

Nebulous Labour Relations in Zimbabwe's Rural Local Authorities

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Abstract

Executive turnover can have far-reaching consequences on a local authority's development policies, programs and commitments. This paper examines nebulous labour-related problems in Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils (RDCs). The article chronicles the origins of the problems and how the RDCs have fallen prey to historical pitfalls. This paper critically reflects on the recruitment and dismissal of senior Rural District Council officers. The article analyses the longevity of CEOs in eight RDCs over a ten year period. The results demonstrate the sensitivity and vulnerability of such offices, and unpack the blurry boundaries that lie between policies and practice and the resultant impact on the labour relationships with RDC staff.

Key words: Labour relations, Rural District Council, Capacity building, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The effective management of human resources is a *sine qua non* condition for any organisation aiming for a mature and mutually respectful labour relationship with its staff. Effective human resource management is vital for the local state as it grapples with monumental development challenges, and whilst the exit of staff may create space for new blood, the old adage 'old broom knows all the corners' holds true. McCabe *et al* (2008) argue that executive turnover can have far-reaching consequences on a local authority's development policies, programs and commitments. They analysed turnover patterns of council executives in large American councils to distinguish 'push' and 'pull' factors that induce council managers to leave their jobs, and concluded that political conflict and economic development can influence the likelihood that a council manager will leave. Grindle (1997) examined how staff were educated and attracted to public sector careers, and the utilisation and retention of individuals in the public sector, focussing on managerial, professional and technical staff and the extent to which career trajectories affect overall performance. This paper adopts a similar

approach, examining managerial employees in Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils (RDCs) as key actors responsible for development in rural constituencies.

Why are these described as nebulous labour relations?

To set the context, we need to unpack the concepts – 'nebulous' and 'labour relations'. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (2000) describes 'nebulous' as hazy, vague, indistinct, confused, cloudy or cloudlike. Trebilcock (1998) defines the term 'labour relations' (also known as industrial relations) as the system in which employers, workers and their representatives and the government, interact to set the ground rules for the governance of work relationships. The concept also describes a field of study dedicated to examining such relationships. Trebilcock (1998) further contends that the phrase 'labour relations' can also encompass individual employment relationships between an employer and a worker under a written or implied contract of employment.

Based on the author's twelve years of experience in Rural District Councils (RDCs) and the intense research and ensuing analysis, this paper argues that labour relations in Zimbabwe's RDCs were nebulous. As the winds of change blow over Zimbabwe in the post-crisis era (2009), it is our fervent hope that lessons learnt will be useful as the country embraces change and the much-sought administrative effectiveness.

The paper does not claim to be exhaustive on labour relations but is a modest contribution to the gaps and growing literature on labour relations in local government, public administration and cognate disciplines. This paper will provide institutional memory and add to knowledge or change prior beliefs. Indeed, there is a possibility of making a contribution that solidifies knowledge as Zimbabwe finds its feet in the post-crisis era.

McCabe *et al* (2008) argue that turnover in top administrative positions has been linked to management difficulties in public, private, and non-profit organizations, and that in the private sector, a great deal of research indicates that turnover has critical effects on an organization's performance and remaining personnel. It is thus axiomatic that executive turnover should also prove important in the public sector. At the local government level, turnover disrupts the relationship structures on which local governance depends. Council manager turnover is especially important because leaders play increasingly complex and interrelated roles in both the substance and the process of local governance.

McCabe *et al* (2008) further posit that turnover among managers is often attributed to 'push' or 'pull' factors. Push factors prompt managers to leave their current positions because of political conflict or differences in style, orientation, or policy between the managers and their councils. Pull factors entice managers to leave their current positions for professional, financial, or personal advancement.

McCabe *et al* (2008) strongly suggest that change from one council manager to another has significant policy implications if different managers bring different preferences, skills, and backgrounds to the

job. Among other things, turnover affects a council's implementation of local innovations such as experimentation with new service delivery approaches.

Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils (RDCs) depend on salaried executives for the day-to-operations of their activities and implementation of their development policies. This article sketches an overview of the development of labour relations in Zimbabwe. To illustrate nebulosity, the paper examines eight selected¹ RDCs from eight Provinces and shows how they have been entangled in the cobweb of labour relations. With passage of time, labour relations regulations in RDCs have been streamlined, but what remains is the inability of the actors to encompass the lessons learnt and engage in meaningful dialogue. The study finds that in the case of Zimbabwe's RDCs, push factors were more dominant than pull factors, which is highly symptomatic of the volatile political climate under which RDCs operate.

Methodology

There are sixty RDCs in Zimbabwe, and to study the whole population was impractical, so the study sampled eight RDCs from four (of the eight) provinces: Mashonaland Central, Manicaland, Midlands and Matebeleland South for a good geographical representation. The study examined one suspended council, or so-called 'laggard', in each province and one of those said to be doing well ('progressive').² It also considered the amalgamation mix in 1993 (ie: how many Rural Councils and District Councils had amalgamated to make up the RDC) and political history and affiliation (pro- or anti- Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front – ZANU PF) (Mandiyanike 2009b). The research included semi-structured interviews with key informants, and examination of official records and documentation. Primary data included field study observations and reflections on personal experiences of key informants. (See Mandiyanike 2006 and 2009b for a detailed methodological justification).

Historical Overview

Zimbabwe has been through a very rough political and economic patch in what has been dubbed the 'Zimbabwe crisis' 1999 to 2009. The Zimbabwean political landscape has considerably shifted from a one-party system to a plural one, where the Movement for Democratic Change is part of the government machinery. The Minister of Local Government has acknowledged this plurality for the benefit of all. Mutizwa-Mangiza (1991) and Mandiyanike (2006) contend that until independence in

¹ This paper draws from my doctoral research that examined critically the performance of rural local authorities in Zimbabwe over a period of ten years (from 1993 to 2003). The performance of local authorities had been progressively declining. Money, equipment and other resources were made available through the Rural District Council Capacity Building Program (RDCCBP) and other donor-funded programs to salvage the RDCs, but the downward trend still persisted. I was thus questioning whether there was any 'capacity building' or 'capacity erosion'? Was there a willingness to build lasting capacity or it was being driven by donor conditionality?

² The councils were suspended from office by the Ministry of Local Government. The 'progressive' ones were also appraised by the same ministry.

1980, local government in Zimbabwe was divided racially, based on the principle of 'separate development', a Rhodesian³ formulation of apartheid. Rural Councils catered for white settlers in commercial farming areas and District Councils covered the villages where the black majority lived. This arrangement existed for almost five decades and in 1993, these Local Government Units (LGUs) were amalgamated to form Rural District Councils (Mandiyanike 2009a). Amalgamation was a political decision meant to remove one of the last vestiges of colonial rule – the de-racialisation of local government (Mandiyanike 2009a) – which took place under *the Rural District Councils Act* No.8, passed in 1988 but not implemented until July 1993 (Mandiyanike 2006; Matyszak, 2010). The transition to the new dispensation was fraught with resistance from the respective contenders and haggling among members of staff. The five-year delay in effecting the provisions of the *RDC Act* was, among other explanations, testimony to the complexity of the exercise that sought to unify two very different institutions at different levels of sophistication that were intended from inception for different purposes (Mandiyanike 2006; 2009a). The paper will set in context by examining pre-independence labour relations and the scene after 1990.⁴ The paper will also explore the first RDC labour test case, whose interpretation had far-reaching implications for all RDCs as they dealt with labour issues.

Pre-independence and Pre-ESAP Labour Relations

In pre-independent Zimbabwe, *the Industrial Conciliation Act* 1934 guided labour relations from the 1930s. Lloyd (1993) argued that soon after independence in 1980, the government brought about several changes to the law, among them, the *Employment Act* 1980 which took away an employer's right to dismiss employees at will.

However shortly afterwards, the government turned its attention to providing an entirely new Act to govern labour relations and in December 1985, the *Labour Relations Act* 1985 (now *Labour Act* Chapter 28:01) came into operation. Lloyd (1993) argued that the *Labour Relations Act* caused quite a stir, especially among employers, who saw it being weighted in favour of the employee. The government's position (then) can be explained in terms of its Marxist-Leninist leanings. In the period 1980–1989 central government assumed control of the termination of employment, for disciplinary reasons⁵ and ensured that this could be affected through the Ministry of Labour. However, with the global political-economic trends, the government's position changed. Lloyd (1993) conceded that in 1989 the government began to loosen its grip on labour relations and promulgated regulations that encouraged more employer-employee interaction.

³ Rhodesia – colonial name for Zimbabwe

⁴ When Zimbabwe adopted an Economic Structural Adjustment Program.

⁵ Statutory Instrument 371 of 1985 (Termination of Employment) Regulations was the primary instrument for such cases.

Personnel Systems in General

Nabaho (2012) proposes three types of personnel systems for managing providers of decentralized services: an integrated personnel system, a unified personnel system and a separate personnel system.

In an *integrated personnel system*, local government is composed of central government civil servants, with central and local government personnel forming part of the same service, with transfers possible between both tiers. The system implies 'deconcentration' rather than 'devolution' of the civil service. Nabaho (2012) argues that one of the noticeable features of the integrated personnel system is that a dichotomy between central and local government cadres is non-existent. Central government appoints and posts officers to local authorities to meet service delivery needs from the central pool.

In a *separate personnel system*, each local government acts as a completely autonomous employer (Mawhood 1993; Nabaho 2012). In principle, each local government appoints and administers personnel who are not transferable to another jurisdiction. Nabaho (2012) asserts that the separate personnel framework is preferred under decentralization by devolution because:

- (a) It keeps the employees' loyalty unidirectional, ie: to the local government that has the right to hire and fire;
- (b) Staff appointed locally gives quicker feedback since they are appointed to meet their employer's developmental needs, and proximity makes them more accountable to constituents through the elected local leadership. This is unlikely in integrated personnel systems where dual allegiance is common especially for senior officials.

In some cases, a separate personnel system does not always mean that terms and conditions of service of central and local government employees are different. For example in Uganda Section 61(1) of the *Local Government Act (Cap 243)* states that: '*The terms and conditions of service of local government staff shall conform to those prescribed by the Public Service Commission for the public service generally*', while in Kenya, prior to the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, the terms and conditions of local government civil servants were different from those of central government and were negotiated between local governments and trade unions (Nabaho 2012).

Nabaho 2012 follows Olowu's 2001 argument that the *unified personnel approach* is a midway house between the extremes of integrated and separate personnel arrangements and is a personnel model in which some or all categories of local government staff constitute follow a national career service (Nabaho 2012; Olowu 2001). In unified personnel arrangements, local government staff are employed locally but organized nationwide into a single civil service parallel to the central one (Mawhood 1993). In a typical unified system, all local government civil servants are members of a national 'local government civil service' but are only transferable between local governments.

In the case of Zimbabwe's RDCs, the separate personnel system is used. With a highly centralised government structure, the next section will discuss the involvement of government operatives within the RDCs' labour relations.

Post-1990⁶ Labour Relations in RDCS

Until amalgamation in 1993, District Administrators (DAs) had been *de jure* CEOs for District Councils (Mandiyanike 2006; Hammar 2003). The office of the DA falls directly under the Ministry of Local Government, and is totally separate from the RDC and increasingly plays a supervisory role. After 1 July 1993, the nascent RDCs were expected to recruit their own CEOs and DAs would revert to their usual roles as representatives for central government policies representing the authority of Government within any given District.

Thus, in the pre-1989 era (as described above), RDC employees were generally taken to be employees of the state (civil servants). The District Administrator (DA) was the *de jure* Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and so conditions of service for RDC staff were almost equated to those of the staff at the DA's office. RDC employees were treated differently, and they were given lesser status than those working in the DA's office. Before amalgamation, councils received salary grants from the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing (MLGNH). Thus, the conditions of service were not debatable or subject to collective bargaining (a cardinal factor in labour relations), and recruitment and dismissal were subject to the approval of the Minister of Local Government. Because of their daily involvement, the DA⁷ and his/her staff were able to exercise immense power, and councillors could not stand their ground against 'the minister's representative' (the DA who was also better educated and earned a high salary). The colonial imprint of the DA also had a bearing on this deference.

In this scenario, labour relations were very lopsided. However, many DAs had limited knowledge of labour relations and their advice to councils hinged very much on their (mis)application of Public Service Regulations to council staff. Council workers were considered as 'government employees' (civil servants) and could be fired willy-nilly or could become frustrated leading to resignation. During day-to-day discussions, one could often hear reference to some unstated 'public service regulations', while in most cases there was very little contestation from employees because of the authoritarian nature of the regime.

Following amalgamation in 1993, DAs were no longer mandatory CEOs, salary grants had been significantly reduced, and RDCs could set their own salaries (although they tended to align them with

⁶ See footnote 4.

⁷ Mandiyanike (2006) argued that Zimbabwe inherited from the Rhodesian era powerful, centralised state bureaucracies staffed by Rhodesian personnel, 'including the mighty District Administrators (DA).' The DA was feared. When local people visited the DA's office, they had to remove their hats from quite a distance and other unduly officious etiquette.

civil service rates). Labour relationships continued to be heavy-handed. With the diversity of staff taken over at amalgamation and the emotive manner in which RDC decisions were made cracks began to emerge and disciplinary cases were on the rise. In an article to an ARDC Newsletter (2000; p5) I argued that:

The manner in which RDC decisions are made to fire or retain staff is a sobering thought. In the council chamber, if one member shouts 'ngaaende!' (she/he must go) it becomes a chorus – ngaaende! If the culprit has a fair share of sympathisers (personal, religious, totem and other patronage whims indubitably take precedence), the decision takes a new twist and can be subject to voting.

In the above scenario, decision-makers tended to be guided by emotions rather than facts.

RDC Test Case

1992 saw the test case that radically changed the labour relations landscape. *The Labour Relations Act No. 16 of 1985*, in Section 3, provides that *'This Act shall apply to all employers and all employees except those whose conditions of employment are otherwise provided for by or under the Constitution'*. In the case of *Gumbo v Norton-Selous Rural Council 1992 (2)*, the Zimbabwe Law Report (ZLR) 403 (S) stated that the Norton-Selous Rural Council dismissed Mr. Gumbo (an engineer) in 1991. Lloyd (1994) noted that the council did not obtain the prior written approval of the Minister of Labour, Manpower Planning and Social Welfare. It was contended, in light of Statutory Instrument (S.I) 371 of 1985,⁸ that the dismissal was unlawful and void. The Judge sought first to answer the question whether an officer of Norton-Selous Rural Council was an employee *'whose conditions of employment were provided for by or under the constitution'*, for him to decide whether the Minister of Labour's approval was necessary.

Lloyd (1994) contends that the judge went on to look at the categories of people covered by the phrase *'except those whose conditions of employment are otherwise provided for by or under the Constitution'* These were members of the Public Service, the Zimbabwe Republic Police, the Defence Forces of Zimbabwe, the Prison Services, Judges, Ombudsman, Attorney General, Comptroller and Auditor-General, the President, Ministers and the Speaker of the House. What then was the position of Mr. Gumbo, an officer of a Rural Council, whose tenure of office was not regulated by the Constitution but by the *Rural Councils Act*?⁹ The Judge cited instances where other Acts explicitly excluded their employees from the ambit of the *Labour Relations Act*, for example, the *Parastatals Commission Act 1987* and the *Urban Councils Act* (chapter 214) as amended in 1986 (consent of the Minister of Local Government to fire an Urban Council employee was made acceptable as an

⁸ In terms of subsection 2 and 3 of Statutory Instrument 375 of 1985: "No employer shall, summarily or otherwise, terminate a contract of employment with an employee unless – a) he has obtained the prior written approval of the Minister (of Labour) to do so ... the contract of employment is terminated in terms of section 3 (which provides for suspension pending a ruling by a Labour Relations Officer.

⁹ The *Rural Councils Act* (Chapter 211), though repealed by the *Rural District Councils Act No.8 of 1988* continues to exist for the purposes of this case.

alternative to the Minister of Labour). Apparently no change had been brought about in respect of RDCs (Lloyd, 1994). Thus, the case concluded by upholding that the prior written approval of the Minister of Labour, Manpower Planning and Social Welfare was necessary before Mr. Gumbo could be lawfully dismissed.

Implications of the Gumbo Case for RDCS

The Gumbo case had far reaching implications for RDCs, District Administrators (DAs), the Minister of Local Government and other politicians. RDCs have continued to disregard the due processes of law, making haphazard decisions in the hiring and firing of RDC employees, flouting procedures and pandering to the dictates of politicians, as illustrated in the selected RDCs. RDCs have continued to lose cases at the labour offices for simply not following provisions of the law and tenets of natural justice.

In the liberalised economy, Statutory Instrument 379, 1990, provided for the establishment of Employment Codes of Conduct. These form the rules of engagement between employer and employees, who have to agree in writing to the code. If endorsed by the Minister of Labour, there will be no need for disciplinary cases to be referred to the Labour Officer. Very few RDCs managed to register their codes of conduct.

At amalgamation, Statutory Instrument (SI) 170, 1993, stipulated that no officer or employee was to lose his/her job because of amalgamation. Everyone had to be accommodated and vacancies had to be offered to members of staff¹⁰ already working in the amalgamated RDC(s). Some DAs and/or their officers applied for the CEO positions with differing results. In some RDCs, for example, Guruve, Mazowe and Umzingwane, DAs were offered the CEO positions because they were suitably qualified, or possibly because of councils' fear of a backlash from the Minister of Local Government, however they turned down the job offers because the salaries were lower than their current earnings.¹¹ This stance saw Senior Executive Officers (SEOs) (from the District Council) or Council Secretaries (from the Rural Council) being appointed to CEO positions, even though some of them were not appropriately qualified for the added responsibilities. The jostling for key council positions exacerbated the hitherto tense relationship between and among DAs, and aspiring District Council and Rural Council candidates. This was characteristic of a Hobbesian state of war of all against all.

Following the erratic appointment of CEOs and other council heads of department after amalgamation and the wave of scandals that hit many RDCs in 1997/98, in September 1999 the Secretary for Local

¹⁰ There was also a skewed interpretation in some RDCs that the DAs were to be considered if they applied, particularly in RDCs that rich with a strong resource base.

¹¹ For example, Umzingwane RDC special Full Council meeting No.12 (24/11/94) made a conditional offer to Gumbo who was DA-Esigodini (colonial name for Umzingwane) and was also the Acting CEO. Guruve RDC offered the CEO position to Felix Mhishi, a local indigene who was then DA of Gutu District.

Government and National Housing issued Local Authority Circular No. 205 of 1999 outlining entry qualifications for CEOs and Finance departmental heads. The circular read:

The Ministry, having carefully assessed and evaluated the overall performance of RDCs since amalgamation, has found it imperative to prescribe a new recruitment policy with respect to the post of CEO and Finance Head. While statutory instrument 170 of 1993 did not precisely stipulate any academic or professional entry qualifications to any office at council, this status quo is no longer sustainable in light of the civic complexities and intricacies resultant of today's global demands. Thus, with immediate effect, all offices of the CEO and finance head falling vacant shall be offered only to persons in possession of one or a combination of the following plus a minimum of three years of relevant experience ... a degree or higher national diploma ... failure to comply with the foregoing minimum stipulations on the part of Council shall invariably result in the Minister disapproving the recommended appointment.

This scenario resonates with the comments by Oyugi (1993; p.129) on Kenyan local government in the 1960s, where he observed that the Minister of Local Government had the power to approve the appointment of senior officers, as their salaries and benefits and dismissals had to be endorsed by the Minister. In Zimbabwe, RDC employees, though under the tutelage of the Minister of Local Government, can only be dismissed with the blessing of the Minister of Labour unless they are working to a Code of Conduct approved by the Minister of Labour. This aspect that the Zimbabwean powers-that-be have to think about seriously.

Oyugi (1993; p.129) argued that the power of an organisation to choose its own staff was an essential ingredient for decentralisation. It is unfortunate that through this 'veto power' that the Ministry of Local Government may exercise unfettered power that may create divided loyalties among staff. Mawhood (1993) observed that this 'divided loyalty' was rife in councils that did not get on well with the Ministry of Local Government. In my view, the senior officers often found themselves in awkward situations as they trod finely between the ministry and their council. This element of cronyism and victimisation inevitably led to job insecurity.¹²

Amidst this controversy, the following section attempts to explore what happened to CEOs a decade after amalgamation – to establish the rate of turnover. From the literature surveyed and cases examined, the paper concludes by arguing that labour relations in Zimbabwe's RDCs have been highly politicised and that Ministers of Local Government have fuelled the confusion and propagated unfair labour practices in the RDCs. This was further compounded by a murky legal framework. The next section will examine the recruitment and retention of the first CEOs after amalgamation and the controversy surrounding their employment.

¹² Oyugi (1993; p.130) brought out very illuminating cases from Kenya on the abuse of the employing power. He argued that "a chairman would disagree with an officer (say the officer opposes illegality or malpractice). At once, he [chairman] begins to mobilise other councillors against that officer, thus, preparing him for dismissal. They may bring in their own cronies who may suffer the same fate when the chairman vacates office."

First CEOs after Amalgamation

The first CEOs appointed for Mazowe, Bindura and Chirumhanzu were from the amalgamating Rural Councils. Whilst educational qualifications were considered (in any case they were not better educated than their District Council counterparts), this study established through interviews with council staff that the decision on whom to appoint showed the dominant nature of the amalgamating Rural Councils and the appeasing nature of the amalgamating District Councils, having satisfied themselves that these candidates were relatively acceptable. All the first CEOs in the cases studied, except for Umzingwane and Makoni, were middle-aged males who had attended the Domboshawa Council Secretary Course in the early 1970s. Umzingwane¹³ and Makoni appointed recent graduates who were rising in the organisation.

RDCs were keen to take on their own members of staff for continuity. In any case the councillors of the former Rural or District Councils wanted one of their own to safeguard their interests. Because of the many uncertainties at amalgamation, RDCs wanted to deal with the 'devil they knew'. Moreover, they could pay the new CEOs low salaries as they set their own salary scales.

Ten Years Later, What Happened to the CEO's?

Having identified the contentious nature of the recruitment process for the first CEOs in the fledgling RDCs, the research established the longevity of the CEOs in their respective RDCs (Table 1). A 'substantive CEO' refers to a new permanent appointment; an 'acting CEO' - entails temporary appointment from within either the RDC or the DA's office. The third column in Table 1, the Acting CEO from DA's offices, shows the number of DAs appointed to act as CEOs where for some reason the Minister of Local Government directed that the DA be a CEO whilst a problematic situation was being taken care of. The table does not consider the pre-amalgamation scenario where the DAs were *de jure* CEOs.

Table 1: Profile of CEO longevity: number of CEOs by the RDCs 1993 - 2003:

RDC	No. of Substantive CEOs	No. of acting CEOs (from RDC)	No. of acting CEOs (from DA's office)	Total No. CEOs
Mazowe	3	3	3	9
Bindura	1	0	0	1
Mutasa	2	1	3	6
Makoni	1	0	0	1
Gwanda	1	0	0	1
Umzingwane	2	0	0	2
Chirumhanzi	2	3	2	7
Gokwe South	2	3	2	7
TOTAL	14	10	10	34

Source: Mandiyanike 2006 (excludes acting replacements during vacation, sick leave or short courses)

¹³ Many insults were traded when the DA, who was also the Acting CEO, tried to preside over the consideration of CEO applications when he had also applied. The young CEO cried foul and called for the DA to recuse himself and his office from the selection. The process was started afresh and the chairman handled the applications.

As reflected in the table above, three RDCs, Bindura, Makoni and Gwanda,¹⁴ managed to retain the first CEOs. The Umzingwane CEO sought greener pastures and resigned after three years, whilst the first Mazowe CEO died in 1998.

In the latter part of 1997, the CEOs for Mutasa, Chirumhanzu and Gokwe South RDCs were embroiled in corruption scandals, with the collusion of their chairmen, which rocked their councils to the brink of collapse. The CEOs were fired and the respective chairmen sidelined. From the minutes analysed, the disciplinary cases for these CEOs created many fissures in the already fragile RDCs recovering from the post-partum amalgamation pains. These CEOs had strong connections with the political leadership, including some councillors, and an *'unholy alliance with the council chairmen'*.¹⁵

The RDCs were sharply divided on proper disciplinary measures. For example, in Mutasa, after an adverse audit report in 1997 implicated the CEO and Treasurer, the RDC held a Finance Committee meeting to debate the issue. The Full Council then convened a special meeting (10 February 1998) to discuss the audit report and resolved that the CEO and Treasurer should continue working as normal. Two days later (12 February 1998), another second special Full Council meeting was held where *'a committee was set up to investigate issues raised in the audit report and have all details ready in a week'* (18 February 1998). Meanwhile the Council resolved that the officers were *'to continue as normal'*. The decision to dismiss them was made on 6 March 1998. Thereafter legal battles ensued, whereby the officers were challenging the dismissal. In a Council meeting (FC number 3/98) on 30 April 1998 *'the chairman appealed to all councillors and the executive not to divulge any information on the issue of suspended officers'*.¹⁶ By December 1999, the issue of the suspended CEO was still unresolved. It was on that day (23 December 1999) that Council decided to appoint another substantive CEO and that the suspended CEO *'be dismissed whether he won the case or not'*¹⁷ pending approval by the courts.

The same scenario was witnessed in Gokwe South RDC, where the Special Full Council minutes of 15 January 1998 (p.2) indicated that the CEO, Mr. Tazvinga,¹⁸ was suspended from duty after being arrested on allegations of theft and fraud. The Council's application to dismiss continued for some time, and the Gokwe South RDC Full Council minutes of 19 November 1998 reported that he was still on suspension. However, 58th Full Council of 27 April 2000 indicated that the Tazvinga case was concluded and that he had been dismissed from the date of suspension. It is noteworthy that from

¹⁴ The CEO was a war veteran together with his chairman. The work of McGregor (2002) may help explain his longevity.

¹⁵ A ministry official during an interview gave this description.

¹⁶ From my experience throughout my service at Guruve RDC (1987 to 1999), I also witnessed a situation where some sympathisers would inform the officers concerned on the issues discussed immediately after the meeting.

¹⁷ Mutasa Full Council Minutes FC 5/99 held on 23 December 1999.

¹⁸ He has since died.

the sampled RDCs, those RDCs with contentious dismissals of their CEOs were also in line for suspension by the Minister.

CEO Retention: Virtuous or Vicious Leadership Circulation?

Whilst it is generally expected that employees should remain at one workplace for a long time, *'the concept of a 'job for life' has gone ... employees now have a more sophisticated and self-determined view of the world of work and their relationship with their employer ... people expect greater freedom, flexibility and co-operation from the employer'* (KPMG case study 6 January 2005; Rainnie 1997). As indicated in Table 1, there has been remarkable turnover of the CEO within RDCs. Summit Consultants¹⁹ (2005) argued that it was vital to see staff turnover for what it was, as an important part of any business. It provided the continual renewal of skills and experience, which acts as a motor for innovation, longevity and sustainability. It is only when this turnover reaches a scale where it begins to have a detrimental effect on the organisation that it becomes a problem. So what is the scale of turnover that creates a detrimental effect? Summit Consultants (2005) argued that the answer was different for each organisation, even for different grades of staff within organisations, and suggested that it was often better to look at staff turnover in relation to industry averages.

From the individual profiles obtained from the RDCs, the fourteen Substantive CEOs (Column 1 in Table 1) had served a total of 63.5 years during the first decade of amalgamation. The study deliberately excluded their service period before amalgamation in to focus primarily in their tenure as CEOs. The CEOs have served an average of 4.54 years each. The shortest period was six months, while the three longest serving CEOs were in post for ten years. Where RDCs were not able to retain their CEOs Council operations were adversely affected by the time taken to recruit another substantive CEO and the in-fighting and jostling for the position. Thus, the stop-start scenario stalls the momentum for development.

In Mazowe RDC, the first CEO died in March 1998, and a new CEO had been lined up for appointment during 1999. The Mashonaland Central Provincial Administrator's Report (Monitoring visit of Districts December 1999 to February 2000; p.27) noted that:

Council had made plans (a resolution after the recruitment process) to appoint one of their officers who had just graduated from University. At this juncture, the officer looked like a natural choice for Council, having grown within the ranks and persevered to improve himself in line with changing times. As fate would have it, Council plans were interrupted by the publication of audit results for the period soon after amalgamation, implicating a number of officers to varying degrees. In the ensuing procedures requiring responses, explanations and so on, the Minister intervened and appointed the then DA to Acting CEO position.

¹⁹ Article "How to use Training As A Retraining Tool", www.summitconsultants.co.uk/news-details.asp?fldNewsArticles_ID=109

In a separate discussion with an official from the DA's office, this officer who was to be appointed had been aligned with the controversial chairman who was subsequently dismissed. The Provincial Administrator's office recommended that the Minister should not approve the appointment. In the meantime, two Acting CEOs held office before the next substantive CEO was eventually appointed in July 2001. This new CEO served for six months and resigned for greener pastures. The next appointment was made in April 2002 when a substantive CEO was confirmed.²⁰

In Mutasa, the council had a series of legal battles with the CEO from early 1998 until 2001 when another CEO was appointed. In the process, there had been two Acting CEOs appointed from the DA's office and one from the Executive Officers.

Following the dismissal of the Substantive CEO at Chirumhanzi in late 1997, the next substantive CEO was appointed only in 2001. Sometime in 1999, the Council had resolved to appoint the Acting CEO (the then Executive Officer). However, the Minister did not approve this appointment because the recommended candidate did not meet the conditions stipulated in Circular 205,1999. The candidate took the Minister to court but lost the case. Another Acting CEO was appointed and served the whole of 2000. Early in 2001, a substantive CEO from among the Executive Officers was approved and appointed.

From 1998, when the first Substantive CEO was suspended pending dismissal, to 2002 when another Substantive CEO was appointed, Gokwe South RDC had four Acting CEOs (three from among the EOs and one DA). Gokwe South was also held up in legal battles with the suspended CEO. The Acting CEO who had been appointed (immediately after a CEO suspension) resigned after ten months²¹. The next Acting CEO served for a few months before he fell out of favour with some councillors and was implicated in a scandal involving a cattle sales register.²² The next appointed Acting CEO served for a few months again before being implicated in a scam involving getting unauthorised fuel and money from a council for his own use and was subsequently involved in a road accident with a council vehicle on an unauthorised journey. The DA was appointed in 2000 to finalise the cases and pave the way for a new CEO.²³

²⁰ This new substantive CEO was the same person who had been caught up in the previous political fiasco involving the dismissed chairman and had his appointment turned down. At the time of the fieldwork, I was told that the political gladiators had left the scene, whereby the chairman had been dismissed, the ego-bruised provincial governor had died and the PA had been promoted to another portfolio at Head office. Thus, no-one vetoed his appointment.

²¹ She had been with the council for more than ten years.

²² The register where impounded stray cattle were recorded was suspected to have been meddled with.

²³ It is noteworthy that Gokwe South RDC administrative offices were closed by war veterans on 5th February 2001. The war veterans alleged massive maladministration and corruption. A task force was set up and the DA continued to Act as CEO and another DA was seconded to be a commissioner to oversee the transfer of Gokwe Urban wards to town status. There were also cases of in-fighting between councillors, especially after a council employee who was suspended pending dismissal contested council elections and came back as a councillor to become the council chairman.

There was an equally shaky retention scheme for departmental heads (managerial employees) below the CEO level in the RDCs. Hayhurst (2004) rightly observed that recruitment difficulties do not just happen at the Chief Executive level. She added that in a tightened job market with skills shortage and high vacancy rates, retaining high performing managers at all levels is an increasingly important issue for organisations. In all the RDCs sampled for this research, Heads of Departments (HoDs) were quite mobile within and outside the respective RDCs. Internally, the HoDs were shuffled and reshuffled amongst various departments and were treated as generalists. In other instances, the RDCs made efforts to recruit externally.

Hyder and Thomas (2003) observed that changes in leadership necessitate the re-negotiation of work boundaries and established practices with a new leader whilst coming to terms with the loss of the dismissed/deceased leader. Nevertheless the politicised and inconsistent manner in which the retention has occurred erodes all the gains that could have been realised. Bindura, Makoni and Gwanda RDCs showed some consistence and stability. It was also unfortunate that the majority of the purges in the affected RDCs occurred at the inception or in the middle of the Rural District Councils' Capacity Building program (RD-CBP), with the result that the program lacked strategic leadership and continuity. More fire-fighting and crisis management than meaningful learning took place. In a study of the international experience in capacity building (CB) and its relevance for Ethiopia, Davidson and Pennink (2001; p.65) also dealt with this phenomenon. They observed that:

Fire fighting is what most local governments are doing – the focus is on current short-term problems and with limited political will and ability to think of long-term investment in managing the necessary change in the system. Fire fighting is in the sense of leadership, inspiration, energy, enthusiasm and spreading knowledge. Changing culture is what is severely lacking but is badly needed.

In terms of CEO retention, the cases studied (excluding Makoni, Bindura and Gwanda RDCs) exhibited what Davidson and Pennink (2001) aptly described as 'negative capacity'. This is the unproductive absorption of energies and motivation of individuals, but ending up with little as tangible output.

Hayhurst (2004) argued that restructuring, mergers and organisational changes have all contributed to the erosion of staff loyalty. She advised that retention did not always have to be expensive because rewards could be non-financial, but also some staff turnover is inevitable and could in fact be healthy for the organisation, as new employees bring new skills and ideas with them. Low staff turnover could also contribute to a lack of promotion opportunities, a static workforce and a lack of innovative thinking as bureaucratic inertia sets in. Generally, public sector salaries in Zimbabwe were low and the RDC scenario was even worse. There was a very high staff turnover in all the RDCs, especially in professional job categories such as engineers and accounts personnel, who had very good chances of finding alternative employment. The volatile political environment had compounded staff turnover. With trade unions becoming vocal, this was readily associated with the opposition party. The 'war

veterans' and vigilantes of the ruling ZANU PF party would be handy to 'purge any malcontents'. The work of McGregor (2002) and Hammar (2005) amply demonstrated this point. As a result, fear had reached alarming levels.

Watson (2005) observed that the link between staff development, employee satisfaction and staff retention had been established for some time but that many organisations missed out by not treating the issue of staff retention strategically. Watson (2005) thus advised that the first step was the development of an employee retention strategy that identified the pinch points for the organisation, the areas where the organisation regularly suffers high staff turnover, the particular concerns and the problems of the targeted staff groups.

Conclusion

While RDC employees are not civil servants in terms of the Public Service Commission regulations, they may appropriately be called public servants as they serve in the public domain. Thus, the label of being a council employee has lesser prestige than a civil servant, though in essence, there is nothing qualitatively different between the two.

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