

Riding the whirlwind: Leadership amidst political uncertainty

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It's that time of the election cycle: the caretaker period looms. With it comes a degree of uncertainty that the public service knows all too well. The prospect of a new government always brings with it the potential for departmental upheaval. But even if the government remains the same, the post-election period typically involves strategic rethinks, reshuffles, and other people movements. The sense of uncertainty this time around is magnified by the prospect of a hung parliament and the extended negotiations that may follow.

No matter what the election outcome, it is important for leaders at all levels to be thinking about how to set yourselves and your teams up for success. The caretaker period and the gear shifts that go with it can provide the space and time to consider opportunities for broader strategic thinking, and for more critical thinking about performance and optimisation. You can bring staff along on the journey by carefully considering the impact of uncertainty on people, managing their doubt and unease by adopting a mindset of empathy and empowerment.

Managing the caretaker period well can help reinforce an enduring culture of stewardship, at a time when public servants are thinking about their role as stewards in the APS. It is important to consider questions like 'how do we maintain integrity during periods of transition?' and 'how do we provide continuity while remaining adaptable to potential changes to policy or priorities?' The election period is an opportunity to strengthen resilience, uphold values, and ensure that people feel valued and supported, no matter what shifts around them.

Recognising the human element of change

The impact of the election period varies significantly across departments. Some are accustomed to the machinery of government changes that typically follow elections, while others operate in more settled environments and experience less uncertainty about what an election outcome might mean. Those in policy roles will experience the period differently to those in corporate and enabling ones. Those in politically contested areas will experience it differently to those who work in areas with stronger bipartisan support.

Either way, however theoretically or intellectually prepared for change your employees are, they will inevitably experience a degree of disruption to their work and, depending on your organisation and your employees' individual roles, job uncertainty. We may talk about "machinery of government" changes and processes, but this terminology belies the reality of such transition: people are not simply cogs to be reconfigured. They require authentic, adaptive, and empathetic leadership to help them thrive through times of change.

You will need to focus on maintaining morale and productivity while navigating the practical consequences of potential resource reallocations and departmental re-positioning. You should balance the need to prepare for potential outcomes, while not predicting potential endpoints, with the inherent unknowns that exist. However, there are things that can be done to provide a sense of focus and stability.

CASE STUDY

Nous supported the MOG transition taskforce in a large government department in 2022

We established clearer mechanisms for coordinating a large-scale MOG by building structures and processes for the department's transition taskforce to support effective governance and ways of working. We also supported change management by guiding whole of department communications, establishing champions networks, and facilitating open forums for discussion questions.

Key lessons learned:

- **Prepare early by establishing structures, delegations, accountabilities and processes up front.** MOG changes are inherently complex and require the management of cross functional areas to work together seamlessly. Upfront effort to establish processes for working effectively will enable the effort to be focused where it matters most.
- **Good data enables easier people management.** Pre-change or pre-potential change can be leveraged to get HR data in check. While perfect HR data is often elusive, having a good understanding of where gaps may be and what can be better aligned ahead of time can mitigate against later challenges.
- **A strong and early focus on change and communication support to all staff cannot be underestimated.** Even when it feels like more time is needed before communication can be made with all staff, sharing what is known, and when more will be known, can put staff at ease and include them in the process.
- **Clearly define the leadership of MOG processes.** Clarity of accountabilities and responsibilities is integral, particularly when managing changes across departments and agencies.
- **An unwavering *One APS* mindset will enable more productive collaboration with other departments.** Setting clear principles upon which decisions will be made – anchored in a commitment to broader APS goals will enable the necessary collaboration and effective coordination with other departments and agencies.

Getting your ducks in a row: What you can do right now

It is advisable to have strategies in place to lead and support teams in the face of significant potential disruptions. Nous' work in leadership development across the APS offers several lessons for those leading in such uncertain environments.

Focusing on lasting organisational improvements

Focus on what is known to be of enduring importance to future success. Placing attention on areas such as process tightening, capability uplift, and people development will drive lasting benefits that withstand political change. The caretaker period may present an opportunity to focus on these sometimes lower-priority development efforts, while other program or policy areas necessarily need to slow down.

A key example is ensuring that knowledge management systems are robust, with important information properly documented and not reliant on the expertise of a few individuals. It is helpful for managers to invest in such systems during the caretaker period to safeguard important information, as departments are generally less pressured by ministerial demands and short-term projects while campaigning is underway.

Leveraging the gear shift for strategic thinking

The caretaker period is a useful time for sharpening your strategic thinking. It is imperative that the time is used well, to consider how to drive policy and service outcomes forward in order to provide good advice to the next government. Both new or returning ministers and governments will have been talking extensively to industry, sector, and community stakeholders about government delivery of services, the performance of investments in programs, and the responsiveness of agencies. Leaders should ensure their teams are equally attuned to stakeholder expectations and challenges, and ready to think about the shifts required to manage new agendas and priorities.

There is an opportunity here for big, bold thinking. The uncertainty of the moment lends itself to exploring ideas, scenarios, and objectives that may have previously been considered distractions, presenting an opportunity to break rigid patterns and challenge assumptions with fresh perspectives. Leaders who embrace this mindset can turn uncertainty into an advantage. By involving your teams in this process, you can foster productive discussions and innovative thinking.

While actively working to alleviate the fears and anxieties of the election period, you should also encourage your teams to view uncertainty as an opportunity for development, rather than as a threat. This may include taking the time to refine policy-making frameworks, reviewing program performance measures and governance, or considering targeted capability building that addresses long-standing leadership or management development needs.

This investment in capability and policy readiness will help your teams prepare for the possibility of a change in government and the practical implications of a new set of policies and programs. It supports teams to assess the requirements needed for new policy directions, identify potential challenges, and adapt structures and ways of working to enable successful implementation.

Making the unknowns known

Transparency and communication will be critical in the lead-up to the election and any changes that may follow. To slow the rumour mill ahead of time, relay as much clear and accurate information as you can in accordance with the Caretaker Conventions and in close alignment with the APS values of impartiality and integrity. Balance the need for discretion with the necessity to inform. Uncertainty breeds speculation, and providing clarity, even about what is currently indeterminate, helps mitigate the fear of the unknown.

A key responsibility for leaders during an election period is to create a sense of stability. When the future working environment and priorities are uncertain, you can help anchor your team by clearly communicating the processes that will be undertaken in the event of change, and by being explicit about when more information is likely to become available.

Managing the aftermath: The importance of stewardship and empathy

Connecting people to long-term ambition and goals – however these may have shifted – presents a powerful opportunity to enable people to feel connected to purpose, especially their purpose as system stewards. Empathy and genuine connection are essential in this period. Acknowledging the human element in your communications and actions will foster a supportive atmosphere. After any decisions about changes have been made, focus on empowerment, inclusion, and participation. Building ownership and encouraging team involvement will be key.

Embracing stewardship as legacy

Elections, by their very nature, serve as a powerful reminder that all individuals in government are stewards of public issues, not personal proprietors. Indeed, in December 2024, stewardship was officially incorporated as the sixth of the APS's core values, and the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) released guidance around what that means.

CASE STUDY

We are working extensively with teams and leaders on what stewardship means at all levels of an organisation.

Our work across leadership development in the APS has involved working with leaders at all levels to define and discuss what stewardship looks like at the day-to-day level. These conversations have surfaced key 'lightbulb' moments for emerging leaders in recognition of the many ways public sector leaders have an opportunity to reframe their purpose and work in line with the practice of caring for and protecting the long-term integrity and sustainability of their part of the system.

Several themes have emerged from discussions with leaders about how to embrace stewardship as an APS value:

- **Constantly connect teams to overarching purpose.** Never overlook the value of taking time to articulate and connect the work of today with the long-term health of the system. This further contributes to team members' motivation and sense of engagement with their work.
- **Drive effective processes, documents and reporting.** While they may appear the simple tasks, transparency in decision making, clear reporting and robust processes are critical acts of ensuring long term integrity and sustainability.
- **Build psychologically safe teams.** By prioritising fostering environments where all employees are comfortable to raise issues and risks without fear of retribution, we are actively safeguarding against mismanagement. This can come in the form of vulnerability of leaders, explicit openness to new ideas and feedback, and public praise for those come forward with frank and fearless views.
- **Engage with curiosity and apply scrutiny.** Within reason, always ask why and question the processes and decisions that have been made. Checking and checking again (including checking one's own biases) is an important habit of demonstrating care for systems, processes and decisions. Leaders note the need to also engage with risk in ways that is appropriate to their environment and enables innovation where possible.
- **Share learnings for greater benefit.** Leaders recognise that to amplify the value of their work, there is a responsibility to share lessons learned and critical observations broadly, enabling system-level learning and adaption. Siloed progress is limited in its potential for impact and change.
- **Comply with established frameworks.** Established APS wide processes and frameworks are there to provide well informed guidance and protection. Leaders acknowledge that careful compliance with established frameworks is a core part of their role as system stewards.

In the event of machinery of government changes, there may be a need to hand over responsibilities, relationships, and objectives, to be taken forward by others, reinforcing the role of public servants as custodians of collective goals. Therefore, you can use this time to redefine the concept of continuity, emphasising the importance, not of individual policies or programs, but of well-organised records, functioning systems, a government that works. This can instil a sense of pride and purpose, turning what could be a time of anxiety into a period of meaningful work and contribution to the public sector's enduring success.

Managing a potential sense of loss

Impact on work areas during and after the election period can be profound. Often, change management is less about managing the change, but supporting people through any sense of loss they may experience based on what is, or will be, different. The potential threat to certain programs and policies can very often feel personal and plays a significant role in the sense of unease many feel. People may find they are transferred to another role, team, or area that does not appeal to them; they may find their non-ongoing engagement is cut short or not renewed; they may lose colleagues and supervisors whom they had enjoyed working with. And then there is the sadness that comes with programs that they had become personally invested in facing an uncertain future.

On the ground, this can lead to decreased morale and engagement. For effective change management, leaders should lean into the process of understanding the sense of loss that team members are feeling and, where appropriate, acknowledge this openly, with genuine empathy and understanding. It's also a time to acknowledge people's broader wellbeing, considering the supports for all elements of personal growth, physical, emotional, and social development.

Paying close attention to the shadow you cast

Above all, leaders must consider what we call the shadow of your leadership. Your actions and responses before, during, and after the election period will be highly visible, and will cast a shadow that might be longer than you initially anticipate. What you model for your teams is more than just what you say, but rather a combination of how you say it, how you act, and how you use your time. It is crucial to ensure that your values are consistently reflected in what you say, do, recognise, and prioritise. Getting this alignment right is critical in maintaining trust and credibility amongst your teams during a time of change. This might mean intentionally being vulnerable about your personal experience, visibly demonstrating a commitment to a One APS approach or explicit collaboration and coordination with other leaders to demonstrate whole of organisation ways of working.

Don't expect successful change to occur overnight – collective leadership effort is necessary for sustained positive outcomes

No matter how well leaders manage the election period, it remains the case that for some areas, change will leave a legacy. What is done today will determine what this legacy will be. While some changes will be minor and easily contained, the flow-on effects could last for years. This is especially the case with major organisational mergers that bring together, not only different functions, but often quite different cultures.

CASE STUDY

We helped establish the culture of a new department and continue to play a role in building its leadership capabilities.

When two major government departments with intersecting priorities combined to create a new department, we engaged leaders at all levels in order to undertake the critical task of embedding the behavioural change required to realise the new organisation's mission and vision.

We engaged the workforce of the two organisations to gain insight into their strengths and their barriers to success, and to co-design the future culture of the integrated organisation. Significant investment was made in staff consultation and the bottom-up co-design of the future culture.

We continue to advise the department on methods to embed the culture locally, building the capability of its leaders to drive cultural change and ensure the espoused behaviours become a consistently lived experience for all staff.

The opportunity that MOG changes present for a strategic and cultural refresh are immense, when leveraged successfully. Importantly, it takes dedicated, collective effort across leadership teams to define the desired future state, and commitment from all leaders to drive this reality across an organisation. We view cultural change as holistic, not just the fluffy stuff.

True culture change is about the aligned structures, systems, processes, ways of working, and behaviours that form a collective way of being for the organisation. This builds the collective mindsets of an organisation. This takes time and requires leadership commitment, long after the catalyst of any particular change.

Oh, the times, they are a changin'

Regardless of the election outcome, the public service is always evolving. Even if the government is returned, new ministers and advisers are likely to be appointed, organisational restructures are on the cards, there will likely be movement among senior executives. There is often more change in the three months following an election than in the subsequent three years. In addition, broader geopolitical, economic, and social forces will continue to reshape government priorities, requiring public servants to navigate not just electoral shifts. In this constantly changing environment, our advice for managing change remains the same.

The public perception of public servants is often lacking in basic sympathy. Public servants, the thinking goes, enjoy a stability unique in the economy. However, the reality is that change does happen, can happen quickly, is often recurring, and can be profoundly challenging for those in the government workforce. Navigating these periods of pre- and post-election uncertainty requires leaders to focus not only on policy and program management but also on the well-being and stability of their teams. The human side of these transitions is real. Effective leadership involves addressing the emotional and psychological impacts on their employees to maintain – and, in some cases, even build – a resilient and productive workforce.

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of success

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PEOPLE

75
PRINCIPALS

9
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