



APEX

The Executive Client Experience:

A Four Year Retrospective Report
(2004-2007)

The Advisory Service for Executives

ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL EXECUTIVES
OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Highlights	1
2	Background & Context	1
3	Evaluation Framework, Privacy & Confidentiality	2
4	Client Satisfaction	3
5	A Profile of Clients Served	3
6	Client Issues: Reasons for Referral/Data and Trend Analysis	5
7	Conclusion	11

1 HIGHLIGHTS

The fourth annual report of the Advisory Service for Executives (ASE) positions the data for 2007 as part of a four year retrospective on the Service since its inception. This combined data will allow a “big picture” analysis over time of key issues of concern to executives, with a view to bringing attention to, and hopefully triggering action to resolve persistent issues.

As with previous annual reports, this one provides a full demographic profile of clients served, the reasons the executives sought out this executive support service, their reported levels of satisfaction, and recommendations for change.

Although the ASE was established to address the needs of individual executive clients, the composite data in this four year compilation can provide a unique perspective on the collective needs, issues, concerns, aspirations and frustrations of a large cross-section of the senior leadership cadre of the Public Service. An analysis of this data allows one to take the pulse of this group and to identify hotspots and trends and to recommend actions that would serve to improve the job satisfaction, retention, productivity and well-being of the Executive community as a whole.

Given the number of important reports recently issued relating to the subject of Public Service Renewal, the data in this report can hopefully contribute to that important dialogue currently underway, by adding the “voices” and experiences of over 800 executives.

The issues that were most on the minds of client executives over the past four years include: Career Management, Relationship with Superiors, Reorganizations, the Performance Management Program, “Dismissals”, Harassment and Health-related concerns.

The report that follows will discuss the extent and the implications of each.

2 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Repeatedly, over many national consultations, APEX consistently found that executives were concerned about their lack of access to independent advice and support on matters of concern to them. Specifically, they felt a need for an

objective and confidential ear when they found themselves in difficult work-related situations such as defending themselves against a harassment complaint, managing an employee's performance, encountering an ethical dilemma, or dealing with relationship problems with their superiors or colleagues.

In April 2003, the Treasury Board Secretariat Advisory Committee (TBSAC) recognized this need and fully endorsed the creation of this service as a workplace well-being initiative, to be delivered by a single executive at APEX and funded by deputy heads initially for a five year period. It was recognized that the service could complement existing services for executives who felt unable to access those services for confidentiality, conflict of interest or comfort concerns.

In December 2003, APEX appointed Colette Nault as its first Senior Advisor. Upon her retirement in early 2006, Ed DiZazzo was selected to carry on this role, and is the author of this current report.

Available free of charge to all executives and EX equivalents across the country and abroad, the Advisory Service provides a discreet and confidential sounding board and a safe place to discuss sensitive issues. It also offers a single window for arms-length advice and, as required, referral to trusted professionals and specialized services targeted to the particular needs of the executive community.

Over the years, the Senior Advisor has developed a series of networks and partnerships to ensure that clients are able to receive the assistance they require from expert resources both inside and outside the Public Service.

3 EVALUATION FRAMEWORK, PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY

In keeping with the terms of the agreement with TBSAC, APEX established a monitoring and evaluation framework that required the collection of data and regular reporting on the extent and purpose of use of the service. Consequently, goals were established for the ASE each year and a comprehensive annual report was produced. These reports are available at www.apex.gc.ca.

Information collected is stored and disposed of in accordance with the Association's Privacy Policy and explained to the client in a reader-friendly document entitled "Confidentiality and the ASE----What You Can Expect" posted on the APEX website.

4 CLIENT SATISFACTION

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.

A formal questionnaire is periodically sent to randomly selected clients and returned to the APEX Chief Executive Officer (to preserve impartiality). This questionnaire rates dimensions of the ASE such as timeliness of the response, relevance and helpfulness of the advice, accuracy of the information provided, professionalism and listening skills of the Senior Advisor, and appropriateness of the expert resources to whom the client may have been referred. Additional open-ended questions seek to capture the extent to which the ASE was instrumental in resolving or improving the client's situation, reasons why the client would or would not refer colleagues to this service, and what could be done to improve the ASE.

Throughout the first four years of the program, both the client response rate and satisfaction levels remain consistently high. As the Service has matured, these positive evaluations have been bolstered by the increasing number of new clients referred by former clients of the service. This attests to the growing reputation and credibility of the ASE as an impartial, confidential 'safe space" where executives can tell their story to a neutral third party, be heard, and obtain factual and practical information/advice as well as access to expert resources when needed. For testimonials from former clients, consult the APEX website.

5 A PROFILE OF CLIENTS SERVED

In its first year of operation, the ASE vastly exceeded projected client numbers by serving 196 executive clients. This number stabilized in 2005 with 187 clients and in 2006 with 199 clients. In 2007, the client load peaked at 226, an increase of approximately 13%. It is likely that this is attributable more to a significant effort by the Senior Advisor to increase outreach and awareness (via educational presentations to almost 1,000 Executives) than a signal that problems are worsening

in the Public Service. **The four year cumulative total of clients served by the Advisory Service now exceeds 800 executives.**

The four year average demographic profile of clients served closely parallels the profile of the entire Federal Public Service Executive community (as of December 31, 2007):

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>ASE Clients</u>	<u>EX Community</u>
<u>Language</u>		
Anglophone:	69%	70%
Francophone:	31%	30%
<u>Gender</u>		
Male:	54%	59%
Female:	46%	41%
<u>Geographic Location</u>		
NCR:	77%	72%
Regions:	20%	23%
Outside Canada:	3%	5%
<u>Classification Level</u>		
EX-01:	58%	55%
EX-02:	20%	24%
EX-03:	11%	15%
EX-04/05:	5%	6%
Other:	6%	

Over the past four years, the ASE has served executive-level clients from **over 100** different departments, agencies and Crown Corporations.

The data clearly indicates that the cumulative demographic profile of ASE clients is representative of the EX population as a whole.

6 CLIENT ISSUES: REASONS FOR REFERRAL/DATA & TREND ANALYSIS

As a comprehensive Employee Assistance Program for Executives, the Advisory Service deals with an extremely wide range of issues and needs. Issues raised by clients are classified under a number of specific headings. (It should be noted that one client may consult the Senior Advisor on more than one issue in a particular year or that a single issue can overlap several headings).

The table below shows both the yearly and the cumulative four-year average percentages of the most frequent reasons why Executives consult the Advisory Service for Executives.

Top 7 reasons for referral	2004	2005	2006	2007	4 Year Average	Trend Line
1. Career Management	23%	23%	31%	31%	27%	↑
2. Relationship with Superiors	16%	16%	15%	16%	16%	↔
3. Reorganizations	15%	14%	13%	16%	15%	↗
4. Performance Mgmt. Program	11%	15%	12%	9%	12%	↘
5. "Dismissals"	5%	12%	9%	13%	10%	↑
6. Harassment	9%	7%	7%	7%	8%	↔
7. Health	-	-	8%	8%	-	-

1. Career Management is an umbrella category that covers the full spectrum of career-related issues---from seeking advice on resumes and job search strategies to queries about how to achieve a semblance of work-life balance as an executive. Guidance and coaching is offered on how to successfully navigate sometimes confusing career waters according to one's personal and individualized plan. Many of the clients who come for other reasons (listed below) also require a career management component as part of the

resolution—eg. as a consequence of a reorganization or an unsolvable poor relationship with a supervisor.

Demonstrating an upward trend in the past two years, it is not surprising that this is a **growth area** in terms of client numbers, as more and more executives are using the hot job market and the feverish competition for replacement talent to either advance their careers, find a more challenging growth or learning opportunity, or escape an untenable work situation for a more suitable or hospitable work environment (in effect, “talent refugees” from poor management practices).

Interestingly, a growing number of younger EXs are coming to discuss not “how to land that ideal job” but how to refuse opportunities offered to them without appearing to be seen as “lacking ambition”. At the other end of the age continuum, consultations are held with many senior public servants approaching retirement age who are weighing whether to stay or go or who feel they have “one good job left” and come seeking strategic assistance to find that one perfect job that will allow them to continue to contribute and to “leave a legacy”.

Fortunately, the ASE is not alone in responding to this growing area of need. After many years of Advisory Service recommendations that more attention be paid to this important dimension, talent management is finally on the radar screen of progressive departments, and the Canada Public Service Agency has planned and/or implemented a number of significant initiatives in this domain, most notably the expansion of the ADM talent management model to other EX levels with the creation of a new Visiting DG position.

2. Relationship with Superiors is a category that has not budged in either direction in four years, reflecting a stable but perennial problem. Clients most often spoke of being treated with disrespect, humiliated in front of others and generally bullied by superiors who lacked basic people skills. In other cases, lack of support from above, lack of recognition for work done, or in some cases intractable personality conflicts were at the root cause of this reason for referral. Rare, but nonetheless dramatic cases of toxic managers brought multiple clients from the same organization to the ASE, and most recently, inter-generational conflict issues have begun to appear more frequently.

While there is no easy solution to this problem, significant gains could be achieved by a more liberal application of the “3 Cs”—communication, consideration and compassion in the day to day interactions between superiors and subordinates. While training courses abound in the fundamentals of fiscal management, one component often neglected is training in the fundamentals and dynamics of people management. Individual EXs have a duty to develop their skills in managing people and communications in order to avoid unnecessary and costly conflictual situations. Moreover, those in authority must demonstrate the high value they place on human resource management by taking swift, concrete corrective action when they are made aware of situations of abuse. **It is hoped that the new focus in the Performance Management Program on “how” results are achieved will be the start of a long-needed emphasis on “people skills” in the assessment of Executives.**

3. Given the state of transition in the Public Service, it should come as no surprise that the collateral damage from **Reorganizations** would be a source of concern and distress for affected executives, and that this particular reason for referral will likely continue its **upward trend**. While some reorganizations are exceptionally well carried out by departments who negotiate a fair, reasonable and respectful resolution for executives caught in the turmoil caused by organizational changes, many that are brought to the attention of the Senior Advisor are clumsily, callously or inhumanely handled. True leaders know that reorganizations involve more than simply redrawing “org charts” on paper, and one cannot effect rapid culture change simply through systemic or structural change.

In some cases those left “without positions” felt that the reorganization was merely a pretense to remove them from their positions; others felt targeted because of their age and chose to leave as a consequence, though they felt they could not even make a graceful exit after decades of service to the organization. In most cases EXs felt powerless and lacked basic information about their rights, options and services available to them. To remedy this, the Senior Advisor provided emotional support as well as information about the applicable policies and referred clients for expert assistance (psychological, financial or legal) to help them make decisions about their future; for those who chose to stay in the system, the Senior Advisor provided strategic assistance in landing suitable employment elsewhere.

4. After a peak of referrals in 2005, the number of clients coming to the ASE for issues related to the **Performance Management Program** has been **gradually declining**, but it still remains the 4th most common reason for referral. The most frequent client complaint was that they had received no prior notice that their performance was lacking, or that there was no remedial action plan proposed or requested to help address the performance shortfalls. Typically, ASE clients were advised on how to properly respond to a poor appraisal (which often included a “reality check”--an honest assessment of whether the appraisal actually was accurate and how they might take the initiative to remedy the shortcomings identified). Referrals to performance coaches were made and advice on designing learning plans and accessing appropriate training or developmental programs was offered. In a few cases, after exhausting other options, the clients were referred to legal specialists, and in many of those cases, clients were successful in obtaining a more satisfactory resolution.

There are laudable efforts at the Canada Public Service Agency to continue to try and improve the PMP, and to be fair, many of the shortcomings and inconsistencies brought to the attention of the ASE do not come from shortcomings in the program itself but from lack of understanding of, or the failure to properly implement, the existing provisions of the program in a consistent and transparent fashion. Improvements could be made at the departmental level by providing more training on how to set and monitor performance objectives, how to provide clear, continuous and meaningful feedback on performance, and how to develop, implement and monitor remedial plans.

5. Discouragingly, there has been an **upward shift** in the past year in the number of cases captured under the category of “**Dismissals**”. This follows a drop in 2006 from the previous high of 12% of cases in 2005. Whether it is a direct consequence of the “change agenda” underway throughout the Public Service, whether it is an unfortunate by-product of attempts at renewal, or whether it is a justified attempt to deal with poor or inadequate performance, there is no denying the shock and consternation inflicted upon executives when they are abruptly told that they were being removed from their positions with no prior warning. Some did not pick up the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, hints that they only recognized in retrospect.

In some cases the executives had derailed or were no longer seen as being the “right fit” for the department’s new directions or new regime; in others they were told that they had lost the confidence of (or incurred the displeasure of) senior management; and, in a few cases, were “urged to move on” for no apparent reason other than a desire for “new blood” or to accelerate the creation of a “new face” to the organization (the “flush and refill” strategy).

While there are clearly many legitimate circumstances where executives must be reshuffled or need to move on, the manner in which this occurs is the distinguishing hallmark between the true leader and the callous technocrat. Too often, the affected executives who are made to feel unwelcome are left to fend for themselves or put on a shelf, receiving little or no assistance to work through the emotional and practical issues related to forced job change. While a lack of support, respect or even fair play can trigger and sustain a litigious, adversarial and protracted response that serves no one well, there are departments that stand out as positive role models in the generous and dignified way they have attempted to mitigate the inevitable distress and dislocation experienced by their executives. Unfortunately, this exemplary practice was not commonplace. Also, although solely anecdotal in nature, a disproportionate number of these clients were age 50 and over.

6. The **Harassment** category is reserved only for cases where the Executive has formally received an accusation of harassment by a subordinate. While the frequency of this reason for referral has not vacillated significantly over the years covered by this report, the significant impact on the executive’s life also has not diminished. Repeatedly, client executives have reported that once an accusation is brought against them, “everybody disappears”---they feel abandoned by their organizations, left alone, unsupported and uninformed. Sometimes, in a legitimate effort to appear “impartial”, their HR units do nothing more than provide a copy of the policy to the affected EX; the unintended consequence is an imbalanced situation with an unrepresented EX facing a complainant represented by their union. While the Senior Advisor promoted the importance and value of the mediation phase of the process, in too many cases the process unfortunately necessitated the involvement of labour lawyers at the executive’s personal expense.

While no one would suggest that executives are incapable of harassment or inappropriate behaviour, there were a striking number of situations where the complaint appeared to have been triggered by the EX's attempt to manage poor performance—ie. filed strategically as a diversionary tactic or a way of deflecting the manager from addressing performance or disciplinary issues in the workplace.

The long-awaited new policy on Harassment is desperately needed to provide more balance and clarity to the harassment complaint process and to level the playing field for EXs by providing more palpable support and guidance to them. Also, the now defunct network of volunteers willing to assist unrepresented employees in cases of harassment should be reestablished, supported and maintained.

7. **Health-related Issues** were ranked after Harassment simply because only two years of hard data are available for this category (which previously was embedded in the “Other” category). Understandably a broad category, it encompasses client support and subsequent referral to professionals in the community dealing with mental and physical health issues such as depression, substance abuse/addictions, stress, burnout, workplace reintegration following extended disability/sick leave, as well as issues related to significant work-life imbalance.

Fortunately, the results of the APEX Executive Health and Well-Being survey will more precisely capture the pervasiveness of this issue in the workplace, and will serve to generate dialogue and action on this important domain.

However, based on the intimate insights obtained by the Senior Advisor on albeit smaller numbers of Executives, much remains to be done in several areas. The system's comfort level in dealing with re-entry to the workplace after significant illness (mental *or* physical) requires attention, as there is a need to enhance awareness and sensitivity and reduce stigma among staff, supervisors and HR specialists. Overall, the general topic of mental health in the workplace and the specific issue of dealing with “troubled employees” is rarely addressed, and should be part of every manager's mandatory learning plan, given the financial and human costs of doing nothing in the face of this growing “unspoken” problem area. Greater knowledge is the portal to greater comfort, compassion and problem avoidance/resolution.

8. While comprising smaller numbers individually, “**Other**” is a catch-all category that truly demonstrates the range of questions, problems and issues that bring Executives to the Advisory Service. It includes requests for help in navigating through the sometimes confusing “system”, information on one’s rights and obligations, a struggle with an ethical issue or dealing with a “problem employee”.

This latter issue goes beyond dealing with the “troubled employee” referred to in the previous section and encompasses managing all poor performers irrespective of the reason for that poor performance. Knowing how to have those “difficult conversations” and being able to both compassionately but firmly and progressively deal with a poor performer is a rare skill that needs to be included in all leadership training programs, for it is part of the next frontier of the leadership learning challenge in the Public Service—providing enhanced training and sensitivity sessions on the “human factor” component of successfully managing tomorrow’s workforce.

7. CONCLUSION

Over its four years of operation, the Advisory Service has proven itself as a credible and readily accessible resource to executives in distress or in need of information and advice. It has also attempted to be a corporate ally both in fulfilling its role as a healthy workplace initiative and providing insights into the needs and issues of the executive cadre.

This report highlights some of the areas in human resources management practices, work environment and corporate culture that would benefit from support by decision-makers to initiate systemic changes for the benefit not only of the executive group, but also indirectly for the workforce they lead.

At this critical juncture in the renewal of the Public Service, how we treat and support our workforce will have telling consequences on our ability to attract new talent, retain current talent, and carry out the delicate transition management challenges we face.

(For more detailed information on this report, contact the Senior Advisor for Executives at eddizazzo@apex.gc.ca or at 613-992-5592).