



# GOVERNMENT DIALOGUE IN CONVERSATION WITH THE PUBLIC EMPLOYEE

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## Professionalising the civil service

By Albert Pule

*Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe during the interactive platform with delegates at the Government Leadership Summit at the CSIR.*



The 2013 Government Leadership Summit, convened by the Ministry of Public Service and Administration, brought together ministers, directors-general (DGs), mayors, heads of departments and leaders from Chapter Nine institutions to discuss how to improve the administration of government.

One of the key issues was the loss of skills resulting from the relatively high turnover of senior civil servants (DGs) who left the public service because they didn't get along with their ministers.

The general consensus was that measures must be put in place to prevent the continued loss of DGs from the civil service. Minister of Public Service and Administration, Lindiwe Sisulu said the summit was convened to outline the important role senior civil servants play in government's mission of rendering

services to the poor.

"We have created this environment to talk directly to those who need to hear what we have to say, to share our concerns, our frustrations, and our views on how we can do it differently and better."

### Retaining senior public servants

In his keynote address Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe said government needed to take steps to preserve the institutional memory that sits with DGs by retaining them in their positions and clearly defining their role to avoid conflicts.

He was speaking against the backdrop of the departure of DGs as a result of the acrimony that often occurs between the political head (minister) and the administrative head (DG).

"The nature of the relationship between the political



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authority and the administrative arm of the state must always be clearly defined to preclude confusion of roles," he said.

Deputy President Motlanthe said in the past 18 years of democratic

governance, conflict had often resulted from this area of inter-connection between the administrative and the political authority. "In many cases, the ensuing strained relations between ministers and DGs invariably see the

latter leave both the department and government."

He added that the departure often puts strain on the running of the department. "It is not hard to imagine the scale of institutional memory loss for government as an upshot of continued resignations of senior officials.

"Instability occasioned by such high turnover of senior managers inevitably leads to ineptitude during transition periods as replacements are sought."

"This, then, is another point to ponder for this summit. We should, accordingly, seek ways to obviate situations in which new appointments result in paralysis of departments during the said transitions," he said.

Minister in the Presidency responsible for the National Planning Commission Trevor Manuel said the average department had about four DGs in 10 years.

"This figure is even higher at provincial level. No private company, academic institution or even a village football club can thrive with that sort of turnover," he said.

Minister Manuel also called for bold steps when an official does not do his or her job properly. "When people perform poorly, it is sometimes necessary to dismiss or shift people.

"But more often, it is necessary to keep people in their positions so that they can learn from their mistakes, gain some experience and make steady progress in performance. Many of the best performing departments have had much more stable leadership."

He said that the time for blame games was over and civil servants needed to roll up their sleeves and render services to the public.

"Nineteen years into democracy, our government has run out of excuses. We cannot plead ignorance or inexperience. For almost two decades, the public has been patient in the face of mediocre services. The time for change, for a ruthless focus on implementation has come."

As part of the measures to professionalise the Public Service, government is setting up a school of governance and has appointed a DG to set up the Office of Compliance and Standards. According to Minister Sisulu, this office will "monitor the adherence to standards, the Public Service Act and the new Public Administration Act."

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