



TWO RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNING IN THE FACE OF COMPLEXITY

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2014, the non-partisan, registered charity, Australian Futures Project convened a roundtable co-hosted with The Hon Andrew Leigh MP and The Hon Angus Taylor MP, with eight participants from government and 13 participants from other sectors. The aim was to broaden perspectives, share experiences from different sectors and disciplines, and to identify actions to help government govern in the face of complexity.

The outcome of these discussions was our [21st Century Service](#) suite of training courses that specialise in building culture and capability within the public service to solve complex challenges for Australia's future, and our bespoke solutions to assist government to solve complex problems through coaching, facilitation, advice, process design and scaffolding. To date over 1,000 individual public servants and over 25 federal departments have taken part in our courses which have been very successful and for which we have garnered very positive feedback.

From the past three years of designing, facilitating and evaluating courses and bespoke solutions for government we have the following three key insights:

- **Approach** - Those tasked with delivering digital/innovation agendas often do not know where to start or what the most immediate issue is, and these staff need (and have been seeking) help in identifying what their department's capability challenge is.
- **Capability** - Too often staff are trained in 'new ways of working' but struggle to know how to apply those skills in a work force, or struggle to have the confidence to bring it to managers and other colleagues.
- **Culture** - Most departments are not structured in a manner which allows them to easily adopt new ways of working. The relevant skills and behaviours need to be both demonstrated, and authorised by, senior leadership, and staff that do make an effort to employ these new skills and behaviours need to be recognised and celebrated.

To address the challenge for government as it currently stands, we have the following two recommendations that we are in discussion with public sector leaders about:

1. **Shifting the dial** - To work with departments to build on the skills and behaviours introduced in our existing courses and bring both our expertise and a skilled team together to embed these in real, live projects by offering 3-6-months of coaching, teaching and scaffolding on business-as-usual work that people really, deeply care about. This would be an immersive experience on work that is the order of the day, and an opportunity to fundamentally change the way that particular team approaches complex work challenges.
2. **Building community** - To develop a community of practice for SES across the APS who indicated that time carved out to discuss shared challenges and opportunities, learn new and innovative tools and approaches to managing complexity, and the opportunity to support each other, was critical to their ability to play their part in changing the way government approaches complexity.

2 GENESIS

In the Australian Futures Project's conversations across 2013 and 2014 with senior serving and former public servants and politicians and their advisors, there was a common recognition that:

- We live in a rapidly changing and complex world
- Wicked problems abound
- Easy solutions are often mirages
- Governing for the common good in these conditions is not easy
- The public service therefore needs to be able to experiment, take considered risks, and occasionally fail on the way to success
- There is a perceived intolerance among the public and politicians for experimentation, risk-taking, and failure by the public service
- There is a perception that this intolerance flows through to senior public servants and on to all reaches of the public service
- This low appetite for experimentation hampers progress on the big societal issues of the day
- Something needs to be done about this

Consequently, in November 2014, Australian Futures Project's convened a two-hour roundtable with 21 participants from all sectors.

Through this roundtable, and further discussions with public servants, a need was identified to create the conditions for public servants to:

- Refine their ability to classify challenges so that they can apply the most appropriate tools and approaches
- Expand their toolkit to include tools and approaches best suited to solving complex societal challenges
- Build departmental networks and foster greater collaboration

The Australian Futures Project then worked with six federal government departments to co-design, develop, and test a suitable, fit-for-purpose, response. The pilot of 21st Century Service was a success, and various versions have been developed since.

3 21ST CENTURY SERVICE'S EVOLUTION AND SUCCESS OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS

Current Structure

To date over 1,000 individual public servants and over 25 federal departments have taken part in our 21st Century Service courses specialising in building culture and capability within the public

service to solve complex challenges for Australia's future, and we are in the process of expanding to state government in Victoria and Western Australia.

Whilst we have a suite of out-of-the-box course offerings, no two courses have been run the same as we tailor each course to departments' specific needs and challenges. We offer:

- A six-day Practitioner course;
- A one-day Foundational;
- A 1.5-hour SES course;
- A Train the Trainer half day training course designed to provide participants who have been through the Level 2 Practitioner course with the skills and confidence to teach and guide colleagues in the skills and behaviours taught in the course

Increasingly we have been designing entirely bespoke, fit-for-purpose courses and facilitation in response to very particular departmental and agency needs. One example is recent work done for the Federal Department of Social Services with the design, facilitation and advising around the establishment of a Community of Interest in the Department and the first meeting of the Community.

Evaluation

The content and structure of our courses are regularly updated in response to both formal feedback and evaluations as well as informal feedback from a range of stakeholders and advisors.

Recent 21st Century Service evaluations provided the following data on our programs:

Level 1

- 90% outlined something they are going to do differently in their work as a result of the course
- 80% indicated that the course was good or excellent
- In response to an open-ended question about what they will commit to doing differently in their work, many participants specifically outlined that they will: better define the problem and not rush in to a solution, and seek more feedback and collaborate more with colleagues

Level 2

- 92% found the program was good or excellent
- 96% found the course had a positive impact on their ability to navigate complex challenges
- 100% have applied skills and/or behaviours from the course to their work
- 90% built new relationships or contacts through the course

Testimonies

"The program was fantastic! The cross-department groups worked really well and provided the opportunity to see how the approach can be used across a range of policy areas. Facilitation of the course was fantastic and guidance in application of the principles worked really well. The course highlighted the importance of iteration and assumption testing well, with great feedback from the rest of the class." (Participant, Australian Department of Social Services)

"It's a great course and I picked up some techniques that I think will fundamentally change the way I work." (Participant, Australian Department of Human Services)

"It was inspiring to hear so many breakthrough ideas and see people working productively across-Departments. As a result, my team is developing two of the ideas that were pitched further and planning to test them in the Department of Employment before seeing what opportunities there might be for other Departments to implement them." (Silvia Liertz, Director, Innovation and Regulation Advice, Australian Department of Employment)

4 WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

4.1 EXPERIENCE

Increasingly, we have been designing entirely bespoke, fit-for-purpose courses and facilitation in response to very particular departmental and agency needs. For example, we are currently working closely with the Department of Infrastructure and the Department of Social Services to advise on and design processes to approach complex challenges they face in their business-as-usual work and in the last two years we have worked with:

- The National Transport Commission – In 2016, AFP was engaged to facilitate the co-creation with stakeholders of four qualitative scenarios for land transport regulation in 2040. This included two full day workshops for participants from across government, non-government, business, civil society, unions and academia. It also included the design and documentation of the scenario method and outcomes.
- WA Department of Premier and Cabinet – AFP was engaged in 2017 to design and facilitate two meetings of the WA Department of Premier and Cabinet as part of the WA government's public-sector reform, with a focus on identifying a set of whole-of-government targets and then defining them in detail.
- The Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development – AFP was engaged by the Department to design and facilitate a Disruptive Technologies Workshop as part of Innovation Month 2016. The workshop provided a unique and thought-provoking look into disruptive technologies and their implications for government. It involved approximately 110 participants from across 20 Australian Government organisations. It included a mix of panel session, interactive group work and training in applying 'user centred design' methods to understand the implications of new technologies.
- The Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development – AFP was engaged by the Department to provide design thinking services to support regulatory and policy projects and for the delivery (facilitation) of strategic planning workshops in 2017. The support to three live project teams served as demonstrators to other areas of the Department, encouraging them to adopt different processes to policy and program development. We worked with the Policy Development Unit to support significant regulatory, policy and corporate projects and to demonstrate how a design thinking approach can: facilitate a better understanding of a problem or challenge; improve engagement with stakeholders or those impacted by a policy or program; and allow rapid development of more diverse options.
- The Office of the Australian Chief Veterinary Officer (ACVO) in the Department of Agriculture & Water Resources – AFP was engaged to advise ACVO in the conduct of a review to identify

the priority issues that affect Australia’s animal health system. This included the design and facilitation of an engagement process that included internal and external stakeholders from all relevant industries and sectors. Over 250 key stakeholders were engaged through an online survey, in-depth one-on-one interviews and a one-day workshop in Canberra for 60 participants from across Australia.

Our conversations combined with formal and anecdotal feedback through engagement with a cross-section of participants (graduates through to EL 2s and SES) and trusted contacts and advisors throughout government, demonstrate that there is still a barrier to the learnings from these courses being implemented back in everyday work.

4.2 KEY INSIGHTS

Training courses such as the 21st Century Service offerings the Australian Futures Project runs for the public service (or similar training available through other providers) are an important and useful first step for public servants in building culture and capability to address complex problems. They introduce new ways of working, tools and behaviours, they spark staff engagement, establish a shared language amongst colleagues and can reach a large audience (80-100 participants) in a short time frame. In the case of our six-day Level 2 practitioner course we offer an immersive experience which builds cross-departmental networks for learning, sharing and support and we begin empowering participants to confidently apply new skills and behaviours to their immediate work challenges.

However, despite the success detailed above, there is still a barrier to the learnings from these courses being implemented back in everyday work. We have learned that:

- **Approach** - Those tasked with delivering digital/innovation agendas often do not know where to start or what the most immediate issue is, and these staff need (and have been seeking) help in identifying what their department’s capability problem is.
- **Capability** - Too often staff are trained in 'new ways of working' but struggle to know how to apply those skills in a work force, or struggle to have the confidence to bring it to managers and other colleagues.
- **Culture** - Most departments are not structured in a manner which allows them to easily adopt new ways of working. The relevant skills and behaviours need to be both demonstrated, and authorised by, senior leadership, and staff that do make an effort to employ these new skills and behaviours need to be recognised and celebrated.

As a result, there are pockets of cynicism about whether these new ways of working are a “fad” or whether they have real impact and applicability. To ameliorate this, we need to share case studies and examples of success. Failing to address what we have learned is a key risk for the work that has already been done.

4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of what we have learned, we have two recommendations for future 21st Century Service work with government as indicated below and fleshed out in more detail in section 5 below:

1. **Shifting the dial** - To work with departments to build on the skills and behaviours introduced in our existing courses and bring both our expertise and a skilled team together to embed

these in real, live projects by offering 3-6-months of coaching, teaching and scaffolding on business-as-usual work that people really, deeply care about. This would be an immersive experience on work that is the order of the day, and an opportunity to fundamentally change the way that particular team approaches complex work challenges

2. **Building community** - To develop a community of practice for SES across the APS who indicated that time carved out to discuss shared challenges and opportunities, learn new and innovative tools and approaches to managing complexity, and the opportunity to support each other, was critical to their ability to play their part in changing the way government approaches complexity

We will also continue to refine existing offerings based on feedback from participants, stakeholders and advisors, particularly concentrating on making Level 2 even stronger with a focus on ensuring participants have the confidence and skills to take what they've learned back to the workplace and their business as usual.

5 WHAT WE RECOMMEND

5.1 EMBEDDED LEARNING ON LIVE PROJECTS

Australian Futures Project had proven to be most helpful by working in a bespoke, case-by-case basis to understand each team's particular challenges and to design, facilitate and mentor staff through fit-for-purpose solutions.

We have been working in collaboration with Ernezh Dhondy (a facilitator from our Level 2 course and experience design director from Melbourne-based strategic design consultancy [Paper Giant](#)), to design the scaffolding of a 3-6 month, embedded version of our 21st Century Service course which addresses the remaining challenges of embedding new ways of working to address complex challenges.

Criteria

We propose to work with senior leaders to identify appropriate ideas and/or live projects addressing complex challenges in either **policy, service design** or **the way that that government itself operates** and that:

- Lend themselves to the skills and behaviours learned in 21st Century Service (e.g. systems thinking, strategic leadership, agile, user-centred design, assumptions testing, collaboration and co-design)
- Have the greatest potential to add value to the organisation
- Would benefit from an extended and embedded approach to training and support

Importantly, this would need to be a project which is authorised by senior leadership so that staff have the permission and space to take risks and be recognised for working in new ways: providing an example to other staff in the department.

Approach

Once we are mutually satisfied that there is an appropriate idea or project that is feasible, desirable and viable, we will work with department leaders to assemble a delivery team and design a bespoke accompanying process.

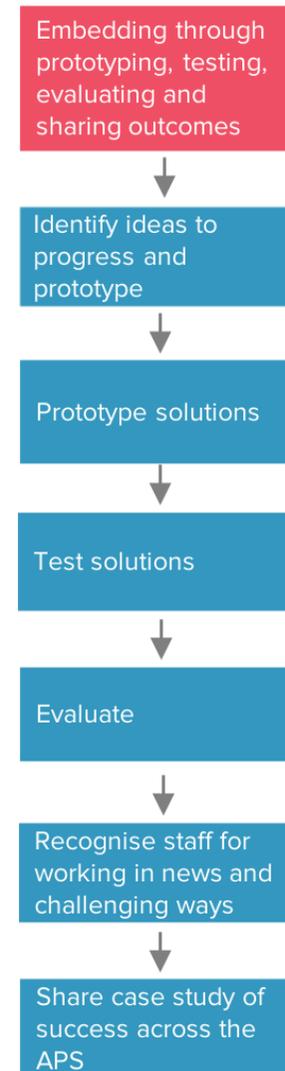
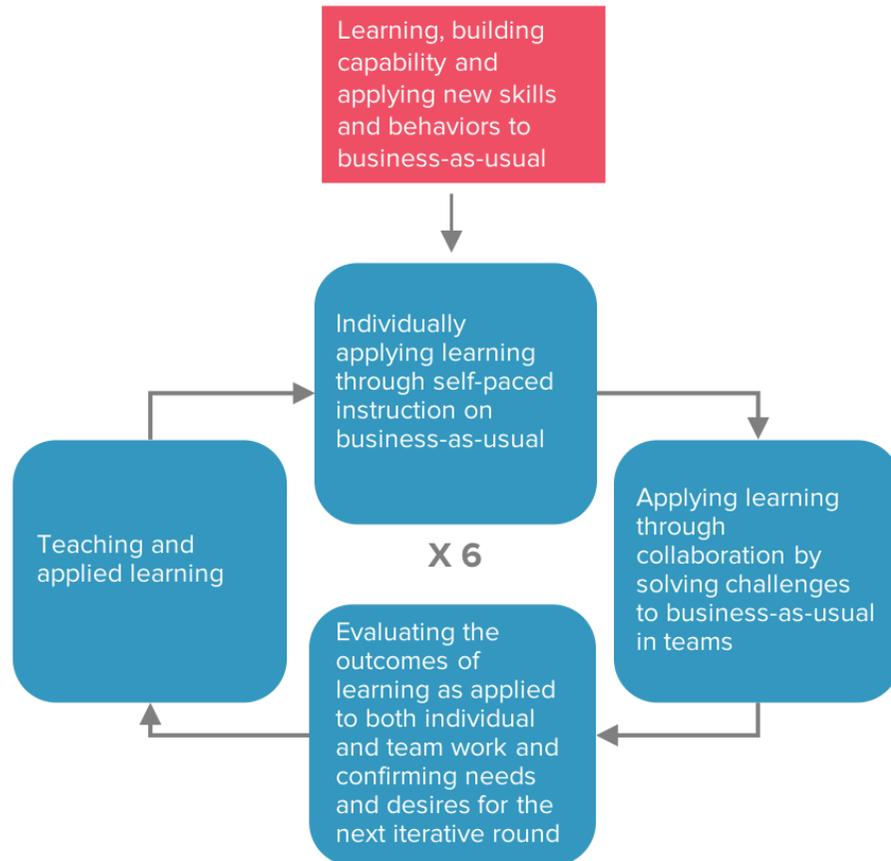
This would be delivered in a range of modes potentially including intensive face-to-face delivery, digital delivery and content, workplace-based learning, webinars, phone-based coaching, self-paced instruction, discussion groups and collaborative forums with a variety of pedagogical approaches.

Each module in Stage Two (please see diagram on following page) will be executed within a two-week sprint and include:

1. Teaching and applied learning;
2. Individually applying learning through self-paced instruction on business-as-usual;
3. Applying learning through collaboration by solving challenges to business-as-usual in teams;
4. Evaluating the outcomes of learning as applied to both individual and team work and confirming needs and desires for the next iterative round

As a rough guide, we envisage that the delivery would loosely follow these steps:

STAGE ONE: PREPARATION → **KICK-OFF EVENT** → **STAGE TWO: IDEATION** → **PITCH EVENT** → **STAGE THREE: IMPLEMENTATION**



The above process serves as an example but could be shortened, lengthened or adapted to meet the particular needs of the department or agency we work with. This work would be delivered in partnership with facilitator Ernezh Dhondy and the design consultancy where he works, Paper Giant.

5.2 SES COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Across 2017, the Australian Futures Project ran three SES Breakfast courses with SES from seven federal departments. Our discussions, and the reflections of SES participants, indicated that time carved out to discuss shared challenges and opportunities, learn new and innovative tools and approaches to managing complexity, and the opportunity to support each other, was extremely valuable. We found that SES across departments have similar objectives and are facing similar challenges when it comes to addressing complex societal challenges in increasingly dynamic environments.

In light of this, Australian Futures Project invited any interested SES across the APS to co-design a Community of Practice (COP) to effectively address this need. Our first co-design SES Community of Practice event was held on Friday 9 March with ten participants from four federal departments, and was an exploratory workshop facilitated by the Australian Futures Project with the aim of:

- Sharing their desires for what a COP could look like
- Discussing the barriers they experience in implementing innovative approaches to complex problem solving
- Ideating creative solutions for an effective COP, sharing these with colleagues for feedback and refining their solutions further
- Making commitments to further explore and test a COP with the Australian Futures Project beyond the workshop

After the first event, Australian Futures Project created a straw man version of what the Community of Practice could potentially look like as a pilot for the community to collectively build, test, evaluate and rebuild, with the intention to pilot it more broadly later in 2018. Since then we have run two further co-design workshops focused on:

- Crystallising thoughts about what exactly the barrier in skills and knowledge is in their respective departments
- Articulating this in a challenge statement
- Identifying hypotheses about their challenge statements
- Designing ways to test these in their business as usual work before the next COP event
- Examining lessons learned so far about the challenges of building an effective COP
- Unearthing the real incentives for COP participation both for current participants and future potential SES participants
- Articulating through SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely) goals what success would look like for participants

Another three COP events are scheduled up until October 2018. In August the founding SES members will be agreeing on a draft proposal for a pilot event as designed by the Australian

Futures Project, in September the pilot will be run with a broader group of interested SES, and in October there will be a group evaluation and next steps and recommendations will be defined.

6 NEXT STEPS

We are now testing and refining both our understanding, and our respective solution and approach. We are doing this through conversation with public service leaders and the implementation and co-design of the SES Community of Practice. We are also exploring opportunities to implement our embedded work with a department team on a project that is critical, that staff are passionate about, and for which there is an appetite to approach the work in a fundamentally different way.

We invite opportunities to discuss or workshop anything covered in this document, both to further illuminate our findings, to find opportunities to implement our outlined approach, or to explore how we can help departmental teams to navigate and solve specific challenges with complexity.

This is a working document, which we will update (and have updated previously) in response to conversations we have been since the reports first release in April 2018.

7 CONTACT

For more information or to discuss how the Australian Futures Project can support your particular needs and work challenges with a bespoke solution, please contact Chloë Spackman, Director of Programs, Australian Futures Project at chloe@australianfutures.org or 0421 514 366, or Ralph Ashton, Executive Director, Australian Futures Project at ralph@australianfutures.org.