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CEO FOCUS: NOELENE DUFF

In this latest of our series focusing on Chief Executives, Noelene Duff, City of Whitehorse CEO, talks about the importance of customer service in local government.

One of the most important things a local government can do is embed a strong customer service

we also saw some benefits we were not expecting. As the process developed we saw growing ownership by staff, we saw teamwork

culture within its organisation. People are always moving around in the local government sector, so it really helps if there is a strongly embedded customer service culture to ensure teams remain focused, despite changing membership.

Here at Whitehorse we felt we were starting to slide a little, because we were seeing a slow decline in community survey ratings in some areas. It wasn't a big decline, but there was a perception that some areas dealing with large numbers of transactions were not responsive enough to telephone calls and correspondence, or were not following up quickly enough. At the same time, we thought we weren't recognising our good performers enough. We discussed this in the Executive group and decided we could not allow this to continue. The General Managers, especially Terry Wilkinson, assisted by Tony De Fazio, Civic Services Manager, led the effort to formulate a program tailored to our needs. We didn't want something off the shelf, we wanted to shape it to suit us.

We have now run through two cycles of improvement project work and we can see the results in the latest surveys, which are trending up again. Along the way we learned some important lessons about what works for us and

developing and people getting more involved across the organisation, breaking down the 'silo' effect. It is a front-line, hands-on people-driven program – not the latest program coming down from management. Our people took on its leadership and became mentors to other groups picking up and participating in the exercise, so we have our own people leading it. We have tried to create continuity and ownership through the organisation.

Being empowered to examine and change our service delivery "tools of trade", for example the way we handle correspondence or the way we manage things, now goes down deeper into the organisation. It means we can

sustain the change and embed it much deeper into the culture.

These exercises give people 'permission' to advance ideas and views on how to do things better – and everyone usually has lots of good ideas. That's my experience of implementing change – it is not about me going around talking to groups of staff, its about staff getting the means to bring about change in their own workplace.

For more on the Whitehorse approach to customer service, see page 2.



BUILDING BEST VALUE WITH CUSTOMER SERVICE

In recent years, Best Value has focused change in local government on consultation and achievement of community outcomes. Many councils are now building on their community consultations by developing customer service that not only aims to maximise the experience of the customer with the service, but also to optimise the work processes delivering outputs to satisfy the customer's needs. 'Best Practice' recently talked with some councils about their customer service improvement initiatives.

Whitehorse City Council

Tony De Fazio, Civic Services Manager, Whitehorse City Council.



Early last year, Whitehorse City Council Executive became concerned about some of the results of the annual community survey:

- Less than half the survey respondents (47%) claimed to have received an answer to an enquiry from Council within a week, down from 61% in 2004.
- One in five who had made a complaint claimed to have never received an answer.
- Overall satisfaction was down from 83% in 2004 to 73% in 2005.

The Executive decided to implement a program of ongoing service improvement to improve the quality of customer interactions, and to also optimise the service delivery processes.

Two business units, Local Laws and Engineering and Environmental Services, participated in a pilot project to establish a modular service improvement approach useable by any department to deliver visible and measurable service improvements. ACIG was engaged to provide training and facilitation to the project teams and a steering committee ensured the projects were appropriately resourced, supported by the Executive and attuned to the values and strategies of the organisation.

The Traffic and Local Laws team made improvements including:

- Multilingual educational information sheets on issues such as fire hazards, parking controls and safe footpaths.
- A newsletter for school crossing supervisors.
- Information sheets to be distributed to residents prior to seasonal issues, such as overgrown vegetation in Spring.

Engineering and Environmental Services:

- Expanded the use of the Pathway customer request system through training.
- Improved templates and standard correspondence.
- Initiated inter-departmental meetings with key stakeholders.
- Reviewed and improved acknowledgement & feedback letters.

The program is continuing with more teams being involved. Recent surveys show the improvements are making an impact.



Hobson's Bay City Council

Helen Anstis, Executive Manager, Organisational Development, Hobson's Bay City Council.



Hobsons Bay's 'Backfill' program uses customer service staff rotating to fill temporary vacancies in business units to cover staff leave. This benefits the business unit through customer service staff bringing their breadth of customer service skills and knowledge to the temporary assignment. This also avoids the loss of productivity typically experienced when using outside 'temps'.

The program benefits Customer Service staff by expanding their knowledge of technical operations and giving them variety in their work. The Customer Service team has become a pool of cross-trained staff with good knowledge of how council business units function and the roles of staff in those units. Skills and knowledge are retained within council instead of being lost when a 'temp' moves on. Business unit managers now request 'Backfill' staff for their short term vacancies and some business units look first to Customer Service when recruiting staff.

Hobsons Bay regularly reviews 'frequently asked questions' and 'line of business' statistics to identify improvement opportunities. Recent evaluations have identified that more attention needs to be given to understanding the outcomes required by the end user of a service before any changes are made.



Hobsons Bay
CITY COUNCIL

Wyndham City Council

Steve Burgess, Customer Service Co-ordinator, Wyndham City Council.

Wyndham is a growing and diverse community. A major upgrade to the civic office is planned that will enable more service-oriented client interactions.



The program "Aim for 80" works at a more day-to-day level. Originating from workshops to develop ideas to achieve a result of 80 in future Annual Community surveys, the program aims to assist all staff to be more customer focused, to 'go over the counter' to better understand the customer point of view.

Initiatives so far include:

- A systematic, department by department, review of the standard letters sent out to residents and ratepayers – terse, compliance-focused communication can cause confusion in Wyndham's diverse community, and cause extra unnecessary work.
- A Household Panel of 600 people is being used as a consultation resource.
- "Aim for 80" is an agenda item at management meetings, to reinforce the importance of management attitude and behaviour

Glen Eira City Council

Greg Goldenberg, Manager Customer Service Centre, Glen Eira City Council.

The Service Centre has been operating for ten years. Initially, council's business units were cautious about customer service staff's capability handling technical questions. By working with business units to develop consistent criteria and guidelines to ensure reliable advice to callers, the Service Centre has built up confidence in the service.



Service staff numbers have grown to around 20, reflecting the high proportion of requests now resolvable at the first point of contact: around 77% of inbound calls are now successfully dealt with by Service Centre staff at the first point of contact, up from 67% five years ago. Call data shows the time spent resolving each call has increased considerably over the years, reflecting the increased complexity of services and the depth and range of issues now dealt with at first contact. This has reduced the workload of professional staff in units such as Planning and Building, and made their working day more focused, with fewer interruptions.



Murrindindi Shire Council

Ann Le Lievre, Manager Library and Customer Service, Murrindindi Shire Council

Murrindindi is a municipality of approximately 4,000 square kilometres and 13,000 residents with Council offices at Alexandra complemented by a joint customer service and library service at Yea and Kinglake.



Council adopted the Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) as a way of continuously improving the systems and service at Murrindindi. The ABEF approach commenced with all staff being offered either a half-day or three-day training program. The approach is now fully integrated into the Council planning and reporting process and staff are engaged at all levels in using the approach to improve processes and relationships.

Identifying organizational values is an integral part of the Business Excellence journey; they have a close synergy with personal values. Ann Le Lievre's personal values are creativity, beauty, passion and learning, which add a complementary and creative adjunct to the more function and process oriented aspects of Business Excellence. Ann's philosophy embraces:

- Appointing customer service staff on the basis of personality, to find people with passion who enjoy connecting with people every day. Not surprisingly, many customer service staff have 'community' as one of their top four personal values.
- Building relationships between customer service staff and other council departments, promoting face to face communication over impersonal methods like emailing;
- Using retail display techniques to create attractive and clutter-free customer service environments;
- Ensuring all customer service staff have well developed time management skills – recognizing they are core business skills for everyone. Staff have embraced the philosophy of David Allen, whose book "How to get things done" has turned time management into an art.
- Using creative tools such as mind maps for agendas, minute-taking and group problem-solving (meeting record can be printed off and circulated immediately using an electronic whiteboard);

Earlier this year council staff began developing a new web site, using many of the above approaches in its planning. Taking a systems view, the project team recognised the importance of identifying the web site's customers. The team has extensively used Mind Maps to plot the complex issues involved in the project and to develop creative thinking.



To take advantage of ACIG's experience with strategies, methods and tools to enable customer service improvement, call David Smith or Rachel Powning on (03) 9650 7222.

BEST VALUE GUIDE RELEASED



The Best Value Practitioners Interest Group, a working group of the LG Pro Victorian Corporate Planners Network, has released the first edition of 'A Guide to Implementing of Whole of Organisation Approach to Best Value' to assist Councils in Victoria.

It is founded on these principles:

1. an organisation wide improvement framework is critical to sustaining a culture of performance and improvement;
2. organisational improvement frameworks can be strengthened and made more relevant to local government by incorporating the Best Value principles, and
3. the Best Value principles can be implemented most effectively when they are built into an organisation wide improvement framework.

The Guide examines how each of the Best Value principles can assist councils in carrying out a range of responsibilities, and how the principles can be integrated into a performance management framework for local government.

The Interest Group has carried out extensive consultation in the development of the Guide, including metropolitan and regional councils and sector peak bodies. Importantly, the Best Value Commission has worked with the Group to review and advise on the Guide, and the document aims to reflect the direction the Best Value Commission and Local Government Victoria wish to see Best Value headed in the future.

ACIG Senior Consultant Rachel Powning worked extensively with the Interest Group, developing content reviewing drafts and providing general advice. The Guidelines are available on the LGPro and Local Government Victoria websites for downloading. Alternatively please email rachel@acig.com.au and she will send you a copy.

ACIG People - Rachel Powning

Rachel joined ACIG three years ago from local government, where her last position was Project Manager for a major business systems re-development. Recently she has been focusing on performance management and business planning, where she has had several assignments working with State and local government organisations.

Rachel has an MA in International Relations and has worked on international projects on capacity building in project management and monitoring and evaluation.

At home, her recreation interests include reading, films and spending time with her family.



Australian Continuous Improvement Group is a specialist group addressing the best practice needs of the public and private sector. Our skills cover implementing continuous improvement processes which have a customer focus, meet strategic goals and achieve culture change. For advice, contact any of our named Directors, Consultants or Managing Director, Gerard Colla.

These notes are not intended to be comprehensive. Readers are therefore advised that before acting on any matters arising from these notes, they should discuss the situation with a director of the firm.

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