

**SOUTH AFRICA's LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICE DELIVERY WOES IN  
RESPECT OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES: LESSONS FROM  
THE SOUTH**

*by*

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Paper prepared for Working Group III of the 27<sup>th</sup> NISPAcee Annual Conference to be  
held in Prague, Czech Republic, 24 – 26 May 2019

## **ABSTRACT**

The creation of new policies is of no use if these policies are not adequately implemented to achieve set objectives to *inter alia* improve service delivery. The realities of policy implementation failures are addressed in this paper, but also suggestions as to how overcome these failures. This will mean that implementation agencies should focus on their core competencies and functions to fulfil the tasks being assigned to them. A new understanding about roles, responsibilities, duties and obligations should therefore be created. Linked to the latter is that strong, coherent leadership and pro-active political and administrative leadership is necessary to steer implementation, necessitating the new skills and competencies to implement policies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The onset of democratic transformation in South Africa in 1994 and the subsequent public administration reforms that followed on each sphere of government created excitement and expectations for better services beyond recognition. Seldom before has constitutional change of so fundamental a nature as we experienced in South Africa been achieved in a peaceful manner. Change, however, does not necessarily imply a positive outcome and although having been a democracy for 25 years, does South Africa remain a highly unequal society especially taking cognisance of the recent recorded cases of corruption on local government level.

Public administration reform and transformation implies an outcome of an efficient public service which is vital to a well-functioning country that maximises its developmental potential and the welfare of its citizens. In this regard, local government should play a particularly important role in developing countries, working to extend services and reduce inequalities, and demonstrating to citizens that their society is capable of organising itself in an efficient way. In Africa and specifically

South Africa the public service of which local government forms part of, is unfortunately rapidly gaining a reputation for ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and incompetence as governmental institutions routinely receive qualified audits, thereby undermining, rather than maximising, the developmental potential of the country.

The new challenges of governing and governance seem increasingly complex, placing governments in situations that are quite different from those known before. Good governance is reflected in terms of value driven perspectives which manifest itself in effective, legitimate, democratic government, and high levels of institutionalization or combinations of the above. This also coincides with the introduction of an array of public policy documents in an endeavour to improve public services to all inhabitants.

However, improved service delivery does not only necessitate the generation of creative ideas and their formalization in policy documents, but requires *inter alia* an expert, skilful and dedicated workforce to implement these ideas. Efficient and effective policy implementation is therefore evident to ensure the afore-mentioned. As an academic field, Public Administration and Management is obligated to advance theoretical and pragmatic understanding of governmental institutions and processes. Such understanding, however, cannot be advanced solely by the explication of current knowledge through education and service, but it also requires the generation of new knowledge (widely understood as a necessary and sustainable source of efficiency and effectiveness) through research and managing this knowledge. In this paper, these aspects will be addressed to ensure that international lessons are shared to demonstrate the use of scientific research in policy implementation within the EEC and CE regions.

Regarding the research method, a literature study of appropriate primary sources containing authoritative publications, books, journals, the internet and official documents such as departmental policies will be conducted to gather information,

while the field operations include interviews with practitioners and academics in the field of public administration and management.

## **THE CHANGING FACE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT**

The constitutional change that paved the way for a democratic dispensation in South Africa directly impacted upon the public sector which was and still is undergoing major structural changes to undo and unlearn the aberrations of the past. These changes are sometimes characterized by terms such as modernization, reform, transformation, restructuring and rationalization. This focus on modernization of the public services reflects a commitment of the government to improve public services but also a declaration that the core public services are not performing as well as the government believes that they should (Mbeki 2008:8).

One of the major consequences of modernization is a lessening of administrative disparities and less divergence in models due to the development of the principle of standardization and uniformity of management rules. This takes a number of inevitable routes that can be summed up by the term New Public Management. The new environment has aimed at producing a more responsible and efficient customer-focused service, thus aiming not only to improve administrative output technically, but also to develop public relations techniques based on communication skills, simplified administrative formalities and procedures, cooperation in public affairs, safeguarding the public interest, developing partnership practices, transparency, fighting corruption, promoting a code of ethics, citizen participation in public affairs and consultation. The objective therefore was to turn administration into a tool for development and social change, imbued with a concern for performance and greater consideration for the general interest in order to give priority to the interest of citizens by promoting moral values and civic trends (Lwendo 2009:2).

The undertaking of the South African government to deliver quality services to the public manifested itself in numerous policy documents that have been designed for one common goal – the improvement of life for all. Emphasis was put on meeting the basic needs of all the citizens by a reduction in unnecessary government consumption and the release of resources for productive investment and the redirection to areas of greatest need. This meant that government institutions had to be re-orientated to optimize access to their services by all citizens, within the context of fiscal constraints and the fulfilment of competing needs (Wiseman 2006:96). It meant that the government had to revamp its expenditure management system where new initiatives had to be funded by the reallocation of existing resources, a stable fiscal environment had to be provided for longer-term departmental strategic planning, business planning had to be introduced to assist the Department of Finance in developing an overview of strategic planning across government institutions, and emphasis had to be placed on the continuous modernization of programmes and by delivery of services with the available funds. The implications were that firm and binding financial targets had to be established and programmes and activities that were delivered, had to be subjected to tough scrutiny (Arnaboldi & Lapsley 2003: 349). As can be expected, responses to these endeavours varied from highly emotional – sometimes politically driven – and negative comments, to critical but rational analysis of the outcomes.

Caution has been expressed that modernization in South Africa should not only focus on social upliftment objectives, since these efforts can only be achieved if the South African economy can be placed firmly on the path of sustainable economic growth and development. The present state of growth and development in South Africa seems to demonstrate an apparent lack of progress in terms of delivery of *inter alia* infrastructural, housing, health and educational services (Mafela 2006:12 & Friedman 2006:20). To sustain its programmes, the government must develop a culture that supports continual change and improvement. The public service of South Africa must remain a structure in which South Africans can be proud of and service delivery, therefore, should be continually modernized, improved and directed towards the best interests of the citizens. Mbeki (2008:12) is of the opinion that a

particular focus of the government and its pursuit of modernization and improved service delivery is the tool of policy implementation.

## **POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AS AN OPTION FOR IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY**

Although policy implementation is generally regarded as the conversion of mainly physical and financial resources into concrete service delivery outputs in the form of facilities and services, or into other concrete outputs aimed at achieving policy objectives (Cloete *et al.* 2006:183), scholars of policy implementation (Torenvlied *et al.* 2003) view the division as artificial and misleading. It is argued that the relation between policy and action can be regarded as a process of interaction and negotiation in policy networks, implying a break with the more traditional multistage view of implementation as the transmission of policy into consequential actions. With the latter approach, *different role-players* are of importance during the decision-making and the implementation stages: the focus of attention shifts from the voting power of the decision-makers to the authority of implementation agencies to realize the political decisions (Torenvlied *et al.* 2003:66). Of importance is also the *policy discretion* exhibited by the implementation agency as it can compel adherence to the norm of bureaucratic loyalty to the political decision-makers, or implement their own policy preferences regardless of the content of the political decision they should realize. However, the intention of this paper is not to contest whether the shift has yielded more insights into implementation, but to determine how effective implementation can improve service delivery and therefore address the challenges faced with policy implementation. It is therefore imperative that attention be focused on the reasons why policies fail and how this can be rectified.

## **REASONS FOR POLICY IMPLEMENTATION FAILURES**

The mere existence of a policy and its impact is no guarantee that it will be translated into action with the results intended. New and unanticipated problems may be encountered during implementation as few policies stipulate exactly how the implementation should be effected, implying that the content of the policy can be substantially modified, elaborated, or even negated (Anderson 2006:134). On the one hand, policies are sometimes, due to a lack of time, interest, information or expertise framed in general terms and is the implementation left to implementation agencies that might thwart the original intention of the policy. On the other hand, it might embrace so much detail that the actual meaning becomes vague. Other reasons for the failure of implementation highlighted by the feedback from practitioners and academics are:

- overly ambitious and idealistic policy making (Burger 2005: 491);
- delayed or rapid implementation without taking into consideration changing realities;
- unethical behaviour by the different role-players (Raga & Taylor 2005:24);
- the challenge to solve a particular problem might undermine or create another problem in another area (Bloomfield 2006:405);
- hidden political agendas of policy makers and implementation agencies;
- the political divisions and conflicts within communities (Keen *et al.* 2006:211);
- bureaucracy bashing, affecting policy implementation through low morale, poor recruitment and fostering an environment of distrust towards the bureaucracy (Garrett *et al.* 2006:235);
- inadequacy of the 'means' at the disposal of the government to meet die ever-increasing community expectations;
- the presence of factors such as the state of economic development, the existence of a formal market economy, the rule of law, the advanced level of administrative infrastructure and state efficiency to address particular social phenomenon;
- non-availability of information (Sarker 2006:199);
- dependence on approval from other institutions if more than one institution is involved in the implementation;

- a lack in capacity to manage the processes of planning, implementation and monitoring of development outputs;
- limited skills, expertise and commitment amongst implementation agencies; and
- differences between the organisational and operational ethos of partners are sometimes difficult to reconcile, causing many misunderstandings, divisions and mistrust in interactions and exchanges (Butler & Allen 2008:424).

Fan and Yang (2019:375) add to the afore-mentioned that cognisance should also be taken of the four types of implementation, namely administrative implementation, experimental implementation, flexible implementation, and symbolic implementation. It is therefore apparent that a variety of factors can influence the success or failure of policy implementation actions.

The main premise of public policy is that it should be in harmony with the public interest. The question, however, remains who decides what the public interest is, how it should be served, or which section of society will be taken as representative of the public interest? To improve policy implementation, the following actions related to *inter alia* leadership can be undertaken.

## **REMEDIES TO OVERCOME POLICY IMPLEMENTATION FAILURES WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO LEADERSHIP**

To overcome the above-mentioned policy implementation failures, one can argue that the issues should be addressed in a positive manner. Seeing that this is not an exhaustive list of policy failures, further remedies need to be addressed. According to Cloete *et al.* (2006:207) implementation agencies should directly focus on their core competencies and functions should policy and service delivery programmes be designed for implementation. These agencies should also be designed in the most appropriate way for them to fulfil the tasks being assigned to them. A new understanding about roles, responsibilities, duties and obligations should therefore

be created. Output-orientated benchmarks should furthermore be included and is strong, coherent leadership and pro-active political and administrative leadership necessary to steer implementation. But leadership goes hand-in-hand with particular challenges, especially in the public sector. Van Zyl (2016:12) identifies these as

- confronting long-standing poverty and disadvantage;
- limited education and health infrastructure;
- disparities in access to technological innovation and sophisticated communication systems;
- people looking back to blame rather than forward to achieve;
- wide division within societies between haves and have nots; and
- economic colonisation.

Dobbs, Fine, Hieronimus and Singh (2018:47) stress the importance of committed leadership. Leaders must commit extraordinary energy to the effort, take personal accountability for success or failure, lead by example, and challenge long-established conventions. To inspire others they must spend substantial time communicating face to face with the people affected, listening as much as they talk. Van Zyl and Campbell (2019:26) opine that the latter behaviour can best be explained by a set of continuous, reciprocal interactions among three sets of variables, namely the person's internal attributes (cognitive and emotions), the behaviour (actions) and the environment. Particular skills and competencies are needed in this regard. The question can, however, be posed as to what a skill and a competency entails.

### **SKILL VERSUS COMPETENCY: ANY DIFFERENCE?**

The literature defining a skill can be summarized as follows:

- Proficiency, facility, or dexterity that is acquired or developed through training or experience.
- The ability, coming from one's knowledge, practice, aptitude, etc., to do something well.

- An ability and capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills), and/or people (interpersonal skills).
- A skill is the learned capacity to carry out pre-determined results.
- A learned ability to bring about the result you want, with maximum certainty and efficiency (Onyango-Delewa 2018:88).

A skill is thus something learned in order to be able to carry out one or more job functions.

A competency is defined as:

- A cluster of related abilities, commitments, knowledge, and skills that enable a person (or an organization) to act effectively in a job or situation.
- Competencies refer to skills or knowledge that lead to superior performance.
- Measurable skills, abilities and personality traits that identify successful employees against defined roles within an organization.
- A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context.
- A measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully.
- Competencies specify the "how" (as opposed to the what) of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully (Van Jaarsveldt and Wessels 2015:413 & Van Jaarsveldt 2018:3).

Competencies, therefore, may incorporate a skill, but are more than the skill, they include abilities and behaviors, as well as knowledge that is fundamental to the use of a skill. An example of this in an IT context is "Programming". To effectively write a computer program one needs good analytical, logical, and interpretive ability as well as the skill to write the program in a specific language. Learning Java, C++, C#, etc. is a skill. But underlying the ability to use that skill effectively is analytical, logical

and interpretive ability – those are competencies. It is relatively easy to learn other programming languages once one knows one language well. However, without the underlying competence, it is virtually impossible to write an effective program – irrespective of the language.

The types of competencies falling in three groups can be identified as follows:

- **Professional Competencies:** Professional competencies are competencies that allow for success in an organizational context. They are the accelerators of performance or – if lacking in sufficient strength and quality – are the reason people fail to excel in jobs. Examples are: Business Environment, Industry and Professional Standards, Negotiation, People Management.
- **Functional (or Technical) Competencies:** Functional competencies relate to functions, processes, and roles within the organization and include the knowledge of, and skill in the exercise of, practices required for successful accomplishment of a specific job or task. Examples are: Application Systems Development, Networking and Communication, Database Analysis and Design.
- **Behavioral (or Life Skills) Competencies:** Life skills are problem solving behaviors used appropriately and responsibly in the management of personal affairs. They are a set of human skills acquired via teaching or direct experience that are used to handle problems and questions commonly encountered in daily human life. Examples are Communication, Analytical Ability, Problem Solving and Initiative.

In any organization there are some competencies that are more important than others based on different criteria and are classified into levels of criticality (see Table 1):

Table 1: Competency types and categories

<i>Competency Categories</i> <i>Competency Types</i>	<b>Core Competencies</b>	<b>Key Competencies</b>	<b>Critical Competencies</b>
<b>Professional Competencies</b>			
<b>Functional Competencies</b>			
<b>Life Skills Competencies</b>			

- **Core Competencies:** Core competencies are those competencies that any successful employee will need to rise through the organization. These competencies would generally relate in some way to the business of the organization.
- **Key Competencies:** Key competencies contribute to valued outcomes of the organization, defining the abilities of individuals to meet strategic demands, and are important not just for specialists but for all individuals.
- **Critical Competencies:** Critical competencies are competencies without which the organization will be unable to achieve its goals and strategy.

It can therefore be deduced that it is important to understand the difference between skills and competencies, the different types of competencies needed in the organization, as well as to categorize the competencies so that investments in core HR initiatives, such as development, workforce planning, career management, etc. are based on initiatives that will deliver sound return on investment.

Hickey, Iles and Macaulay (2007:7) are of the opinion that the literature on the management role and the skills and competencies of leaders in the public sector has

been dominated by discussions of generic frameworks as depicted above, and has not addressed the competencies needed for managing in a politically-led organization where issues of accessibility of services, participation in decision-making, greater responsiveness and capacity-building are important. Additional competencies are therefore needed by the leadership in the public sector to ensure that services can successfully be implemented.

## **COMPETENCIES REQUIRED BY LEADERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

The different roles which leadership needs to undertake to ensure the effective implementation of services necessitate particular competencies, namely (Aucoin 2002:15, Ali in Rosenbaum *et al.* 2006:136 and Van Jaarsveldt 2018:6):

- **Intellectual competencies:** These include the *cognitive capacity* needed by the leaders in order to understand and respond strategically to the complexities inherent in service to the public, to create order out of chaos, and to develop policies that are acceptable from multiple points of view. It also includes the *creativity* required to question conventional means and to build a continuous learning environment in the organization by supporting a culture where the cutting edge is highly valued.
- **Visioning competencies:** This is the ability that allows the leader to describe to others the future of service to the public, in compelling terms, thus promoting enthusiasm and commitment.
- **Management competencies:** These competencies include the *action-oriented management* needed to develop backup strategies to deal with potential negative outcomes, to remain focused, to make things happen, and to get things done. It furthermore stresses the *organizational awareness* required of the leader for acute sensitivity to the relationship between key players in the organization, and to use good judgement about the relationships that influence the organization, as well as the instinct that allows them to manoeuvre rapidly and to maximum effect. Management competencies also include *teamwork abilities* that the leader demonstrates by

encouraging others to offer their ideas or opinions, and by trying to understand the positions, thoughts, concerns, and feelings of others through consideration, respect, and valuing their diversity of experience, while reinforcing the common goal of maximizing service to the public. *Partnering* skills help the leaders develop a community of external people who share common interests and goals in a climate of trust and open communication, be it in the public or the private sector (Palus *et al.* 2004:5 & Fitzgerald in Rosenbaum *et al.* 2006:127). De Wet and Moseki (2015:80) and Mfikwe and Pelsler (2017:124) refer to management competencies as “strategic capability and leadership, programme and project management, financial management, change management, knowledge management, service delivery innovation, problem solving and analysis, people management, client orientation and customer focus, communication and accountability, and ethical conduct”.

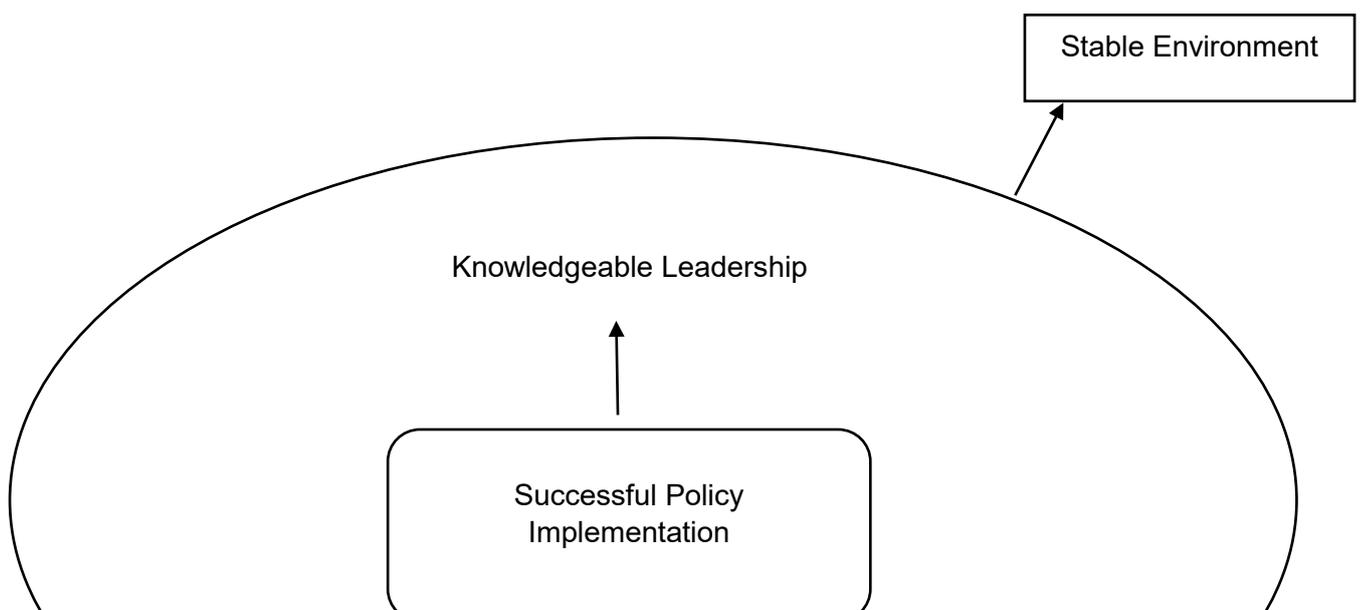
- **Relationship competencies:** *Interpersonal relations* skills allow the leader to interact effectively with others in a climate of respect and appreciation, to influence people, and to deal with complex and difficult interpersonal situations. *Communication* skills, including the ability to verbalize messages in a compelling and articulated manner, instill commitment and an attitude that allows opportunities for others to provide input. This skill includes listening for underlying nuances and intent in other’s messages. This is important as some tasks increasingly require listening and developmental skills as well as managing and directing skills, for example working with communities. There is an increasing emphasis on developing lateral skills as well as vertical skills, that is upwards to the superior and downwards to subordinates. Lateral skills mean that leaders need to be competent at working in cross-service and inter-agency ways (Hartley 2002:428 and Erasmus *et al.* 2005:333).
- **Personal competencies:** These competencies describe the *stamina* required of the leader in order to remain energized in the face of difficult demands. Early signs of fatigue or burnout need to be recognized by the leader, who should then use effective coping mechanisms. *Ethics and values* should be demonstrated by the leader in treating people with fairness and dignity (Hickey *et al.* 2007:8). It furthermore means that the leader needs to admit mistakes at times, even in the face of adverse consequences, and to honor

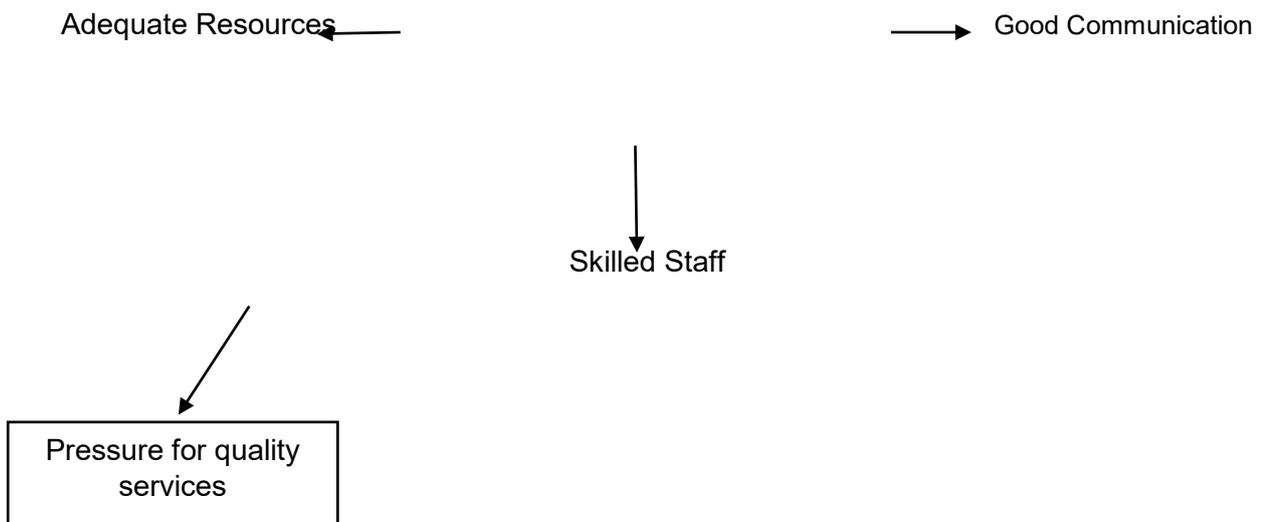
commitments. Strong principles need to act as the internal compass to guide the behavior of the leader who should be known for doing the right things for the right reasons. The competencies also include *personality* as evidenced when power is pursued only as a tool to accomplish objectives rather than an end in itself. This sub-category relates to an absence of arrogance, vindictiveness, resentment, timidity, and depressiveness. *Behavioral flexibility*, as demonstrated by working effectively with a broad range of situations, people and groups and by acquiring new, more effective behaviors, and discarding others, as contexts and roles change, forms part of these competencies. *Self-confidence* will be demonstrated by taking ownership of, and responsibility for their decisions, and projecting an assurance that quells the fears of others, which, especially in times of transition, help to maintain productive working conditions (Mafunisa 2003:279 & Fisher 2007:30).

It is therefore imperative that new types of competencies, knowledge, aptitudes and cultures are required if governments are to operate not as a modernist bureaucracy providing basic goods and services, but in a responsive leadership role which is concerned to contribute to articulating the needs and aspirations of inhabitants by implementing policies in an efficient and effective manner.

Schematically can the conditions to determine policy implementation success be depicted as follows:

Figure 1: Conditions for policy implementation success





(Adapted from Barbaso *et al.* 2016)

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be deduced that although public service modernization took place in South Africa and fundamental changes have been achieved, the constant questioning and striving to find better ways of delivering improved services must continue. The government realized that in its quest for improved service delivery, implementation of policies should be highlighted. For this reason the failures of policy implementation were discussed, eg overly ambitious policy-making, unethical behaviour by different role-players, and hidden political agendas. Leadership as remedy to overcome these failures was proposed. However, for leadership to be successful in policy implementation, they should be aware of their respective roles, duties, responsibilities and obligations and should communication be clear to avoid misunderstanding. Use should also be made of administrative aids and techniques which would promote successful implementation. This will necessitate that intellectual, visioning, management and relationship competencies be acquired by the leadership to ensure that effective policy

implementation takes place, thus reaffirming that there is a connection between the leadership of the organization and effective policy implementation.

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