

Building the World's Best Public Service

Staff Submission:

Strengthening the Staff Council Through Peer Support

A program using peer selected officers to provide regular support and opportunities for all staff. It will focus on the needs of the individual and how they can contribute to the success of the organisation, using regular personal interviews, emails and correlation, to actively encourage and develop suggestions, and to identify and resolve problems.

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Introduction

My submission is based on working in The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service. My suggestions apply specifically to my workplace but I am sure that elements of this proposal will apply to other departments.

Customs currently has a Staff Council. It is described as:

The Staff Council is a national consultative forum comprised of management, staff and Union representatives and is part of the Customs Strategy for Employee Participation. The Staff Council's role is to provide an opportunity for the representatives to consider and discuss longer term strategic directions and emerging issues of importance for Customs and its employees.

The Staff Council is not a forum for bargaining employment matters, resolving industrial disputes or a replacement of local workplace communication.

My proposal is to boost the effectiveness of The Staff Council by making it truly representative of every member of staff.

Goals:

- Increase staff involvement in decision making, policy development and implementation.
- Provide Management with a powerful problem solving resource.
- Empowerment – giving each member of staff more say in the workplace.
- Actively seek suggestions for improvement of the organisation.
- Focus on the needs and well-being of the individual; identify early signs of stress, depression and mental health issues.

Results:

- Improved development of changes and policies by speaking to those who will be directly involved. Frontline staff are usually aware of obvious issues and solutions that planners may not anticipate.
- Smoother introduction of changes.
- Better co-operation between management, unions and staff.
- Discover and resolve problems in the workplace before they escalate.
- Improve the self esteem and motivation of staff members.

Methods:

- Selection of a Peer Support Officer (PSO), by fellow officers, representing between 50 and 100 staff. Within Customs and Border Protection, a PSO would be selected from two groups: Level 1, Levels 2 to 4.
- Regular (at least yearly) interview of each member of staff by their PSO.
- PSO's from both levels form a Peer Council to discuss and develop suggestions received. They will also discuss the results of all interviews and determine how to improve their effectiveness.
- The Peer Council submits suggestions, and issues gleaned during interviews, to the relevant managers within the organisation and The Staff Council for consideration.
- Management can send suggestions or requests for ideas to the Peer Council instead of using outside consultants. The Peer Council can draw on each other and use those within their groups to answer and resolve management concerns. Staff in Customs typically bring to the workplace an enormous range of experience, knowledge and work skills. These valuable resources are largely untapped. Whether the question is something as basic as fitout design or signage, there will more than likely be a member of staff who is equipped to advise both from trade experience and current workplace requirements.

Sample Notice regarding Peer Interview

Dear Fellow Officer,

Your annual Peer Interview is scheduled for (date, time and location).

The purpose of this interview is to help you gain the maximum benefit of your employment with the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service. You will have the opportunity to discuss a range of issues with an officer selected by your peers. Following this confidential discussion, you will have the option of deciding which, if any, of the matters discussed will be forwarded to management for consideration.

Items to be discussed include:

- **Suggestions on any work related matter.** Do you have any ideas on improving our performance or results? Any ideas on how to reduce waste? Have you noticed any faults in our methods that can be easily resolved? What are we doing wrong?
- **Bullying and discrimination.** Are you aware of any work-related abuse in your area? Have you been a victim? Do you know anyone in your work area that has been victimised?
- **APS Values and Fraud.** Are you aware of any breaches within your work area? Do you feel uncomfortable with any practices around you? Are you aware of the procedures in regard to reporting any discrepancies?
- **Personal issues.** Are you aware of the EAP counselling service? Under what circumstances would you consider seeking personal counselling? Who would you speak to if you felt the need for help? Are you aware of anyone in your work area who you think may benefit from personal support?
- **Career satisfaction.** Are you happy at work? Are you interested in seeking higher duties or do you prefer general duties? What are your career goals? Is there another department that appeals to you more?
- Any other issues that you feel are important.

I look forward to meeting with you,

(signed)

Sample Peer Interview Agenda/Instructions

Keep in mind that you are not a counsellor and you are not qualified to give advice or therapy. Take care not to impose personal values; the APS Values are sufficient. Your role is to provide support, and refer the individual to a specialist as needed.

Begin the discussion by emphasising your (the interviewer's) obligation to maintain confidentiality.

Agenda as per the notice, with the following conclusion:

If you would like, I can refer your suggestions to the Peer Council for review and development. Keep in mind that not all suggestions are acted on – for a variety of reasons. To formally submit your suggestions, send me an email, and indicate if you would like to be contacted for further information, or if you would prefer to submit it anonymously via me.

Are there any matters that we have discussed that you would like to be taken further? (Keep in mind that in some cases, a duty of care may exist where an allegation is made or you are made aware of a serious issue.)

The options include:

- Do nothing (unless a duty of care is involved)
- Refer the issue (to management or external officers) in the form of a monthly summary of interviews.
- Report the issue directly and be involved in the investigation/resolution.

Email an acknowledgment of the interview, with an outline of the format to submit any suggestions. Request feedback on the effectiveness of the interview

Conclusion

It is understood that management has the responsibility to give lawful directions and for staff to respond. My proposal is not designed to challenge this process, or to suggest a veto power. But where staff have been involved in the planning and development of policy, implementation will be better received.

The use of consultants and surveys.

I have seen three surveys conducted within 18 months to measure the movement of passengers from arrival to clearance. In speaking with the survey staff, they reached the same conclusion that any Customs officer could have answered: the major delay is at the secondary examination area (Quarantine).

Not only were three expensive surveys conducted to prove the obvious, the result was to take staff away from the examination area (where the real delay occurs) and move them to the Primary Line. All this has achieved is moving passengers quicker to where the real problem exists. A peer based approach would have saved valuable funds spent on consultants and found a better solution.

The effective implementation of this proposed peer-based council would make the best use of the organisation's greatest asset – the staff.