Using a Client Survey to Support Continuous Improvement: An Australian Case Study in Managing Change

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ABSTRACT

With the arrival of online survey tools that are low-cost, readily available and easy to administer, all organizations have access to one of the most effective mechanisms for determining quality improvement priorities and measuring progress towards achieving those priorities over time. This case study outlines the use made of this simple tool by a research office in one of Australia's most research-intensive universities during a substantial change management exercise over the period 2008–2011. The rationale for reaching out to the University's researchers as clients; basic principles followed to ensure high response rates and robust results; uses made of the data; and contribution to the change process are described, with a view to assisting research management professionals who are setting in place similar monitoring systems as an alternative to, or complementing, process-related (time and effort on task) performance data.

CONTEXT

The research office that is the subject of this case study was substantially restructured in 2008 with the specific and simple objective of improving researchers' satisfaction with the University's research management services. The objective was not a gratuitous one. Researchers require robust management systems to support their activities in a funding environment that is highly competitive and carrying a significant compliance burden. If they are not well supported, they are likely to scale down, or fail in, their grant seeking activities; funding will diminish; and there

is a risk that whole research programs could be shut down due to compliance breaches. An effective barometer for excellent research management will undoubtedly be how it is perceived by those who rely on it.

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Over the period covered by this case study, the research office managed significant volumes of applications (around 1,200 annually), grants (upwards of 1,500 under management), accounts (over 5,000 individual research accounts), and upwards of $200 million AUD in external research funding. As are all research offices of this size and scale, it was a high pressure environment where deadlines were externally driven, workloads had significant peaks at certain times of year, and a great deal was at stake for individual researchers and the university.

The office's restructure represented the second significant restructure of research management delivery at the university in a three-year period. The first restructure had caused significant disruption to existing workflows and disquiet among the grants management staff. A quite complex matrix structure had been set in place, with dual reporting lines leading to a lack of clarity as to where actual responsibility for actions lay.

The first restructure had been operationalized via an external consultancy with no continuity through early stage implementation. Unsurprisingly there was little ownership of the arrangements among office staff and external stakeholders. During one-to-one conversations, researchers reported "not knowing who to talk to any more" and provided numerous instances of grant management issues having arisen and been left unresolved. The unfortunate consequence was that the staff who could have made a positive difference were firmly entrenched in 'bunker mode'. From their perspective, the fault lay with the restructure. Past arrangements were better and it was unfair that the perceptions of poor service delivery were being seen as 'their fault'.

RATIONALE FOR USING THE ONLINE SURVEY TOOL

Sharon Cole, in her article "Reframing research administration" (Cole, 2010) concluded that a co-operative approach involving faculty and administrators and attention to organizational culture are vital ingredients for successful improvement in research services delivery. The situation was evidence of this and the survey tool was directed at both of these imperatives. It would provide an avenue for broad stakeholder input and engagement in the

change process and demonstrate the office was listening and responding in a proactive way.

The 2007 restructure had adopted a hierarchical approach with a twist—a small Operations Unit was established alongside the customer-focused Grants and Ethics Teams, to ensure consistency of process, deal with generic activities (creation of 'shell' records; file establishment; system-driven communications), manage and continuously improve systems (including database management), and conduct quality assurance. The customer-focused teams, on the other hand would have a firm focus on researchers, with service and relationship-building as key drivers for their work.

The structure was very different from anything in place in the larger Australian universities; it introduced high levels of accountability and challenged the formerly very autonomous management culture. Low morale among the staff, weary of change, meant that over the first twelve months most positions were re-filled. This led to further controversy and unease amongst stakeholders.

Given the climate of discontent and the major change agenda, the client survey tool was going to provide a 'line in the sand'. Researchers would be able to rate all services provided by the office and remark on whether they perceived any improvements, as well as provide comments and suggestions and endorse particular members of staff whom they

had found helpful over the last 12 months. The responses would provide the office with clear direction on what areas of the business to prioritize in order to achieve positive outcomes. As importantly, the survey would ensure that those involved in and impacted by the change management process focused on the relevant time period. Researchers had hitherto been demonstrating long memories—quoting poor service or an instance of bad practice from several years prior if canvassed for their opinion of the Office. The survey would lock down those observations and relegate them to history.

All the same, the exercise was met with scepticism from some quarters, not least a number of key staff who expressed such reasons as 'you will never make some researchers happy' and 'the ones that like us won't respond' to argue the futility of the exercise.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOLLOWED

The survey was voluntary and more in the nature of a conversation than a quantitative tool to test particular assumptions. All researchers who had applied for a research grant received an email invitation to provide feedback (rather than complete a survey) on the office's services, so that issues could be addressed and future service delivery could be improved. The information collected did not include personal information. However, the respondent was given the option of providing an email address if they wanted a staff

member to contact them to discuss an issue they had raised. The purpose of the exercise was clearly described—the office was committed to continuous improvement and feedback would be used to develop and improve services over time. People who participated would be informed of findings and the progress that was being made to address issues raised.

All of the office's stakeholders, including other university professional staff, were individually contacted and invited to provide their views. This amounted to around 1,100 individuals who had interacted with the office in any one year, rising over time. In later years, a friendly invitation to complete the survey was also added to staff email signatures. This re-enforced the message that the office was looking for input on how to improve services, created impetus (the invitation was connected with their experience of service delivery), and led to much higher response rates (rising from just over 20% in the first survey to more than 35% in 2011). The consistency in the responses received suggested this return rate was adequate for good judgment at the outset, and more than enough by 2011.

Only a few questions were asked. Respondent burden was kept low and the invitation alerted respondents to the fact that the survey would be a quick 5-minute exercise. Every question was neutral, with a view to simply covering all service delivery aspects. The wording of questions was simple and unambiguous

so as to provide clear guidance on quality improvement opportunities.

The questions were a mix of ratings and open-ended opportunities to elaborate on service delivery and never failed to produce a rich set of responses and a real sense of how the office was performing. The questions looked back— "do you think we've improved or gone backwards?" They also looked forward— "what would you like to see us change for next year….?"

The ratings scale was a 6-point scale ranging from very high to very low, and did not allow respondents to 'fence sit'. The middle rankings had the descriptors 'better than average' and 'worse than average'. This would force respondents to put forward a considered view even if they had not thought a great deal about the office's services in the past. The underlying message was 'tell us what you *really and reasonably* think we should be achieving'.

The seven standard annual questions were neutral in the sense that they did not try to focus on any particular known issue or concern, and covered:

- Respondent role (stage of career, researcher, executive, administrator, new to UNSWA, new to the office). Respondents could indicate that they had multiple roles. This allowed us to analyze the rankings by stakeholder group.
- How they rated the office's services. This was presented as a table of services, from pre-award support to

legal and ethics clearances, provision of research data, communications, and training. Opportunity for an open-ended comment was provided at the bottom of this table. Interestingly, a not uncommon open-ended comment was "I didn't know you did all of those things", suggesting the survey was raising awareness of the comprehensive nature of the office's pre-and post-award service delivery.

- What they liked about the office's services in the year
- What they would like to see changed in the following year
- Whether they thought services had improved, stayed the same, or gone backwards (or had no view)
- Whether they would like to commend any particular staff members
- Whether they would like to make any further comments

Sometimes other 'omnibus' questions were cautiously added about particular management issues—for example, in 2011 two questions were added about perceptions of training delivery and whether researchers would like to receive communications via new media (Twitter; Facebook, etc.). The importance of maintaining a balance between survey burden and opportunity to learn more was a foremost consideration.

USES MADE OF THE DATA

Initial concerns that the exercise might provide a vehicle for a minority of disgruntled people to unreasonably criticize the office were quickly dispelled. The feedback was always remarkably consistent across the respondent pool and, as many a market research professional will say, they had a commonsense 'feel' to them, confirming in the main what staff already knew about service delivery weaknesses and providing a mandate for addressing issues raised.

Those staff who expected the worst were pleasantly surprised to find that the number of people who rated their services on the positive side of the scale outnumbered those who expressed dissatisfaction, and that only a very few researchers had extremely negative views. What emerged was a sense that the office's clients were equally and reasonably invested in service improvement. They became, in a very real sense, part of the quality improvement team through having aired their views.

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The results were reported back to stakeholders after analysis and the actions that had been taken to respond to issues raised formed a brief preamble to the next year's call for feedback. Year-on-year comparisons were reported to the Committee on Research and the Vice Chancellor's Advisory Council, ensuring

that senior management were as well informed as those close to the coalface, and aware of the continuous improvement efforts and achievements being made. Individual staff used examples from actions arising when preparing their documentation for their annual performance appraisal, creating grassroots buy-in both to hearing what people had to say about service delivery and doing something about it.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHANGE PROCESS

The results were a primary input for the annual research office staff retreat. As themes emerged, staff became active in contributing to addressing identified needs not just during the planning day but throughout the year. For example, the main concerns expressed one year were around an apparent lack of consistency in advice given at the pre-award stage. The grants teams responded by leading a comprehensive recruitment and training strategy for the casually appointed compliance advisers and introducing checklists and in-round debriefs that ensured consistency of advice.

The following year, the scales tipped further into the positive and the feedback from researchers then focused on a desire for personal attention and value-added strategic counselling, over and above the (now consistently provided) basic compliance advice.

Similarly, a concern regarding phone responsiveness was met with the

appropriate technical and team response, and with due acknowledgment to the changing nature of office communications.

Over time the only difficult-to-address issues became those for which the office's operations were reliant on the input of other departments. In those instances, the customer feedback was a primary, objective driver for the negotiation of service-level agreements that had quality assurance at their core.

Commendations were passed on and successes from year to year celebrated. The office developed a continuous improvement culture and its stakeholders continued to demonstrate their willingness to articulate room for improvement, in a positive way, by providing constructive input and taking the time to provide praise where praise was due.

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

At the time this case study was prepared, the office was relying primarily on the annual customer satisfaction survey and a handful of other high-level indicators to measure its annual service effectiveness. Transaction times were being used only in the area of ethics application review, where deadlines tend not to be set by funding agency grant rounds, making internal tracking more important. However, the electronic grants management system in use at the office provides for load reporting as well as transaction time reporting and the workflows are well-documented, allowing case-by-case consideration of staff resourcing, process effectiveness, and staff responsiveness.

While the annual call for feedback provided an important catalyst for positive change and responsive service delivery, a next step in optimizing efficiency and effectiveness might lie in seeking improvements at a more granular level and taking a more comprehensive approach. Smith and Gronseth (2011) outlined a comprehensive Quality Management Systems approach to improving research administration at the Mayo Clinic as one way forward. Its RISE initiative includes guidance on structuring a team-driven change exercise that captures key performance data on system efficiencies that can be analyzed at regular intervals and such supporting initiatives as the designation of particular staff as

Research Quality Coordinators who look for continuous improvement over time.

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CONCLUSION

The office's annual call for feedback using an online tool was a simple and effective means of addressing a number of pressing change imperatives. In providing an annual opportunity for everyone involved in the research enterprise to pause and reflect on how things had gone that year and to quickly and easily engage in a basic conversation about service provision, it built a culture supporting change. It allowed those who wanted change to articulate exactly what kind of change they were seeking, across any and all aspects of service. It allowed staff to respond and report back on how they were addressing issues over time. And it allowed those who wanted to acknowledge good service to do so, 'on the record'. It put everyone on the same page, and kept people focused on, and rewarded for, continuous improvement. Importantly, news of performance and progress was incorporated in whole-of-university reporting at the senior

executive level. Past perceptions of faculty as impossible to please, and administrators as only interested in getting the rules right, were able to be seen for what they were—a mythology with little foundation and without justice to all concerned.

LITERATURE CITED

Cole, S. S. (2010). Reframing research administration. *Journal of Research Administration, 41*(1), 11–21.

Smith, S. C., & Gronseth, D. L. (2011). Transforming research management systems at Mayo Clinic. *Research Management Review, 18*(2), 27–38.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janice Besch is the Managing Director of the National Institute of Complementary Medicine (NICM), University of Western Sydney. NICM was seeded by the Australian Commonwealth and New State Wales governments to provide leadership and support for strategically directed research into complementary medicine and translation of evidence into clinical practice and relevant policy. Janice comes to this role with a depth of experience in the university, government, the arts and not-for-profit sectors. She headed the University of New South Wales Grants Management Office for five years and was a member of the Group of Eight Research Directors Group during that period, the members of which play a key sectoral liaison role with the national research funding agencies. She has held senior strategy and management positions at Macquarie University, the Australia Council for the Arts, Arts Queensland, and the Australian Market & Social Research Society. She has been listed in the Who's Who of Australian Women and is an active member of the Australasian Research Management Society.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

Rating scale used: Very high; high; better than average; worse than average; low; very low
n/a option provided for all questions
Response required on all questions

RespondentID
CollectorID
StartDate
EndDate
IP Address
Email Address
First Name
LastName

1. **Please indicate what role/s you have within the University by ticking which of the following applies to you. If you have multiple roles, please tick all that apply.**
    This allows stratification of responses, to see how well client needs are being met at different stages of a research career, and amongst those who support research as well.
    - Early career researcher
    - Mid-career researcher
    - Senior researcher
    - Researcher holding an executive role
    - Researcher that arrived at the University in the past year
    - Researcher that has not used research office services
    - Research administrator
    - Other (please specify)

2. **How would you rate our services in 20XX? (Please tick one box for each area – compulsory to chose one.)**

    Very high; high; better than average; worse than average; low; very low; n/a for each of these.

    The question is presented in table form with the various services below forming a line in the table and radio buttons for the rankings, which are expressed across the top. A response for each line is required before moving on. Note there is no 'fence sitting' allowed. 'average' is not an option, so that people are forced to express a positive or negative view. This makes them really think about what message they want to send to the office.
    - Helping you submit your grant application
    - Providing relevant, appropriate assistance and advice in administering your grant/s
    - Communicating grant deadlines and requirements
    - Opening research accounts
    - Assisting you in obtaining legal advice
    - Assisting you in obtaining ethics clearances
    - Providing information and advice on research ethics requirements
    - Providing you with high quality research data
    - Helping you use funding body application systems e.g (ARC RMS or NHMRC RGMS)
    - Sourcing timely and quality information from our website

Any comments regarding the services outlined above?
Open ended response – people tend to want to comment on one or two services or experiences. A box 'per service' is not offered, so as to keep the survey short/respondent burden low.

3. **What did you like about our services in 20XX?**
Open ended response
4. **What would you like to see us change in 20XX?**
Open ended response
5. **How do you believe our services have changed in 20XX as compared with prior years? (Please tick one box)**
   - Improved
   - Stayed the same
   - Gone backwards
   - No opinion
6. **Are there any staff members that you would like to commend for their service in 20XX?**
(drop down list of staff members)
7. **Please feel free to provide any further comments or advice**
    Open ended response
8. **If you would like someone from the Office to contact you to discuss your feedback please provide your name and contact details here:**

Open ended response