

DIARY OF A NOMINATION WRITER

This is the fictional diary of someone involved in writing a nomination for the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management. It shows one approach to writing a nomination. There are many other ways that a team might wish to approach writing a nomination. However, we hope that this diary helps a nomination writer develop a realistic appreciation of the time and effort required to write a nomination, as well as highlighting some of the common pitfalls.

AT THE BEGINNING

FIRST ENTRY

You wouldn't read about it! This morning a pile of stuff lobbed on my desk about some Award program or other that the Branch Head thinks the team and I should have a go at. Is she kidding? We've got so much on our plates right now. I'll have a flip through it tomorrow – right now I've got more pressing things to do.

SECOND ENTRY – A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER

OK, so maybe the Branch Head was right. These Awards sound just the ticket for us. We were planning to undertake a major review of the project in the next couple of months, so we can use the preparation of a nomination for an Award as a way of doing the review. The whole thing looks quite well-structured, although I'm a bit fazed by the assessment dimensions. PIMMS. I mean, I ask you – who dreams up these silly acronyms anyway?

I've been flipping through the Nomination Guidelines and it seems like there's a lot more stuff I need to read before I can get going with the team. And apparently there's some stuff on the IPAA website as well. I've asked Tony to print it all out for me and copy it to everyone else so it can be discussed at our team meeting on Tuesday, next week.

THIRD ENTRY – A WEEK LATER

Well, this morning's team meeting was a bit hectic. Everyone had so many questions about the Awards process and what we need to do to prepare a nomination. We brainstormed a whole heap of things on the whiteboard – Do we fully understand the criteria and assessment model? Who's going to do what? What's our story? What data do we have and who is going to compile it? What's our timeline? Do we have enough resources to do this while we are chugging away at some other big tasks over the next month or so? Who's going to do the plan? What support can we get from other areas or from the Branch Head? Who else in the Department is putting together a nomination? Could we work with them? Who's good at writing in the team?

My head was spinning by the end of the meeting. Generally, most folk in the team are fairly enthusiastic although I'm a bit worried about the whole workload thing. The Branch Head was still really supportive when I reported the outcome of the team meeting to her. She said she'd do what she could to shift some of our workload into another team for a few weeks. Yep, that'll make me really popular – not!

FOURTH ENTRY – A WEEK LATER

We had another team meeting yesterday and handed out the different tasks for preparing the nomination to different people in the team. Tony is going to compile all our data – he’s a good numbers man so that will suit his talents well. Caroline is steadily working her way through the nomination guidelines and template etc and putting together some questions for us all to discuss – we’re not sure if we’ve got everything that they’re looking for, so this will be an important first step. Mahmoud is hunting through the files trying to find any tangible evidence that we can use, although my guess is that we’ll only use a small part of what he finds. My job is to coordinate the whole thing, but also to pull together the high level stuff – goals, objectives, principles that kind of thing. Heck, we started this project so long ago now that I’ve forgotten half that stuff and I’ll have to do some digging myself.

FIFTH ENTRY – SEVERAL WEEKS LATER

I knew it – the flack has already started. My colleague Alex is getting a bit thingy about his team picking up some of our work. We’ve been down this road before so I know I’m going to have to manage his sensitivities throughout this process. However, when I explained to him that the main reason we were nominating for an Award was to use the process as a way of doing our normal review and evaluation, with the added bonus of potentially winning something at the end, he got quite interested. I explained that really all that was different was that we had to do the review in a more compressed time frame than usual and that’s why we needed support from his team. I think I’ve smoothed him over for now. Anyway, I gave him a copy of the paperwork so that he could see what it was all about. Maybe he’ll be inspired to have a go next year. Who knows?

SIXTH ENTRY – THE FOLLOWING WEEK

We had our ready, set, go! team meeting this morning. We’ve done a thorough stock take of the information we have about the project, the evidence we can use to support our claims and Caroline has been through the Awards paperwork with a fine tooth comb. She’s ferreted out a whole heap of things that we’ve now worked through and made some decisions on. We’ve all realised now that our project may not be old enough to get us up with the winners. We just don’t have enough data against a couple of the criteria, particularly the one on governance. Darn, I wish we’d thought of some of this stuff earlier in the project but we just blithely sailed on without really giving too much thought to whether or not our working group structure was the best way to govern the project. So surprise, surprise, we didn’t have indicators and we didn’t collect data. Our customer satisfaction stuff is top notch and so is our leadership and change management stuff. The innovation stuff is a bit flabby but at least the implementation was good – we monitored that quite closely (for once!).

So, we’ve decided to set our expectations about winning an Award a bit lower, and now that I think about it, we’re really doing this mainly so that we do our own evaluation, so an Award would be icing on the cake, but we’re not betting on it now. We’re really in this to learn, so we’re not kidding ourselves. There was a bit of a soul-searching discussion and I’m not sure the Branch Head was so thrilled when I told her that we were going to take a “learning” approach rather than a “winning” approach to writing our nomination.

We’ve now got a Nomination Compiling and Writing Plan – boy, that sounds formal doesn’t it? For all the flash title, this just means that I’m doing Criteria 2 and 3, Caroline is doing Criterion 1 and Tony is doing Criterion 4. Mahmoud is our resources man and he will be pulling all our inputs into a master document. We’re going to get together in a month’s time to pull together our first rough draft. Here’s hoping!

IN THE MIDDLE

SEVENTH ENTRY – FOUR WEEKS LATER

It's been a rugged four weeks. I really thought that I'd get right on top of my two criteria quickly because Tony had pulled together some great data and Mahmoud had left me a pile of documents and reports that he thought matched my criteria. Who was I kidding? A whole bunch of urgent things fell out of the sky and I feel like I've been flapping around dealing with those instead of pulling my weight with the nomination.

Tony has finished his first draft and I know Caroline isn't far off finishing hers. I feel bad that I'm letting the team down. And Alex has been on my case again! Can't he see how busy I am? Once I cool off, I think I'd better have another coffee with him and just keep him on side. And I better give the Branch Head an update and let her know I've been struggling a bit.

EIGHTH ENTRY – A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER

Well yesterday would have to win a prize for being full of surprises. I had lunch with Alex and we thrashed through his "issues" about his team picking up some of our work. As it turns out, he's not peeved about that at all. Actually, I think he's just a bit bored right now and looking for something to stretch himself, but nothing new is coming up in his area so he's just grouching off at everyone.

The meeting with the Branch Head was interesting too. I thought she'd bite my head off but instead she asked me if I'd like someone else on the nomination preparation team. You bet, I said, and guess who she suggested? Yep! Alex! And he said yes and was thrilled to be doing something a bit more interesting. I'm briefing him tomorrow morning before introducing him to the rest of the team. He's going to pick up Criterion 3, which is one of our better criteria and I'm going to keep slogging away on Criterion 2.

We're really going to have to ramp up soon as there's only a few weeks to go and somewhere in there we've got to get the ruddy thing up to the Secretary for approval. Things can sometimes languish in his in-tray – sigh.

NINTH ENTRY – A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER

Okay! We're really cooking now. We have a first draft (beautifully compiled by Mahmoud – what would we do without that guy? The rest of us are technologically challenged, that's for sure). Tony had a brainwave after Alex came onto the team. He reminded us about the schematic in the Awards paperwork and we've been using that to check how we're going in preparing our content. We're leaving the Outcome Statement for the end, just to see how the story flows in the rest of the nomination.

It's all in a single document now but it's way too long. And is it just me, or is it a bit repetitive in places? Have we missed something in the guidelines that means we're saying the same stuff over and over? And boy does the hole in our governance criterion data look like it's got bells on it. The other big thing that's emerged is that it looks like our approach for innovation was really flabby not just a bit flabby. We'd had great implementation (of something!) but once we started diving back in time, we couldn't find any goals or objectives for our innovation process. It was just something that happened because someone had a good idea. The guidelines talk about three different types of innovation:

- Something completely innovative and novel and had never been used anywhere else before.
- Something that used an existing approach from another organisation or sector in an innovative and novel way.
- Something that other people/organisations had used but which was completely new to your organisation.

I guess our innovation probably falls into the second category but it's hard to tell since we don't appear to have documented this part of the project very well at all. Hmm, unlikely to impress the assessors especially since they seem to have some specific views about innovation in the nomination guidelines.

Stop. I can't believe I just wrote that. After all our talk at the beginning about being in the Awards process to learn something, I've just realised that we've all slipped into a competitive mindset and we're beating ourselves up about the stuff we haven't done, as opposed to the stuff we have done. Aaargh! Must not do this, must not do this. Repeat after me – in to learn, in to learn. Aaah, that feels better. I think we should talk about this at our next team meeting and just refocus on our reasons for doing this whole thing.

TENTH ENTRY – TWO WEEKS LATER

Last week was hard work and this week may be just as hard. I completely forgot to take account of the parliamentary sitting calendar. Oh brother – I spent last week doing question time briefs and all the other running around that's part of sitting days. And this week will probably be just as bad.

Star note to self – check parliamentary sitting calendar at beginning of planning process. Still, at least I had the sense to check the Secretary's availability – he's available and the Branch Head has already briefed him about our nomination.

That way he knows that the nomination can't grow mushrooms in his in-tray and that he has to turn it around quickly. We'll be running right to the wire to get the darn thing ready in time.

The team has been doing some great work this week and having Alex on board has been a real bonus. He's a great writer – much better than me – and he's made some top suggestions about massaging the content of the nomination to knock out some of the repetition.

AT THE END

ELEVENTH ENTRY – NINE DAYS TO GO

We're on the homeward leg now – phew! All we have to do over the next few days is write the Outcome Statement, go through our checklist – actually, it's the one in the nomination kit – and then get it off to the Branch Head and then the Secretary. Easy peasy!

TWELFTH ENTRY – SEVEN DAYS TO GO

I can't believe I was feeling so cocky the other day. Talk about cruising for a fall! The Outcome Statement is proving to be much harder to write than I thought. I wish we'd started this a week ago. We've had to put the brains trust (the whole team) to work on this as my brain is just devoid of ideas. I know we need to make the most of the Outcome Statement because it's the only chance in the nomination where we can locate our project in its broader context and talk about its wider impacts on the community and our clients. This is worse than writing a high school essay.

THIRTEENTH ENTRY – FIVE DAYS TO GO

Right, the nomination is finished now, bar the Outcome Statement, which is with the Branch Head. She wasn't happy with our collective efforts so now she is having a go. Mahmoud has given the document a final polish and it looks great. It'll be no problem to paste in the Outcome Statement when it's done. Caroline has organised all the supporting evidence and saved it onto USB memory sticks. We can add the rest of the nomination once the Outcome Statement is finished.

FOURTEENTH ENTRY – FOUR DAYS TO GO

Thank heavens for Tony! He was going through the Awards documentation one last time and realised

that I'd done nothing about organising payment for the nomination fee. Checked the IPAA webpage and we can pay by credit card. I rang the accounts folk today and they said they could arrange payment provided we get all the approvals.

The Branch Head has sent back the final Outcome Statement and I must say I'm impressed. She's got a much better grasp on the policy drivers and bigger picture than me and she certainly has a way with words. Heck, this'll knock the socks off the assessors. Mahmoud's going to paste it into the document then it's off to the Secretary's office via the various approval routes. I can't believe we're travelling so well. What can still go wrong?

FIFTEENTH ENTRY – ONE DAY TO GO

Well, I didn't tempt fate on Thursday. Nothing has gone wrong. The nomination has been approved and signed by the Secretary, payment's been organised and the USB sticks are packed up and ready to be delivered in time for the deadline tomorrow. I'm going to deliver it myself first thing in the morning.

SIXTEENTH ENTRY – DEADLINE FOR NOMINATIONS

Signed, sealed and delivered this morning. I'm taking the team to lunch so that we can celebrate.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

SEVENTEENTH ENTRY – A MONTH LATER

I can't believe a month has already sped by since we lodged our nomination. I wonder how the assessment is going? I know things have been moving on here.

Tony, Caroline and Alex have pulled together all our nomination material into an evaluation report for our internal use and the results have been quite interesting. Those assessment dimensions really made us look at the governance and innovation parts of our project with a much more critical eye. Needless to say, we've identified some interesting improvements that we're going to trial later in the year. We're also going to get much smarter about documenting our goals, plans and indicators so that we can really test our processes. It's a bit more work all round but I think it is an important way for us to value-add for our clients.

Alex is going back to his team soon. Funnily, although we've had some rough patches, I think I'll miss him. Actually, I think he's keen to take some of the things he learned with us back into his own team. An unexpected bonus from writing our nomination.

EIGHTEENTH ENTRY – EARLY NOVEMBER

We received our invitation to the Awards Presentation Dinner today. The Branch Head was really great about it. She says we can all go and that the Department will pay – choice! Actually, she'll be going too, along with another Branch Head and team and, heaven forbid, one of the Deputy Secretaries. It turns out we weren't the only team in the Department to lodge a nomination.

RECOGNITION

NINETEENTH ENTRY – AWARDS PRESENTATION NIGHT

Well, last night was a night to remember. The Awards Presentation Dinner was a great night out for our team. Believe it or not we were Commended! Sure, we didn't win a Gold or a Silver Award, but then we weren't expecting to, so the Commendation was a real surprise. The Branch Head was really chuffed and the team were ecstatic. This morning at morning tea the other Sections gave us a big hooray. Very nice indeed.

WHAT NOW

TWENTIETH ENTRY

We got our Awards feedback report yesterday. It made for interesting reading. The assessors had identified some strengths that we weren't aware of, so that was rather nice. And the opportunities for improvement really came as no surprise because we'd already identified most of them when we found the holes as we wrote our nomination. We've already got a plan in place to implement several of them before the end of the year and I think I'll take the remaining suggestions forward into our team planning day early next year.

The team are already talking about putting in another nomination next year to see if we can win something this time. I think we could win something soon, but not next year. Some of the changes we need to make are going to take time, and if we're going to do them properly then we also need to choose our indicators and get our data collection stuff working properly as well. And to be honest, this process took a lot of energy out of us all, and I'd like us to consolidate a bit next year. But after that – watch out! We'll be back!