

# Stewardship of Resources in the South African Public Sector Institutions

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to assess the extent to which public officials adhere to the basic principles of stewardship in the use and management of public resources in the South African public sector institutions. In this regards, it is imperative to note that public officials have a significant role to fulfil as stewards or managers of financial and non-financial resources entrusted upon them. Moreover, public officials (stewards) are responsible for protecting or safeguarding public resources in an efficient and responsible manner. Despite this pivotal role, public officials misuse resources entrusted to them for personal gain at the expense of general populace. In order to comprehend and appreciate the importance of stewardship in the context of public sector institutions, this paper presents the scope and definition of stewardship. The paper argues that the resources under the custodianship of public officials belong to the citizens and therefore ought to be managed with utmost circumspection. To this end, public officials have to denounce greediness and corruption thereby exercising self-control in order to eschew misuse of scarce resources. Further, this paper maintains that if public officials aspire to abide by basic tenets of stewardship they must be accountable, trustworthy, honest and loyal to the citizens. Building a relationship of trust and maintaining loyalty to the citizens is important primarily because citizens are the real owners of resources under the control of public officials. Equally important, citizens deserve to be treated with positive attitude, humility and care. In other words, stewardship ought to be a manifestation of love for the citizens by public officials. It is also argued that to be good stewards requires total commitment or dedication from public officials in managing resources. This paper concludes that failure by public officials to give account for the utilisation of resources and ineptitude to render quality service to the citizens with humility in the South African public sector institutions constitutes an antithesis of the spirit of stewardship.

**Keywords:** Accountability, Discipline, Professionalism, Steward, Stewardship, Trust

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## 1. Introduction

There is paucity of research on stewardship particularly in the context of public sector, and the extant research on this subject is predominantly theoretical, with less empirical research (Ee Wan, 2015:18). The concept of stewardship can be traced from the book of Genesis in the bible when God created human beings to be in charge of creation (Saltman & Ferroussier-Davis, 2000:732). Further, Worrell and Appleby (2000:272) point out that stewardship emerged as part of Judeo-Christian heritage although similar terms can be found in other religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam and Confucianism. Clearly, religious institutions have played a significant role in promoting the concept ethical stewardship. According to Caldwell, Hayes, Karri and Bernal (2008:161), ethical stewardship seeks to achieve effective and efficient governance model that would bring about long-term institutional prosperity by maximising employee commitment. In the same vein, Section 195 (1)(b) of the *Constitution*, 1996, calls for the promotion of efficient, economic

and effective use of resources in the public sector institutions (Republic of South Africa, 1996:99). Despite this provision in the *Constitution*, abuse of monetary and non-monetary resources is prevalent in the South African public sector institutions. In this regard, Botha (2017) reports that approximately R16 billion was misappropriated during the 2015/16 financial year. The national departments of Basic Education, Transport and Water and Sanitation were severally responsible for misuse of about R9 billion. Additionally, Mngoma (2017) reports the irregular deployment of members of public order police to guard a private house of former Minister of Police, Nathi Nhleko, in the northern KwaZulu-Natal. This occurred irrespective of the fact that politicians are protected by the VIP protection services in the South African Police Service. Indeed, the use of public order police to guard the Minister's private house amounted to an abuse of human resources because public order police are trained to deal with chaotic riots and protests. Therefore, this paper focuses on the assessment of the extent to which public officials adhere to the basic tenets of stewardship

while utilising and managing public resources in the South African public sector institutions. In the first section of this paper, the meaning and essence of stewardship as well as steward is provided in context. Moreover, this paper discusses important principles linked with stewardship. This paper concludes that failure by public officials to account for usage of public resources and incompetence to render quality service to the citizens with humility, care and respect in the South African public sector institutions constitutes an antithesis of the spirit of stewardship.

## 2. Conceptual Clarity: Stewardship and Steward

Worrell and Appleby (2000:269) define stewardship as sagacious utilisation and management of resources with a view to sustain and improve life for present and future generation. Further, stewardship can be defined as "careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care" (Barret, 1996:11). Salman and Ferroussier (2000:733) assert that stewardship connotes a desire to be held accountable for the success of an institution through total commitment in service, instead of imposing control measures upon others. In agreement with this view, Worrell and Appleby (2000:266) emphasise that the importance of stewardship is predicated on taking a good care of something which is in one's trust on behalf of another person. In other words, stewardship indicates that public officials have an obligation to conduct themselves as reliable stewards of resources they control on behalf of ordinary citizens (Cossin, Ong & Coughlan, 2015:4). Moreover, Cossin *et al.* (2015:4) contend that stewardship requires appropriate management and usage of resources "with integrity and high moral standing with a view to serving the wider community." In support of this notion, Hernandez (2000:122) states that stewardship concentrates on subjugation of personal interests in pursuit of broader communal goals, with positive attitude and conduct.

Nassauer (2011:321) suggests that stewardship could mean the following: the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance and protection of someone or something; serious consideration applied to doing something correctly or to avoid loss and risk. According to Caldwell, Truong, Linh and Tuan (2011:173) ethical stewardship emphasises a need for proper institutional

governance whereby public officials pursue broader interests of the stakeholders, particularly the citizenry, through cultivating a culture of trust between institutions and citizens. Fundamentally, stewardship is the principle of "service over self-interest" and requires that citizens ought to be treated as "owners and partners".

In Saltman and Ferroussier-Davis' (2000:735) view, stewardship presents public officials a good opportunity to advance public trust and legitimacy in state governance. However, stewardship may encounter some major challenges when public officials are pressurised by political office-bearers who seek to achieve self-interests. In this sense, the political, religious, social and economic patterns (e.g. corporatism, authoritarianism, theocracy) can influence the extent to which public officials could be good stewards (Saltman & Ferroussier-Davis, 2000:736). Additionally, Sindane and Uys (2014:401) note that since public officials are entrusted with public money, it is possible for them to utilise their authority to hinder the freedoms of the citizenry. Contrary to the aforementioned challenges in relation to stewardship, Barret (1996:16) maintains that stewardship requires that the rightful owners of the resources should be able to exercise control over the allocation of user privileges as well as the "enforcement of stewardship responsibilities." In the context of this paper, stewardship is a responsible utilisation of financial and non-financial resources by public officials in such a manner that the interest or aspirations of the citizens are taken into consideration and ensuring that public servants remain accountable to the people they serve.

Having defined the meaning of stewardship in the context of public sector, it is essential to explain the meaning of the concept "steward". Equally important, it is necessary to state who the stewards are, and what their concomitant characteristics are. Steward refers to a person entrusted with a responsibility of protecting and taking care of another's property or resources (Ee Wan, 2015:5). In keeping with the foregoing definition of steward, it is clear that public officials are the stewards since they are responsible for administering finances and other important resources on behalf of the citizens in a state. For instance, Pauw, van der Linde, Fourie and Visser (2015:15) state categorically that "public money belongs to the community of citizens in a state." Further, Pauw *et al.* (2015:15) accentuate that public money does not belong to public sector

managers, taxpayers, president, treasury, or a specific racial group. However, the public officials play a pivotal role in safeguarding public money as well as other resources that generally belongs to the people.

In order for the stewards to discharge their duties with greater circumspection, it will be important to understand and adhere to some basic principles of stewardship. According to Mathews (2018:43), stewards are "defined by their willingness to accept and execute the moral principles of personal responsibility." Acceptance of personal responsibility as personal choice is an essential characteristic of stewards whose interest is maximising the interest of owners of resources. As a matter of fact, such responsibility should be discharged in such a manner that the current and future generations are not disadvantaged through depletion of resources (Worrell & Appleby, 2000:268). In other words, stewards must not be ignorant and reckless in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

Stewards are expected to conduct themselves in such a manner that they can be able to maximise results rather than making unprecedented concessions that culminate in lost opportunities (Caldwell *et al.*, 2011:173). In support of this assertion, Cossin *et al.* (2015:4) and Caldwell *et al.* (2008:154) mention that stewards should not pursue self-interest, instead, they should strive to increase institutional performance for the benefit of the citizens. At the same time, Ee Wan (2015:5) argues that stewards must not be tempted to use resources in their trust for personal benefit. It is undesirable to have public officials who disregard basic principles of stewardship when performing official duties. Clearly, if stewards or public officials use their skills and knowledge to pursue the interest of the owners of resources (citizens), they are likely to earn respect and trust from them. To this end, stewards have to be proactive and preserve the truth, thus, stand for what is right (Mathews, 2018:41). By so doing, stewards will be able to defy all that is unethical, unconventional and shameful.

### 3. Accountability and Stewardship

The auditor general (AG), Kimi Makwetu, says that the South African municipalities are failing to enforce accountability in relation to usage of financial resources. This is evidenced by irregular expenditures, poor financial statements and

performance reports (Auditor General South Africa, 2018:2-4). Section 195 (1) (f) of the *Constitution*, 1996, states that public administration ought to be accountable (Republic of South Africa, 1996:99). In other words, public officials as stewards must be able to provide account for their actions to the citizenry. Ee Wan (2015:5) states that an accountable steward should be able to take responsible and justifiable decisions and risks with a primary goal of satisfying the needs of the citizenry. Moreover, an accountable steward must be in a position to make decisions for the long-term benefit of the collective in the midst of competing options that are all ethical and defensible. Ssonko (2010:4) defines accountability as a "commitment required from public officials individually and collectively to accept public responsibility for their own action and inaction." This view indicates that public officials are not required to account only when things go wrong, but, they need to provide justification for the right things achieved as well. In fact, public accountability signifies and emphasises that citizens should be able to make inputs concerning the funding of government programmes (Sindane & Uys, 2014:401).

Ideally, "the notion of accountability requires that the governing body provide reasons to the electorate for their actions (or inactions) and allows a community to express an opinion on their governing ability. It is crucial that public officials and political office-bearers understand the need for accountability in public management and governance because the behaviour of various public role players directly affects the delivery of public services, and distinction between right and wrong is not always clearcut" (Thornhill, 2015:77-78). This view suggests that if the principle of accountability is not upheld and endorsed by public officials and political office-bearers, stewardship is bound to fail dismally. Realistically, stewardship cannot be divorced from accountability. Sindane and Uys (2014:401) maintain that in the context of public sector it is imperative for the public officials to account to the communities they serve as well as any other stakeholder. Consistent with these views, Dicke (2002:486) highlights that when accountability fails public money tends to be utilised recklessly and ultimately, ordinary citizens find themselves in a precarious situation.

There are multiple categories of accountability that are central to stewardship. In this regard,

Thornhill (2015:79) classifies accountability into five different categories as follows: legal accountability (requires adherence to legislative prescripts), financial accountability (emphasises a need to provide an explanation on how public funds have been utilised), procedural accountability (requires compliance with formal procedures), programme accountability (focuses on the implementation of programmes), and outcome accountability (place emphasis on the importance of achieving effective results). Public officials need to adhere to the aforementioned categories of accountability as they relate to the usage and management of resources in the public sector institutions. Ee Wan (2015:6) argues that there must be negative or positive consequences for stewards depending on how worse or better they have managed or used resources entrusted with. Nevertheless, Sindane and Uys (2014:401) postulate that the fact that accountability is associated with control and punishment tends to lead to distorted understanding of this basic tenet in public administration.

#### 4. Stewardship and Trust

"The South African government is least trusted by its people, with only 15% of the citizens affirming their trust in the government, according to the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer" (Rittenberry, 2017). In other words, the South African citizenry have less confidence and trust in public officials as well as political leadership. Trust is an emotional trait that stewards need to achieve consistent and reliable performance and integrity (Cossin *et al.* 2015:16). In essence, stewardship is founded on the principle of trustworthiness. The issue of trust is important for improved relations between public officials and citizens. Caldwell *et al.* (2008:157) argue that "trust is an affirmation of one's own identity and an investment in one's future. When we trust we not only acknowledge our desire to enter into social contract with another party, but we willingly accept the risks involved within that relationship." This indicates that citizens have trust in public officials that they will preserve and manage resources in a responsible manner despite possible risks that could emerge. Mathews (2018:47) asserts that stewards ought to remain trustworthy or faithful, which implies that they must be champions of ethical deeds. Moreover, this denotes that stewards need to be extra cautious when making decisions in order to avoid unethical choices that could translate into erosion of a relationship of trust.

In this regard, Caldwell *et al.* (2008:157) postulate that when people decide to trust one another it is essential to surrender their personal control and choice to another person in the belief that the other person will act honourably with due consideration of the parameters that define such relationship.

A trustworthy steward should demonstrate wisdom and courage to pursue all that is noble without fear or favour (Mathews, 2018:51). According to Mathews (2018:51), trustworthiness as it relates to ethical stewardship denotes a "crown jewel of ethics" which places the "moral principles on display in their purest form." Ethical public officials work towards building trust through real investment and affirmations of the identities of the communities they serve (Caldwell *et al.* 2008:157).

Hernandez (2007:123) points out that trust develops gradually and to a certain extent, it is determined by the observer's reliability and dependability judgements of those in positions of authority. Further, trust can be nurtured or nourished through dynamic interactions between public officials as stewards and citizens who are real owners of public resources; such interactions ought to be grounded on mutual interpersonal care and concern (Hernandez, 2007:123). Fundamentally, ethical stewards ought to focus on assisting individuals to attain their best possible potential (Caldwell *et al.*, 2008:175).

As far as trust is concerned, Hernandez (2007:123) recommends that the creation of institutional trust which "facilitates calculative and relational aspects of trust through institutional factors (i.e. legal forms, social networks, and societal norms regarding conflict management and cooperation) whose interactions create a context for interpersonal and inter-organisational trust". This type of trust is crucial for creating a lasting bond based on trust between public officials as representative of public institutions and the citizenry. It is through the institution-based trust that public officials can be able to take the citizens into confidence particularly in relation to usage of resources in the public sector. Conversely, Mathews (2018:27) notes that unfaithful stewards strive to limit the owner's access to their own possessions. In other words, untrustworthy and corrupt officials can make it impossible for or difficult for citizens to gain access and enjoy benefits of their own resources.

## 5. Honest and Loyal Stewards

More than 3000 public officials unduly benefitted from government tenders worth more than R600 million. However, since the former President, Jacob Zuma, signed the Public Administration Act in 2014, which requires the public officials to declare financial interests, about 90% (9 689) senior managers in the public sector indicated that they have financial interest in private companies (Whittles, 2017). The above statistics shows that the levels of honesty among public servants could be alarmingly low. Honesty and loyalty of the public officials is important to the citizens since ordinary people are the real owners of the resources controlled by government institutions. If public officials steal and misuse public resources, this would constitute a betrayal of the citizens. Having said this, Mathews (2018:56) asserts that honesty is an important personality trait that can assist stewards to remain loyal, particularly under circumstances where they would have to choose between ethical and unethical options. Therefore, public officials must avoid dishonest practices thereby refraining from rationalising unethical actions or behaviour. In order to guard against betrayal, public officials must ensure that they do not commit public resources to illicit contracts or dealings.

An honest and loyal steward must not be controlled by selfish desires and emotions nor succumb to transient pressure that seek to dispose logical reasoning (Mathews, 2018:90). Additionally, Mathews (2018:90) argues that "the desire for instant gratification is symptomatic of uncontrolled mind; it is an enemy of patience that undermines long-term goals, mocking and injuring accountability." The issue of honesty and loyalty embraces the concept of integrity as one of the most important elements of ethical stewardship. In fact, integrity is concerned with an individual's personal character in terms of perceived consistency pertaining to expectations, outcomes, values, actions, methods and measures (Ssonko, 2010:6). In other words, a person of integrity will not change his or her principled stance on the basis of who he or she is dealing with.

## 6. Stewardship and Transparency

There is a growing concern about perceived levels of transparency in the South African public sector institutions. This concern is reinforced by reports that "government officials were ordered by

ministers, directors generals and a state security officer to destroy all traces of documents related to the controversial R246 million upgrades" to former President, Jacob Zuma (Tlhabane, 2014). The concept of transparency suggests that the decision and actions taken by public officials and political-office bearers should be subject to public scrutiny (Ssonko, 2010:5). This means that public servants ought to be ready and willing to be criticised harshly or constructively by the people they serve. At the same time, it means that the citizens will be informed constantly about the intentions or planned programmes that public sector institutions seek to pursue. More importantly, this suggests that members of the public will be able to know how their money was used in pursuit of government policies and programmes. By so doing, public officials embrace the notion of fiscal accountability. Hlongwane (2015:295) accentuates that transparency can be enhanced tremendously if the citizens are provided with timely, accurate, relevant and useful information regarding public officials' actions or inactions.

## 7. Stewardship and Commitment

Saltman and Ferrousier-Davis (2000:736) note that introducing stewardship into governance is an arduous process that requires total commitment by all interested stakeholders. Public officials need to approach their duties and responsibilities with positive attitude in order to raise levels of motivation in managing public resources while offering quality and good service to the citizens (Ee Wan, 2015:17). As far as commitment is concerned, public officials must be committed to the values, mission and vision of the institution. In the same vein, it is imperative for public officials to demonstrate commitment towards institutional goals. This means that public officials will work hard to achieve a predetermined performance targets (Staniok, 2016:19). In order to remain positive and focused, public officials will require high levels of motivation. Furthermore, Paille, Morin and Grima (2011:301) highlight that commitment by public officials is central to service quality in the public sector. In fact, commitment to the citizens indicates the extent to which public officials exercise their willingness to engage in continuous improvement and put more efforts to serve the citizens (Paille *et al.*, 2011:301). Nevertheless, Mastekaasa (2004:ii) points out that public officials tend to be depicted as partly lazy and opportunistic. According to this view, public

officials are seen as being less committed to their duties and responsibilities.

## 8. Disciplined Stewards

Beangstrom (2018) reports that the national and provincial departments reported approximately 758 incidents of financial misconducts for 2016/2017 financial year whereby an amount of R524 million was involved. In other words, financial malfeasance in the public sector could be attributed to ill-discipline among public officials who are supposed to safeguard public resources or money. Stewards must adopt an attitude of self-discipline in order to nurture the ability to distinguish between good and bad. In Mathews' (2018:101) view, the word discipline has its roots in the Greek word, "*sophronismos*", which is concerned with the capacity to do what is expected with a certain degree of balance, superior logic and understanding without diverting from ethical principles. Discipline connotes that public officials will comply with fundamental rules and regulations in the public sector (Sule-Dan & Ilesanmi, 2015:95). Mathews (2018:19) emphasise that stewards must learn to discipline themselves in important issues thereby showing more self-restraint and sound judgement. In an institution where there is a lack of self-discipline it is most likely that chaos, corruption and disobedience will reign, leading to institutional dysfunction (Sule-Dan & Ilesanmi, 2015:95).

Moreover, Mathews (2018:19) notes that self-discipline can be difficult to pursue or maintain due to a human's insatiable desire to own things, greediness and covetousness. In this sense, public officials have an obligation to protect and preserve public resources entrusted upon them by the citizens. Therefore, it is incumbent upon public officials to be more circumspect and ethical in order to prevent theft and plundering of scarce resources in their custody. However, Mathews (2018:18) note that a major challenge is the fact that greediness "can be like a virus that that will latch onto its host and consume every virtue until all that remains is more and more greed." In other words, although it is an important exercise to root out corrupt and self-serving practices in the public sector institutions, solutions to the spectre of greediness are still elusive.

## 9. Stewardship and Professionalism

The South African Nursing Council's (SANC) statistical report indicates that unprofessional conduct

among healthcare workers in the public service is rife (South African Government News Agency, 2013). Section 195 (1) (a) of the *Constitution*, 1996, demands that a high standard of professional ethics must be advanced and sustained in the public sector (Republic of South Africa, 1996:99). In this regard, Ssonko (2010:7) argues that professionalism becomes more evident when public officials are determined to improve their knowledge and skills in order to enhance the quality of service delivery to the citizens. In that sense, if public sector employees strive to improve their knowledge and skills, they will have better chances of managing public resources in a proper and accountable manner. Moreover, Ssonko (2010:7) adds that public officials should be suitably skilled, knowledgeable, neutral, unbiased and seek to pursue public interests in discharging their responsibilities. Essentially, public officials must be willing to apply their skills and knowledge to safeguard public resources against waste or possible irregularities. More importantly, there will be little prospects of success in provision of quality service if public officials remain unprofessional in their conduct (Mle, 2012:27).

## 10. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion indicates that the concept of stewardship remains crucial and relevant to the public sector institutions as it as it relates to responsible management of resources. Practically, public officials have to surrender themselves as stewards in the service of the citizens. This reverential call requires awareness on the part of the public officials about the important roles that they ought to fulfil as stewards. Public officials should put the interests of the people ahead of their personal preferences or desires. This assertion is in consonant with the South African principle of "*batho pele*" which means "putting people first". Ideally, public resources must never be diverted for any purpose other than the one that seeks to advance or maximise public good.

Furthermore, accountability is a significant and infallible virtue of ethical stewards in the public sector. As such, public servants need to be answerable not only to the higher authority in the bureaucratic chain of command but also need to be accountable to the citizens who are the actual owners of public resources. Accountability in the public sector institutions can help to create a lasting bond or trust between public officials and the citizens. In this way, it could be beneficial for the public sector to

maintain trust and promote citizen's confidence in public sector institutions regarding the usage and management of public resources. If public officials are reckless, dishonest and disloyal to the citizenry it will be difficult to create or mend that relationship of trust with the citizens once it is broken. Honest and loyal stewards manifest through pursuit of noble ideals and abstinence from unethical practices. Indeed, a discussion on stewardship would have been incomplete without reflecting on total commitment and positive attitude on the part of public servants. In this sense, positive attitude is not only critical to human interactions but it is required in order to ensure economic, efficient and efficient usage of resources. However, achieving this ideal requires public officials who are highly disciplined. In other words, public servants must be able to restrain themselves; prevent theft and looting of scarce public resources. Equally important, this calls for public officials to demonstrate highest standards of professionalism in carrying out their duties. The citizens must be treated with greater degree of respect, care and humility. Finally, failure by public servants to account for usage of public resources and inability to render quality service to the citizens with care, humility and respect in the South African public sector institutions constitutes an antithesis of the spirit of stewardship.

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