**Submission to the Independent Review of the APS**

**Purpose**

To comment on the effectiveness of the current capability, culture and operating model of the APS in relation to two elements in the scope of the review:

* Tackling complex, multi-sectoral challenges in collaboration with the community, business and citizens
* Acquiring and maintaining the necessary skills and expertise to fulfil its responsibilities

**Background**

The APS has made a number of serious commitments to improving collaboration for at least two decades (e.g. *Connecting Government* 2004, *Ahead of the Game* 2010, and many other reports). However, the APS continues to struggle to make the shift to the different way of working, with the same issues and concerns repeatedly raised. For example, all recent evaluations of collaborative remote Indigenous initiatives have identified failings in the over-reliance on top-down centralised approaches, the lack of effective engagement early in the process, and the lack of community and government capacity for genuine engagement and collaboration (Phillips-Brown, Reddel, and Gleeson 2012, 256-259).

It is important to recognise that collaboration represents a significant shift from established bureaucratic practices. As such, it is unsurprising that the shift is difficult. Understanding what is required, and why these requirements are problematic is an important first step in understanding what is required for successful reform.

*What is needed for collaborative approaches*

The requirements for a successful shift to collaboration are significant and challenging for an established bureaucracy.

New levels of engagement intended to involve the targets of the government intervention in both the specification of the problem and the design of the solution require policy actors to invest considerable time and resources to achieve the desired results (Wilks et al., 2015, Cantin, 2010, Hunt, 2013, MacLean et al., 2013).

Policy actors also need to reconceptualise citizens as “resources of value to … the system rather than mere beneficiaries of it” (Holmes, 2011), and to revisit their hierarchy of evidence which puts expert evidence above local, lived experience (Armitage et al., 2008).

Developing solutions which take account of local context requires policy actors to move away from linear thinking towards making space for the complex, unpredictable and at times unintended consequences of action at the local level (see for example Chaffin et al., 2014, Cantin, 2010, Rijke et al., 2012, Burton et al., 2006).

At an institutional level adaptive approaches also require being open to outside influences and evidence and, as noted by Campbell (1969), if “the political and administrative system has committed itself in advance to the correctness and efficacy of its reforms, it cannot tolerate learning of failure.” Further, Holmes (2011) notes that “cultural, psychological and procedural shifts” are all required for policy actors to be able to make the shift from ‘fixers’ to ‘enablers’.

*The way the current culture operates in response to attempts to collaborate*

Any attempt at reform is overlaid on existing, strongly held norms about the way things should be done. There is an inevitable tension between the old and new ways that needs to be resolved. This requires the existing norms to shift to make space for the new ways of working. However, if the shift required is significant, then other norms are often mobilised to legitimise resistance to change.

For example, rationality is a well-established bureaucratic norm, reflected in the preference for evidence-based policy. In most contexts, this is a desirable aspiration, however in complex and contested policy areas, reliance on the norm of rationality can result in preferencing expert knowledge. However, collaboration requires policy actors to place a high value on outside knowledge and experience. This means that the norm of rationality is in conflict with the norms required for collaboration. Where this tension is resolved productively, then collaboration is successful. However, further norms are sometimes mobilised to justify reversion to old ways of working. In this instance, an example of this occurring is when discourses of capacity deficit can be used to justify the preferencing of expert knowledge.

The table below is based on a study of attempts at collaboration in remote Indigenous policy (Brown, 2018b). It identifies four strongly held bureaucratic norms which are problematic for attempts to overlay collaboration. It also identifies how they influenced practice during implementation. Finally, it identifies how these norms are in tension with the new norms required by collaboration.

| **Existing norms** | **Manifestations in practice** | **In tension with collaborative norms of:** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Command and Control | * Consulting with pre-determined outcomes
* A centralised focus
 | * Being open to outside influences and evidence
* Comfortably working with uncertainty
* Changing conceptions of accountability
 |
| Action orientation | * Deliverables
* Reporting
* Responsiveness to Minister
 | * Being willing to adapt approaches in response to lessons from the local level
* Questioning assumptions, committing to frame reflection
 |
| Risk aversion | * Following ‘the rules’
* Avoiding ‘bad news’
 | * Being willing to adapt approaches in response to lessons from the local level
* Comfortably working with uncertainty
* Changing conceptions of accountability
 |
| Rationality | * Preference for expert knowledge
 | * Attaching value to different knowledges and lived experience
 |

The fact that there are tensions does not mean that collaboration is not possible. What is required is an environment that is supportive of a productive resolution of that tension, rather than reversion to the status quo. That is why the culture and capability of policy actors involved with collaborative efforts is so important.

**Discussion**

It is critical that policy makers are aware that developing a strong policy framework is not sufficient (Brown, 2018b). Policy makers need to pay attention to the role of the policy actors who will implement the policy and the way that they exercise discretion. This discretion can be directed through closer specification of key terminology and detailed implementation plans – in other words at the policy level. It can also be directed through developing new social and political logics to support the new logics of reform – in other words at the implementation level (Brown and Head, 2018).

As such, it is clear that policy failure is not a result of *either* policy *or* implementation *or* capacity, but emerges from the complex interplay between all three.

In the policy space, it is important to ensure that policies do not unintentionally authorise reversion to the status quo. In particular, if governments want to move towards the contextualised policies required for effective responses to complex problems, then they need to move away from the current one-size-fits-all national approaches.

In the implementation space, governments need to pay more attention to making sure the inevitable tensions generated by reform can be navigated productively. This involves developing new norms to counteract the strongly held old norms which can be mobilised to legitimise resistance to reform.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Norms**  | **Used to legitimise resistance to projected social logics of:** |
| Capacity deficit  | * Attaching value to different knowledges and lived experience
* Being open to outside influences and evidence
 |
| Expert evidence | * Changing conceptions of accountability
* Being willing to adapt approaches in response to lessons from the local level
 |
| Upward accountability | * Changing conceptions of accountability
* Being willing to adapt approaches in response to lessons from the local level
* Questioning assumptions, committing to frame reflection
* Comfortably working with uncertainty
 |

In terms of capacity, policy actors who are able to manage tensions and ambiguities – or boundary spanners (Williams 2013, 29) – are critical during attempts to introduce new approaches. These actors are able to manage tensions productively and overcome the pull of the status quo when implementing reform.

There is a considerable body of literature which examines the capabilities required by boundary spanners, and the need for specific training in these new capabilities (O'Flynn et al. 2011; Pollitt 2003; Williams 2010, 2013; Carey et al. 2017). Williams raises the issue of whether it is possible to train and develop people to become boundary spanners, or whether is it just a matter of “personality” (Williams 2010, pp. 21-2). He suggests that “personal attributes or traits are likely to influence the manner in which he/she undertakes their boundary spanning role” (p. 22) but that it is possible to develop the necessary capabilities, particularly those that relate to technical knowledge and understanding. However, he notes that further research is needed to determine “future training and development” needs (p. 32). Furthermore, Brown (2017) questions an exclusive focus training and suggests that efforts to diversify the public sector workforce might be more fruitful. She further suggests that policy actors who have at some stage worked outside the public sector might be more open to collaboration than long term career public servants (Brown, 2018a).

For collaboration with the community, business and citizens to be successful in tacking complex, multi-sectoral challenges, the APS will need to pay attention to policy, implementation and capability. It is important to recognise that the usual concept of an ‘enabling environment’ needs to go beyond the usual overlays of structural reform and training, to also include addressing the elements outlined above.

**About the author**

The author has recently completed a PhD to extend on her professional observations during nearly 20 years in senior policy roles in the Northern Territory, Australian and Queensland governments. In particular, her recent role with the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services sparked her interest in the role of public sector mindsets and traditions in the ongoing policy failure in remote Indigenous Australia and subsequent opportunities for reform. Her thesis investigates resistance to reform in the public sector and how to successfully embed new ways of working.

In the public sector she has worked in executive policy roles relating to Indigenous land, housing, local government and justice as well as more general policy coordination roles. Prior to the public sector she worked at the Australian National University managing a large international trade and macro-economic database and consultancy. She has also conducted consultancies for The University of Queensland International Development, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, World Bank and UNDP.

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