

QUALITY IN PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

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“Government is not a business in the usual sense, but there is a business of government that can be done well or poorly.”

*Bryne Purchase and Ronald Hirshhorn,
Searching for Good Governance*

Abstract

At the recent workshop of the Regional Hub for the management of public bodies and educational institutions in the field of civil service the author made a presentation on the topic of Quality in Public Service Delivery. This paper describes how the government of Ontario Canada utilized a Quality Service System to improve its service delivery and results for citizens. The paper describes how through a customer survey called Citizens first the government got to know the needs and expectations of its citizens /customers.

How armed with the survey results it developed a Quality Service Strategy which identified the elements of quality service in a framework comprised of seven cornerstones. In order to demonstrate that citizens are getting results from government the implementation and evaluation of the common service standards is described.

What do citizens want and expect from government? How well are government programs doing in meeting the needs and expectations of the people who use our services?

In an attempt to answer those questions Ontario participated in the development of a national survey by the Institute of Citizen Centred Service (www.iccs-isac.org). The Institute which includes more than 220 officials from all levels of government, as well as leading academics and outside experts in public sector service delivery, was created by the Canadian Public Servants “to accelerate the modernization of service across the public sector in Canada.”

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Ontario was one of the government co-sponsors of the research project that produced *Citizens First*. A randomly selected group of 2,900 Canadians were surveyed for their perceptions of public services. Highlights of the findings included Canadians rate the quality of various government services as high as or higher than many private sector services. For example, fire departments (78%), public libraries (75%) and provincial parks and campgrounds (64%) received higher satisfaction ratings than insurance agencies (55%) and banks (51%). Overall, however, if citizens are asked a general question about the quality of government services, the rating is much lower than if the question zeroes in on a specific government service. Both Provincial and Federal government services *in general* received a service quality rating of 47% (municipalities were at 53%), whereas private sector services, in general, received a 60% rating.

Citizens understand that governments have a more difficult and complex role than the private sector, balancing efficiency with the public interest. However, they still expect services to be as good as or better than private companies.

Their assessment of service quality is based on five key factors:

- timeliness;
- knowledge and competence of staff;
- courtesy/comfort;
- fair treatment;
- outcome (getting what you need).

The survey notes that the chief constraint on achieving performance that will generate high satisfaction is outcome. Public servants cannot always give people the answer they want to hear. For example, someone may be applying for a program for which they do not qualify. Having acknowledged the major constraint, the study found significant room to improve how citizens rate government services – by creating and meeting high service standards for telephone, counter, mail and electronic services, and by providing more one-stop shopping for a variety of certificates, licenses and registrations. Those who experienced services they did not rate highly were asked to rank options for process improvements. High on the list were reducing red tape, reducing telephone waiting times,

simplifying forms and documents, and making information easier to obtain. The findings of *Citizens First* indicated that government was on the right track by creating and meeting high service standards, by providing more one-stop shopping for a variety of certificates, licenses and registrations, by reducing red tape and generally making government services easier to access.

Quality Service Strategy Ontario

It includes the overall approach and the common service standards. It documents progress made through two other related initiatives that speak to common concerns identified in the surveys – making it easier to find services in the telephone book and reducing red tape. Finally, there is an illustration of an important lesson – that the quality journey is continuous.

The beginnings of the Quality Service Strategy can be seen in the work of the Customer Service Task Force, which was established to find ways to improve government service. The mandate was to provide corporate direction and support for high quality practices. The Task Force conducted research internally and externally on customer expectations and service gaps, and issued a report in *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* identified what customers expect, at a minimum, of government services: timeliness, accessibility, reliability, cost, and responsiveness. Many customer complaints fell into the area of time – how long and how many separate contacts it took to get information.

Service quality gaps included: the public service understands its customers, service design, delivery, and communications. All of these areas were targeted for improvement. Some Ministries used the findings to improve services by surveying customer preferences, redesigning processes, training staff, and developing performance standards. But the Task Force's recommendations were not implemented consistently across the government.

The Restructuring Secretariat recognizing that becoming a quality organization would be an important part of the reshaping of the Ontario Public Service, established a Quality Service Project. The

project team used the work that had already been done by the Customer Service Task Force and by Ministries that had continued to work on their own quality initiatives. In addition, as part of the Business Planning process, all Ministries were conducting surveys and focus groups to get to know their customers better. The Quality Service project team consulted with public and private sector organizations for information on best practices and quality benchmarks, and searched the literature on quality standards and strategies for the best ideas around. They also consulted with more than 1,300 public servants in all Ministries, at all levels, and in all regions of the province. The major difference between this effort at improving quality service to the public and previous initiatives is its scope or “reach” across government, and how it is leveraging cultural change. The aim is to create an organization that motivates, supports, and enables quality management in all activities. The Quality Service Strategy applied across the public service. Corporate standards are mandatory. From relatively modest beginnings – standards for phone answering and mail service in high-volume, high-profile offices – the standards moved into more complex areas, such as complaint resolution. Development of Ministry plans to improve quality service and regular monitoring and reporting on results are part of the annual Business Planning cycle.

The overarching goals of the Quality Service Strategy are to: increase public satisfaction with service; have the Ontario Public Service measure up to external benchmarks in the public and private sectors; and to set the benchmark for quality among similar jurisdictions. Its principles are expressed as follows:

Quality Service

- is customer/citizen focused
- is everyone’s business
- is valued and recognized
- respects the diversity of businesses, Customers and stakeholders
- is measured against standards
- is achieved through ongoing learning and ongoing improvements
- requires sustained commitment.

The Ontario Public Service endorsed **seven quality cornerstones** to provide the basis for future benchmarking. They are based

on internationally-recognized standards. For each key element, evaluative criteria have been developed.

Leadership. The public service through its Ministries and staff, exhibits leadership in establishing a culture of excellence, setting direction for the organization, directing work through effective management, and building responsibility and accountability for improvement throughout the organization and in all its relationships.

Key elements: quality culture, strategic direction, leadership involvement.

Customer/Citizen Focus. Ministries clearly understand their overall public service responsibility, identify

Internal and external customer needs, and convert this information into measurably improved services and products.

Key elements: service delivery, measurement of customer satisfaction.

People Focus. Accountability and responsibility for leadership in quality services is shared by all employees. In partnership with employees, Ministries ensure that all human resource policies, procedures

and practices support the achievement of excellence in public service.

Key elements: human resource planning, participation in the organization, a learning organization.

Planning. Through its Ministries has strategic and operational plans in place supporting its vision and delivery of core business. Staff and customers have a clear understanding and input into these plans and expected outcomes.

Key elements: effective planning processes, assessment.

Processes. The ability of the Public Service through its Ministries to provide quality services to customers depends on the quality of the organization's internal processes. The Ministry continually reviews its processes to add value for its customers and the organization. Design, monitoring, analysis, review and continuous improvement of the Ministry's processes are key to the achievement of excellence.

Key elements: linking processes to business, monitoring and improvement of processes.

Partners / Delivery Agents/Suppliers. External relationships with partners, delivery agents and suppliers support the commitment to be a customer-focused organization, providing excellence in service to the public. The Public Service, through its Ministries, routinely applies principles of customer service in its relationship and management of partner/supplier relationships (includes vendors and service providers). This includes aspects of the relationship such as vendor selection, contract management, communications, input and feedback, relationships with customers, monitoring and assessment.

Results. The Ontario Public Service serves Ontario through its Ministries and is dedicated to ensuring Ontarians receive high quality, customer focused public services. All OPS staff has a clear understanding of the internal and external customers they serve and the outputs designed to meet each of their customer requirements. The results of the work are regularly measured and extensively communicated both internally and externally. Results are regularly analyzed to share successes and determine opportunities for improvement. Plans are developed based on the analysis of result data. Each year, Ministries are reporting on progress on their quality plans in their annual Business Plans. As part of the cycle of ongoing improvements, future assessments will be undertaken to track progress and determine strengths and further areas for improvement.

An independent evaluation of the Quality Service Strategy found the quality planning process to be sound. In their report, consultants noted that quality service requires at least five years of continuous effort to launch and expand in an organization as large as the Ontario Public Service, and those results were already showing within one year. The report, called *Evaluation of the Quality Service Pilot Projects and Common Service Standards*, made a number of recommendations to improve the process.

Common Service Standards

The common service standards that are part of the Quality Service Strategy gave a clear signal that the Ontario government was

committed to improving services to the public. They reflected key areas for improvement that were identified by the Citizens First survey. The standards represent minimum service levels in four key areas: telephone, including voice mail; mail, including fax, letters, electronic mail; walk-in service; and customer feedback/complaint resolution.

Telephone Standards

- When you contact the Ontario government by telephone, you can expect eight times out of ten that:
- Your call will be answered by the third ring, during core business hours (8:30a.m. to 5:00 p.m.).
- Your call will not be redirected more than once.
- You will always have the option of reaching a person.
- All calls will be returned within one business day.
- A common telephone protocol will be in place (elements of the protocol include: identification of the Ministry and program, name of the person answering, courteous introduction and follow through).

Mail Standards

- When you contact the Ontario government by fax, mail or electronic mail, you can expect that:

Correspondence will be answered within 15 working days of receipt. If a conclusive response is not possible within that time, an interim acknowledgement with an anticipated date of response will be sent within five working days of receipt.

Walk-In Standards

- If you visit one of our service locations, you can expect that:
- Core business hours for staff-assisted service will be at least 8:30 a.m. to 5:00p.m.
- You will be served in order and will be advised as to the expected waiting time.
- Best times to receive speedier service are posted.

Complaint Resolution/Feedback Standards

If you have comments or concerns about our services, we encourage you to let us know and provide us with details at your earliest convenience. You can expect that:

- Each Ministry will have a complaint resolution process in place.
- Your complaints will be acknowledged within two working days.
- There will be a follow-up with any required actions within a specified time frame.
- With each contact, you will have the opportunity to provide feedback on services.

Independent consultants conducted an assessment to see how the Public Service was meeting the phone and mail standards. Evaluation involved “mystery shoppers” placed more than 4,000 phone calls and sent 400 letters, e-mails and faxes. The consultants found that the telephone standards being met or exceeded:

- 91% of telephone calls was answered within three rings;
- 90% of calls were resolved on the first or second contact; and callers were universally given the option of reaching an operator.
- Half of the Ministries met the 15-day reply standard for mail. Those who did not meet the correspondence standard are working to improve their response times. The consultants recommended that these standards be reviewed regularly (at least every three years) and that the OPS move forward.

The Telephone Book Blue Pages

Of the more than 50 million contacts the Ontario government receives from the public each year, about 35 million are by telephone. A significant percentage of those calls go to the wrong place, frustrating callers and wasting time. The Bell Canada telephone directory has had a separate section on government for about 20 years. The trouble with the Blue Pages section is that it is organized by level of government and by department or ministry. So if citizens do not know who does what – which level of government (federal, provincial or municipal) and which office (a choice of literally hundreds of branches) provides the information or service they are seeking – it can take some time and misdirected calls to find the answer. Its goal is to improve telephone service by making it easier for the public to get to the right place the first time around and not just for Ontario services. The project has designed, in cooperation

with Bell, the federal government and municipalities, a new format that reflects how most citizens approach government.

What does that mean? Citizens generally approach government for a specific service – a building permit, a birth certificate, a health card, a passport. They do not necessarily know (and why should they?) the details. The new format integrates the listings by subject matter for all three levels of government. The topic headings are designed to respond to public needs – apprenticeship, births, drug benefits, employment, garbage collection, pensions, passports and day care.

References

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About the author:

Art Daniels has over 40 years' experience in managing and developing institutions and human resources in the Canadian public service. He is widely recognized as a leader in implementing public sector change initiatives and, in the course of executive appointments, has effected tangible improvements in workforce motivation, efficiency, productivity, client satisfaction, and cost-efficiency. He is a leader in public sector reform and a former Assistant Deputy Minister in the Ontario Government. He served as Assistant Deputy Minister, Ontario Public Service Excellence and Innovation Office, Centre for Leadership, Cabinet Office, and as Assistant Deputy Minister, Ontario Public Service Restructuring Secretariat, Centre for Leadership, Cabinet Office, and 1997–2002.

He has also been Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for the Registration Division, Ministry of Consumer and Business Services; Assistant Deputy Minister, Business Division, Ministry of Consumer and Business Services; Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations Division, Ministry of Community and Social Services; and Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for the Community Division, Ministry of Correctional Services. Since leaving the public service in 2003,

Mr. Daniels has been a Senior Manager at BearingPoint involved in major public service reform nationally and internationally with projects in Qatar, Egypt, Ireland, Jordan and Jamaica. Nationally he has worked on the federal governments Modernizing Service for Canadians initiative as well as two projects with Service Ontario. He was a founder of the Institute of Citizen Centered Service and continues to be involved as a Fellow of the Institute.

Mr. Daniels contributions have been recognized through awards such as the Lieutenant Governor General Award for excellence in the Public Service and the Amethyst Award for Leadership in Innovation in addition to numerous project-based awards from organizations including IPAC and CAPAM. He was awarded the first Ralph Hienzman Award for leadership in citizen-centred government. In 2010 he was recognized by the National Quality Institute with the lifetime achievement award.

References

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