

Working towards business excellence

Customs continuous program of reform and improvement

The Australian Customs Service is strongly committed to achieving excellence in serving its client groups.

Gerard Rodrigues explains how Customs is working towards that goal through a program of reform and continuous improvement.

Customs is achieving significant results in its program of reform that began in 1994, focusing on improved efficiency and the delivery of tangible benefits to government, industry and the Australian community.

The underlying themes of the reform program include effective use of technology, greater service orientation, building partnerships with industry, closer relationships with other agencies government agencies and being thoroughly professional in the way we go about delivering Customs services. There is a real commitment by the organisation to investing in staff so that they operate with increased autonomy and self-reliance.

To support the reforms, Customs established a Quality Management program in early 1995 called Customs Quality Management (CQM). This first focused on a team-based approach to problem solving using Quality Improvement Teams, developing an externally accredited management training program, and national surveys of staff and client groups.

Sue Pitman, Customs National Manager, Planning and International Branch, says "Customs has become far more outwardly focused in recent years. We have used our reform program to help staff meet the challenges of a rapidly changing operating environment. We expect that the positive effects of our approach will flow on to our clients in improved service delivery".

The efforts of all Customs staff were recognised in 1998 at the Australian Quality Awards with a Progress Toward Business Excellence award. Customs became the first Commonwealth agency to receive recognition at this level in the fully autonomous enterprise category. Following this success, CQM was revised to better help Customs sustain its improvement efforts.

Integrating Quality Management

Chris Wall, Director of Customs Planning and Performance Analysis Unit, emphasises that the revised Customs Quality Management Program will 'focus on the ongoing integration of quality management practices and procedures so that continual improvement is sustained and becomes the way we do business'.

Customs will continue to use Quality Improvement Teams (see *Manifest* Vol. 1, No. 1) to help improve business processes and service delivery. Customs has established over 70 of these teams and has had some encouraging results. The teams foster staff involvement, and analyse performance information in determining improvement strategies.

Customs is implementing a national Complaints and Compliments Handling System. The new system, which has been extensively trialed by Customs staff in NSW, will foster timely and effective resolution of complaints and provide trend data so

that systemic issues can be addressed. Linda Pellew, a member of the National Complaints and Compliments Handling System Implementation Team said, "Our clients have a right to expect that their complaints will be dealt with promptly and taken seriously. This system will ensure that this expectation is met".

Other key features of the CQM strategy include maintaining the national survey program and continued organisational assessment against the Australian Business Excellence Framework.

The national survey program has a three-pronged approach: organisational self-assessment, industry client

opinion, and a staff opinion. The program aims to build on Customs strengths and identify opportunities for improvement.

Value from staff survey

Last year's staff survey was extremely useful. Ninety-five per cent of the staff took part. The survey sought to measure employee motivation and productivity, the Customs culture and stress levels.

Staff representatives from each Customs region analysed their region's results and recommended improvement strategies. For example, a team in Victoria comprising Sheryl

Bryce, Paul Dunne, Rosemary Jakovceski and Jennifer Moltisanti, analysed the survey results for Victoria and identified the important issues for staff motivation as being leadership, training, performance feedback, promotion process and corporate focus. The team presented its findings to senior officers who then developed specific strategies to increase motivation, which will be incorporated into their regional planning.

In 1998, Customs Chief Executive Officer, Lionel Woodward, said management of workplace tensions and the difficulty in pleasing everyone makes the job of a Customs manager complex, but not insurmountable. He said communication between all staff was the key instrument in resolving such problems.

"With communication being a two-way process it is hoped that the individual performance assessment and feedback process will go a long way toward addressing these dilemmas and problem areas highlighted

Customs Chief Executive Officer, Lionel Woodward (third from right) accepted the award for Progress Toward Business Excellence for Customs at the 1998 Australian Quality Award presentations in (month).

Picture shows (from left) John Ralph AO, Chair, Review of Business Taxation; Natalie Howson, Chief Executive, Australian Sports Drug Agency, which also received the Progress Toward Business Excellence Award; Norm Iddles, Chair, Australian Quality Council; Bill Hilzinger, Chairman, Integral Energy (Gold Award – Australian Quality Award for Business Excellence); Ric Charlton, Chairman, South East Water Limited (Australian Quality Award for Business Excellence); Lionel Woodward; Brian O'Dea, Managing Director, Australia-New Zealand Direct Line (Australian Quality Award for Business Excellence); and Ian Jennings, General Manager, Building and Construction Industry (Portable Long Service Leave) Authority, which also won the Australian Quality Award for Business Excellence.



in the staff survey report. The survey results are for the first time providing Customs with a baseline of scientific data. This data together with feedback from the Performance Assessment and Feedback process and the Structure Review team gives us an environment which, by working together, we can strive to improve," Mr Woodward said.

The other key features of CQM include benchmarking and a review, in consultation with relevant industry clients, of the Customs Service Charters.

Chris Wall highlighted initiatives that are part of the Australian Customs Service program of reform and continuous improvement.

"Risk Management, the re-engineering of Customs business systems such as Cargo Management, the centralisation of certain functions and closer working relationships with industry and the community, are some

examples of the reform process," he said. "The Customs Quality Management Program is evidence of the ongoing commitment by Customs in providing support to the important reform and change process."

*'Customs has become
far more outwardly
focused'*

Other initiatives include compliance improvement, corporate data and statistics reporting to support development of performance measures and to provide a better understanding of Customs activities and trends which shape our business, Customs Information Centres and the increasing use of technology to streamline service delivery and to assist in enforcement activities.

The Customs investment in quality management continues to help the

organisation manage and coordinate its ongoing program of reform. Through such reforms and a program of international benchmarking Customs is also better placed to achieve its corporate vision: "To be a world leader in Customs administration delivering high quality service to the community, industry and commerce".

The aim of these reforms and associated activities is to ensure continual improvement of all Customs business processes to provide the highest possible level of service delivery across all our programs. Achievement of this aim is measured by organisational performance information collected over the last five years which, in turn, is used as the basis for further improvement.

Gerard Rodrigues is Assistant Director, Customs Business Improvement, in the Planning and Performance Analysis Unit.

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