Submission to the Independent Review of the APS: Priorities for Change

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About us

The Public Service Research Group at UNSW Canberra has a strong track record of research into public services in Australia and overseas, covering various aspects of public sector management, delivery of public services and the implementation of public policy[1].

Professor Deborah Blackman's[2] research interests include public sector policy implementation, systems level change, employee performance management, organisational learning, soft knowledge management, organisational effectiveness, psychological contract, and governance, and she was the lead researcher on a joint collaborative project with the Australian Public Service Commission on *Strengthening the Performance Framework*.[3] Professor Helen Dickinson[4] has published widely on governance, leadership, commissioning and priority setting and decision-making in public services, is co-editor of the Journal of Health, Organization and Management and the Australian Journal of Public Administration and a Victorian Fellow of the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and has worked with all levels of government, community organisations and private organisations in Australia, UK, New Zealand and Europe on research and consultancy programs. Dr Fiona Buick's[5] research focus is on the value that human resource management can provide to public sector organisations, particularly the Australian Public Service. She undertakes research into organisational culture, performance management, and the dynamics involved in structural change, highlighting tensions between informal and formal institutional practices. Dr Linda Dewey's research is on the behaviour of the individual in the workplace. She has worked at senior levels of government and private industry and has worked with all levels of government on consultancy programs.

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[2] https://research.unsw.edu.au/people/professor-deborah-blackman

[3] http://www.apsc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/56507/Performance_accessible.pdf

[4] https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/school-of-business/associate-professor-helen-dickinson

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Executive Summary

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this review examining the capability, culture and operating model of the APS. Under six headings we present our response for implementing sustainable change in the APS:

- Understanding "culture"
- Culture as an outcome of change
- Shared purpose
- Behaviours and performance evaluation
- Designing a sustainable change program
- The APS as a system

We consider cultural change as an outcome of a change program rather than a driver for change, and that a clear focus on people that outlines what is changing and why is essential to embedding sustainable change. A shared purpose and view of the change contextualised to the desired behaviours at a local level will enable the identification of success prior to the commencement of the change program. Identification of success enables evaluation of achievement of desired outcomes rather than ticking off activities. Considering the APS as a system, with programs of work rather than Departments or Branches as sub-systems enables the identification of existing practices that can be standardised rather than innovated or deleted to understand what inhibits the embedding of desired practice.

With this approach, we recommend the following approach for consideration by the implementation team:

1. Consider the cultural change as an outcome of the change program rather than as a driver of the change program
2. Focus on identifying, initiating and supporting the desired behaviours; through changing behaviours, cultural change is likely to evolve over time
3. Clearly focus on the people involved and be able to describe what is happening and why it is important
4. Develop a shared understanding of the purpose and importance of the public service and the value it delivers, and contextualise this as desired behaviours at the local level
5. Identify and clearly describe what success will look like prior to commencing the change program to enable evaluation of the achievement of desired outcomes rather than ticking off activities
6. Consider the APS as a system with programs of work, rather than Departments or Branches, as sub-systems to enable identification of existing practices that can be standardised rather than innovated or deleted through understanding what currently inhibits embedding of desired practice.

Introduction

The *Independent Review of the APS: priorities for change* (released in March 2019) (Independent Review) outlines the changes identified to build an Australian Public Service (APS) that will be fit for the future. The review details the approach adopted by the Review committee, introduces the subsequent understanding of the challenges, opportunities and aspirations facing an APS transformation, and includes the priorities for change.

The Review committee is seeking comments on strengthening each proposal, identifying anything that is missing and recommendations for ensuring lasting change. The recommendations in this submission are focused on what we believe is necessary to support lasting change.

The Public Service Research Group (PSRG) is broadly supportive of the priorities for change outlined in the Independent Review and, while we understand the order of the priorities listed in the document does not necessarily represent a hierarchy of importance, we believe it is important that cultural change not be held up as the highest priority, nor is it something that predicates the other priorities. Our experience shows that cultural change, and the accompanying strengthening of governance and leadership, is an outcome of change rather than a driver of change.

Understanding "culture"

Organisational culture, in everyday language, is considered to be "the way we do things around here"[6]. It is the deeply embedded and patterned ways of thinking and behaving evident within groups and organisations, which evolve over time as a result of shared learning regarding what is most effective for mission accomplishment[7]. Because culture evolves over time, and as a result of the behaviours that have historically led to success, the desire for cultural change must be underpinned by an understanding of the factors that have led to an undesirable culture in the first place. Therefore, for this review to move beyond the rhetoric regarding cultural change, and result in real and sustainable change, we encourage those implementing the Independent Review to approach change in a fundamentally different way to previous reforms. Despite many waves of reform that have attempted to change culture within the APS, public service systems as they currently operate in the APS reinforce recurring issues such as: a culture of risk aversion and silo mentalities, ineffective people management and individual achievement at the expense of program delivery. Thus, it could be argued that these reforms have not achieved the desired results. We believe this is because the assumptions underpinning the current approaches do not facilitate a shift as they have not changed, despite espoused desires for change over time[8].

The Independent Review appears to assume: it is desirable and possible for there to be "one APS" culture; that such a culture can be clearly identified and achieved; common aspects that are supportive of the desired performance can be identified; and the existing legislation, structure and frameworks are supportive of the common culture. It is also assumed that if these aspects are changed this will lead to improvement, and that a common "one APS" culture is both definable and achievable. It also appears to be assumed that cultural change is a necessary precondition to behavioural change; that is, we need to change the culture *before* more collaborative, open and transparent behaviours will emerge.

We ask those implementing the Independent Review to consider a different way of approaching this reform. We suggest that, for there to be real and sustainable cultural change, desired behavioural changes will need to be identified, initiated and supported first. If these behaviours prove effective and lead to the attainment of desired outcomes, then it is likely they will result in cultural change; in doing so, they will become the new norms, with the culture holding them in place in the future.

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[6] Deal and Kennedy, 1983, p.501
[7] Schein, 2017
[8] For example, the Management Advisory Committee's (2004) report on Connecting Government and the Ahead of the Game 2010 report.

Culture as an outcome of change

With the success rate of change initiatives estimated to be <30 percent[9], we suggest approaching this significant proposed change with careful consideration of the interventions used. Theory suggests the key aspects of a change strategy include content, people and process[10] and highlights the importance of alignment between these concepts:

- Content includes a clear strategy that links systems, technology and work practices where technology is key to embedding change; all levels of the business strategies must be aligned with a strategic and systematic orientation to change[11].
- Process is about the implementation of the policies and procedures that are used throughout the organisation; communication, regular meetings, and the allocation of strong resources dedicated to the change feature here[12].
- Increasing the probability of successful transformation requires attention being given to which people are involved; addressing their specific needs, and understanding what it is that people *do* and how they *work* to identify what inhibits the embedding of desired practice[13].

The key to change success lies in bringing all of these aspects together in a cohesive and collective way that makes sense to those involved. Previous reforms have tended to concentrate on the technological and procedural aspects, and the people concept has been primarily concerned with the espoused desire for cultural change. Such initiatives have not necessarily recognised the complexity of culture in an entity as large, differentiated and diverse as the APS, where there would be hundreds of subcultures nested within the broader APS culture. This may mean there has been a lack of recognition of the plethora of existing, often context bound, subcultures that may operate as driving forces for change, staunch defenders of the status quo, or quiet (or not so quiet) sabotagers of any changes or initiatives. Thus, understanding the reality of the current APS cultural landscape, and gaining consensus from the disparate APS community for the desired culture and how the behaviours within this culture will be articulated, recognised, and then measured, is a sound starting place for sustained and sustainable cultural change.

Therefore, we propose the APS reform be implemented using an approach that has a clear focus on the people involved. We believe the only way to facilitate significant reform is to understand that humans are central to change and a shift in their behaviour from the current to the desired involves people identifying with and subsequently altering their own values and perspectives to align with the overall strategy[14]. Before this can happen, however, people also need to see *why* changing their behaviour is important, particularly for their work group and department. If they can see that these changed behaviours contribute to successful attainment of desired outcomes, then there is a higher change they will be maintained. Thus, *cultural change becomes an outcome of the change process rather than a driver of the change process.*

Because there are multiple and potentially competing subcultures within the APS that may be stratified by hierarchy, Department, Division or Branch, it can be assumed that innovations, programs and interventions will work only in particular circumstances and results are likely to differ for different groups of participants[15]. It may be that some of these groups might be readily visible as they are formed around functions and structure, for example Branch, while others may be latent identifying and understanding these groups provides a clear framework for implementing change. For this reason, we argue that creating a strong sense of shared purpose is the first task.

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[9] See for example: Al-Haddad and Kotnour, 2015
[10] See for example: Anderson and Ackerman Anderson, 2001 in Al-Haddah and Kotnour, 2015
[11] See for example: Bayerl et al., 2013; Kotnour, 2011; Smith, 2002
[12] See for example: Smith, 2002; Van et al., 2013;
[13] See for example: May and Finch, 2009; Smith, 2002; Van et al., 2013
[14] Moran and Brightman, 2001
[15] See for example: Greenhalgh et al., 2009; Marchal et al., 2012; Pawson and Tilley, 1992

Shared Purpose

We understand the desire for a common purpose in the APS, particularly since it appears there are two major assumptions underpinning this desire for an APS-wide common purpose: (1) that a common purpose will enable the APS to become more trustworthy and re-engage with customers; and (2) that it will make it easier to work across boundaries.

We propose, however, that priority should be placed on establishing a shared understanding of the importance of public service, but with greater, locally contextual, clarity regarding the purpose and how this can shape behaviours. The APS is already governed by a set of Values that aim to guide behaviour in an appropriate way; these values are consistent with the aspirations set out in the Independent Review for trustworthiness, impartiality, collaboration, accountability, openness, ethical behaviours, integrity, and a focus on the community[16]: Therefore, rather than establishing a common purpose at the level of the APS, we suggest that consideration be devoted to establishing a broad public service purpose, centred on why the public service exists and the value it delivers to society. Then this purpose could be made contextually relevant at the departmental level and then localised to ensure it is meaningful for teams and individuals. This could help drive behavioural change, as employees can see why exhibiting the desired behaviours is important in a broader sense.

We propose that focus on establishing a common purpose should primarily occur at the local level to enable collaboration. This is because the capacity of a shared sense of purpose to act as 'glue' that binds people from disparate groups together and enables collaboration, even where there is no common culture in place, has already been demonstrated[17]. This would entail ensuring that at the outset of any policy or program that requires collaboration, attention is devoted to clarifying the desired outcomes and why the different groups need to work together to achieve it. We argue that establishing a shared sense of purpose at the level of individual policies and programs will encourage more collaborative behaviours. There is a possibility that, when operating this way leads to successful outcomes over time, more collaborative behaviours may become accepted as the norm and, therefore, valued and embedded in a broader APS culture.

Behaviours and Performance Evaluation

If a desired outcome of the Independent Review is behavioural change, we suggest those implementing its recommendations identify what success will look like *prior to* commencing the change, rather than attempting to evaluate something at the end of the program of work. The evaluation, and requisite measures, can then focus on desired outcomes in terms of observable behaviours.

It is acknowledged that measuring change success can take an economic approach (for example: downsizing, restructuring, redundancies[18], efficiency, effectiveness, quality, productivity, innovation, profitability, budgets) or a capability or human resource approach (for example, leadership, or quality of work). We agree that defining and setting goals and performance measures is an important decision, or range of decisions facing organisations during transformational change[19]. However, we suggest that evaluation and measurement will be most effective if a blend of approaches are used that focus on the outcomes in the specific context. This matters because how evaluation and measurement is framed affects the way the employees will develop their actions. For example, where there is a desire for avoiding failure, not failing becomes the benchmark that employees' performance is measured against; perversely, this contributes to a risk averse culture. In addition, when there is a desire for high levels of customer satisfaction, this becomes the performance measure; perversely, this may discourage transparency, integrity and effective governance.

Thus we propose that a clear starting point for sustainable change, would be to identify the aspects of performance that are currently most valued, affirmed or rewarded within the broader APS community

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[16] https://www.apsc.gov.au/aps-values-1
[17] Buick, 2012
[18] See the following for discussions on types of measurement: Beer and Nohria, 2000; Sink and Tuttle, 1989 in Al-Haddad and Kotnour (2015)
[19] See for example: Gunasekaran and Kobu, 2007, Itner and Larcker, 1998; Wouters and Sportel, 2005

and the language associated with those aspects. This would help to explain whether they represent the desired culture or are inadvertently maintaining an inappropriate status quo. This can emerge through understanding the perceptions and lived experiences of those involved in the change.

Embedded in the discussion of ensuring successful reform is maintaining a focus on outcomes, rather than ticking off recommendations as they are achieved. A clear vision, supporting strategy and desired outcomes, including evaluation mechanisms for these outcomes, is integral to the success of this program. It is important to remain focused on outcomes as concentrating on data can shift the priority to gathering data, rather than the change program. This results in both a rediscovery of what is already well established and understood and a strategy of more of something that is already failing to create the desired systematic and cultural shift. Shifting the focus of measurement to understanding perceptions and lived experiences of those involved, for example, could provide a very different, people oriented, way of thinking about and planning for the change.

Designing a sustainable change program

A program approach to transformational change (or reform) is made up of a number of concepts working together to define the fundamental characteristics of the change required[20]. Therefore, the essential first step is articulating or defining the concepts to establish a shared, or a contested, view of "what the change is", "who is the supposed target" and "what is the supposed outcome"[21]. This macro level of understanding provides a perspective of how the existing structures, cultures, and resources interact and thus enables a provisional description of what is required of the APS Reform through describing the principles, characteristics and organisational outcomes associated with the APS Reform. This macro-level helps identify the way/s people interact and behave because they are "conditioned" by the current structures and cultures and hence believe their choices are constrained. For example, are the behaviours associated with procurement decisions within areas of the APS limited by the FMA Act, the CEIs, procedures developed at a Departmental level or myths that are active at a local level?

The second step, or meso-level, identifies the new or desired model of practice or the "normalisation" of what people do. There is often an assumption that a desired model of practice involves the "innovation" of practices; however, it may also focus on the standardisation of existing practice to ensure a better practice across a range of situations. For example, the standardisation of procurement practice or recruitment practice to address transparency. This involves understanding what it is that people *do* (rather than what you think they do) and how they *work* to identify what inhibits the embedding of desired practice[22]. For example, if staff in the Department of Human Services operate within a subculture that is underpinned by the assumption that NewStart recipients are considered to be "dole bludgers" and "cheats", the focus of the subculture is catching the cheats and thus all resources are directed towards this focus and rewarded when they "catch a cheat". Changing this model requires significant changes to the prevailing assumptions about human nature, or at least the intentions of their customers, as well as a significant shift in the use of resources and the reinforcement (or reward) mechanisms.

Understanding *why* people behave in a certain way rather than understanding *what* they are doing enables the design of interventions designed to shift behaviour and therefore create change. A new desired practice is made possible when the beliefs, behaviours and acts associated with it have a shared meaning and use with those who are doing the work, is clearly defined by those doing the work as being different from the previous practice to establish a new shared meaning for the work, and this meaning is anchored in the lived experiences of those doing the work. In the case of the Department of Human Services, a new narrative about NewStart recipients might trigger change far more than discussing APS values.

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[20] Shearn et al., 2017
[21] Pedersen and Rieper, 2008
[22] May and Finch, 2009

The APS as a system

From the above it can be seen that the APS can be conceptualised as a "system" with a series of "sub-systems". As such it needs "*an integrated approach to drive systematic, constructive change and minimize the destructive barriers to change, as well as addressing the consequences of making change*"[23]. We suggest that part of the problem is that the sub systems are currently considered to be around Departmental lines; hence, for example seeing collaboration as the solution across a silo.

We suggest instead seeing the programs of work (design and delivery) as being the sub-system map. This will enable a different perspective for the identification of cultures, subcultures and potential leverage points within the APS; and will enable a more nuanced understanding of what it is that encourages people act as they actually do[24]. Each program of work can then be evaluated to understand the range of resources available within the program of work which includes legislation, policy, human resources, structural resources, financial resources, external links and so on. From this analysis it can be determined which resources should remain and be emphasised or built upon, those that need to change, whether the capability required for this change is already present, and what mechanisms could facilitate this change.

When using a systems approach, understanding all elements, both tangible (such as technology) and intangible (such as management capability) is critical in understanding why it is behaving as it is and what might actually lead to the desired outcomes if it as changed. Understanding the pride and other cultural elements of the existing APS and harnessing these will be important; as will understanding the interconnections between these elements, many of which will be operationalised through the flow of information (both formal and informal) and which links to the earlier recommendation regarding fully understanding the behaviours linked to why people do what they do – what are the truths and myths that guide why people do certain things.

Within the system/s there will be stated goals and objectives, however, people will determine purposes from behaviour they are observing, not the stated goals, and if the behaviour of all players in the program of work are not aligned to the stated goals, the resulting behaviour may add up to something no-one wants. There may also be purposes within purposes as systems nest within systems and the disparate behaviour of players within each of the systems influences the outcome of each of the sub-systems. For example, within the NDIS system there are procurement, human resource, information technology and other sub-systems. This all sits within a broader departmental sub-system which nests within the broader APS system; and each of these sub-systems have their own behaviour, myths and legends.

Changing the purpose and behaviour of one of the nested sub-systems may result in it being misaligned with the overall system, thereby altering the performance of the overall system in ways that were unanticipated and unwanted. Changing the leadership at any level throughout the system can have the same impact as behaviour drives the change. Changing political leaders results in changes to the system of the APS; changes to the senior levels within a program of work usually results in changes to the sub-systems within the program of work. The results are not always anticipated.

It is also important to understand which feedback loop in which sub-system is dominating and has a stronger impact on behaviour and program theory enables us to understand what is happening now (context), to identify some potential changes to this context to understand the mechanisms for change (the "what if" questions) and to then evaluate what actually happened (outcomes). The APS has been recruiting staff capable of "resilience" for many years, and this behaviour or ability to "bounce or spring back into position" may in fact make change difficult as staff are accustomed to managing difficult change and "bouncing back" after a machinery of government change, a round of productivity increases or staff or funding decreases. Thus the default setting within the APS seems to be to do more of the same behaviour. Without fully appreciating what "resilience" is triggering means the APS

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[23] Al-Haddah and Kotnour, 2015, p 234.
[24] Lowe and Plimmer, 2019; Meadows, 2008;

may to "bounce back" rather than change and to come up with whole new ways of doing things that are unpredictable and disruptive or significantly reinforce existing relationships and myths.

Summary

In summary, this paper proposes the implementation team consider cultural change within the APS as an outcome of change, rather than a driver of change. We suggest that focusing on initiating and supporting behavioural change is likely to contribute to cultural change over time. Through focusing on the people engaged with the APS as employees, contractors, customers or political actors, the implementation team can develop a description of what is happening and why.

We propose that the implementation team (and others) develop a shared understanding of the purpose and importance of the APS and the value it delivers, and contextualise this as desired behaviours at the local level.

We also propose that the implementation team establish a shared view of what the change is, who it is supposed to target and its desired outcomes; this will enable definitions of what success will look like prior to commencing the change program. This description enables the identification of evaluation criteria and desired outcomes prior to commencing the program so that measurement does not become a tick-the-box of activities, rather it is focus on changed behaviour and performance.

Finally, we proposed that considering the APS as a system with a series of programs of work as sub-systems (rather than Departments as sub-systems) will facilitate the identification of existing practices that can be standardised, rather than innovated or discarded. This will enable the implementation team to understand what people do and why they do it to uncover what inhibits the embedding of new or desired practices in the system as a whole.

Recommendations:

We recommend the following approach for consideration by the implementation team:

1. Consider the cultural change as an outcome of the change program rather than as a driver of the change program
2. Focus on identifying, initiating and supporting the desired behaviours; through changing behaviours, cultural change is likely to evolve over time
3. Clearly focus on the people involved and be able to describe what is happening and why it is important
4. Develop a shared understanding of the purpose and importance of the public service and the value it delivers, and contextualise this as desired behaviours at the local level
5. Identify and clearly describe what success will look like prior to commencing the change program to enable evaluation of the achievement of desired outcomes rather than ticking off activities
6. Consider the APS as a system, with programs of work, rather than Departments or Branches, as sub-systems to enable identification of existing practices that can be standardised rather than innovated or deleted through understanding what currently inhibits embedding of desired practice.

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