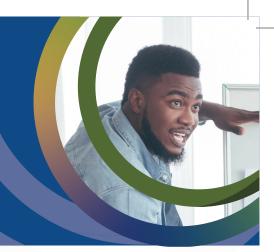# Where do Competency and Competency Frameworks fit into building a Capable and Competent State that Delivers?

Key Findings

In the wake of Cabinet approving the 2022 National Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Service, the debate has intensified around transforming the Public Service Sector (PSS) to contribute to a professional, ethical and capable developmental state. Therefore, a renewed focus has been on professionalising the PSS with competent and skilled employees. The first question to answer is how the sector assesses whether public servants are competent and performing in line with specific behaviours linked to their roles and functions.

Competency frameworks are needed to manage performance

Currently, within the PSS, various interventions seek to manage performance. Competency frameworks (CFs), which are in place in the PSS, are key mechanisms for assessing competency.

A CF is effectively a model that describes perform-ance excellence within an organisation. Such a framework usually includes several competencies applied to multiple occupational roles within the organisation, mainly management roles. Each framework sets out and defines individual competencies an organisation requires to meet performance standards.

This briefing aims to show how competencies are measured and managed, and how the CFs are conceptualised, used and applied to improve the performance of the PSS. This understanding is based on research undertaken by the University of Witwatersrand's Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL) on behalf of the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA).

The four CFs — senior management services, middle management services, monitoring and evaluation services, and financial management - are performance tools to assess individuals, and guidelines for recruitment, selection, developing and managing human capital.

CFs are supposed to help develop the human resource value chain, but this research revealed that CFs are not optimally used. The reason for this lies partly in the frameworks themselves but, more importantly, in the context and environment in which they are supposed to be implemented. Ultimately, if a CF is not located in an enabling and conducive environment, the framework on its own will not achieve its intended purpose. In other words, building and exercising competencies in a space where people are not encouraged to learn and make

PSETA
Public Service Sector Education & Training Authority

UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

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mistakes is challenging. This is compounded by some incompetent and corrupt officials who create a culture and climate of chaos and dysregulation.

Why are competency frameworks not delivering?

A CF is a way for the PSS to communicate which behaviours are required, valued, recognised and rewarded in leadership and management occupational roles. They also identify skills, knowledge, behaviours and abilities needed to meet current and future talent selection needs, depending on organisational strategy, priorities and performance. In addition, they are used to develop individual and organisational development plans to bridge the gap between the skills the organisation needs to work with and the available skills. So, for example, in the PSS, most leadership and management CFs use a combination of core, generic and process competencies, while others (such as the finance management CF and the monitoring and evaluation CF) also rely on technical competencies.

A significant problem with leadership and management competencies is that the 'knowledge' dimension is never correctly conceptualised nor rooted in any specialised body of knowledge. However, 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 excel in their roles.

The omission of what 'knowledge' entails in each sector limits the advantages of individual competencies and CFs in improving public service delivery.

A second concern is that if CFs should be used for human resource (HR) functions and the HR value chain, individual competencies should be easy to assess, measure and apply. The research shows that

CFs are mainly used for competency assessments aimed at development, training, and performance management (even if little management occurs after such interventions). However, CFs are meant for selection and recruitment processes.

CFs are often treated as yet another exercise in bureaucratic compliance; subsequently, there is a lack of ownership of the process.

While in many departments, the CFs may not lead to the identification of appropriate and effective training courses nor an effective performance management process, some departments are more proactive in developing CFs to strengthen their HR functions. Thus CFs are aligned only to a limited degree with competency requirements for public service leadership in a developmental state.

Thirdly, what emerges very strongly from the research is limited space for individuals to show what they can and cannot do despite their organisational arrangements. Individuals may be able to perform, but their work environment constrains their capability. This is because current work organisations, organisational structures, culture, political stability and leadership are often inadequate and mitigate against an individual performing well. This is also because many senior and middle managers are reluctant to adopt managerialist structures and processes that decentralise decision-making by giving greater authority and responsibility to units, divisions or departments. Instead, many senior managers prefer to operate in the safe rule-bound bureaucratic mould. This does not call on their critical

thinking or their subordinates' problem-solving skills to make decisions that affect change. Some exceptions exist for leaders and managers who act decisively and proactively despite their constraining organisational environment.

Competency frameworks - building a capable, competent, ethical state: What is needed?

CFs cannot be seen separately from their current organisational and broader environment. CFs cannot be used as the main driver or starting point for promoting these changes in the PSS structures and culture, as they are embedded in the existing structures and environment.

Having analysed and explained the limitations of competencies and CFs in improving the performance of the existing PSS, the research argued that there are deeper organisational, structural, and institutional conditions behind the relatively poor performance of the PSS. These must be addressed.

There are a number of drivers which have been identified through the research process which could facilitate a gradual move towards a better PSS performance within which new definitions and use of competencies and CFs could play a part.

The research proposes several recommendations to improve the functioning and impact of CFs.

Firstly, all CFs should include two kinds of competencies: the core ones, which consist of competencies specific to an occupational field of knowledge, that the specific department manages (as found in the Financial Management CF).

Secondly, an enabling environment is required in which newly defined CFs could contribute to a better-performing PSS. Such an environment would entail the non-politicisation of appointments to avoid the "play it safe" culture. Leaders and managers must have a strong professional knowledge base beyond a 'management toolbox' to exercise their agency to lead, plan and manage sectoral issues. An ideological and cultural mind shift, coupled with new ways of working, is necessary. This, in turn, will require changes in organisational arrangements, structures, cultures, leadership, and different CFs.

Thirdly, the CFs should include intra-organisational arrangements and transcend the intra-organisational and sectoral boundaries by embracing group dynamics, institutional dynamics, social regulation structures and feedback mechanisms across different departments and organisations. Greater collaboration, networks and partnerships between various Public Service departments and organs of civil society are also required to implement the developmental objectives of the state. CFs should move away from static competencies into dynamic competencies with an effective form of collective leadership capable and committed to continuously learning and renewing itself.

Lastly, some departments (such as the National Treasury) may be more equipped 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.

Conclusion

In the face of rising unemployment, poverty and inequality, the pressure on the state to deliver grows ever more pressing. Hence the PSS should give consideration to the research's recommendations to actualise the vision of a state which has the competencies and capabilities to deliver effective and efficient services to the citizens of this country as outlined in the 2016 Public Service Commission (PSC) discussion document:

> **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)**

With the right supportive leadership and a solid knowledge base, those departments that can focus on collective leadership should be given the space and autonomy to pilot new approaches that could be replicated across other departments. There is a danger in failing to explore new organisational approaches and a paradigm shift in terms of dynamically thinking about measuring and monitoring competencies. This should be coupled with a more enabling ethical leadership and a conducive organisational and institutional context that encourages the exercise of individual professional agency and may disturb some of the existing leadership and senior managers with a vested interest in the status quo.