



Agency size matters

A new method of reporting by OPSSC has identified a link between the size of public sector agencies and their ability to manage and implement governance, human resource and policy issues.

Released in November 2008, the State of the Service Report is the first compliance report produced by OPSSC that covers the practice and promotion of, and compliance with, both the *Public Sector Management Act 1994* and the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2003* (PID Act). It compares data from responses to the OPSSC CEO Annual Agency Survey and Employee Perceptions Survey to report on the leadership, conduct and perceptions of those whose work entails serving the public of Western Australia.

An important theme relating to the implications of agency size emerged from the key findings of State of the Service Report.

The findings indicate that larger agencies have a greater capacity to develop systems and frameworks. They do not perform as well, however, with respect to policy implementation and communication.

Small and medium size agencies tend to communicate well but have less capacity to plan strategically as well as develop and implement specific policies or training initiatives.

The findings also show that agency size plays a significant role when it comes to championing the PID Act and raising awareness amongst staff.



Launching the State of the Service Report: OPSSC staff (from left) Communications Manager Phil Torrisi; Director, Evaluation and Reporting Dr Chris Stansbury; and Executive Director, Public Sector Practice Penny Bird.

Agencies of all sizes considered this to be the responsibility of the CEO. When asked to nominate if it was the responsibility of senior management, however, agencies with fewer than 20 staff were much less likely to agree.

Commissioner for Public Sector Standards Dr Ruth Shean said that the findings have important implications for agency heads.

“All public sector agencies have vulnerabilities as a function of size,” Dr Shean said.

“The findings of the State of the Service Report suggest that CEOs should make themselves alert to those risks which relate to their size and take appropriate action, seeking assistance where necessary. Advice and assistance in this respect is readily available from OPSSC.”

The State of the Service Report 2008 is available from the OPSSC website at www.opssc.wa.gov.au/sots/index.htm. Printed copies of Part One of the report, which includes the Commissioner’s overview and the key findings, are also available.

Guiding boards

An appointment to a government or public sector board carries with it significant responsibilities and obligations, many of which are bound by legislation.

While for a government agency the responsibility for all areas is usually very clear – that is, within the agency – it is not always as clear for boards as to who needs to do what. Factors such as the type of board and whether support is provided by a host agency may impact on the degree of responsibility of the board to meet legislative requirements or administrative instructions.

A code of conduct is an effective way to clarify the public duties and legal responsibilities of board members. It is also an effective way to set the standard of conduct and integrity expected of board members, executive officers and other officers working with the board. When applied effectively, it enhances teamwork and ensures better outcomes.

OPSSC is currently developing a guide to assist government boards prepare a code of conduct. The guide and supporting information takes into account the WA Public Sector Code of Ethics and provides advice about what types of issues should be included within a board's code of conduct.

Commissioner for Public Sector Standards Dr Ruth Shean believes it is important for boards and committees to have a well developed code of conduct.

“Board and committee members are in a position of trust and often make decisions that affect the welfare, rights or entitlements of individuals and the community,” said Dr Shean.

“A code of conduct is an essential tool for setting out the appropriate standards of conduct and assisting board members to perform their duties and meet their responsibilities in an ethical and accountable manner.

“This guide provides practical information relevant to boards, and will assist boards to develop or review their codes of conduct,” said Dr Shean.

The Conduct Guide for Boards and Committees will be released in the coming weeks. It will be available online at www.opssc.wa.gov.au. A print version will also be available. For more information phone 9260 6600 or email pssc@opssc.wa.gov.au.

Setting new standards

After reviewing the public sector standards in 2008, OPSSC is proposing a move from nine separate standards to three. The new standards are represented in a model incorporating entry into the public sector, tenure covering the period of employment and exit from the public sector.

Executive Director, Public Sector Practice Penny Bird said feedback from government agencies suggests the simplification of the standards is a positive move.

“We have been overwhelmed by the number of people wanting to assist with the development of the standards during our consultation processes,” Penny said.

“The broad view is that the development of the new standards will allow us to generate a cultural change around human resources practices.

“People are seeing the standards review as an important opportunity to rethink and refresh public sector approaches to human resource management.”

The draft new standards are available at www.opssc.wa.gov.au/standardsreview2009. It is anticipated that the new standards and accompanying resource material will be available for implementation on 1 July 2009.



Reviewing the standards: Rebecca Harris (*far right*) and Joy Hillman (*far left*) from OPSSC, discuss the new standards with Helen Slater from the Peel Development Commission and Alan Ruthven from the Public Transport Authority.

OPSSC update

OPSSC website

We are currently redeveloping our website. If you notice any broken links or cannot find what you are looking for, send an email to webadmin@opssc.wa.gov.au.

CEO selection

OPSSC undertakes the selection process for public sector chief executive officer positions and nominates people suitable for appointment to these positions. Positions are advertised nationally and details are available from our website at www.opssc.wa.gov.au/ceo/index.htm.

OPSSC Service Charter

The OPSSC Service Charter sets out our commitment to delivering the highest possible standard of service to all Western Australians. Our new charter is available at www.opssc.wa.gov.au/aboutus/servicecharter.htm.

PUBLIC INTEREST DISCLOSURES

PID DVD now available online

In 2008 we release the DVD titled Speaking Out: A Guide to Making a Public Interest Disclosure. The DVD can now be viewed on our website. Visit www.opssc.wa.gov.au/flash/PID_video.swf.

STANDARDS AND ETHICS

Tips for minimising breach claims

Analysis of breach claims processed by OPSSC provides insight into the current key issues relating to human resource management standards. To view a summary of issues contained in recent breach claims visit www.opssc.wa.gov.au/documents/breachclaims/tips/march2009.pdf.

Taking action on integrity issues

The Integrity Coordinating Group has released a DVD of the recent forum titled Taking Action on Integrity Issues. The DVD provides valuable insight into how the Western Australian integrity agencies (Ombudsman, OPSSC, Corruption and Crime Commission and the Office of the Auditor General) tackle integrity issues. For more information visit www.opssc.wa.gov.au/icg/events.htm.

Managing Interest Checklist

Conflicting interests occur frequently in public life and are not necessarily unethical or wrong. It is how the conflicts are identified and managed that is important. To assist, we have developed the Managing Interest Checklist which details possible areas for action and provides guidance on minimising risks in the management of interest. The checklist is available at www.opssc.wa.gov.au/ethics/managinginterests.htm.

EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

OEEO Diversity Forum

The next Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (OEEO) Diversity Forum will be held on Thursday 19 March. This forum will look at strategies that public sector agencies have developed and implemented to increase employment opportunities for women. Full event details are available at www.oeeo.wa.gov.au/diversityforums/2009/index.htm.

Moving towards equity and diversity

In January the Premier released the Third Progress Report on the Equity and Diversity Plan for the Public Sector Workforce 2006-2009. The report shows the public sector made significant progress towards achieving a diverse workforce during 2008. It is available from the OEEO website at www.oeeo.wa.gov.au/publications/diversityplan.htm.

How does your agency compare?

Agencies with over 100 employees have recently received their How Does Your Agency Compare? reports. These reports show how the diversity in an agency compares to the public sector as a whole. Contact the OEEO for more information by email to deope@opssc.wa.gov.au or phone on 9260 6600.

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Whistleblower study

A study has found that managing public interest whistleblowing is one of the most complex challenges in public sector management.

“Whistling While They Work” is a three year study into public interest whistleblowing in Australian public sector agencies and the practical aspects of how whistleblowing should be managed.

At a presentation to OPSSC staff in November 2008, Project Leader Dr A.J. Brown said the study found huge gaps in the provision of support to whistleblowers.

“With more than half of public interest whistleblowers estimated as suffering a stressful experience, including around a quarter reporting reprisals or mistreatment, there is a huge gap to be filled in the more effective provision of support,” said Dr Brown.

The key findings of the project show that:

- fewer than two percent of public interest whistleblowers received organised support from their agency;
- seventy percent of the agencies surveyed had no procedures in place for assessing the risk of reprisal when officials in their agency blew the whistle; and
- only three percent were rated as having reasonably strong procedures when assessed against the relevant Australian Standard.

Dr Brown said the research also showed that outcomes for whistleblowers are not always bad.

“Their vital role in support of public integrity is often recognised by their own organisations and governments in general,” he said.

“But this only increases the responsibility of governments to ensure public interest whistleblowers are supported and, where necessary, protected.”

Whistling While They Work was funded by the Australian Research Council and 14 partner organisations, including OPSSC.

The findings are printed in Whistleblowing in the Australian Public Sector: Enhancing the Theory and Practice of Internal Witness Management in Public Sector Organisations, available at http://eprints.anu.edu.au/whistleblowing_citation.html.

Commissioner’s comment



Welcome to the first issue of “In Principle” – the quarterly newsletter from OPSSC.

One of our main goals at OPSSC is helping agencies to navigate their way through the many accountability requirements of government. For every action we take, we ask ourselves – how can we make this easier for others in the public sector?

A key concern is that of differing expectations and accountability requirements across government. For this reason, we are developing a Good Governance Guide, which will help agencies to comply with the public sector standards as well as combine the across-government accountability requirements into a single simple-to-use framework.

The guide is based on the principles of the Australian Stock Exchange. We have translated these into principles and functions relevant to public agencies. We have worked through these with CEOs to express them in a way which is unique to public sector practice. This approach starts with the relationship between CEOs and their Ministers, and includes reference to legislation, reporting relationships, people and financial management and specific ethics and integrity matters.

The principles are linked to standards, operations, monitoring and reporting. Agencies can then adapt this to best suit their business.

Our intent is that this user-friendly guide will help you to coordinate your existing compliance requirements. In particular, it will help you to streamline your accountability obligations. It will help you to identify any duplications which might exist, and also assist in identifying gaps in your processes.

If you have an interest in working with us as part of the implementation of this guide, please contact me at ruth.shean@opssc.wa.gov.au or call me on 9260 6608. We are happy to work through this with you, or take on board suggestions for added tools which might help simplify your accountability needs.

All the best,

Ruth Shean