

## Leadership — connecting some current public sector perspectives

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Much publicity was given late last year to the appointment of four senior women to head Australian Public Service (APS) agencies. The appointments were notable on several fronts, but particularly because they represent a sizable shift in the gender composition of heads of departments. Up until recently women had been almost 'one out' in APS leadership fora. While now still in a sizeable minority, they are a clear demographic presence that compels attention and has the potential to influence future outcomes.

The position of Secretary to a Department is of course the pre-eminent leadership role within the APS. A scan back across the past 30 to 40 years reveals that this role has evolved considerably, in line with the changes that have taken place generally across the public service. Whereas a Secretary was once surrounded with a god-like aura, remote and on-high, the role has been greatly democratised over time. It is hard to see any of the latest appointees fitting into the cosy power paradigm evoked by the descriptor 'mandarin'.

Things have moved on. Nowadays the world of 'secretaryhood' is much more managerialist, practical, engaged with staff to make things happen and focussed on the importance of leading by example. As the promotional material for the Public Service Commission's Integrated Leadership System proclaims: 'Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing'. The command economy has gone, not just in eastern Europe, but also in the one time fiefdoms of the Australian public service. It is not sufficient to issue decrees. Advocating, demonstrating, acknowledging, engaging, empowering and supporting are the **doing** words for today's leadership lexicon.

In fact what the recent appointments demonstrate is the effectiveness of what the *MAC report* on Organisational Renewal referred to as 'bench strength'. This term, seemingly derived from a sporting context, highlights a focus on having depth in the leadership team. This effectively speaks of leadership being diffused across an organisation, but nonetheless consistent

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and unified. To put it another way there are great advantages in having a solid group of leaders who support and articulate the push from the top and who can step up and take the pre-eminent leadership role.

This emphasis on building leadership down and across the key influencing levels of SES and Executive Level roles, has been a major focus of several leadership programs developed by Yellow Edge for various agencies across different jurisdictions in the Australian public sector. It is ultimately about sharing an agenda and building support for change and corporate objectives. Importantly, it also aims to demystify the leadership role for those at these executive levels so that managers in such positions can have a real impact across the organisation. It has been said that positions at the EL 1 and 2 levels have more potential to impact an organisation positively or negatively, than do those at the top of the leadership ladder or the SES. The point of this analysis is that those who operate at the middle management levels in effect reach right down through the organisation and can have a far more profound impact on the bulk of an agency's workforce. They are effectively the human face of senior management and how they pursue the corporate agenda goes a long way towards determining its success.

Recognition of this factor is reflected in the increasing attention given to words used to describe leadership capabilities. The emphasis has moved on from simply communicating with employees. It is now about influencing and persuading. Of course a key element in such a re-framing of communications is the need to engage and listen in the first place. It also involves valuing individual differences and working with them; nurturing relationships; guiding and encouraging. That much of this vocabulary is sometimes seen as feminine is both relevant and irrelevant.

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It is irrelevant in that it grows out of good organisational and human resource practice and is applicable irrespective of gender. It is relevant, however, in that some have claimed many of these capabilities are operating styles that come more naturally to women. Time will tell whether there is a more fundamental force at work here.

The appointment of the four new female agency heads will certainly change the chemistry around the Management Advisory Committee table.

The new composition will help to set the gender balance right and better reflect the composition of the service itself, for which the committee has broad stewardship. That can only be a step in the right direction. It comes at a time when the Committee has issued perhaps its biggest challenge to public sector agencies. This relates to the *Connecting Government* report, issued earlier in 2004. Here the emphasis is on devising a new form of government approach to service delivery, one that starts from the premise that organisational boundaries should be invisible to the citizen and should facilitate not hinder seamless, effective delivery of services and the achievement of broader policy objectives.

It is interesting to note that both the Commonwealth public sector and the ACT Government Service are experimenting with whole of government approaches. In the case of the ACT the learning came out of the crucible of the 2003 bushfires, where an effective response to the trauma and pain of clients and citizens drove public sector managers to experiment with case management approaches. These aim to effectively harness the resources and services of government to deliver optimal outcomes to individuals in need.

In the Commonwealth scene there is a recognition that solutions and services delivered by government, whether in terms of payments or assistance to citizens or policy options for

ministers, must represent the best that the resources of government can bring to the task. Program structures and organisational rigidities must be challenged in a similar way to the intellectual challenges that have been applied to the reform of the Australian economy over the past 20 years. Already the challenge is out there to succeed with programs to deliver whole of government services to indigenous communities.

In launching the *Connecting Government* report the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold emphasised that it ‘reinforces the need to continue to build an APS culture that supports, models, understands and aspires to whole of government solutions. Collegiality, at the most senior levels of the service, is a key part of this culture.’ Putting collegiality centre square in the public service leadership capability framework is significant as it heralds an emphasis that will need to be driven across and throughout all agencies. Already this has given further nuance to the range of leadership capabilities required for the public sector to be successful in the future.

Part of the priorities and challenges for Secretaries will revolve around such tasks as modelling and fostering co-operative behaviours, seeking creative solutions that are outside the rigidity of organisational silos, not defending turf and territory but rather defining new alliances and working relationships. Not that these approaches render older models to be totally outdated. Indeed the *MAC report* emphasises that leadership needs to find a balance of authoritative and collegiate approaches.

For the emphasis on *Connecting Government* to be successful, much will depend on the tone that is set from the top of organisations — by secretaries and senior management teams. As the *MAC report* notes, it will be a particular challenge for secretaries to articulate, model and reaffirm behaviours that fit with this framework. Moving to a culture of inter-agency trust and collaboration will be challenging, especially if it is a cultural quality that does not resonate within the organisation

itself. This highlights the fact that each agency has its own set of individual challenges in framing its leadership and cultural development. Best practice leadership development is predicated on an honest and realistic assessment of the existing organisational climate.

At the broader generic level it is likely that APS leadership development initiatives will need to consider a range of emerging capabilities:

- How to work within a networking or horizontal culture.
- Building organisational agility.
- Establishing channels of dialogue .
- Risking short term confusion to build shared commitment across agencies.
- Learning to identify horizontal issues, risks and opportunities.
- Working with differing governance frameworks.
- Rewarding horizontal achievements.
- Balancing accountability upwards and responsiveness downwards and outwards.
- Managing cross agency data sharing.

Much of the above represents unworked ground for the APS. The most effective responses to this development agenda will likely emerge from broader collaborative approaches — in other words applying the very principles of Connected Government. Agencies have long operated within various orbits of operation, in which they link with others in developing policies or providing services. Using these networks may be a logical place to start to frame development initiatives that are real and leverage off shared experiences.

Moving out of rigid organisational frameworks is exciting and challenging for agencies. It reinforces the importance of the leadership tone set from the top — but just as strongly it underlines the fact that leadership needs to be grown across an organisation at all levels. Not only are the challenges great, so also are the potential benefits.