

Wellbeing – the new measure of program success

A speech by Commonwealth Ombudsman Allan Asher
to the 2011 Australian Government Leadership Network Conference

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Wellbeing is an issue I've raised before¹, and the reason it's close to my heart is because during the 40 years I've spent advocating for consumers, I have seen time and again the sometimes dire consequences of an organisational culture that puts the wellbeing of clients pretty much last. For instance, the habit British energy companies had a few years ago of using thugs to push into people's homes and bully them into signing unconscionable contracts, or cutting off customers' power during that country's freezing winters. Winters in which thousands of people die every year due to inadequate heating.

By wellbeing I mean a life of sustained dignity, meaning and personal value.

It is significant that the World Health Organization Constitution defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".²

This is ambitious stuff, but what I want to convey to you today is that the simple principle of fostering the wellbeing of people needs to be the starting point for all service delivery and that there needs to be a consistent, whole-of-government approach to improving and measuring wellbeing. Doing this is not only possible but essential if we are to take seriously any attempt to deliver customer-centred services, as well as improve government integrity and social inclusion. I will be talking about this a little later, in particular how government communication can help.

The idea that improving people's wellbeing is the fundamental role of government dates back to the Enlightenment, but measuring it is much more recent. Indices started to emerge by the 1970s but they have only really gained currency over the past few years. The French and the British governments announced wellbeing indices in 2009 and 2010 respectively, and they are seen by economists such as Nobel Laureate Professor Joseph Stiglitz as better measures of economic progress than gross domestic product.

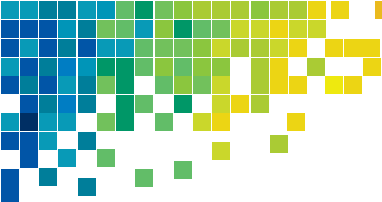
Arguing for a greater focus on wellbeing is not new, and I'm sure many people here today have considered it, or seen it in action, or even watched it fail. It is certainly still seen in some circles as a woolly idea with little real-world application.

Part of the reason it is challenging is that it relies to a degree on thinking beyond metrics. Any measurement of wellbeing is – has to be – subjective, but that is not to say it isn't meaningful, particularly when it complements traditional indices. However, the real point is that we should focus on the outcome not on the indicators – a common pitfall because measuring performance is a key part of bureaucratic life.

One of the benefits of thinking in these terms is that it encourages us to connect properly with people, and to avoid the pitfall of rolling out programs that are too high level, that don't involve community consultation. This was highlighted in a

1. Speech to L21 – Public Sector Leadership 2011 conference: Rethinking and improving service delivery, 12 May 2011

2. http://www.who.int/governance/eb/who_constitution_en.pdf



recent opinion piece by Noel Pearson who said:

Politicians and public servants who have never built anything from the ground up in such communities never really get it. Most people in social policy live in a world of programs and plans, bearing scant relation to realities.³

Ultimately, I believe it comes down to empathy, to putting yourself in the shoes of the end-user and to working on broad, underlying issues.

■ BARACK OBAMA

The principle that people's wellbeing comes first is articulated in US President Barack Obama's Executive Order for improving the US Government, which was issued in April. Titled *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, it pushes for better customer service activities as well as finding ways to use innovative technologies to deliver them. It states:

Government managers must learn from what is working in the private sector and apply these best practices to deliver services better, faster, and at lower cost. Such best practices include increasingly popular lower-cost, self-service options accessed by the Internet or mobile phone and improved processes that deliver services faster and more responsively, reducing the overall need for customer inquiries and complaints.⁴

It requires that each agency develop a customer service plan:

- (a) establishing one major initiative (signature initiative) that will use technology to improve the customer experience, and
- (b) establishing mechanisms to solicit customer feedback on Government services and using such feedback regularly to make service improvements.

■ TREASURY

Of particular importance to any agency aiming to focus better on the needs of people is *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration*⁵, which can be summed up as: talk to the people in ways they understand and communicate between themselves, get their views and feed them back into better performance.

It is noteworthy that the Treasury Department has enshrined a Wellbeing Framework⁶ in its strategic objectives⁷, which outline the Department's values, role and key policy responsibilities. Foremost among the five elements of this is, and I'm quoting:

The opportunity and freedom that allows individuals to lead lives of real value to them ... that human development is measured by the extent to which individuals have the capabilities necessary to choose to lead a life they have reason to value.

Treasury staff are encouraged to assess new and existing public policy against the wellbeing framework, which requires a qualitative, long-term approach to measuring the health of the economy. One way the Department does this is by routinely issuing its Intergenerational Report, which focuses on such things as environmental challenges, social sustainability and the fiscal and economic challenges of an ageing population.

To quote the framework: "it serves an important unifying function for the Department's policy analysis and advice, through providing a broader intellectual context for our work".

It looks at how to measure wellbeing:

The (2004) Australian Bureau of Statistics publication, *Measures of Australia's Progress*, has brought together statistics across a wide range of economic, social and environmental considerations to provide a better information base for considering wellbeing in Australia (ABS, 2004). For example, apart from conventional economic statistics of income, consumption and productivity, it also provides information on other key indicators

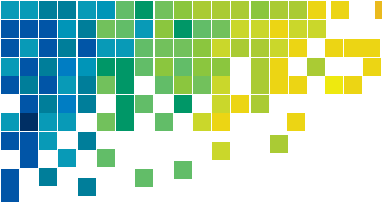
3. 'Social policy begets social misery as the Western world fails the poor', *The Weekend Australian*, 30-31 July 2011

4. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/27/executive-order-streamlining-service-delivery-and-improving-customer-ser>

5. Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, March 2010, http://www.dpnc.gov.au/publications/aga_reform/aga_reform_blueprint/index.cfm

6. June 2009, http://www.treasury.gov.au/documents/876/PDF/Policy_advice_Treasury_wellbeing_framework.pdf

7. http://www.treasury.gov.au/documents/1874/PDF/Treasury%20Strategic%20Framework_w.pdf



such as life expectancy, education levels, rate of unemployment, biodiversity levels, air pollution and levels of crime.⁸

The framework reinforces Treasury's strongly-held conviction, inherited from the intellectual tradition of economics, that *trade-offs matter deeply*. Most policy reforms will involve trade-offs within or between dimensions of wellbeing . . . The ultimate value of the wellbeing framework is that it improves the quality of Treasury's policy advice to Government, through helping to identify the important trade-offs for wellbeing, and providing a consistent basis for understanding their impact. Treasury considers that helping to understand wellbeing is an important part of our contribution to improving wellbeing.⁹

■ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX

Treasury's Framework points out that the approach used by the Bureau is similar to that used by the United Nations Development Programme for its Human Development Index. According to the Programme, the Index "was created to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone."

The Human Development Index represents a push for a broader definition of wellbeing and provides a composite measure of three basic dimensions of human development: health, education and income. Australia is ranked second out of 169 countries in the 2010 rankings; Norway is first.¹⁰

When the Index was established in 1990 it defined human development as a process of "enlarging people's choices". But the Development Programme acknowledges that the concept of human development is much broader than can be captured in the Index it illustrates, pointing out that wellbeing encompasses "a much broader range of capabilities, including political freedoms, human rights and, echoing Adam Smith, 'the ability to go about without shame'"¹¹. Dignity, in other words.

■ WELLBEING IN AUSTRALIA

Aspects of the Human Development Index were used by the Australia Institute in its proposed Genuine Progress Indicator for Australia. A paper¹² prepared by the Institute five years ago reported some interesting findings from a national opinion poll. Tellingly, above a certain level, increases in income have little or no effect on wellbeing. In fact, almost 60 per cent of respondents nominated their relationships with their family as the most important factor, followed by health (18 per cent), community and friends (eight per cent) and religious life (five per cent). Only four per cent of respondents considered their financial situation to be the most important factor in their wellbeing.

As an aside, state variations suggested different emphases on "a nice place to live", which three per cent of people in New South Wales considered important versus 13 per cent of people in Tasmania, perhaps not surprisingly. Nationally, that's two per cent versus eight per cent in Britain – again not surprisingly.

It found that 39 per cent of Australians believe life in Australia is getting worse versus 25 per cent who think it's improving.

Of most interest is that 77 per cent agreed with the admittedly somewhat loaded statement: "A government's prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth". Only 16 per cent disagreed.

Part of the reason financial concerns are not a priority in Australia is because, as an industrialised nation, there is less disparity between rich and poor. Such a disparity, or the perception of it, greatly influences people's sense of wellbeing.

Other wellbeing factors can be seen in the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, which was developed early in 2001 as a joint exercise between Australian Unity, a financial services and healthcare company based in Melbourne, and the Australian Centre on Quality of Life at Deakin University. They developed a Personal Wellbeing Index and a National Wellbeing Index.

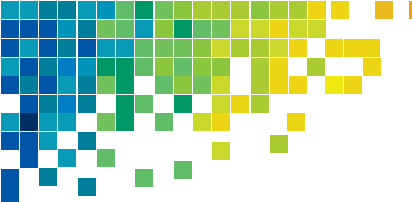
8. *Police advice and Treasury's Welfare framework*, 2004, page 5. http://www.treasury.gov.au/documents/876/PDF/Policy_advice_Treasury_wellbeing_framework.pdf

9. *Ibid*, p16

10. United Nations Development Programme website – <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/AUS.html>

11. *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development – Human Development Report 2010* – http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Overview_reprint.pdf

12. 'The Attitudes of Australians to Happiness and Wellbeing', September 2006



Elements of the Personal Wellbeing Index are satisfaction with:

- your health
- your personal relationships
- how safe you feel
- your standard of living
- what you are achieving in life
- feeling part of the community, and
- your future security.

Elements of the National Wellbeing Index are satisfaction with:

- Australian social conditions
- Australia's economic situation
- the state of the Australian environment
- Australian business
- national security, and
- Government.

BHUTAN

One country that has famously taken the idea of national wellbeing fairly seriously is the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan – one of the world's smallest and least developed economies.

In 2006, it launched its Gross National Happiness index, which was developed by a Bhutanese think tank, the Centre for Bhutan Studies, and reflects the government's concern to preserve the country's environment and culture. The reference to 'happiness' in this context obviously relates to the idea of wellbeing we're discussing today.

The Centre based the index on the valid point that indicators embody specific values, pointing out that:

The almost universal use of GDP-based indicators to measure progress has helped justify policies around the world that are based on rapid material progress at the expense of environmental preservation, cultures, and community cohesion.¹³

The four pillars of the index are: the promotion of sustainable development; preservation and promotion of cultural values; conservation of the natural environment; and establishment of good governance.

Because the Bhutanese government has taken steps to keep it un-Westernised, and retain a sustainable way of life for its people, Bhutan has been spared many of the problems associated with most developing nations with a comparable Gross Domestic Product. It is no Shangri-la, but the quality of life most Bhutanese experience is widely recognised as outstripping that suggested by its Gross Domestic Product. Nor is the government ignoring economic growth, which has been at 6-8 per cent a year since the mid-1980s. According to Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade¹⁴, Bhutan has very little debt and a history of fiscal prudence and good governance, and the World Bank commends its five-year economic plans.¹⁵ It is significant that these plans are based on its Gross National Happiness principles and are focused on areas such as poverty reduction. In relation to Bhutan's economic policies, the World Bank says: "Balancing development with tradition and the increasing availability and use of public services throughout the country have been priorities".¹⁶

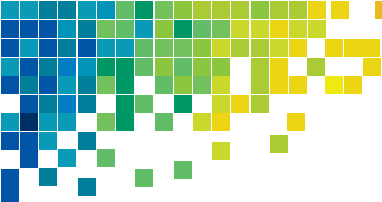
13. The Centre for Bhutan Studies - <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/gnhIndex/introductionGNH.aspx>

14. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website – http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/bhutan/bhutan_country_brief.html

15. 'Bhutan: Achieving Happiness and Millennium Development Goals' – World Bank website:

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/BHUTANEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22889971~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:306149,00.html>

16. Ibid.



Gross Domestic Product alone does not accurately reflect the wellbeing of Bhutan's people, any more than its happiness index alone does. It is possible to have a low Gross Domestic Product and a moderately high happiness index, just as it is possible to have the exact opposite. The point is that a better idea of how well a government is delivering to its people is ascertained by looking at both indices, and that a wellbeing index can drive the extent and nature of material development.

■ WELLBEING AND HEALTH

Looking at wellbeing in health rather than economic or social terms is valuable. The Ottawa charter for health promotion framed the discussion as far back as 1986 and has been hugely influential in academic and policy circles since.¹⁷

In preventive health terms, this means looking at the 'upstream' determinants of health, in other words the root causes. For instance, treating smoking-related diseases is downstream; attempting to reduce their incidence through anti-tobacco campaigns and so on is mid-stream; while addressing the causes of smoking and other poor lifestyle behaviours is up-stream and becomes a broader social, economic and political issue.

A lack of wellbeing is at the heart of many endemic public health issues, where a self-perpetuating cycle of poor mental health, welfare dependency and low socio-economic status contributes to ongoing reduced participation, quality of life and life expectancy. This is also of course the hardest level to address. It requires resources, political will and innovative policy-making, but it also requires a broadening of approach to ensure that people and their wellbeing remain at the forefront.

■ SOCIAL INCLUSION

I'd like to talk a little about social inclusion because I believe it should be the issue for anyone involved or professionally interested in public administration.

Apart from the fact that it is obviously the responsibility of the public sector to improve social inclusion, we only need look to recent events in Britain to see the dire consequences of not doing so. If you are not participating in society in any meaningful way, then your wellbeing is obviously compromised.

The Australian Government has defined a socially inclusive society as one in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully.¹⁸ This means ensuring that people who are currently marginalised become fully engaged – people such as newly arrived immigrants, the elderly, people with disabilities, mental illness or problems with addiction, many Indigenous people as well as whistleblowers, children, the illiterate, those who are impoverished, particularly the homeless, and many others.

Of particular concern are those who are newly socially excluded – for instance, the recently unemployed or homeless, immigration detention centre detainees or newly arrived and vulnerable immigrants – who are less likely to be aware of their opportunities to have a voice.

It is heartening that the phrase 'social inclusion' is cropping up more often in government and public sector discussion, and in initiatives such as the National Compact¹⁹, which seeks to strengthen relations between Government and the not-for-profit sector. My office is in the process of signing up to the Compact and I very much look forward to us taking part.

Social inclusion, or the lack of it, is a huge issue for my office. Last financial year, we received around 39,000 approaches from people wishing to make a formal complaint about a government department or agency, of which we chose to investigate more than 4,000. However, I suspect that for every complaint we get, there are maybe 10 we don't. In general terms, I believe that the people we don't hear from are the people we should be hearing from most, because they are likely to be those members of our community who are the most marginalised and disadvantaged.

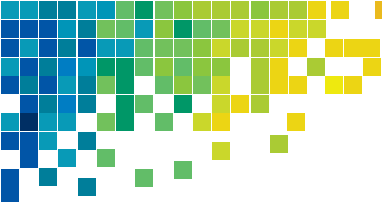
If only 10 per cent of people who should be complaining are complaining, the remaining 90 per cent cannot be said to be fully enfranchised in any meaningful sense. How can we provide accurate feedback and recommendations to agencies, how can the agencies themselves get direct feedback, if we're not hearing from most of the people with real problems?

I suspect there is a range of reasons why these complaints aren't made. A person could be unaware of our existence, or

17. Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, First International Conference on Health Promotion, Ottawa, 21 November 1986 – http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/ottawa_charter_hp.pdf

18. *A Stronger, Fairer Australia*, summary brochure published by the Social Inclusion Unit, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009

19. www.nationalcompact.gov.au



has heard of our office but doesn't realise we take complaints from the public, or knows all this but doesn't think we can do anything. Or perhaps they have cultural or language issues, or concerns about the implications of making a complaint, or certain disabilities such as cognitive impairment.

A recent public awareness survey we conducted showed that less than one-third of people under 35, and a similar number of people who speak a language other than English, have heard of my office. More surprisingly, only 60 per cent of women are aware we exist versus 72 per cent of men.

While my office addresses some of these issues through its outreach and education programs, as well as our broader publicity work, it is clearly our responsibility to find innovative ways to tackle this better. With that in mind, I am keen to raise the profile of my office wherever appropriate, including in social media forums. We are currently using Twitter and very soon we will establish Facebook sites – initially for the Commonwealth and ACT Ombudsman roles – and down the track for the Overseas Students Ombudsman. We will also soon start posting material on YouTube.

That such a large proportion of the community is unaware of us, or precisely what we do, points not just to the communication imperatives of my office but highlights a degree of ignorance of the complaint-handling process in general, and indeed the need for it. After all, our survey also found that a substantial number of people under 35 (around 14 per cent) weren't even sure whether they had ever been treated unfairly by a government agency – seven times more than those aged 65 and older.

Connecting with the Indigenous community poses a unique set of challenges. Prior to the introduction of my office's Indigenous outreach program, virtually no Indigenous people complained to us – as far as we are aware – and it hardly needs saying that this is not because they had little about which to complain.

A report²⁰ based on research my office commissioned late last year revealed that Indigenous people are unlikely to complain because:

- they do not know it is possible or acceptable to complain, or who to complain to
- they believe they must accept their lot in life
- they fear reprisals
- they dislike confrontation
- there are language issues
- complaining brings with it a sense of shame
- they have poor self-esteem
- they believe that complaining in itself won't change anything.

The research also found that many Indigenous people prefer to use an intermediary whom they know to discuss problems or issues, preferably face-to-face in a familiar location, and only after they have come to trust the impartiality and effectiveness of the complaint-handling process.

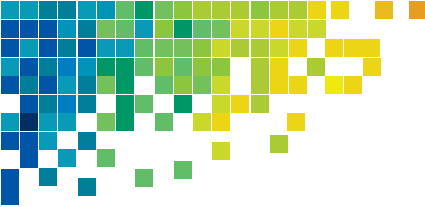
That is presumably why our outreach teams are effective in gathering complaints from Indigenous people. And it is perhaps telling that we have occasionally drawn criticism from some within the Public Service for using such methods to supposedly 'drum up' business.

It is worth highlighting that some government departments, such as Centrelink, are also taking active steps to engage with Indigenous communities in this way by sending remote access teams into Indigenous communities. And I can't endorse this approach more strongly.

The research agency we used also recommended the use of printed materials with simple messages and illustrations that tell a story, as well as community forums and Indigenous radio and TV to get messages across.

One of the reasons some people don't make contact with us, or fully engage with other government agencies, is lack of access. This is particularly true of socially marginalised people in remote areas. How do you contact an agency, including my office, if you don't have a landline, or if the local payphone doesn't work? Perhaps you have a mobile phone, but not enough credit to make calls to 1800 and 1300 numbers, which are only free or charged at a local rate if you're using a

20. *Improving the services of the Commonwealth Ombudsman to Australia's Indigenous peoples*, prepared by Winangali Indigenous Communications and Research, November 2010



landline. That is the irony – it is often the most disadvantaged who do not have landlines but are most in need of ‘free’ phone services.

I highlighted my concerns about this issue in a letter to Chris Chapman, Chairman of the Australian Communications and Media Authority, in April this year. The Authority’s own research has found that the number of people without a landline is increasing. Indeed, 14 per cent of the population are mobile-only users.²¹ There has also been a decrease in the number of payphones available to the public.²²

One complainant to my office found himself in the somewhat absurd position of calling Centrelink to advise them of his income so that he would receive his fortnightly payment. His pre-paid credit ran out before he had completed the call and he did not have enough money to top it up. This required him to miss a day of classes to visit the Centrelink office in person.

Now, there’s online of course, but only around half the population has functional access to the internet. This digital divide must always be borne in mind when an agency seeks to engage meaningfully with its more marginalised clients. And of course not all agency websites are equally accessible.

It should also be remembered that a website, even an accessible one, is no panacea in itself. Online should complement, not displace, other communication channels.

So at the heart of any attempt to improve social inclusion is effective, two-way communication between agencies and all members of the community. In other words, enabling the voiceless to find their voice, and listening to what people say when they do speak up. It’s crucial that government departments and oversight agencies take this approach because it is fundamental to any claim a government can make about its level of accountability.

Helping governments to improve services to the community through socially inclusive activities, not simply finding fault, is a key feature of the work my office does and will continue to do.

■ SOLUTIONS

Some ways in which governments can attend to the wellbeing of the people they serve include improving accessibility, complaint-handling procedures and stakeholder engagement.

Given the diversity of our population, there is scope for the public service to make us a lot happier by giving up complexity and obfuscation. Sometimes location or disadvantage are identified as barriers to accessibility and they need to be addressed. In this regard it is pleasing that the government announced in the Budget improved access to Centrelink and Medicare for geographically and socially isolated Australians. This is being done through increasing the number of outreach workers who help the homeless or those at risk of homelessness, and social workers who work with families experiencing difficulty.

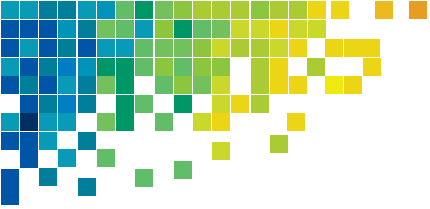
Enabling people to seek review and learn from this process is also key. People need to be given clear pathways and opportunities to seek review of a government decision, action or inaction. This should include clarity about how people can seek redress through a comprehensive and accessible complaints mechanism that enables them to have their matter effectively investigated and dealt with. Agencies that have good complaint-handling systems are doing themselves a favour. Not only do they have the opportunity to clarify or resolve a matter for their customer – thereby making them happier – but complaints are a valuable source of intelligence on how effectively the agency is performing. They also provide an opportunity to learn from any mistakes made and improve systems.

Without genuine stakeholder engagement, it is a mistake to think that you know what impact your policies and actions will have on people. When we do engage, sometimes the reality of what people think we should be doing or prioritising can be a bit of a shock. There are significant benefits in consulting with a wide audience on organisational work plans.

Here’s a confession: my office’s stakeholder engagement strategy needs improvement – something we are working hard at to achieve. We want to improve the ways in which we stay in tune with key issues for the community, business groups and the departments whose conduct we investigate. Our aim is to understand the points of view of our stakeholders and to influence them with our thinking so that we can shape their expectations and become more effective in improving

21. ACMA, 2009-2010 *Communications Report 2 – Take-up and use of voice services by Australian Consumers*, pp 4, 14, 22

22. *Ibid*, p77



public administration. We have created a Defence Force Ombudsman consultative forum to advise us on issues that may require intervention and we're putting together a Taxation Ombudsman consultative committee to provide advice on how we can best influence the Australian Tax Office in its interactions with taxpayers.

■ HOW GOVERNMENTS COMMUNICATE WITH PEOPLE

It is no good having well-designed policies or programs if the very people they are intended for have difficulties accessing them. The outcomes government policies and programs seek to achieve won't be realised if there are barriers to accessibility. Sometimes these barriers are found in the complex and formal language government agencies use to communicate with the public. We must use much simpler and better targeted language and we must improve communication with those who are not literate.

Tell people what's going on. The Information Age has brought with it demands to be more open about organisational decisions and policies and to be more careful about how information about individuals is handled and shared. It is vital to keep abreast of these changes and meet new legal obligations.

Think creatively about how to disseminate and collect information. Online services provide great scope for people to access information about programs and to transact with government. For example, my office receives and redirects complaints through a *SmartForm* that allows people to send us complaints online.

We have to remember that only half the population has functional access to the internet. However, what is to stop us working with other oversight agencies to set up a collective 'fourth arm' internet facility in remote communities and among other disadvantaged groups? Providing outreach services to remote and regional communities may be another important strategy for collecting and disseminating information.

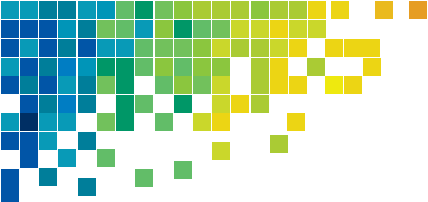
One obvious area we can work on is improving service delivery through means that focus on the needs of the public, and one way we can measure the effectiveness of this is fewer complaints to agencies, and fewer complaints to my office.

Many of the complaints we receive about government agencies arise from poor communication. Partly, I suspect, because many agencies see the way they communicate as a side issue to the services they provide, whereas the two are inextricably linked or indeed the same thing.

Some common examples of poor, or even lazy, communication include:

- computer-generated form letters, or letters that cut and paste great tracts of impenetrable legislation, or refer to websites to which clients may not have access
- sending people too much correspondence, or too little, or none at all
- call centre staff who don't have enough information themselves, or don't have the authority to make proper decisions
- failing to provide key information, such as the right to review, and how to complain
- writing in bureaucratese rather than plain language, using jargon, acronyms and abbreviations
- failing to provide simple explanations for people with cognitive impairment
- taking an officious tone
- not providing translations or interpreters
- having no single point of contact, so that people have to repeat their concerns over and over again.

Often people will accept a negative response if they receive it soon enough and in an appropriate way. One overseas student recently wrote to my office to thank us for saying we couldn't help him. It meant an enormous amount to him that we had responded promptly. Wellbeing, or the sense of it, comes down to psychology – how people are treated, the levels of consultation, and so on. In other words, it can be more about how a person feels about a particular circumstance, rather than the circumstance itself.



Let's look at Indigenous people again. Poor communication is overwhelmingly the main source of complaints to my office from Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, where our outreach programs currently operate. For instance, there is often confusion about how people are affected by government programs, due to insufficient communication, or communication that is too high level, or has been over-simplified to the point of excluding important information, or doesn't explain how government initiatives will affect lives.

A report²³ my office published in April this year followed a series of complaints about interpreters not being used when they should have been, either because they were not available, or because they were not deemed necessary.

One case study used in the report relates to the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program, which is jointly run by the Northern Territory Government and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

A resident of a remote Indigenous community complained to my office that Northern Territory Government staff and building contractors had not used interpreters when they met with residents to discuss housing plans in that community.

As a result, some residents did not understand the nature of the work that was planned, where they would live while work was being done, and whether they would be re-allocated the same house when the work had been completed.

We raised this with the Department and I'm pleased to say that in response they organised two meetings attended by an Indigenous language interpreter at which the housing program and other housing-related matters were properly explained. The complainant later told us that the community felt this addressed the issue.

Communicating with people who are socially excluded is obviously a particular issue for frontline agencies such as Centrelink. It should be said that those of my staff who deal with Centrelink are of the view that it has a culture geared towards improving service delivery to the disadvantaged, and it's encouraging to see that its 10-year service delivery reform plan places a strong emphasis on this. In March this year we accepted an invitation from Centrelink to work with them on the design and review of their new internal review process, and I look forward to this.²⁴

However, by virtue of the size of the agency and the sheer number of its customers, problems do arise. Among these are:

- a failure to provide reasons for decisions
- a flurry of letters sent to customers that sometimes contain conflicting information
- not tailoring communication to individual circumstances, such as hearing, vision or cognitive impairment.

In September last year, my office published a report²⁵ looking at how three agencies involved in social security deal with clients with mental illnesses.

In one case study, a Mr E complained to my office that despite first contacting Centrelink to enquire about claiming a Disability Support Pension in 2006, he was not granted payment until 2008. Mr E had lodged a claim for compensation from Centrelink for this loss of entitlement, but his claim was refused. Following an investigation we asked Centrelink to reconsider Mr E's claim on the basis that, despite being told that he had a mental illness and was clearly having difficulty with the claim process, Centrelink staff did not try to help Mr E complete his claim. Centrelink accepted our view, and agreed to pay Mr E compensation equivalent to his lost entitlement.

Our investigation showed that it is clear the agencies involved do focus, wherever possible, on providing discretion for staff to adjust to the requirements of customers who need flexibility as a result of a mental illness. However, the report made the following recommendations:

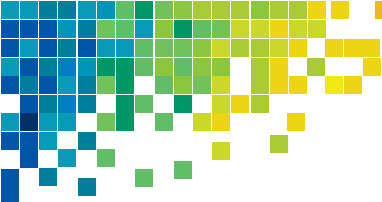
- greater consideration of a customer's barriers to communication
- more training for staff to identify customers with a mental illness
- encouraging customers to disclose a mental illness
- better recording of information about a customer's illness or barriers to engagement.

The problem that these examples illustrate is that poor communication creates a wall between agencies and the people to whom they provide services. So we must sweep away this obfuscation. Helping governments do this by seeking to

23. *Talking in Language: Indigenous language interpreters and government communication*, April 2011 – http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/files/Talking_in_Language-Indigenous_Interpreters_REPORT-05-2011.pdf

24. *Centrelink: Right to Review – having choices, making choices*, March 2011 – http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/files/centrelink_the_right_of_review_having_choices_making_choices.pdf

25. *Falling through the cracks – Centrelink, DEEWR and FAHCSIA: Engaging with customers with a mental illness in the social security system*, September 2010 – http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/files/Falling-through-cracks_customers-with-mental-illness.pdf



change the culture of poor communication is one of the things my office will be looking at over the next three to five years.

I am in discussion with the Plain English Foundation on what measures might be required to make this happen, and I have written to the Prime Minister suggesting we meet to discuss such a long-term, service-wide plan.

It is important to emphasise that while these communication problems are widespread throughout the public sector, many agencies are very responsive to our recommendations.

■ PLAIN LANGUAGE

William Tyndale was the 16th century English scholar who translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into English for a public readership. He also took advantage of cutting-edge technology, namely the printing press, to increase the readership as much as possible. Remember that at this time clergymen were in the habit of reading the Bible to themselves during services, tinkling a bell now and then so the congregation would know when they'd come to an especially edifying bit. This is I suppose the very definition of lack of access.

It is perhaps not surprising then that, Church authorities, fearful of becoming obsolete, burnt Tyndale at the stake.

So in a way he was a martyr to plain language. Though he enjoys a degree of immortality in the King James Bible, which was introduced about 80 years after his death and was largely based on his translation.

I recently had a productive talk with a latter-day crusader for plain language – Dr Neil James, Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Sydney. The Foundation recently conducted a survey²⁶ looking at what motivates public sector agencies to adopt plain language and what factors lead to success or failure.

The results were interesting. For instance, external criticism had little effect on whether an agency took up plain language. The main reason they did was that a similar agency had done so, or an internal review or senior staff member championed the idea. Worth noting if you're keen to see a plain language program rolled out in your agency.

The benefits of plain language to all concerned are clear. The time and money saved from the agency's point of view, and the improved accessibility for users, can be significant. This illustrates the mutually beneficial effects of taking a similar approach to wellbeing. It is curious too how plain language can affect attitudes. One respondent in the survey wrote: "I now see the clients I write to as real people when I prepare a document."

According to a briefing paper prepared for the NSW Premier in 2009, NSW agencies that adopted plain English enjoyed the following benefits:

- a reduction in drafting time of roughly half
- a reduction in management editing time of around 40 per cent
- an increase in client satisfaction to a 92 per cent rating.

International case studies also reveal startling savings. For instance, the US Navy has saved \$350 million by moving to plain English memos.

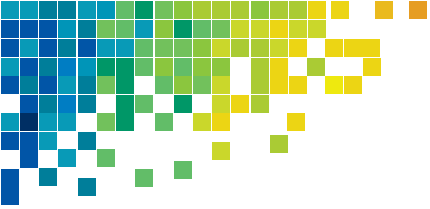
The Foundation also looked at how to evaluate plain language programs. They measured: an organisation's writing; perceptions about writing; and actual outcomes of writing. In one instance they used the rate of follow-up correspondence as an evaluation measure and found that the number of complaints halved.

Introducing a plain language program is one obvious way an organisation can begin attending to its communication issues, and illustrates in a broader sense the whole idea of wellbeing and how to evaluate it. Many government agencies introduce such programs, but only 40 per cent reach completion and therefore have a lasting effect.

Some of the problems routinely encountered by plain language programs are:

- management not supporting or participating in the program
- templates and systems that are inconsistent with the new approach
- individual staff or departments opposing change
- the underlying culture of the organisation.

26. Reported in 'Persuading the public sector to invest in plain language' – Industry seminar for Clarity 2010 Lisbon



This tends to be where many programs flounder, and it is telling because it suggests that the process of incorporating an effective wellbeing framework into an agency would be no mean feat. Subtle changes to a public service culture, enshrined in work practices, articulated and championed clearly and consistently by senior management and perpetuated over time do make a tremendous and important difference.

■ CONCLUSION

Kerry Packer once said: “Governments are there to do things for you, not to you”. He probably didn’t have in mind the sentiments I’m trying to express today, but in a better sense this maxim gets to the heart of this issue.

Of course, a government can manufacture a wellbeing index as a fig leaf to obscure its economic failings. Which is why such indices must be robust and transparent, and not merely a political trifle.

It’s part of the role of my office to improve administration in this country and I see improving wellbeing as key to achieving this goal. We are ready and willing to work with any agency prepared to make a positive contribution to this end.

ENDS