

Experiences of the Performance Management System at district level in South Africa – a development, mentorship or monitoring tool?

Nonhlanhla Nxumalo¹, Jane Goudge¹, Shakira Choonara¹ and John Eyles² ¹Centre for Health Policy/MRC Health Policy Research Group; School of Public Health; Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, ²McMaster University, School of Geography and Earth Sciences



Background

The change brought by decentralization in a health system poses complex demands and shocks, requiring effective management and skilled leadership. Central to this is an effective performance management (PM) system, which provides a conduit for managers to generate routines to enhance health system resilience and responsiveness to local needs.

South Africa's PM system – the Performance Management & Development System (PMDS) guides human resource management and support. Given the constant health reforms faced by the District Health System (DHS) in the country, it is important to understand how PM enables resilience and responsiveness.

Research aim and methods

To describe the experiences of district mid-level managers and senior managers with the PM system, and the extent to which the PM system enables or constrains managers from exercising leadership and mentorship.

Methods	Source	Site	Analysis
A learning site approach was used to trace experiences and processes over time. Qualitative methods included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document reviews In-depth interviews Observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior managers Mid-level managers (facility level) 	 <p>District in Gauteng Province</p>	Thematic content analysis

What is a Performance Management & Development System?

PMDS is an annual cycle during which health managers' performance is planned, executed and assessed following four steps:



Key findings

Positive views about the Performance Management and Development system

Performance management is implemented at the district and is perceived by mid-level managers to contribute to development

"I think for me... because I have been a manager in a clinic and I was managing 100 people. I think it develops people a lot"

"I have learnt a lot from the PM process and it also makes me push myself"

Challenges of implementation

Financial gain and poor reward system

"People are more focused on the bonus, on the money not on the development.... They have grown more accustomed to the bonus now they were asking me when are we're getting paid for PMDS"

Mid-level Manager

"There was a year where there was a problem with the PMDS. The outcome of negotiations was that everybody would receive a small bonus. This created expectations that 'I am entitled to something...if I received it once, I can receive it again'. It is now a tool for getting a 13th cheque."

Senior Manager

Poorly defined indicators and inadequate implementation compromises the intended objective

"Our performance management and development system is not aligned to our operational plans...so outputs on PMDS are very vague. There aren't specific measureable goals, the items are too general"

Senior Manager

There is an established system of scoring oneself, which renders it difficult to reverse: *"this whole group of people that will on a continuous basis get fours (which leads to a bonus) and once you've given a four it's very difficult to go back ... because you've been doing things the same way"*

Senior Manager

The process has become a compliance and routine exercise - open to loopholes

"It has become something that people comply with...they just change the date (and keep the same details)"

Mid-level Manager

Limited adherence to official performance management cycle

"The policy requires that we have one contracting process and quarterly performance management...but if you ask me, across departments you'd only come across one, which is the annual one. I am also the culprit because I don't do that either with my staff. There's no time."

Senior Manager

Poor performance feedback and limited opportunities for development of skills and career advancement

"The PA system is not serious at all. Mrs X (Manager) just sits with me and says 'Ok. I'm giving you a three here and here.' That's it. No room to say, you are not doing well here, what could be the problem. There is no chance to develop yourself or where they can say, you need development on this...or you need to attend this course"

Mid-level Manager

Contextual factors affecting implementation the performance management

Highly unionised context

"Unions interfere with performance management negotiations between subordinates and supervisors...but people still go to unions for managerial issues...They (unions) turn a small issue into a matter to protest about. They do not know their role.... The District had in-service training with the unions about the role of unions and that of managers... That they have separate functions..."

Senior Manager

"The public sector is highly unionized... I have seen it happening in public institutions...where the unions appear to be overpowering management. In fact in terms of management, unions are co-managing them (the managers)"

Senior Manager

Limited management skills to avoid conflict to protect relationships

Managers have limited skills to hold 'difficult conversations': "What I usually notice is that for instance - perhaps the two of you (supervisor and supervisee) might have not have been objective...because of the very close relationship that you may have, and the manager does not want to trample on the supervisee's toes. For the sake of peace, the manager gives a high score"

Senior Manager

Limited management skills >>> lack of relevant training

"People are getting promoted but I think the department is lacking (in ensuring skills). You are clerk, then you become a senior clerk... the department doesn't recognize you as a 'new' employee. You are 'old' staff but are on a new position. You should be inducted like new employees because you're now going to hold a new position altogether"

Senior Manager

"So you'll find that people just get promoted...they're not getting training, they're not orientated and then they start to mismanage their employees...Which is a problem."

Senior Manager

Culture of hierarchical, autocratic and punitive management approach compromises communication through the PM process

"They (staff) often say the PMDS is a way for the managers to punish the workers"

Mid-level Manager

"The system is a hierarchy. We don't have a flat structure. It's hierarchical and problematic, that is the only hinge which troubles me."

Senior Manager

"We use an approach that is used in the army to give instructions. That is, 'this is what is required and that's for you to do.' This is what you are required to do."

Senior Manager

Conclusion

Awareness of the contextual factors affecting performance management in the district can potentially generate processes that mitigate against their influence on PM processes. Development of management skills are key to nurturing mentorship and supervision skills that create spaces for informal engagements and communication.

Districts should consider establishing PM aligned training mechanisms that are relevant for managers' and staff needs. External actors such as unions and systemic challenges can compromise the objectives of a PM system - including its potential benefits of enhancing resilience and responsiveness at the district level.