

# A thing or two we learned from public servants in a management course

Ian McAuley – former lecturer at the University of Canberra, with acknowledgment to my colleague and friend, the late Helen Coventry, and to Jeff Kelly

## Summary

Over 16 years around 800 Commonwealth public servants passed through a postgraduate management unit, which as part of its educational design required students to reflect on their work experience.

Among this group we found performance management, in its many dimensions, to be a strong concern. We found little evidence of dissatisfaction with pay and mandated conditions. We observed a difference in motivation between those working in roles that called on their professional skills and those working in general administrative areas, the latter often disheartened by unclear work assignments, politicisation, and a lack of opportunity to perform meaningful work.

What we observed was consistent with a proposition that the Commonwealth was not making full use of the productive and creative potential of its workforce.

## Background – Learning from 800 public servants

A colleague, Helen Coventry, and I as co-teachers had responsibility for a unit “Management Theory and Practice” at the University of Canberra from 1990 until 2005. It was a core unit in postgraduate management courses – a three unit graduate certificate, a six unit diploma, or a master’s degree by coursework.

It was offered both as part of regular university courses, and as part of special certificate courses offered in-house under contract to government agencies.

We taught it for 16 consecutive years in regular courses, and about 10 times for in-house courses, with an average enrolment of around 40. Therefore about 1000 students would have passed through this unit. In the in-house courses all students were Commonwealth public servants, while in the open courses we found about two thirds were from Commonwealth agencies, the rest being private sector, ACT Government employees, or military. That means about 800 Commonwealth public servants<sup>1</sup> passed through that unit.

Almost all Commonwealth public servants were Canberra-based. Unless students told us, we did not know (nor did we want to know) their public service rank. As far as we were aware it ranged from around APS 6 through to SES 1.

We were mindful that there was probably a bias towards more highly motivated people. Most of those in regular courses were paying their own way (some had departmental support), and those in in-house courses were supported by, and chosen by, their employers. Entry requirements were standard for postgraduate courses – an undergraduate degree.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Some were employees of statutory authorities or GBEs, therefore not technically “public servants”.

2. A small number without undergraduate qualifications were accepted by our university on the basis of recognition of prior learning (RPL). We did not know who the RPL students were, but the university

Although part-time study is often difficult for people with child-minding responsibilities, we noticed no gender bias. The in-house courses were mainly during normal working hours and the agencies involved generally chose a diverse group of students, almost always among the best students we came across in such courses.

## **The unit and the journal**

The unit “Management Theory and Practice” was co-taught to achieve balance. Helen’s specialty was in human resource management, sociology and psychology, mine in economics and finance. Her professional background was mainly in universities and CAEs, mine mainly in private and public sector professional and managerial positions.

An initiative of Helen’s was to require students to keep a weekly journal “covering managerial situations that arise during the course”. Students were to make an entry each week – compulsory but non-assessable – and at the end of the semester to submit an analysis of their learning through reflecting on these entries. That analysis aspect was assessable. We expected students to track their own learning and to see their work situations from a more detached, analytical perspective. A description of the journal assignment, taken from a subject outline, is in the Appendix.

We deliberately weren’t too prescriptive about what we meant by “managerial situations”. We expected that most students would choose to mention areas of dissatisfaction with their work situations, and this expectation was confirmed.

## **Students’ journals – the source of our findings**

We didn’t envisage that we would use these entries as a research project. At the outset, we had no idea that the course would go on for 16 years. We had a firm contract with the students that at the end of semester we would return their hard copy entries (which dominated in the early years), and that we would delete what was submitted electronically. And, because the requirements were deliberately left open, the entries did not have enough structure to form a basis for a research project.

The observations recounted below are based on what Helen and I observed over the time we taught together, with help from Jeff Kelly, a management consultant and a former senior public servant who also taught in the unit over several of the occasions it was offered. It would have been more appropriate had Helen prepared this report. It is more in her territory and she had intended to write a report, but in 2009 she was diagnosed with cancer and died in 2013.

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administrators tracked their performance based on our assessments, and found their performance to be slightly better than the students with degrees, but the difference was not statistically significant.

## What we found

### No complaint about pay and conditions

We did not expect, nor did we find, many complaints about pay and conditions. (“Hygiene factors” in Frederick Herzberg’s terminology<sup>3</sup>). A few people mentioned perceived injustices in promotion or higher duties allowances, but that was all.

People in agencies with varying workload accepted that there would be periods of high pressure and long hours – but some mentioned the stress of “invented” panics when people attempted to emphasise (to their ministers or to other departments) the importance of some aspect of their division’s work by escalating the supposed relevance of a minor issue.

While overwork was not a general problem, stress was an issue in many areas, particularly in areas with vague and changing work assignments and expectations – sometimes unreal expectations. (The practice of sending people on “stress management” courses came in for particular criticism when stress was seen to have been unnecessarily generated.)

### Performance management – where discontent was strongest

A majority of students (not necessarily a majority of weekly entries) raised the issue of carrying unproductive staff. Usually peers, sometimes subordinates, and sometimes bosses. The “sickie” on a Monday or on the day of an important assignment got frequent mentions, as did the practice among some staff of taking every piece of available leave.

The resentment was not only about carrying others. The strongest aspect of that resentment was a feeling that those who abused the system were letting the side down, confirming the right wing view that public servants are intrinsically lazy or incompetent, thereby paving the way for privatization and contracting out.

Students’ final analytical assignments based on their observations provided revealing insights (often speculative) into the root causes of such behaviour. They attributed unproductive behaviour to:

- a response to politicians’ and tabloid journalists’ presentation of public servants as lazy and underworked – “if that’s how we’re described, we may as well act that way” – a conclusion consistent with the theory of “cognitive consonance” (we tend to behave as we are described by others to behave);
- public sector unions, which students considered to be working within an outdated industrial model, and which had little concern with professional values or the costs imposed on others by generosity to underperformers;
- bureaucratic hurdles in dealing with poor performance;
- “soft” bosses;
- skills mismatches arising from the idea that public servants have general “clerical administrative” skills and can be moved at will from workplace to workplace – a problem manifest in rearrangements;

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3. Reference to the terminology used by Frederick Herzberg “One More Time: How do You Motivate Employees?” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1968.

- poor appointments of senior staff, with appointments perceived to be based more on loyalty to and conformance with agency traditions than on competence.

A few students complained about the ways performance management had been implemented in their organizations, mainly concerning simplistic metrics encouraging gaming and working to the metric. At the other extreme some complained about the subjectivity in performance assessment.

### **Productivity impediments**

Many students were critical of what they saw as practices impeding productivity.

A common complaint was the difficulty in obtaining access to resources to allow them to do their job properly – travel, subscriptions to data bases, specialised software.

I should point out that this awareness was heightened when we had students calculate the full absorbed costs of activities such as calling a two-hour meeting of five staff. Part of our teaching was to develop cost-awareness of all their activities, and to dispel the idea that bureaucratic labour is a sunk cost.

Many mentioned arbitrary bureaucratic compliance rules, unproductive work environments (the open office came in for harsh criticism), and the perennial problems of poor delegation, ill-considered orders, and a lack of feedback.

To an extent these are common issues in both private and public sector workplaces, but we were struck by certain aspects more strongly manifest among public sector employees.

On delegation, both Jeff Kelly and I who have worked in large companies, have been struck by the practice in the public service of showing disrespect for experience, knowledge and expertise – for example a representative to a meeting being chosen on the basis of seniority, rather than expertise. Some of our most competent students mentioned the frustration at having to brief a senior officer for a meeting at which the senior officer would be out of his or her depth on technical matters. (One student, a qualified accountant, wrote of a case in which, due to a lack of accounting experience, a senior officer negotiating a private contract cost the Commonwealth several hundred thousand dollars.)

### **Training**

A few students took the opportunity to make invidious comparisons between what they were learning at university and what they had experienced in training courses run by big-name consultants. One common complaint was that such courses were often generic, without adaptation to the public sector. Some mentioned dated or discredited theory on which training was delivered.

Courses on “leadership” came in for particular criticism (possibly because we were drawing on the work of the Kennedy School Leadership Program, which, because it differentiates between authority and leadership, doesn’t fit easily with conventional theories).

And there was a general cynicism about the jargon of management.

## Politicisation

Many students, probably those in more senior ranks, complained about politicisation. We were surprised to find many were aware of, and resentful towards, the 1999 changes to the Public Service Act that required public servants to be “responsive” to the government.

Some of those who had the task of writing press releases and speeches for ministers, drafting replies to letters, and preparing responses to possible questions put to ministers, were distressed by the moral conflicts they encountered when carrying out these tasks. They felt that they had to resort to obfuscating, lying, and using casuistry and sophistry to satisfy ministers’ demands. By contrast, a few commented favourably on their ministers’ integrity. Attitudes to ministerial staff were almost always negative, however.

These complaints tended to become more prominent in later years of these courses, reflecting, possibly, a trend to greater politicisation of the public service the longer a government is in office. (By 2005 the Howard Government had been in office for nine years.)

In presenting traditional readings of the moral dimensions of management and social responsibility our teaching probably contributed to this distress.

Unsurprisingly there were complaints about resource allocations – perceived generosity to ministers’ favoured projects for example.

Also unsurprising was the disheartening effect when, following a media or opposition beat-up, a minister would suddenly abandon a project on which people had worked for a long time.

There was a more general issue coming through in many of these entries – a sense that their work was useless and of no value.

In small groups, Helen, Jeff or I, when teaching about public value, would set a challenge to students. It went as follows:

- (1) Estimate the cost of your employment last year – salary plus overheads.
- (2) Calculate how much income tax the average household pays. (We provided students with income tax statistics.)
- (3) How many households’ income taxes therefore, were required to keep you employed last year? (The answer was usually about ten – we didn’t bother with the refinement of pointing out there were other taxes.)
- (4) Now imagine yourself before a meeting of those ten households explaining what you did for them last year. You have ten minutes to prepare a five-minute presentation to the group.

For some the task was easy. If the student was a statistician in the ABS, a regulator in the Therapeutic Goods Administration, or a CSIRO scientist, the presentations were usually clear and often creative. But those working in general policy and administrative roles often had immense difficulty with the challenge. In cases students were reduced to tears.

Quite clearly the more abstract the person’s work the more difficult is this task. (I have given the same exercise to state and local public servants who usually find it much easier.) But it does present a major motivational issue for Commonwealth public servants.

## **Learned helplessness**

Helen Coventry, who had some clinical psychology background, said that she identified the phenomenon of “learned helplessness” in quite a few public service students. These were people who had been brought in to the Public Service through departments’ competitive graduate recruitment process – a process which brings in very able people – and whose university assignments showed they had not lost those basic competencies, but who showed a lack of energy, confidence or enthusiasm, and in some cases deep cynicism.

It was manifest in beliefs that consultants could do a better job than public servants (a belief confirmed by governments’ overlooking in-house capabilities), that their friends in the private sector were more competent (a belief supported by higher pay and more autonomy in many private sector jobs, and by the fact that people tend not to keep contact with school or university friends who drop out), and a general public and political stereotype that presents the whole public sector as an unproductive overhead.

A few students mentioned the enthusiasm with which a minister may announce a privatization or downsizing, comparing those announcements with the messages of regret when a well-managed private firm announces a closure.

Helen saw some of her work with particular students in terms of remedial care – restoring self-confidence to people who, as a result of humiliation or disrespect, had lost enthusiasm for their work.

## Appendix – Journal Assignment

### Extract from 2004 Unit Outline

You will be required to maintain a weekly journal covering managerial situations that arise during the course. (We'll discuss in class what is meant by "managerial situations"). In writing the journal you should analyse the situations through theory which comes from managerial literature or the lectures. Apart from the first entry (see below), each weekly entry should be no more than 250 words (around one page at most). Each entry should combine description and reflection.

The entries should be clear and legible, either handwritten or on a computer file. In the final week of the subject you should submit the diary together with a report of 1500 words maximum based on your journal entries. This report should be a reflection on some aspect of what you have learned about management and how you have adjusted your management assumptions and practice.

In the first class we will ask you to write down:

- a short answer to the question "what is management?"
- why you have enrolled in a course or subject in management

We will ask you to hand these in, anonymously, and we will return them in the second week. Our aim is to see where the group is coming from in their beliefs and expectations.

From then on, the weekly journal entries are for your own use; apart from seeing evidence that they have been completed there will be no assessment on their content or style. (In fact it is important for your learning that you not revise these entries, even if you come to feel during the subject that you would wish to re-write your early entries). The content and style of the final report are assessable.

The whole project counts for 40 percent, and should be submitted by June 8, one week after the semester ends.