

SUBMISSION TO PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM PROCESS

I have worked as a public servant on and off over about 20 years. Some things have changed, others haven't.

Paperless offices

Some departments have been very good about moving to totally electronic files. This is excellent and eliminates a lot of clutter. The next obvious step is to eliminate scribbling on printed copies of documents that officers have to interpret and key in.

In the interests of efficiency there should be a guideline that no document should reach beyond, say, Version 5. More than that indicates a lack of planning or strategy or perhaps, sanity.

Awards and gongs

Some of the truly wonderful work that is done in the public service should be shouted from the rooftops. Often these great successes don't get recognised beyond their departmental walls. Likewise, some of the foolishness that embarrasses us all should be exposed, with a sense of fun and in the spirit of camaraderie. The Ignoble Awards could be the model, and all of Canberra could celebrate these two ends of the spectrum, because we all have our moments, both good and bad. I believe that public servants are by and large mature, intelligent and self-confident enough to manage this and do the whole nation proud along the way. It could become a good form of reality TV

Integrated environmental planning for the Parliamentary Triangle

Many departments now have environmental action plans, and some are doing quite good projects with energy saving, recycling, etc. In the spirit of the times, and to reinforce the esprit de corps, it is now desirable to formulate and implement an integrated plan, with the Parliamentary Triangle the first cab off the rank. The Windsor Walk, which goes from Brisbane Ave to Canberra Ave, could be completed with the addition of composting bins that would serve for herb-growing and also for taking the organic refuse from the many cafes in the area.

Parents could do a bit of weeding with their children during school holidays, and the chefs would have a steady supply of herbs. This could be expanded to include fruit trees and berry bushes, all maintained by the devoted volunteers who love gardening. Such an initiative would require coordination and planning, and would be a wonderful public communication effort for Canberra to offer the rest of the nation. Students in appropriate courses (community development, horticulture, urban planning, organisational studies, etc) could be enlisted to assist. It would be a long term service-building exercise, with many positive externalities (for the economists to study).

Hierarchy still rules

The pressures of change have accelerated, but the internal processes remain intensely hierarchical.

The tendency of agencies to be overly focussed on internal processes and documents to the detriment of serving their external publics remains a big problem.

Likewise, there remains great hesitancy at the lower SES levels to put forward any information that implies any level of criticism or negativity of internal processes.

The flip side of this fearfulness is hesitancy to take even small risks or steps that are anywhere outside the realm of the completely known. These tendencies impede progress.

One solution might be to break up the hierarchies with teams that don't have clear leaders. Rotating leaders might also help.

At the very least, full 360 degree assessment is very important.

Greater external transparency about internal matters and documents is also useful to give a hurry on and stop the internal focus. Turning organisations inside out for greater dialogue with their real stakeholders might also help.

There is a difficulty in many areas of harnessing the skills of workers. Again the hierarchy gets in the way, and people with real expertise are not listened to if they are at a non-SES level.

Professional development networks

In the 1990s there were a number of informal networks for officers in particular fields to meet over lunch, have one of them do a presentation, and networking followed. These seem to have vanished in the pressures of the moment. However, these informal professional development activities are very important at the middle manager level. They can help to maintain an esprit de corps across departments which cannot be filled by more formal interdepartmental committees.

These networks used to cover areas such as public affairs or accrual accounting (?). Today they could form around key challenges for Australia, such as climate change. They would compliment other more formal processes.

Differential pay scales

It is also advisable that the differential pay scales between departments be abolished. These serve to create artificial distinctions between departments, and reinforce stereotypes about work vs pay vs home life balance, etc. for the public sector to be fully united and resilient, these boundaries should be dissolved and workers would be more likely to make career choices on the basis of interest, rather than pay or conditions.