



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

***“Role of the Secretary in Facilitating Large-Scale
Organisational Change”***

Public Sector Change Communications Conference

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. It’s a great pleasure to be here.

Introduction

Type the word “communications” into a Google search and you will come up with about 400 million references!

The reason that there is so much discussion about the subject of communications is because of its paradoxical nature: it is at once, both easy and difficult.

Today I would like to share with you, some of my own experiences as the Secretary, communicating to staff and external stakeholders about all of the issues surrounding what I believe to be one of the largest business and cultural transformations undertaken by a government department in Australia in recent decades.

I will talk to you about how I have been conveying the message about this important task, so that all 7000 DIAC staff in some 100 locations throughout the world, have a shared understanding of where we are going and what we want to achieve.

Three years into this major change program, it is no understatement to say that without a clear and explicit commitment to communications throughout the entire organisation, such a transformation could not have occurred.

The catalyst for change

But let me begin by putting this story into a historical context.

There were clearly serious failures in the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs as it was then known, affecting Cornelia Rau, Vivian Alvarez and other people held unlawfully.

These failures were documented in the Palmer and Comrie reports released in July and September 2005, and subsequent reports by the Ombudsman.

In his report at the time, Mr Palmer noted a ‘culture that is overly self-protective and defensive, a culture largely unwilling to challenge organisational norms or to engage in genuine self-criticism or analysis.’

More broadly, the Palmer and Comrie reports focused on leadership, governance, training systems support, the relationship between policy development and implementation, client service delivery and records management.

These issues required an urgent response. It is clear to me as Secretary, appointed immediately following the Palmer report, that the department had to acknowledge failures had occurred. We had to develop an organisation-wide understanding of why the department as a whole had to change and improve.

This had to start immediately, but could not be achieved overnight.

We also had to recognise the considerable experience and insights of people who had worked in the pre-Palmer environment, while being clear that nearly every aspect of the organisation needed fundamental reform.

We also had to bring in new people to bring new ideas and energy.

We had to engage people at all levels across the department, to ensure ownership of the new approach and the new ways of doing business.

We had to acknowledge that major failures had occurred, with tragic results. But we also had to recognise that in some areas, the department is a world leader – for example, in planned migration programs, in refugee resettlement and in border technology.

And we had to recognise that some staff had been directly and personally affected by working for long periods in difficult and sensitive areas of administration.

These were complex issues and we had very little time to resolve them — we were under significant pressure to show quick results that the culture of the department was changing for the better.

In other speeches over the last year or so, I have talked about “leadership” and “culture” in achieving major, lasting reforms. Today I am pleased to talk about the importance of strong internal and external communication.

Importance of communication

There is no use in trying to engineer major cultural transformation if the message goes no further than the senior leadership team.

We had to communicate effectively with all staff and stakeholders so that we had buy-in at all levels. Change and reform can only occur if everyone is involved – staff need to hear the message, understand it, own it – otherwise nothing can change.

And the fact that the department has 7000 staff in around 100 locations throughout the world, often working in difficult and sensitive circumstances, meant that we had to be clear and consistent in our messaging.

When I began as Secretary of the department in July 2005, the government and many stakeholders were eager for change to occur and many staff recognised that the status quo was not working.

Staff at all levels needed to understand we all needed to embrace our new ways of working.

We developed a small, high-level team – the Change Management Taskforce - which met with myself and the deputy secretaries every morning for four months, to craft the messages

that would be communicated to staff, cut through any road blocks and calibrate all the different streams of activity underway.

We needed to make it clear what was important and where we were going.

In some ways, this was the easiest and yet the hardest part of the whole process.

It was easy because it wasn't difficult to define the key elements of our vision.

The hard part of creating a new vision was to develop ownership among the staff for these goals and the cultural change required.

This is where communication became absolutely crucial.

Since the Palmer report, we have worked very carefully to clearly communicate the appropriate behaviours and values for the organisation as a whole,

At the same time, the magnitude and nature of the culture change required, meant that all staff had to be participants in the process.

It was essential that each staff member felt ownership of the department's new direction.

As I mentioned earlier, we had to develop a collective understanding across the organisation, of who we were and where we were going.

We started by developing a very clear statement of what we do, through our motto – **people** our business.

Our motto was developed after asking for staff input, so there was ownership and pride taken in this fundamental statement of what our work is about.

We added another level of detail by developing three strategic themes for the organisation to guide every aspect of our work.

These are to:

- be an open and accountable organisation
- have fair and reasonable dealings with clients, and
- ensure well-trained and supported staff

We have now reinforced this with comprehensive business plans and individual performance discussions.

As I mentioned earlier, from the very first day that I started as Secretary, I was determined that all staff should understand the need for change and how the changes were occurring.

In addition to many face-to-face meetings, I now speak to all my staff twice a week, through an all-staff email, and all Senior Executive Service staff once a week, also by email.

Messages have been sent out twice a week, from the very first week I started at the department, in July 2005. As at this morning I am up to around 400 messages sent!

Each message is crafted not only to inform staff about important developments and issues, but they can all be mapped back to our three strategic themes, which I mentioned earlier.

But communication needs to be more than frequent, it has to be meaningful – and it has to be two way, to involve listening as well as talking.

Staff are encouraged to provide feedback through my Secretary's email box. And let me tell you, I know for certain through the emails I receive from staff, there are many frank and fearless public servants in my department!

However, it is important that they have a channel to speak directly to the Secretary, if they so choose.

And it gives me the opportunity to learn on a daily basis, the issues that are important to staff.

Another key communication/feedback tool has been our Staff Surveys.

We have held one survey for each of the years I have been Secretary, and the surveys have been invaluable in assisting the executive to shape the department into the sort of place where staff are happy to work.

The 2008 DIAC Staff Survey participation rate was 85.2 per cent which is a very good response rate for an electronic survey (an increase of nearly 5 per cent on last year).

We have also encouraged staff input and incorporated their suggestions into the DIAC Strategic Plan 2008–11, the department's key document for the future, which I will be formally releasing to our staff and stakeholders later this week.

I have held regular "town hall" addresses to staff, recognising their work through events such as our own Australia Day celebrations and awards, announcing major new changes following federal Budgets, or highlighting the work of particular business areas.

Communicating in a way people will listen to

Immediately post-Comrie and Palmer, we recognised we had to build up the department's communications branch capability

because it would provide the skills and equipment needed to get many of the messages across.

We did this, and apart from our monthly DIAC People on-line magazine, we now have our own highly professional monthly TV style news program, highlighting the work being done by staff, created at a surprisingly modest cost to the department.

Staff access the program through our intranet site.

Our departmental cameramen have followed Immigration officers working for Seaports, processing the papers of sea crew entering Australia. They have filmed compliance training operations, gone out on the road with regional outreach officers and filmed citizenship ceremonies around Australia.

Web analysis shows that more than 4000 staff view the *Our People* video program within 24 hours of it being posted on the intranet.

I am able to communicate with staff through podcasts and vodcasts on a regular basis, when important announcements have to be made.

Let me show you just one story from *Our People*, to illustrate what I am saying: [video shown]

We have also filmed training programs, that help staff to communicate better with each other and they are placed on the intranet for all to use. For example, we recently launched a program showing staff real-life role plays on how to conduct their twice-yearly performance interviews. It showed staff how to prepare for their interviews, and it showed supervisors how they should conduct the interview, and the sorts of discussions they should have with team members.

This expanded communications capacity has been particularly important, given that a large proportion of our staff are under 30 years of age and are very busy.

Research has indicated that this age group are more likely to retain information presented to them through contemporary, high-tech methods such as podcasts as opposed to the traditional presentation methods.

This communication method has, in my view, has been key to engendering the type of long term, cultural change required in my department.

Good communication doesn't mean not having fun

But in addition to all these “serious” messages, we have also introduced some plain old-fashioned morale-boosters, to improve communications between staff.

Simply said, our social clubs do great work for staff and the communities we live in. The DIAC National Office Social Club raised a total of \$64 000 last year for local Canberra charities through events such as our annual Ball; Christmas Party; Shave for a Cure; Red NoseDay, Salvos Red Shield Appeal, and so on.

And we have raised just over \$54 000 so far this year.

I have to make a sheepish confession here. There are not many Secretaries who have been coerced by their Social Club into wearing a very tight, white lycra Elvis suit, resplendent with a black latex wig - all in the name of charity, of course.

Our staff are enthusiastic contributors to the Red Cross blood service – winning the competition amongst Canberra public sector agencies in recent years, including some much bigger departments.

Another old-fashioned communications tool I insist on is that both I and all of our Senior Executive Service officers must

spend some time on a DIAC front counter or with operational staff at some point, each year.

I have done this so our senior leaders truly understand what it is like for our staff operating at the coal-face of what can often be demanding and complex work.

Stakeholder Engagement

One of the major issues identified in the Palmer and Comrie reports was that the department knew little about its stakeholders, let alone engaged or communicated with them.

As a result, we set up a strategic priority for ourselves as an organisation of significantly improving our relationships with our stakeholders.

We hold annual forums in capital cities around Australia, where our stakeholders can talk directly to senior staff and policymakers, and provide valuable insights and viewpoints into the policy process.

At the same time, our staff can explain to stakeholders the challenges and complexities of developing government policy.

This has established a robust and mutually beneficial relationship between us and our stakeholders.

Communication through improving client service

We have also taken steps to raise our levels of client service – to aspire to *excellence* in client service - a lot of which is based on better communications with our clients. One simple step was to ask all our staff to wear a name badge, to present an open and welcoming image.

In a 2008 survey carried out by the University of Queensland Social Research Centre, just over 82 per cent of clients were ‘satisfied’ to ‘very satisfied’ with services provided by DIAC.

This is up from 79 per cent in 2007.

Less than 8 per cent were ‘dissatisfied’ to ‘very dissatisfied’, down from 15 per cent in 2007.

Levels of “courtesy” by DIAC staff also jumped from 72 per cent in 2007 to 82 per cent in 2008.

So you can see that our external clients and stakeholders, are definitely registering the change in DIAC’s culture and the way we do business.

For instance, Peter Gillson, the Vice President of the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals noted that he had been looking closely at what DIAC had been doing with our Client Service Charter, and our Service Standards, and has described it as “leading edge”.

I must add however, that our minister quite rightly continues to request improvements in the way we deal with clients, so we are continuing to focus on further improving our customer service. We can always do better.

Media

As I mentioned earlier, we built up our National Communications Branch in recognition of the need to communicate all that we were doing.

This included communicating to external audiences through the media.

Prior to the development of the branch, we were literally deluged daily with an avalanche of negative media.

It is fair to say that the department was not media-friendly — understandably so.

But it had to change. We had to be able to communicate to the community and our stakeholders, about the massive changes that were going on within the department.

We tore down the bunker and put up a sign that said: “ Media Section: now open 24 hours per day, 365 days a year.”

The media now knows they can call our media team (most of whom are ex-journalists) at any time, and will get a response. On a normal working day, the aim is to have a response to the media enquiry, within 60 minutes of receiving the call.

We are also developing an on-line newsroom, which will be a large repository of broadcast and press quality audio files and visual files, which can be used by the media.

It means we are able to highlight the great work being done in many areas of the department — not just simply responding to media enquiries. We’re making it easy for the media to use the film footage and audio files, that would otherwise be only used internally.

Departmental business

In the midst of all of this, the department is getting on with the daily business of immigration, settlement and citizenship.

We are working at a fast pace, reflecting the engagement of Australia and Australians in the wider global economy.

For example, last financial year, we:

- processed more than 24 million passenger and crew arrivals and departures
- answered 1.7 million phone calls at our Sydney and Melbourne contact centres
- granted nearly 3.6 million visitor visas offshore
- processed 13 000 refugee and humanitarian visas

- granted over 158 000 migrant visas and 110 000 subclass 457 (temporary skilled work) visas and
- granted citizenship to nearly 170 000 people.

The government has announced a range of reforms in the area of compliance, detention and asylum seeker processing, while maintaining a strong focus on our border integrity.

Earlier in the year, the government ended the ‘Pacific Strategy’ with the closure of the Nauru Offshore Processing Centre. The abolition of Temporary Protection visas for asylum seekers, resolving the status of some 1000 refugees in Australia, and of course, the recent landmark speech by the minister on our new directions in detention.

The government has also firmly established in the public arena that migration is a central pillar of nation building and the key to our national prosperity.

In my speech at the L21 Public Sector Leadership Conference last week I outlined some of the announcements by the minister in the 2008-09 Budget. This speech is available on the department’s website if you are interested. In summary, they include increases to the Migration and Humanitarian Programs; strengthening measures to help migrant’s develop their English language skills; the reform of the Subclass 457 visa, and the recently announced Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, much has been done over the past three years to change the Department of Immigration and Citizenship into the organisation it is today.

It is fair to say that not one single area of the department has remained untouched by the massive cultural and business transformation that is currently occurring.

This has happened while the organisation continued with “business as usual” – and a record migration program.

I firmly believe that without a serious commitment to strong and effective communication at all levels, we would not be where we are today – a department that is committed to our motto of: **people** our business, and working to our three strategic themes of:

- being an open and accountable organisation
- having fair and reasonable dealings with clients
- having well-trained and supported staff.

I have no doubt that as an organisation, we will continue to develop in our goals of excellence in all areas of business, because the foundations are now firmly in place, and we are well and truly on our way.

And good communication will remain crucial.

Thank you