Public Service Transformation – Perspectives from the COVID-19 Experience

Gordon de Brouwer, National President Institute of Public Administration Australia
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Thank you so much for the invitation to talk with you today about the importance and transformation of public services across Australia, especially in the world of COVID-19. I am looking forward to hearing about the work that you have done, particularly in the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy in Queensland, and the Queensland Public Service more generally.

I am speaking with you from Canberra on the lands of the Ngunnawal People, and I would like to start by acknowledging and expressing my deep respect for the traditional owners and their leaders, past, present and emerging. I warmly welcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating today.

I have been asked to talk with you today in my role as National President of the Institute of Public Administration Australia. The pandemic has had a profound impact on public services across the federation, and institutions like IPAA, at both the state or territory and the national level, play a useful role in telling the story of public services. In that spirit, I will talk about the public service coming out of COVID-19 in three parts.

First, start by **celebrating some of the changes that you and other public servants have made**

- changes made to ensure that you could do your job, be it in service delivery to the Queensland people and businesses, operations and regulation, policy advice and use of data, and enabling services

- showing just how important relationships have proven to be in finding solutions to working and living with COVID-19, including the experience of how the federation has worked in the pandemic, and

- thinking about the different ways of working that have emerged, especially how digital has enabled working from home and broadened participation in workplace interactions.

Second, talk through **how to be in control of these changes, and keep the positive changes that have occurred, doing so explicitly, pro-actively and transparently** with, importantly, the support of your key stakeholders.

- The response includes how to deepen the use of technology in how you do your job, how to sustain changes in work practices, and how to exercise your own initiative and leadership without excessive hierarchy.

- The pandemic has accelerated some basic trends underway, most notably in the use of technology, digitisation and data, and flexibility in the workplace. And outside of Australia it has deepened emerging problems like declining trust in institutions, the rise of vocal populist nationalism and the advent of outright strategic competition between the United States and China. On the issue of trust in institutions, the experience of the pandemic in Australia and New Zealand has been to improve trust in institutions and lift a sense of community, which is something we would all want to sustain.

- It is your responsibility to be part of decision making about which change to retain, how it is locked in and managed, and how we deal with the various problems we face. You are not observers or bystanders to change.

Third, talk about **how to manage some of the risks that have emerged** and that sit ahead of you. The risks that you need to deal with include:

- growing scrutiny about decisions made under extreme uncertainty and emergency, and, more generally, ensuring integrity of decisions and processes

- exercising leadership as you shift from rapid decision making to what will become normal life under COVID-19

- making sure we do not unwind the gains to fair and broad-based participation in our workforce, especially of women, as businesses and the economy restructure, and

- ensuring the wellbeing, and especially mental health, of the people you work and deal with, as the pressures of crisis decompress somewhat and the tensions, fears and exhaustion that have been hidden come to the fore.

I guess I have given the plot away but I'll now delve into the detail of these three points.

1. Let's celebrate public service

I would like to congratulate and thank public servants, in Queensland and across our nation, for the work you have done during the pandemic. You have made a profound contribution during a major health, social and economic crisis to protect and improve the lives of the Queensland and Australian people. Well done. And thank you.

Across the Commonwealth, States and Territories, public services have moved quickly, collaboratively and effectively to deliver their governments' responses to COVID1-19. This has been in every type of activity that public services across the federation do:

- in policy advice and implementation in areas like health, the economy, public safety, people movement and foreign relations

- in service delivery in all levels of education, health and hospitals, community and justice services, income support, employment services, utilities and communications, and public safety including police, defence and customs

- in regulation and government operations.

In all these areas, public servants have found the capacity to think creatively and to act, change quickly and do things differently so that they can achieve the purpose of their job.

Digital technology has been particularly important in dealing with a pandemic. Public servants from health professionals to regulators of land, for example, have found more digital technology alternatives to face-to-face engagement than they had expected – from digital meeting places for tele-health consultation to the use of drones and go-pros for land, water and crop or stock surveillance and data collection. Digitisation has made more data available more quickly than before, and this has been rapidly and flexibly used to inform government decision making.

Throughout this, ministers and public servants have found that they could only do their job by working with others, be it within their own government, other governments in the federation, or with business and the community. The outstanding example is the formation of the National Cabinet, which brings the leaders of the nine sovereign entities in the Australian federation together. It is but one example. The early work between governments and business on personal protective equipment and on keeping supply chains working (from groceries to growing crops and running stock to resource commodities) are great case studies of working with others to achieve an outcome. Think, too, of the rapid work by Indigenous communities in protecting vulnerable members of their communities, especially in remoter parts of Australia. More generally, COVID-19 has provided a real imperative for those in public service to work together, talk frankly and honestly, share information, and rely on and trust each other, in order to achieve a shared goal. It has shown that relationships really matter and there is a lot we can achieve when we work together as adults with decency and common sense.

Like all other workplaces, public sector workplaces have been affected – disrupted is probably the better word – by the pandemic. Like others, public servants have changed work practices, typically working doing their job from home often with extraordinary support from their corporate enabling services, especially in IT. In some cases, public servants shifted tasks to provide surge capacity, like the five thousand or so members of the Australian Public Service who transferred jobs to take calls and process applications to Services Australia for support. Many have started using digital meeting forums and found this liberating in its flexibility, the time it saves in travel, and the fact that it puts staff on an equal footing no matter where they are. DNRME staff have recounted how different teams in the department and others have used technology. One of the unexpected and positive outcomes is that regional staff feel that they participate in e-meetings with Brisbane-based staff as equals and they are important sources of information, which is really important in a big and decentralised state like Queensland. That's a great insight for the Australian Public Service, too, given that two-thirds of the APS are outside Canberra.

For some public servants, the change in work has been both enjoyable and productive, giving them more control over their work and flexibility in their lives, and actually achieving more in their job. For others – more typically parents (especially mothers) with young children, people who are subject to abuse at home, people who feel isolated at home, and people who share accommodation in a small residence – it has been a difficult experience and something they can't wait to see the end of.

For some public servants, the need for a rapid response to the pandemic has seen decision making elevated and centralised in more senior ranks, and they have struggled to see their contribution or purpose. For others, the need for a fast-paced response has meant that they have had to make on-the-ground operational decisions, sometimes big, and they have relished the responsibility and done well. Many of the innovations in how to get the job done have come from within, not from the top of, the public service.

What the COVID-19 experience has shown is that public-sector work practices do not need to be fixed in stone. A lot flexibility in the workplace is possible. Hierarchy can be streamlined. Giving staff responsibility can achieve better results.

2. Locking in positive change

The positive developments we've seen in terms of achieving outcomes, strengthened connections and openness, and flexible work practices are things that should be retained, even if they might need to be finessed. How do we lock in positive change in public administration? You won't get the change you want without explicitly planning and implementing it.

The checklist you might ask yourself is:

- are you explicit, pro-active and transparent in what you want to retain and what you don't, in the changes across the domains of what you do (eg service delivery, operations, regulation or policy), the relationships you need to be effective in doing your job, and how you do it (eg who works from home and when, how much hierarchy and level of clearance do you really need to get the job done)?

- do you have the evidence to support your case, including material from staff surveys, formal feedback or surveys from business and affected communities, measures of output per employee before and after the change and their impact, such that you have a narrative of change and improvement? A particularly interesting part of the Queensland narrative is that as a state that regularly experiences natural disasters you had effective systems, mindsets and relationships to deal with the pandemic as it emerged. How did your experience with natural disasters influence what you did in the pandemic, and what are the learnings, including for how you might deal with future natural disasters?

- do you have the (broad) support of key stakeholders, including senior officers in your agency, affected businesses and communities, and ministers or their key advisors as necessary? Informally talking through and discussing what changes have been made and what their impact has been with others is a good starting point to building both a narrative and consensus for change.

- are you prepared for when things go wrong under the new system? When something goes wrong, there can be a tendency in the public sector to reflexively revert to the way things were done before or to elevate or centralise decision making. Things will go wrong, as they always do, and so it is useful to think ahead about what you will do when things go wrong. If you're a land-use regulator, for example, using digital technology as part of monitoring, what will your response be if you miss something? The key is to acknowledge and take responsibility for the mistake, to explicitly and tangibly learn from it, and strengthen and improve the way things are done as needed.

Much of this turns on how the public sector uses technology, be it information and communications technology, digital methods, and data, especially big data. As outlined in the 2019 Independent Review of the Australian Public Service, one of the biggest challenges in sustaining public administration across Australia has been securing sufficient and ongoing funding and strategic investment in digital resources and capability in the public sector. All administrations experience this problem. Yet the pandemic has shown so clearly the possibilities of digital technology and capability in not just sustaining but lifting the quality of delivery and implementation by the public sector. In this sense, you can do your part as public servants in locking in good change but governments also need to do their part in prioritising and investing in those resources for the public.

In talking about locking in good change, I would invite you to think specifically about what you personally can do to achieve this. The downside of talking about system-wide change is that the people who are part of that system think that the driver of systemic change is someone else, that it is above them. You really can do two things.

One is to be an active participant in workplace conversations about how to improve what you do, who you do it with, and how you do it – be it in pulse surveys, staff meetings, conversations with your boss or staff, planning days and the like.

The other thing is to live change yourself in how you interact with others and do your job. Maybe have an extra chat each day with someone in a different area in your department, a different department or in the Commonwealth or another State. Reach out to businesses or communities that you work with to talk about recent developments and how things are going in the sector. Think of how you could improve the processes that you are engaged in, to better achieve outcomes on the ground. Is there data that you could share with others, or them with you, that would improve the quality of decisions.

3. Managing Risks

Having a go, trying something new, taking a risk is an essential part of effective and dynamic public administration. Ministers and public servants took many risks in making changes in the course of the pandemic to the way services were delivered, regulation and operations conducted, data used and policies made. The public is very glad they did.

But there have been risks in the conduct of public administration that you should be conscious of and explicitly and actively manage. There are four that are worth putting on the table now.

First is the **inevitable scrutiny that goes with decisions made quickly under high uncertainty**. It is a great strength of our liberal democracy that decisions made by governments can be reviewed in the Parliament, scrutinised by the media, probed by independent integrity bodies, and assessed by independent audit agencies. This is heightened when elections are due, as you face in Queensland.

You should be prepared for this scrutiny, and able to account for how you, as a public servant and your institution, used processes and consultation to put information and advice together, kept records and provided advice to ministers in writing, acted with integrity and non-politically, and properly used public resources and information. Good practice in public administration in being confident about proper conduct is to assess and review key processes against good-practice principles for public administration in crisis. Luckily, the Australian National Audit Office prepared a 12 page note on Rapid Implementation of Australian Government Initiatives early on in the pandemic with COVID-19 in mind.[1] It is a necessary read. There are already independent inquiry processes underway into the Commonwealth Government Response, the Ruby Princess problem in NSW and quarantine security in Victoria, and it would naïve to think others won't eventuate in the next few years, especially if there are changes in government. Be prepared.

Second, **patterns of decision making** have often shifted in the pandemic, with decisions run at the very top in some cases and some decisions left to the middle management in organisations in other cases. Command and control models of decision making may work well in a crisis but they are rarely sustainable models in more ordinary times, even if ordinary times is now one where we live with COVID-19. The solution is reflecting and planning explicitly for more decentralised and devolved systems of decision making.

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[1] To quote the document: "Audit reports have reinforced the importance of effective implementation to achieving government policy goals, and identified key lessons learned which are likely to have wider applicability to the Australian Public Service as it supports the national COVID-19 pandemic response. Key learnings, which focus on the fundamentals of sound government administration, include: (1) identify challenges and risks to rapid implementation (2) engage with stakeholders (3) establish fit for purpose governance and planning arrangements (4) identify and mobilise necessary skills, resources and systems to support rapid implementation (5) document and apply approved assessment processes and requirements (6) maintain focus on objectives (7) maintain appropriate records (8) maintain active budget oversight and financial management (9) adopt an active management posture."

Third is the risk that the crisis will **disproportionately hurt some parts of the public sector and general workforce**. At least so far, the pandemic has had a bigger initial impact on sectors that rely on more intensive people-to-people contact and on people who are employed on a casual basis. This has disproportionately hurt young people and women. Given the importance of diversity to the effectiveness of the workforce, sustainable workforce management will be focused on identifying and managing differential impacts on parts of the workforce. This will become more pressing in the public sector as the use of digital technology grows. The challenge is to enable transformation in a way that supports, rather than undermines, diversity.

Fourth is explicitly addressing the **risk of mental health and wellbeing problems** in the workforce. The pandemic, coming on top of drought, bushfires and smoke, and damaging storms, have put people across the country under deep stress. This has consequences for mental health, domestic violence and wellbeing in general. While this is a problem for all workplaces, it is incumbent on public-sector workplaces to lean in on the wellbeing of employees. Taking leave is not selfish. Not taking, or discouraging, leave is counter-productive to effectiveness and efficiency, and is unethical. Indeed, as my friend Jeff Whalan says, it is important that you look after yourself as well as those around you, not least because that is the decent and human thing to do but also because it is the best mitigation to the risk of tired people making mistakes. People have been living on adrenaline for a while and have to refill the tank. This is especially relevant for Queensland public servants because there is typically renewed activity after an election.

On that note, I will finish here. I very much look forward to hearing more of your own experience as public servants in the pandemic. Thank you for listening so patiently and thank you to the Department and Commission for inviting me.