A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS’ OPINIONS CONCERNING THE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out opinions of public administrators concerning the performance management system, to identify their current problems and to propose solutions. In this study, focus group interview, which is a qualitative method for collecting data, was employed. The opinions of 6 directors, who work in different public institutions in Manisa, were consulted. It was considered that they do have detailed information about legislation and operations at their institutions. The focus group interview lasted 93 minutes. Institution directors were asked 16 questions concerning performance management. The directors applying the performance system found current applications useful despite their shortcomings whereas others criticized their institutions as they have not yet adopted performance management.

Keywords: Performance, the Performance Management System, Evaluation of Individual Performance, Civil Servants, Public Administrators

1. INTRODUCTION

In working life, evaluation of an individual’s performance, in other words measurement of his or her physical and mental labour, has always been a subject of primary importance. It is one of the leading factors providing competitive advantage to enterprises. Therefore a good performance management system is necessary in order to make fair decision concerning employees and the enterprise.

Performance management is a systematic process in order to improve employee, group and organizational performance (Armstrong, 2006). The organisational systems which considers concept of performance evaluation not only a static activity of evaluation but as a dynamic process extensively including planning, evaluation and improvement of employee performance, is nowadays called the Performance Management System (Uyargil, 2010).

In Turkey, the necessity of improving the performance management system at the public institutions was mentioned on the 10. Development Plan (2014-2018). In the framework of the Law 5018 Public Finance Management and Control and Public Internal Control Standards Statement, which was issued in 2007, public administrations were authorized for making provisions concerning the evaluation of employee competence and performance. Public Internal Control Standards were determined by the Ministry of Finance, in accordance with COSO (Committee of Sponsoring Organizations of the Treadway Commission) and INTOSAI (International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions) standards. According to the Statement, public administrations should prepare action plans and complete procedures and related
regulations in order to provide adaptation of internal control systems (Public Internal Control Standards Statement, 2007). Nevertheless, inclusion of globally accepted standards to the legislation is not enough. Public administrations should make necessary efforts for adaptation and implementation of these standards. Therefore, finding out the opinions of public administrators towards the performance system, presenting current problems concerning performance management and identifying measures for solving these problems will increase the success of the performance management system.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Performance describes how good are the efforts of an employee while working (Schuler, 1995). Performance is the process of collecting organisational data concerning how well an employee works (Waxin and Bateman, 2009). This measurement and performance evaluation including improvement and corrective information if necessary should focus on determined activities and results (Fry, Stoner and Hattwick, 2004). Performance management is a systematic process including performance evaluation. Armstrong (2006) defines performance management as a flexible process which focuses on values and behaviours as well as goals, includes minimum documentation and a process where managers’ responsibilities are clear. Performance management is not directly associated with wages.

Demmke (2007) states that qualitative assessment and measurement are considered more important and unmeasured task components tend to disappear. In many European administrations, measurement procedures and note taking diminish except individual necessities and abilities. Evaluation procedures tend to become simplified, criteria for personalities decrease and evaluations include differences according to organisations. Particularly delegation of authority for staff functions, strategy towards localisation and consolidation of local state units and administrators are at stake. In terms of adaptation of the performance management systems by units, determination of goals and conferment, local governments are more and more authorised (Selden, Ingraham and Jacobson, 2014). For instance, goals oriented management is common in the EU countries but there are differences in implementations (EC, 2012). The most remarkable implementations in today’s performance management are the following: key performance indicators (KPIs), balanced scorecard, mixed analysis by using each method, 360 degree evaluation, clear determination of performance goals, using performance management as a cycle of learning and participation from the upper management to the staff at the lowest level (The KPI Institute [KPI], 2013). There are many techniques for performance evaluation. However, it is hard to tell which technique is the best one because each technique has advantages and disadvantages with regard to the type and size of organisation and environmental factors (Aggarwal and Thakur, 2013). Grossi (2012) points out the low level of organisational confidence as the primary difficulty for performance evaluation in the public sector. Particularly inadequate understanding of performance evaluation tools and general idea that they are insufficient is another problem. The variety and extensiveness of the bureaucracy, limited number of rewards in the public sector and lack of trade unions’ supports are the observed difficulties. Therefore these difficulties should be taken into consideration while determining standards concerning performance evaluation.

In the public sector of Turkey, there is a life-long job security on behalf of employees. Public employment in Turkey is regulated by the Law number 657. This law classifies employees into four categories: permanent civil servants doing basic public services, covenanted employees working on temporary basis, temporary labourers whose contracts last less than a year and labourers who work permanently and labourers in other categories. There are approximately 2 million civil servants in Turkey. Civil servants have no right to go on a strike (OECD, 2012). In working life, making no discrimination concerning race, language, belief and gender is a legal obligation. Nonetheless, enterprises should design the performance management system in accordance with the properties of their employees. Different groups of workers (immigrants, the disabled, generation differences of employees etc.) should be taken into consideration. For example in 2004, the number of disabled civil servants in Turkey was 8.717; this number rose to 34.088 in June 2014 (General Directorate of Disabled and Elderly Services, 2014). Although the increase of disabled employment in working life is positive, there should be efforts to regulate working conditions of these employees and implementation of processes of the performance management system.
Performance management in Turkey develops in the process of Turkey’s EU candidacy. The unique cultural structure of Turkey necessitates a democratic and secular state. Performance management in Turkey is highly specific organisational issue. However, 80% of the private enterprises use some current aspects of the system. In Turkish culture, employee relations play a significant role. Validity and credibility of the systems implemented in Turkey and fair performance management are very important (Aguinis, Joo and Gottfredson, 2012). Although performance evaluation has begun to become important, current implementations in the public sector do not go beyond repetition of traditional methods. Top to bottom operating supervision system authorised by the ministries, hinders institutions to become transparent and does not follow modern approaches (Bellibaş and Gedik, 2013). In public organisations, “annual registry report”, which can be considered as performance evaluation in the strict sense, was lastly done in 2010. Some institutions such as Ministry of Education, Social Security Institution, and Turkish Grand National Assembly Chairmanship evaluate their employees with multiple evaluation methods. Ministry of Health performs individual performance management system at hospitals since 2005. Each hospital has performance coefficients and performance indicators that are used in performance evaluations (KPI, 2013). Although there are different criteria for evaluation in each institution, some are in common. For example criteria like behaviours concerning coordination and performance criteria concerning evaluation of professional knowledge and skills are among performance evaluation scales of many institutions in Turkey (MÜ, 2011; BÜ, 2014; ODTÜ, 2014; TBMM, 2013). However it is identified that in many public institutions, employee performance has not been evaluated in the last four years and performance evaluation implementations have not yet been adopted.

3. METHOD

In this study, focus group interview was employed as a qualitative method for collecting data. In focus group interview, the interviewer asks a small group of individuals (usually between four and eight people) to think about a particular problem. Focus group interview is not a discussion or a group for making decisions and solving problems (Büyüköztürk et al., 2013). Therefore different from quantitative interviews, it is essential to understand feelings and thoughts of participants in a deeper way rather than being superficial (Kuş, 2009). The place, day and time of interviews with 6 directors, who are working at public institutions in Manisa, were jointly determined. Average age of participating directors to focus group interview is 49. Average duration of service is 26 years and average duration of service as an administrator is 19. All directors are male and university graduates. The directors represent public service institutions which completed their organisation since the foundation of Republic of Turkey (1923)

3.1 Research Question and Aim of the Study and Interview Questions

The research question of the study is: “What are the opinions of public administrators concerning the implementation of the performance management system?”

The aim of the study is to determine opinions of public administrators about the performance management system in public institutions, to demonstrate current problems concerning performance management and to identify necessary measures in order to solve them.

The following questions were asked to the participating institution directors during focus group interview, answers were noted and recorded.

1. Does your institution have aims and goals? What sort of attempts are made in order to encourage your employees adopt these aims and goals?

2. Does your institution have mission, vision and values that are widely known by all employees? If any, could you inform us about process of formulating these?

3. Are there job descriptions and work analysis in your institution? Could you inform us about these processes?

4. How should employee performance be measured at your convenience? How do you benefit from data concerning job description and work analysis?

5. Who determines goals and criteria for employee performance? Which factors influence (work place, aims, goals etc.) this?

6. In your opinion what should be the significance of the results of team/individual performance goals in performance evaluation of employees?

7. On which criteria should employees be evaluated concerning attitudes?
8. On which criteria should employees be evaluated concerning professional knowledge and skills?

9. Who should evaluate employee performance?

10. How often should employee performance be evaluated?

11. Who should deliver the results of evaluation to employees and how?

12. Do administrators in your institution have the capacity to discuss the results of employee performance evaluation?

13. Could you make a qualitative and quantitative assessment concerning professional and individual improvement training of your employees?

14. In which processes of human resources management should the results of performance evaluation be used?

15. Do you find the performance management implementation of your current institution successful?

16. What are your criticisms and suggestions concerning the evaluation of employees’ individual performance?

3.2 Research Findings and Interpretation

The data acquired from focus group interview were content analysed under four main themes. The emergent themes are the following:

Theme 1: Performance Planning

The answers of the questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 were analysed under the theme of performance planning.

The directors indicated aims and goals of their institutions. It can be said that existing paternalist understating of management in Turkish society is used as a tool of motivation in order to adopt these aims and goals. The issue is to maintain unity of employees (etc. banquets, wedding and funerary visits).

The institutions represented in focus group interview have missions, visions and values. These have been formed in different processes. Employees do not contribute much to formulation of mission and vision.

The directors have positive opinion concerning mission and vision formation of local organisation and competition between institutions.

Job descriptions and work analyses are done in institutions.

The preparation of job descriptions and work analyses facilitates works.

With the exception of two institutions, job descriptions and work analyses are not benefited during evaluation of employee performance. It would be beneficial to use job descriptions and work analyses during evaluation of employee performance. First, performance of institutions and units should be evaluated then individual performance should be measured.

Although managers of local institutions are consulted from time to time, goals are set by the upper institution/the ministry. If goals set includig local level, participation should be ensured, goal setting process should not be complicated and loss of time should be avoided because when external experts make solutions, it is hard to adopt; this also decreases feeling of responsibility on the local level (EC, 2013:6).

Theme 2: Performance evaluation

The answers of the questions 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 were analysed under the theme of performance evaluation. The research findings are listed below:

The significance of the results of performance goals during performance evaluation should be at least between 40-60%.

The directors stated behaviour criteria for employee evaluation as entrepreneurship and being innovative, human relations, being open to learning, organisation skills, team work, self confidence, work ethics and resistance to stress respectively.

In performance evaluation of employees, the directors desire the following criteria: “theoretical and practical knowledge levels, performing the task in desired time and amount, communication with service takers and taking responsibility.

The directors prefer that performance evaluation should be done every six months.

The directors of public institutions stated that employees should be evaluated by service takers, colleagues, the first administrator, the second administrator, subordinates, employee himself and administrators of other units respectively. According to these findings, administrators prefer 360 degree feedback implementation.

Evaluation results should be delivered to employees by their superiors face to face.

Administrators do not have a total capacity of evaluating employee performance and discussing the results with employees.
Theme 3: The Use of Evaluation Results

The answers of the questions 13 and 14 were analysed under the theme of the use of evaluation results.

Training necessities change according to the structures and resources of institutions. The directors expressed that some institutions need for professional training and some need issues of expertise except superficial topics or personal development. However, they also criticised that utility analysis was not made after training and the trained staff make the same mistakes. In general, they stated that all employees take part in-service training once a year.

The average age of directors is 49 and their average duration of service is 26 years; so they can be considered experienced. They indicated that performance evaluation results should first be used for wage payments, identification of the need for training and bonus payments. The directors indicated that money alone is not a motivation although they regard monetary rewards as a significant tool of motivation.

Theme 4: Critics and Suggestions

The answers of the questions 15 and 16 were analysed under the theme of the use of critics and suggestions.

The directors, whose institutions implement performance management, found current implementations successful whereas the others did not. The latter criticise their institutions for not adopting performance management.

The directors are particularly aware of regional and institutional differences. They think that each institution has different priorities; therefore the performance management system should be established accordingly.

Another accentuated topic is the support for projects and ideas of employees. This will motivate employees and help to increase their performance. Employees of local institution know their priorities and strong and weak sides; thereby the projects and ideas that they desire will be more lucrative than standard projects. Because in the activities, which are prepared and implemented by employees, the management by aims method’s function of goal setting and agreement is done naturally.

In addition, the directors stated that nepotism may occur during performance evaluation. Objective, valid and credibly evaluation methods and capable administrators are needed in order to gain employee’s trust and overcome their concerns about performance evaluation. All of the directors reported that there is a need for open criteria for administrators and these criteria should be obeyed. They also said that administrators should be informed about the performance management system.

According to the research findings, administrators in public institutions underlined necessity for some regulations in the context of human resources in order to operate in line with the open and objective criteria. More importantly, these procedures should apply everyone equally. For example, transparency, neutrality, struggle against nepotism in implementation such as employment, promotion, appointment and performance evaluation. In public institutions, there is a particular need for research on the performance management system. However, rapid application of such studies, whose preliminary preparation might take a few years, without taking opinions of administrators, employees and experts, may bring harm instead of benefits.

4. CONCLUSION

Although Turkish public administration has included globally accepted standards concerning performance management to its legislation, apparently there have been some delays in practice. The institutions, which have not yet established a performance management system, cannot evaluate their employees’ performance. As supervision and guidance services concerning performance management are executed through inspectors, investigation and examination are more dominant.

It was identified that in legislation studies concerning the performance management system, opinions of local administrators and employees are not adequately taken into consideration. Projects and ideas of administrators and employees in provincial organisations should be considered as significant motivations for performance. Particularly in determination of unit goals and preparation for procedures, shareholders’ opinions should absolutely be regarded.

Because of nepotism and incompetency of administrators, there are negative perceptions about choices of performance evaluators and objectivity of evaluation.

In public institutions, administrators and employees should be trained on strategic management and performance management system;
training should be encouraged. In particular administrators, if they study in the field of administrative sciences, should be given extra credits during performance and proficiency evaluation.

It was observed that capacity oriented, output or result centred methods are used. Individual performance goals should not be prepared only in accordance with output or result centred perception but the quality of services, behaviours, professional knowledge and skills should be included into performance goals. Evaluation of employees only on the basis of institutional profit will not be for the benefit of the institution.

It was found out that evaluation takes long time and there is excessive amount of documents at the institutions with performance evaluation (e.g. The Public Hospitals Institution and The National Education Directorate). Methods that necessitate long time and many documents should not be used in the process of performance evaluation. Nowadays although web-based performance evaluation software is common, face to face communication with employees is more important.

Performance evaluation results should be taken into consideration in the process of human resources. Performance evaluation results have little or no effects on employees’ appointment, promotion or rotation procedures. Therefore, performance evaluation results should be sufficiently considered in employees’ appointment, promotion or rotation procedures. According to the personnel regulations of ministries, performance and competency evaluation criteria include certificate of achievements and rewards whereas level of general performance is not regarded.

Payments to employees according to performance evaluation results should not deteriorate work achievement. Payment based on performance, as in health services, should not create a wage gap between employees. It should be remembered that extra payment is a tool of motivation.

More studies on the results and problems of performance evaluation implementations in different regions and in different organisational cultures would be very beneficial.

REFERENCES


