

Californian Dreamer – Lisa Paul, Department of Education, Science and Training

The biggest privilege in her career, Lisa Paul says, was to be able to lead the Commonwealth's domestic response to the Bali bombings in 2002. Overnight she pulled together a large group from her then department, the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS), and other departments. They took on the huge range of issues from the immediate – the way the Government could help victims and their families – through to the long term.

She says she learnt a lot of lessons from the taskforce experience, including how to bring a very diverse team together to do something quite out of the box. Paul is keen to thank others for the success of the operation, saying, for example, that Centrelink was "fantastic at responding". "They had the call centre set up and we were assisting families to fly to Bali and to fly to hospitals around Australia within less than 24 hours." Paul herself was also considered to have done a first class job and was awarded a Public Service Medal for her work.

In her career, Paul says she has rarely said no to an opportunity, even if some of the offers have been "scary". "Change is always a scary thing," she says. "Any of the moves I've made from one organisation to another, you know I've been anxious about because I want to do a good job."

Paul must have done a good enough job because she has risen rapidly in the service to head the Department of Education, Science and Training. This rise is all the more surprising because Paul says she did not set out to be a public servant. "It was probably an accidental career," she says. "I came to Canberra from Adelaide to go to ANU and hadn't particularly intended to enter the public service. But everyone seemed to be sitting the exam so off I went and sat the exam in Canberra High School."

Paul did well and was taken in as a graduate, beginning a career that has focussed on the human services areas – health, welfare, family services, housing, homelessness and education. Her career has taken her into both the Federal and ACT arenas, with about half her time spent in each. She says when she joined the service 21 years ago she did not envisage rising to the top. "I was really lucky in having a fantastic supervisor as my very first supervisor in the public service and she excited me about being able to offer public service."

Given her relatively young age Paul could well be destined to be Australia's first female head of the Prime Minister's department, a suggestion she dismisses with laughter and the response that she's only been head of DEST for a year and

she's terribly pleased to be in this department and would like to stay for a long time.

No secretary expresses more enthusiasm for a department than Paul does for DEST. "It's just so important for Australia," she says. "It's also a great place to work." She points proudly to the national award DEST has won for excellence in people management and says the department is not only a nice place to work because of what it does, but it is also a great place to work because the people are great.

In Education Paul says she has now joined the family business. "Both my parents were teachers ... and my father was a school principal in California." A little known fact is that she was born and raised in the United States, "but you can't tell can you", she says laughing. "My family first moved to New Zealand for a year in I think '67, '68 when I was about seven or eight. My father got an opportunity to be a lecturer at a teachers college in Christchurch, and then to be a deputy head of a new teachers college in Adelaide. So I grew up in Adelaide, did an Arts Degree, starting in psychology and changing to an urban focus and ending up with a housing focus."

After her public service exam she joined the Housing Trust in the ACT Government, starting a personal passion about housing, public housing and homelessness. She says she likes to say to DEST staff how exciting it is to work in a place that touches the lives of every Australian in a positive way. The department is important to Australia's future because, for the country to remain globally competitive, its people will have to be as skilled and innovative as they can be. The people working in DEST's vocational and technical education area are fundamentally reforming the way training is delivered in Australia. "In the face of a booming economy we face considerable skills shortages and the Government's given us this great privilege of being able to try to solve these shortages. We're implementing a whole range of election commitments. We've fundamentally restructured the whole framework of the national training system. So a person in DEST, in that area at the moment, is not only implementing huge reform, but is probably learning a new job, as well."

So will this mean that in two or three years time Australia will have no skills shortage? "Yeah, that's our aim," she says. "That Australia can actually match up the need for skills with the skills that are available. That's exactly the aim. But that's only one part of the department. A feature of our work at the moment is that we have reform in every area. So, for example, we're trying to ... drive more national consistency in schools, looking at an Australian certificate of education ... looking at how literacy is taught, looking at how parents get information about how their children are going."

While the state governments deliver education services, Paul says DEST is the only entity that can actually make national change, albeit often with the necessary

assistance of the states and territories. At the moment, for example, DEST is working on a common starting age for schools. Paul says parents would love this, especially if they moved inter-state. Currently the starting ages range from four to six and have a flow-on effect through the 12 years of school.

One of the major challenges in education policy is indigenous education. “We’re implementing reforms which put Australian taxpayers’ money where it’s most needed, which is mainly in remote areas,” she says. “We’re also focussing on things that work.” An example is the funding of parents to help indigenous students. In the past a set amount was provided without limitations. But DEST now targets the funds so that parents work in partnership with their schools to make a difference to the students’ education. Benchmarking is part of the process to ensure that such things as literacy, school attendance and retention are actually improving.

Paul says internationally Australia is “way up there” on schooling and usually only second to a country like Finland. On a typical day, Paul says she would definitely do something about the issues concerning DEST people. She might meet to discuss a staff survey or current accommodation issues, or the next certified agreement. During a sitting week she may meet with the ministers or their staff several times a day. In a non-sitting week contact tends to be by phone. Meetings range over a wide area including such things as policy, current issues, the budget or estimates issues.

Paul says she is keen to understand the details of issues which are both urgent and important. “But at the same time I’m keen not to get in people’s way.” She delegates to her deputies and senior officers but believes in working on the “no-surprises principle”. “So normally we would talk in advance about any issues of the day. Usually I would know when there’s going to be contact (between the ministers and their offices and senior DEST staff) and the nature of the contact because not only may I want to have input, but I may want to be there too. It’s a very collegiate senior team and we would normally talk through issues every day.”

Paul says she has never had a period in her career when she has wanted to leave the service and says every supervisor she has had has been “fantastic”. But then she adds that some have been pretty challenging. “Supervisors can be frustrating ... if they won’t make a decision,” she says. “Or if they don’t stay calm. I like to remain composed and make decisions calmly. She says she is happy to assist, if people ask, when decision making processes becomes bogged down.” And do they do that? “Ah well, certainly over the years people have come to me, absolutely. And you try to unblock a situation.”

She believes it is essential for the organisation to get the whole culture right. “It will never be good enough to try to work on a case by case basis even though of course you must do so, and must be available to listen to people and sort

through problems with people. But if that's all you do it will never be enough. I tell our people that they need to do two things –one is to be able to describe the strategic direction of where you're going. But the other one is to genuinely care for your people. And you've got to back it up." She says people ask her where they should go with their career and she replies that if they can go somewhere where they can learn both from the content, and from their supervisor, then that is the ideal. "You know when you're in a situation where you're not learning, that can be really frustrating."

A normal working day for Paul often runs from 8 am to 7 or 8 pm. Like many other department heads she also comes into work on the weekends, and often works on both Saturday and Sunday. "But I hasten to say this is not something one is necessarily proud of," she says. "We all strive for work and family balance so I wouldn't advertise [this]." Paul says she is "absolutely strict with myself that I will not ring people after hours except in exceptional circumstances. I do not expect people to be here on weekends and after hours." But she concedes that like her, other people will always go the extra mile. She says she has heard secretaries thank people because they worked on a weekend, whereas what they should have thanked them for was the great job they did. "You've got to be very careful about what you reward. I'm keen to reward the job people do. Not the hours they work. If someone can get the job done in half the time and go home early, fantastic."

DEST rates its senior peoples' performance on two bases. One is business, and the other is leadership. "You can't get away with being a poor leader over time because the metrics will speak for themselves," Paul says. On her own leadership style she says a sense of humour is really important. "I like to see the humorous side of things. I like to enjoy what I do and I like our people here to enjoy their jobs. I believe there is a direct relationship between morale and productivity. So it's not just doing your job but enjoying it as well."

The department conducts 360 degree feedback to assess performance. It also conducts staff survey and manager level surveys to determine how senior people are going and how their organisational units are tracking. Stakeholder surveys are conducted outside the organisation to get the views of the department's main clients. At the moment Paul says all of the metrics are looking positive. In the staff survey, for example, on the question of staff engagement, which covers not only being happy but advocating DEST outside DEST, the department got a 37 per cent positive response against the public sector benchmark of 29 per cent. In the stakeholder survey DEST has gone from 83 per cent customer satisfaction to 85 per cent. "We're starting from a high base and moving up," Paul says.

But not all outside commentary has been favourable and there has been some criticism from aboriginal communities over the lack of consultation about

proposals for a nuclear dump in the Northern Territory. Paul disputes these claims. “Our consultation has been quite intensive and we’ve had a team both from our science area and from our communication area up in the Northern Territory with really in-depth meetings and visits over quite a period of time with the communities around the three potential sites,” she says. She adds that the key in all these things is information and that this shows that the dump is not as threatening as people fear.

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