

# Putting Service Back Into Public Service: The Transformation of Botswana's Immigration Services

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*Poor customer service at Botswana's Department of Immigration and Citizenship placed its home ministry, Labour and Home Affairs, in the bottom tier of performance rankings and made it a frequent target of criticism. After identifying the root causes of the breakdown in service, the department's leaders used a transformational approach to sharply improve customer relations. Its key elements were a focus on the organization's quality culture, management intervention, on-site improvement projects, and nontraditional engagements with staff. The awards and testimonials that followed demonstrate that a government organization that concentrates on improving the service-mindedness of its staff can make rapid, profound, and sustainable gains in the delivery of customer service. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Efficient government services are essential to the effective performance of any nation. Botswana is no exception. So when its Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs was ranked 16th out of the 17 ministries in the Botswana government structure because of poor customer service within the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIC), action had to be taken. Noting that the Ministry was critical in driving Botswana's economic development, the nation's Economic Advisory Council called for improving service by restructuring the issuance of work and residence permits and visas. Meeting this objective required transformational change. By redirecting human resources and creating a new culture of service, the leaders of the DIC transformed it into a model of public service at its best.

## Multiple Manifestations of a Department Gone Astray

Besieged with immigration challenges from four neighboring states and growing dissatisfaction among its domestic customers, the Botswana DIC was a frequent target of public criticism. Nonresponsive to customer needs, the staff members simply met minimum service standards. Worse yet, they did so with a dismissive attitude that sometimes resulted in rude behavior, such as ignoring customers while conducting private cell phone conversations or chatting with other employees about subjects outside work, and verbally mistreating customers at border crossings. Additionally, the Department, and therefore the Ministry, was third on the government's list of organizations plagued by economic crime and corruption in the form of unofficial issuance of work and residence permits, unauthorized extension of temporary visa days for financial or in-kind rewards, aiding and abetting the issuance of passports to noncitizens, and the disappearance of files and dockets.

Overall, the DIC was characterized by unprofessionalism, a poor work ethic, and subpar leadership. Staff members took unauthorized absences, were late to work, would eat at or disappear from the work counters, and would be rude to and even ridicule customers. Systematically, the uniform became optional, which is very unusual for immigration departments anywhere in the world. The DIC's leaders had overlooked serious problems, and, in a sense, the disregard of the dress code was the manifestation of the much more egregious lapses in

customer service and operational standards, the visible signal of a department gone astray.

In general, immigration staff skill levels were very low. More than 50 percent of staff had, at best, three years of secondary education; only about 5 percent had a university education. Forty percent of the staff was age 55 or above, averaging 25 years of service, with immigration work the only job they had ever held.

As is characteristic of those in the immigration field, each officer had worked at a border post for a minimum of five years and rotated to an inland office or airport for another five years. A landlocked country, Botswana shares long borders with three of its four neighboring states (see Exhibit 1). Therefore, border operations are found at 29 land borders, four airports (Gaborone, Francistown, Maun, and Kasane), and four recognized airstrips. The latter are open seasonally for tourists' convenience. All are staffed by immigration officers on a full-time or as-needed basis. Some of the entry points are close to 2,000 kilometers (more than 1,200 miles) away from headquarters, and communication with headquarters typically was minimal—only through handwritten memos, which often would get lost in the mail system or be attended to very slowly.

Complicating any transition to more useful technology was the fact that the staff had practically no IT skills. Computers, faxes, and photocopiers generally were rare. The Ministry had only one expatriate IT officer, who was in charge of procurement, hardware, and software support, and had very little time to train other staff members in IT skills. Desired leaps in performance promised by potential IT projects were hard to imagine, given the existing skill sets and low staff engagement levels.

This state of affairs attracted a great deal of criticism both nationally and internationally. At the national level, complaints reached alarming levels, with numerous reports and tip-offs submitted to the

Exhibit 1. A Look at Botswana



Botswana is a breathtakingly beautiful and vibrant country. Approximately the size of France or Texas, this Southern African nation transitioned from British protectorate status to become independent in 1966. After more than four decades of continuous civilian leadership and good governance, this once impoverished nation boasts a dynamic economy based primarily on mineral extraction. Diamonds are chief among these resources, but copper, nickel, salt, soda ash, potash, coal, and iron ore also are mined. The government co-owns the largest diamond mining company, Debswana, with DeBeers. More than 40 percent of government revenues are derived from this successful and innovative public-private ownership approach to natural resource wealth distribution. As a result, the national GDP (\$28.5 billion in 2010) is heavily weighted toward government services.

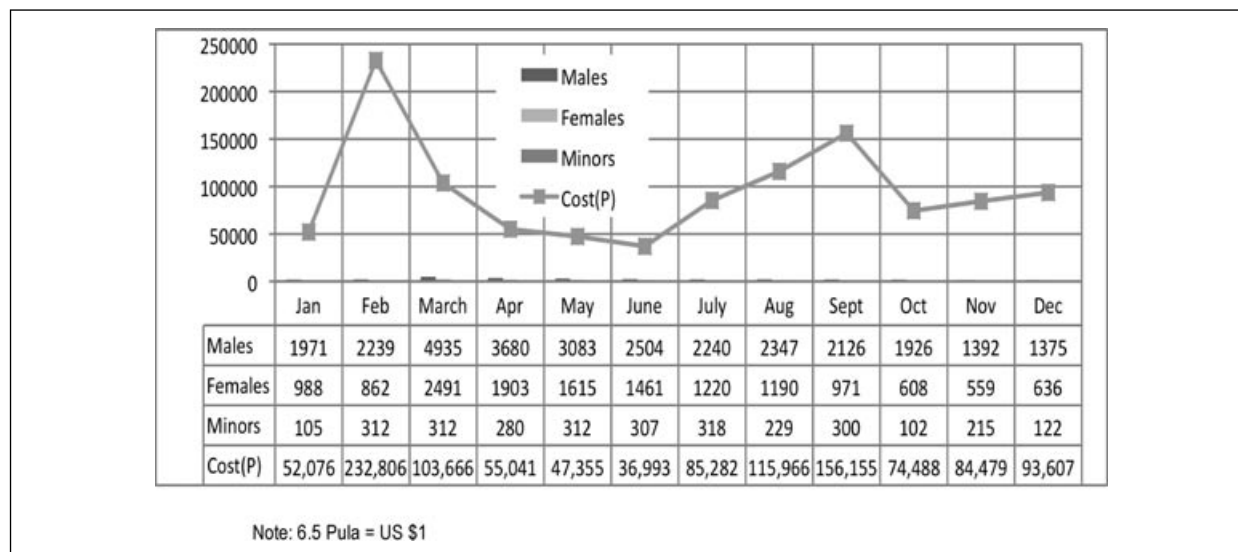
In the arid grasslands, cattle ranches provide the base for a beef exporting sector that deals primarily with the European Union. Strong anticorruption policies have positioned Botswana as a trusted provider of financial services in the region, thus adding to its economic strength. Overall, Botswana has maintained one of the world's highest economic growth rates in the past 40 years.

A rich diversity of plants and animals can be found throughout the country, from the Kalahari Desert to the Okavango Delta wetlands and rivers. Reserves, national parks, and wildlife management areas account for 38 percent of the land; thus, tourism is also an important industry.

The population is about 2 million, with a median age of 22 years. Literacy is 81 percent among those over 15 years of age. Skill training is readily available in both the private and public sectors.

Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime, to the Office of the President, on the radio, and in newspaper articles and editorials. At the international level, Botswana was threatened with being placed on a visa waiver test by strategically important countries, such as the United States. Also, unprofessional behavior was seen as a threat to the tourism industry. The volume of complaints reached an intolerable level.

**Exhibit 2. Number of Illegal Immigrants Repatriated Against Cost**



**Economic Meltdown in Zimbabwe Further Strains Botswana’s Borders**

The economic catastrophe in Zimbabwe during the past decade has led to an influx of Zimbabweans into Botswana seeking employment. Most of them had no travel documents and, therefore, no possibility of obtaining employment. This put additional pressure on the DIC, which had to oversee the increase in the number of border crossings, handle work and residence requests for those with proper travel documents, and repatriate those classified as illegal immigrants.

Exhibit 2 details the cost of repatriating illegal immigrants in 2009. More than 90 percent of repatriations were of Zimbabwe immigrants. Zimbabweans also accounted for an unprecedented number of applications for Botswana work and residence permits, as well as for citizenship after ten years of continuous residence or through resettlement and/or resumption. The latter refers to obtaining citizenship through a confirmed paternal or maternal lineage to Botswana. Another major pressure on the DIC stemmed from the fact that Botswana shares long borders with Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. Significant parts of these borders are game

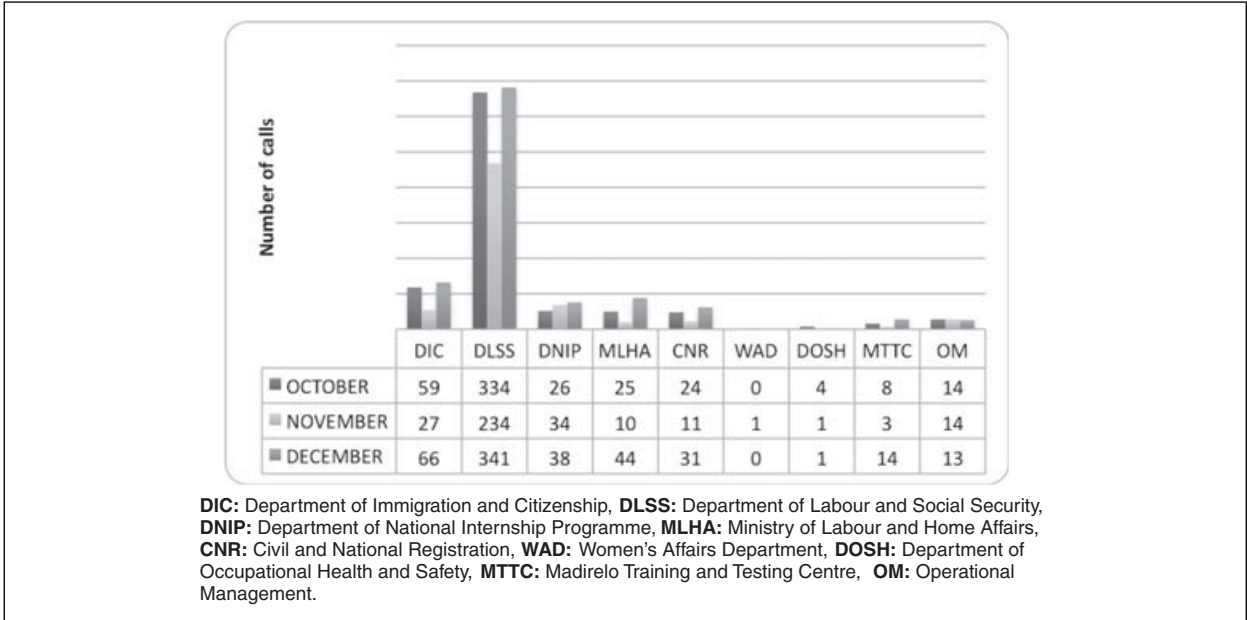
reserves that allow for the free movement of wildlife. Though risking loss of life, many illegal immigrants have found such parks to offer relatively easy passage into Botswana.

Meanwhile, ongoing concerns with bordering nations added to the strain on the DIC. Botswana (the people of Botswana) have a close affinity with South Africa because of family ties and historical employment patterns whereby most Botswana citizens were, until the late 1970s, working in the South African mines. As a result, a Botswana passport became a document of right and not a travel document. Most children would have obtained two passports before being eligible for an identity document by age 18, just in case they would have to travel to South Africa one day. The passports were also used as a form of identity for transactional purposes, as well as confirmation of age for international competitive sporting purposes. The demands for these documents left the DIC very little time for strategic thinking and renewal.

**Overburdened Civil Servants, Less Civil Service**

These pressures led to challenging problems for the DIC’s staff. Lines at the border stations increased,

**Exhibit 3. Number of Call Centre Interactions, October–November 2010**



as did wait times. The average wait time of four hours could stretch even longer, especially around public holidays. One customer complained that he had to wait for 12 hours and then had to go back the following day and wait another two hours—despite the fact that the major borders are open 24 hours a day to ease congestion. The sheer number of customers—and the fact that most of the paperwork had to be processed manually—took a huge toll on the three shifts of 10 to 15 officers per shift. This became evident in their behavior: short tempers, rudeness, talking in the vernacular to customers who had no clue about the local language, and excessively calling out sick.

Internally, there were excessive delays in processing passport applications from citizens and work visas for those with critical skills. The average time to receive a passport was 30 to 60 days in 2006, and a critical skill work and residence visa took 180 days. Meanwhile, the government had embarked on a series of large-scale infrastructural development projects that included a new Science and Technology

University; the Morupule and Mamabula power stations; dams; a transport hub comprising roads, railways, and airports; an IT park; an education hub; new hospitals; and an agriculture hub. These were threatened by the DIC’s inability to quickly facilitate work and residence visas for the expatriate labor needed to work on these critical projects. In the eyes of its customers, especially those running the contracts for the aforementioned projects, the DIC was a blemish on an otherwise highly respected government within the continent of Africa.

**Feedback Points the Way to a New Culture of Service**

Botswana’s Economic Committee of Cabinet, the High Level Consultative Council (a forum between government and the private sector that meets twice a year to evaluate government facilitation of the private sector), and many other areas of government received a chorus of complaints about the DIC. **Exhibit 3** gives a sample of complaints received from the Ministry Call Centre, which was

established in 2009 to get unfettered complaints from customers so that customer service could be re-engineered around customer feedback. The areas represented are the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIC), Department of Labour and Social Security (DLSS), Department of National Internship Programme (DNIP), Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs (MLHA), Civil and National Registration (CNR), Women's Affairs Department (WAD), Department of Occupational Health and Safety (DOSHS), Madirelo Training and Testing Centre (MTTC), and Operational Management (OM).

Similarly, a website that recorded the number of complaints posted was launched the same year. One of the feedback platforms that the leaders of the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs are working on is the improvement of this website, which customers have indicated is poor in structure and content. In addition to this, the Ministry organized a face-to-face colloquium with customers to help it understand the business community's concerns about the two departments generating the most complaints—the DLSS and DIC—and for the Ministry to share its direction and commitment to improved service.

All these efforts generated valuable feedback. The complaints gathered through the Call Centre and website, along with numerous written complaints, clearly pointed to a common cause. Although the immigration systems and policies were lacking, the crux of the problem was the staff's disinterest in providing public service. Many staff members simply were not motivated to do their jobs. Others viewed good service as a reward that the government would have to earn from them with extrinsic motivators, such as new uniforms, overtime allowances, remote area service allowance, hardship allowances, transfer allowance, training, and accelerated promotions.

It was obvious, then, that creating a new culture of service would be of paramount importance. The

Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs was the first point of call for the business community and investors all over the world and, therefore, the DIC would have to change fast to live up to the business attitude and acumen expected by its new customers. Those customers came from the world over, wooed by global trade missions initiated by politicians, the Botswana Export Development and Investment Agency, and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The previously mentioned development initiatives, as well as the opening of new mines, added to the demand. All these opportunities meant there would be customers who needed to bring in individuals with specialized skills from abroad and expected visas and permits to be issued in a professional manner. This meant immigration officers would have to transform from being authoritarian to being customer-focused.

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### Embarking on a Multifaceted Approach to Transformation

To rise to the many challenges it faced, the Ministry had to set parameters for transformational change at organizational and individual levels. Because of its strategic importance to the country, the ailing DIC was chosen as a focal point. The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs took direct leadership, and with the help of strategic consulting partner Transformation Systems International, LLC, (TSI), was able to reverse the downward fall, replacing the complaints with scores of testimonials. The Department's leaders were able to improve service through several nonconventional

workshops and on-site improvement projects. These included the redirecting of human resources, infusion of knowledge, creation of new value propositions, organizational restructuring, computerization, and the crafting of new onboarding strategies. These efforts resulted in a dramatic turnaround of the DIC, with its Ministry moving into second position in overall performance within the Botswana Public Service. Once an embarrassment to its members, the Ministry became an employer of choice, with potential entrants wanting to know what one needed to do to work for the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs. The Ministry adopted a new strategy map and a new logo to help symbolize its new beginning. The key elements behind this transformation were:

- clear communication of the Department's burning platform,
- leaders' direct intervention,
- challenge to poor service mind-sets,
- implementation of projects and procedural changes, and
- increased customer interaction and direct feedback.

### **Planting Seeds of Hope With a Clearly Communicated Burning Platform**

The immediate need for change had to be transmitted to all staff. To that end, the Permanent Secretary visited the DIC's officers throughout the country—at 13 border posts and 26 inland offices—to share details on their actual performance and to experience firsthand the conditions under which they served. By listening to front-line staff and sampling service on behalf of the customers, she learned of customers' frustration with uncaring staff and the lack of feedback mechanisms, and that the staff felt disconnected from Ministry headquarters.

Her willingness to reach out planted seeds of hope among the staff, slowly building their trust in the Department's leaders. Many indicated they appreciated

being treated with respect. Various staff interactions, such as information and dialogue sessions, were undertaken to sustain the focus on the transformation agenda. Furthermore, the Ministry's strategy map, performance and customer service standards, and complaints procedures were introduced during these encounters, along with the Ministerial Customer Centric Protocol, a pocket-size booklet detailing expectations for officers and customers.

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In addition, the Permanent Secretary established the Ministerial Performance Improvement Committee, composed of heads of departments who would meet monthly. She also introduced a regular performance review system within the Ministry, holding individual leaders responsible for the performance of their departments, thus creating personal burning platforms. During these meetings, performance was brought to the forefront. The heads of the various departments were asked to explain their results, both positive and negative, and move away from the culture of excuse making. During these meetings, managers were asked to detail the number of customer complaints they received and explain any long lines, delays in processing document, and reasons for underperforming staff. Instead of focusing on why external factors caused problems, department leaders began considering how their actions might overcome obstacles and improve performance. The heads of the departments were made to understand that achieving breakthrough performance in customer service was their responsibility, the reason they were chosen to lead.



### **Direct Leadership Intervention Leads to Dramatic Staff Change**

As a result of this new orientation, there were many changes in leadership. Some energetic and committed junior leaders moved to positions of higher responsibility, while some struggling leaders moved on to retirement or less critical assignments. The Director of Immigration was replaced. All these changes were well executed with the conviction that performance was at the heart of the staffing decisions. This is not to say the changes were easy to make, however. There was considerable resistance, including formal staffing complaints. But the Permanent Secretary was determined to ensure that the right people would be on staff to fulfill the DIC's mission by serving the needs of its customers.

TSI, which has enjoyed a long association with the Botswana government in performance management, introduced training programs to address work improvement, anticorruption practices, and transformational customer service.

As would be expected in any organization, there were some especially problematic areas in the DIC. Of the hot spots identified, Francistown was of particular concern. In many cases, Francistown officers failed to follow department policy and local leaders did not enforce customer service standards. Francistown became a specific project for transformation, and required drastic measures against noncomplying officers. A good number of its officers were dismissed, while those without the capacity to learn new skills were encouraged to opt for early exit. The most drastic measure was the Permanent Secretary's decision to bring in an entirely new leadership team whose members were selected from different parts of the country. TSI, which has enjoyed a long association with the Botswana government in performance management, introduced training programs to address work improvement, anticorruption practices, and transformational customer service.

Direct engagement between the Ministry's leaders and the public and other stakeholders also was increased. The goal was to get senior staff out of the headquarters office and into the public eye. Forums, public sessions, radio shows, and industrial group gatherings were held to allow for dialogue between Ministry leaders and the people. Kgotla meetings, or traditional community council meetings, allowed full discussions to be held where everyone attending could have their say. **Exhibit 4** shows some of the interactions that took place during the second and third quarters of 2010/2011.

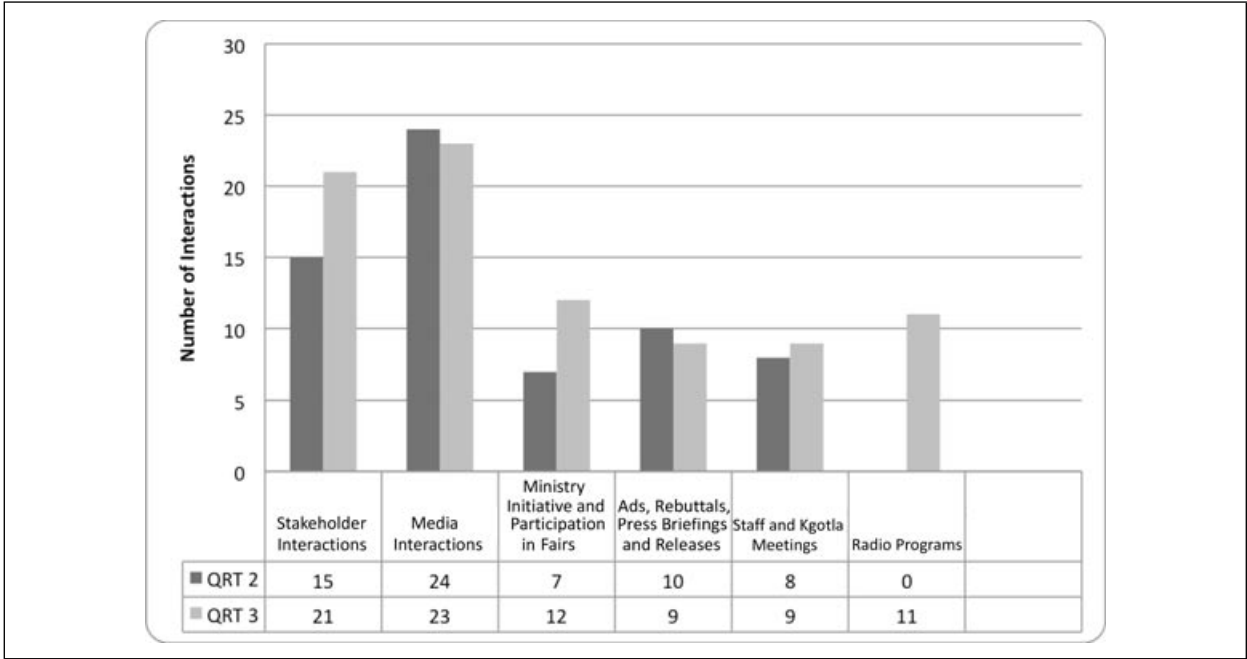
### **Challenging Poor Service Mind-sets**

It was clear that front-line service staff at the DIC needed a new mind-set about customer service. As part of the customer service training, TSI created a forum to bring to light the underlying reasons why service was not being delivered.

Groups of front desk officers were convened in both Gaborone and Francistown for a dialogue concerning the current state of customer service. Frank conversations were conducted, and all were encouraged to explore the deeper individual and collective attitudes informing poor customer service. In short, the participants discovered that resentment, judgment of others, and a lack of willingness to serve were the underlying causes of poor performance.

Rather than merely telling the staff members who participated in these sessions that they had to provide better service, the TSI coaches encouraged each person to reflect on their own life, including their sense of purpose and vision, and to discover their own calling for service. During the intense, interactive four-day workshops, customer service staff and managers were challenged as to why they were choosing to deliver poor service to customers and each other. They also explored the kinds of individual actions that would be required to quickly change the environment. Owning the problems—and not blaming the system—was a huge leap for some, followed by the understanding that each

**Exhibit 4. Interactions With the Public, Media, and Stakeholders for the Second and Third Quarters of 2010/2011**



person had the capability to turn around the current state of poor performance. The individual breakthroughs that resulted helped participants understand that individual initiative—on the part of both staff and management—would be needed to improve customer service.

TSI’s transformation foundation models were used in these sessions. For instance, the Transformation Cornerstones model emphasizes self-mastery, interpersonal mastery, value exchange, and change tools and methodologies. Discussions on these four cornerstones guided the conversation toward the achievement of a holistic view of the problems that the DIC faced and the opportunities for improvement—from self to team, customers, and productive methodologies to change. The training approach challenged participants in a way that promoted the internalization of all they were learning and experimentation with the new mind-set. Conducted over four days, the session involved intensive and engaging coaching designed to create space

for personal transformations—that is, a new view of self. It also focused on building authentic commitment (not simply compliance) to and collective alignment toward the organization’s vision. In summary, the big conversations were held concerning each individual’s connection with service, their team, and their country. Instead of classroom lectures, profound engagement helped the staff uncover the service ethos within themselves.

**Implementing Projects and Procedural Changes**

With its staff committed to providing a high level of customer service, the DIC could embark on critical improvement projects. In response to International Civil Aviation Organization regulations calling for all countries to adopt electronic passports by 2015 to improve passenger security worldwide, in March 2010 Botswana adopted the use of electronic passports. The requirements demand that all passports have embedded biometrics and visual security features and be machine-readable.



The electronic passport technology required a new set of skills and process transformation, as well as the establishment of new business units within the DIC to respond to specific customer expectations. Training on the use of computer-generated passports enabled the project to move forward quickly. For the first time, the Ministry introduced express service, whereby customers were assured of a passport within five days and offered the opportunity to obtain one within 24 hours for an additional fee. The normal cost of a passport is P260 (about \$40), and the express service is P390 (about \$60). The availability of this expedited service has motivated customers to demand express service for an additional fee in other areas of the Ministry and across Botswana's government.

#### **Increased Customer Interaction and Direct Feedback Facilitates Service Quality**

The Ministry's Call Centre and website helped its staff establish a closer relationship with customers. In addition, the Ministry convened a stakeholders' forum to give business customers an opportunity to describe their experiences with the Ministry service as well as their expectations. In his opening speech, Minister for Labour and Home Affairs Peter Letlhogonolo Siele said, "We aim for absolute service excellence, and we need the guidance of the people we serve, whom we believe are best placed to say exactly what they experience in their daily interaction with us. . . . We shall grow in terms of knowledge of how to serve you better. And you shall grow in terms of empowerment with knowledge of how things happen and why they happen the way they do . . . and how these are to change."

To facilitate a higher level of service quality, the Ministry introduced floor managers, a new cadre of service hall officers whose main role is to chaperone customers to the relevant service counters. To the delight of customers, their service included helping the illiterate fill out their application forms and checking compliance of all required attachments well before customers reached the service counter,

thereby saving the customers' and officers' time. Initially, it seemed a boring and redundant job, but the positive responses and compliments to officers concerned soon attracted staff members to volunteer for these positions. This initiative was hailed as more personal than an electronic queue management system and is now being rolled out in other units of the Ministry.

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One of the most critical functions of the floor managers has been the application of the guidelines contained in the Ministerial Customer Centric Protocol. Here are some examples of the protocols outlined in the booklet:

- Front desk officers shall not be chosen by default. Rather, particular attention shall be paid to personnel for the front desk. The choice should be informed by their ability to serve customers satisfactorily.
- There shall be more emphasis on appropriate attire for officers, especially front desk officers.
- Requisite training in customer care shall be routine for front desk officers.
- There shall be floor managers who are responsible for management of queues to ensure that customer needs are met while they are waiting to be served in the Ministry premises.
- All front desk officers shall wear nametags at all times.
- All staff shall be courteous as stipulated.
- All customers who come into the Ministry premises shall be acknowledged with a standard greeting by staff.
- All customers shall be accorded full attention by officers.

- All customers when leaving the Ministry and Department premises shall be given a standard farewell by staff.
- There shall be standard reception etiquette for the Ministry customer service provision.
- The staff of the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs shall not solicit or accept any rewards or gifts from customers for service rendered.
- Failure to refer an unsatisfied customer shall be deemed as negligence of duty by an officer. Contact details for supervising officers and directors shall be clearly displayed at the enquiries desk for referral purposes in all Ministry offices.
- All customers shall be given an opportunity to give feedback on the services they get from the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs.
- All heads of department shall put measures in place to review feedback provided by customers on a monthly basis and inform the Permanent Secretary on the action taken to address the issues raised by customers.
- Customer satisfaction surveys and barometers will be conducted on a regular basis.

A detailed list of dos and don'ts also is part of the booklet. Customer expectations are included as well, underscoring the concept of mutual respect and fostering a culture of customer service.

### **Training Alone Cannot Deliver Service Breakthroughs**

As already noted, the DIC significantly reduced the time it took to obtain a passport or critical skill work and residence visa. In addition, average wait times at border crossings have been cut by more than half. The number of complaints per month has fallen, and there has been a new phenomenon: the receipt of numerous testimonials. As a result of these and other breakthroughs in performance, the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs has moved from 16th out of 17 ministries to number 1 in governmental performance ratings. It also took first place in Botswana's

2010 Consumer Fair (government category) and in November 2010 was awarded the Debswana Crystal Plaque for Service Excellence for being the best public service provider.

When built upon clear objectives, a burning platform, and a passion for the organizational mission, direct leadership intervention breaks down barriers and opens the door to rapid improvement.

When experiencing chronic service problems, organizations often will seek to remedy the situation through customer service training. But all too often, that training results in little or no impact. When a quality culture is lacking within a service sector and reasonable knowledge of what constitutes excellent customer service does not exist, training alone is not the answer. The solution lies not in training people on how to be polite or courteous; it is about discovering the root cause of why known behaviors are not being conducive to efficient and effective customer service. This requires a deeper conversation with service providers on their decision to undertake a public service role. Deep consciousness and self-mastery hold the power of transformative improvement in service delivery. Transformation coaches must not shy away from such meaning of life dialogues. Likewise, managers of customer service staff must have a deep understanding of why they chose such work, and top leaders must hold staff members accountable for their behavior. Customer service delivery and management is not everyone's calling. A set of customer service protocols can aid in the management of performance. When built upon clear objectives, a burning platform, and a passion for the organizational mission, direct leadership intervention breaks down barriers and opens the door to rapid improvement. Standards and performance-based expectations are important in transforming customer service, but without a mind-set shift by service delivery staff,

there will be no lasting performance shift in service quality. Service-minded people are the basis of a customer-centric organization.

### Additional Resources

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