or restore the public trust in government”(Kirsch et al. 2018:2).

A public complaints handling system can only be viable for a long time if it operates fairly and has people’s confidence. Furthermore, traditional complaints handling and appeals mechanisms that are oriented towards citizens may have inherent inefficiencies, but they play a vital role in enhancing good governance norms and values such as equity, social justice, due process, transparency, legality and fairness, which are necessary for ensuring accountability in the public sector (Brewer 2007:551).

Consequently, Dahlggaard-Park (2015:12) argue that the guiding principles for the development of policies and procedures for the management of complaints is to develop clear policies and procedures regarding how complaints will be received, recorded, managed,
and reported. Moreover, organisations ought to ensure policies on how complaints will be managed are available and communicated clearly to the public and staff.

Serrat (2017:2) argues that customer service is the set of activities that a business undertakes to ensure that its customers’ needs are met and exceeded. The emphasis from Serrat’s definition is importance of customer service throughout the entire customer journey. It also highlights the importance of communication, which is essential for building and maintaining strong customer relationships. Furthermore, Hadiyati (2014:108) postulates that it is important to have faith that complaints are made solely with the intention of improving the service, without any other ulterior motives.

According to Petelin (in Colnar and Dimovski 2017:146), the goal of any reform of public administration is to create a public service that is effective, efficient, provides high-quality services to its customers, and offers a good working environment for its employees. In addition, Gafar (2017:29) argues that the relationship between citizens and governments should be guided by the principles of customers and service providers. One of these principles is that citizens have the right to demand better, faster, and more accessible service delivery from the government, which recognizes itself as a service provider.

The study by Moynihan and Thomas (2013:789) suggests five guidelines for working with the public as customers Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Five guidelines for working with the public as customers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralize customer contact points. This could include a call centre, a website, and other channels where customers can easily contact you with questions, requests, and complaints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use mobile technology to reach your customers. Many people now use their smartphones and tablets to access the internet, so it's important to make sure your customer service channels are mobile-friendly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide high-quality customer service. This means being responsive, helpful, and respectful to your customers, no matter what their concerns are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider using a customer relationship management (CRM) system. A CRM system can help you track customer interactions and preferences, so you can provide better service in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train your staff on how to use CRM data. Once you have a CRM system in place, it's important to train your staff on how to use it to improve customer service. This could include regular meetings to discuss the data and identify areas where you can improve.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Moynihan and Thomas (2013:789)

In simpler terms, these guidelines propose that governments should simplify the process for people to get in touch with them, utilize technology to connect with people in convenient ways, and offer friendly and supportive customer service. Additionally, governments should consider adopting customer relationship management (CRM) systems to enhance customer service gradually. In relation to the customer complaints within the public service, the Presidency (2013:9) reported several lessons learnt from the presidential hotline and they include the following:

i. “Complaints management should be treated as a strategic issue requiring high-level oversight and monitoring by department management.”

ii. The quality of resolving complaints (speed, communication, and relevance) is as important as the number of complaints received.

iii. A weakness in the government complaint management system is often poor communication during the investigation; and,

iv. Complaint information should be used as a source evidence in planning and budgeting for service delivery improvement.”

According to Masango and Pieterse (2014) the other common challenge is the culture of secrecy. This culture of secrecy in the South African public service can make it difficult to investigate and resolve customer complaints. This is because staff may be reluctant to share information about complaints, for fear of reprisals. Jerger and Wirtz (2017: 263) maintain that bad complaint handling can have a negative impact on employees in many ways, including:

i. A negative attitude towards service orientation

ii. Lower job satisfaction

iii. Stress and frustration
iv. Emotional exhaustion

v. Absenteeism, retaliation, revenge, and sabotage

The study argues that through survey the real problem will emerge, rather than the public service institution to assume what could be the problem that give rise to customer complaints. In order to unlock the doors to accountability and transparency, the public service should ensure that employees are trained on customer complaints handling and that processes and procedures should be effective and efficient when dealing with complaints. According to Kariuki and Tshandu (2014:805) a public grievance redress mechanism rating model requires a sound grievance redress system operating in a manner that leaves the citizen more satisfied with how organisations respond to citizens dissatisfaction. The study's theoretical framework is derived from Justice Theory, which posits that customer satisfaction with service recovery is contingent on the perceived fairness of the outcomes, processes, and interactions involved in resolving the complaint. Customers expect to receive fair compensation (distributive justice), fair procedures (procedural justice), and fair treatment (interactional justice) from the service provider. Thus, transparent, and responsive customer complaint management can increase perceived justice and satisfaction (Ang and Buttle 2012: 1026). The methodology is presented in the next section.

**Methodology**

The rationale for this study, is the concern around how customer complaints are handled within the public service, specifically at the Department of Employment and Labour in the Freestate province. The study employed a qualitative approach and collected data from participants who were purposely selected. The department's director general approved the study, and ethical clearance was obtained from both the Department of Employment and Labour as well as from the University of South Africa. The data collection method was self-administered questionnaires that were sent via email to participants who agreed to voluntarily participate in the research study. All participants also signed a consent form before joining the study.

The study chose respondents who could provide relevant and useful information, using purposive sampling, a method that does this. The respondents were from three levels of policy implementers: 10 Client Service Officers (CSO), 5 registration supervisors (RS), and 5 deputy directors of centre operations (DD:CO), making a total of 20 participants. The 7-C protocol framework, which has seven dimensions that are essential for effective policy implementation, was the basis for the interview questions.

Nishishiba, Jones and Kraner (2017: 8) argue that each theme in qualitative research results should be supported by sufficient evidence from the data itself. This can be done by using direct quotes from the original text that capture the essence of the participants' experiences. “Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (Braun and Clarke 2012:57).

Table 2 provides data to support how results were interpreted with direct quotes from the participants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Response from participants</th>
<th>Analysis of the responses</th>
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| Do you think management has done enough to ensure effective policy implementation? | • “I don’t think there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy, either the official will be protecting his/her colleagues to be exposed of the wrong doings”.  
• “Nope, firstly the process of complaints is not clear and when the complaints have been lodged there is no clear process of how to deal with it”.  
• “No, the office complaint box is not monitored and if only the DD and some trusted officials will know about the complaint, their kept secret for no valid reason. The officials in the office they were never orientated about the complaint box or even how to handle it from the Helpdesk”.  
• No, the department focuses on reporting on daily and monthly stats of people assisted. There is no formal way of ensuring officials completely understanding how the implementation of this policy should be carried out, there aren’t formal ways of reporting of how clients were assisted, therefore if the department does not know that clients are dissatisfied, they will not see the need of employing enough officials to implement the policy.  
• “I think they don’t know, because I also don’t know. They never attend any training. Even when they go for orientation as new appointees, they don’t take them through the policy”.  
• “No, policy is not supported by deployment of necessary resources to ensure effective implementation, e.g., poor systems and lack of material and human resource”.  
• “Not all staff members were trained on the policy it was only specific employees”.  
• “No, I am not sure if the staff that have been working for the department in the past years were not trained on this policy, but they do not seem to have a full grasp of the policy”. | secrecy  
inadequate personel  
unclear complaints  
processes                                                                                           |
| Do you believe there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy? Please elaborate | • “Based on the current status quo I don’t think there is enough committed officials to implement Customer Complaints Management policy only the chosen few are committed. There is a lack of control measures, those in power fail to implement. We only see suggestions and complaint boxes for clients that are useless, not serving the purpose of customer satisfaction”.  
• “I don’t think there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy. The official will be protecting his/her colleagues to be exposed of the wrong doings”.  
• “No, the department focuses on reporting on daily and monthly stats of people assisted. There is no formal way of ensuring officials completely understanding how the implementation of this policy should be carried out, there aren’t formal ways of reporting of how clients were assisted, therefore if the department does not know that clients are dissatisfied, they will not see the need of employing enough officials to implement the policy”.  
• “No, there are not enough, some officials are there because they were employed, there are few officials who are committed in implementing the policy, the lack of capacity  
unclear complaints  
processes |
A department should do a survey and/or research to see who should be where.”

| Have you been trained on this policy to manage customer complaints? If yes, how do you rate the training provided? | • “I haven’t been trained, so I would not comment on the training”.
• “Unfortunately not, I would like to be trained on it, so that I can handle complaints effectively”.
• “Previously I was on training of the Customer Service many years ago, the training is basically on how you supposed to treat the customer, the customer is always right, you are the image of the organisation blah, blah etc. I would like to see the training specify why the client it is there to ask for help at the department, I think the primary reason is the vulnerability and the CSO need to be trained and understand why the client is setting in front of him or her”. |
| --- | --- |
| Is the procedures to lodge complaints clear, user-friendly, and visible? | • “No, because till now clients doesn’t know what to do if they are not satisfied about the service, they received and were to lodge a formal complaint”.
• “No, because till now clients doesn’t know what to do if they are not satisfied about the service, they received and were to lodge a formal complaint”. |
| Do you believe that there is enough support from other sections (e.g. Training and Development, Communications, finance) to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively and efficiently? | • “There is a delay in training to train the staff, I think it’s a lack of funds”.
• “In my view, there is not enough support from other Business Units because the policy is not implemented due to the fact that, there is no control measures and official that will be held accountable for the Failure of policy implementation. There is no consequence management implementation, everybody is free, and by the way other business units refrain from supporting the policy”.
• “I would like to believe that complaints could be limited if not there at all, if all public servants can understand and do their part in servicing the clients. The principle of service the client once and for all (one stop service) without any return be implemented. Proper monitoring by Management and Supervisors on how the clients are serviced not be reactionary, acting when there is a complaint. Client service be given a priority at all costs”.
• “Effective implementation will assist for both complainant and the organization, it will build a trust to the client and confidence to the staff. These will ensure the responsibility and accountability of the organization and proof the best service delivery. Batho-Pele principles, the staff will be client orientated and capacitated with ethics and Code of Conduct”.
• The implementation of the Customer Complaints Management policy according to my perception and experience, department need to extent its horizon by extending its services to establish a Business Unit called Complaints and Enquiries within the department in order to implement the customer complaints management policy effectively and efficiently, or an Independent Special Unit that will not be biased, that will ensure justice is prevailing. Independent Special Unit will ensure Control measures are there and useful and those who are not doing their job are held accountable for failing to perform their duties”. |
Discussion of findings

The research adapted the 7-Cs protocol on policy implementation in order to elicit responses from participants of the study. As such, the interview schedule has seven themes derived from the 7-Cs protocol through which respondents will provide their insights and experience on in the implementation of the complaints management policy. The 7-Cs protocol variables that were investigated are: content, context, commitment, capacity, client/coalitions, communication, and coordination. The following section outlines the findings of the study.

It is for this reason that the authors of this article believe that this article is the first step to confront the space of customer complaints management in the public service (especially within the context of the South African public service) and to offer valuable lessons that can turn around service delivery challenges experienced across the public service and to promote accountability in the public sector space.

The study investigated the obstacles that could hinder the promotion of an accountable public service. In order to establish whether the policy on customer complaints management was adequately implemented and whether it was taken seriously by management, the following question was posed to participants, Do you think management has done enough to ensure effective policy implementation?

As shown in Table 1, data revealed that there was an element of secrecy within the organisation. Furthermore, respondents believe there is inadequate staff to deal with customer complaints and that the customer complaints processes are unclear. To this end, the study confirms the views of Khan and Khandaker (2016:542), in that “effective implementation of any policy can be strictly weakened over a lack of sufficient resources, incentive or competent staff, an absence of specific technical know-how or administrative capabilities, in prevalence of self-serving goals of street-level bureaucrats and an absence of organisational willingness and a lack of inter-organisational communication”. The secrecy and unclear processes will reduce accountability and officials will not be able to take responsibility of their actions. To restore public trust in government “citizen dissatisfaction with public services has been a constant concern in public sector reform initiatives. Many administrative reform initiatives have explicitly made a connection between the need to reform public services, improving citizen satisfaction with public services, and maintaining or restore the public trust in government” (Kirsch et al. 2018:2), there is a need for management to reform and look at customer complaints differently.

The other question that was put to participants was, Do you believe there are enough and committed officials to implement this policy? Please elaborate.

Data revealed that too few officials are handling customer complaints, which could lead to underreporting of complaints. Additionally, the lack of capacity in the organisation is slowing down the handling of customer complaints. As a result, those responsible for managing complaints may not be able to thoroughly investigate and analyse them, which could reduce the effectiveness of the customer complaints management policy. Scholars of public policy implementation suggest that policy implementation is constraint in that “sometimes personnel are not available, or facilities are inadequate, and sometimes frontline implementers are unable to carry out an intervention due to lack of motivation or expertise” (Khan and Khandaker 2016:541). McTigue et al. (2018 :323) maintains that policy makers must make sure that resources, including appropriate funding and skilled and committed implementing officials, are available to eliminate barriers for effective policy implementation. In the context of customer complaints management, this means that governments must provide the necessary resources to ensure that complaints are handled efficiently and effectively. This could include funding for training for staff, as well as funding for technology and other tools that can help to improve the complaints management process.

Participants were asked the following question: Have you been trained on this policy to manage customer complaints? If yes, how do you rate the training provided?

This study found that staff in public sector institutions have unequal access to training. Frontline staff, who interact with dissatisfied and difficult customers on a daily basis, need continuous training, but the current training is not tailored to their needs. The quality of customer care training is also poor, and facilitators lack the insight and technical skills to train staff on customer complaints management. This suggests that there is poor planning and coordination of training programs. Training and the development of staff in the public service should be conducted by accredited service providers and facilitators who understand the dynamics of public service. It is also suggested that organisations design training manuals that deal with specific customer complaints trends within their province. To provide feedback to customers requires a well trained personnel.

Moynihan and Thomas (2013 :789) argue that governments are struggling to provide good customer service, which has led to a need for clear, accessible, and easy-to-use systems for communicating with citizens To establish if the procedures to lodge customer complaints is clear, user-friendly, and visible, data from previous internal survey indicated that the accessibility of the complaint system is inadequate. For instance, survey results of clients of the DEL Free State Province (2016/2017: 19) found that 75% were not aware that they could complain if they were not satisfied with the services offered, while only 25% knew how to complain. The researchers believe that this low level of policy awareness could hinder the success of the policy. This could further deter accountability, transparency, and hamper service delivery. The data in this study confirms this trend as participants indicated that there is no plan to communicate the message to clients and that the channels to complain are still not clear.
In order to establish coordination and communication in relation to customer complaints management within Department of Employment and Labour, the following question was posed to participants: Do you believe that there is enough support from other sections (e.g. Training and Development, Communications, finance) to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively and efficiently?

Data retrieved from the participant indicates lack of communication between officials internally in dealing with customer complaints. Furthermore, there were no clear communication strategy and coordination of activities to deal with customer complaints. As Gafur (2017:29) argues that the relationship between citizens and governments should be guided by customers/service-providers principles, and among these principles is the recognition by government as a service provider, that citizens have the right to demand for better service delivery in a quicker and accessible way, through this study it emerged that improved communication with all stake holders and coordination of activities in relations to customer complaints management will provide an improved service delivery.

Conclusions

The turning point to improve public service delivery rests upon government’s ability to implement policies. The policy to manage customer complaints within the public service provides an opportunity to relook at the trends that emerge as a results of complaints received and develop strategies that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. At the heart of the strategy to turn around the effectiveness and efficiency of delivering services to citizens, is government capacity to employ staff that are highly trained on managing customer complaints. The study proposes the following interventions in order to strengthen accountability and feedback mechanisms through customer complaints management within the public service institution. Improve access and the quality of staff training on customer complaints management. The study suggests that there should be a training manual on how to implement the customer complaints management policy. It is imperative that all public service organisations utilises the expertise of internal staff for training. The importance of skilled staff will help to practically explain complaints received and how they can be dealt with. The coordination, preparations and the facilitation of training should be cascaded to the lower level of the hierarchy within the public sector organisation. This study suggests a training manual as a strategy to address how public servants should be trained with regards to customer complaints management. Moreover, when training is offered, it should address specific challenges of a particular public service organisation and staff should be trained on how to handle those specific complaints.

Many employees in the South African public service lack the essential training to manage client complaints effectively. As a result, complaints may be handled improperly, further aggravating customers. Furthermore, there are limited resources to investigate concerns of citizens.

When client complaints are received, thorough investigations should be conducted, and officials who failed to carry out their obligations properly and efficiently should face disciplinary action. “Public accountability is reinforced when complaint and redress procedures address systemic and policy shortcomings. An exclusive customer focus, which restricts voice to the content of decisions or the actions of officials who fail to follow correct procedures, can fail to address concerns about the policies that lead to the decisions in the first place” (Brewer 2007:554). The implication for the practitioner is that the department should consider online complaints management systems. This to address the inaccessibility challenges and the trouble to use channels of lodging complaints within public service institutions.

To cultivate a culture of accountability and transparency, there is a need to enforce consequence management when services rendered do not meet the expectations of citizens. To build a capable state, accountability, and a sound customer complaints management system should be promoted. This is to gain the trust of citizens and to improve public service delivery. It should be kept in mind that administrative reforms are not merely administrative twists; they bear the potential to reform the relationship between citizens and their governments. By improving efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability, these reforms can cultivate public trust and engagement, laying the foundation for a more responsive and inclusive governance system.

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