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Strengthening relationships with First Australians

It's often said that "relationships matter".

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders dealing with the Commonwealth's public sector bureaucrats to develop Indigenous policies, relationships certainly do matter. And not just any sort of sort of relationship. High quality ones that engender a sense of trust and mutual respect.

Developing good policy often involves negotiations between the public service and stakeholders, and the testing of ideas. Not everyone gets everything they want. In such situations, trust and respect can be the difference between people remaining at the table or walking away.

These individual relationships form part of a larger Indigenous policy network. Today these networks have reach across the public service and out into the business, academic and Indigenous community sectors.

To create new policy, public servants have to reach across these diverse contexts, mobilise policy actors and create an environment in which innovation can flourish. These relationships are also fundamental if we are to address many of the challenges in implementation.

A key to strengthening policy relationships across the Australian Public Service (APS) is to increase the number of Indigenous people working in the bureaucracy. Another is to build the capability of non-Indigenous public servants to develop strong Indigenous relationships.

Public sector leaders are key to the creation of a culture that values high-quality relationships. The challenge is as much internal as it is external. Public sector agencies need to tackle the challenges of cultural diversity in order to create a foundation for respectful external relationships.

As an Indigenous health practitioner and academic who has spent more than three decades working in policy development, I have often observed the fleeting nature of the Indigenous stakeholder-public sector bureaucrat relationship.

It can be a very frustrating cycle.

Early in my career, I invested significant personal effort to help non-Indigenous people build policy relationships across the Indigenous sector.

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(In my experience, it is important for non-Indigenous bureaucrats to understand the biographies and connections of Indigenous policy actors. They also need to understand the history of Indigenous institutions. And they need a detailed understanding of the complexity of Indigenous issues.)

However, with every new non-Indigenous appointment to the senior ranks of the bureaucracy came a new cycle of learning. After a while I just found it dispiriting.

I suspect I am not alone. In fact many of Australia's prominent Indigenous policy leaders, including Tom Calma, Jackie Huggins, Rod Little, Marcia Langton, Mick Gooda, June Oscar and Noel Pearson, have been around a long time in the face of an ongoing churn of bureaucrats.

What are they to make of the churn and constant loss of corporate knowledge? Of the need to work with the latest non-Indigenous senior bureaucrat who lacks even a rudimentary knowledge of Indigenous Affairs issues? Is it any wonder they become weary and cynical of the public service? I don't think so.

The result is an endless cycle of corporate knowledge loss and the rebuilding of relationships. A continual loss of trust and the need to rebuild it. How can this be good for the development of public policy? Clearly it isn't and if we reflect on the 50 years the Commonwealth has been involved in public administration in Indigenous Affairs, this has impacted on public administration.

So what is the solution?

It is tempting to suggest that part of the solution is to create an environment where senior non-Indigenous public servants don't view working in Indigenous Affairs as a stepping stone to a job somewhere else. It should be a career highlight where the best and brightest bureaucrats want to stay – and where there is an expectation senior staff will commit to staying.

Although there is some value in this proposition, I think it is a bit too simplistic. There are obviously benefits in having public servants move between departments. Fresh people do bring in fresh ideas. And it's also in no one's interests to have a bureaucrat "nesting" in a position for 20 years – not evolving or taking in new ideas.

There is also value in having non-Indigenous bureaucrats with experience in Indigenous Affairs move into other domains of policy. If they have built good relationships across the Indigenous sector, this can be an asset to whatever part of the bureaucracy they move to.

Part of the solution is to refine our selection of non-Indigenous public servants to ensure they have relevant relationship capability. It is also important to invest in activities and processes that accelerate the development of the bureaucrats' Indigenous policy relationships.

Another part of the solution is to accelerate the participation and leadership of Indigenous Australia in policy development.

In the world of the 1967 referendum, Indigenous participation in the public sector was rare. Since then, the Indigenous world has changed enormously.

Figures for 2016 show that Indigenous Australians made up 2.9 per cent of the APS (Australian Public Service Commission, 2016). There is also a large national cohort of Indigenous Australians in higher education – approximately 18,000. And Indigenous leadership has diversified – with growing numbers in the private and academic sectors.

The APS should tap into these Indigenous leaders and people from other sectors and encourage them to consider working in the public service. And if they make the move, support should be given to them so they stay. But if they don't, we will have still strengthened the bureaucracy's policy relationships.

We also need to encourage more Indigenous university graduates to join the APS. Various recruitment programs exist, including the Australian Government Indigenous Graduate Recruitment Program. However, it's a competitive field with the private and education sectors also trying to attract the top graduates.

The APS needs to invest in stronger relationships with universities and their Indigenous students. It's not enough to assume they will want to join the APS; active recruiting is required. As part of this, the public service should place a greater emphasis on working with Indigenous students through internships and create easier pathways for them to join the ranks of the public service.

And not just within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Indigenous Affairs Group. If we can have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – from graduates up to senior SES staff – working within other Commonwealth departments, this can only strengthen the relationships between the public service and Indigenous Australians. But this requires stronger leadership and new thinking; departments need to be more agile and more willing to bring in people from outside the public service.

The bureaucracy – with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet driving it – needs to work in partnership with this new generation of Indigenous leaders to nurture the power of “collaborative leadership”. In focusing on the quality of policy relationships, we can unlock the potential of innovation and create an environment with a strong focus on implementation.

And as the Prime Minister has said, government agencies need to continue to do things with, and not to, Indigenous Australia.

Reference

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