1. **De-politicise the APS** – the politicians, i.e. ministers, have far too much influence/power over APS leaders, policy-makers and program implementers. Fewer and fewer of those ministers accept ‘frank and fearless’ advice, and good policy is too often ignored, dismissed, or otherwise trashed by pollies wanting quick wins in their electorates and on social media. For example, the removal of the APVMA to Armidale on the bloody-minded say so of a deputy prime minister who has since been retired in disgrace. Why did he have the power to overrule the sensible facts and advice of his APS advisors? Politicians come and go, the work of the APS endures. It’s unfair that public servants are criticised for being fools, dullards, inept, lazy – you name it – and yet it’s the government that is holding the reins and making the decisions. I’ve worked for the public service for the majority of my 30+ year career, at state and federal level, all over Australia – and since the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and social media, policy-making has sunk to its lowest level of quality. Apart from the ever-increasing ‘government-by-powerful-corporate-interest-lobbying’, it seems all our government (of either political stripe) wants is to increase the number of social media ‘likes’ it receives.
The APS may have its share of lazy, limited, entitled workers, but it has even higher numbers of passionate, committed, talented and innovative people who want to work for the greater good but are stymied by short-sighted ministers playing re-election games instead of governing. Stop the over-reaching of politics into the decision making and management of APS responsibilities. The mad race for ‘announceables’, something a minister can stand up with in front of the insatiable news beast, is far too often the root cause of poor policy making and program implementation. Ministers need to be able to free themselves from the tyranny of the media, which lives in and for the moment, and start looking and thinking further ahead – and this will allow the APS to do the same.
2. **Remove the APS cap.** Find other ways to make savings – like properly taxing corporations and private sector CEOs earnings multi-million dollar salaries, and curbing politicians’ absurd salaries, perks packages and ongoing exorbitant benefits after ‘retirement’ – and stop forcing budget cuts and dividend efficiencies year after year on the APS. This has only resulted in a false economy where the work still demanded by those same well-paid politicians, and desperately needed by the long suffering Australian public, can only be done by bringing in contractors, who charge far more than APS staff are paid, with less care factor and no corporate knowledge. Why is anyone surprised at the decline in the quality of APS services? When people don’t have time and space for deep work, you won’t get innovation. When people aren’t invested in an organisation and its core business because they’re expendable contractors, there is no motivation to strive for that time and space – and you won’t get innovation. The most effective workers don’t put up with these pressured conditions – they move on, because they have the skills to, leaving those with less to recommend them behind. And you’re that much less likely to get the innovation and high productivity you’re after.
3. **Improve performance management** – set professional development requirements and make management of poor performance more streamlined. It is currently far too difficult to manage poor performance in the APS. Yes, there are malingerers, though not as many as people think – it’s just that their negative impact is a heavy one. Chronic poor performers tend to know every feature, benefit and loop hole of their employment conditions – using and abusing every single one to get away with delivering very little actual work or none at all, absolving themselves of responsibility for mistakes, and feigning stress, bullying, harassment of every kind (racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia etc) when they are called on it. They are twisting conditions meant to protect and support our workers into ways of keeping themselves in comfortable roles with entitlements that most APS staff really, truly earn. So simply taking these features/protections away isn’t the answer, but the typical, torturous three-month process and far too forgiving ‘three strikes – or maybe twenty if you threaten to claim harassment – and you’re out’ policy are a major impediment. In my long career, I’m aware of less than a handful of cases where people have been suspended or lost their jobs, and these were all for spectacular cases of poor judgement or actual criminal behaviour. Those who are ‘merely’ poor performers, yet who suck the life out of managers forced into long and complex under-performance management processes, de-stabilise teams, and make productivity gains so hard to achieve, seem to linger on forever.
At the other end of the equation, encourage a high level of professionalism by putting in place annual professional development requirements – every accredited profession requires its members to dedicate a minimum amount of hours per year to maintaining and refining their professional skills and knowledge. Why is this optional in the APS?
4. **Improve the quality of leaders and people managers** – insist on mobility, a range of paths for career development, and 360degree feedback for all managers, from EL1 level up.

The 360 degree feedback should go down several levels, making for bigger groups and less fear of being identified and punished for speaking up. There are too many poor managers and leaders in the APS, and no effective way to raise their self-awareness and generate positive growth.
The idea that if you are a senior person you must automatically manage people is a damaging one. Why force a ‘span of control’? The Australian government needs senior technical people in all fields who are very, very smart at what they do. There should be allowance in departments for career pathways for technically skilled people, to allow them to do what they do best – and it’s not always managing or leading people.
Staff at EL levels and above should not be permanent. At the moment, as other submissions have pointed out, the APS is not competing well across a lot of professions with the private sector – so we’re losing the ‘good’ people – those who are smart, innovative, effective leaders and managers. Highly qualified young graduates are not seeing enough opportunities to progress within (what seems to them) a lifetime – and they need to progress if they’re to have any hope of saving a house deposit. Senior people who are lacking in key leadership skills do so much damage. There should be a way to move them on/demote them – so why not insist on 360 degree feedback (independently assessed via random checks) and mobility? One five year contract, and then you must move on, either within the organisation or on to another, but not the same role.

1. **Reduce red tape and reporting requirements.** The amount of administrivia that ‘leading a team’ or managing any other function generates is mind-boggling, and worse, all that reporting is then regurgitated all the way up the chain in one form or another, wasting incredible amounts of time. Anyone complaining about the dumbing down of the APS should start looking at the corresponding and climbing rates of administration and reporting requirements over time and they’ll soon see where the best efforts of our managers are going. Make the reporting more meaningful, asking the big questions that will drive more useful behaviours, instead of having agencies take refuge in counting their beans – creating elaborate frameworks to achieve this, keeping everyone busy, but not adding real value.
2. **Reduce risk management demands and improve more flexible risk management thinking and behaviours** – make it okay to fail and learn. Adopt language that supports innovation – experiment, rather than trial, for example, which allows for testing and learning from observations and then more testing, rather than ‘you get one shot and if it doesn’t work the trial is over (and probably so is your credibility and career)’. Make sure leaders and managers understand the new risk management thinking, so they can feel confident they don’t need to make every decision from an ass-covering point of view. I’ve heard managers say ‘I’m accountable’ for that xyz function, so I need to approve every little thing related to it’ – regardless of actual risks. This makes a mockery of delegations, infantilising all the levels below the over-worked accountable manager and keeping such managers down in the weeds instead of thinking strategically. Look at contradictions between the guidelines and policies the departments put out – e.g. the ASD puts out super strict ICT guidelines, even as we’re supposed to be moving to greater digital service delivery, yet it’s hard to work with external suppliers (who have the expertise on this) because of these conflicting security vs service requirements.
3. **Reward the behaviours that support innovation.** What is being rewarded currently? Being able to report against all the usual traditional achievements. Having key reports in on time. Meeting bottom line requirements. It’s all surface-level numbers and rarely digs into the ‘how’ of these results. How many ideas has any one department received, assessed and then nurtured to fruition in a reporting year? How many processes have been improved, re-invented, digitised or done away with in favour of a new and more effective one? Wouldn’t those be interesting statistics… At the moment this type of support for innovation is left to optional award schemes – a ‘nice to have’, not a ‘must have’ in an agency’s life.
4. **Teach an agile mindset.** For example, teach senior managers how to get the most use out of technology and flexible work practices to improve recruitment and retention – why are agencies building in a range of flexible work practices into their Enterprise Agreements, and then making it so hard for APS staff to access them? As a parent at management level (EL1/2), for the last decade I have had to continually struggle to gain and justify my access to flexible work arrangements. It may be a generational thing that will shift as more young workers move into senior positions, but many senior managers refuse – just straight out refuse – to support or consider job sharing, part time work, work from home or remote working options, especially for senior staff (ie EL+). They don’t offer hard evidence to prove their thinking that it doesn’t work. They just say no, and/or rely on ‘security issues’ to block remote work etc. The DTA is wanting the APS to look at digital service provision, but if this anti-technology, anti-flexibility mindset on even the small things is typical of APS leaders, we have a very, very long and painful way to go before we’ll succeed.
5. **Standardise the APS** – despite the work of the APSC, virtually every agency I’ve worked for has re-invented the wheel and developed its own set of intricate HR policies, position descriptions (encompassing work level standards etc), and ways of doing the very same administrative and people management things that every other department needs to do. And so we see staff at the same APS level being paid wildly different salaries, and having wildly different responsibilities. In a recent organisation, a Band 1 was concerned that a team of six was too much for an EL1 (despite the lack of any evidence of stress or poor performance) simply because all the other EL1s in the branch only had two or three staff apiece and that had come to be seen as the acceptable standard – and yet I’ve worked in agencies where APS5s and 6s managed 20 people. This ‘my agency is special’ attitude is nonsense. It wastes enormous resources and limits mobility, quite apart from creating inequity and poor morale across a wide swathe of a critical cohort of Australian workers – those who want to help others and contribute to their community through their work.
6. **Share learnings** – so much time, energy and resources wasted as departments re-invent the wheel over and over, making the same mistakes, running into the same dead ends. The Public Sector Innovation Network is having a real bash at sharing knowledge, information and ideas around this critical capability. Surely with the technology available today there could be a shared resource established where critical lessons learnt from policies, programs, initiatives and projects across a range of disciplines could be shared? ICT, HR, policy development, program implementation come to mind…