

Submission

Reform of Australian Government Administration: Building the world's best public service

1. My comment relates to the following Discussion Paper-item only:

“27. What mechanisms should be used to systematically improve efficiency across the public service as a whole?”

2. I nominate the following measures:

- (i) meetings to be severely curtailed

Half a dozen well paid public servants sitting around a table for an hour sets the meter running – 6 hours removed from the work program for the day.

Holding meetings, in my opinion, is the most abused of all public service practices. Meetings are largely unnecessary (due to e mail facility), often employed as a device to be seen to be doing something and inevitably poorly structured. Indeed I suspect they are simply an excuse to socialise at work.

When Carlos Ghosn assumed the leadership of Renault/Nissan one of his first acts was to ban his managers from holding meetings.

Agency-heads need to issue a direction that meetings are to be the exception rather than the rule and that an official under the level of Director should not convene a meeting unless approved at Director-level.

- (ii) each agency to have its own Ombudsman to resolve work-place issues

Work-place disputes occur often. Indeed every workplace seems fractious. Disputes can significantly impair a worker's performance and disrupt a workplace and accordingly appropriate mechanisms are needed to resolve

them. The key to a successful outcome to a dispute is the existence of a procedure overseen by an impartial and appropriately qualified arbitrator. While some such procedures do exist in the Australian Public Service I believe they lack the necessary formality to make a significant impact.

(iii) work-changers to be penalised

Half the Public Service does the work, the other half changes it.

One of the most powerful needs known to human science is the desire to change someone else's work. Re-drafting work can be extremely time consuming and demoralising (move the rocks from A to B and back to A).

Is there a more pathetic sight than a hapless minute winding its way up through an agency's ranks and changes being made to changes?

A manager worth his/her salt knows the name of the game is to avoid bottlenecks and get the work out and he/she will only send work back for re-drafting if something is wrong, missing or misleading. The manager will be possessed of that rare wisdom that acknowledges that writers all have different styles and to substitute one style for another negatives the role of the writer which undermines the function of the workplace (resources being allocated to perform duties).

Sometimes work can be changed for sinister reasons - as an exercise in control or a desire to humiliate, annoy etc.

Agency-heads should issue a direction that managers are not to change work unless something is wrong, missing or misleading. The proposed Ombudsman should be empowered to entertain complaints about work-changers.

(iv) stricter Stance on Responding to the Public

Agencies devote considerable resources to responding to communications from the public. Often it's not justified -

the citizen simply seeks to raise an issue in the hope it will be addressed in the policy-making mix. He/she probably doesn't want a response let alone reams of Government propaganda.

Stricter criteria for responding to the Public need to be developed. In particular, a Government's achievements in a particular area should be left to politicians to publicise at election time.

- (v) managers' performance should be assessed by subordinates at least as regularly as the converse situation applies

A manager's performance is assessed by his/her manager but in the main the first-mentioned manager's performance essentially reflects the results of his/her subordinates. Good results means the manager is assessed as performing well but there is no input into the assessment, from those who achieved the results, as to the manager's role in facilitating the relevant outcome. The same considerations apply to poor results.

A manager's performance needs to be assessed by reference to all relevant criteria including the opinion of the manager's staff.

- (vi) e-mail to be preferred over the telephone

The telephone can be a highly disruptive device and in my opinion its use is a good indication of personality type. Impatient, self-important (must have your personal attendance), inconsiderate types mostly use the telephone. Civilised people use ... e-mail.

The advantages of e-mail are:

- creation of a record (a vital part of good administration)
- a reference-point to check matters
- more accurate communication (people tend to think when they write)

The disadvantages of the telephone are:

- disruptive to concentration
- more potential for poor communication (accents, inaudibility, people tend not to assemble their thoughts as carefully as they do when writing)
- time-consuming (people love the sound of their own voice and want you to love it too)
- potential for friction – people resent being cut-off in full flight and needing to do so, as the minutes turn into periods of 10, can (unnecessarily) impair a working relationship

Agency-heads need to issue a direction that use of the telephone is to be the exception and only used in urgent matters and where e-mail communication has not evoked a response.

(vii) FOI Officer to be Inter-Agency Information Clearing-House

Human beings are not machines, which is unfortunate in some cases. They have sensibilities that are not always soundly based.

Often I need to obtain information from another agency. It's garden-variety-type information, not secret, sensitive or indeed, significantly effort-causing.

I seek such information by e-mail. Invariably I get an e-mail back requesting a telephone call to discuss my request. In most cases this involves reading the contents of my email to the person. He/she will then make noises along the lines of: "I see" and "mmm", and then proceed to tell me something I don't want/need to know (groan), and then accede to my request.

But 10 minutes have elapsed.

Despite working for the same employer, I need to jump through hoops to obtain standard information from a colleague in another agency. Engage in something akin to a courtship ritual. Bond with the information-giver. An electronic request for the information is deigned not to be sufficiently respectful.

Clearly the person regards himself/herself as having a proprietary interest in the information and doesn't want to part with it except for a valuable consideration i.e. grovelling gratitude on the part of the information-seeker.

FOI officers need to be given the additional function of handling inter-agency information-requests (with the minimum of fuss).

Mark Collins
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