

Municipal call-centre conditions

Can Batho Pele work?

New ideas of management in the public sector have put the customer at the centre. But can such ideas work? **Babalwa Magoqwana** looks at two metropolitan municipalities in the Nelson Mandela Metro and concludes that unless call-centre work conditions are addressed such ideas cannot work.

I honestly don't know why the municipality has the electronic help desk if you can't get any help. Try to speak to the consultant and they are always busy and you are told to leave a short message they will get back to you, which they will never do. You have to call them again... I called and I followed the voice prompt and I got cut off... some of us work far from the CBD we cannot drop in for issues that can be sorted over the telephone... talking about Batho Pele (people first) I'm sure the majority of them do not even know the meaning of the concept' (The Herald (PE), 17/4/2007).

This is a common view of users of municipal call centres. But why is this the case? Why is it difficult for call-centre workers to deliver a better service?

Influenced by ideas of new public management, South Africa introduced Batho Pele which changed the identity of the citizen into a 'customer'. Through the Municipal Systems Act municipalities are required to set up customer-care and performance management systems.

Central to these reforms in local government is the introduction of customer-centred workplace call-centres. These call-centres are occupied by public servants who deal with customer queries on account balances, electrical disconnections and other related services.

The legislation seeks to transform the organisational culture of local

government to support the principles of Batho Pele. This culture has to promote responsiveness to the needs of the community served. Batho Pele also states that local government must develop strategies to eliminate distance as an inhibiting factor in service delivery.

Focusing on the workers at two Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality call-centres, I looked at the workplace organisation of these call-centres. The first call-centre is housed in the Budget and Treasury office at the Eric Tindale Building (Customer Care Centre) in Govan Mbeki Avenue. It is seen as the 'flagship' of the customer-care system.

The other call-centre is at the Electricity and Energy Services department - Munilek (Municipal Electronic Services and Energy) and is situated less than a kilometre from the first.

Two sets of technology are used in these call-centres: Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Automatic Call Distribution (ACD). This technology allows the company to measure how many times the phone rings before being answered, how many calls are answered, who is on the phone, who is not and how long each agent took on each call.

Government sees call-centres as a new niche for job creation in South Africa, although most are situated in Gauteng (51%) and Western Cape (38%). There are at least 22 call-centres operating in Port Elizabeth, East London and Uitenhage. All these are in-house call-centres.

The main purpose of call-centres in the public sector is to improve customer satisfaction rather than to reduce costs.

Inasmuch as the call-centres are designed to open access to those



'disadvantaged by distance', these centres seem to limit access to the 'affording few' as calls usually take a long time and are expensive. Customer-oriented service delivery seems to negate the poor and focus more on the wealthy customer.

The system seems to close off the citizen and individualise contact with the municipality. Many people still queue in the Metro, with a South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) representative explaining it well, 'You can't call with only R10... those people have telephone connection but they have no credit to use to call the municipality. This is why in most cases calls to call-centre numbers other than the municipality are free, so that people can get access to information.

STRESSFUL WORK CONDITIONS

It is clear from my research that call-centre workers are 'not just answering the phone', they have become 'fire extinguishers' or 'shock-absorbers' who have to harmonise the relationship between the customer and the council. As customers call the municipality angrily looking for

answers and irritated about services, they are met with a smile and a voice that has to assure them that 'all is going to be well'. Due to an inefficient billing system and Eskom power problems, these workers bear the brunt and have to be 'spokespersons' for the Metro.

This was evident when Eskom increased tariffs by 30%. Call-centre operators in the Buffalo City Municipality had to answer for both municipality and Eskom, which ended up not answering the calls. This was worsened by the lack of communication between the back-office and front-line workers. 'When the council makes a decision that is very unpopular we get more frustrated callers of which we understand but it's not our fault'

Working conditions have worsened due to service delivery expectations from the council. Local government call-centres, though small and unionised, are stressful to the operators, because they are not seen as call handlers but the 'face of inefficient service delivery'.

The abuse from irate customers is not based only on 'bad customer service' but is also about service delivery itself. This is made worse

by the lack of communication between the back-office and the call-centre. Call-centre workers have to answer for things that they are not informed about, and so they sound 'inefficient' to members of the public.

One worker seemed to have accepted these relations with customers, saying, 'Threats and angry customers are part of our job.'

Having to deal with irritated customers and protect the council's decisions makes this job stressful for workers. Call-centre workers become associated with the public sector as a whole, not only the municipality.

All the workers in the Metro call-centre termed these insults and abuse from the public as racist as they were accused of inefficiency and blamed for the national government's faults. One agent quoting the customer said, 'All of you Thabo Mbeki government people you don't know what you are doing there... you are so incompetent'.

CAUSES OF STRESS

Besides being called names, call-centre operators identified the lack

of appreciation and recognition as demoralising factors.

Also ear problems were common among workers due to noise and type of headphones used.

In one of the call-centres, workers identified managerial control, strict supervision and racist customers as the major causes of stress in their job. Though managers seek to control workers there is still space for resistance in the absence of supervision. Dropping the phone on an irate customer, or putting it on loudspeaker and letting the customer talk unattended, or 'working to rule' by restricting information and friendliness given to customers, were all common forms of resistance.

The majority of operators mentioned one of the causes of stress as being 'politics' amongst themselves. The infighting was explained by many as being the 'girls only' environment, whilst others generally thought it was personality clashes.

Workers' voice and accent was one of the key contributing factors in stress experienced by call-centre operators. Operators identified their accent as the source of attack and abuse by customers who immediately accuse them of incompetence. 'When they listen to your name and accent then you get it'

This was also highlighted by the Budget and Treasury customer-care manager who argued for voice training and telephone etiquette for workers. One of the operators explained that when she complained about the lack of training 'you know us hey from disadvantaged education background when you get here and deal with English and Afrikaans speaking customers you tend to be intimidated and not want to answer the calls'

LACK OF TRAINING

There is no set criteria for recruitment, as long as candidates have knowledge of the job. Most of the managers seemed to think that age was a big problem with call-centre operators, as they had worked in the 'old culture of the organisation' which posed a challenge to the now 'customer-oriented' municipality. A top manager stated, 'The biggest challenge is changing the attitudes of the employees towards this new customer-oriented approach... it is easy to deal with new recruits but the old staff has to be re-trained and it is hard to re-train those people.'

One of the most common and effective ways of changing attitudes and culture of an organisation is extensive training and development. Mostly managers were trained in the new customer-care approach and they were not the ones who sat at the front desk dealing with customers every day. Top management showed awareness and understanding of the concepts of Batho Pele but this did not filter down to the bottom.

This lack of training was displayed by workers in Budget and Treasury who had no idea what Batho Pele meant. This was evident when one of the call-centre workers looked lost saying, 'Is that something on TV or newspapers... what is that Batho Pele I have no idea what it is.'

UNIONISATION

Samwu is the majority union in both Nelson Mandela Metro call-centres. According to Omar it is difficult for call-centre workers to strike due to the 'individualised' nature of the job. Collective action is constrained by individual employment contracts and the nature of work. Only one call-

centre operator was able to attend Samwu meetings because of time constraints.

The union needs to deal with call-centre issues differently because of workers' unique working conditions. Samwu needs to pay more attention to issues relating to women such as maternity leave, shift work, transport home from late-night shifts, and management time-control which leads to stress, and training to deal with stress.

Greater Samwu visibility in call-centres would also assist in building trust amongst membership as some termed their shop stewards 'shop stupid' because of their perceived ineffectiveness.

CONCLUSION

In local government, the call-centre's goal is customer satisfaction and the creation of easy access to municipal services. This has contributed to the high stress levels of call-centre operators. Constant surveillance, poor recruitment, lack of training, internal conflict, lack of internal communication and irate customers all add to the pressure experienced by these workers.

For Batho Pele to succeed, working conditions of call-centre operators need to be improved if service delivery to customers is to be enhanced. If not, then the objectives of 'new public management' will not be attained and customer and citizen satisfaction will suffer. This thwarts government's objectives with its aim of improving customer satisfaction and service delivery. ^{LB}

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