



SHOULD ALL MUNICIPAL MANAGERS

# Get the boot?

With the election of new councils on 18 May, many municipal managers are likely to lose their jobs. The same applies to the managers reporting to the municipal managers.

How is this possible, given that the law provides for fixed-term contracts? What impact does it have on service delivery? Can we afford this when there are so few municipal managers with experience? Does the phenomenon take any account of the skills deficit in most municipalities and the fact that the law requires all municipal officials to have qualifications, competencies and the relevant experience by 31 December 2012?

Experience has shown that a change of government brings a clean-up of senior administrative staff, the so-called political appointees. This is more likely if the incoming party used to be the opposition party. An incoming DA administration, for example, would purge the officials appointed by the ANC government and appoint officials favourably disposed to the DA's policies, and vice versa. This also happens, however, when one faction of a party takes over from a rival faction of the same party, a practice prevalent in, but not exclusive to, many ANC-run municipalities. This change is often occasioned by the inclination to accommodate the people who saw to it that the victorious party or faction took the reins of power: it becomes their turn to benefit. As a result, the administrative apparatus that kept the organisation going for years is often dismissed, or placed on paid permanent leave or even given a golden handshake.

## Effects on service delivery

This practice disrupts service delivery because, two years before the end of a term, many municipal managers start looking for new jobs. The prospects of a change in administration, with the resultant dismissal of municipal managers and managers directly accountable to municipal managers, shifts the focus from service delivery to securing new employment. This affects the provision of services to communities.

## Brain drain

The phenomenon also ignores the fact that some administrators have, over the years, gained experience and competence in their fields of responsibility. Dismissing them merely to accommodate one's cronies or cadres leads to the dissipation of institutional memory. The machinery that has kept the organisation going for years is replaced by people who need a whole local government term or more to gain that experience. To the extent that this delays the provision of basic services to communities, it also contributes to the distress faced by local government.

## Effects on experience requirement

This practice flies in the face of commitments by government to professionalise local government and improve service delivery to the people. Professionalisation, as understood by government, has three elements: experience, qualifications and competence. Municipal managers must have five years' relevant experience at the top management level and a bachelor's degree in a relevant field, and must be competent.

The law requires all municipal officials to satisfy these criteria on 31 December 2012. Will the clean-up of top management after the forthcoming local government election not render this target unachievable? It is difficult to imagine how people appointed in June this year could have gained the requisite experience – that is, five years' relevant experience at senior management level – by December next year, unless they already have experience when they are appointed. If the practice of wholesale replacement of managers is not resisted, the government's insistence on managerial experience will ring hollow.

## Effects on qualifications requirement

The accommodation of those who ensure that a certain faction or a party emerges victorious in the local government elections has, by its very nature, no regard for qualification: the relevant consideration is whether a person is instrumental in ensuring that victory comes the way of a particular faction or party. This means that notwithstanding the legal requirement to consider proper formal qualifications in the appointment process, the political

parties or factions in the municipalities that adopt this practice in the elections will disregard the law, once the elections are over, and accommodate cronies or cadres. In respect of fixed-term contracts, political parties will plunder taxpayers' money to give golden handshakes to officials appointed by the previous administration, just so that they can appoint their preferred individuals. This is cause for concern as a change of administrative staff often has severe repercussions for the proper functioning of local government.

The problem will be exacerbated if the number of new councillors exceeds the number of returning councillors. New councillors will not immediately appreciate the complexity of local government and the importance of having experienced and competent personnel. This realisation might dawn only when

things start to go awry. Purging the administration under these circumstances will deal service delivery a devastating blow, because the new managers will need more time to fully grasp what is expected of them.

The country can no longer afford to kill capacity in this way; we need to build it. Let us create favourable conditions so that the scarce skills are not easily poached by the private sector.



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