A Strategic Leadership Competency Model for the South African Public Service

Nico Schutte, Nicolene Barkhuizen, and Sonia Swanepoel

Abstract— Government leaders thus play a major role in bringing together the resources to produce products and to deliver services. Research on the strategic competency requirements of leaders within the public service remains scant. This research presents an integrated leadership competency model based on surveys (N=168) and focus group (N=155) discussions of designated leaders in public service organisations.

Keywords— Leadership, Competencies, Public Service, Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

SOUTH African Public Service strategic leaders were confronted with numerous national and international challenges which required urgent and decisive action [20]. Given these challenges and in order to achieve personal and public service organisational success, South African public service strategic leaders need to develop new ways of thinking or a shift of mind (paradigm shift), which according will lead to improved competencies [1]. Accordingly, to support the premise that all organisations must operate within an environment that is changing all the time, it is argued that the public service also has to reconsider its world of work and more specifically its strategic leadership competency framework [3].

Article 195 of the Constitution of South Africa refers to expected behaviour in that it specifically refer to the word ‘principle’, which means “statements or descriptions of what should or should not be done, that describes the rules, parameters or guidelines for performing the task”. It would be important for the public service to become sensitive to the fact that embedded within the stated principles are specific expectations. Expectation on the side of the government that the appointed public managers (strategic leaders) are able (competent) and willing (motivated) to deliver (perform) supposed responsibilities as cited by article 195, and expectation on the side of the community that they will receive the promised services as a result of the appointed public managers leadership ability [23].

However, for the public service to instill effective and efficient public service delivery, as well as proper public service governance, would enquire a proper public service value system, which forms inseparable constituents of public service strategic leadership role descriptors, in particular the generic tasks describing the characteristics and context of expected (outcomes) conduct at strategic level. Thus the strategic leadership level descriptors relate to the relevant knowledge, attitude and skills of the position (subject matter) and the ability to make the most of such competence [7]. The position might also expect abstract abilities, also known as Meta - cognitive abilities, which a strategic leader should possess at that level.

Most of the public service strategic leaders play many roles simultaneously, because they may have different role relationships. For example, the position of public service strategic leader involves not only the role of leader in relation to members, but also numerous other roles relating the position to managers, peers and the community. Each group may expect different things. Members may expect good leadership performance; managers may expect leadership performance, team performance and political awareness; and the community may expect community service.

According to Ivancevich and Matteson [17], a role set refers to those individuals, and in this case the members and community of the public service, who have expectations for the behaviour of the individual (strategic leader) in the particular role. The more expectations, the more complex is the role set. For example, a public service strategic leader probably has a more complex role set than that of a forest ranger, but one less complicated than that of a politician.

Multiple roles refer to different roles, while role set refers to the different expectations associated with one role. As indicated by article 195 there are clearly different expectations of public service strategic leaders. Undoubtedly, a public service strategic leader is involved in many different roles, each with a complex role set and faces the ultimate in complexity of individual behaviour. The concepts of multiple roles and role sets are important because there may be complications that make it extremely difficult to define specific roles, especially in the public service organisational settings. This can often result in role conflict for the specific public service strategic leader.

Nico Schutte is an Associate Professor at the Department of Public Administration, North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, South Africa.
Nico.schutte@nwu.ac.za

Nicolene Barkhuizen is an Associate Professor and Programme Leader of the Talent Management Focus Area at North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, South Africa, Nicolene.Barkhuizen@nwu.ac.za

Sonia Swanepoel is the executive dean of the Faculty of Commerce and Administration, at North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, South Africa.
sonia.swanepoel@nwu.ac.za
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This paper is structured as follows. First and overview of the concept of strategic leadership is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the research method used and the findings of the research. This paper concludes with recommendations for practice.

II. STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

The concept of strategic leadership competency has emerged in various developed and developing countries as a basis for assessment and training policies and for job compliance as well as the building of capacity to anticipate the internal and external environments of organisations. The concept is directly related to the changing modalities of organisational performance which began to appear in the early 1980s. The relationship can be seen in several aspects of the new approach to strategic leadership that is:

- the creation of competitive advantages in a global market place;
- The dynamics of technological innovation and knowledge management
- The organisational inter and intra connectiveness.

Adair [2] conveys the following conversation which was taking place between Socrates and one of his scholars, Xenophon: “Well, I suppose you know that under all conditions human beings are most willing to obey those whom they believe to be the best. Thus, in sicknesses they most readily obey the doctor, on board a ship the pilot, on a farm the farmer, whom they think to be the most skilled in his business.”

The first step to remain competitive is to develop an understanding of the trends and discontinuities to gain an edge. Strategic leaders are responsible for the relationship with the external environment, the choices about vision, mission, its core values, purpose, and reason for existence. Strategic leaders need to provide a strategy that gives direction to the organisation, which translates the vision into action and as such creating the basis for the development of specific mechanisms to help the organisation achieve goals and align each level of the hierarchy to support the levels above it. Globalisation, deregulation, advancing technology, and changing demographics and lifestyles are profoundly altering the way businesses are perceived and operate [19].

In addition, strategic leadership has also been defined as an individual’s ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think globally and innovatively, and work with others to initiate changes in order to create a viable future. Success at fulfilling these responsibilities involves generating new perspectives and responses, making strategic choices and managing strategic change [25].

Guillot [10] defines strategic leadership as “the ability of an experienced senior leader who has the wisdom and vision to create and execute plans and make consequential decisions in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous strategic environment”. Strategic leadership, also known as executive leadership, is the set of activities directed towards the development and management of the organisation as a whole, including all of its subcomponents, to reflect long-range policies and purposes that have emerged from the executive leader’s interactions within and interpretations of the organisation’s external environment [26].

Kemp [18] is also of the opinion that, in order for organisations such as the public service to achieve the agreed upon performance, it needs to focus on the competence or ability of its members (strategic leaders) to do the job. In cases where candidates lack the competencies, but an affirmative action appointment is called for, an individual should be selected who has the potential to be trained and developed in the necessary competencies.

Hitt, Ireland and Hoskisson [12] define strategic leadership as the ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility and empower others to create strategic change as necessary. Ireland [15] maintains that strategic leadership may prove to be one of the most critical issues facing organisations and as such the public service. They further contend that without effective strategic leadership, the probability that an organisation (public service) can achieve superior or even satisfactory performance when confronting the challenges of the global economy will be greatly reduced. Hence strategic leaders go about forming great groups at the top (strategic leaders) who accept their responsibilities for the organisation’s (public service) outcomes, seek to learn from multiple parties and embrace information and knowledge acquisition [13; 14]. They further postulate that because of the complexity of the new competitive landscape, both in its structure and dynamism, the collective intellect generated by a top management team is necessary for effective strategic leadership to occur in an organisation and as such, the public service. An effective strategic leader “finds glory in the whole team reaching the summit together” [16].

Boal and Schultz [5] maintain that clarity of vision and mission, continuous evaluation of human potential, organisational assessment and revision, driven by effective strategic leadership, all underpinned by appropriate core values and purpose, will lead to sustained excellence and global authority. This is supported by Collins and Porras, [8] who argue that if organisations (the public service) want to enjoy enduring success, they need to focus on their core values and core purpose (as depicted by article 195 of the Constitution, 1996). It also needs to remain set, while their organisational strategies and practices endlessly adapt to a changing world.

Added to the discussion above, Boal [5] state that it is all about leadership of an organisation rather than in an organisation and is synonymous rather than competing with the concept of leadership. They suggest that the crux of strategic leadership lies in three elements. Firstly, the leader needs to create and maintain absorptive capacity – the ability of the organisation and its members to keep on learning (see
chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on learning organisation). Secondly, the leader creates and maintains adaptive capacity or strategic flexibility. Thirdly, the leader requires managerial wisdom – a combination of decision-making and Cairo’s timing.

In a manner related to the latter discussion, Hamel and Prahalad [11], maintain that the task of strategic leaders is, therefore, “not so much to stake out the future as it is to help accelerate the acquisition of market and industry knowledge. Risk lessens as knowledge grows and as knowledge grows so does the organisation’s capacity to advance”.

Then again, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee [9] argue that in order to be an effective leader in a flourishing organisation, the leader must ensure that all participants are aligned with a common vision, with shared objectives and goals to which people can be dedicated. Alignment means everyone’s efforts form part of the pursuit of a larger purpose embodied in the products or services of the organisation (public service). Employees are empowered through this alignment, which means that strategic leaders influence and motivate employees by demonstrating to them that they are contributing to the accomplishment of the organisation. Strategic leaders must therefore develop empowered individuals who feel that what they are doing has meaning and significance; that they have discretion as well as obligations; that they work in a culture of respect where they are encouraged to work independently.

Consequently, the public service through its strategic leaders creates an ethos of empowerment, which will generate and sustain trust. This message of empowerment must be communicated constantly from the top down. However, if the values and beliefs as stipulate in article 195 of the Constitution of 1996 are not well-grounded intrinsically, and the public service’s strategic leaders do not uphold it, it will be difficult for the workforce to progress towards becoming a successful team with interdependent relationships.

Schein [22] mentions the so-called “reality shock”, which often sets in when a newly appointed strategic leader realises that the actual working life is not in accordance to what he or she expected. The individual might found out that it is not only the work that is different, but might also discover that their own personal needs, values, abilities (competence) and limitations do not meet the requirements of the task.

A. synopsis of leadership competencies

Based on the preceding the following synopsis on strategic leadership competencies can be made:

**Influence, teamwork, participation and empowerment, with particular emphasis on transformation and black economic empowerment**

Leadership is an “influence relationship” among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their shared purposes. Leadership involves influence. It occurs among people, who intentionally desire significant changes, and the changes reflect purpose shared by leaders and followers. Influence means that the relationship among people is not passive; it is multidirectional and non-coercive.

**Ability and creativity: Challenge old ways of thinking and doing.**

Leadership ability determines the leader’s level of effectiveness and this will influence who they attract. Only self-assured leaders delegate power to others. They are problem solvers and always find creative solutions to difficult problems - in a way they are pioneers in changing times.

**Reciprocal**

Leadership is reciprocal. Superiors influence subordinates, but subordinates also influence superiors.

**Process**

Leadership develops daily, not in a day. Leadership involves creating changes which reflects purpose leaders and followers share. Leaders empower and have the ability to direct and keep people focussed on their own and organisational objectives. Leaders also embrace positive considerate energy and a sense of identity.

**Navigation, recognition for performance: Care, wisdom, confidence, diligence and communication.**

Leadership is a “people activity” and is different from administrative paperwork or planning, which means that leaders need to chart the organisational course. The followers first buy into the leader then into their vision. The leader acts as a strategist and has the ability to share and communicate the vision and create team-learning, organisational alignment and results.

**Respect: Honesty, integrity, openness, and respect for human dignity**

It occurs among people; it is not something done to people. Since leadership involves people, there must be followers. Competent leaders know how to follow, and they set an example for others. Leadership is shared among leaders and followers, with everyone fully engaged and accepting higher levels of responsibility. The qualities for effective leaders are the same as those needed for an effective follower.

**Inner circles**

Effective leaders are known by the people closest to them and as such, their followers think for themselves and carry out assignments with energy and enthusiasm. They also develop leaders amongst them. Leaders are stewards - they love and respect people, they create equal opportunities and do not tolerate discrimination; they lead organisations and communities so that members can learn new ways to work collaboratively.

Emanating, from the above analysis, strategic leaders have an organisational vision that needs to be achieved through effective leadership competence (knowledge, skills and attitude). Such leadership is therefore not a simple mechanical process, but rather a complex practice involving the leader, followers and the situation, also related to as social cognitive theory. Leadership involves relationships and as such need leaders to be aware of themselves and others, as well as the big picture, which they want to achieve through these people. It is also essential for leaders to understand and apply communication appropriately. The effectiveness of a leader depends on the competence (knowledge, skills and attitude) of the leader. Leadership involves the exertion of
and/or superiors) and, interpret the content through his or her communication medium (job description, directives, peers). The strategic leader receives a message via somewhere or someone from a way communication process that includes when the strategic organisational expectations and the strategic leader. The two-completed cycle of two-way communication, between the theory and empirical findings.

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The competency framework includes amongst others a completed cycle of two-way communication, between the organisational expectations and the strategic leader. The two-way communication process includes when the strategic leader receives a message via somewhere or someone from a communication medium (job description, directives, peers and/or superiors) and, interpret the content through his or her interpretive scheme i.e., exchange meaning, after which the strategic leader is able to reply (decoding through knowledge, skill and attitude) and/or respond competently (give an answer and or perform expected activity) to the sender of the message the sender sees or hears his/her reply/response to it, and it is considered proficient or not.

III. Method

A Mixed method research approach was followed. Data was collected by means of a survey (N=168) and focus group (N=155) discussions of designated leaders in public service organisations. A mixed method approach allowed for the triangulation of data.

IV. Findings: Towards a Strategic Leadership Framework

Based on the data analyses the following strategic leadership model was developed.

Firstly, the model brings together some highly developed research streams, social cognitive learning theory and learning organisation theory, and extends them to the leadership studies domain. What results is a congruent network of five leader social cognitions: 1) strategic leadership causal reasoning process, 2) leader social skills, 3) leader competence, 4) leader task schema, and 5) leader strategies. Each is grounded in the leadership theory, social cognitive theory or learning organisation theory, described and defined conceptually and linked together based on both theory and empirical findings.

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V. Conclusion

Government plays an important role in the wealth creation of any nation. The public service in particular is a transparent system, embedded in a thriving environment that not only sets the pace, but also outlines the actions to be taken by institutions within this service. Government leaders thus play a major role in bringing together the resources to produce products and to deliver services.

Legislation dictates that leaders should amongst others develop strategic management plans in keeping with the medium-term expenditure framework, organisational structures that comply with the strategic management plans, strategies to improve service delivery. This implies that leaders should have the mindset to create an organisational culture that contributes to and unleashes passion, commitment, and performance of people which in turn contributes to the organisation achieving its mission, vision, and business goals.

Yet our understanding of how leaders’ mindset influences service excellence and the outcomes thereof is limited. The main objective of this research was to develop a strategic leadership competency model for the application in the South African public service. Despite various inroads into the concept of leadership, research on the strategic competency requirements of leaders within the public service remains scant.

This paper presents a leadership competency framework that can be strategically applied in the South African public service. Based on the findings of the research the following recommendations are made:
• The research revealed that there is congruence and a reciprocal interaction between the listed strategic leadership competencies when strategic leaders perform their roles. Hence, the public service should take note of the fact that competencies are interconnected.

• Collective efficacy has been defined as the members’ perception of their group’s competency or aggregated ability to successfully complete a designated task. In accordance, the analysis of the strategic leadership competence, where strategic leaders made explicit judgments, their perceptions on the importance of stated strategic leadership competence for the purpose of this research, their perception on satisfaction, the public service ability to successfully complete a designated task was also assessed and as such produced inferences about the public service’s strategic competence.

• Flowing from the previous finding, it should be viable for the public service to assess the current strategic leadership competencies against the competency model, and to invest in these members by providing the required training as part of the public service’s skills development programme.

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