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# Review of Professional Competency Frameworks in the Public Service sector

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

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Prepared for the Public Service Sector  
Education and Training Authority (PSETA)

by

the Centre for Researching Education & Labour (REAL),  
University of the Witwatersrand

# Research report

Conducted by the Centre for Researching Education & Labour (REAL), University of the Witwatersrand,  
on behalf of the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA)

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

|       |                                                                         |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4IR   | Fourth Industrial Revolution                                            |
| CFs   | Competency Frameworks                                                   |
| DDG   | Deputy Director General                                                 |
| DG    | Deputy Director                                                         |
| DHA   | Department of Home Affairs                                              |
| DPME  | Department of Monitoring and Evaluation                                 |
| DPSA  | Department of Public Service and Administration                         |
| EQ    | Emotional Intelligence                                                  |
| FM    | Financial Management                                                    |
| HR    | Human Resources                                                         |
| HRD   | Human Resource Development                                              |
| HRM   | Human Resource Management                                               |
| KPI   | Key Performance Indicators                                              |
| MBA   | Master of Business Administration                                       |
| MMS   | Middle Management Services                                              |
| M&E   | Monitoring and Evaluation                                               |
| NFPPS | National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector |
| NPM   | New Public Management                                                   |
| NSG   | National School of Government                                           |
| OD    | Organisational Development                                              |
| OFO   | Organising Framework for Occupations                                    |
| PARI  | Public Affairs Research Institute                                       |
| PDP   | Performance Development Plan                                            |
| PS    | Public Service                                                          |
| PSC   | Public Service Commission                                               |
| PSETA | Public Service Sector - Education & Training Authority                  |
| PSS   | Public Service Sector                                                   |
| SMS   | Senior Management Services                                              |
| ToR   | Terms of Reference                                                      |
| TUT   | Tshwane University of Technology                                        |
| WC    | Western Cape                                                            |

# Executive Summary

This report reviews four competency frameworks (CFs) that are in operation in the Public Service Sector (PSS) - Senior Management Services (SMS), Middle Management Services (MMS) CF, Financial Management (FM), and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) –to understand how these are conceptualised, used, and applied to improve the sector's performance. In reviewing the CFs, this report investigates the major challenges and issues that explain what in CFs works and what does not. It also identifies the key issues that need attention with suggestions and recommendations on how to deal with them. It does this by examining three issues related to the use of CFs and public service performance.

- 1) CFs as appropriate, empowering human resource (HR) tools aligned to the PSS organisational performance.
- 2) CFs as mere symptoms of deeper causes behind the relatively poor PSS performance.
- 3) Can CFs be improved, and how and under what conditions?

The study started with a review of the literature on CFs in the PSS, which led to the development of a conceptual framework to explain how to think of the nature and role of competencies at three different levels (individual, organisational, and state-wide)). It postulates that competencies are linked relationally, enabled, and/or constrained by the relations between the three levels. The diagram below shows that each level is represented by a circle which is influenced and shaped by the higher-level circles (represented by the downwards arrow), even if there are also some discretion and space that the lower-level circles can use to operate within and work proactively despite a constraining wider environment (represented by the upwards arrow). The bigger upper circle refers to the state-wide competencies in different state institutions and the broader political and social context, which frame to a large extent what departments and organisations can and cannot do, even if there is some discretion for the organisational agency. The next circle of organisational competencies, consisting of intra-organisational and inter-organisational management and leadership, influence what individuals can and cannot do, even though there is some discretion for individual agency. Individual competencies (behavioural and occupational competencies) appear in the smaller circle.

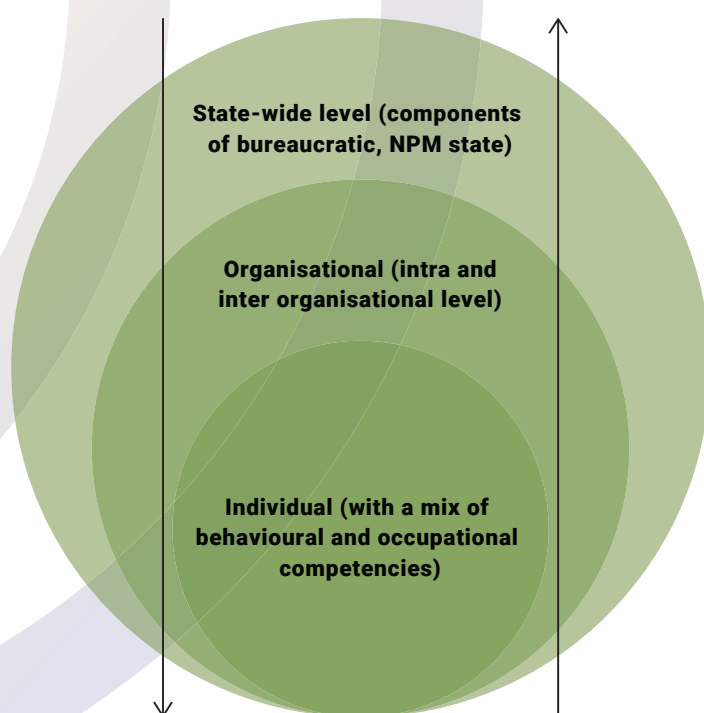


Figure 1: *The Conceptual Framework*

The desktop review of international and national documents on CFs focuses on how these appear and are used by the sector in general. Interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to investigate the nature and use of competencies in the four sector operation frameworks. A purposive sampling was chosen to interview twelve key officials across various national departments and learning academies. This was followed by a two-hour seminar with around 150 attendees, including national and provincial department officials, to discuss and reflect on the nature, purpose, and conditions under which CFs could work and add value.

Emerging out of the research process, this report argues that the ways CFs are defined and implemented have severe limitations in dealing with the relatively poor performance of the PSS. The report highlights that CFs are often not being implemented as intended while problems exist in the CF frameworks themselves. In addition, a lack of departmental ownership emerges when they are used for the human resources functions of recruitment, selection, development, and managing human capital performance. Organisational conditions also limit the potential of individual competencies and their CFs. It is argued that the existing institutional arrangements and context of the state administration restrict the use and potential of CFs. It is only with certain enabling and conducive arrangements and environment that slightly differently formulated CFs could contribute to their intended purpose.

Central to CFs is a clear definition of individual competencies, which refer to a mix of knowledge, skills, and personal aptitudes measured by a long list of behavioural indicators. Yet many departments do not define these terms tightly and often use them interchangeably, leading to a poor distinction between knowledge and skills. The leadership and management CFs in the public service use a combination of core/generic competencies, whereas the Financial Management CF and, to a certain extent, the Monitoring and Evaluation CF also rely on technical competencies.

It is argued that assessing core/generic competencies is more difficult, especially when they are decontextualised and content-free, than technical competencies. Technical skills and competencies are sometimes mentioned in public service documents but are broadly defined and not attached to a body of specialised knowledge. The little reference to technical skills and competencies suggests that these are lacking in the PSS and, too often, must be outsourced to professional and technical services. Another major problem with leadership and management competencies is that it appears to reduce knowledge to the knowledge of policies, legislation, and regulations but not to the 'knowledge' of the technical field of practice in the sector that they manage. Yet, it is argued that if leaders and managers in a department do not have some grounding in a specialised body of knowledge related to their sector, they are unlikely to assume their roles effectively. This omission of what 'knowledge' entails limits the advantages of individual competencies and CFs in improving PS delivery, explaining why the design of competencies and CFs are not empowering HR tools to improve the performance of leaders and managers.

The literature links CFs with various HR functions and the HR value chain. This is why individual competencies must be easy to assess, measure, and apply, but in reality, they are not. CFs are mainly used, as mentioned by the National Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Service (NSG, 2022, p34), for competency assessment aimed not at selection and recruitment or performance management but for development and training interventions which are not always appropriate. There is a lack of full ownership of these CFs among many departments that treat them as another exercise in bureaucratic compliance. Some departments interviewed, such as the National Treasury, appear more proactive than others in developing more detailed and specific CFs to strengthen their HR functions, while in other departments, the CFs do not seem to lead to the identification of appropriate and effective training courses nor an effective performance management process. In that sense, CFs contribute only to a limited degree to a more developmental and effective PSS.

It is important to locate individual competencies within the wider context of organisational strategies and priorities as well as the broader socio-political conditions. As the conceptual framework indicates, individual and organisational competencies must reinforce and be aligned with one another. It is assumed that proper organisational systems and strategies are in place and that they enable the application of CFs and the exercise of individual competencies. Yet, what emerges is that current work organisations, organisational strategies, structures, conditions, political stability, and leadership can be inadequate and work against what individuals can or cannot do.

Too often, individual and organisational competencies are designed as wishful tools to contribute to moving away from a PS being over-reliant on compliance towards a more professional PS able to use some discretionary authority to make decisions to improve its performance and contribute to a capable state. However, the reality is somewhat different because CFs, on their own, with their individual competencies, cannot be separated from their current organisational environment, which impacts what they can and cannot do. CFs (even if better defined and used) cannot be used as the main drivers for change in the PS as they are embedded in these organisational and institutional structures and environments.

The fragmented bureaucratic administration continues to dominate many departments whose actual bureaucratic practices are not functioning well, undermining management's agency and problem-solving. The political/administrative appointees retain these systems and ways of working to protect their interests without significantly contributing to the institutional functionality of the state (Chipkin, 2013). Factors such as political interference and the unpredictable roles of top public servants have rendered many state institutions dysfunctional or weak, judging from the many damning reports from the Auditor General.

The New Public Management reform, which regulates and decentralises more responsibility for delivery to unit managers, encourages the exercise of some professional agency but in a silo manner, with competition between employees and their organisations without much collaboration with civil society. Many senior managers, however, are reluctant to adopt such managerialist structures and processes, preferring to operate in the safe rule-bound bureaucratic mould, which does not call on their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. More recently, with state capture affecting many state institutions, the public confidence in the performance of state institutions to perform the duties assigned to them under the constitution and relevant legislation and deliver on their mandate has further eroded and is in desperate need of improvement.

The real challenge is to understand the role of CFs in a mature value-based developmental state with robust ethical and moral values and a commitment to inclusive growth and collaboration with other organisations. The report identifies the following important drivers for change that will assist in improving the sector's performance and the use of CFs:

- 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 them to lead, plan, and manage the issues 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.
- Changes in the formal and informal institutions, including better training regimes.
- CFs need two kinds of competencies: 1) the core, which consists of competencies specific to an occupational field of knowledge that the specific department manages (as found in the FM CF), and 2) selected core/generic competencies taken from the leadership and management competencies found in the SMS and/or MMS CFs.

Only then will the CFs have a chance to transcend intra-organisational and sectoral boundaries and embrace group dynamics, institutional dynamics, social regulation structures, and feedback mechanisms. Greater collaboration, networks, and partnerships between various PS departments and organs of civil society will assist in implementing more effectively the developmental objectives of the state. CFs will then be able to move away from static to dynamic competencies with an effective form of collective leadership capable and committed to continuously learning and renewing itself.

Some departments (such as the National Treasury) may be more ready than others to work towards and adopt this model with enabling environments, organisational structures, ways of working, and leadership. These departments should be used as pilots by being given more space, authority, and power to exercise professional agency, with the possibility of failing and learning from their failures. Rigorous independent monitoring and research will be needed to reveal the lessons learnt from such new practices both in the short and medium term.

# 1. Introduction and background

*“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” (PSC, 2016, p54).*

- This report reviews four competency frameworks (CFs) that are in operation in the Public Service Sector (PSS) - Senior Management Services (SMS), Middle Management Services (MMS) CF, Financial Management (FM), and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) –to understand how these are conceptualised, used, and applied to improve the sector’s performance. In reviewing the CFs, this report investigates the major challenges and issues that explain what in CFs works and what does not. It also identifies the key issues that need attention with suggestions and recommendations on how to deal with them. It does this by examining three issues related to the use of CFs and the performance of the public service to answer the research’s Terms of Reference:
  - i. CFs as appropriate, empowering HR tools aligned to the PS organisational performance.
  - ii. CFs as mere symptoms of deeper causes behind the relatively poor PS performance.
  - iii. Can CFs be improved, and how, and under what conditions?
- Since the 1980s, the idea of competency and CFs have increasingly been introduced as tools (used by the private sector) to improve individual and organisational performance in the public service sector (Horton, 2000b in Op de Beeck & Hondeghe, 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. According to Mills et al. (2020), competencies refer to how performance is achieved (behavioural approach), what achievements look like in the context of a profession (functional approach), or a combination of both. Mulder (2014) foregrounds the ability to develop dynamically, to possess knowledge, mastery, and performativity, and the ability to transfer knowledge (close to Winch’s (2022) understanding of transversal abilities).
- The terms ‘skills’ and ‘competencies’ are often used interchangeably, and the notion of ‘knowledge’ remains unspecified. The resulting ambiguous definition and use of competencies can lead to a mismatch between skills and competencies and the job description as well as intra- and inter-organisational strategies, as will be seen later. Therefore, engaging with the conceptualisation of CFs to better clarify their meaning, interpretation, and application is important.

CFs set out a list of individual competencies required by individuals working in an organisation. They describe performance excellence within an organisation, including the competencies applied to multiple occupational roles within the organisation (and in the context of this study, the focus is on management roles). The main purposes of CFs are to identify the skills, knowledge, behaviours, and abilities needed to meet current and future talent selection needs, depending on organisational strategy and priorities, as well as strategies to develop individual and group development plans which assist in bridging the gap between the competencies needed by an organisation with those available. In the context of the PSS, CFs act as a vehicle to communicate which behaviours are required, valued, recognised, and rewarded with respect to specific occupational roles (Jarvalt, 2007).

## 1.1 Competencies and competency framework in the South African PSS

The competencies in the PSS are benchmarked against those of other public services globally, such as in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, this can prove problematic because, as emerged later in the report, competencies do not exist in a vacuum and independently of specific PSS contexts.

In the past, different public service departments had many variations in job descriptions and profiling for officials who occupied similar jobs and ranks. The job descriptions and qualifications were the main tools used for performance assessment and management, which were linked to skill audits. These assessments often depended on self-assessment rather than a more objective assessment conducted by management or an external party.

By the end of the 1990s, the inherited administration became known for its poor service delivery, generating a low level of trust among civil society (Chipkin, 2013). The New Public Management (NPM) reform since the late 1990s was introduced more in some departments than others, as the government attempted to counter the red tape aspects of the rule-bound public administration and move towards a form of corporatisation of the PSS with the conversion of divisions and/or departments into free-standing units whose performance could be measured on the basis of their outputs and performance indicators (Mc Lennan, 2007). At the heart of the NPM reform is the Public Finance Management Act of 1999, which gives managers some discretion in their roles and introduces a performance-based approach to move away from inputs and rules to outcomes and responsibilities (Cameron, 2009). In 2000 the Department of Public Service Administration (DPSA) commissioned a report which recommends the establishment of an SMS CF incorporating managers between the ranks of director and director-general in a competency-based management framework (DPSA, 2007:23). The intention of such a move was to improve the ability of the PSS by retaining quality managers and creating a mobile and flexible public service-wide pool of scarce resources for utilisation throughout the sector. This led to the development and use of individual behavioural and job competencies as well as CFs to complement the qualification-only job selection requirement.

Reference to CFs in the PSS appears in a number of government documents such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (108 of 1996), the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, 1997 (also known as the Batho Pele White Paper), and the Public Finance Management Act (Act 1 of 1999) in the hope that this will increase the effectiveness of service delivery. For example, the 1997 Batho Pele White Paper seeks to move the PSS away from bureaucratic systems and processes towards a new way of working which is more responsive and puts the needs of the public first (also known as 'customers'). The Batho Pele principles give a perspective from which the government service delivery programmes could be evaluated. It requires national and provincial departments to develop a Performance Management System, including setting service delivery indicators and performance measures (DPME, 1997:10 and 23). The first version of the SMS CF in 2001 explains that it forms the basis for performance improvement. The 2003 SMS handbook notes that the key role of the CF is to professionalise the PSS - Senior Management level and build a consistent approach to human performance throughout the PSS from National to Provincial levels, thus helping to drive and support human performance initiatives. The MMS CF followed in 2006. By 2008, after an extensive competency research project by the DPSA in 2007, Cabinet approved and made compulsory the competency assessments for senior managers (DPSA Competency Framework for Human Resource Management and Development, 2008c). The Financial Management (FM) CF emerged in 2010, while the Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) CF was published in 2014.

The DPSA's behavioural competencies (how to do the work) and functional competencies (what has to be done) are translated into a long list of behavioural indicators as well as levels of proficiencies to assist in measuring these competencies (DPSA, 2008c). The SMS CF (2003), as well as the FM CF (2010), understand competencies as the combination of skills, knowledge, attributes, and underlying characteristics that enable a person to perform better in different situations with better results. The MMS CF (2006) mentions knowledge, skills, aptitudes, and judgement required for effective performance in a particular job, while the M&E CF (2014) reduces competencies to knowledge, skills, and ability to undertake an activity.

A 2005 review of the impact of the SMS CF (DPSA, 2006a) shows mixed results. The impact study highlights, amongst other issues, that capacity develops, but human resources practices - such as competency assessments for development and performance management purposes - are not effectively applied.

## 1.2 Conceptual framework to assess competency frameworks

The literature distinguishes three levels of competencies: individual, organisational, and state-wide level.

*Individual competencies* are about exercising the know-what, the know-how, the show-how, and the doing, which 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 and Mentzas, 2006). They are often not linked to any body of knowledge or context and are said to be acquired through incentives or sanctions aimed at behavioural changes. Yet, in reality, they are related to a body of knowledge and exist within an organisation and a broader social and political context. A better understanding of individual occupational competencies can be achieved 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 work standards in relation to an occupational domain and foregrounds the subject matter and practical knowledge that most occupations have, as well as the contextual capacity of integrating professional knowledge, skills, and activities (Winch, 2022).

An interesting issue is understanding the relationship between individual behavioural and occupational competencies in various CFs and determining which ones weigh more heavily than others, especially as one goes up the vertical hierarchy of positions within the PSS. It would appear that the behavioural generic/core competencies feature more prominently at the senior management level than at the middle or lower management level, as the latter requires a deeper understanding of the technical issues of the project or programme they oversee (DPSA, 2008b).

Individual competencies cannot be understood fully without an analysis of the organisational conditions that can enable or undermine exercising them. This may appear a determinist view, but it can be balanced by the argument that there is some individual discretion and agency possible, even within uncondusive organisational 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 arrangements may complement or contradict individual competencies and influence how leaders and senior managers within the organisation/department interact, relate to each other, and perform. In post-1994 public administration, bureaucratic practices at the level of organisational structures and ways of working, as well as leadership and senior management support, can sometimes enable or undermine the exercise of individual competencies. An example of enablement is how leadership and management can influence and support the way the HR department operates. It can strengthen the department and improve the performance of employees by establishing a strong horizontal alignment between competency assessment for individual selection, training, and performance management purposes.

There is a new level of inter-organisational competencies derived from a perceived need that departments should work beyond their silos and forge links and partnerships with other organisations (Sedibe, 2021). Collective leadership is about leading systemic change and building coalitions and partnerships, which are necessary to deal with the complexity of the ever-changing environment facing the sector. Sedibe (2021) argues that this call for a new form of shared collective leadership with inter-organisational structures can only take place if there are changes in the broader institutional arrangements. This explains the importance of analysing organisational competencies within their institutional conditions, as the latter can enable or undermine exercising them. This is not to say that some organisational discretion and agency are possible within uncondusive institutional arrangements, as this conceptual framework suggests.

*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, giving rise to different trends at different political and economic dispensation periods.

The first trend relies on line management and hierarchical accountability typical of the traditional, modern bureaucracy. According to Olsen (2006:2), Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is defined by a hierarchical rule-based organisational setting; with particular practices of recruitment, tenure, and reward of staff; and a larger organisational and normative structure where the government is founded on authority; or the belief in a legitimate, rational-legal political order.

The authority structures correspond to departments' power dynamics, which have evolved since 1994. In terms of the Public Service Act (amended 1998), the executive may appoint personnel at all levels of the bureaucracy. This policy of cadre deployment of party officials is used to gain control of the inherited administration, something not that different from the apartheid administration (Meny-Gibert and Brunette, 2015). This leads to struggles over political and official positions as well as some instability within the bureaucracy (Chipkin, 2013). According to Lodge (1998) (cited in Meny-Gibert, 2019), internal hierarchies and authority structures correspond to these organisations' power dynamics and generate a culture of unquestioned deference to authority and regulatory compliance of the rank and file. Most public servants become more interested in serving upwards towards their seniors and the politicians rather than outwards towards the citizen, undermining democratic accountability and a focus on servicing the citizenry (Mc Lennan, 2007).

The leadership positions work through line management with a limited scope of decision-making and delegation of authority. There is often a blame culture that passes the problems up and down the management line as submissions work up and down the hierarchical line before they are implemented. This enables many public servants to detach from the effects of their work as they feel protected by regulatory controls and instructions (Mc Lennan, 2017). At times, there are official bureaucratic rules and norms which are not well defined and administrative processes and job descriptions that are unclear, leading to some departments and their administrative processes becoming semi-dysfunctional. This partly explains why many leaders and senior managers do not favour delegating decision-making and authority, enabling some departmental agencies. This trend is found in many post-1994 departments, which continue to be characterised by a weak, fragmented administration, operating in silos and with little collaboration and teamwork (Cameron, 2009).

A second trend found in state institutions and influenced by the new public management (NPM) reform relates to establishing new systems, such as business plans and strategic goals/cycles, and new ways of working with integrated systems and horizontal clusters that emphasise outcomes-driven measures. The NPM encourages regulation and decentralisation of service delivery for the sake of greater efficiencies and value for money. Senior managers in these departments are given some flexibility and autonomy to bypass aspects of the rule-bound administration. However, their responsibility is not accompanied by sufficient powers and/or resources to manage their units (Cameron, 2009).

Competencies and CFs fit well as tools to develop and monitor human resource capacity through the regulation of officials' recruitment, training, career development, performance management, and assessment. They also assist with pressure for better outputs measured by key performance results or targets. However, McLennan (2007) warns that the 1997 White Paper on Transforming the Public Service (Batho Pele) creates a framework that treats citizens as customers, generating a self-interest rather than a professional culture within the PSS.

A review of the conceptual framework points to the fact that competencies are linked relationally enabled and/or constrained by the relations established between the three levels, which are reflected below. Each level is represented by a circle to capture its influences on the lower-level circles (explaining the downwards arrow). There is, however, some discretion and agency in the lower-level circles that officials and organisations can use to operate differently or proactively despite a constraining environment (explaining the upwards arrow). The bigger upper circle refers to the state-wide competencies in different state institutions and the broader political and social context, which frame what departments and organisations can and cannot do, even though there is some discretion for the organisational agency. The next circle of organisational competencies and arrangements, which consist of intra-organisational and inter-organisational management and leadership, are influenced by the nature of state institutions but also influence what individuals can and cannot do, even though there is also some individual agency possible. The bottom circle comprises individual competencies, which are both behavioural and occupational.

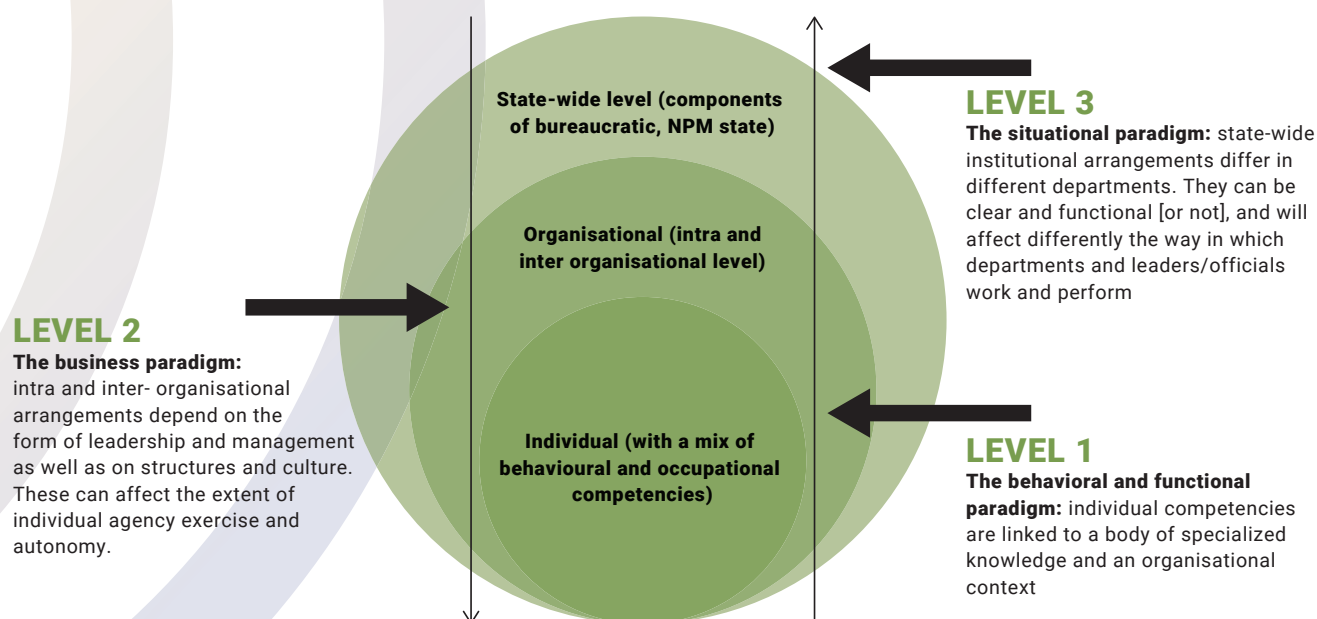


Figure 2: Description of the Conceptual Framework

## 2. Methodology

A desktop review involved scanning literature, analysing secondary data, and creating a reference list of CFs to understand how they came about, how they are used by various public services, and for what purpose. Different documents produced by international and national public service sectors and scholars were reviewed to gain insights into the challenges affecting competencies and CFs.

Interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to investigate the CFs at the Service Management Services (SMS), Middle Management services (MMS), Financial Management (FM), and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) levels. A purposive sampling was chosen for in-depth interviews with key officials (from the ranks of Deputy Director to Chief Director to Deputy Director General) with an insightful understanding of CFs in their departmental units or divisions. Twelve officials were interviewed from Human Resource Management, Human Resources, Organisational Development, or Capacity Development in five national departments: the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), the National Treasury, the Presidency, The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and officials from the Public Service Commission (PSC), the National School of Government, 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. The intention was to gauge public service officials' perceptions of competency frameworks.

In addition, a two-hour seminar was held for around 150 attendees, including 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 documents were reviewed when recommended by the participants (such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (108 of 1996), the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, 1997, the Public Finance Management Act (Act 1 of 1999), the 2003 SMS handbook, the 2006 MMS CF, the 2008 DPSA Competency Framework for SMS, the 2010 FM CF, the 2013 SMS CF, the 2014 M&E CF, the 2016 PSC Discussion document on the state, the 2021 DPSA HR planning guideline, the 2022 National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service and the 2022-2023 PSETA Sector Skill Plans), which were all useful in clarifying and further unpacking what surfaced in the interviews.

In terms of the interview process, participants' reliability levels varied. Some emphasise that all is well in their units/departments and that the CF policy works and implementation is happening. They steered away from delving into problematic issues. The majority appeared reluctant to talk about their ambivalent experiences, while others expressed frustration and showed little ownership of what they saw as bureaucratic tools designed to make them comply. A few participants appeared more proactive, appreciating CFs and determined to make the most out of them.

The data collection process, which included the identification of relevant PSS documents, interviews, and data emerging out of the workshop, led to the identification of three key areas with their related themes. This provides the basis for the data analysis and interpretation, which was done through the conceptual framework.

- i. CFs as appropriate, empowering HR tools aligned to the PSS organisational performance: The themes identified here are a) the nature and definition of individual competencies, b) the use, measurement, and assessment of competencies and CFs in the HR value chain, c) individual competencies in relation to organisational and broader contextual conditions, and d) the assessment of organisational or departmental competencies and performance.
- ii. CFs as mere symptoms of deeper causes behind the relatively poor PSS performance: The themes identified are a) the limitations of the rule-bound bureaucratic public administration, b) the political and wrong appointment of leaders and senior managers, and c) the New Public Management's impact on the capable state administration.
- iii. Can CFs be improved, and how, and under what conditions? The themes identified are a) the enabling state arrangements, b) the new inter-organisational leadership, c) the leadership and management competencies with an ethical, moral mindset and professional agency to serve the citizenry, and d) the enabling organisational culture, as well as supportive structural and institutional arrangements.

# 3. Findings: data analysis and interpretation

## 3.1 Part I. CFs as appropriate, empowering HR tools aligned to the PS organisational performance?

The data collection and the conceptual framework identify four problematic themes under this issue, a) the nature and definition of individual competencies, especially in relation to the four CFs under investigation, b) the use, measurement, and assessment of competencies and CFs in the HR value chain, c) individual competencies in relation to organisational and broader contextual conditions, and d) the assessment of organisational or departmental competencies and performance.

The *nature and definition of individual competencies* at the SMS, MMS, FM, and M&E levels face some challenges. Leadership and management competencies are interrelated: some are core or generic competencies, while others are foundational or feeder competencies built into generic or transversal competencies as one goes up the management chain.

Most interview participants and workshop participants acknowledged the importance of the DPSA-generated competencies for standardising job descriptions and profiles across public administration. Many participants perceive the competencies and the CFs as useful HR tools linked to job requirements and profiling to improve the coherence within the PSS. Participants did not raise the difficulty of distinguishing between knowledge, skills, and abilities. Hence, eliciting any input on their understanding of these terms was impossible. However, they acknowledged that it is not easy to work effectively with individual competencies and CFs because these are cumbersome bureaucratic tasks requiring departmental ownership and individual buy-in.

The SMS CF (DPSA, 2003) limits itself to individual competencies that are behavioural (how to do the work) and do not incorporate occupational competencies (what has to be done). It refers mainly to core/generic and process competencies with behavioural indicators and proficiency levels. Core/generic competencies refer to the idea behind the competency: *"[they] succinctly define what the idea means and propose behavioural indicators to illustrate the competencies."* Examples of core competencies for the SMS 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 by employing certain competency techniques."* Examples in the SMS CF are Knowledge Management, Service Delivery Innovation, Problem Solving and Analysis, Client Orientation, and Customer Focus and Communication. Behavioural indicators are attached to these competencies and are used by assessors to rate and score the level of proficiency.

The 2003 SMS CF document does not foreground or clarify the meaning of knowledge underpinning these management competencies, which appear to exist out of context, making it difficult to assess them effectively and objectively.

The MMS CF (2006) foregrounds generic and feeder competencies but also mentions a few technical competencies. The generic/core competencies are those required by all middle managers in most of their duties and activities throughout the Public Service. Feeder competencies are what employees *"entering the middle management ranks must possess or be able to demonstrate as these are the foundation steps required to successfully display the generic competencies"* (DPSA, 2006b, p4). Prioritised core and feeder competencies are also identified: Organisational Communication Effectiveness; Problem Analysis; Self-Management; Budgeting and Financial Management; Customer Focus and Responsiveness; Developing Others; Planning and Organising; Problem Solving and Decision-Making; and Project Management and Team Leadership. The MMS CF document privileges core competencies but do not attempt to link these to a specialised body of knowledge or knowledge of a technical or occupational field of practice, leaving their assessment difficult and subjective. Contrary to the SMS CF, the MMS CF mentions one technical feeder competency (technical proficiency) and refers to a mix of technical and management work content when specifying the three main primary middle management roles: a) Professional/Production specialist, with supervisory management duties; b) Managers of production units; and c) Managers of regional offices or institutes. This inclusion of a few technical competencies relates to the fact that middle management works more closely (than senior management) with the sector and its technical components.

It is worth noting in this respect that, in a previous DPSA HR document (DPSA, 2008b), the various management occupations in a PSS department are broken down to identify the kind of knowledge required. The post of DG has a ratio of 50/50 technical and professional knowledge whereas, as you go down the management chain, the ratio increases with junior management having an 80/20 technical versus professional knowledge (DPSA, 2008b, p58). The exact meaning of professional and technical knowledge is not clear. The mention of different mixes of management knowledge is no longer found in recent DPSA documents (such as the 2003 DPSA SMS competency framework), suggesting that it is no longer in use today. However, for sector-specific public servants employed at the top to middle management level, for example, in Health, Education, Security, Defence, Diplomacy, etc., it is important to remember that these public servants fall under their specific sector Acts and that they belong to statutory professional associations which are there to promote and stimulate the professionals and strengthen the professionalisation of their sector. Not only do these associations aim to ensure the professionals' certification and credentialing, educational standards, enforcement of standards, codes of ethics, and standards of performance, but they also regulate the professionals' recruitment, occupational practises, and career development or pathways. Unfortunately, research evidence reveals that many professional associations are lacking in effectiveness and do not play their role adequately for their members (Naidoo and Rajcoomar, 2020). This is caused by their lack of sufficient authority, power, and legitimacy to legislate and enforce the rules and regulations on behalf of practitioners and perform their various functions to promote and protect the profession's reputation (Meintjes & Niemann-Struweg, 2009).

The over-reliance by the SMS and MMS CFs on core/generic leadership and management competencies is argued here to be problematic. This is because core/generic competencies are out of context and include mainly different forms of management, such as strategic management, programme and project management, communication and information management, diversity management, people management, knowledge and change management, self-management, etc. In addition, they refer to soft skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, planning and organising, communication, and self-management. But the CFs ignore the importance of occupational competencies specific to an occupational field of knowledge that the department manages.

Yet, most participants agree with this DPSA competency language of decontextualised content-free core/generic leadership and management competencies because they believe each department needs some consistency across the PSS and some discretion in using these core/generic competencies for similar occupations in their own department. The DPSA also endorses generic transversal competencies for DGs: *"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, 2010, p692).

Can generic/core competencies accurately capture the full job of senior or middle managers? An argument can be made (but it was never made by the participants) that behavioural competencies for leadership and management are insufficient. Yes, aspects of the jobs of middle management that cover operational practical routine tasks can more easily be monitored and translated into monthly or annual KPIs. In contrast, senior management (and aspects of middle management functions) requires broader and deeper strategic abilities, which core/generic competencies and behavioural indicators can easily simplify and '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 to effectively learn the history, politics, and culture of the organisation where a senior manager works, the structural possibilities, constraints, expectations, and forces at play? To achieve this requires deep knowledge which goes beyond a management toolbox. To make decisions on appropriate policies, programmes, and 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.

A related argument made by participants is that generic competencies "only reflect the basic minimum and should be treated as a guideline" designed for the standardisation of what is needed in similar positions across the SMS, MMS, FM, and M&E of the PS. That is why different departments should be allowed some discretion in the way core, generic, and/or process competencies are interpreted or given meaning in their specific department, acknowledging thereby that individual competencies (level 1 of the conceptual framework) are influenced by the organisational set up (or level 2).

During discussions, most participants interviewed agreed that occupational/professional competencies must complement generic behavioural competencies for specific professional tasks. This aligns with the conceptual framework suggesting that generic individual behavioural competencies are insufficient and must be complemented by occupational/professional competencies (see 2.2). A participant pointed out that his departmental exercise has been,

up to now, 'a hit and miss' because of the lack of capacity and political will to do this. This may explain why the DPSA recently commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to undertake participatory research with government departments to develop a template and toolkit to assist each department with developing professional/occupational CFs. Occupational competencies should not focus narrowly on task and activity-specific job competencies but rather on occupations based on the integration of professional judgement-based knowledge and skills. An official who cautions against generic competencies pointed out that: "*where discretion can lead to a disaster, there should be room for specificity.*" For example, the competencies of electrical engineers should be more precise because of the specific nature of the job. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of The Public Sector (NFPPS) also warns 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, p34). However, senior managers working in a specific sector such as Health, Education, Security, Defence, Diplomacy, etc., by virtue of their specific sector Acts, are required to possess occupational knowledge and belong to their professional statutory associations that define and regulate their occupations and practices, even if many of these bodies need to be strengthened because they often lack in effectiveness.

An analysis of the SMS and MMS CFs raises an important issue: whether senior and middle management can be considered an occupation or profession linked to a formal body of specialised knowledge. When asked about the knowledge of leaders and managers, most participants refer to their knowledge of policies, legislation, and regulatory frameworks of the environment and department in which they operate. In contrast, Shalem (2022) argues that leadership and senior management are not occupations or professions *per se* because they are not linked to a field of study with a formal body of specialised knowledge. Gamble (2020, p5) claims that occupation is grounded in a substantive knowledge base and expertise consistent with discretionary autonomy and judgement over occupational work and decision-making processes. The 2022 NFPPS also recognises special knowledge as part of professions 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, 2022, p18).*

If leaders and senior managers are not linked to a body of specialised occupational knowledge, problems will likely emerge when they try to flesh out and implement policies, programmes, and strategies in their sector. This is because the knowledge in a professional field of practice related to their sector (such as education, energy, business studies, engineering) is needed to be able to assume their roles and undertake more effective strategic work. Shalem (2022) claims that, rather than occupations or professions, leadership, and senior management are merely roles or techniques that can be mastered and improved through short courses, experience, and reflection on practice.

The two other CFs under review, the M&E CF and the FM CF, are interesting and different from the SMS and MMS CFs because they contain more detailed technical competencies for their officials, many of whom have a professional qualification linked to a body of professional knowledge and belong to a professional statutory body.

The M&E CF is influenced by national and international associations but considers the distinctive political and cultural history of South Africa. The DPME oversees the design of the national evaluation system's tools and guidelines to develop supervision and assessment of courses and programmes across the government. It develops guidelines and templates, a set of assessment guidelines and skills. These resources and instructions are intended to help public sector evaluators, monitoring and evaluation officers, and lead programme managers. Crucial competencies are rather technical and include data collection skills, statistical analysis, economic impact and econometric analysis, understanding of sector policies, implementation modalities, and data quality assurance. To these are added soft skills such as facilitation skills for participative M&E, the impact of poverty, gender, and other dynamics (DPME, 2007, p16). Goremuचेche (2017) mentions that "training is needed in technical research skills (e.g., qualitative and quantitative data analysis software) as well as non-technical skills such as understanding budgets and team coordination," foregrounding that both technical and non-technical generic competencies are important in the evaluation world.

The competencies of the M&E CF (DPME, 2014) are attached to three role players:

- i. A programme manager who administers the programme and is the main target user for the assessment results.
- ii. An M&E advisor, internal to the government department, who often advises on the evaluation process and affects both valuation and management of the choices.
- iii. An evaluator who is internal or external to the government and is involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation. The evaluator can carry out his/her evaluation alone or with team members who carry the supplemented knowledge, skills, and abilities. (M&E, 2014, p4)

Four competency dimensions are identified:

- 1) the overarching competencies relevant across the practice of evaluation with the contextual knowledge and understanding, ethical conduct, and interpersonal skills, which refer to a mix of generic and technical competencies.
- 2) evaluation leadership relates to the quality of championing evaluation practices that foreground generic management and leadership competencies such as strategic planning and thinking, decision-making and organisational strategy, resource management, and team leadership.
- 3) the evaluation craft with the domain of evaluative discipline and research practice, which refers to some technical competencies in the context of a discipline.
- 4) the implementation of evaluation with the planning management; reporting and improvement relying on different practical skills, which refers to generic competencies.

The 1, 2, and 4 dimensions foreground the generic competencies of evaluators, while the 1 and 3 dimensions hint at contextual knowledge of the field or discipline in which the programmes, projects, or issues have to be evaluated, and this calls for some technical competencies. The DPME evaluation unit is rather small and does not always have the wide-ranged professional expertise to evaluate important projects in all departments, which is undermining their work, according to a DPME participant. He admits that when the professional and technical knowledge of the sector where the evaluation must occur is missing, the evaluation is outsourced to outside experts, and the unit tries to monitor the external evaluation tightly. This explains why the M&E CF mentions the importance of balancing generic and technical competencies.

The 2010 FM CF (National Treasury, 2010) foregrounds the professional financial knowledge linked to a body of specialised knowledge. The functional/technical competencies “provide for different levels of complexity described in accordance with occupational levels” (p12). These are built across nine occupational functions, with each function being divided into a series of competency clusters representing a major component of the function. The ten functions are 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 CF makes a functional distinction between an employee carrying out financial accounting tasks and one carrying out management accounting tasks. Within the financial accounting function, another distinction is made between the work of different accounting employees. The second distinction is between employees working within a defined function but exercising different levels of responsibility or occupational roles. Middle management includes a Supervisor (Tactical) at Assistant Director and Deputy Director levels, whereas senior management includes Management (Strategic) at Director, Chief Director, and Deputy Director General levels (2010, p11). Recognising that different operational units structure their finance function and financial management tasks differently, the CF shows some flexibility in “*specifying the tasks to be carried out in a way that is independent of how they might be assigned between operating units and/or individual employees*” (2010, p22). This approach affords public financial managers maximum flexibility in using the CF to provide a series of building blocks with which to define the competencies required within the organisational and employment structures.

The 2010 FM CF adds to the functional/technical competencies behavioural, core/generic competencies regarded as “*essential to the successful execution of various tasks in the financial management field*” (p22). Behavioural competencies refer to various emotional competencies, professional conduct, and soft skills, while core/generic competencies refer to those shared across all financial management roles (including Enterprise Risk Management, Supply Chain Management, and Internal Audit). Generic competencies fall into four skills categories: Management Skills, Communication Skills, Computer Skills, and Customer Service Skills. This illustrates that the FM CF foregrounds the importance of decontextualised content-free competencies in addition to the technical and professional competencies.

Even if technical or professional knowledge remains somewhat broadly defined, the FM CF illustrates how best to combine, in a more balanced manner, technical competencies with core/generic competencies that are decontextualised and content-free. It does this through a more flexible approach to CFs with building blocks needed to define the competencies required within the organisational and employment structures.

At the other end of the spectrum is the SMS CF, which focuses only on core and generic competencies, making these problematic and difficult to deal with. In the middle, there is the MMS CF with a few technical competencies and the M&E CF with a few more technical competencies.

The limited reference to technical skills and competencies (as opposed to core/generic) suggests that these are lacking in the PSS and, too often, must be outsourced to professional and technical services. This is acknowledged in the DPME 25-Year Review (1994-2019), which calls for the need “to proactively plan for strengthening technical and professional skills in the public service” (NSG, 2022, p22). In view of the fact that a number of PSS documents refer to technical or professional skills, it will be important to understand how these skills relate to the knowledge of the field of practice.

On the issue of competencies for the future world of work (in the context of 4IR), it is interesting to note the recent agreement between DPSA and TUT to launch a programme to assist with effective, efficient, and responsive delivery:

*we need innovations that have less red tape, agile institutions that are able to respond timely and impactful, and departments that promote entrepreneurship [rather] than bureaucratic responses.*

Some departments believe that, with the Covid pandemic, the acceleration of technology and digitalisation (which is affecting them to some degree), and the likely future disappearance of lower-level jobs, it is vital to review and update their competencies (every 3 to 5 years). Some participants pointed out that competencies are dynamic and strategic and should be adapted to promote the competencies of continuous learning and critical problem-solving skills, especially to face the fast-changing environment. The Western Cape Provincial Institute has recently committed itself to a future-fit skill strategy for senior managers. In addition, the Institute is reconfiguring new skills they will need, even if they do not know all the future skills they will need. Other departments appear less proactive and do not believe reviewing their competencies is necessary as they do not see any need for it.

A significant number of participants noted that the state wants competencies that “reflect the values and principles of the “Constitution,” including “ethics, honesty, and integrity,” but these are not as present as they should in the CFs, especially in these days of state capture, mismanagement, and corruption.

Central to CFs is a clear definition of individual competencies, which refer to a mix of knowledge, skills, and aptitudes measured by a long list of behavioural indicators. Yet many departments do not define these terms tightly and often use them interchangeably. With the use of competencies, CFs are developed. The CFs for leadership and management in the PSS use a combination of core/generic and process competencies, whereas the FM CF, and to a lesser extent the M&E CF, also rely on technical competencies. It is more difficult to capture and objectively assess core/generic competencies than technical or professional competencies. However, when public service documents refer to technical skills, these are broadly defined and not sufficiently linked to a body of specialised knowledge. The limited reference to technical skills and competencies suggests that these are lacking in the PSS and are too often outsourced to professional and technical services. Another major problem with leadership and management competencies is that it appears to reduce their knowledge to knowledge of policies, legislation, and regulations but does not refer to the ‘knowledge’ of the field of practice in the sector they manage. Yet, it is argued that if leaders and managers in a department (for example, management of water infrastructure in the water sector) do not have some grounding in a body of specialised knowledge related to their sector, they are unlikely to effectively assume their roles. This omission on what ‘knowledge’ entails limits the advantages of individual competencies and CFs in improving PSS delivery, and this explains why the design of competencies and CFs are not empowering HR tools to improve the performance of leaders and managers.

The use, measurement, and assessment of competencies and CFs in the HR value chain. CFs are of little value unless they are used to strengthen the HR value chain in view of their main aim, which, 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. There are some challenges in the way units or departments use and implement the CF frameworks across the different HR functions. According to a significant number of participants, the assessment of competencies is not an easy task to carry out across the different HR functions as it is cumbersome and encourages the ticking of bureaucratic boxes.

The first function is *competency assessment for selection and recruitment*. It raises issues around who is doing this assessment, how it is done, and with what measuring instruments. Many participants argue that the SMS, MMS and FM, and M&E competencies and their behavioural indicators are useful in developing occupational profiles and consistency in the public service. They explained that the assessment of SMS competencies gets outsourced to private firms, often at a relatively high cost (DPSA has accredited six private firms from which departments can choose). A National Treasury participant highlighted that their HR unit/department has its own assessment centres but only for middle and junior managers, while others explained they do not have the capacity and resources to do an in-house assessment and argue that their HR should be capacitated to that effect. The Western Cape Provincial Institute is the only learning academy with its own assessment centre for middle and junior managers.

The 2008 DPSA HR document on competency assessment framework for SMS (DPSA, 2008c) explains that multiple complex competency assessment methods exist and should include: behavioural questionnaires, competency tests, simulations, observations, 360-degree feedback, observations, and interviews. However, this does not seem to have been implemented. A DHA participant pointed out that the outsourced SMS competency assessment consists of a work-related integrity test as well as a personality index, while the 2015 FM CF emphasises robust measuring instruments in the form of personality questionnaires, psychometric assessment, and testing for generic/core competencies. A National Treasury participant explained that the use of CF is owned by his department and has been institutionalised. It works on its competencies and CF for the nine disciplines of finances by giving them detailed content through a collaborative effort to develop specific competencies with other concerned stakeholders, such as people in similar professions in the private sector and professional associations or statutory bodies.

Most participants from the learning academies and some departments do not question the reliability of these assessment results as they believe that the outsourced and in-house assessment centres do a good and rigorous job. However, a few participants were not convinced that competency assessment is robust enough, as they perceived it as too subjective or worse, that the HRM is captured politically to make and manage certain 'problematic' appointments.

The 2022 NFPPS emphasises that, in the future, pre-entry, competency, and integrity assessments need to be in place to *"inform meritocratic appointments at the middle and senior management levels."* It also specifies that *"those appointed should, within the minimum probation period, comply with the minimum requirements for pre-entry into SMS while acknowledging that so far, "the results of the [SMS] competency assessments have only been validated for development interventions and not for selection purposes"* (NSG, 2022, p34).

The second HR function that follows competency assessments is for *training and development interventions*. For newly appointed or currently employed officials, assessment results are used to identify the competency or skill gaps between what is desired/necessary 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 and development programmes which are captured by continuous professional development points and takes the form of coaching, mentoring, as well as multiple formal and informal courses of different durations offered by different accredited providers who must train in compliance with the legislation and the regulatory framework.

A National School of Government (NSG) participant explained that there are various tools used to identify training needs. They include workplace skills plans, skill audits, or training needs analysis (which is done by the NSG). The latter starts from the department objectives and plans and then narrows them 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. A participant cautions that assessment exercises, like skill audits or workplace skill plans, do not automatically lead to the diagnosis of "appropriate training needs," as they depend on people who still have to mediate these assessment exercises.

Many leadership and management courses exist and sometimes compete with or complement each other. Participants involved in training acknowledged that their focus is mainly on leadership and management core and generic competencies because these are often diagnosed as lacking in potential or existing candidates and managers. In addition, a participant affirms that these courses *"can be taught explicitly out of context to improve leadership and management practices."* For example, 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 useful for and enriching 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 and those focusing on diversity and anti-discrimination are popular. A participant pointed to a private organisation called “Apolitical,” which offers effective short-term training programmes designed by senior managers for senior public servants. Other participants involved in training mention a partnership with other providers.

*We work in partnership with other specialised training providers that offer more professional/ technical competencies, such as the SETAs and learning academies within a department.*

Assessing the effectiveness of training programmes has proved to be challenging. Some participants mentioned that research on programmes is done through the monitoring and evaluation unit or by tracking the impact of the training on changed and/or improved delivery by the trained officials. However, the participants admit this is hard and tricky to research. Other participants agreed that many trainees do not sufficiently use and apply what they have learnt in the workplace. For example, ethics courses do not necessarily produce officials with better ethical conduct. In fact, a participant argued that the best trained, competent officials could remain the most corrupted and uninterested in changing the way they assume their responsibilities.

This raises questions about whether short programmes can really change behaviour, especially if there is no sufficient consequence or sanction. Some participants sought to explain why the return on investment in the training is not leading to changed behaviour. They argued that sometimes the wrong individuals are sent to the wrong courses because they are chasing certifications for their individual advancement. In addition, organisational conditions in the unit/department sometimes 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. They can focus narrowly on workplace tasks and roles rather than wider occupational knowledge (Gamble, 2020). The 2016 PSC 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. The training is also not compulsory for career progression in public service. There is no assessment of the impact of such programmes on employee performance and productivity and the overall functionality of the public service (p x).*

A more substantial issue about training programmes that focus on leaders’ and managers’ generic or core competencies is that they are not in a body of specialised knowledge and an organisational/institutional context. Can they be effective, especially if these managers do not have some specialised conceptual knowledge in their field of practice of their sector? How do these courses make the targeted group apply these generic or core competencies to their specific programme or sector? For example, the 2022-2023 PSETA list of Sectoral Priority Occupations and Interventions document (PSETA, 2022) recommends a generic training approach for what it diagnoses as six (out of 10) priority occupations at the senior and middle management level. An example of occupation is – *the senior government management* – defined in relation to the areas of training interventions which should focus on generic competencies: *Public Administration and/or Management (postgraduate); Management Development, Public Development Management, and Monitoring and Evaluation (postgraduate); Governance and Public Leadership. Change Management, Leadership Management, and Risk Assessment and Risk Management.* Another priority occupation is *policy and planning manager*, which calls for interventions in generic competencies such as *Public Policy Development, Monitoring & Evaluation; Change Management, Leadership; Management, and Risk Assessment and Risk Management.* Because there is no explicit mention of the conceptual or professional knowledge involved or the kind of specific organisational and institutional arrangements in which these posts are located, one can only wonder what kind of curriculum and assessment these training interventions will design to improve these generic/core competencies.

The third HR issue revolves around *performance agreement/management*. Competency assessment monitors and manages officials against their performance standards and targets. Cameron (2009) argues that performance management is only inconsistently applied because many senior managers do not own up sufficiently to their performance management function. Many participants mentioned that senior managers believe that the performance assessment of their subordinates is not their direct responsibility and that it has to be done by the HR units/divisions or the DGs or DDGs because they did not appoint these managers themselves. Some participants mention that many HR units and DG/DDG can politicise the appointment and performance management processes of some managers, making it difficult to deal with these problematic wrongly appointed managers. Far from making the PS more effective and professionally accountable, individual performance management can be flawed for a few reasons, according to the 2016



PSC discussion document, which does not allude directly to the politicisation of some appointments:

*[it] is fundamentally flawed mainly because measurable performance standards are not set, and accountability has been eroded. Poor day-to-day performance management by supervisors – including poor supervision, poor people management, and poor operations management – contributes to the failure of formal performance assessment (p viii).*

However, proactive HR participants explained that “*performance management should not be perceived as an event but rather as an ongoing empowering process.*” One participant mentioned that leaders and managers of units should be taught formally how to track and analyse the trends, strengths, and weaknesses of individual performance by engaging with their colleagues or subordinates as to the underlying problems hampering poor performance so as to address them.

The fourth HR issue, *consequence management*, is supposed to follow the competency assessment and performance management of well- or under-performing officials. Consequence management does not appear to apply widely. Reward and recognition of well-performing officials are supposed to occur, if no longer in the form of bonus, at least as a portfolio of evidence to apply for a higher-level job. When it comes to under-performing officials, some departmental units, whether HRM, OD, or capacity development, mentioned that it is not their remit to discipline these officials, while others mentioned that the departmental line managers do not always act on poor performance reports and prefer to pass this responsibility onto their HR division or their DGs or DDGs as it is perceived as not their responsibility. Some participants perceive HR to be better equipped to deal with trade union representatives involved in the poor performance management process because unions will try and protect poorly performing officials. Yet, many HR divisions are either too politicised themselves or do not own up or follow up on the application of CFs when dealing with consequence management of poorly performing officials.

A training provider argued that consequence management must take the form of a “*positive carrot*” (in the form of support and training offered by them) rather than a “*negative stick*,” which relies on the poor performance management process. A poor performance management plan could contribute to improved performance. If performance does not improve, it will lead to disciplinary measures and procedures enshrined in the Labour Relations Act. Many participants mentioned that the poor performance cycle is lengthy, and poor-performing officials continue to be protected by a time-consuming bureaucratic legal system that does not appear to censure such officials easily.

In summary, CFs are of little value unless they are used effectively to strengthen the HR value chain, which is about consistently assessing competencies 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 being yet another tick-box bureaucratic exercise that needs to be complied with. At most, competency assessments are used mainly, but not always accurately, for training, even if there are doubts that these are used effectively on a large scale. Many HR participants stressed that they do not have sufficient powers to make the most out of these CF recruitment and performance management tools because they are perceived as transactional rather than strategic units. They believe they could strengthen and enhance the HR strategy if they could have such strategic powers to act as a more proactive HR comprising forward-thinking principles and ideas. A few proactive HR participants mentioned that they ensure they prove to their department that they can use these tools strategically to add value to improve performance management and performance.

If CFs are supposed to be used for HR functions and the HR value chain, individual competencies should be easy to assess, measure, and apply, but the reality is the opposite. CFs are mainly used for competency assessment aimed not at selection and recruitment or performance management but at development and training. There is a lack of full ownership of these CFs among many departments that treat them as another exercise in bureaucratic compliance. A few departments, such as the National Treasury, appear more proactive than others in developing more detailed and specific CFs to strengthen their HR functions, while, in most departments, the CFs do not lead to an adequate identification of appropriate training courses or an effective performance management process. In that sense, CFs only contribute to a more developmental PSS to a limited degree.

### 3.1.1 Individual competencies as independent from organisational and broader contextual conditions?

At level 1 of the conceptual framework, individual competencies 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? Leaders and senior managers may be qualified and have the correct specified competencies, but they cannot always settle and assume their role within the unit or organisation because the latter does not have sufficient resources, capacity, expertise, or political stability. A 2022 PARI report on municipal government highlights this issue by distinguishing the individuals' ideal capacity and their poor actual capability to perform their role 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 (which is the critical factor that actually impacts that municipality's outcomes) because of constraints imposed by that person's working environment and over-arching context within which that municipality operates (p iii)*

As a participant mentioned:

*It is just not only strong individual skills that matter... it is also the capability to function at that level within the organisation and then the capability of the organisation to receive these individuals and make them learn at that level.*

Most participants agree that individual competencies cannot be understood out of their context as they are part of, and should be derived from, the organisations' objectives, systems, and structures. Interestingly, participants rarely mention that their organisational structures, processes, culture, resources, and/or leadership may be deficient or not properly established or designed to enable individuals to fulfil their roles and functions. Yet, if there are, this will have a deleterious impact on the ability of individual managers to use their competencies and exercise their individual agency. Strong individual competencies are unlikely to work effectively in a unit or organisation where there is a possibility that the HR value chain in that unit or organisation is not fully functional.

As the conceptual framework suggests, individual and organisational competencies need to be aligned and reinforce each other throughout. As one participant noted:

*If the human relations value chain is misaligned within the organisation, it means that the whole organisation will have to be realigned.*

If individual competencies are not aligned, and in contradiction with the current rule-bound bureaucratic organisational processes, the frustrations of individuals are likely to emerge if they are unable to exercise their agency. In support of aligning individual and organisational competencies, a National Treasury participant explained that their strategic

objectives are to create an enabling environment and develop mutually beneficial stakeholder relations to positively impact the enactment of individual and organisational competencies.

Locating individual competencies within the wider context of organisational strategies and priorities is important. It is assumed that proper organisational systems and strategies are in place and that they enable the application of CFs and the exercise of individual competencies. However, current work organisations, organisational strategies, structures, conditions, political stability, and leadership can be inadequate and work against what individuals can or cannot do (referred to as actual capability to perform, as opposed to ideal capacity to perform). As the conceptual framework suggests, individual and organisational competencies must reinforce each other and be aligned.

### 3.1.2. The assessment of organisational or departmental competencies and performance.

Organisational competencies and their assessment are not something that came up strongly in documents or in the interviews. How does one assess organisational competencies *per se*? Whereas there is an individual performance review, there is no such thing as an organisationally based performance review. Many participants mentioned that units or departments are assessed in terms of their Annual Performance Plans or deliverables measured with key performance areas. The Auditor General and audit reports are seen as good assessment measures of organisational performance.

To achieve their deliverables, organisations need fit-for-purpose objectives, supportive structures, adequate financial and human resources as well as effective leadership at different levels. When assessing a unit or organisation, several questions can be posed. Is there a common unit/organisational vision? Are objectives and their key performance indicators properly conceptualised to have the desired impact? Is leadership based on a participatory and enabling approach? What is possible, what can be done better in the unit/organisation, and what undermines it?

Poor performance of individuals within a unit or organisation could be the result of divisive politics, bad policies and systems, semi-functional bureaucratic structures, inflexible culture, and/or a general unconducive organisational environment, which all militate against the organisational performance that is not the main responsibility of leaders and senior managers. While competent leaders and senior managers can make a difference, their impact will be limited because many organisational circumstances are beyond their control.

When organisations do not deliver, a frequent response is to point to the responsibility of the leadership or senior managers and their low level of competencies, knowledge, skills, and traits, leading to calls for further development. But, in view of what has emerged from the comments of many participants in relation to training, investment in programmes for the improvement of leadership and management competencies can only have some, but not significant, impact on the unit or organisational performance.

Individual competency development is only one contributory element of something much bigger and more complex, which revolves around the way in which the state organisational arrangements work and have evolved since 1994. This is highlighted by an official:

*to consider the broader social, political, and economic context, which makes [the leadership] not properly conceptualise the policies, programmes, and work of its division to answer the needs of the people. The programme and work methodology are not sound or not well informed by the latest developments nor sufficiently related to what is going on at the provincial or local level.*

Too often, individual and organisational competencies are designed as wishful tools that will facilitate a shift away from a PSS over-reliant on compliance towards a more professional PSS able to use some discretionary authority to make decisions to improve its performance and contribute to a capable state. However, the reality is somewhat different because CFs, with their individual competencies, cannot be separated from their current organisational environment and arrangements, which will impact what leaders and senior managers can or cannot do. CFs (even if better defined and used) cannot be used optimistically as the main drivers for change in the PSS as they are embedded in these organisational structures and environment.

## 3.2 Part II. Are CFs mere symptoms of deeper causes behind the relatively poor performance of the PS?

The next issue to unpack and understand is the broader political and social context within which the PSS operates, such as the nature of the state and how this influences the operation of officials and the public administration. This section examines whether CFs are symptoms of deeper causes underlying the relatively poor performance of the PSS. Within that, it will show how and why the institutional arrangements and context of the state administration in which the CFs are to be implemented restrict their use and potential. The research and literature review revealed that the deeper underlying causes lie in a fragmented rule-bound inherited bureaucratic administration, the wrong appointment of senior managers, and the problematic impact of the New Public Management (NPM) reform in some departments.

### 3.2.1 Limitations of the fragmented rule-bound 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 officials and departments should adhere to and to ensure that the work is done according to specified standards. These structural bureaucratic arrangements prescribe institutional practices of who works on what, with whom, and to what extent.

A too-formal rigid hierarchical, bureaucratic structure and culture of the institution may hinder the work of departments and their officials (Nelufule, 2021). In addition, the actual bureaucratic practices can differ from the institutional rules and norms, especially if these are poorly understood, bypassed, or broken. Sometimes, bureaucratic norms and rules are not well defined, administrative processes and job descriptions are unclear, and divisions of labour and institutional hierarchies are poorly demarcated and open to interpretations and contestations (Chipkin, 2013). When state institutional arrangements are unclear and well-aligned, departments and their administrative processes become less functional, and bureaucrats who want to be compliant feel restricted. This leaves departments semi-functional, with lower-level bureaucrats insecure about their appropriate courses of action (Meny-Gibert, 2019), thereby undermining both organisational and individual competencies.

As a result, leaders and senior managers, who fear losing further control over their subordinates, want to add more administrative rules and processes which hampers innovation. The unintended consequences of too many rules are highlighted by the 2016 PSC:

*[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, p8).*

Does this mean that senior and middle-level bureaucrats are totally hamstrung by their sometimes semi-functional departmental and institutional arrangements? Lipsky (1980) argues this is not the case as 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. It may also result from senior managers not setting a clear strategic direction or having other priorities, which renders their control weak down the line of the bureaucracy. In line with this, Meny-Gibert (2019, p10) argued that:

*different rules and norms operate at different times or points in the bureaucracy – dependent on who has de facto authority in a unit or department at a given time and the particular imperatives of a political or administrative leader in a particular period.*

The use of discretion by lower-level bureaucrats makes some senior managers reluctant to encourage more delegation of decision-making and authority. Instead, they prefer to strengthen compliance by limiting the devolution of decision-making and creating a proliferation of additional and sometimes contradictory administrative processes and rules. This produces strong disincentives for systems and processes to change and improve the performance of these departments since so much is invested in the existing way of operating. The PSC notes the shortcomings of too many rules:

*[Bureaucratic rules] set the bounds of discretion and allow efficient administrative decision-making within those bounds. They ensure that objective criteria are applied equitably in all situations. 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, p8).*

Instead of discretion by default, a true management agency is recommended:

*the legitimacy of government is determined by the quality of staff at the coalface and the management of coalface institutions like hospitals and schools. The quality of managers at this level and their agency (when empowered to make a difference) greatly impacts the quality-of-service delivery and the legitimacy of government (PSC, p12).*

A few participants confirmed that rigid bureaucratic procedures prevent the exercise of management agency, problem-solving, innovation, and learning from practice. Some senior managers explained that they struggle but want “to assume more responsibility in their work and use their judgement to develop creative solutions and innovations to resolve difficult issues.” Another participant, who believes in the power of individual and collective agency, pointed out 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 are 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 the inter-governmental level. That is why the legislative and regulatory frameworks must support the individual competency frameworks.*

### 3.2.2 The political or wrong appointment of leaders and senior managers

Under the terms of the 1994 Public Service Act, the executive may appoint personnel at all levels of the bureaucracy, sometimes leading to appointments of senior officials who do not always meet the job requirements and do not contribute to the state's institutional functionality. Politically appointed top officials, enabled by the ANC cadre deployment policy, together with the power of politicians, create challenging bureaucratic practices. Some officials in high-level political and administrative positions are constrained by the short-term (3 to 5 years) political appointments that lead them to focus on managing 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 stressed 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...there should not be such a prescript of insubordination to politically motivated officials.” Some officials are too junior and/or do not have the correct qualifications, competencies, and attributes for the job they occupy.

There are also corrupt officials who act against the law and take advantage of their positions to enrich themselves through suspicious tenders and other means. A PSC participant pointed out that, in her view, 10% of public servants are not ethical or, worse, corrupt but that the real problem is the chaos they create and the negative impact on the work of the officials 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.” There is a serious problematic governance issue in the PSS. According to Pillay (2022), to ensure a government’s credibility and ensure appropriate behaviour of government officials - reducing the risk of public corruption is a crucial target. Factors such as political interference and the unpredictable roles of some top public servants have rendered many state institutions dysfunctional and weak, leading to many damning financial audits from the Auditor General. Tightened ongoing monitoring of problematic departments and their leadership should be put in place with sufficient powers, authority, and consequence management.

Participants highlighted that it is difficult to cope with poorly appointed or poorly performing officials as negative consequence management within the PSS is not strong enough to discipline them. A possible alternative disciplining way 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, which 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 are needed to ensure that senior managers are appointed on merit for a longer tenure to avoid dependency on politicians and ministerial changes and with a form of public accountability, as is recommended by the 2022 NFPPS. This, in turn, requires a different political context and environment, which will then impact individual and organisational competencies. The PSS culture and its leadership need to shift first, then the organisational structures, systems, and tools. The incorporation of broader political and economic competencies for leaders and senior managers is necessary in this regard because it will alert them to their broader environment and how to think of strategic change, as mentioned in the 2022 NFPPS (NSG, 2022, p34).

### 3.2.3 The New Public Management reform and its impact on a capable state administration

As mentioned earlier, around the end of the 1990s, the new government - influenced by other governments and the globalisation discourse of cost-effectiveness measures - decided to introduce a more modern management style borrowed from the private sector. The NPM reform encourages a form of managerialism that promotes regulation and decentralisation of delivery and human resources for greater efficiencies and value for money. This global discourse promotes a form of corporatisation with the conversion of departments into free-standing units whose performance is to be measured (Mc Lennan, 2007). Units are no longer supposed to be monitored bureaucratically for following prescripts, regulations, and processes, but they 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 outcome-based performance indicators that are monitored. This is an attempt to move away from rigid rule-bound bureaucracy towards a system that promotes improved service delivery by using a new form of accountability based on key result areas and performance indicators. The NPM took hold of certain units or departments more than others.

CFs are aligned with this managerialist approach because they are tools designed for a more cost-effective public service performance. A participant explained that the NPM and competency assessment measures assist them *“with standardising and improving their processes by allowing the exercise of a professional agency to make tough decisions and take risks.”* A few participants believe management competencies could encourage risk-taking: *“Risk and problem-solving are not yet part of managers’ attributes or competencies.”* The National Treasury mentions that its effectiveness in systems thinking has improved through such competency measures that made them take the space and exercise some professional agency, made easier by their professional knowledge in their field of practice. However, other departments remain scared by this management change and prefer to continue with the safe, compliant bureaucratic administration mould, whose rules and norms protect them from 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 its 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 working in silos and, if anything, encourages competition between employees and their organisations (Cameron, 2009). It does not promote collaboration with other departments nor active engagement with stakeholders, including the citizenry.

It should be noted that the NPM did not manage to prevent or minimise the extent of state capture and the mismanagement of funds, which has emerged over time and has led to the serious erosion of public confidence in state institutions and their ability to deliver on their mandates.

The fragmented bureaucratic administration continues to be associated with some departments whose actual bureaucratic practices are not functioning well and are undermining senior management agency and problem-solving. As Chipkin (2013) argues, the political/administrative appointees retain these systems and ways of working to protect their interests and do not contribute greatly to the institutional functionality of the state. Factors such as political interference and the unpredictable roles of some top public servants have rendered many state institutions dysfunctional and weak, leading to damning financial audits from the Auditor General. Tighter monitoring should be put in place with sufficient power, authority, and consequence management. The New Public Management reform, which promotes the regulation and decentralisation of more responsibility for service delivery to units, encourages the exercise of professional agency but in a silo manner, with competition between employees and their organisations and without much collaboration with civil society. However, many senior managers are reluctant to adopt such managerialist structures and processes and prefer to operate in the safe rule-bound bureaucratic mould, which does not call on their critical thinking and problem-solving. More recently, with state capture affecting many state institutions, the public confidence in the performance of state institutions to deliver on their mandate and perform the duties assigned to them under the constitution and relevant legislation has further eroded and is in desperate need of improvement.

### 3.3 Part III. Can CFs be improved? How and under what conditions?

It has been argued that leadership and senior management competencies must be assessed in relation to their actual organisational context and 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 more professional agency space?

This 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 and agency to serve the citizenry; a supportive organisational culture as well as enabling institutional arrangements.

Sedibe (2021) notes that, since the turn of the century, in this fast-changing environment, the state has created *new enabling arrangements* with departmental clusters, horizontal inter-sectoral clusters, and intergovernmental structures encouraging collaborative work to deliver more integrated services. The 2016 PSC discussion document also emphasises this:

*the 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 (p14).*

Sedibe (2021) argues that this new structural reality requires a form of leadership that goes beyond the intra-organisational into a form of inter-organisational leadership that is not about formal hierarchical authority but depends on structural conditions of possibility that are beyond one unit or department and incorporate an inter-organisational systemic perspective. This view calls for a value-based collaborative leadership (level 2) 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, p45).

According to a few participants, leaders and senior managers need a vision, a *commitment to continuous learning, and a value-orientated, ethical, disciplined, and adaptable approach to leadership and management* to service the citizenry. State leaders and managers should have the ability to master the complexity facing the public sector as well as lead the systemic change required in this fast-changing environment. In view of this, their competencies should transcend intra-organisational and sectoral boundaries and embrace 'dynamic competencies.' A participant explained:

*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 public service, which is capable of continuously learning and renewing itself.*

This may appear unrealistic, but ultimately, it is about changing the organisational arrangements and ways in which people work and relate to each as well as the existing mindset and organisational culture.

Managers with a body of specialised 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, ensuring they will be monitored. A few participants mentioned that managers should be encouraged to learn from their mistakes by reflecting effectively on their practices at the workplace. Their superiors should follow and support them by tracking what works and what does not work to facilitate reflection in practice. According to a participant, the National Treasury 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.*

*When you have given them the space, and they misuse it, it is very easy to deal with them. So there has to be an element of trust. If you appoint the right people, entrust them with a responsibility, and guide and support them, they will make you shine.*

*If officials are treated well and given such space, they will remain in PS employment, not looking for tender money but work hard to improve the way they serve the public.*

Beyond a more supportive organisational culture, enabling institutional arrangements refer to a state's well-managed capacities committed to delivering on its mandate. In this respect, a participant explained that the WC is adopting a new ideology of "citizenry-centrism and collaboration with communities, civil society organisations, counsellors, local and municipal governments." Some WC courses are even offered to address "community capacity enhancement" and teach about more effective forms of engagement with the communities, with representatives from the public service and the communities attending these courses together.

Yet, there are powerful current institutional conditions that mitigate against a move towards more enabling leadership, cultural, structural, and institutional arrangements. What is needed is an appropriate theory of change for the PSS and its officials that will not antagonise senior and middle managers who may be reluctant to undergo such changes that will disturb their routines and zones of comfort. It will be important to research and rely on debates about the theory of strategic leadership and an integrated model of change of leadership competencies that could assist in managing the PSS organisational transformation.

The real challenge is to understand the role that CFs could play in a mature value-based developmental state with robust ethical and moral values and a commitment to inclusive growth and collaboration with other organisations and civil society. CFs should transcend intra-organisational and sectoral boundaries and embrace group dynamics, institutional dynamics, social regulation structures, and feedback mechanisms. Greater collaboration, networks, and partnerships between various departments and organs of civil society are also required to implement the developmental objectives of the state. CFs should therefore move away from static to dynamic competencies with an effective form of collective leadership capable of continuously learning and renewing itself.

## 4. Recommendations

The 2016 PSC 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, p 14).*

Having analysed and explained the limitations of competencies and CFs in improving the performance of the existing public service, this report argues that there are deeper organisational, structural, and institutional conditions behind the relatively poor performance of the public service sector that need to be attended to. There are a number of drivers which have been identified through the research process which could facilitate a gradual move towards a better public service performance within which new definitions and use of competencies and CFs could play a part:

- i. Appointment regimes that are not politicised to avoid the “play it safe” culture.
- ii. Leaders and managers need a strong professional knowledge base that goes beyond a management toolbox to enable them to exercise their agency to lead, plan and manage the issues in their sector.
- iii. An ideological mind shift focused on ethics, morality, and the citizenry.
- iv. Dynamic inter-organisational leadership.
- v. Enabling organisational structures and cultures.
- vi. Changes in the way public service budgets are managed and distributed.
- vii. Changes in the formal and informal institutions, including better training regimes.
- viii. CFs with two kinds of competencies: 1) the core, which consists of competencies specific to an occupational field of knowledge that the specific department manages (as found in the FM CF), and 2) selected core/generic competencies taken from the leadership and management competencies found in the SMS or MMS CFs.

Some departments (such as the National Treasury) may be more ready than others to work towards this new PSS model. Such departments and their leadership 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.

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# Appendix

## Competency frameworks: interview for users and developers

1. With the introduction of SMS (2003/2013), MMS (2006), FM (2010), and M&E (2014), the public service is using different notions of competencies, and we want to understand how these different terms are similar and/or different: We select six. Is it possible to give us examples of what these competencies (and their behaviour indicators) cover:
  - Behavioural competency
  - Technical competency
  - Organisational competency
  - Generic competency
  - Transversal competency
2. Do you think it is easy to measure and evaluate competencies? Individual and organisational competencies? Which criteria/tools are used to measure and assess behavioural indicators of attributes, skills, and knowledge of individual and organisational competencies? Are these clear, narrowly, or broadly defined?
3. Do you think these CFs for SMS/MMS/FM/M&E distinguish well between the meaning and content of competencies, skills, and knowledge? What is meant by knowledge?
4. Who is expected to measure and assess the competencies of SMS and MMS in financial management/monitoring and evaluation? have they got the time and capacity? How different is this exercise from the old Performance Agreements? Is it better or worse or the same?
5. What is the main purpose of using competencies and CFs for SMS/MMS/FM/M&E at the moment? Do they help more with some of the following tasks, and how?
  - standardisation of job specifications/roles
  - recruitment decisions
  - skills audit
  - planning for and devising employee /training programmes
  - improving individual performance
  - improving organisational/departmental performance
6. Are individual skills/competencies' development part of and follow from the wider organisational development initiatives and strategies?
7. Do you think individual competencies are influenced by or independent of organisational conditions, climate, and culture? explain
8. Do you think individual and organisational competencies are influenced by or independent of social and political conditions in which the public service works? explain
9. Can one use competencies to distinguish easily between different leadership levels in your organisation/department? What generic/core/transversal and technical competencies are associated with the following:
  - Entry level of leadership
  - Middle level of leadership
  - Senior level of leadership
  - Financial leadership
  - Monitoring and evaluating leadership
10. Are competencies and CFs for SMS/MMS/FM/M&E realistic, and are there not too many competencies to assess? Are some of them idealistic or inappropriate? explain

11. What do you think has changed in the public sector in terms of skills and competencies of managers for the future of work in the 21st C with the 4IR?
12. Going beyond individual competency framework into organisational competency framework in your dept, why was the latter developed, and who influenced this? Who benefits most from OCF? What does HR do with it?
13. Does the Organisational CF start with individual job descriptions and functions OR with departmental or organisational mandate and strategy, OR are these influencing each other?
14. Are the Individual CF and the Organisational CF aligned with each other? Or are they constraining each other?
15. Is there a leadership/management's political will (and at what level, which unit) to implement and institutionalise Individual CF and Organisational CF?
16. Is the organisational CF implementation done in a top-down merit-based bureaucratic manner, and/or is it negotiated/contested/resisted by some stakeholders? Explain.
17. What are the 2 main institutional strengths and obstacles in the department for the implementation processes & practices of your department's Individual CF and Organisational CF?
18. What are the 2 social and political uncondusive conditions working against the implementation processes and practices of your department's Individual CF and Organisational CF?
19. Could you suggest ways in which the Individual CF and Organisational CF and their implementation can be improved?

# Appendix

## Competency Frameworks: interviews for learning academies (Gauteng/WC/ NSG)

1. People use different notions of competency, and we want to understand what the different terms refer to and in what way they are similar and different. We selected 6 here. Is it possible to give us examples of what these cover? Do you think these are narrowly/broadly defined:
  - Behavioural competency
  - Technical competency
  - Organisational competency
  - Generic competency
  - Transversal competency
2. Do you think it is easy to measure and evaluate competencies? Individual and organisational competencies? Which criteria/tools are used to measure and assess behavioural indicators of the attributes, skills, and knowledge of individuals and organisations?
3. Who is supposed to develop and use these in the depts? Do they have the capacity? What is the purpose of using competencies?
4. Do you think individual competencies are influenced by or independent of organisational conditions or social interactions within a department? Are competencies' development part of the wider organisational development initiatives and strategies?
5. Do you think individual and organisational competencies are influenced by or independent of broad social and political conditions in which the public service works? Explain?
6. Can one use the idea of competencies to distinguish between different leadership levels in your organisation/ the public service? What generic/core/technical/transversal competencies are associated with:
  - Entry level of leadership
  - Middle level of leadership
  - Senior level of leadership
  - Financial leadership
  - Monitoring and evaluating leadership
7. Are competencies in the MMS and SMS, financial management, and M & E realistic/up-to-date? Are some of them idealistic or inappropriate? Explain
8. What are the new skills and competencies for the future of work in the 21st C with 4IR? Are these found in the organisational competency framework (OCF)?
9. Why was the OCF developed, and who influenced this? Who benefits most from OCF? What does HR do with it?
10. Do the OCFs start with individuals' job descriptions and functions upwards OR with departmental or organisational mandate and strategy downwards, OR are these influencing each other?
11. Are the individual CF (ICF) and the OCF aligned with each other? Or are they constraining each other?

12. To which function do the ICFs and OCFs add more value to:
- advertise and develop job specs for recruitment?
  - do skill assessment and audit?
  - develop appropriate learning and development programmes?
  - improve individual and/or department performance assessment and service delivery?
  - some tasks more than others? Explain
13. Is there a leadership/management's political will (and at what level) to institutionalise and implement the ICF and OCF in departments? Are these produced and sent to HR regularly?
14. What happens to the training and continuous development of the professional and occupational competencies of officials?
15. What kind of courses does the provincial academy provide for senior/middle management and leadership competencies? Do they target generic, professionally specific, and/or organisational competencies/skills? Or a combination of these? explain
16. Are these courses about induction, continuous professional development courses for career pathing? Better performance management? With consequence management?
17. Who decides on people enrolling in your courses as opposed to courses offered somewhere else? What are the most popular/frequent courses offered by your provincial academy?
18. Do the departments' HRDs provide you with good contextual information to devise target specific training content for officials? What are the main problems in this respect?
19. Are they mainly informal or formal courses? Who teaches them? How often do officials meet? How effective is the impact of the courses (what criteria are used)? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these informal and formal courses? Explain
20. What are the 2 main positive characteristics/conducive conditions that allow the provincial academy to provide relevant courses for senior/middle managers? Explain
21. What are the 2 main obstacles and less conducive conditions (social and political context) mitigating against courses' effectiveness for senior/middle managers? Explain
22. Suggest ways in which the academy could be more effective in the impact of their courses on senior/middle managers re: modalities and content.

## Contact us

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