Competency Frameworks in the South African Public Service: The Wrong Magic Bullets?

Francine De Clercq
Wits University, School of Education
https://doi.org/10.53973/jopa.2023.58.2.a10

Abstract

Debates around how to transform the public service to contribute to a professional, ethical, and capable developmental state have intensified around the world. There are a range of interventions that seek to manage and improve the public service employees' performance and ensure that they have the competencies required. A key mechanism to assess competency is through Competency Frameworks (CFs), which were introduced in many public services in the 1990s.

This article argues that the ways CFs are defined and implemented in the South African public service have severe limitations in dealing with the relatively poor performance of the public service. It shows how and why CFs are not being implemented as intended. After a desktop review of how and why CFs developed and are used by various public services, interviews were conducted on the basis of a purposive sampling with twelve key public service stakeholders to investigate the nature and use of competencies and CFs in the South African public service (Senior Management Services (SMS), Middle Management Services (MMS), Financial Management (FM)). A two hour-long seminar discussion was also conducted with about 150 national and provincial department officials on the nature, purpose and conditions under which CFs could work and add value. Finally, more supporting documents were consulted as they were recommended by the participants.

The research findings point to the fact that, while CFs are supposed to help develop the human resource value chain, what is happening in reality is something different. The reason for this lies partly in the frameworks themselves but also more importantly in the context and environment in which they are supposed to be implemented. Ultimately, the CFs will not achieve their intended purpose if there is a lack of departmental ownership of them and if they are not located in an enabling and conducive environment. This article notes that the existing institutional arrangements and context of the state administration restrict the use and potential of CFs. It concludes with the argument that, with specific enabling and conducive arrangements and environment, slightly differently formulated, CFs could contribute to their intended purpose.

Keywords: Competency, Knowledge, Human resources, Lack of ownership, Performing public service.

Introduction

In order for South Africa to achieve its developmental objectives, there is a need to determine the organisational culture and the kind of leaders required for a developmental state. This calls for a review of the competency tools. (Public Service Commission, 2016:54)

In October 2022 cabinet approved the National Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Service (NFPPS) (National School of Government (NSG), 2022) which seeks to transform the public service sector to contribute to an ethical and capable developmental state by ensuring that competent people drive service delivery. As government moves to introduce and reinforce various measures to professionalise the public service, it might be an opportune time to reflect on *how* it assesses whether public servants are competent and are performing in line with specific expected behaviours linked to their roles and functions.

Since the 1980s, the idea of competence and CFs have frequently been introduced and used by public services to improve individual and organisational performance (Horton, 2000 in Op de Beeck & Hondeghem, 2010). Draganidis and Mentzas (2006) refer to competencies as the integrated capabilities of knowledge, skills and attitude clusters needed in a certain profession, occupation, job, role, organisation, or task situation. Mulder (2014) foregrounds the ability to develop dynamically, to possess knowledge, mastery and performativity and ability to transfer knowledge (close to Winch's (2022) understanding of transversal abilities).

CFs set out to list each individual competency required by individuals working in an organisation. They describe performance excellence within an organisation, including the competencies that are applied to multiple occupational roles within the organisation – and more specifically for management roles. So, CFs are a way for the PS to communicate which behaviours are required, valued, recognised and rewarded with respect to specific occupational roles (Jarvalt, 2007).

To understand one such measure that relies on the use of CFs, the Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL) based at the University of Witwatersrand, conducted research for the PSETA[1] four CFs used in the (PS) at the level of SMS, MMS, FM, and Monitoring and Evaluation are conceptualised and implemented. The aim was to investigate the major challenges that explain what works and does not work with CFs, the key issues that need attention and how to deal with them. This article illustrates these issues by focusing on two of the four CFs: the Senior Management Services (SMS) CF and the Financial Management (FM) CF which were selected because they differ in the way in which their competences are specified and made operational.

This article argues that the ways CFs are defined and implemented have severe

[1] The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Kate-Mercia Mlauzi who worked with her on the PSETA report. Findings, interpretations, views, and conclusions expressed in this article do not necessarily represent PSETA policies. The PSETA does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included and accepts no consequence for its use. The PSETA is not liable for any views expressed or misprinted in this article.

limitations in dealing with the relatively poor performance of the public service. The different reasons for their poor implementation are explored. The first section looks at the problems in the frameworks themselves and the reasons for the lack of departmental ownership of them, when they are used for the different human resources (HR) functions of recruitment, selection, developing and managing the performance of human capital. Organisational conditions also limit the potential of individual competencies and the CFs. The second section investigates why the existing institutional arrangements and context of the state administration restrict the CFs' use and potential. The last section discusses an enabling and conducive environment in which slightly differently formulated CFs could contribute to their intended purpose.

Competencies and Competency Frameworks in the South African Public Service

South African competencies are benchmarked against those of other public services, such as in the United States of America and the United Kingdom, something that can be problematic because, as will become clear later in this article, competencies do not exist in a vacuum and independently of specific public services.

In the past, public service departments in SA were known for the many variations in their job descriptions for officials who occupied similar jobs and ranks. The job descriptions together with qualifications were the major tools used by HR for performance assessment and management. By the end of the 1990s, a New Public Management (NPM) reform emerged, more in some departments than others, as the government attempted to counter the red tape aspects of the rule-bound public administration. The introduction of CFs fits well with the NPM, which aims to contribute to a shift by the PS towards performance outcomes (Cameron, 2009). It is therefore not surprising to find the mention of CFs in many public service documents such as the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (also known as the *Batho Pele* White Paper) (Republic of South Africa, 1995), and the 1999 Public Finance Management Act (Act 1) (Republic of South Africa, 1999). There have been consultations and talks since 2003 about establishing a competency-based framework for leaders and senior managers or those occupying the ranks from Director to Director-General[2]. Cabinet eventually took a decision to make competency assessments compulsory for Senior Management Service (SMS) members by December 2008 to strengthen the recruitment and development of these senior managers.[3]

Conceptual Framework to Assess Competency Frameworks at the SMS and FM Level

It is important for the purpose of our analysis to derive from the literature reviewed a framework that shows three levels of competencies: the individual, organisational and state-wide levels and their relationships.

[2] https://www.dpsa.gov.za/dpsa2g/documents/sms/publications/sms_hb_ch_5.pdf

[3] https://www.dpsa.gov.za/dpsa2g/documents/sms/2018/Leadership%20Management%20Competency%20Framework.pdf

Individual competencies are about exercising the know-what, the know-how, the show-how and the doing that enable the performance of a wide variety of tasks. Behavioural individual competencies are criticised for being defined narrowly as the personal traits, integrity and attitudes brought by the individual (Draganidis & Mentsas, 2006). They are not linked to any body of knowledge or any context and are said to be acquired through incentives or sanctions aimed at behavioural changes, even though, in reality, they do exist within an organisation and a broader social and political context. A better way of understanding individual occupational competencies is through a holistic approach that starts with a broad notion of occupation rather than making the whole by adding the parts (Gamble, 2020). This approach examines the standards of work in relation to an occupational domain and foregrounds the subject matter and practical knowledge that most occupations have, and the contextual capacity of integrating professional knowledge, skills and activities (Winch, 2022).

Individual competencies cannot be understood fully without an analysis of the organisational conditions that enable or undermine the exercising of them. This may appear a determinist view but, as our conceptual framework suggests, it can be balanced by the argument that there is some individual (and organisational) discretion and agency possible, despite unconducive organisational and institutional arrangements.

Organisational competencies relate to the organisational/departmental vision, strategy, culture, structures, and procedures as well as, in some cases, key performance results. These organisational aspects may complement or contradict each other and will influence the way officials within the organisation/department interact and relate to each other. The recent attempt in SA to call for inter-organisational leadership and competencies across departments derives from a perceived need that departments should work beyond their silos and forge organisational links and partnership with other departments and non-state organisations (Sedibe, 2021). This call for a new form of shared collective leadership within inter-organisational structures will depend on whether broader structural conditions of possibility and institutional arrangements support it.

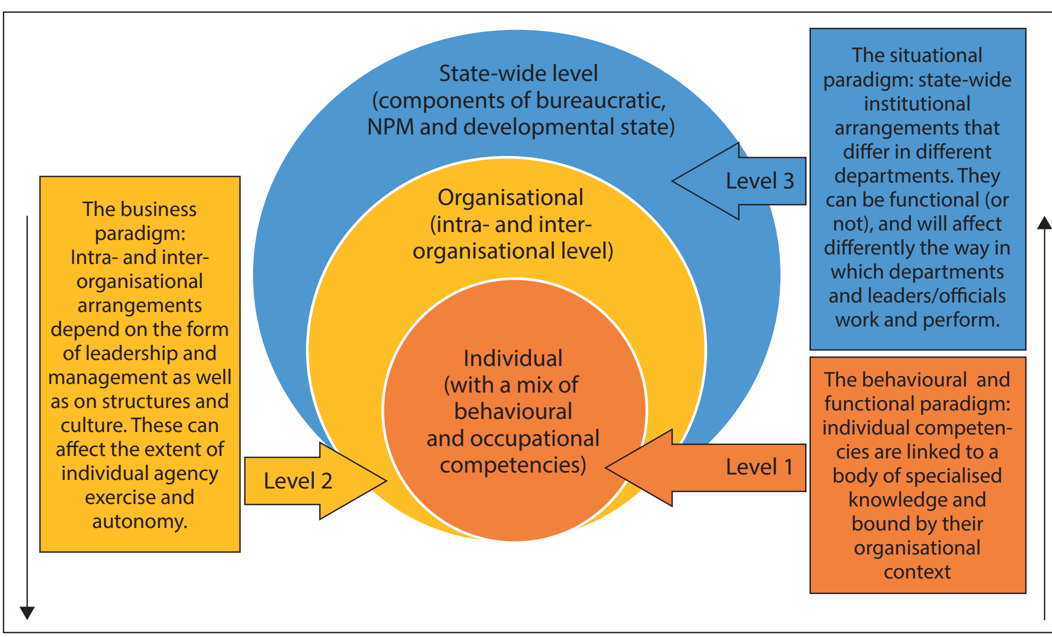
State-wide level institutions and institutional competencies differ in the post-1994 administrative state as the latter is not monolithic. The state is heterogenous with different dominant systems and leadership styles. State processes and practices co-exist or overlap in different departments and give rise to different trends at different periods of our political and economic dispensation.

The first trend relies on online management and hierarchical accountability. The authority structures correspond to the power dynamics in departments that evolved somewhat since1994. The policy of cadre deployment of party officials was used to gain control of the inherited administration, something not that different from the apartheid administration. This shapes the way many public servants work as they are more interested to serve upwards towards their seniors and the politicians rather than outwards towards the citizen, undermining democratic accountability and a focus on servicing the citizenry (Chipkin, 2013). The leadership positions work through line management and the scope of decision-making and delegation of authority is limited. There is a blame culture which passes the problems up and down the management line as submissions are working up and down the hierarchical line before they are implemented. This enables public servants to detach from the effects of their work as they feel protected by regulatory controls and instructions (Mc Lennan, 2017).

A second trend is found in state institutions that have been influenced by the NPM reform. New systems, such as business plans and strategic goals, have been introduced together with new ways of working with integrated systems and horizontal clusters which emphasise outcomes-driven measures. The NPM encourages decentralisation for the sake of greater efficiencies and value for money. Senior managers are given some flexibility and autonomy to bypass aspects of the rule-bound administration. However, their responsibility for delivery and human resources is not accompanied by sufficient powers and/or resources to manage their divisions (Cameron, 2009). Competencies and CFs fit well here as tools to develop and monitor human resource capacity through the regulation of officials' recruitment, training, career development, performance management and assessment.

To sum up, the view advanced here is that individual competencies are linked relationally, enabled and constrained by the relations established between the three levels. Figure 1, compiled by the author after consulting the literature on CFs, shows the interaction of

FIGURE 1: Interaction of the Three Levels of Competencies



Source: Author's compilation from the literature reviewed the three levels of competencies. Each level is represented by a circle to capture the influences it has on the lower-level circles (explaining the downwards arrow). There is, however, some discretion and agency in the lower-level circles that can be used by officials and departments to operate differently or pro-actively despite a constraining environment (explaining the upwards arrow). The individual level is comprised of behavioural and occupational competencies. These competencies and the exercise of individual agency are influenced in what they can and cannot do by the organisation/department in which these individuals work. The next wider upper circle of organisational competencies with intra-organisational and inter-organisational arrangements is in turn influenced by the last wider circle that refers to the state-wide competencies in different state institutions and the broader political and social context.

Methodology

Different documents published by international and national public services and scholars were consulted to gain insights into the challenges affecting competencies and CFs. Interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to investigate the CFs at the SMS and the FM level. Purposive sampling was used to gain access to key officials for in-depth interviews (from the ranks of Deputy Director to Chief Director to Deputy Director General) who had an insightful understanding of CFs in their departmental units or divisions. Ten officials were interviewed from Human Resource Management, Human Resource, Organisational Development or Capacity Development in four national departments: the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), the National Treasury, the Presidency, and the Public Service Commission (PSC), as well officials in the National School of Government (NSG), the Gauteng City Region Academy, and the Western Cape Provincial Institute. The same standard set of open-ended interview questions was used with all the participants who were assured of total confidentiality and anonymity. We aimed to gauge public service officials' perceptions of competency frameworks.

In addition, a two hour-long seminar was organised for about 150 national and provincial department officials to discuss and reflect on the nature, purpose and conditions under which CFs could work and add value. Finally, supporting public documents from the Department of Public Administration and other departments that introduced the SMS and FM CFs were consulted when recommended by the participants, and this was useful in unpacking what surfaced in the interviews and seminar.

The levels of reliability of participants varied: some participants were keen to emphasise that all is well in their units/departments and that the CF policy, and its implementation works for them. They did not want to delve into any problematic issues. Many appear reluctant to talk about their ambivalent experiences while others express their frustration and showed little ownership of what they see as bureaucratic tools designed to make them comply. A few participants appeared more pro-active, appreciating CFs and determined to make the best of them.

Findings

In line with the conceptual framework, the data analysis emphasises three major issues related to the use of CFs and the poor performance of the public service.

1. CFs as appropriate, empowering HR tools aligned to the organisational performance.

2. CFs as mere symptoms of deeper causes behind the relatively poor PS performance.

3. Can CFs be improved, how and under what conditions?

1) CFs as Appropriate Empowering HR Tools Aligned to the Organisational Performance

This section investigates first the clarity in the definition of competencies and then the departments' use and implementation of CFs in the HR chain. It ends with an examination of how individual competencies are often restricted by the organisational conditions and context.

Definition of Individual Competencies at the SMS and FM level

The SMS CF (Department of Public Service Administration (DPSA), 2003) refers mainly to generic[4] and process leadership and management competencies with behavioural indicators and proficiency levels. Most participants acknowledge the value of the DPSA-generated core competencies as useful for standardising job descriptions and profiles. Examples of core competencies in the SMS CF are: Strategic Capability and Leadership, People Management and Empowerment, Programme and Project management, Financial Management and Change Management. Process competencies refer to how the function is performed. Examples are knowledge management, service delivery innovation, problem solving and analysis, client orientation and customer focus and communication. SMS competencies include soft skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, planning and organising, communication, and self-management. Behavioural indicators are attached to these competencies and used by assessors to rate and score the level of proficiency.

The SMS CF document (DPSA, 2003) does not mention occupational or technical competencies in context. Most participants believe in the need to have broad content-free decontextualised generic/core leadership and management competencies because, they argue, each department needs some consistency across the PS but also some discretion in using these generic/core competencies for similar occupations in their own departments.

The DPSA endorses transversal generic competencies for Directors General: "the skills of DGs should not be lost to the public service when their contracts expire and ... DGs should form part of a pool of experts who can be deployed across the public sector and its various departments" (Cameron, 2009:928). There are, however, some questions to be asked about the use and relevance of the generic competencies. Can generic/core competencies accurately capture the full job of senior managers, especially since senior management requires broad and deep strategic abilities which core/generic competencies and behavioural indicators could

[4] Generic competences communicate what is expected of senior managers, compared to competencies that are essential to a department or a job

simplify or "technocratise". For example, strategic or change management refers to senior managers being able to navigate complex legislative, institutional, and organisational opportunities and constraints. How does one measure through behavioural indicators and levels of proficiency the competencies of mastering complexity, creating ownership of vision, and effectively engaging and enabling all stakeholders? How does one measure the ability of learning effectively the history, politics, and culture of the organisation in which a senior manager works, the structural possibilities, constraints, expectations, and forces at play?

To achieve all this requires deep knowledge that goes beyond a management toolbox. To decide on appropriate courses of action, it is vital for senior managers to have the occupational knowledge related to their sector and the broader specific socio-political institutional context in which they work.

Most participants agree that generic behavioural competencies must be complemented by occupational/professional competencies for specific professional tasks. For example, the competencies of electrical engineers should incorporate technical competencies because of the specific nature of the job. The NFPPS cautions against the fact that the SMS framework contains "only generic management competencies and does not test candidates against the functional or task requirements of the job" (NSG, 2022:34). Senior managers working in a specific sector such as Health, Education, Security, Defence, Diplomacy, etc., by virtue of their specific sector legislation, possess occupational knowledge and are regulated by their professional statutory bodies or associations that define their professional occupations and practices.

When asked about the knowledge of senior managers, most participants refer to the knowledge of policies, legislation, and regulatory framework of the environment and department in which senior managers operate. Shalem (2022) argues that senior management does not constitute a field of study with a formal body of specialised knowledge. In fact, she argues further that senior management is not even an occupation or profession *per se*. An occupation is grounded in a substantive knowledge base and expertise consistent with discretionary autonomy over occupational work and decision-making processes (Gamble, 2020:5). Special knowledge is also recognised by the 2022 NFPPS as part of professions which are defined as:

> A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others. (NSG, 2020:18)

The problem in not grounding managers in a specialised body of knowledge is that difficulties are likely to emerge when they try to flesh out and implement policies, programmes and strategies in their sector.

The 2010 Competency Framework for Financial Management (also known as FM CF) (National Treasury, 2010), in contrast to the SMS CF, foregrounds the professional financial knowledge and technical competencies. To do this, it first makes a functional distinction between an employee required to carry out financial accounting tasks, and one carrying out management accounting tasks at different levels of the accounting system. A second distinction is made between employees working within a defined function but at different levels of occupational roles. These two distinctions are important in recognising technical knowledge and the need for flexibility. The technical competencies are then built across these different occupational functions, with each function being divided into a series of competency clusters representing a major component of the function. The ten functions include Management Accounting (Planning and Budgeting), Movable Asset Management, Immovable Asset Management, Revenue Management, Expenditure Management, Financial Accounting and Supply Chain Management, Internal Audit, Internal Control and Enterprise Risk Management.

The 2010 FM CF complements these technical competencies with behavioural, core and generic competencies that are regarded *as* "essential to the successful execution of various tasks in the financial management field" (National Treasury, 2010:22). Behavioural competencies include emotional competencies and soft skills while core competencies refer to those shared across all financial management roles (including Enterprise Risk Management, Supply Chain Management and Internal Audit). Generic competencies consist of four skills categories: management skills; communication skills; computer skills and customer service skills. The FM CF illustrates that content-free decontextualised competencies are needed in addition to technical competencies.

The FM CF combines in a more balanced manner a mix of technical/professional competencies and core/generic competencies, whereas the SMS CF only refers to core and generic competencies. The omission of what "knowledge" entails, together with an unclear definition of the various skill components that make up the competencies in both competency frameworks limits the advantages of individual competences in improving the HR value chain.

The Use and Implementation of Competencies and CFs in the HR Chain

According to many participants, the assessment of competencies is not an easy task to carry across the different HR functions as it is cumbersome and encourages the ticking of bureaucratic boxes. The main aim of CFs, according to the 2022 NFPPS, is to ensure a horizontal alignment in competency assessment between the four HR functions of recruitment, training and development, performance management, career management and succession plans. In reality, competency assessments are not used for all four HR functions. We deal here with the first three functions as these are the most important.

The first function is competency assessment for selection and recruitment. It raises the issues, of who is doing this assessment, how it is done and with what measuring instruments. Many participants explain that the assessment of SMS competencies for recruitment is outsourced to private firms often at a relatively high cost (DPSA has accredited six private firms from which departments can choose). Participants mention that their

HR unit/department have their own assessment centres for middle and junior managers, while others explain that they do not have the capacity and resources to do in-house assessment.

A DPSA HR document on competency assessment framework for the recruitment of SMS explains that multiple methods of competency assessment should ideally include behavioural questionnaires, competency tests, simulations, observations, 360-degree feedback, observations, and interviews (DPSA, 2008). The 2010 FM CF mentions robust measuring instruments in the form of personality questionnaires, psychometric assessment, and testing for generic/core competencies. A participant explains that the use of competency assessment is institutionalised by his department for the nine disciplines of finance. They assess content knowledge and skills through a collaborative effort with other concerned stakeholders, including people in similar professions in the private sector and professional statutory associations.

Participants from learning academies and some departments do not question the reliability of assessment, arguing that the outsourced and in-house assessment centres do a good rigorous job. However, a few participants mention that they are not convinced that such assessment is robust enough because it involves many subjective judgements. Others note that some competencies are not sufficiently foregrounded, such as those that reflect the values and principles of the Constitution, including "ethics, honesty and integrity", especially in these days of state capture, mismanagement and corruption. The 2022 NFPPS notes that pre-entry competency and integrity assessments are needed to "inform meritocratic appointments at middle and senior management levels". It acknowledges that so far "the results of the [SMS] competency assessments have only been validated for development interventions and not for selection purposes" (NSG, 2022:34).

This brings us to the second HR function of interventions for training and development that follow competency assessments. For newly appointed or currently employed officials, assessment results are used to identify the skill gaps between what is desired and what exists. An individual performance development plan (PDP) is drawn up and will influence the individual's next performance agreement targets. The PDP leads to training programme that take the form of coaching, mentoring as well as multiple formal and informal courses of different durations offered by different accredited providers.

A participant from the National School of Government (NSG) mentions the various tools used to identify training needs. They include workplace skills plans, skills audits or training needs analysis, starting from the department objectives and plans and then narrowing it down with customised instruments to identify individual needs. The training diagnoses depend on the quality of people who mediate these exercises and can either enrich or undermine the HR value chain by pointing to adequate or inadequate training programmes.

Participants involved in training admit focusing mainly on leadership and management core and generic competencies because these can be taught explicitly out of context to improve leadership and management practices. Universities offer courses such as the MBA and short courses to broaden the mind, give deeper insights and teach critical problem-solving skills, which are seen as critical for different forms of leadership and management. Other short courses focus on specific activities or themes, such as women in leadership and futuristic studies. Ethics short courses from the NSG are popular and so are those on diversity and anti-discrimination.

The important issue is how to assess the effectiveness of training programmes. Some participants mention that research is done through the monitoring and evaluation division or by tracing the impacts of training on changed/improved delivery of the trained officials, although they admit that it is a hard and tricky aspect to research. Other participants agree that many trainees do not sufficiently use and apply what they have learnt in the workplace. For example, the ethics courses do not necessarily produce officials with better ethical conduct. In fact, a participant argues that the best trained competent officials can remain the most corrupted and uninterested in changing the way they assume their responsibility. Another participant mentions that, in her view, 10% of public servants are not ethical, or worse, corrupt but that the real problem is the chaos they create around them. A few participants want better and quicker regulatory processes and procedures to get rid of these officials who are not interested in doing their job and serving the public.

Can short programmes really change the behaviours of officials, especially if there is no sufficient consequence management or sanctions? The fact that the money invested in courses for public servants does not show major returns on the improvement of individuals can be explained differently, according to participants. Sometimes the wrong individuals are sent to the wrong courses because they are chasing certifications for their individual advancement; at times, organisational conditions in their divisions do not allow trainees to apply what they have learnt and finally the training itself is not well conceptualised. This is especially the case when training programmes underplay the occupational knowledge and the organisational/institutional context of the participants. Many occupational training programmes tend to focus narrowly on workplace tasks and roles rather than on wider occupational knowledge (Gamble, 2020). The 2016 Public Service Commission Discussion document summarises the training problems:

> The training offered is theoretical and conducted in a classroom setting without any follow-up support or on the job coaching. There is no assessment of the impact of such programmes on employee performance and productivity and the overall functionality of the public service. (PSC, 2016:x)

The third HR function revolves around performance management. Competency assessment is used to monitor and manage officials against their performance standards and targets. Cameron (2009) argues that performance management is only erratically and inconsistently applied because many senior managers do not have sufficient ownership of the performance management function. Many participants mention that senior managers believe that performance assessment of their subordinates is not their direct responsibility and prefer to refer it to HR units/divisions or to the Directors General or Deputy Directors General on the grounds that the latter appoint them and may have, for various reasons, selected the wrong candidates. Far from making the PS more effective and professionally accountable, individual performance management, as the 2016 Public Service Commission discussion document acknowledges, is flawed for several reasons:

> mainly because measurable performance standards are not set and accountability has been eroded. Poor day-to-day management of performance by supervisors - including poor supervision, poor people management, and poor operations management - contributes towards failure of formal performance assessment. (PSC, 2016:viii)

The poor performance management process is supposed to lead to a personal management development plan to improve the individuals' performance. If the performance does not improve, it leads to disciplinary measures and procedures that are enshrined in the Labour Relations Act (RSA, 1995). Many participants mention that it takes a long time to discipline poorly performing officials who remain protected by a time-consuming bureaucratic legal system that is not able to easily fault officials.

There are, however, a few pro-active HR participants who explain that performance management should not be perceived as an event but rather as an empowering on-going process. One participant mentions that senior managers of departments/units should be taught formally how to trace and analyse the trends, strengths, and weaknesses of individual performance by enquiring from people around or below them what the problems are so as to find the deep causes of, or trends in, the poor performance of some managers.

To sum up, CFs are of little value unless they are used effectively to strengthen the HR value chain, which is about assessing competencies in a consistent manner for recruitment, training and development, performance management and career management, and succession plans. There is a lack of ownership of CFs among many departments as these HR tools are treated as another "ticking boxes" bureaucratic exercise that needs to be complied with. At most, competency assessments are used not always accurately for training and performance management but there are doubts that these are used effectively on a large scale. Many HR participants mention that they do not have sufficient powers to make the best out of these CF tools because they are perceived as transactional rather than strategic. A few pro-active HR participants mention that they ensure they prove to their department that they can use these tools strategically to add value to the officials' or departments' performance.

Individual Competencies as Independent From Organisational Conditions

Individual competencies (level 1), as explained in the conceptual framework, are embedded in and influenced by organisational conditions and context (level 2), which can restrict (and sometimes enable) the enactment of individual competencies. What does this mean concretely? Most participants agree that individual competencies are part of, and should be derived from, the organisations' objectives, systems, and structures. It is difficult to assess organisational competencies *per se* because, whereas there is an individual performance review, there is no such thing as an organisationally based performance review. Participants mention that divisions or departments are assessed in terms of their Annual Performance Plans, or their deliverables measured with key performance areas. The Auditor General and audit reports are seen as good assessment measures of organisational performance. Interestingly, participants do not often mention that their organisational structures, processes, culture, resources and/or leadership may be deficient. Yet, if they are, they will have a deleterious impact on the ability of individual managers to use their competencies to fulfil their roles and functions. Senior managers may be qualified with the correct specified competencies but will not be able to assume their role if their organisations do not have, for example, sufficient financial and human resources and/or adequate business processes and systems. The 2022 Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI) report on municipal government distinguishes between individuals' actual capability to perform and ideal capacity to perform within the value chain:

> 'Capacity' refers to potential under ideal circumstances, while 'capability' refers to what is possible under actual (almost always not ideal) circumstances. 'Capability' incorporates a wide range of factors: individual skills, financial resources, business processes and systems, political stability, staff morale, staff turnover, effective use of technology, community participation and other contextual issues. A capacity building programme might succeed in significantly increasing a person's capacity through skills development but make only marginal improvement to their organisation's capability ... because of constraints imposed by that person's working environment and over-arching context within which that municipality operates. (PARI, 2022:iii)

Strong individual competencies only work effectively if there is, as a participant mentions, a capability of the organisation to receive these individuals and make them learn at that level.

To achieve their deliverables, organisations need fit-for-purpose objectives, supportive structures, adequate financial and human, and good leadership at different levels. When assessing a division or department, several questions can be asked. Is there a common organisational vision? Are objectives and their key performance indicators properly conceptualised to have the desired impact? Poor performance of individuals within an organisation could be the result of divisive politics, bad policies and systems, inflexible culture, and a general unconducive organisational environment. While competent senior managers can make a difference, their impact will be limited because of poor organisational circumstances beyond their control. Competency development is only one contributory element of something much bigger and more complex, which revolves around the way in which the state institutional arrangements work and have evolved since 1994.

2) CFs as Mere Symptoms of Deeper Causes Behind the Relatively Poor PS Performance

This section will show why the institutional arrangements and context of the state administration in which the CFs are to be implemented restrict their use and potential. The deeper causes behind the relatively poor performance of the PS lie with a fragmented rule-bound inherited bureaucratic administration, the wrong appointment of senior managers, and the problematic impact of the NPM reform in some departments.

The Inherited Bureaucratic Public Administration

The post-apartheid government inherited a weak hierarchical bureaucracy, re-purposed with new policies and programmes directed at the poor and marginalised (Mc Lennan, 2017). Bureaucratic hierarchy and accountability are needed dimensions of a public administration. They are intended to stipulate the official bureaucratic rules and norms that stipulate the way that departments and their officials should follow, and to ensure that the work is done according to specified standards (Nelufule, 2021). The actual bureaucratic practices, however, can differ from the institutional rules and norms if these are poorly understood, broken and/or bypassed. Sometimes, bureaucratic norms and rules are not well defined, administrative processes and job descriptions are unclear (Chipkin, 2013), and divisions of labour and institutional hierarchies are poorly demarcated and open to interpretations and contestations. This leaves departments semi-functional with lower-level bureaucrats insecure about their appropriate courses of action (Meny-Gilbert, 2019). As a result, managers may add more administrative processes and rules that will prevent innovation even more because public employees fear being more out of control than they are. The shortcomings of too many rules are noted in the 2016 Public Service Commission document:

> [Bureaucratic rules] set the bounds of discretion and allow efficient administrative decision making within those bounds ... But rules invariably have the unintended effect of increasing complexity and reducing flexibility/responsiveness, especially when analysing the combined effect of a whole body of rules. The mode of administration may become compliance - rather than solutions-driven. (PSC, 2016:8)

Does this mean that senior and middle level bureaucrats are totally hamstrung by their sometimes semi-functional departmental and institutional arrangements? Not according to Lipsky (1980:13;23), who argues that bureaucrats enjoy some discretion to deviate from sanctioned practice for a range of reasons. Discretionary practices can arise when officials at the lower level have interests that are at odds with their managers, and where resources do not allow for the processes to be strictly followed. They may also be the result of senior managers not setting clear strategic direction or having other priorities that render their control weak down the line of the bureaucracy.

Instead of discretion by default a truly management agency is recommended:

> [T]he legitimacy of government is determined by the quality of staff at the coal-face and the management of coal-face institutions like hospitals and schools. The quality of managers at this level, but also their agency (when empowered to make a difference) has a great impact on the quality-of-service delivery and the legitimacy of government. (PSC, 2016:12)

A few participants confirm that rigid bureaucratic procedures prevent the exercise of management agency, problem-solving, innovation and learning from practice. Some senior managers struggle to assume more responsibility in their work and to use their judgement to come up with creative solutions and innovations to difficult issues. Believing in the power of individual and collective agency, a participant from the PSC mentions that the institutional arrangements of the current rule-bound bureaucratic institutions and processes constrain the exercise of agency:

> Our prescripts institutionalise particular practices that tend to militate against what competencies expected. This would apply to teamwork, collaboration across units and institutions and spheres of government. How can we still have performance assessments and punitive measures that are always directed at an individual? For example, we have a rigid budgeting system that is still very much silo-informed and the departments and their DGs/DDGs have to account for it ... irrespective of the work they could do and accomplish at inter-governmental level. That is why the individual competency frameworks must be supported by the legislative and regulatory framework.

The post-1994 rule-bound administration continues to limit the devolution of decision-making to managers down the line and this creates strong disincentives for systems and processes to change and improve the public service.

The Political or Wrong Appointment of Senior Managers

Under the terms of the 1994 Public Service Act, the executive may appoint personnel at all levels in the bureaucracy, leading sometimes to appointments of senior officials that do not really contribute to the institutional functionality of the state. Politically appointed officials, enabled by the African National Congress cadre deployment policy, together with the power of politicians, create challenging bureaucratic practices. Some officials in high level political and administrative positions are caught by their short-term (3 to 5 years) political appointment that leads them to focus on the management of crises with short term responses, hoping to avoid blemishing their reputation. They do not work for a common developmental agenda with long term strategies to resolve deep problems to improve service delivery (Mc Lennan, 2007). A participant mentions that the managers of these political appointees do not dare to challenge such officials and their performance by fear of being charged with insubordination by their DGs or Minister. So, the recommendation was not to have such a prescript of insubordination to politically motivated officials. Some officials are too junior, and do not always meet the job requirements or do not have the correct qualifications and competencies for the job.

Participants mention that it is difficult to cope with poorly appointed or poorly performing officials as negative consequence management within the PS is not strong enough to discipline them. A possible alternative way of disciplining could be via the professional associations they belong to, especially those with profession- or sector-specific skills in, for example, education, health, policing, security, and defence, who fall under specific Sector Acts. However, many managers do not belong to professional statutory bodies and continue to hide behind the long drawn-out bureaucratic accountability process, and generic CFs. New institutional arrangements and a different political context are needed to ensure that senior managers are appointed on merit for a longer tenure period to avoid dependency on politicians and ministerial changes and with a form of public accountability, as is recommended by the 2022 NFPPS.

The New Public Management Reform and its Problematic Impact

As already discussed, the NPM reform encourages decentralisation of delivery and human resources for greater efficiency and value for money. This global discourse promotes a form of corporatisation with the conversion of divisions and departments into free standing units whose performance is to be measured (Mc Lennan, 2007). Divisions are given more autonomy and space to problem-solve, and to achieve results and service delivery through whatever means they decide on. They are required to develop strategic goals and business plans with output- or outcomes-based performance indicators that are monitored, introducing a new form of 'customer' accountability for better service delivery.

CFs are aligned to this managerialist approach as tools for a more cost-effective public service performance. A participant mentions that the NPM and competency assessment measures assist them with standardizing and improving their processes as well as allowing the exercise of professional agency to make tough decisions and take risks. A few participants assert that management competencies should include risk-taking which are not at the moment part of managers' attributes or competencies. Other participants remain uneasy about this change because they prefer to continue with the safe compliant bureaucratic administration mould, whose rules and norms protect them of much wrongdoing.

Although the NPM provides some advantages over the bureaucratic model, it did not substantially improve public service delivery (Mc Lennan, 2007). Criticisms levelled include values and tools borrowed from the private sector (such as efficiency, performance accounting, profit and value for money) at the expense of value-driven ethics and a commitment to promoting opportunities for inclusive growth for the public good. The NPM does not challenge the working in silos and, if anything, encourages competition between employees and their organisations (Cameron, 2009). It does not promote collaboration with other departments or active engagement with stakeholders, including the citizenry.

It is worth noting that the NPM did not manage to prevent or minimise the extent of state capture and the mismanagement of funds, which has grown rapidly since 2008. This has led to a serious erosion of public confidence in state institutions and their ability to deliver on their mandates.

3) Can CFs be Improved? How and Under What Conditions?

This article argues that senior management competencies must be assessed in relation to their actual organisational context but also broader institutional arrangements. Could more enabling and conducive state-wide level arrangements lead to a better definition and use of senior management competencies and CFs to achieve their intended purpose? What kind of CFs could work for a state administration that promotes space for professional agency?

The section explores the conditions that need to be in place, such as a new form of inter-organisational leadership; an ethical moral mindset, professional knowledge, agency to serve the citizenry; a supportive organisational culture and enabling institutional arrangements.

Sedibe (2021) notes that, since the turn of the century with this fast-changing environment, the state created departmental clusters and horizontal inter-sectoral clusters and intergovernmental structures that encourage collaborative work to deliver more integrated services. The 2016 Public Service Commission discussion document also emphasises this (PSC, 2016:14):

> [T]he macro-organisation of the state should include permutations among policy and implementation organs within each sphere, allocation of responsibilities across the spheres, effective inter-governmental relations, and stability of the management system.

This new structural reality, Sedibe (2021) argues, requires a form of leadership that goes beyond the intra-organisational into a form of inter-organisational leadership. This leadership is not about formal hierarchical authority but depends on structural conditions of possibility that are beyond one division or department and incorporates an inter-organisational systemic perspective. This view calls for a value-based collaborative leadership with multifaceted forms of accountability at the vertical and horizontal levels, the development of networks, cooperation with other organisations as well as a collective engagement with broader social, political, and economic forces and conditions (Sedibe, 2021:45).

According to some participants, leaders and senior managers need a vision, a commitment to continuous learning, and a value-orientated, ethical, disciplined, and adaptable approach to management. State managers seen as leaders should have the ability to master the complexity facing the public sector as well as lead systemic change in this fast-changing environment. Their competencies should thus transcend intra-organisational and sectoral boundaries and embrace "dynamic competencies". Sedibe, in the two-hour long seminar, explains:

> This will enable the exchange and development of cognitive complexity at an institutional level and a move away from a static competency framework towards a dynamic competency framework. Static competencies need to be converted into dynamic competencies and an effective form of shared collective leadership needs to be promoted in the public service which is capable of continuously learning and renewing.

This may sound like a pipedream; even more reason that this is why the organisational arrangements and ways in which people work and relate to each other need changing. A new mindset and organisational culture are required. Managers, with a specialised body of knowledge pertinent to their sector, need to demonstrate their professional knowledge and skills to learn to use and pass judgement when they diagnose, analyse and/or problem-solve difficult issues. They should allow their subordinates to take risks and innovate by collaborating with partners, with the proviso that they be monitored. A few participants mention that managers should be encouraged to learn from their mistakes by reflecting properly on their practices in the workplace. Their superiors should follow and support them by tracing what works and what does not work to facilitate the reflection in practice. According to a participant linked with the National Treasury, the latter is a good example of such a way of working and treating its officials:

> Junior officials in the National Treasury speak with authority because they are given the space to do so ... to make decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions. When you give people that space, they know when to go to leadership to ask for help [if they mess up] and they learn from their mistakes.

> There has to be an element of trust. If you appoint the right people, and you entrust them with a responsibility and you guide and support them, they will make you shine and will remain in public service employment, not looking for tender money but working hard to improve the way they serve the public.

Beyond a more supportive organisational culture, enabling institutional arrangements refer to the well managed capacities of a state committed to deliver on their mandate. Yet, there are powerful current institutional conditions that mitigate against a move towards more enabling leadership, cultural, structural and institutional arrangements.

Conclusion

The 2016 Public Service Commission discussion document summarises state capacities:

> It should have the capacity to lead in developing a common national agenda and in mobilising society to take part in its implementation through effective systems of interaction with all social partners, and exercise leadership. Its organisational capacity should ensure that its structures and systems facilitate the realisation of its national agenda. It should have the technical capacity to translate broad objectives into programmes and projects and to ensure their implementation. (PSC, 2016:14)

Having analysed and explained the limitations of competencies and CFs in improving the performance of the existing public service, this article argues that there are deeper organisational, structural and institutional conditions behind the relatively poor performance of the public service that need to be attended to. Below are some drivers that could facilitate a move towards a better public service performance within which new definitions and use of competencies and CFs could play a part:

- Appointment regimes that are not politicised to avoid the "play it safe" culture.
- Leaders and managers with a strong professional knowledge base that goes beyond a management toolbox to enable the exercise of agency to lead, plan and manage in their sector.
- An ideological mind shift focused on ethics, morality and the citizenry.
- Dynamic inter-organisational leadership.
- Enabling organisational structures and cultures.

- Changes in the way public service budgets are managed and distributed.
- CFs that combine content-free decontextualised competencies and technical competencies.
- Some departments (such as the National Treasury) may be more ready than others to work towards this new Public Service model. Such departments should be given more space, authority, and power at many levels to exercise professional agency while rigorous and independent monitoring and research will identify the lessons learnt from such new practices in the short and medium term.

References

Cameron, R. 2009. New Public Management Reforms in the South African Public Service: 1999-2009, *Journal of Public Administration*, 44(4.1):910-942.

Cameron, R. 2010. Redefining political-administrative relationships in South Africa. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 76(4):676-701.

Chipkin, I. 2013. Whither the state? Corruption, institutions and state-building in South Africa. *Politikon*, 40(2):211-231.

Department of Public Service and Administration. 2003. SMS handbook. Pretoria: DPSA.

Department of Public Service and Administration. 2008. Competency framework for Human Resource Management and Development. Annexure 2. Pretoria: DPSA.

Draganidis, F. & Mentzas, G. 2006. Competency based management: A review of systems and approaches. *Information Management & Computer Security* 14(1):51-64.

Gamble, J. 2020. 'Occupation', labour markets and qualification futures. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 74(2): 311-332. DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2020.1760336.

Govender, L. (Eds.). *Reimagining Basic Education in South Africa: Lessons from the Eastern Cape*. Johannesburg: Real African Printers on behalf of the Mapungubwe Institute. pp. 37-58

Järvalt, J. 2007. What does professionalisation of public service mean to Estonian top officials? Available at: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=7cfaab4ffc1125f3f9d4d952c2339c1864bdccf1.

Lipsky, M. 1980. *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Mc Lennan, A. 2007. Unmasking delivery: Revealing politics. *Progress in Developmental Studies*, 7(1):5-20.

Mc Lennan, A. 2017. Policy reform is not system change. In Mc Lennan, A., Ngoma, W. and Govender, L. (Eds). *Reimagining Basic Education in South Africa: Lessons from the Eastern Cape*. Johannesburg: Real African Printers on behalf of the Mapungubwe Institute. pp. 37-58

Meny-Gilbert, S. 2019. Shifting power, shifting rules in the South African state: The case of the Eastern Cape Education Department, a PARI working paper.

Mulder, M. 2014. Conceptions of Professional Competence. Billett, S., Harties, C. and Gruber, H. *International Handbook of Research in Professional and Practice-based Learning*. Dordrecht: Springer. pp. 107-137.

National School of Government (NSG). 2022. *A National Implementation Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service*. Pretoria: National School of Government.

National Treasury. 2010. *Competency Framework for Financial Management*. Pretoria: Department of National Treasury.

Nelufule, I. 2021. Institutional knowledge management in South Africa's Public Sector: Organisational structure and contexts. *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives*, 6(1). Available at: https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/ejc-jpada_v6_n1_a2.

Op de Beeck, S. & Hondeghem, A. 2010. Managing competencies in government: State of the art practices and issues at stake for the future. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/paper-managing-competencies-in-government-state-of-the-art-practices-and-issues.pdf.

Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI). 2022. System of capacity building for local government: Diagnostic review. For the National Treasury. Pretoria.

Public Service Commission (PSC). 2016. Building a capable, career-orientated and professional public service to underpin a capable and developmental state in South Africa. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Public Service Education and Training Authority (PSETA). (2022). Sector skill plans (2022-2023). Pretoria: PSETA.

Republic of South Africa 1995. *Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995*, *Government Gazette No. 16861, Notice No. 1877 of 1995.* Pretoria: Government Printer.

Republic of South Africa 1995. *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service*. *Government Gazette Vol. 365, No. 16838 of 1995*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Republic of South Africa 1999. *The Public Finance Management Act (Act 1) Government Gazette Vol. 405, No. 19814 of 1999*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Sedibe, K.G. 2021. Developing a complexity leadership competency framework for the Governance and Administration Cluster of the South African Public Service. PhD Dissertation, University of Pretoria.

Shalem, Y. 2022. Why management is not an occupation. Research in Education and Labour (REAL) Policy brief for PSETA. Wits School of Education.

Winch, C. 2022. Forming and exercising professional judgement. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 74(1):12-30. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2020.1860117; https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=7cfaab4ffc1125f3f9d4d952c2339c1864bdccf1.