

Performance management in Ghana's local government: a case study of Ada East District Assembly

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Abstract

This article examines performance management in Ghana's local governments through a case study of the on-the-ground experiences of staff at Ada East District Assembly, in the south-east of the country. The study found that performance management is envisaged in the preparation of action plans. However, the evidence also showed that severe logistical constraints, poor capacity resulting from inadequate training and poor supervision remain key challenges. In practice it was shown that performance management may achieve its intended results when accompanied by continuous employee performance evaluation.

Keywords: Performance management, district assemblies, evaluation, supervision, Ghana, local government

Introduction

All over the world, governments have implemented productivity-oriented measures in the workplace – including target-setting, league tables, performance information, planning and management techniques – and have developed faith in the potency of performance management (Andrews 2014).

However, over the past 20 years, public sector performance management has proved to be a major challenge for both central and local governments (Walker and Andrews 2013), and has warranted a great deal of empirical and theoretical research (Favoreu et al. 2015; Van Dooren et al. 2015). Within Ghana specifically, the debate on performance management has become a critical issue in the administration of the local government system, particularly as local governments are required to play increasingly important roles in the provision of social services for development (National Performance Management Advisory Commission 2019).

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In their scholarly work on rethinking new public management delivery forms and efficiency, Perez-Lopez et al. (2015) have suggested that using performance management tends to increase the efficiency of government institutions and agencies. Performance management is widely acknowledged as an effective managerial tool, and has become an integral part of the management system of many local governments (Woolum 2011; Martin and Spano 2015; Favoreu et al. 2015). Growing pressures such as budgetary and financial constraints, public demand for improved services, and the need for greater accountability have combined to force public organisations to pay more attention to performance in order to achieve results (Favoreu et al. 2015). Local governments have sought to step up the productivity of their employees and do more with less.

There is also a growing consensus among public administration scholars that making organisations efficient is central not only to improving performance, but also to creating value for the general public (Van Dooren et al. 2015; Henrich 2002). According to Zakaria (2013), many local governments in Ghana receive performance-oriented grants – such as district development funds and other financial support from donor partners – which are typically tied to improved performance. Deploying performance management would help these local governments make the most of their grants, particularly given their enormous developmental responsibilities. In effect, the need for local governments to manage the performance of their employees is now essential if they are to achieve their objectives and successfully develop both their employees and services for local people. Indeed, Ohemeng (2011) argues that many governments in Africa have introduced performance management to try to turn around poor public services.

Nevertheless, in many African countries, the public sector continues to be seen as “*dysfunctional, inefficient and ineffective in meeting and addressing societal demand in a more particularly fast-changing socio-economic environment*” (Davids 2012, p. 4,587). Davids goes on to argue that poor management, inefficient practices and public criticism of public services have highlighted the need to harness performance management in order to use public resources more effectively. However, there is scepticism amongst some local governments on the effectiveness of performance management (Baird et al. 2012). This paper therefore seeks to explore the reasons for underperformance, via a case study of Ada East District Assembly, a moderately-sized local authority in the Greater Accra Region, south-east Ghana.

Performance management in Ghana

Local governance can be defined as the transfer of resources, power, and responsibility from the centre to the grassroots, which creates an avenue for citizens to take part in decision-making and to ensure the accountability of local authorities (Faguet and Pöschl 2015). In Ghana, this finds expression in the metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies (MMDAs) enshrined in the 1992 Constitution and

invested with political, legislating, budgeting and planning authority (Republic of Ghana 1992; Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) 2018).

Some notable efforts have been made to incorporate performance management systems in the Ghanaian Civil Service, under a flagship programme known as the Civil Service Performance Improvement Plan (CSPIP). Since it was operationalised ministries, departments and agencies, including all local governments, have continued to use it. According to Ohemeng (2011, p. 475) this was the first serious attempt by the Ghanaian government to *“revolutionize public service organizations by focusing specifically on institutionalizing a performance-driven culture similar to those already found in developed countries”*.

These processes include:

- Annual budgeting within the context of Ghana's Medium-Term Expenditure Framework
- Publication of service standards and charters, annual organisational performance reviews and reporting
- Publication of performance league tables
- Systematic consultation with clients
- Composite performance monitoring reviews.

These kinds of measures make it imperative to use performance management to take timely and informed decisions, carry out corrective action if required, and measure progress against planned activities. Even more importantly, using performance management also allows the state to be held accountable for the allocation and use of resources against predetermined objectives.

A second initiative worthy of note is that of Ghana's Local Government Service, which has a performance management system which involves the signing of performance contracts between the relevant regional minister, regional coordinating director and district chief executive. Performance appraisals are also in place for all staff in the Local Government Service, which helps in identifying individual training needs and also with career and succession planning.

Performance management in Ghana's local governments

In Ghana, decentralisation and local governance in principle create a platform for ordinary people to participate in setting the agenda for local development (Ahwoi 2010). By transferring some powers from the centre to the periphery, decentralisation and grassroots local governance make room for non-state actors, civil society and private individuals and organisations to become involved in local governance (Crook and Manor 1998). It is believed that local governments will be more efficient in the provision of poverty-reducing public goods and services than the central government (Manor 1999). Awortwi (2011) has even suggested that because local governments are theoretically accountable and

responsive, citizens should benefit disproportionately from socio-economic development projects tailored to meet local needs.

It is now standard practice for local governments worldwide to be results-oriented, given their proximity to citizens and their direct responsibilities for service delivery (Perez-Lopez et al. 2015; Ammons and Roenigk 2015; Zakaria 2013). It is therefore not surprising that local governments are using strategic planning to identify and prioritise community needs, and have turned to performance management as a means of pursuing their goals and avoiding the trap of merely complying with procedures in their work (Ammons and Roenigk 2015).

In Ghana, despite concerns about limited impact, interest in the performance of local government authorities continues to grow. This is largely because their constitutional mandate empowers them to facilitate the country's development from a bottom-up perspective (Zakaria 2013). Successive governments in Ghana have therefore channelled significant resources into encouraging the use of performance management within local administrations. For example, a local-level performance reporting system was established to enable local assemblies to submit quarterly, mid-year and annual reports about their performance for assessment and feedback (Adei and Boachie-Danquah 2003). As indicated by Adei and Boachie-Danquah (2003), MMDAs also sign performance contracts, which are tied to institutional goals and outcomes, with their supervisory agencies.

Local assemblies have however suffered some formidable implementation difficulties. For example, both Issachar (2009) and Bawole et al. (2013) found that work was hampered by an absence of guidelines to drive a well-defined and enforceable implementation framework, a lack of objectivity and continuity in system administration, and the absence of any mechanism to link performance to enforceable rewards or sanctions and staff development. Bawole et al. (2013) further found that annual reporting, monitoring and feedback mechanisms were lacking or poorly executed, while Issachar (2009) argued that key executives lacked the commitment to support the system.

Operationalising local government performance

Many functions which hitherto were traditionally performed by local governments are increasingly contracted out to private institutions and non-governmental organisations (Perez-Lopez et al. 2015). With this in mind, Zakaria (2013) has proposed some theoretical perspectives – economic, accountability and service quality – from which to develop benchmarks for measuring and managing performance systematically.

The economic perspective focuses on value for money, which directly impacts grassroots performance and to a great extent shapes the perceptions of citizens, because if local assemblies execute their functions in an efficient manner, it shows in the availability and cost of services they provide. The accountability perspective makes public officials who are entrusted with public resources answerable

to citizens, who not only prioritise performance but are often also actively involved in governance issues. The service quality perspective, finally, argues that services provided to citizens must meet certain minimum specifications (although it is accepted that quality is a subjective concept).

Over the years, various legal frameworks and policy interventions have been adopted by successive governments in Ghana as a means of improving the performance of local governments with a view to achieving key policy objectives, delivering social services effectively, and discharging the functions assigned to them. To take one example, according to article 245 (a) of Ghana's 1992 Constitution, the functions of district assemblies include the "*formulation and execution of plans, programmes and strategies for the effective mobilization of the resources necessary for the overall development of the district*" (Republic of Ghana 1992). Local governments are therefore mandated to provide an array of functions and critical services to local communities, including waste management and sanitation, public health education, academic education, support for agricultural extension and rural electrification, town and country planning, and construction and maintenance of roads and public buildings (Walker and Andrews 2013). Local governments are also responsible for maintaining markets, social welfare centres, disaster management, tourism development, sports facilities and other recreational services (CLGF 2018). These are very significant responsibilities, and consequently there is now a growing effort by local governments to develop performance management tools to improve service delivery, efficiency and accountability in delivering those functions.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to capture the thoughts and experiences of local authorities on performance management, by means of a case study of Ada East District Assembly. Ada East was chosen because this assembly has not been very impressive in the 2018/2019 district league table being scored 42.7%. Also, the researcher lived close to the study area and access to respondents was easy. The study focused primarily on the interpretation of multiple socially and historically constructed employee experiences of and perspectives on performance management as it is used in local governments. The choice of a case study approach was informed by Yin (2009), who argues that case studies are most appropriate when the focus of the study is to find answers to 'how' and 'why' questions and where contextual factors are believed to be of importance to the study.

The study commenced with the collection of primary data through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which allowed both for further discussion and to gain an understanding of what interviewees actually intended to say while answering a question. Prior to the interview, the research participants were contacted to seek their consent and appointments were made for the interviews, which were conducted usually at their offices. In all, 21 respondents from Ada East District Assembly took part in the study, as follows: two each from the planning and auditing units; three each from the environmental

health, social welfare and human resource management units; and four each from the central administration and community development units.

The interviews were recorded and analysed thematically using the approach advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994), to identify broad themes generated from the transcripts within the context of the study. The interview contained open-ended questions which made it flexible enough to guide and probe further whenever respondents' answers did not answer a question sufficiently. The questions were not asked in a strict order. Rather, follow-up questions were asked where necessary to gain deeper understanding of views expressed by respondents before proceeding to the next item.

Results and discussion

This section presents the results and discussion. The findings are presented using the following themes: the extent of performance management in Ada East District Assembly, and the challenges of performance management implementation.

The extent of performance management in Ada East District Assembly

The broad view of all respondents was that performance is expressed in the preparation of an action plan for the assembly. The action plan outlines the specific actions, activities, steps and processes followed to reach identified performance targets. At the unit level, staff use the action plan as a guide to executing their tasks. An employee's job and the action plan are inseparable; they go in tandem. The action plan also includes the measurement criteria adopted, a timeline, and a description of the resources needed for the action.

Mechanisms for managing staff performance

In order to optimise staff performance, unit heads employ elaborate and systematic schemes. Firstly, assignments are given to individual staff with respect to rules and work schedules. Since most of the work is done in the field, the ability of a staff member to deliver expected outcomes is used as a yardstick for performance. Unit heads are therefore able to determine whether staff have worked satisfactorily based on the tasks given to them. A manager summarised this well in the following:

I look at the assignment that I give them, the rules and schedules, looking at our code of ethics and what they are expected to do. I also match it against the objectives and goals of the quarter. By that, I am able to determine whether they have worked up to satisfaction by measuring whether the goals are met or not.

It was clear from the interviews that staff are encouraged to adhere to the rules guiding their work for the attainment of goals, which means they tend to follow rules in performing tasks supervisors allocate to them. Apparently, however, the quest for innovative ways to achieve results does not receive corresponding emphasis. This 'rules-based' approach departs from recent academic thinking which argues that performance management, as part of public management reform, has witnessed a shift of attention away from input, rules and excessive bureaucracy and towards goal-setting and the use of

performance information (Andrews 2014). However, Andrews also found that employees' performance improves when periodic assessment is undertaken; and that, in such environments, supervisors have a key role to play in focusing on and directing employees' performance towards planned goals.

Secondly, the district assembly monitors the punctuality and attendance record of staff. Most interviewees acknowledged the significance of performance management in curbing absenteeism from work. This means performance management is functioning as a mechanism to monitor the movements of workers, which helps identify staff who may abandon work to engage in other activities during official work hours. However, even though coming to work is necessary, it is not sufficient to make employees productive. As Ammons and Roenigk (2015) argue, one of the core doctrines that underpins performance management is greater emphasis on results as opposed to procedural compliance. Performance management also needs to ensure that, day in day out, employees' performance is tracked against measurable outputs.

Another finding was that some unit heads simply observe their staff as they perform their tasks and the extent of their involvement in departmental activities. According to an official in one of the units:

Oh, this one is just observation. She uses observation. She sees how you are working by looking at you.

It seems likely therefore that formal and informal observation of employee performance also forms an important part of the performance evaluation process. Nevertheless, there was a general consensus among heads of department that although observation is essential, it becomes more effective when combined with other important criteria such as departmental goals, staff capabilities, readily available logistics and time limits. A unit head gave an overview of their approach thus:

So what we do is that we look at your problem and we try to know what are the contributing factors, those that we can work on, we work on them; those that we cannot work on, we cannot force you that by all means you have to achieve that target. So the best way to do is review it for you to be able to achieve it.

Performance and rewards or sanctions: tracing the link

While high performance is linked to incentives and rewards, poor performance should in principle be linked with sanctions such as demotion, pay reduction and reassignment. However, the evidence from Ada East District Assembly was that such actions are not satisfactorily applied. A senior official was straightforward, stating:

I've never seen anyone queried in this department for not delivering, for non-performance, no. I have not come across it yet. You may be queried for not coming to work but regarding your core activities, I'm yet to see one. So maybe sometimes, make sure you come to work. If you come to work and just sit down and stare into the air from eight to five, you are okay.

The concern raised in the above submission suggests that too much emphasis is placed on mere adherence to administrative procedures at the expense of performance; for example, staff's regular attendance at work rather than the outcomes of their work. While they believe in results, some

employees are not really focused on delivering actual outputs largely because management has not been strict. An employee may report daily to work without doing any meaningful work and yet may not be questioned by their supervisor(s). It is important therefore, for unit heads and other senior managers to ensure that employees are productive.

The findings also suggest that most senior local government staff assign tasks and performance targets to their subordinates, but then neglect performance monitoring and fail to provide results-oriented leadership. This is in line with the findings of Andrews (2014), who asserts that work-related initiatives tend to focus on the development of performance contracts based on specified targets, but with little emphasis on whether or not employees actually deliver on what they have been engaged to do. To be effective, a performance management system needs to link continued employment with satisfactory performance. This is supported by Bawole et al. (2013) who in their study of the culture of rhetoric in performance management in Ghana civil service found that poor implementation of supervisory and monitoring mechanisms in the use of performance management sabotages overall performance and that district assemblies seem not interested in making employees work for results.

Poor monitoring and supervision also make it difficult for managers to differentiate between good and bad performers, and hence reward or sanction appropriately. It has also been observed that many public services do not have appropriate mechanisms in place to identify, utilise and reward top performers (Martin and Spano 2015). Even if rewards or sanctions do not encourage improved performance, they are essential prerequisites for employee performance and development. A research participant stated hence:

I think one major challenge is at the management level. They are not, I think they are not really interested in, how would I put it, I think there is lack of monitoring, proper monitoring.

It appears from the above quote that sanctions are not applied in managing performance of employees. A combination of positive and negative incentives designed to encourage or discourage employees' actions is important in making staff more open to performance management, and essential to improving service delivery for the assembly.

Challenges of performance management implementation

Responses gathered by the study suggest that introducing performance management is not a guarantee of organisational effectiveness, and, furthermore, that the implementation process has faced some formidable challenges in the case study assembly.

Firstly, respondents unanimously agreed that logistical constraints are one of the biggest challenges to the implementation of performance management. Prior to performing tasks, employees are supposed to be provided with tools and equipment, and if these are not readily available, it becomes almost impossible to perform to a standard that could achieve organisational goals. This is exactly the situation

in Ada East District Assembly. Equipment as diverse as laptops, printers, photocopiers, paper, motorbikes, cars, rakes and boots were cited as inadequate when it comes to both general administration activities and field inspection. As a senior official in one of the units said:

If you request for a report on time ... you know I cannot use carbon paper to write the report. I must print and the printer is not there, you blame me if there is no paper? ... I am not happy as an individual of what I have achieved, not because I cannot do it but rather because things to work with are not there.

Likewise, the lack of and delay in release of funds needed to execute activities, programmes, and services in a manner most likely to achieve desired results remains a huge obstacle.

Secondly, office transport is a major problem. For instance, when the office pick-up vehicle is needed to take officers or documents to national headquarters, or for other official assignments, the only other vehicle may be broken down, so cannot take other officers to the field. Interestingly, however, although the assembly often grapples with inadequate official transport, workers felt that it is not right for them to abandon their work, and many find means of transporting themselves to work using their own money to pay fares, often without reimbursement.

Thirdly, staff need training and capacity-building. On-the-job training enables employees to acquire new skills and update their knowledge in order to keep abreast of current issues. Fortunately, most of the 21 staff interviewed had undergone performance management-oriented training at some point in their employment, although they argued that such training did not happen often. This suggests that managers and supervisors pay lip service to the idea of improving performance, but are not doing much in practice. When asked about this point, management staff noted that they are unable to organise regular training programmes because of insufficient funds.

Fourthly, the study found poor monitoring and supervision as another barrier to performance management implementation. Essentially, monitoring and supervision should be about comparing the actual output of staff with their performance targets as specified in the action plan. However, if monitoring and supervision are inconsistent or intermittent, staff may be present at work regularly, but not working for improved service delivery. As this respondent said:

... the truth is, it all boils down to supervision because if my supervisor is being supervised, he'll supervise me. He'll ensure that I will not do things that will get him into trouble. And the thing is when you don't do it, you know, without consequences, you know, I can do anything and wait for last minute. Even when they know that I am filling it last minute, there will be no consequences. That's the thing – so supervision is key, supervision is key. Without supervision, everybody will do what they want.

This demonstrates that flexible but decisive monitoring and supervision is a *sine qua non* for improving employees' performance and accountability; and confirms the argument of Bawole et al. (2013) that in Ghana leadership that is proactive, committed and results-oriented is indispensable in achieving results.

Another challenge the study uncovered was undue interference. It was observed that managers use their positions to interfere with and change the action plan. They influence the officers involved and try to include new items, but often without the accompanying budgetary allocations. As one respondent pointed out:

You decide on anything which is inside the plan for you to do, but you see them doing things which are not in the plan. Then, they will call you later, try and put this in the plan; try and put that one in the plan. Meanwhile, initially, it wasn't part of it and the things which are in the plan, then we don't get money to carry them out but they do things which are outside the plan. So the DCE (mayor) and the director have to understand the fact that as an assembly, we are going by this system; anything you want to do, you have to put it in the plan and you do it. If it is not in the plan, don't do it.

With this, original items in the action plan are compromised for those added by management. It can be argued that including items which are originally excluded from the action plan may contribute to some employees falling short of their performance targets.

It is also interesting to note that most of the challenges are attributed to financial constraints because it is considered one of the challenges of district assemblies. Mandatory fund transfers from central government, as respondents concurred, are irregular and always arrive late. One respondent vividly noted:

The thing is the release of the funds, timely release. I mean, yes, the funds will be released all right but at what time are they going to release the funds? That's key, it's the timing that does it all. If I am supposed to do a project in the first quarter and ... the release for first quarter comes in the fourth quarter... I mean, you practically kill my targets. So they also have a key role to play.

The late release of District Assemblies' Common Fund (DACF) money can virtually bring many operations to a halt. It also suggests that the time the fund is released is a determining factor in whether or not it is possible to achieve all performance targets specified in the action plan. As studies by Adei and Boachie-Danquah (2003) and SEND-Ghana (2015) showed, many local assemblies are unable to optimise their performance largely owing to late release of funds.

Conclusion

Generally, performance management at the local government level in Ghana is still at its introductory stage and has a long way to go to support employees' commitment to developing more efficient and effective local government administration. It needs to be understood that performance management is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end, but a vital tool in addressing the factors that make or mar performance, in local government as elsewhere.

Performance management has many benefits. It enables close monitoring of the progress and performance of staff on a regular basis and the identification of deviations, enabling corrective steps to be taken. Performance management however needs to be undertaken continuously, with quarterly and

annual reviews, in order to keep performance on track. This study's findings suggest that it has enabled local assemblies to step up their performance.

While staff recognise the benefits of performance management, they experience many difficulties in effectively aligning it with their culture. Additionally, the implementation of performance management is hampered because resources needed to boost performance are not readily available. A key problem is that the equipment, transport and logistics required to meet performance expectations are not reliably available. Furthermore, training and capacity development workshops which could help improve staff performance are rarely organised, and the supervision of employees is below par. For all these reasons, staff do not perform to their full potential.

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