

ASSESSMENT OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE BOTSWANA PUBLIC SERVICE

Kefentse NDONGA*
Theophilus Tebetso TSHUKUDU**

Abstract: *The level of productivity in the public service has always remained a topical issue among both the public (as clients) and stakeholders of the public service. According Tshukudu (2008), the prevailing situation in the work place has been that of low work performance poor service delivery and high labour turnover, exacerbated by an extremely apathetic work attitude. Evidence of these factors is observable in BPS and to a large extent continue weaken the structures established and affecting the economy at large. This article explores measure of employees' engagement in the Botswana Public Service. The article is inspired by the persistent outcry about poor performance in service delivery and the low productivity levels in the BPS, amidst adoption of performance reforms. The introduction of administrative reforms has seen some progressive improvements in the processes and work systems albeit gradually. The qualitative study was undertaken to investigate strategies used to improve employee engagement in the Botswana public service and has observed that generally there has been limited attention given to this factor in many previous studies conducted on the sector, and consequently less is known to managers and how it can be incorporated into people management practice in the Botswana public service.*

Keywords: *Botswana public service; administrative reforms; measure of employees' engagement.*

1. Introduction

Employee engagement is emerging as a popular strategy in the human resource management (HRM) practice. The advocates of this discourse continue to demonstrate its strong correlation to individual and organizational performance, making it one of the most desired people management strategies for many organizations in the 21st century. This study purports to contribute to the growing knowledge on this concept with a specific focus on its application in context of HRM practice in the Botswana Public Service (BPS). It will further seek to establish the level of engagement among employees in BPS in tandem with identifying strategies of EE used in the organizations. The paper will adopt both primary and secondary data collection methods to collate relevant data in exploring the breadth of the topic. The study will cover key elements of EE, such as the mental (cognitive), emotional (affective), behavioral (physical) as well as employees' organizational advocacy. The introduction of performance

* Corresponding Author.

** Department of Political and Administrative Studies, University of Botswana, email: theophil700@gmail.com.

improvement initiatives in the public service has always triggered great anticipation for more efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery system from stakeholders and the general public as clients. Yet the sad reality is that many at times, the results of these initiatives appear in stark contrast to the set objectives, and deliverables. The BPS has experienced an unprecedented wave of change in its management practices over the years, most of which were triggered by the need to address the challenges presented by globalization. Research findings demonstrate that the organizations' seemingly traditional bureaucratic state and its taut management practice have been highly tested, as its quest for global competitiveness became apparent (Hope, 1999). To this end, the academic fraternity still advocate for intensive research into the sector to discover the challenges and propose actionable measures. According to Kullar et. al (2008), despite its significance on performance and productivity, there remains a paucity of academic literature on the subject of employee engagement in the public sectors in general. In BPS the administrative reforms and performance improvement initiatives adopted rarely make any reference to the significance of 'EE' on performance or in effecting change in that regard.

The intention of this study is not to cast any doubt on the credibility of the reform initiatives in the BPS. Rather, its thrust is to explore a complementary course to revitalize performance, service delivery and productivity. The study will assume a qualitative approach to the research design. Nonetheless the use of statistical data will be equally implored as a means of providing a balanced validation for the research findings.

2. Background/Motivation of the Study

The main aim of this study is to make a critical assessment of employee engagement (EE) in the BPS in tandem with a thorough investigation of EE strategies employed in the process of public service management with the intent, at the end, to put forward appropriate recommendations for enhancing employee engagement in the BPS as an integral facet of the human resource management practice. As pointed out by Sebusang et al (2005), the public service in Botswana occupies a unique position compared with other countries as a key player in socio-economic infrastructure and as the largest employer of human capital, consequently any systematic change in the processes and attitudes of work delivery, proposed or adopted, should be geared towards addressing challenges faced in the operational premises of this system in order for such a change to have a meaningful impact nationally. Axelrod (2000, p24) on the other hand maintains that many of the changes introduced in the public service continue to fail due to the authoritarian fashion with which they are often introduced. This style of leadership has been castigated by many management experts as a suitable breeding ground for disengagement among employees. Perhaps this has consistently been mentioned as

a major inhibiting factor in effective management of employees in the BPS (Mothusi 2008).

The World Bank Report of 2003 cited poor work performance as one of the factors that contributed to a decline in Botswana's economic growth from an average GDP of 8% to 7.1% between 1990 and 2003. On the other hand the CIPD 2008 report finds a strong link between engagement and high work performance. Mpabanga (2003, p.51) emphasizes the importance of an effective public service which provides an atmosphere in which all stakeholders in the economy are able to operate efficiently and effectively. This assertion appears perfectly aligned to Buhler's (2006, pg2), findings that engaged workers help organizations reap benefits such as increased efficiency, high levels of customer satisfaction, high productivity and lower turnover rates'. Employee engagement is also found to help foster the apparent need to produce organizational commitment, involvement, satisfaction, and success in the reform process (Washington et al 2004; Investors in People 2010).

Management scholars, across the globe continue to demonstrate that in order for public sector organizations to be able to wither the growing challenges of globalization they need to accustom themselves with the paradigm shifts in the management philosophy. In most developed countries, this trend is amplified by organizations' demonstrated perpetual desire to update and rework their management strategies consistent with the globally acclaimed best practices. "*Organizations are queuing up to purchase 'sake oil' solutions to try seek out additional discretionary effort and performance from employees*"¹. For some, particularly those in less developed countries which are still inherently mechanistic in view of their highly formalized and inflexible character specifically BPS, this desire has always seemed idyllically unpractical.

Research shows that private sector management strategies are gradually becoming an ideal course for public sector organizations. The reform initiatives implemented in the BPS confirm this assertion. Employee Engagement has become one of the highly recognized HRM constructs in the 21st century with its emphasis on synchronization of employee behaviors, emotions and actions with the overall business strategy of the organization in order to assume high performance and productivity levels. The evidence from recent research works in Europe and the USA suggesting the strong link between EE and positive organizational outcomes is overwhelming and largely uncontested (see for example Tower-Perin 2003; Robison et al 2004; CIPD 2006; Sarah 2008; Macleod and Clarke 2009 and Right Management 2010). Studies conducted in Botswana have shown that there has been frequent demonstration of discontent at the level of productivity and service delivery in the public service (Hope 1999; Forche and Fako 2007, and Mothusi 2008), in spite of the continued move to bring about change through adoption of

¹ A quote adapted from the Human Resource Directors website (www.hrdirectors.com) which publishes online essays on HRM topics.

performance improvement initiatives complemented by a wide-cast personnel training policy. Failure in government projects implementation and service delivery were highlighted in all annual national budget presentations by the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (see Budget Speech 2004/5, 2005/6, 2006/7... to 2010/2011) as key challenges to development. The 2010/2011 Global Competitiveness results put Botswana at position 118 out of 139 countries in terms of productivity and quality service delivery. This if not checked remains a threat to the competitiveness and development of the economy. The situation is equally not helped by lack of in-depth empirical analysis of the factors that negate performance revival in BPS (Hope 1999). The current study presumes that one of those challenges is employee disengagement. On account of the foregoing factors, this study is geared towards augmenting the on-going attempts to enhance performance and productivity levels in the public service. An appreciation is made of the view shared by some researchers (Towers-Perin 2003; Robison et al 2003; Kular 2008 and Wilson 2009) to the effect that employee engagement underscores the success of organizational management, change, performance and productivity as well as human resource development in public institutions. As asserted by Catsouphe (2008) there is abundant empirical evidence that justifies the positive impact of employee engagement on performance and productivity levels on individuals, team and organization as a whole.

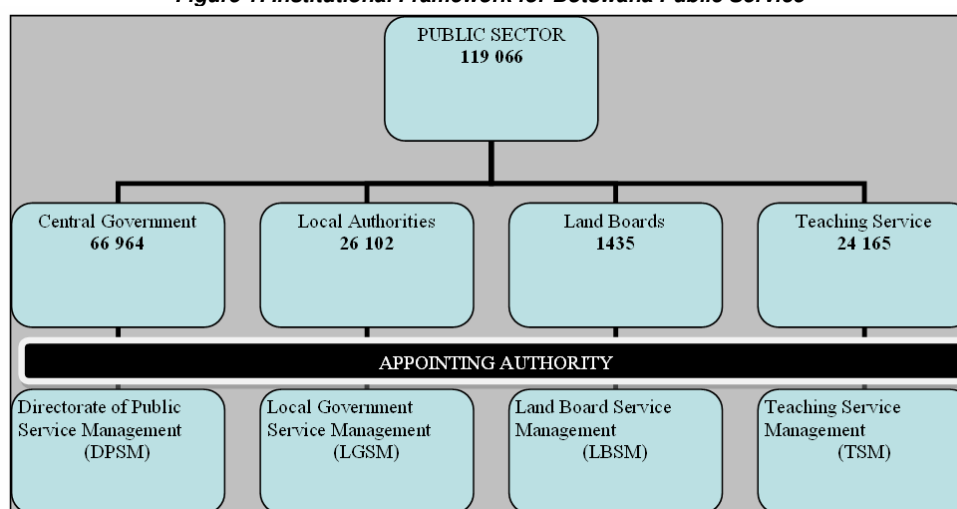
Given the challenges facing the BPS, it has become apparent that more research is needed in the areas of people management. The discontent expressed by the public and stakeholders over poor service delivery vis-à-vis low productivity levels in public service structures cannot be overstated. The impact is real on the economy. Government's continued emphasis on reform confirms these concerns (Marobela, 2008). Nonetheless over the years it has proven that the adoption of 'blue print' initiatives (best practices) is infeasible (UN Public Sector Report, 2005). But how else can organizations address performance management challenges? To answer this question and others, this study embarks on an explorative course to review relevant literature, building upon theoretic models developed in previous studies as well as gathering primary data on the concept of employee engagement in the public service.

3. Overview and challenges of Public Service management in Botswana

Dzimbiri (2008) pointed as critical the need to revisit the role and structure of the public sector in discussing the challenges it faces in its environment. The public service in Botswana constitutes both central and local government and other decentralized institutions financed out of public coffers. The BPS is currently made up of 16 Ministries and 9 independent departments. In terms of the Public Service Act of 2008 (Cap 26:01), the public service performs its duties

under the general direction of the President (DPSM, 2008). The Permanent Secretary to the President (PSP) as the head of the public service is responsible for its general administration. At ministerial level, the responsibility of supervision of the public service is vested upon Permanent Secretaries as accounting officers of the distinctive ministries (*ibid*).

Figure 1: Institutional Framework for Botswana Public Service



Source: Directorate of Public Service Management (DPSM) 2008 Report.

Prior to the enactment of the new Public Service Act of 2008, the functions of the public service were regulated through the Public Service Act of 1998 (No.13 of 1998)². The main objective of the new Public Service Act was to provide for a single legislation governing employment of all government employees, something that was not provided for in the former. This statutory instrument sets out guidelines and procedures for managing human resources in public institutions. It makes provision for appointments, termination of appointments; disciplinary measures and establishment of public service bargaining structures as a platform for negotiations on issues of concern between employees, recognized trade unions and the employer (see UN Report on Public Administration in Botswana, 2004).The Act also made some amendments in both structural and operational functions of the BPS. These among others included, the abolition of three other pieces of legislation governing employment in the Public Service, i.e. Unified Local Government Service Act, Teaching Service Act and the Tribal Land Act. This led to the cessation of mandates of three other decentralized appointing authorities (i.e. DLGSM, TSM, LBSM) whose responsibilities were now bestowed

² Note that the structure of the Public Service Changed in effect of the New Public Service Act of 2008. The three other appointing authorities (i.e. TSM, LGSM, LBSM) were abolished in 2009 when the Act was enacted.

upon Permanent Secretaries working closely with the DPSM as the central appointing authority (Republic of Botswana 2009).

The new Act equally recognizes trade unions and provides for the formation of a bargaining council to be a negotiating party on matters relating to conditions of service (including salaries) for public service employees (Republic of Botswana, 2008), a function that was initially carried by the National Employment, Manpower and Income Council (NEMIC). Other administrative matters are addressed through the General Orders (No. 52.1.11 of 1996) issued by the office of the President. The Botswana Public Service's objective to provide efficient and effective services is well encapsulated in both its mission and vision statements enshrined in the Public Service Charter.

3.1. Challenges in management of the Botswana Public Service

Government is committed to optimizing the use of available scarce resources to provide essential services to its citizens (DPSM, 1993). However it is evident that the public service workforce has grown rapidly since the early 90s presenting a real human resource management challenge (Dzimhiri2007). Robinson (1992) notes, that in 1991 the public service had about 58 394 employees, standing as the largest employer in the country. Today the figure is estimated at about 121 000+ employees in total (Gazette, 28/09/10).The challenge in managing a large workforce has been noted in previous writings as a probable cause of some of the failures. In an error where organizations are preaching efficiency, and demonstrating deliberate efforts to do more with less, it indeed causes concern that the opposite is observed in BPS. Transfer of training, managing change and performance has all become daunting processes for the public service in general (Goldsmith, 1999).

In his PhD Dissertation, Mothusi (2008) explains that whereas there was no empirical evidence to support it, there were serious observations that attested to the declining performance of the public service in the early 1980s to late 90s. This disturbing trend was also noted by the DPSM as a real challenge to the core functioning of the public service (*ibid*). It was subsequent to these realizations that the proposal for reform, informed by some aspects of the New Public Service Management (NPM) philosophy, gathered momentum. According Gatenby et al (2009), the NPM emphasizes changes in management tactics and techniques in order to maintain competitiveness and labor peace. The public service in Botswana is the principal actor in macro socio-economic policy making infrastructure and an architect of an enabling environment for national development. Government has clearly been concerned about the quality of its service delivery to the public and its ability to compete effectively in the global market (Nkhwa 2005). Consequently any failure in its work systems has potential to spell doom on the whole economy.

The inspiration to be a competitive public service and the desire for high performance work systems are profound; the need to change the attitudes of employees is a widely and publicly expressed appeal, hence the desire to have a competitive and adaptive workforce. As witnessed in the recently released Global Competitiveness results, the country has dropped significantly in the areas of performance, basic requirements, efficiency enhancement as well as innovation compared to previous years (www.bidpa.bw). These are all at the helm of public service management. The current administration has made commitment to address these challenges by introducing the 5 principles of Development, Delivery, Development, Democracy and Discipline to guide public service employees on their daily discharge of public duties. At some point government has even pondered on downsizing the public service to cut down costs³. Some of this drastic policy and regulatory changes demonstrate the inherent desire to adopt sound strategies to augment the noble course the performance reform instruments were set to serve.

3.2. Public Sector Reforms

Research findings show that whereas many factors can be identified as impeding the delivery of quality services, productivity and effective implementation of performance reforms, the lack of commitment and proper engagement across management and lower level employees, are without doubt at the core of this (see BIDPA 2008, Mothusi 2008, Mpabanga 2005). As asserted by Ketter (2008), 'there is mounting evidence that employee engagement correlates to individual, group, and organizational performance, in the areas of productivity, change, retention, turnover, customer service and loyalty'. Lack of 'buy-in' or engagement of employees can adversely affect the performance of an organization, reform initiatives and ultimately, the performance of employees.

The findings presented by Mpabanga (2005) on the implementation of PMS in the Department of Administration of Justice, show that generally there is limited involvement of lower level employees, compounded by lack of a clear linkage between the departmental strategic instruments to individual and team goals, and inadequate training and development of managers and lower staff in PMS. Even though these findings were only appealing to a specific department, it is tempting to postulate that they are a true reflection of the BPS as a whole. As Mothusi (2008) maintains, 'the top-down approach adopted by management in the performance reform process has to be blamed for its unsatisfactory outcomes. This study therefore derives its inspiration from an observation that, there is generally an expressed dissatisfaction about the level of efficiency, productivity, customer satisfaction and high turnover rates in the BPS in spite of the adoption of administrative reforms,

³This idea was primarily informed by the constantly growing size of the recurrent expenditure which has tended to affect the balance of the budget over the years.

hence the apparent need to assess the phenomenon of employee engagement in order to help explain the problem and seek credible solutions.

4. Key findings

The study analyses focused on addressing the study questions which were based on two hypothetical assumptions. The key questions were to find out whether employee engagement is used as an organizational performance improvement strategy within BPS and also to assess the level of employee engagement within the BPS. Below are discussions on the findings of the three hypotheses:

EE is not used as an Organizational Performance Improvement Strategy in BPS

The results show that majority of managers are not aware of the conceptual framework of employee engagement. 70% of managers interviewed could not define engagement as conceptualized in literature. The results also reveal that most of the organizations do not have functional employee engagement strategies. The lack of knowledge in the nature of the concept and the behaviors that depict its existence as a psychological and behavioral phenomenon limits the managers' potential to foster its inculcation into the organizational culture. Research on most subtle aspects of human behaviors in organizations have considerably become success cornerstones in addressing performance issues. As posited by Vizarani (2007), in order to eke out that discretionary effort from employees to deliver the best results you need to deeply understand how to get their minds and heart feelings invested in the work.

These findings are in absolute agreement with the first assumption, that *employee engagement is not used as a performance improvement strategy*. The findings also compare positively with assertion that the concept of employee engagement is still reluctantly considered in public sector organizations (Wilson 2009). As argued by UN Public Sector Report (2005) most managers in public sector organizations are reluctant when it comes to addressing issues that are considered intrinsically psychological or human behavior related in the workplace because of the implied complexity and costs associated with such an exercise. In the same tone, The Public Service Commission report (2007, p.15) states that "...staff responsible for human resources[have been] confined to playing a restricted, bureaucratic and reactive role, limited by and large to routine decisions about staff entitlement to pay increments and the like". When it comes to reform, the practitioners are mostly concerned with the presumed positive consequences related to a concept, and often pay little attention to the underlying principles that inform strategies of successfully implementing these reforms. This deliberate oversight is highly prevalent in HR practice in public service organizations and has by large hampered change management. The UN Public Sector report (2005) further advices that government institutions should be able to collect workforce statistics and make critical analysis of management trends. In Botswana a large

amount of this information is consumed by academics and private sector organizations but seldom used in public sector organizations.

Employees in the BPS are not engaged:

The findings also confirm the above assumption. The results show that on average majority of the employees are ‘*not engaged*’. Previous studies on performance management in the Botswana Public Service (Mothusi 2008, Mpabanga 2005), indicated that employees attitude towards change causes great concern among managers. This process has now been reduced to a mere routine exercise. When employees are not engaged their main concern is to complete tasks but not accomplishment of results (Vizarani et al 2007). Nonetheless this first part of the findings should be interpreted carefully in that it shows the average scores drawn from the different categories of EE, thus overall engagement. However it does not give a spectacle on which component of engagement is deficient among employees, i.e., is it emotional, mental, cognitive or organizational? Note, ‘*full engagement*’ in terms of the current study, connotes a blend of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and organizational engagement aspects. As alluded to by Macey and Schneider (2008), it is critical that both researchers and practitioners are clear about the type of engagement they are talking about. This question can only be answered by addressing each category of engagement separately. The instrument used in this case was tailored to address this shortfall, by asking specific questions under each category of engagement. The questions were developed to reflect the kind of psychological state and behaviors associated with each category. As in this case scores of questions under each category were analyzed individually to rate employees, before an average was calculated to find out overall engagement.

The findings therefore show that the level of employee engagement differs under each category of engagement. For example, whereas 71.4% of respondents were both recorded as having a high emotional and cognitive engagement, only 21% showed organizational advocacy, while 52.4% represented those with active behavioral engagement. Majority of employees were also found to be lacking cognitive engagement.

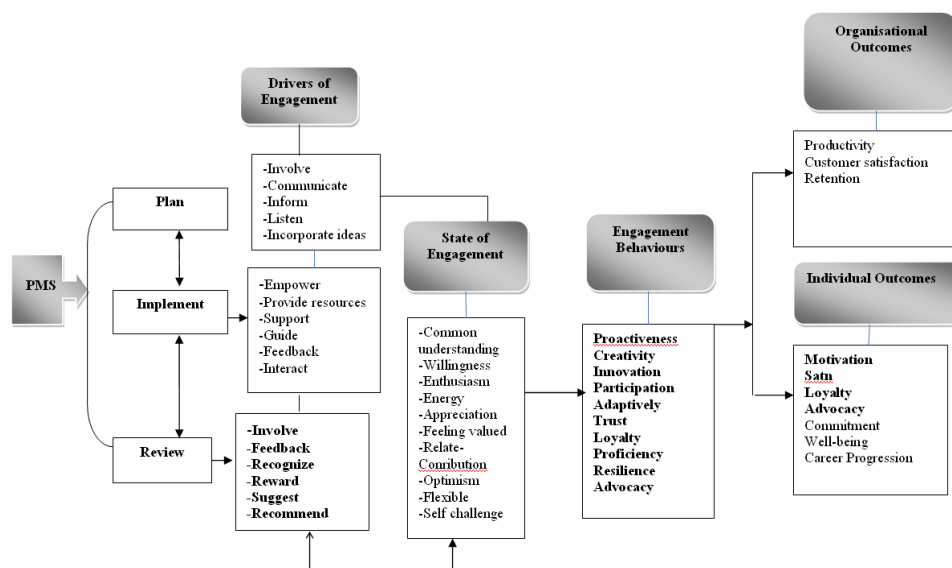
As reflected in the literature review, and drawing upon the working definition of the study, a fully engaged employee characterizes a well-oiled machine. They are always ready to deliver and can go an extra mile in accomplishing the results. This is of great significance if an organization wants to identify the component of engagement that is lagging behind among employees, and to formulate strategies that will respond specifically to that situation. In the current case it is evident that organizational advocacy is lacking within the Botswana Public Services. While remarks about people using the public service as a gateway to greener pastures have been treated as a cliché, with intuitive observation we can conclude this statement holds a kernel of truth in it.

It is critical to know which areas within the organization would drive individuals to be advocates of the organization, show pride in representing its

ideals and celebrate its accomplishments. It is therefore at this point that thorough assessment and categorization of drivers of EE is critical. As mentioned previously a wholesale approach is not ideal in change management. Literature equally projects the understanding that there is no universally agreed definition of this concept, nonetheless scholars remain synonymous on the position that any definition that presents a strong blend of components that collectively promote positive behaviors and work attitudes gives a more practical feel (Macey and Schneider, 2008). The four categories of engagement that are presented in this study touch on all corners of this understanding.

4.1 Employee Engagement Strategy for Botswana Public Service

A functional employee engagement for the BPS would be one that is in synch or harmony with the performance management system and tailored to the culture of the organizations. As acknowledged in this study and other previous works, the problem of the reform process in the public service is not with the performance improvement tools but the approaches and or implementation strategies used. On account of the foregoing discussions, the researcher provides a simplified model below to integrate the concept of employee engagement in the PMS.



This model is premised on the conceptual understanding that employee engagement builds from prevailing positive organizational factors. These are also referred to as drivers of engagement. According to Saks (1999), there is no better way to develop an engagement strategy than to model it around organizational

processes. In this case the PMS as applied in the Botswana Public Service context represents such a process. PMS occurs in three faces being planning, implementing and reviewing. In all these phases the role of leadership is often clearly defined, whence the role of a general employee remains ambiguous except at implementation (at the slightest) and review/evaluation stages. However unless leaders or managers understand engagement not as a condition of involvement but as a psychological and behavioral phenomenon influenced by organizational and work experiences, it will always be difficult to inculcate it in their strategies. Employees do not just want to be informed, they need to be guided, supported, commended and advised. Management need to bridge the gap between them and lower level employees by continually interacting with them in an open and informative manner.

The communication strategy should be highly based on an open door policy. In this model it is suggested that managers should be able to identify the key drivers of engagement at each stage of PMS to fulfill their role as leaders. Employees reciprocate by developing positive traits which at the end define their behaviours. When there is consistency in this practice literature confirms that the outcome will be a high performing organization and high performing employees (Welbourne 2007). The organization should provide the key psychological conditions for employees to fully engage with their jobs and be able to produce meaningful results that would impact positively on the organization strategy.

4.2 Recommendations

The following are key recommendations based on the findings of the study. Given that managers have shown lack of conceptual knowledge on employee engagement, maybe the starting point would be to involve key stakeholders such as Botswana National Productivity Center (BNPC), and the DPSM to workshop more of public sector administration managers on employee engagement and how it can be inculcated into the organization culture.

- Conduct regular employee surveys to gather information on views and opinions of employees about the work plan of the organization, its strategies, HR policies and people.
- Identify the shortfalls in employee engagement in the BPS. This will include identifying levels of engagement of employees.
- Review Organization culture and HR policies (i.e. recruitment, training, performance management, rewards) and ensure they promote the principle of engagement.
- Develop a long-term employee engagement strategy to guide the organizations operations, policies, mission, vision and activities.
- Organizations such as the Botswana National Productivity Center (BNPC) should expand their activities to help public sector organizations conduct more

employee surveys to be able to identify inhibitors of good performance and change management.

4.3. Implications for further research

Basing on the fact that this was the first study to tackle the application of this concept relative Human Resource Management practice in the Botswana Public Service amidst the preponderance of literature developed in other countries, it is critical to suggest that more research is needed to explore its various facets.

- The study results show that, organizations lack functional engagement strategies compounded by the apparent lack of knowledge of the concept by managers. Academic literature can highly influence the operational purpose of this concept. The sample used in the study obviously presents some notable limitations on statistical inferences.

- There is clearly more that can be discovered by administering the study tools on a larger sample especially looking at the population of the target organization. Research is also needed to investigate the impact of other organizational factors such as culture, structure and leadership style have on employee engagement. Perhaps the need for a study focused on assessing engagement levels of employees at various levels should be emphasized. Organizations such as the Botswana National Productivity Center should assist public service organs to design engagement survey tools to accomplish this.

- Further research should also focus more on empirical research to investigate the relationship between engagements and other variables or organizational outcomes such as turnover, burnout, change management and talent management in the public service.

5. Conclusion

From the literature explored in this study it is evident that the definition of employee engagement is arguably the most contested component of its conceptual framework. Many researchers find varying ways of defining the concept, but at the same time consensus on its attributes, benefits and its drivers is clearly demonstrated. What then should organizations such as the Botswana Public Service do to identify with this strategy? Macey and Schneider (2008), after exploring various definitions advise that when it comes to engagement there is no silver bullet. The only thing that can save practitioners from the definitional controversy is to be able to identify the conditions of engagement within their organizations. This is because studies indicate that engagement is defined by psychological and behavioral conditions of employees. These may vary in a very organization, hence according to Khan (1990) are to a larger extent within the purview of management. In this study engagement is defined

as a state of cognitive, emotional, behavioral attachment that individuals have with their jobs and the organization in general. The study results reveal that there is an inherent lack of conceptual knowledge about engagement among HR practitioners in the Botswana Public Service. This limitation led to a conclusion that engagement is not used as an organizational performance improvement strategy in the organizations sampled. What is deduced from the findings is also that majority of employees are not engaged, but due to lack of a functional engagement strategy, this challenge may continue to prevail and affect the performance of the public service employees and the organs in general.

There is more that needs to be done to influence the public sector administration managers to comprehensively understand employee engagement and its implementation.

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