

# The Impact of the Relationship between Public Organisations and their Commitment toward Service Improvement

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## Abstract

Continuous improvement has been studied by many scholars in the context of both the public and private sectors. Although public and private organisations both faced some of the same issues in their CI implementation, such as a lack of commitment from top management, a lack of resources and a lack of training, there are some obstacles that are considered specific to public organizations, including government regulations, a lack of clear customer focus, inflexible organisational structure, and a lack of competitors. However, not all the improvement activities of public organisations are driven by themselves; some public services in developing countries require a shared team from more than one organisation to improve their services. Some public organisations improve their services following government regulations, and their improvement strategy reflects their culture and behaviour, while others work only to follow government regulations without a spirit of creativity or culture of improvement. Public organisations that implement CI may face difficulties in improving shared services with other organisations that do not include CI in their plan and culture.

The key assumption is that public organisations that implement CI could influence those that do not have a culture of improvement, and vice versa. The level of commitment to CI in public service organisations may therefore be influenced by the relationship between organisations. Interviews with members of a team from two cases of public service organisations that has implemented an improvement strategy and have to improve their services cooperative with other organisations agreed that there is a difficulty in improving some services that required teams from other organisations especially if those other organisations do not have CI in their culture. Several barriers that are result of such team including lack of training, lack of improvement skills, centralization of decisions that causes delay in some improvement process, involving irrelevant members in solving problems, and low responses. These issues have a negative impact on service improvement and the organisation's performance.

The impact of this relation should therefore be investigated in more depth in further research. Public organisations that are involved in shared services should take into account these possible issues in relation to their improvement strategy. Implementing Improvement programmes has become essential for public organisations. Improvement initiatives such as quality management, Lean and Six Sigma, are considered a competitive strategy for private organisations and, unfortunately, still a choice for many public organizations in developing countries.

This paper proposes investigating the impact of relationships between public organisations and their commitment toward service improvement.

## **Introduction**

Over the past thirty years, public sector organisations have turned to private sector performance management practices as a potential means of improving and demonstrating their own performance and accountability [1,2,3,4]. The concept of continuous improvement (CI) is considered to be the base for every successful implementation of quality management [5,6].

Both public and private sector organisations are constantly facing the challenge of “doing more with less”, which means increasing competitiveness within markets at the same time that regulatory controls have become more stringent, meaning that past practices are no longer acceptable [7]. Many issues challenge the successful implementation of CI programmes in the public sector. Dissatisfaction with the performance of government organisations has become widespread due to the lack of improvement programmes in public sector organisations [8]. Moreover, the structure of the public sector differs in nature from the private sector. The public sector involves public organisations that provide goods and services that work according to the government’s strategic objectives. The interaction between public organisations is based on complementary relationships. Moreover, not all the improvement activities of public organisations are driven independently; some public services in developing countries require a shared team from more than one organisation to improve their services. This paper aims to investigate the impact of relationships between public organisations and their commitment toward service improvement.

## **Literature review**

Since the late 1970s, New Public Management (NPM) has been introduced to the public sector as a means of reform to improve the performance of public organisations [9,10]. While the NPM concept was originally developed for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development members, it was doubtful if this concept would be applicable in developing countries [11].

Globalisation and the need to ensure international competitiveness encouraged the process of reform and transformed governments in developing nations forcing them to overcome traditional management issues [12,13]. Moreover, traditional management issues such as inefficient systems, cost, lack of accountability, bureaucracy and poor performance all influence management changes [14].

However, public sector reform is still of interest in developing countries and some NPM reforms have been introduced in certain countries [11]. NPM provides many choices and techniques that developing countries can choose to reform their public sector [15]. However, NPM is not the only public management paradigm in developing countries since most governmental functions are still executed by vertically integrated bureaucracies [11].

Reforming the public sector and its organisations requires efforts that focus on productivity, providing more services with less money from tax, marketing in the private sector style to root out the pathologies of the bureaucracy, and service orientation to build the level of trust between citizens and governments [12].

Many management approaches have been introduced to reform the public and private sectors. Quality improvement management is considered one of the new management methods that were introduced into government organisations in the 1980s to enhance performance and to resolve public sector issues [16]. According to Sharma and Hoque [17],

quality management caused absenteeism and employee turnover rates to drop as public sector organisations began to work together towards employee and customer satisfaction. The concept of continuous improvement is considered as the foundation stone for every successful implementation of quality management [18,19]. Deming described continuous improvement as a concept that consists of “*Improvement initiatives that increase successes and reduce failures*”[20]. Few studies have explored the concept of CI in the context of the public service sector. Fryer, Antony & Douglas [21], who studied the public sector, described CI as an effort that involves all members of the organisation who work together on an ongoing basis to improve processes and reduce errors to enhance overall performance for the customer. Boyne [22] describes improvement in public service as attainment of closer correspondence between perceptions of the actual and required standards of such service.

CI requires well-designed and well-executed systems and processes accompanied by effective management [23]. This requires a method for developing and sharing the strategic goals of the business throughout the entire organisation so that every single member or problem-solving group is able to pay attention to enhancement, which will affect the strategic targets of the organisation [24]. The CI initiatives are dependent on the level of commitment of the participants [25], with each participant usually playing multiple roles. However, the role of the continuous improvement facilitator has been greatly emphasised by Caffyn [25], who has also listed ten key behaviours to improve the efficiency of CI initiatives:

- Employees need to be aware of the organisational goals and objectives intended to be met through the initiative.
- Individual goals and aspirations should be aligned with the company goals and objectives.
- All activities undertaken for the purpose of the initiative, including trainings and workshops etc. need to be monitored by the management to ensure that they are contributing to the organisational goals.
- It should be continuously monitored that all activities undertaken towards the initiative should complement one another and be in harmony.
- Managers should be committed to the exercise, and should demonstrate the same through their deeds and actions.
- The employees throughout the organisation need to proactively take initiatives to contribute to the drive.
- All the hierarchies need to work in perfect harmony with each other for the purpose of the exercise.
- Employees should share their experiences with one another as far as possible while working towards the initiative.
- The experiences and learning so attained should be recorded for future reference.
- Organisations should instil a shared cultural perspective in employees, which should also be reflected in the CI initiatives.

Jackson and Schuler [26] believe that the importance of managing performance and competitive strategies partly determines the structure of work, the objectives to be achieved and the behaviours that are needed and considered acceptable for achieving those objectives. According to Chapman and Hyland [27] the strategic structure of an organisation should be clear in terms of constantly integrating developments, making available the resources needed and building the capability for managing improvements in an accurate manner as a constant process.

In spite of the efforts made by the public and private sectors to improve their performance, it has been noted that there is a lack of academic papers in Eastern nations, especially in developing countries, due to little information about the prerequisites of continuous improvement in organisations [11]. Mimba and Tillema [28] argue that developing economies are more complex than developed economies due to the lack of well-structured rules, the constantly changing nature of laws and the existence of multiple reforms.

Many barriers have been identified in the literature, which hinder the continuous improvement efforts in the public sector. Although there are similarities in the barriers to CI between the public and private sectors, such as a lack of top management commitment, lack of teamwork, and poor communication, there are specific barriers that apply in the public sector, including inflexible organisational structure, employees working in silos, too many producers, government regulations and a lack of clear customer focus.

These barriers will be improved if the public organisations gain from the advantages of reforming the public sector. However, as previously discussed, the structure of the public sector forces the open communication between public organisations. This communication can be described as receiving and transferring information between organisations to meet government strategic objectives, sharing services that are delivered to customers or sharing teams for improving services. This relationship might affect public performance positively and negatively. So, the key assumption that needs to be investigated is that public organisations that implement CI programmes and create a culture that leads to improving performance continuously could influence those that do not have a culture of improvement, and vice versa.

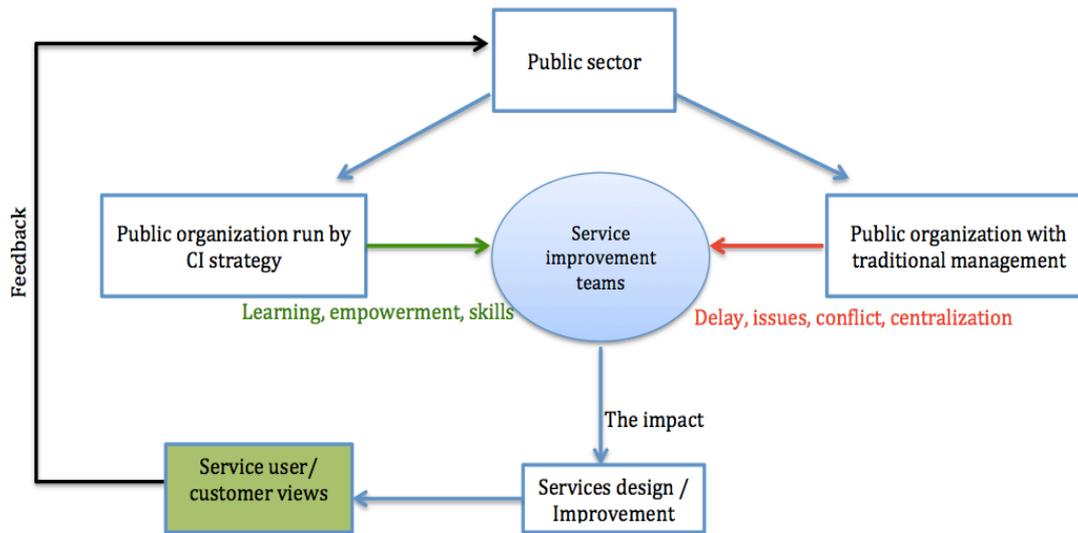
## **Methodology and discussion**

This paper is based on reviewing literature on the barriers that hinder continuous improvement efforts in the public sector. Interviews were conducted with managers of two research cases within the public sector to explain how the relation between public organisations influences the degree of commitment toward service improvement. According to Yin [29] *“case study is a empirical inquiry that investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”*.

Moreover, Interviews were conducted with team members from two cases of public service organisations that have implemented an improvement strategy to improve their services by cooperating with other organisations. They agreed that there are difficulties in improving some services that require working with members from other organisations, especially if those other organisations do not have CI in their culture. Several barriers face such teams including lack of training, lack of improvement skills, centralisation of decisions that causes delays in some improvement processes, involving irrelevant members in solving problems, and low responses. These issues have a negative impact on service improvement and the organisation's performance.

Those public organisations that have improvement strategies or programmes such as quality management, Lean and Six Sigma should take into account the issues of the relations with those who do not have improvement programmes or strategies. Managers of public organisations that do not have improvement strategies should take advantage of organisations that have implemented continuous improvement. Making CI part of the organisational culture requires employees to work together towards the same end [30].

Moreover, Figure (1) describes how the relationships between public organisations influence improvement



**Figure1:** The relationships between public organisations influence improvement.

Those public organisations that have improvement strategies or programmes such as quality management, Lean and Six Sigma should take into account the issues of the relations with those who do not have improvement programmes or strategies. Managers of public organisations that do not have improvement strategies should take advantage of organisations that have implemented continuous improvement. Making CI part of the organisational culture requires employees to work together towards the same end [30]. However, working in silos in the public sector, as result of bureaucracy, is considered a significant barrier that prevents the ongoing improvement of public organisations [31, 32, 33, 1]. Moreover, a lack of effective and qualified teamwork in an organisation is considered unhealthy and interferes with customer service [34].

However, when selecting successful practices or approaches of CI it is important to ensure that they fit into the organisational structure and culture before attempting to implement them in order to avoid failure [14]. Furthermore, this research requires more evidence from the public sector to explore the impact of public organisation relations on service improvement.

### Conclusion

The concept of CI requires cooperation from all organisational departments in order to be successful. Organisational structures, cultures and manpower all contribute to minimising barriers to improvement efforts. The external relations of public organisations should be considered along with their influence on the organisation’s internal environment. This paper is particularly important for developing nations as it provides a learning opportunity to avoid failure in CI programmes.

### Practical implications

The research has significant practical implications as it provides public organisations with an analysis of the key issues that influence commitment toward service improvement.

The influence level of the relationship between public organisation and their commitment toward service improvement undefined. Arab governments organisations (of either well-developed or poorly developed countries) have apparently also not received attention. This paper highlighted this gap. Further research should explore more the level of CI commitment between public organisations.

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