

## How bureaucracy can be turned into meritocracy



The word 'bureaucracy' can have a neutral meaning. Simply, according to Websters dictionary, it can be used as a noun for 'government officials, collectively'. Most of us, however, think of bureaucracy as an 'excessive adherence to rules and routine', very often applied by government departments.

Some ten years ago, the government departments of Dubai would probably have been associated with the more negative aspects of 'bureaucracy'. Without a coordinated approach to setting objectives and standards, and no means of measuring customer satisfaction, government services were operated on an inconsistent basis with limited emphasis on improvement. Government employees may have been secure in their jobs, but not particularly well recognised internally or appreciated by the general public.

The situation was not unique to Dubai, and governmental departments around the world are rarely considered references in 'business excellence'. Given the size of government as a local employer, and the importance of a well run administration to attracting international talent, it was recognised that Dubai could benefit from an invigorated governmental sector. In 1998, the Executive Council under HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice-President and Prime Minister, Ruler of Dubai, launched a wide ranging and ambitious improvement programme: the Dubai Government Excellence Program (DGEP) "to attain international levels of excellence in government performance in Dubai". The focus would not only be on improving the management of government, it would provide rewards to teams and individuals based on their contribution to improving services. Departments would have to fix clearly defined and well communicated objectives, with measurement systems and public reporting of the results. Central to each would be their interaction with customers: and they would be judged on their success in improving satisfaction levels.

The initiative was taken to heart by the administration, which promptly set about learning best practices in business excellence from around the world. Based on the EFQM model, a series of training programmes and assessment procedures drove notions of continuous improvement into municipal services. Measuring progress has become something of an obsession: Dubai was the first government in the world to implement extensive 'mystery shopper', 'customer satisfaction' and employee satisfaction' studies, inspired from the private sector.

Among the initiatives is the Government Excellence Award which has 7 institutional excellence categories and eight awards for individual excellence, such as the distinguished government department, distinguished government employee, distinguished team, and the most distinguished project. Each is awarded at an annual prize giving ceremony. By the time of the tenth annual award ceremony in 2008, the DGEP has become a widely admired and followed programme, not only within government circles, but has also attracted interest from the private sector. Benchmarking visits to government departments have led to some surprising outcomes: several international private organizations and at least eight government excellence programmes in the Arab world have chosen

Dubai Government and DGEP as their benchmark for institutional excellence. In 2007 the DGEP won the United Nations Public Service Award.

The role of DGEP goes much further than the award scheme: the team is tasked with initiating key projects to develop government entities in Dubai such as, the Dubai Government Customer Complaints System, Dubai Knowledge Exchange Teams, and Dubai Government Excellence Service Program.

As much as he is proud of what has been achieved, HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum has made clear that this is only the beginning: "In the race for Excellence there is no finish line." The team which manages the programme is equally ambitious for what is left to achieve: Ola Mohammad Mubaydeen, Projects Manager in the DGEP, says: "we want to make sure that what we are doing takes root in these institutions by providing training and tools, and giving good people the opportunity to share what they have achieved – not only for newcomers to the program in Dubai, but in other countries in the region and possibly in Europe as well". Furthermore, the team is motivated to show, and be recognised, for regional leadership: "We are training a pool of assessors to international standards, applying what they have learned in turning around the government institutions of Dubai."

Supporting these ambitions is a series of in-company training courses, adapted from the "Committed to Excellence" and "European Assessor" programmes. EFQM and its faculty have worked closely with the DGEP to tailor the content of the training, so that it would better meet the local context. In particular, local experts are included in the programme, offering perspectives on how improvement initiatives have been managed, and the results they have delivered. Teaching of RADAR assessment approach is based on examples of actual practice from within the Dubai Government.

It is planned to use the pool of 'Certified Assessors' to conduct EFQM based assessment on an international scale, and so transfer the expertise around the region.

This has been a major undertaking since more than ten years, but is it a costly exercise? Ola Mubaydeen comments: 'setting up of the programme administration, the awards structure and our running training courses has been a significant investment – but our analysis shows that it has paid for itself in terms of the efficiency and improvement to services'.