

Strategies to improve client service: Exemplars in the Canadian federal government

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**STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CLIENT SERVICE:
EXEMPLARS IN THE CANADIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENTⁱ**

ABSTRACT

While client service has become an important focus in public sector organizations (e.g., Klein, 2001; Giannoccaro, Costantino, Ludovico and Pietroforte, 2008), and public administration widely uses customer service ideas (Fountain, 2001), public sector organizations lack a detailed understanding of the meaning of client service and its implications (Fountain, 2001), and require knowledge about “how” to improve public services (Hodgson, Farrell and Connolly, 2007). This study was undertaken to determine the specific strategies used by five organizations in the Canadian federal government providing exemplary client service. A case study approach was used for this research. Results suggest that regardless of organizational size, organizational structure and the type of service, all have a client service organizational culture. Common strategies that have been effective in developing this client service culture and providing exemplary client service include effective leadership, communication, human resource practices, innovation and flexibility in meeting client expectations. These results support previous research (e.g., Dietz, Pugh and Wiley, 2004) that highlights the relationship between service excellence and a positive organizational culture. Further, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature by identifying specific strategies used by public organizations in the Canadian federal government in providing exemplary services to clients.

Key words: Innovation, flexibility, public sector, client service, organizational culture, organizational climate, strategies, case study.

Introduction

Throughout the past few decades, like the private sector, the public sector has been confronted by pressure for change as a result of numerous external factors. These include: technological change (Boudreau, 2009), changes in economic, social and political orders (Taylor, Snellen and Zuurmond, 1997), and globalization (Farazmand, 1999). At the same time, business leaders have been pointing fingers at the slow pace of governments (Lau, 2000). As a result, throughout most of the twentieth century, government institutions have been trying to improve their performance. The shift to the new public management (NPM) that emerged in the 1980s (Christensen and Laegreid, 2002) introduces a new “business-

mindset” into the field of public administration, particularly among the member states of the OECD (Caron and Giauque, 2006).

In particular, “customer focus” has recently come to the fore as an important theme in public management (Williams, Saunders and Staughton, 1999; Alford, 2002); and in recent years public organizations have been striving to enhance services to customers (e.g., Klein, 2001; Giannoccaro, Costantino, Ludovico and Pietroforte, 2008). For example, there has been pressure on the public sector to offer more government services (Lau, 2000), and governments in different parts of the world compete among themselves by launching new initiatives to improve services to their citizens (Jakka, 2004). It is generally accepted that to survive and prosper in the medium to long term, public sector organizations must become more market oriented (Nel, Athron, Pitt and Ewing, 2000). At the same time, there is tremendous demand on many governments to work better and “do more with less” (Daly, 2002) in order to maximize results and reduce costs. Giannoccaro et al., (2008), found that there is a rapidly growing thrust toward “quality service” among public administration systems.

Prior research has highlighted the relationship between service excellence and a positive organizational climate or culture. For example, as noted by Dietz, Pugh and Wiley (2004), “when excellent service is an important theme in an organization, a positive service climate exists” (p. 81). A service culture has been defined as “employee perceptions of the practices, procedures and behaviours that get rewarded, supported, and are expected in relation to customer service and customer service quality” (Schneider, White and Paul, 1998, p. 151). In order to improve quality in services, it is important to strike the right balance between the techniques and methods for improving processes and systems, and the staff attitudes, behavior and the service culture (Edvardsson, Thomasson and Overtveit, 1994). Patterson, West, Shackleton, Dawson, Lawthom, Maitlis, Robinson, and Wallace (2005) noted that the terms climate and culture are used interchangeably, and for the purposes of this paper, we will follow this same practice.

Some researchers have taken the position that organizations *are* cultures and organizational culture is not a discrete variable to be manipulated at will (e.g., Smircich, 1983; Meyerson and Martin, 1987). However, many other researchers (e.g., Schein, 2000; Neuhauser, Bender and Stromberg, 2000; Schneider, Gunnarson and Niles-Jolly, 2001; Bernick, 2001; Hesselbein, 2002, Somerville and Dyke, 2008, Glor, 2008; Somerville, 2009), support the view that culture can be managed. Teleological theory also takes this perspective, contending that a vision, or desired end state is developed, and the organization takes action to achieve that vision, monitoring progress along the way (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995).

Changing an organization’s culture is enormously complex (Bate, 1994), consumes considerable organizational resources (Claver, Llopis, Gasco, Molina and Conca, 1999) and is very time consuming (Schein, 1999). According to Cummins and Worley (1997), shifting an organization’s culture, which is considered an organizational transformation, involves radical changes in how organizational members perceive, think and behave in their work environment. These changes fundamentally alter the assumptions underpinning how the organization relates to its environment and how it functions. Changing these assumptions involves significant shifts in the organization’s philosophy and values, and in numerous structures and organizational arrangements that shape members’ behaviours

(Cummins & Worley, 1997). A number of drivers of organizational culture change have been highlighted in prior research. These include developing a vision, (e.g., Lau, 2000), leaders' actions and communication (e.g., Claver, et al., 1999), and human resource practices (e.g., Linquist, 2000). However, it is also important to recognize that it takes considerable effort and time to shift an organization's culture. For example, Jick (1995) suggested five-to-seven years, while Posner and Rothstein (1994) suggested even longer time frames for organizational transformations: six to eight years in the private sector, and longer in the public sector.

A study conducted by Schneider, Parkington and Buxton (1980) was the first to link employee perceptions of service climate to ratings of customer satisfaction from clients (Johnson, 1996). Extending this research, Johnson (1996) discovered linkages between the effectiveness of management practices and a service climate. The following were specifically identified as factors which enhance service climate: developing a strategy about how service is to be delivered, determining clients' needs and expectations, providing training related to service excellence, and designing service systems, policies and procedures to promote service delivery (Johnson, 1996).

In more recent years employees have become recognized as keen observers of the effectiveness of client service (Wiley, Brooks and Lundby, 2006). Given this, increasingly employee surveys are focused on the client service environment to help diagnose the service climate, organizational leadership, and other performance-centric topics (Wiley, et al., 2006).

Although the public sector widely uses customer service ideas, the concept and its implications for the public sector remain poorly developed (Fountain, 2001). Public sector organizations lack a detailed understanding of the meaning of client service and its implications (Fountain, 2001), and require knowledge about "how" to improve public services (Hodgson, et al., 2007).

Public sector managers have some unique challenges compared to private sector managers. Government organizations must not only take into consideration the economic reality of the organization, but also the political, social and organizational environment (Taylor, et al., 1997). Examples of specific challenges include changes in government due to elections, the involvement of political leadership, and new legislation. These challenges can negatively impact public sector managers' ability to remain focused on longer term initiatives such as attempting to develop a client service culture.

We agree with Hodgson, et al.'s (2007) hypotheses that identifying "what works" in bringing about improvement in public services is a complex subject, and that there has been limited research dedicated to this to date. This research contributes to developing a better understanding of "what works" in improving public services. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Canadian federal public servants concerning client service, and to identify specific strategies employed in the Canadian federal government that have been effective in establishing high levels of client service. Given that the Canadian federal government has been participating in the public sector modernization movement by implementing several NPM measures (Caron and Giauque, 2006), the Canadian federal government provides a particularly relevant and interesting focus.

Methodology

There were two sources of data used in this research. The first source is the results of the Canadian federal government's 2005 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES). Administered by the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada (TBS). This survey was designed to gauge public service employees' opinions on a wide range of issues reflective of the health of their organizations, as well as individual work units. Four of the questions on the PSES were specifically targeted at client service; and these questions provided the starting point of our research. As mentioned in the introduction, employees have become keen observers of the effectiveness of client service (Wiley, et al., 2006), and as a result, it was decided that the PSES data provided an effective means of identifying "exemplary" organizations. That is, those organizations with the highest scores (most positive employees' perceptions), were selected as those which could be said to be "exemplars" or good "models" of service excellence in the Canadian Federal Governmentⁱⁱ. The four questions in the PSES are listed below.

Canadian Federal Government's Survey Questions Concerning Client Service:

1. My work unit regularly applies the client service standards*.
2. My work unit has clearly defined client service standards.
3. In my work unit, there are mechanisms in place for linking client feedback or complaints to employees who can act on the information.
4. I have the flexibility to adapt my services to meet my clients' needs.

*Note: The PSES questionnaire used a four-point Likert scale with the following responses: 'strongly agree' (4), 'mostly agree' (3), 'mostly disagree' (2), 'strongly disagree' (1), and two additional responses: 'don't know' and 'not applicable'.

The PSES generated approximately 100,000 responses from employees in more than 70 organizations. Based on the responses to these questions, the five organizations which were selected as exemplars included the following: the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), the Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB), the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). To understand more about the specific strategies that they employed to receive these exemplary results, it was determined that a qualitative multiple case study approach would be suitable.

A letter was sent to each of these organizations inviting them to participate in this study. All accepted, which ultimately resulted in the second source of data for this research. An initial discussion was held with each organization in which the objectives of the research project were presented, the methodology was reviewed, and the results of the PSES were discussed. Within each organization, a sample group was selected by determining a "best

practice” group with exceptional PSES scores inside the organization. An internal invitation was then sent to the senior officer in this group, inviting him or her to participate in the research project and to identify three individuals, at different organizational levels, to be interviewed. These levels included a senior manager, middle manager/supervisor, and a front-line service provider (making a total of 15 interviews overall). One hour semi-structured interviews were held with each participant.

The interview responses were transcribed and entered in NVivo7, a software analysis tool used for qualitative data. First, a within-case analysis was performed whereby the qualitative data from each organization was analyzed according to key themes associated with client service. Then, a cross-case analysis was performed in which common patterns and divergences were identified. Of particular interest were effective practices used by these exemplary organizations. These results are described next.

Results

Before reporting the results of the interviews, it is useful to make a few comments about the nature of the organizations themselves. Three of these exemplar organizations are small, one is medium sized, and one is a large organization. Each of the organizations is distinct in terms of its mission and operations, organization structure, and type of clients and client service provided. Similarly, within each organization, the sample groups were diverse. While some served internal employees, others dealt with external clients. Table 1 provides a summary of each of these organizations according to different key organizational characteristics. The results are then described, by theme, below.

Client Service Standards

First, the participants were asked about client service standards in their organization – whether they have standards, how they are applied, and whether they have specific practices related to the standards which make them particularly effective. The majority of respondents indicated that they do have client service standards which are documented (posted on the intranet, internet, in the office, and/or published in internal documents). Those that do not have well-documented client service standards indicated that they understand their organization’s service expectations well and operate with clear policies, manuals, processes, procedures and/or performance metrics. Most importantly, they have

**Table 1 – Five Canadian Federal Government Organizations
With Highest Client Service Questions Ratings in the 2005 PSES
Contextual Highlights**

| Attributes | The Transportation Safety Board of Canada | The Canadian Transportation Agency | The Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec | The Department of Veterans Affairs | The Royal Canadian Mounted Police* |
|------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| Mission | - To advance transportation safety in the marine, pipeline, rail and air modes of transportation | - Independent, quasi-judicial tribunal that makes decisions on a wide range of economic matters involving federally-regulated modes of transportation (air, rail and marine). - Dispute resolution authority over certain transportation rate and service complaints. | - Promotes long-term economic development of the regions of Quebec. - Provides counseling services and financial assistance directly. - Also encourages regional business communities and the organizations which support them. | - To provide exemplary, client-centred services and benefits that respond to the needs of Veterans, our other clients and their families, in recognition of their services to Canada; and to keep the memory of their achievements and sacrifices alive for all Canadians. | - Canadian national police service; an agency of the Ministry of Public Safety Canada. - Provides federal policing service to all Canadians and policing services under contract to the three territories, eight provinces (except Ontario and Quebec), more than 190 municipalities, 604 Aboriginal communities and three airports. |
| Size | Small – approximately 230 employees | Small - approximately 250 employees | Small – over 350 employees | Medium – over 4,000 employees | Large – over 26,000 employees, in 3 workforces*. |
| Structure | Operates in Headquarters (Gatineau, QC), Laboratory (Ottawa, ON) and 8 regional offices across Canada | All located in Headquarters (Gatineau, QC) 5 Branches | Operates in Quebec only – Headquarters (Montreal, QC) and 14 regions across Quebec | Operates in Headquarters (Charlottetown, PEI), 4 regions and 36 district offices across Canada | Operates in Headquarters (Ottawa, ON), 4 regions, 15 Divisions and 750+ detachments across Canada |
| Sample | EXTERNAL client service group | INTERNAL client service group | EXTERNAL client service group | EXTERNAL client service group | INTERNAL client service group |

*Note to Table 1: The RCMP has 3 employee groups - regular members, civilian members, and public service employees. However, we were limited to those who had completed the PSES (i.e., members of the Canada Public Service), so this restricted whom we could include in the research.

a client service “mindset” and employees have some latitude around how and when the standards are applied. As one participant admitted,

*...in my area they (the standards) are fairly loosely applied...but where service standards **need** to be applied – they get done first, as a priority... the client comes first all of the time...*

In terms of best practices associated with the application of client service standards, effective communication was mentioned most frequently by all participants across all organizations. Communication was both internal, (within the organization, between team members), and external to the organization (with clients and/or stakeholders). Communication was described as continuous - throughout the client service interaction – both leading up to and following the exchange. While different vehicles and mechanisms were used, the intent is the same – to ensure that expectations are clear throughout the process and that service standards/performance metrics are understood, monitored, met, and reviewed. For example, one organization sought ongoing feedback, constantly looking for ways to improve. Their standards are published on-line and they promote ongoing dialogue with their clients:

We constantly work hard to ensure that they [our clients] receive the benefits in a timely manner and we are constantly reviewing if we met their needs.

Another organization did not have client service standards per se, however, it has a structured review process which ensures that it meets clients’ needs. Teams are typically small and intimate, so communication is made easier. Its performance metrics are clear and they have monthly reporting and review meetings to monitor progress. As well, the iterative process ensures that stakeholder input is sought at many points before reports are finalized. In a similar way, another organization is certified by ISO 9001 (the International Organization for Standardization); and this quality process establishes clear service level requirements and outlines a standardized process for how requests should be handled and interpreted. Yet another organization uses a Balanced Scorecard methodology to measure performance. The Scorecard assists with tracking client service standards at a corporate level, identify gaps, discuss, solutions and action plans. As one participant noted,

One of the main things that it does is it brings focus. Once an initiative is on the Scorecard, it is there and the owner has to report on it and is accountable.

Teamwork and collaboration were also mentioned as key ingredients in the application of client service standards. As one participant commented,

I think the biggest thing in this unit is that we work as a team. It is a huge team atmosphere in here. We help each other out and if one person can't find something then we help each other out. Even the cross disciplines like admin and operational and personnel, we all try to cover each other off and help each other out if need be.

Linking Mechanisms

Next, participants were asked to comment upon the degree to which they can act upon client feedback or complaints – are there linking mechanisms within their work unit or organization, or specific strategies that they can employ? They were asked to share effective practices in this regard. All respondents indicated that their organizations have multiple linking mechanisms, some of which are more formal than others. Two agencies provide a client satisfaction survey routinely upon completion of a service transaction. At one, this is automatically generated by ISO processes and sent to another team for follow-up: *“we want to know their level of satisfaction in terms of the service offered by the program consultant and with the program itself.”*

In addition to client satisfaction surveys, one organization used the Balanced Scorecard to monitor progress and gain feedback. Each division has a Balanced Scorecard that applies at the district level, where metrics for service quality are monitored and action taken as required. At another organization there are multiple mechanisms for collecting client feedback such as focus groups, face-to-face communication, internal mail, and telephone calls; but the internal national database is critical. As one respondent noted, *“it is real time and provides a wealth of data and information related to the [client], the benefits he/she is entitled to, outstanding issues, etc...”* A formal complaint procedure also exists: clients are first directed to the call centre; if the client is not satisfied then it can be escalated to another employee, a “work item” can be raised for immediate action or it is “red-flagged”. Each of these mechanisms ensures that the client’s concern is treated seriously and with proper care.

Overall, however, interviewees preferred informal mechanisms for identifying, discussing, and resolving any issues or complaints. For most, this consisted of informal discussions in their work teams. When it comes to client complaints, they felt that there was no replacement for effective face-to-face communication. In their own words,

I actually find it more effective, the fact that, within this office, if we hear something...we are pretty approachable, so if a client has a problem, they will usually bring it to us and we act on it then. We don't worry about doing a big survey...we act on it as it arises and try to correct anything as we go along.

Direct communications with people is also important. Nothing can replace explaining things through a conversation. This can make an issue a non-issue.

Furthermore, it is important that employees use vocabulary with clients that is easy to understand and non-bureaucratic. Employees from two organizations mentioned, for example, that they receive training in how to address clients appropriately, listen effectively, diffuse anger, and deal with difficult issues. They are also encouraged to take a

positive approach with clients, to be patient, and view criticism as constructive. As senior managers from these organizations explained:

The most important thing is attitude... Everyone makes mistakes. If people accept that, then there is less of a requirement to be defensive....

staff are encouraged to be polite and talk in non bureaucratic terms, answering directly to the level of the [client]...

The importance of relationship-building was stressed as well, particularly in those organizations where client interactions may be somewhat lengthier. At one organization, their standard review process provides a framework whereby client feedback is deliberately built into the process. Through this mechanism, dialogue is ongoing and revisions can be made. At another organization, project managers foster relationships with clients over the course of a project; and through this relationship they can informally discuss questions or issues as they arise.

Flexibility and Innovation

The participants were also asked about the degree to which they can adapt their services to meet clients' needs and if so, to describe the strategies used. All 15 of the participants responded affirmatively. They felt empowered to adapt services when needed. Using their judgment and working within certain limits, (for example, policies and legislation), they can determine when and how a service solution can be customized to meet client expectations. In the participants' words,

We have the opportunity to interact proactively with the clientele. We are not limited to a passive role. We can develop strategies or visions and go out and meet with potential clients/partners and make it a reality.

While there are standardized ways and processes, we look at the specific situation of the client and we always try to customize to the circumstances of the individual case that is being considered.

Senior managers from three organizations described how they encourage a culture of innovation and risk-taking in their organizational unit, where employees feel safe to be flexible and creative in working with clients. As the senior managers explained,

I have tried to make this part of the culture – to be creative, adventurous, try new things... while there are some rules, we have lots of latitude...

If there is a way to go “outside the box” to deliver the service in a more efficient way, while maintaining and respecting the legislation, we will do that.

As a result, staff feels comfortable taking responsible risks without fear of reprisal. The participants described how they feel trusted by their managers and team members:

We share everything and we can argue hard, but it's ok...It's welcomed, they want new ideas... We throw new ideas on the table and if it doesn't work then we can go back to the old way until we find something else. The Director General is the same.

People feel appreciated – there is a healthy respect....

Client Service Perspective and Other Contributing Factors

All interviewees felt that a client service culture pervades their work unit. This attitude starts with the leadership and filters throughout the organization. New employees are recruited with this in mind - much effort is put into hiring the right people with a client service mindset, those who are team players, good communicators, and open to new ideas. Once hired, employees are well supported and enabled through skills training and mentoring. As participants described how this client service attitude permeates their organizations:

We have customer service always in mind. We don't want anyone to say, 'it's not my job'. We all jump to help one another – that's our attitude. We all work together for the client.

Without the clients, we wouldn't have a job... We are here to support the front line... and what they need to do on a daily basis. That is a big part of what we do. That is something that is on our minds all the time.

Employees have a strong belief in the mission of the organization. For example, in one work unit, staff is driven by the knowledge that: “*we make a difference – our work may save lives*”. At another, employees described how they have a strong respect for their clients and are passionate about serving their needs.

Several participants described their organization and/or work unit like “a family”, the atmosphere as “intimate”, “collegial” or “caring”: “*it's a very flexible organization and just a family. Everybody knows everybody.*” There tends to be little turnover and many employees who have spent their careers in that organization. One participant described how it felt: the longer you work there, the more “*it grows on you*”. The leadership sets the example. In two of the organizations, the participants specifically mentioned that the most senior organizational leaders, (Minister, Deputy Minister, Chairman), create a family atmosphere and “know everybody by name”. As the participants described,

“They come directly into our offices..... They know us. It's not hierarchical.”

...this is a very small organization, which means that the distance between the middle level manager and Deputy Minister is one hallway... We all know one another by name...The Minister is very close, well known, and he/she meets people all the time.

They also described the culture as “dynamic” and improvement-oriented. Several organizations mentioned that they are continually restructuring to ensure that they provide the right coverage for the client and optimally meet their needs. For example, in one

organization, they have structured themselves in order to strike the right balance between efficiency and flexibility. They introduced call centres to respond to clients' concerns about coverage –someone is *always* there to answer the phone. But they also have personal service and flexibility at the local level to deal with more significant concerns or issues.

The call centre staff can take transaction- based queries that don't require a counselor. However, if necessary, the [client] can still get to the counselor. Call centre staff can do a "warm transfer" and make sure that there is the right person on the other side.

Another successful strategy is effective knowledge sharing. Client requests are diligently documented and tracked to ensure follow-up to enable sharing of information. This was mentioned specifically at two organizations. As one participant reported, "*we have seen a significant reduction in turnaround times and we are always working to improve.*"

Interviewees also described how their immediate unit leader sets an atmosphere of innovation, risk-taking and openness to new ideas. They empower their employees to come up with new solutions, try them out, and use their own judgment in making sound decisions. At one organization, there was a key initiative related to providing recognition to the importance of the field person – it gave the responsibility and authority to people actually *doing* the work. At another, employees know that "*we can influence decisions*"; and "*the longer you stay, the better you are known and the greater the collaboration is with the management team*".

Conclusions and Implications

This study extends the limited research to date concerning the identification of "what works" in improving public services. These results provide specific suggestions from Canadian federal government employees' perceptions regarding how to improve public sector services. The findings show that, despite the differences in the size and structure of these organizations and the services they provide, there are common themes concerning the client service strategies employed by these exemplars. Perhaps most importantly, a client service culture has been developed and maintained in all five organizations. These results suggest that the organizations' leadership created a culture of innovation, trust, collegiality, empowerment and appropriate risk taking that enabled exemplary client service. As well, other drivers of organizational culture such as effective communication and human resources practices including the recruitment of employees with a client service mindset, training and mentoring are also important.

There are a number of important implications for public sector managers that arise from this research. First, this research suggests that establishing a service culture is necessary for organizations to provide high levels of client service. This will take considerable time and effort for public sector managers to accomplish. Nonetheless, these five public sector organizations demonstrate that developing a client service culture is possible.

Other implications include the roles of central agencies and unions in facilitating an evolution toward more client service oriented public sectors. For example, central agencies could take an expanded role in facilitating the development of a service culture by establishing the groundwork: developing service policies, standards and related guidelines for use by public sector organizations. Further, many public sector organizations are unionized, and unions can also play a role in public sectors managers' ability to develop a client service culture. For example, unions have a particular interest in standards and policies concerning human resource management.

Finally, there is an opportunity for other organizational controls, such as legislation and related policies to provide sufficient latitude for innovation, flexibility and creativity in developing a client service culture. A reasonable degree of risk-taking and innovation can serve foster and support outstanding client service.

As highlighted earlier, identifying "what works" in improving public services is a complex area, with limited research to date (Hodgson, et al., 2007). These results support previous research (e.g., Dietz, et al., 2004) that highlights the relationship between service excellence and a positive organizational culture. Further, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature by identifying specific strategies used by public organizations in the Canadian federal government in providing exemplary services to clients. These results should be of interest to central agencies, public sector managers and employees interested in improving their organization's client service delivery.

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ⁱⁱ Exemplar is defined as a model, a good example (something to be imitated) "*an exemplar of success*"; "*a model of clarity*"; "*he is the very model of a modern major general*". Retrieved from wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn July 20, 2010.