



APEX

Transitions

The 2008 Annual Report of the
Advisory Service for Executives

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ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL EXECUTIVES
OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Background and Purpose.....	1
2.	Data Collection and Confidentiality.....	2
3.	Client Satisfaction and Quality Control.....	2
4.	Profile of Clients Served.....	3
5.	Client Issues.....	4
6.	Recommendations.....	6
7.	Moving Forward.....	9
8.	Conclusion.....	10

1. Background and Purpose

This is the fifth annual report of the Advisory Service for Executives (ASE), and it reflects a turning point both in the program and the Public Service. While renewal continues unabated within the ranks of the Executive group, the human resources community and the broader Public Service, this report also marks the end of one phase of the ASE and heralds the next step in its evolution of serving EXs.

In 2003, in response to repeated requests by Executives over the years for access to an independent, confidential and arms-length source of advice and support on matters of concern to them and their community, the Treasury Board Secretariat Advisory Committee recognized this to be a valid need and approved the creation of an advisory service to be delivered by APEX. Funding for one Full Time Equivalent (FTE) was provided for a five year period from January 2004 to December 2008.

Available free of charge to all executives and EX equivalents in the broader Public Service, the ASE was created to provide a discreet and confidential sounding board, a safe space to discuss sensitive issues and, as required, a single window for referral to a specialized resource network familiar with the needs and nature of the Executive community.

The “foundations” phase of the ASE began with the selection of Colette Nault as the first Senior Advisor in December 2003. Hers was the pioneering task of fleshing out the mandate and operational infrastructure of the ASE, establishing an evaluation framework and privacy protection procedures, and making executives aware of this new service. Actual client demand vastly exceeded initial projections, with 196 clients served in 2004 and 187 clients in 2005.

In 2006, the program entered the “consolidation and expansion” phase of its evolution as the Senior Advisor duties were assumed by Ed DiZazzo, who is the author of this report. In addition to the regular caseload, he continued the work of his predecessor by expanding both the scope and awareness of the program by implementing an enhanced “outreach” initiative for the ASE. This comprised the design and delivery of a variety of educational presentations and awareness sessions to well over a thousand new and existing EXs during his first two years at the helm.

In 2006, 199 executives availed themselves of the service, and as the visibility and recognized utility of the ASE continued to grow, the case load climbed to 226 clients in 2007. (Detailed annual reports on the first four years of the ASE are available on the APEX web-site www.apex.gc.ca).

The purpose of this report is to provide both data and commentary on the nature and number of clients served and the issues addressed during 2008– the last year of the ASE’s original five-year mandate.

2. Data Collection and Confidentiality

In order to ensure absolute confidentiality, clients’ names and case notes are automatically destroyed nine months after last contact (or at any time upon client request). What is retained in a secure database, accessible only by the Senior Advisor, is aggregate demographic data such as classification level, gender, language.

It should be noted that beyond capturing the initial “presenting problem(s)” the Advisor also records the full range and nature of services provided in response to each client’s particular needs. The same presenting problem can generate the need for a range of responses depending on the circumstances-- e.g. “conflict with a superior” may require communications coaching, dispute resolution, legal intervention, and/or career management advice; for example, to assist the client in leaving an untenable situation.

Knowing the full spectrum of executive client needs not only enriches the annual report and informs its policy recommendations, it also allows the Senior Advisor to identify emerging or growing areas and issues which could be addressed by APEX or its partners through group educational presentations, workshops, seminars, videoconferences and informational fact sheets posted on the APEX web site.

3. Client Satisfaction and Quality Control

Since its inception, the Advisory Service has gathered feedback on client satisfaction as part of its evaluation framework. This is done both formally and informally.

Periodically throughout 2008, formal questionnaires were sent to randomly selected clients and returned anonymously directly to the APEX CEO (to preserve impartiality). **In 2008, as in the past, both the client response rate and satisfaction levels remained consistently high.** In addition, as the program has matured, these positive formal evaluations have been bolstered by an ever-increasing number of new clients referred by former clients of the service, attesting to the growing reputation and credibility of the ASE.

4. Profile of Clients Served

2008 was the busiest year to date for the ASE, with a record-breaking growth in clientele to 251. Also, for the first time, the Senior Advisor was able to fully participate in the APEX cross-country consultation process, listening to the needs and issues of executive members in all regions and making presentations on the advisory service as well as co-presenting workshops on career management.

The demographic profile of the clients served in 2008 closely parallels that of the entire public service executive community (as of December 31, 2008):

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>ASE Clients</u>	<u>EX Community</u>
Anglophone:	70%	70%
Francophone:	30%	30%
Male:	49%	58%
Female:	51%	42%
NCR:	78%	72%
Regions:	19%	23%
Outside Canada:	3%	4%
EX-01:	58%	53%
EX-02:	19%	24%
EX-03:	15%	17%
EX-04/05	6%	6%
Other (above/below EX):	2%	

Over the past year, the ASE has served clients from 74 different departments, agencies and crown corporations, and it is gratifying to see that many HR departments have referred their EXs to the Advisory Service.

5. Client Issues

As a comprehensive Employee Assistance Program for executives (complementing existing departmental programs and the PSC's Executive Counselling Service), the APEX Advisory Service deals with an extremely wide range of issues and needs. However, over the years, a consistent "clustering" of familiar topics continues to persist. These issues have been discussed at length in previous annual reports.

In 2008, the most frequent issues and service needs were related to:

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|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1) Career Management | (32%) |
| 2) Reorganizations | (15%) |
| 3) Relationship with Superior | (12%) |
| 4) "Dismissals" | (10%) |
| 5) Harassment | (9%) |
| 6) Health | (9%) |
| 7) Retirement | (8%) |

1) **Career Management** consistently remains the highest area of demand. Requests ranged from individuals seeking advice on professional and career development, assistance in "reading the work environment" and navigating the system, or help in deliberating whether to accept or refuse a promotional opportunity or even whether to stay in or leave the Public Service. The introduction of many talent management initiatives both centrally and in departments has put renewed focus on this important aspect of organizational life.

2) This year, for the first time, the consequences of **Reorganizations** generated the second most frequent number of clients. This likely reflects the growing state of transition and renewal in the Public Service, and suggests that the often necessary changes a department undertakes do not always adequately take into account the distress and displacement experienced by those executives affected. In several cases, however, the purported "downsizing" was perceived as a poorly disguised attempt to get rid of particular individuals.

3) **Relationships with Superiors** dropped from its perennial number two position to third place this year, either reflecting a welcomed improvement in this area or a one-time statistical anomaly. Despite reduced numbers in this category, it is noteworthy that thirty executives came to the ASE with issues relating to being abused, yelled at, harassed, humiliated in front of others or bullied by toxic managers who demonstrated minimal people skills. These practices are not consistent with the fundamental principles of the Public Service Code of Values and Ethics nor with sound business/people management practices.

4) In 2008, twenty-four executives approached the ASE for assistance relating to **“Dismissals”** after they reported being abruptly told they were being removed from their positions, that they no longer “fit” the department’s new directions or that they had “lost the confidence” of senior management. While experience has shown that there are sometimes legitimate corporate reasons for these actions, too often the affected executives were given little information, even less support, and were left to fend for themselves in working through the emotional and financial issues related to forced job change.

5) Tied for 5th place is the category called **Harassment** which is reserved solely for specific cases where an executive has been formally accused of harassment by a subordinate or colleague. Since these figures do not include instances where the executive was the one claiming to be harassed, this would make this category more numerically significant than it appears. In 2008, twenty-two executives (up from 16 in the previous year and 14 in each of the two years before that) sought the assistance of the Senior Advisor when they felt abandoned and unsupported by their organization in the wake of a formal complaint. While not in a position to determine the veracity of the accusations, the Senior Advisor continues to note that well more than half of the complaints came on the heels of the EX attempting to address a performance problem with the employee in question (see Problem Employees later in narrative).

6) Given the aging executive workforce, it is not surprising that the other 5th place item is **Health**-related issues. As in the past, issues related to executive health continue to be of concern to EXs. The APEX Health and Well-Being survey, the subsequent APEX Health Summit, and data from the recent Public Service Survey will hopefully serve to generate dialogue and palpable action at the individual, departmental, and Corporate level in this important aspect of executive life. APEX has committed to working with the new Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer and other partners to address the issue of executive health.

7) In light of the demographic realities facing the Executive Group, it is not surprising that the number of issues and concerns related to **Retirement** spiked this year and for the first time generated a notable number of clients. Eight percent of ASE clients sought advice on such topics as post-employment contracting rules, casual employment, and access to financial advisors familiar with the policies relating to EX compensation, severance and annual leave accumulation.

Conspicuous by its absence from the top tier of executive concerns for the first time is complaints and issues related to the **Performance Management Program**. While 6% of clients still presented with this as a key area of concern, this was a significant drop from previous years. This may herald the fact that recent and welcomed improvements in the Program, the application of a more rigorous approach to performance assessment/management mandated by the Clerk last year, and many departments actively implementing enhanced performance management systems, including talent management, are finally gaining traction and having a positive impact.

Also of note is the slow but steady increase (to 5%) in executives coming to the Service seeking advice on how to deal with non-performing or "**Problem employees**". Managing performance problems and effectively and fairly dealing with poor performers is a system-wide issue that has also been flagged both by the Clerk and the National Managers' Community. It is an area that bears watching and around which EXs would benefit from professional development support and additional resources.

Finally, underlying all of the above areas, is the fact that many Executives have not taken the initiative to make themselves fully aware of the many policies, terms and conditions that govern them. This is primarily an issue of personal responsibility that would be easy to remedy and would pay many dividends in reduced misunderstanding, confusion and grief.

6. Recommendations

In the past, annual Advisory Service reports tended to focus on each of a half-dozen or more individual areas of concern and to then generate a series of recommendations to help remedy each one.

While a number of past suggestions have eventually been embraced and implemented by Central Agencies and others, many valid suggestions, repeated on an annual basis in successive reports, remain untouched.

In an attempt to deviate from tradition – and to avoid simply repeating a litany of un-actioned, issue-specific recommendations, this year’s ASE report will propose a much smaller number of recommendations that cut across multiple areas of need.

Two recommendations—one broad and all-encompassing, the other more focused and specific, if implemented over time, would not only improve productivity and the quality of the workplace environment in the Public Service, but would also serve to reduce the growing workload/demand on the ASE.

Recommendation 1

In his Sixteenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada, the Clerk of the Privy Council underlines the importance of employee development as a core renewal objective. While there is reference to strengthening management development programs within a new Leadership Development Framework, true and lasting cultural change in the Public Service will come only when there is renewed and concerted emphasis specifically on **developing solid people management skills** in our next generation of leaders.

When one looks closely at the genesis of many of the client issues listed above (e.g. conflicts with a superior, the distress caused by clumsy reorganizations and callous dismissals, or the friction resulting from inadequate or insensitive performance management processes) it appears that much of the personal angst and the resultant productivity disruption could be avoided or mitigated by senior leaders well skilled in the fundamentals and dynamics of people management.

Improvements in communication skills, performance coaching skills, and the ability to have “difficult conversations”, among other things, should be a mandatory part of all leadership development programs at all levels— and the earlier in one’s career the better. Leadership development programs should include specific training in these areas, and these aspects should be specifically reviewed during performance assessment and talent mapping exercises.

Systematically assessing these leadership competencies, coupled with strengthening the eroded capacity of new human resource professionals to support managers, is one of the main imperatives in modern HR management. As a business necessity, the appropriate management of human resources is key to attracting and retaining the new generation of knowledge workers who tend to “vote with their feet” and walk away from untenable or unrewarding workplaces without hesitation. As this is the group who support the EX cadre, this issue speaks to the potential vulnerability of senior managers.

There are promising developments underway in this area. The Clerk’s announcement of a new human resources governance regime, the creation of the new Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer, and a reiteration of the fact that performance and human resources management is part of every Deputy’s key accountabilities, signals an awareness of the need for systemic improvement.

Recommendation 2

There is a clear and urgent need to **revisit and rebalance the landscape of harassment management** in the Public Service.

Executives report that they feel that often they face an uneven playing field with respect to harassment. While no one would suggest that executives are incapable of harassment or inappropriate behaviour, the fact remains that whether the harassment is deliberate, inadvertent, or fabricated by an employee, the accused executive can feel unsupported. The employee may use a harassment complaint as a diversionary tactic to deflect the manager from addressing performance or disciplinary issues, thereby putting the onus on the manager to stay focused on the fundamental problem, while dealing with a harassment complaint.

While employees often have access to union and legal representation and support, EXs report that they feel that they seldom have anyone to turn to for support, advice, guidance or information (or must purchase it at their own expense). The personal and productivity disruption that inevitably result from a harassment accusation often takes months to resolve, and even if the accusation is unfounded, there is no consequence to the accuser and a lingering stigma on the unjustly accused can result.

A new policy on Harassment, the purpose of which would be to provide more balance and clarity to the harassment complaint process, has been under development for some time but has not yet been issued. In addition, plans to re-establish the now-defunct network of volunteers trained and willing to assist all unrepresented employees have failed to materialize.

As noted earlier, should the system's capacity, skill and ability to manage poor performance be enhanced, it would contribute to diminishing the frequency of harassment complaints and the resultant turmoil for all concerned.

Until more systemic support is provided at all levels, there is little to guide or protect executives who seriously try to actively manage performance problems instead of using the traditional, and in many cases, less courageous, approach of ignoring the problem or deploying the problem elsewhere.

7. Moving Forward

In June 2008, facing the expiry of funding for the ASE, APEX appeared before the DM Human Resources Management Advisory Committee armed with a four year retrospective report chronicling the extent of the services provided to over 800 executives by the ASE and their positive evaluations of their experience. Based on the results achieved, **the Advisory Service was recognized as an important contributor to workplace well being and the program was renewed and supported for an additional five years.**

This decision and support by the Deputy Minister community sets the stage for the next "renewal" phase in the evolution of the ASE. As it embarks on its second five-year cycle of service to Executives, prospective ASE changes and new initiatives include:

- the arrival of Paulette Panzeri in the role of Senior Advisor. Paulette succeeds Ed DiZazzo and brings a wealth of experience to the position;
- a move to a more versatile and sophisticated data capture system which will permit more timely and more in-depth data analysis. This initiative will allow the ASE to expand its ability to produce reports

for use by APEX and its Central Agency/departmental/other partners, including identification of developing trends/needs to effect change.

- a switch to a fiscal year reporting cycle from the previous calendar year approach;
- a “refreshing” and updating of the internal and external ASE resource and referral network diminished by inevitable departures/retirements; and
- as time and workload permits, implementing the next generation of client outreach that will target ASE awareness sessions to the EX audience most difficult to reach – i.e., APEX non-members who are beyond the normal reach of APEX communiques and learning events.

8. Conclusion

As I conclude this third and final annual report during my tenure as Senior Advisor, I would like to thank those who ably assisted me in providing the best client service possible: my colleagues at the APEX Secretariat who shared their skills, experience and knowledge with me; the network of policy advisors and subject matter specialists at the former Canada Public Service Agency, the Treasury Board Secretariat, the Public Service Commission and the Canada School of Public Service; and members of my external network of coaches, consultants, learning specialists, lawyers, health and human resource professionals.

Finally, on behalf of the Executive cadre, sincere thanks are extended to those Deputy Ministers who are financially supporting the ASE.