

Accountability moves sideways in the public sector

 By [Cynthia Schoeman](#)

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The normal range of career moves is up, sideways or out. Up should reflect success and follow on the employee making a positive contribution. Sideways can be a positive move when it is used to broaden an employee's experience. However, sideways mostly indicates that the employee is not contributing and that the organisation's leadership lacks the courage to take decisive action.

Out should follow a serious failure to deliver or a breach of ethics. This is often avoided in the private sector, citing labour legislation as an excuse when, in fact, our legislation provides for dismissals when warranted.

Sideways moves appear to reward

In the public sector, dismissal also does not seem to be an option. Not only are sideways moves favoured, but they also appear to reward those who should instead be held accountable for their actions.

The current focus is on the National Police Commissioner, Bheki Cele. Will being fired take the form of a comfortable sideways move as the SA Ambassador to Canada? If this occurs, it would not be the first time a disgraced or inefficient political leader has been posted abroad.

The former Minister of Women, Youth, Children and People with Disabilities, Noluthando Mayende-Sibiya, was fired and then posted as the SA Ambassador to Egypt. The former Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladlana, was posted to Burundi. Vusi Mavimbela, the former director general in the presidency, is now the SA Ambassador to Zimbabwe. Makhenkesi Stofile, the former Sports Minister, is the SA Ambassador to Germany, and Geoff Doidge, who was the Minister of Public Service and Administration, has been sent to Sri Lanka.

Who you know outweighs what you do

The message this sends is bad enough: that who you know outweighs what you do or don't do, be that misconduct or non-delivery.

However, the impact of this message is far worse, namely the consequent erosion of accountability. This is a very dangerous outcome. When leaders are not seen to be answerable for their actions, it does not merely undermine a value, which is essential for sound political and organisational health. It oils a slippery slope towards autocrats and arbitrary action.

ABOUT CYNTHIA SCHOEMAN

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