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Wicked problems and beyond

MANAGEMENT EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Anyone who doubts the breadth of the career opportunities offered by local government will soon be set right by the breadth of content covered in this feature. We invited a range of contributors to raise and discuss a current issue in the sector, and to suggest programs that can help equip managers come to grips with this issue.

So it is we have articles focusing on 'wicked problems', leadership, the power of innovation and measuring and improving performance, plus diary dates for events focusing on the financial management of infrastructure and the internal audit process, two key activity areas for local government.

Being the best we can

Following piloting by nine Victorian public library services, an innovative service improvement and professional development program for libraries across Australia has now been finalised.

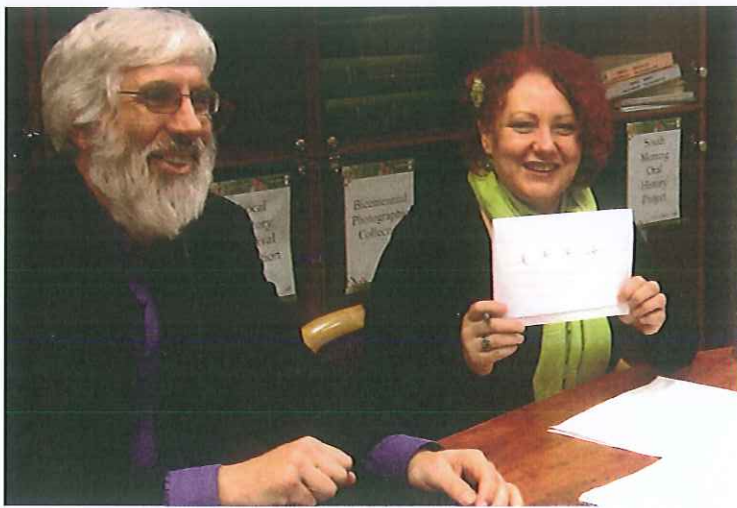
The *Being The Best We Can* (BTBWC) program has created a comprehensive organisational assessment framework and self-



by *Euan Lockie*
Australian Continuous Improvement Group

evaluation process, specially designed for Australian public libraries. The program has been developed by a partnership involving the Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) and the State Library of Victoria, with advice and support from Australian Continuous Improvement Group (ACIG). The program won LGPro's award for best Innovative Management Initiative in 2010.

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Peer reviewers Michael Scholtes and Karyn Siegmann give the 'thumbs up' to one of the pilot participants.

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Completing a BTBWC self-evaluation enables public libraries to demonstrate the results they achieve for communities and how well they meet users' needs. It enables libraries to take stock of current performance, answering three key questions: *How well are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do now?*

Over the past two years, nine Victorian public library services have piloted BTBWC's self-evaluation process to prove its relevance and usability. Based on feedback from the pilot libraries, the final framework and evaluation package has now been finalised and published by the State Library of Victoria. A new round of self-evaluations, involving three library services, began in September.

BTBWC has proved to be a great opportunity for libraries to involve their staff, bringing them together in the self-evaluation process to learn from one another and understand the entire library service better. These comments from two library managers are typical.

"It raised the level of understanding of the service among staff and gave everyone a chance to look critically outside individuals' areas of the service."

"Being The Best We Can has had a very positive impact on our library service through opening of new opportunities for staff engagement, resulting in more satisfied staff. Also, this was a very good way of sharing the information, presenting what we do and finding out what we might be doing in future."

The self-evaluation process

BTBWC's evaluation criteria are contained within a framework of five key result areas (KRAs):

- providing gateways to information, learning and leisure
- building individual skills, capability and wellbeing
- developing social capital
- demonstrating leadership
- designing, managing and improving systems and processes.

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The self-evaluation process starts with the library staff doing an initial assessment in a half-day or full-day workshop, using the BTBWC framework. The evaluation team assesses the library service's performance using successive levels of detail under each of the five KRAs.

Three 'themes' further explain each KRA, and the library team uses one-page guides for each theme to discuss and develop their evaluation, considering what they do under each theme, what evidence might support their evaluation, what strengths they have in that theme and what opportunities for improvement exist. Finally they rate their library service on a one to five 'star' rating scale.

After the workshop, the evaluation team gathers and reviews its evidence, revisits its assessment and builds the initial evaluation into a report.

A crucial part of the BTBWC process is peer review, provided by two independent library managers drawn from a panel of reviewers, who fill the role of 'critical friend'. The peers provide an impartial, independent and thorough review of the library's evidence, in a one-day visit with the library service.

The self-evaluation results are finalised in a written report that demonstrates the library's performance, with peer review comments included, and provides a service improvement action plan.

BTBWC benefits

Library services that have been through the BTBWC process are better able to demonstrate the relevance and value of their library to the community and key stakeholders. Several of the pilot libraries had significant success getting their message across to council management, their boards and the community after they had done a BTBWC evaluation.

Not only that, but the library staff who acted as peer reviewers reported they learnt much while also enjoying sharing their experiences with interested colleagues.

"As a reviewer I have learned a lot, and already see how our service can improve. It's been a wonderful professional development experience. It has also been a great vehicle to support our peers in this industry."

"As a peer reviewer it refocused my attention to drawbacks and issues in my own library service needing attention."

All in all, Being *The Best We Can* offers library services a great platform to improve service, while offering staff a fulfilling professional development opportunity.

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