

SUBMISSION

to

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

Background

I have worked in the APS since 1987, at SOGB/EL2 level for the last 18 years primarily in policy roles in environment and industry portfolios. I joined as a graduate recruit after an 8 year professional career outside the APS. My comments are based on my personal experiences in the APS. The following are the top three things I would change to build a "world's best public service".

1. Ensure only the highest quality candidates are appointed to leadership roles, notably the SES.

It is the quality of senior executives that largely determines the quality of service to government and perhaps more importantly, the quality of the professional lives of large numbers of staff. Care needs to be taken not to equate academic qualifications or previous management roles in the private sector with public sector leadership and management capability. Highly academically qualified candidates can be recruited directly into the SES with no experience of the APS and, more importantly, of managing large teams of people in a hierarchical structure. Such individuals may have substantial content intelligence but lack management know-how, failing to motivate and engage subordinate staff. Equally problematic are the frequent in-house promotions to the SES of the longest serving, next-in-line incumbents. Senior management responsibility is a demanding privilege and recruitment processes must ensure that appointees have not only a solid track record of delivering results, but also bring wisdom, maturity and respect for the APS and its people to the position. Emotional and social intelligence must be essential prerequisites. The current ILS selection criteria and processes do not appear to deliver the highest quality candidates to the SES at a consistently high frequency.

- Suggestion: Overhaul SES recruitment criteria and processes. The ILS selection criteria bear little connection to the daily observable behaviour of many SES officers. Review the filtering processes employed by external recruitment agencies used by some departments. The consultants employed by recruitment agencies may have no practical experience, or more importantly, no successful track record themselves in the APS at the levels for which they are short listing or recruiting staff.

2. Monitor the culture and growth of corporate divisions.

Corporate divisions are an overhead cost to agencies. A frequent frustration of line areas is the seemingly generous resourcing and growth of corporate divisions and support teams, and the associated proliferation of internal rules, guidelines, protocols, instructions, etc.

Corporate divisions can appear to be self-serving, having lost sight of their role as support for line area clients. Corporate human resource branches exist with little or no contact with the line areas they serve. The understandable fear among many senior executives of making mistakes can result in corporate systems being allowed to grow seemingly unchecked, resulting in ever more 'bum protection' protocols being imposed. This makes corporate divisions feel productive and senior executive feel safe. As a result, corporate sections grow into branches, single jobs become project teams, the internal rules manuals get fatter, new jobs are created in corporate to oversee line area functions, and line area frustration keeps increasing, as does the overhead cost to the agency. It is not unusual to see corporate support sections better resourced than line area sections with substantial and challenging policy and program delivery obligations. A question for departmental secretaries is "am I in control of, or a captive of, my corporate division?"

- Suggestion: Review existing costs to agencies of their corporate divisions as a proportion of total budget. Establish efficiency and client responsiveness protocols for corporate divisions in line with private sector best practice.

3. Improve mechanisms to manage underperformance.

APS human resource management guidelines are stacked against managers when it comes to dealing with underperformers, who are easy to come by (usually because of past poor recruitment decisions) and almost impossible to move to roles better suited to their capabilities. The APS thus becomes a sheltered workshop for time servers or underperformers, who end up being shifted around and worked around, simply because that is easier for managers than biting the bullet and initiating disciplinary or remedial action. In my experience at EL2 over nearly two decades of APS performance assessment processes, I recall many instances of my colleagues complaining about incompetent staff, but no examples of such staff being officially assessed as less than 'fully efficient'. The competent continue to carry the underperformers who keep getting their pay, and the public carry the cost. And this culture does nothing to elevate the status of the APS in the eyes of the private sector. Managers who have the determination to address underperformance can end up going it alone, without executive support and giving up because it is easier to do nothing.

- Suggestion: Review existing processes for managing underperformance. Above all, provide no more lucrative packages for those less competent staff that departments want to pay out. Manage them out if necessary, but do not reward them by a pay-out. Most public servants have anecdotes about allegedly less than competent colleagues who were offered attractive packages to exit and have subsequently returned to full-time work in the APS, sometimes at promotion level, or placed in a Minister's office or subsequently promoted.