

## **Active employee participation in the public service decision making process: A public servant perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Active employee participation has been deemed as a key element in securing employees acceptance of new policies and proposed changes. The ready acceptance of these changes could hinge on how active the participation of the employees is. This paper looks at active employee participation in the public service and how it is viewed by those asked to govern policies enacted and/or implemented. Examples are provided to highlight the need as it exists within a government ministry for active employee participation. It compares and contrasts the leadership styles of two permanent secretaries and how their differing styles contributed towards staff morale.

**Keywords:** Decision making, employee involvement, public service, Grenada

### **Introduction**

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There may never be a more bureaucratic system in the world of enterprise than in the Public Service. Most of which, if not all of its executions are documented, in and of itself not usually considered bad, are arguably important for record keeping that serves to maintain order, transparency and accountability. However, when it comes to decision making within the service, whose shoulders does the burden rest on? Is it the officers that engage in daily interaction with the public? Is it the supervisors that have minimal interaction with said public? Or is it the policy makers? Should it be a combination of all three? Does the system allow for public servant to actively participate in the process? Or are they solely viewed as data collectors and nothing more? The system is built on decision making from the top and filtered down to the constituents. This paper puts forth that it is essential for any organization, especially an organization that does not just affect its employees but the economic, social and political well-being of a country and its people, to decentralize the decision making process and include the public officers in the decision making process. This would allow public officers to buy into the policies as proposed by the policy makers and thus make execution easier. It also means that motivation and morale would increase and the spinoff would be higher productivity and lower turnover.

This paper therefore seeks to investigate the relationship between employees' participation in decision making and its effect on turnover within the island state of Grenada in the Caribbean. To achieve this, an understanding of the importance of decision making within the public service needs to be delved into. This will be followed by a discussion on how public servants –like myself- contribute to decision making within the Grenadian Public Service. Last, but certainly not least, a link will be established between the two aforementioned points and show how they can and may result in low employee turnover. All of this is done as a means on answering the question; how does active employee participation in decision making directly reduce turnover?

In an interview conducted with a Senior Officer within the Grenadian Public Service, the officer's view on the importance of decision making in the Public Service was as follows: "decision making within the Public Service is of huge importance, because the simplest of decisions that are made have the potential to affect an entire nation." Thus one can say that without a doubt that decision making lays the foundation of a successful organization (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2007).

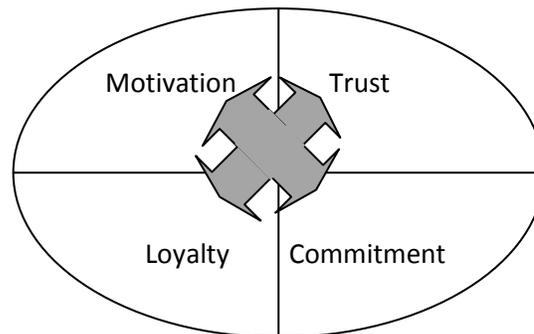
In 2002, the Grenadian Ministry of Labour released what is now known as the Minimum Wage Order of 2002. This policy has had a significant impact on the relationship between employers and employees. Since the release of said Minimum Wage Order, there has been an overwhelming amount of complaints from employees with regards to the wages being paid to them. These complaints, admittedly so, annoys the Labour Officer receiving them, for one simple reason. When the research was completed, Labour Officers said to the policy makers that the Minimum Wage Order would not strike a true balance between both parties and the party most affected would have been the employees and true their word, it happened. This example shows the importance of decisions within the Public Service.

According to Liebowitz (2008, para 1) "Business has to do with who makes the decision: owner, manager, supervisor or employee." It is understood, that within the Public Service, because of its structure, that autonomy may not be the most suitable management style, however, participative management can go a long way in ensuring that policy makers have a clearer understanding of the content of the data through open and free dialogue. It also ensures that the execution of the policy is effective because Public Servants feel that it is a policy initiated, developed and brought to fruition by them and they were a part of every step.

However, it is the feeling by some supervisors that having that form of management style may open the door for their position to be taken away from them. A Former Deputy Labour Commissioner (Ag.) of a neighboring island state categorically stated "when I started within the ministry I was told by my then supervisor I would not be asked for my opinion, as long as I carry out what I am asked to, the information, the data, would speak for itself." Figure 1 shows the influence of employee involvement on motivation, commitment, loyalty and trust. The figure lends to the thought that, Richardson penned, "The main benefits of employee involvement and

empowerment are enhanced morale, more productivity, healthier coworker relationships and creative thinking” (2013, para 1).

**Figure 1:** The influence of employee engagement on motivation, satisfaction and effectiveness



Adapted from <http://retention.naukrihub.com/employee-engagement.html>

This concept of allowing employees, and in this case, public servants, from all levels to actively contribute to decision-making, is known as “participative management.” According to Branch (2002, para 1), “Participative management addresses the relationship between the organization and its workers and stakeholders. It addresses fundamental issues of governance within organizations and the role of employees and external stakeholders in all levels of organizational decision making.” As stated before, decisions in the public service do not just affect public servants, but the country on a whole.

Greenfield (2004) noted that within organizations who value an employee’s participation consider listening to what employees have to say as important as setting goals. Listening is always the first step. Employees want to know that not only are they listened to, but also that their ideas are acted upon where feasible and their participation becomes a staple of the organization’s culture. Research indicates that employees with a high level of commitment “perform 20% better and are 87% less likely to leave the organization” (McGungale, 2011, para 5). Thus, one can see that employee engagement and organizational performance are linked. McGungale also states that of the three groups of employees (engaged, disengaged, and actively disengaged) the tenure of engaged employees is longer and these employees demonstrate more commitment to quality and growth. Engaged employees are those employees who are passionate and profoundly linked to their organization, which drives creativity and pushes the organization onward. Whereas disengaged employees are sleepwalkers just putting in time with little energy and no passion. The actively disengaged employees often put their passion and energy into deviant workplace behaviors.

“High performance organizations promote employee participation in decision making because the managers understand that employees have the right to participate in a decision that will affect them directly,” (McMillan, 2004, p. 256). Employees who are contributing to decisions making and motivated to so create an environment that promotes employee satisfaction and raises performance (Robbins, 1999). Once such a culture is prevalent in the workplace, then it increases the possibility of reducing deviant behavior and turnover in the organization. This argument is strengthened by HR Magazine (1997) when it stated, “...low level of commitment to both the organization and the team has been linked to absenteeism, turnover and intention to quit.”

In addition to inclusion in decision making, employees also need other measures to keep them motivated and engaged. These other measures are broken down into two categories - intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors can be a commendation for job well done, words of encouragement, even support in a difficult situation. The extrinsic factors range from bonuses, day-offs, profit sharing, etc. Application of these factors or a combination of them would depend on two things, the type of employee and the willingness of the employer or supervisor to do

them. In my ministry, application of both are few and far in between. Public servants rarely receive overtime payments and the process to receive it is so bureaucratic, that we tend not to bother. In addition, there are no bonus offered and commendations rarely happen.

With the current economic downturn, officials in my ministry noticed an increase in termination of employment, rotation and even employees quitting their jobs. I questioned one employee who recently quit as to the reason why:

*“...my employer does not ask me anything about the business and I am the only person there. He just makes the decisions he thinks are best for the business and expect me to go ahead with them, even though he is rarely there. What makes it worst, our relationship is not great and now that my salary is reduced with no other incentives, it makes no sense.”*

What can be deduced from that statement is that if her employer gave her more autonomy with the day-to-day running of the business, it would have strengthened her commitment and she would have considered remaining employed even though the relationship and the incentives were not there,.

“Common outcomes of an effective performance appraisal process are employees’ learning about themselves, employees’ knowledge about how they are doing, employees’ learning about ‘what management values’” (Ishaq, et.al. 2009). In the Grenadian Public Service, performance appraisals were done on an annual basis until the mid-1990’s, but when public servants got to the top of the scale the appraisals did not mean incremental salary increases. At that point even the supervisors failed to conduct performance appraisals and it fell by the way side.

At present, Grenadian public servants are faced with the introduction of a new “Staff Orders”. This is not going to sit well with the public servants. On the committee that sat to do the draft of the new orders, none were current public servants. The committee consisted of former public servants (retired about 10 years), and private sector individuals. Had current public servants been included in the discussion and drafting of the new “Staff Orders”, workable solutions to the potential problems that arose or will arise would have been brought to the table from the beginning. Ultimately, we know that the decisions rest on the policy makers, but having helpful information from those directly affected and those giving the mandate to enforce the policy would help.

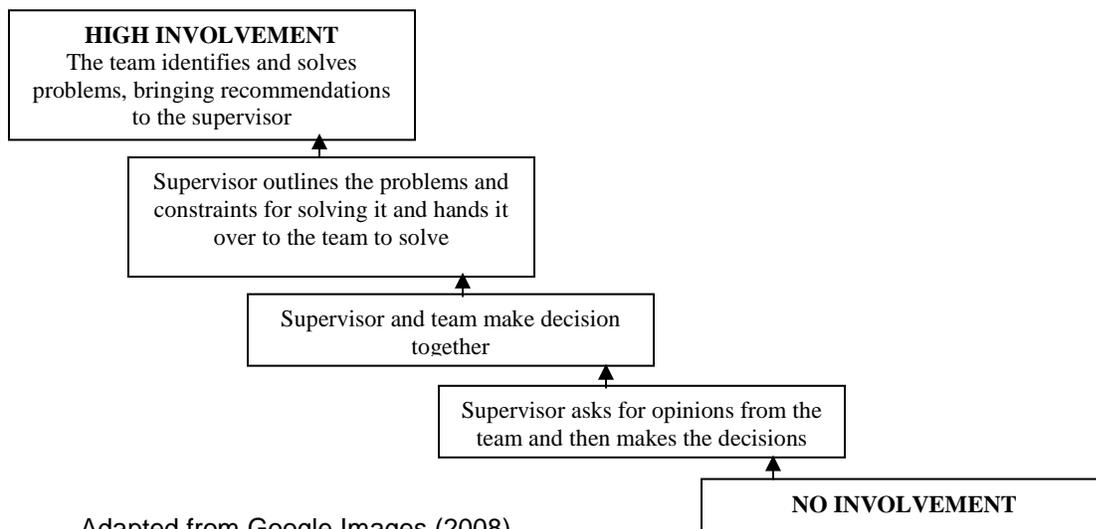
There are a number of ways that employees can partake in decision making –suggestion boxes, in office surveys, etc- but some of the most popular ways are through staff meetings and the usage of trade unions, where applicable. From my experience, I have noticed that organizations that offer employees with more autonomy and who engage trade unions less (not because they are antagonistic, but simply because they abide by the terms and conditions of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA)) have more committed and productive employees and ultimately, a reduced rate of turnover. In the public service, I have spoken to a number of young employees who have indicated that this is just a pit stop, while others see it as a safe and secure job, rather than doing something that they truly love, or something that they can truly invest in with their ideas. A young public servant in one of the ministries said, “When I leave to study, I’ll accept my study leave that is within the CBA, but I will not return. I cannot come back to the service where my ideas and degree would not be completely utilized because of the monotony of the system.” It is safe to assume that the employees less likely to leave are those that are engaged. This adds to what the young servant stated. One of the reasons that this particular public servant will be leaving is simply because her ideas would not be utilized once she completes her degree.

It is understood that it is the culture of the public service to be bureaucratic, because we are in an extremely sensitive area. As I have mentioned before, decisions made within the public service can affect not just the employees, but the country. According to Edelman (2006, para 1) organizational culture is “simply the sum total of customs, actions, attitudes and ideas that permeate a given workplace”. In my ministry, we were accustomed to being governed by the

Labour Commissioner and in the past we have had permanent secretaries who have all tried to instill their own idea of how the ministry should be operated on a day-to-day basis, much to the dismay and disapproval of the members who knew and enjoyed the previous culture. What ultimately happens are dissatisfied employees. We become disenchanted and rarely buy into the idea of the new permanent secretary. One of the recurring themes at the change of every permanent secretary is “no one thought to ask us our views as to how the ministry should go about executing its functions.” According to HR Magazine (2006), employee participation refers “to the process whereby employees are involved in decision making process, rather than simply acting on orders” and within our ministry and by extension, the public service, this is not the norm. At times, we believe that we are being lectured to, or ordered around as opposed to being listened to or even considered. Of course, this is what happens when the organization communication method is from the top, down. I can safely say, because I am an independent and motivated individual, being ordered around does not make me truly committed to the process, but rather, it makes me look for the end of the month when salary is paid and, the start of the New Year, when my salary increases.

A model for managers to follow with strict reference to motivating employees and ensuring that they are satisfied and happy is that of Google Inc. According to Cable News Network (2009) Google Inc. was the number one company to be employed at because the benefits are out of this world and the employees are satisfied”. What Google does is unique, the employees are not only provided with the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process, but they are also provided with other benefits –food, professional development training, gyms, state of the art health facilities. One of the criticisms of our facility (Ministerial Complex) is the lack of the obvious. There are few kitchen areas, sick rooms and no facility for supervision of children, even though it was evident before the construction of the building that public servants would bring their children to work with them when school is out for an afternoon or even on holidays. It could have been an additional way for the government to generate some additional revenues, but it also would provide employees a stronger sense of comfort knowing that their children are in a safe environment. Figure 2 shows the relationship between employees’ involvement and employees’ satisfaction.

**Figure 2.** Levels of Employee Involvement

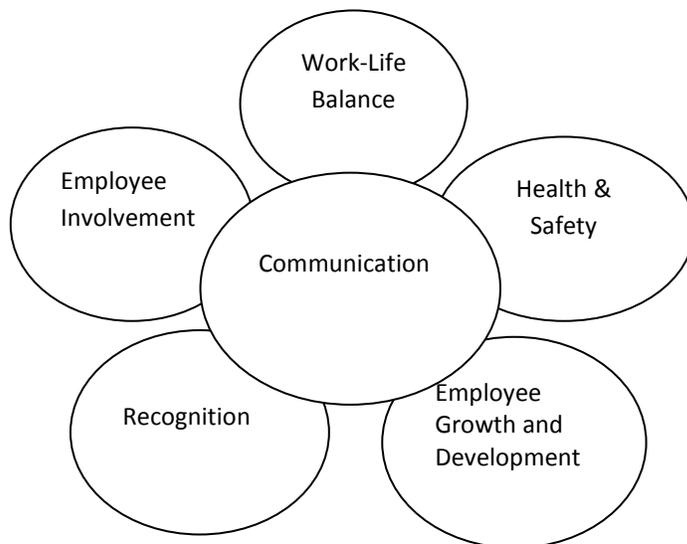


It is imperative for management, especially in the public service to apply some form of employee involvement if they hope to retain workers that they have made an investment in the form of training and salaries. If this is done, and the public servants are satisfied, the myth about public servants being the laziest set of employees can be responded to. Public servants should

demonstrate a greater sense of commitment to the service and noted productivity should increase while absenteeism should decrease. Once this happens, we would all witness a successful public service.

Siegel (2004, p. 327) states that some of the ways in which managers can involve employees within the organization include “work teams, employee committees, participative decision making and employee suggestion forums”, for example, staff meetings. It is in these staff meetings that employees/public servants can share their views on issues within the organizations and also share solutions to said issues. Additionally, employees can also make proposals to changes in day-to-day operations and executions. One of the underlying themes in all of this is the theme of communication. An effective way of discovering what the desires of employees are is through open communication (Harvard Business Review, 2003). If the powers that be would spend the necessary time with public servants, then a better understanding of the way in which the service has changed and is changing would be fostered. This should lead to more employee friendly policies. Once the policies are worker friendly, it saves the government money, because every time a qualified public servants leaves before retirement age, the service has to invest again in training to ensure that the new employee is able to accomplish the tasks set down for them. A former permanent secretary said to us, that “information sharing (communication) is important. Officers should always be briefed as to what is happening within the ministry and the service. When it relates to the day-to-day functions of the departments/ministries, no one person should have all the information and the others none in the event that the person with the information resigns, or is on some form of leave.” What this permanent secretary was doing was fostering the culture of communication. Figure 3 shows how important communication is.

**Figure 3.** The influence of communication on the employees’ well being actively disengaged employees often put their passion and energy into deviant workplace behaviours



Adapted from Google images (2009)

Last year a Minister made remarks with regards to the possible implementation of flexi-time in our country. At our ministry, we have absolutely no issues with the Minister or anyone making statements as long as they are authorized to do so. The issue was, the minister did not brief the staff, before or after the statement. The result was simple, people would call inquiring about it and we would say to them that we knew nothing about it. If the Minister had brought us up to speed with what was happening then the public would have been fed the information that they desired.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I stand firmly behind my belief that if employees are allowed to actively participate in decision making it could and would reduce turnover, absenteeism and increase productivity. Not only does participative decision making provide the previous points, but it also allows management to have a better understanding of the mindset of the staff and put better policies in place that would address the concerns of the staff. From all the people interviewed, not just within the service, but from former employees, it is clear that if consulted on issues that they would have felt as part of the organization and would have wanted to remain in the organization. It is said that information is power and as human beings, we love to feel like we have some power. In the service, I firmly believe that we, the public servants should be consulted more often on the issues that we are faced with on a daily basis. In my office for example, it would be impossible for the Minister to put a policy in place for complaint resolution if he does not truly understand the way in which complaints are settled. If the service is not consulted we would continue to see a service that is not motivated. We would see a service that is old because the young people would seek to go outside and the ones that remain would be there because it is a safety net and not because they can truly contribute. Is that what we want? Looking through my eyes, it is not. I hope when you look through my eyes you can see that I believe that *active employee participation in decision making directly improves service quality in the public service.*

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