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Are we too worried about embarrassing the minister?

Relaxing about 'sensitive' information can strengthen government

By Dr Craig Dalton, conjoint associate professor, University of Newcastle.

Shortly after returning from the US to work in a state government agency I received a bureaucratic culture shock. As a director of a public health unit I was preparing to release information on childhood lead exposure. It was considered "sensitive". About 6pm on the eve of the release, I received an enraged telephone call from the head of another agency. He was appalled at the level of transparency and openness with which I was approaching the release of information. He said the information was going to embarrass the government and that my primary job was "to protect the minister". This sounded so bizarre that I laughed, which didn't make matters better.

It sounded bizarre because I had spent the prior 3 years working for state and federal governments in the USA which had quite a distinct separation between politics and the bureaucracy. There was no sense of protecting the secretary of health (politically equivalent to a minister of health) and at times departmental heads would publically, but politely and respectfully, be in disagreement with the secretary. The idea of "embarrassing the government" was also foreign. It seemed that in Australia government had been reified to an entity that could be "embarrassed", that had a certain fragile persona in need of gentle care and protection. The fragile entity had to be protected at significant cost including being willing to obfuscate, withhold, or spin information. It was clear that the rights of the community were a secondary priority to the welfare of this fragile entity "the government". This was very different to the ethos of the public service in the US. I knew that any document that came across my desk was a public document (barring personally confidential information).

My observation is that the Australian preoccupation with protecting government has actually made government more fragile. Obfuscation and spin create a house of cards that requires a lot of effort and increasing media management resources to protect it against the slightest of ill winds. Many of the issues that consume legions of public servants and media management time would be a non-event in the US. Transparency and truthiness are actually a lot easier and do not create the organisational friction and waste that we see here. I think Nicholas Taleb's concept of "antifragile" applies to government. Tale says that antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better. A fragile government agency, suppresses uncomfortable information, a resilient agency manages uncomfortable information, but an anti-fragile agency thrives on uncomfortable information because it is allowed to flow through the organisation, meet with the public and anchor the organisation in reality.

For example, Australian government bureaucrats almost never admit their funding is insufficient to handle the workload of their portfolio – even when they have internal documents assessing unmet needs and a request submitted for increased funding. They have to find some way to argue that they are achieving appropriate performance and no more funding is required – to admit otherwise would embarrass the government and the minister. During my time working in the US, it was not unusual for a bureaucrat to admit they needed more funding when the media pressed them on shortcomings in service. This did not result in an apocalyptic response from the secretary responsible. A typical response to the media, (if a response was even asked for because remember this is just normal business and not a hot issue – every government department can use more funding!) would be to say: “Director X is a good advocate for his department and I expect all directors to lobby for funding for their departments, but in the end the allocation of resources is up to congress and myself to decide among the many competing priorities.”

I think it is because I have seen that it can be different that I wrote a book and have begun lobbying for a different way of working with communities. It will be easier for our front line staff, the community and our ministers. When we forget the community are the primary stakeholder and instead pander to a fragile neurotic concept of government we actually make it harder for the community and government. Things may have changed in the US somewhat since I worked there but it stands as an example of what is possible. The important role of the public service in ensuring short term political priorities do not corrupt public service delivery in the USA was evident during the recent impeachment process. The mostly clear separation of political and operational roles that police departments demonstrate in Australia promises that such separation may be more widely adopted in Australia.

Part of the battle in changing practice in Australia is that total openness and transparency sounds dangerous and the bureaucrats and politicians cannot see that the community cynicism is of their own creation. They cannot see that the current antipathy towards government officials and experts is co-created in interdependence between government and the community. Instead they may begin blaming community activists or the media for “creating the problem”, completely blind to their own role.

In environmental health incidents such as contaminated land, water, or air it is essential that the community trusts the government officials and experts they are dealing with. It may not matter if you trust your local tax officer or land valuer but government employed public health and environmental experts work with communities on highly emotive issues that requires trust. Parents living with uncertainty about whether an industrial toxin will cause their children to have cancer or some other illness are often sleepless and will abandon their homes to protect their children if they do not trust the advice of public health officials. The current PFAS/fire fighting foam issues is an example of the widespread fear and uncertainty such chemical exposures can cause. The community needs to have an open and transparent relationship with government officials as any uncertainty amplifies their suffering. I am hopeful that the guidance in this book will open a new chapter in government environmental health practice.

What practical steps can a public servant take to ensure that we help our minister not piss off the community? Try these:

- Test fact sheets and media statements on the actual stakeholder of interest. Don’t develop them behind closed doors and then unleash them on the community.

- Express your discomfort with any strategy, statement or policy that places political imperatives above community stakeholder priorities. Do it respectfully, and appeal to core public health values of transparency and integrity.
- Put well-reasoned professional arguments in writing or email. Political sensitivities should not limit reasonable discussion of policy alternatives. A political decision is reasonable but it must be made and seen to be made at the political, not bureaucratic, level.
- Ask to be recused from activities that have an overtly political spin.

These might seem radical, but try them as a nudge rather than a revolution. The first time I excised politically motivated statements from departmental media releases and requested they would better be delivered by ministerial offices I thought the sky would fall. But the statements just disappeared. Slight nudges can change the system and make it easier for bureaucrats, our minister, and the community.

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The views expressed are his own and do not represent the perspective of any employing institutions past or present.

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