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# **Tracing the evolution and development of a senior management network in a government organisation: The case of the Environmental Protection Agency**

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## **Introduction**

The most recent strategy for development and innovation in the public service places particular emphasis on strengthening the capability of public service organisations in the areas of leadership and strategy work (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017). These developmental themes also feature prominently in the new round of organisational capability reviews being carried out under the auspices

of the Civil Service Management Board.<sup>1</sup> The need for such capability building is also a recurring theme in the context of good governance in state bodies (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2016). Irrespective of where one looks in the civil and public service system, the need to invest time, energy and resources in building leadership and strategy capabilities is deemed to be important and of high priority.

Of course, the emphasis on capability building in the areas of leadership and strategy echoed above is not new. It has emerged consistently in a series of reviews carried out on behalf of government organisations in Ireland, the UK, the European Commission, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the UN over the last twenty-five years (McDonagh, in press (b)). The emphasis on capability building in these reviews is generally with a view to unleashing the hidden potential of these organisations and their people whilst also simultaneously pursuing an agenda for purposeful development and change that is engaging, enabling and empowering.

Learning from experience and reflecting on the work of McDonagh (in press (a), (c), (d)), there is strong evidence that government organisations can strengthen their leadership and strategy capabilities by pursuing a range of targeted interventions in a small number of well-defined areas. These include interventions focused on building unified and cohesive senior management networks that co-create and co-own the future development of government organisations through deep engagement with their people at all levels and grades. The process of creating such networks that are infused with passion and purpose requires a strong commitment to having senior managers engage directly in critical cross-organisational work on a sustained basis. The emphases on network evolution and development, co-creating and co-owning the future, and engaging in critical cross-organisational work are defining elements deemed central to strengthening leadership and strategy capabilities.

The case study presented in the remainder of this paper focuses on the evolution and development of such a network within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at a time of fundamental change brought about by the announced merger in 2012 of the EPA

<sup>1</sup> At the time of preparing this case study, the organisational capability reviews for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport along with the Courts Service had been completed. The review for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation was underway and reviews were being planned for the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht along with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

and the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland (RPII).<sup>2</sup> It provides insights into network formation and functioning, the related commitment to co-owning and co-creating the future, and the enabling role of critical cross-organisational work. The purpose of the case study is primarily reflective in nature since it seeks to illuminate the immense value of senior managers working in unison. Focusing on the collective and emphasising the sense of togetherness serve to remind senior managers in government organisations of what can be achieved by working together with passion and purpose.

By way of tracing the evolution and development of the network between 2013 and 2018, the case study below is presented as follows. Attention is first focused on setting the scene, which takes a close look at the circumstances surrounding the genesis of the network in 2013 whilst also noting the ebbing away of earlier innovations in this regard. This is followed by a more in-depth look at the value-adding nature of the network as reported in a series of one-to-one interviews with eighteen members of the network in April–May 2018. The section on strategy work clarifies the manner in which engaging in critical cross-organisational work infuses the network with passion and purpose, while the section on leadership work demonstrates how senior managers become role models for behavioural change through the more effective alignment of leadership interventions and organisational values. The section on management development takes a close look at the manner in which network functioning supports the development of senior managers, both formally and informally. The two remaining sections focus on lessons learned along with the journey ahead. The paper draws to a close with a number of focused observations as part of the conclusions.

### **Setting the scene**

As part of the government's *Public Service Reform Plan* published in November 2011, there was a commitment to merging the EPA with the RPII, as noted in the introduction. It was decided by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government that the two bodies should be merged through the creation of an additional office in the EPA structure, bringing the total number of offices to five, each headed by a director.

<sup>2</sup> O'Riordan (2018) presents a more detailed account of the merger process.

In January 2013 the minister set up a working group to manage the process of merging the RPII with the EPA in accordance with government policy. The merger working group, with the support of a merger project group, developed the *EPA–RPII Merger Action Plan*, which was approved by the minister and published in July 2013. The implementation of approved actions commenced in September 2013 with the aim of having the merger completed by Summer 2014.

The *EPA–RPII Merger Action Plan* incorporated forty-three high-level actions across seven thematic areas, including governance and board, communications and other corporate issues, human resources, financial matters, ICT, accommodation and legislative measures. Taken together, the forty-three high-level actions constituted a significant programme of development and change in support of the merger.

Within the *EPA–RPII Merger Action Plan*, the high-level actions in support of governance and board included a specific commitment to creating a senior management group for the newly integrated entity. The plan noted that:

A new management structure for the merged organisation will be developed by the Director General, EPA / Chief Executive Officer, RPII and the EPA Board. In the merged organisation, the staff currently at Director level in the RPII will become Programme Managers. At present staffing levels, this will result in a Senior Management Structure which will include a Director General, 5 Directors, and 12 Programme Managers. (EPA–RPII Merger Working Group, 2013, p. 9)

The merger was completed in August 2014. The many actions progressed included the creation of a fifth office within the EPA, namely the Office for Radiological Protection (ORP). The former chief executive officer of the RPII was appointed as director of the ORP. An additional four directors within the former RPII were appointed as programme managers within the EPA. This resulted in the new senior management group as originally envisaged in the *EPA–RPII Merger Action Plan*.

In the period leading up to the completion of the merger, the director general, five directors and twelve programme managers had been working together not only in support of the *Merger Action Plan* but also in beginning to think through the future development of the agency along with the development of the newly formed senior

management group. All eighteen senior managers participated in a workshop on 'Managing Planned Change' in November 2013 and a workshop on 'Shaping the Future' in May 2014. These were followed by a workshop for board members in June 2014 on 'The Practice of Strategy-Making and Strategy Execution'.

The three workshops were instrumental in fashioning a consensus on the need for all senior managers to increasingly work in unison. There was full recognition of the immense strengths of both the EPA and the RPII, along with related differences in the areas of leadership style, organisational culture, approaches to development and change, and a range of legacy issues, amongst others. Notwithstanding such differences and the presence of legacy issues, there was a strong recognition at these workshops that a key challenge for the future involved the creation of a cohesive and well-integrated senior management group that would lead the organisation well into the future. There was an equally strong recognition of the need for the new senior management group to play a lead role in shaping the agency's next strategic plan whilst also engaging staff across the organisation in this endeavour.

By way of building on and extending the good work and consensus which emerged from these three workshops, it was decided to continue the process of nurturing the senior management group by engaging all eighteen senior managers in one-to-one, in-depth conversations in September–October 2014. The purpose of these conversations was to establish what senior managers saw as their development needs, what priority issues should be advanced in any new strategy-making endeavour, and what unique contribution each manager would make to the ongoing strategic development of the agency.

The eighteen interviews, combined with insights from earlier senior management workshops, provided a rich set of diagnostic data which were subsequently distilled into a set of emerging themes and presented at a senior management workshop in November 2014 on 'Corporate Strategy Development'. The themes addressed at that workshop included (i) strengthening the leadership system across the agency, (ii) a framework for corporate strategy development, (iii) corporate strategy development priorities, and (iv) corporate strategy development phases, processes and products.

The eighteen senior managers participating in the senior management workshop recognised these four themes as early evidence of the fruits of senior managers working in unison. Emerging from an earlier position of two separate senior management teams leading two

separate and independent state bodies, the newly formed senior management group within the EPA had successfully managed to diagnose its own development needs whilst also co-creating a strategy development process that would attend to these in part at least. Undoubtedly, the strategy process blended together the best of both the EPA's and the RPII's previous experience and achievements in the area of strategy work. This proved to be an incredibly significant achievement for the agency's senior management group as it had successfully laid the groundwork for the more detailed strategy work to emerge from January 2015 onwards.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, the workshop represented a landmark on the senior management group's own development journey. Commitments fashioned at that workshop included:

- Laying the groundwork for a new senior management network as the preferred approach to strengthening the leadership and strategy capabilities of all directors and programme managers. The concept of a network, which emerged from shared conversations amongst directors and programme managers, was particularly appealing in an agency with such a diverse range of functions and responsibilities.
- In laying the groundwork for a new senior management network, directors and programme managers were conscious that earlier attempts to develop a cohesive and well-integrated senior management group had ebbed away due to a lack of passion and purpose. They were also conscious that any new network should not in any way cut across the role and responsibilities of either the board or office-based senior management teams.
- Adopting foundation principles of co-leadership, co-creation and co-ownership when progressing the work of the senior management network.
- Expecting every senior manager to play a role in shaping the strategic development of the agency.
- Expecting every senior manager to dedicate 20 per cent of his or her time to critical cross-organisational work as distinct from work within his or her function. It was believed that senior managers would learn to collaborate effectively by working together on real organisational work (Bigler & Williams, 2013).
- Placing priority emphasis on senior managers working together, deliberately fostering a collective view and enhancing managerial effectiveness through working with and through others.

- Drawing on the power of the network as a means to address a range of legacy issues, including perceived disconnects between the board<sup>3</sup> and programme managers, lack of a unified voice for programme managers, frustration amongst some senior managers and the tendency for some senior managers to be office-focused rather than agency-focused.

Since its inception in November 2014, the senior management network has continued to evolve within the agency. Its form and function has evolved through time and it meets at least six times per year. It has benefited from the active engagement and ongoing support of the director general and it has a well-defined programme of work. It has continued to play a lead role in strategy work (development, implementation and review) since 2015 and in related work on leadership and values since 2016. It is currently taking stock of progress between 2014 and 2018 and reflecting on the journey ahead.

### **The value-adding nature of the network**

Prior to the formation of the senior management network, as alluded to earlier, the agency did not benefit from a cohesive and well-integrated senior management group. Amongst the many challenges were the sense of disjointedness between the board and programme managers, the tendency for senior managers to favour an office-centric rather than agency-centric focus, the lack of a unified voice for either programme managers or the senior management group as a whole, the tendency for programme managers to have limited ownership of the agency's strategy, and the tendency for programme managers to delegate upwards. In addition, many senior managers regularly lacked a whole-of-agency view and were sceptical about the formation of any kind of new senior management group due to repeated disappointments in the past.

By way of harnessing the desire and commitment of senior managers to work more collaboratively, as expressed in the four workshops between November 2013 and November 2014, and by way of learning from past disappointment, there appeared to be merit in working with the concept of a network and all that that implied. Almost four years on from the genesis of that network, many of the

<sup>3</sup> The board, consisting of the director general and five directors, fulfils a range of executive and senior management functions on behalf of the agency.

issues noted earlier which pre-dated its formation are no longer issues on the organisational landscape. Instead, the landscape is infused with a great sense of passion and purpose amongst senior managers, and the network has played a central role in achieving such a transformational shift over time. Of course, that is not to say that there are no new issues that now require attention.

The merger was a catalyst for positive change in the agency. The transformational shift which took place was the product of a clear set of choices made by members of the senior management network. The shift marked a distinct break with past practice and the creation of an organisational environment that favoured harnessing the potential of people in shaping the strategic development of the agency for the years ahead. Based on the data collected from the most recent set of senior management one-to-one, in-depth interviews carried out in April–May 2018, senior managers recognise and appreciate the transformational shift that has taken place and they are fully aware of the immense benefits that have flown from nurturing this network over the last four years. Chief among these benefits are:

- Senior managers working in an increasingly unified manner and speaking with an increasingly cohesive voice. It is no longer the voice of a director general plus five directors plus twelve separate programme managers. Rather, it is the cohesive voice of eighteen senior managers working in harmony where all are considered equal.
- Fostering trust, getting to know each other, being comfortable with each other and growing comfortable working together. The value lies in the sense of togetherness where all directors and programme managers are accessible and committed to each other.
- Accessing and developing important relational connections and personal networks.
- Freely sharing important wisdom, knowledge, skill and expertise.
- Making time for each other, providing support to each other and benefiting from the power of peer support, peer evaluation, peer review and peer learning.
- Fostering an environment that is collaborative, creative, free-thinking, informal, open, purposeful and supportive.
- Promoting safe spaces to have all kinds of shared conversations, including those that are best classified as awkward and difficult.
- Facilitating a system-wide view of the agency and its work and promoting greater coherence and cohesiveness in this regard.

Participation in the senior management network is viewed in a very positive light by all senior managers. The network does not cut across the work of the board or office-based senior management teams. This is seen as important. The ability of managers to work with and through others has been enhanced significantly while all senior managers now have a larger view of the agency and its work. Managers feel part of something bigger. The emergent, fluid and organic nature of the network is deeply appreciated. For recently appointed directors and programme managers, the network is viewed as a source of strong support and connections along with a great place to exchange critical organisational information.

When comparing the health of the senior management group in 2014 with the situation in 2018, most senior managers believe that the related commitments to network development, engaging in critical cross-organisational work and co-creating the future together have paid off immensely. Together, they have infused the senior management network with a sense of purpose and a strong commitment to engaging, enabling and empowering staff across the agency.

### **Strategy work**

With regards to infusing the newly formed senior management network with a sense of passion and purpose, the formation and execution of the agency's *Strategic Plan 2016–2020* was the first major piece of cross-organisational work for network members to engage in together. Senior managers take great pride in their role in strategy work and they believe that this work is highly distinctive in a number of ways including:

- Strategy work infused the network with a sense of passion and purpose and it provided a focal point for its foundation work from 2014 onwards.
- The strategy development process was co-owned and co-created by network members in 2014.
- The emerging strategic goals, objectives, actions and outcomes were co-owned and co-created by network members in 2015.
- The transition to strategy implementation and the embedding of a distributed leadership model in support of implementation emerged naturally from the highly collaborative approach to strategy work.

- The strategy review process was co-created and co-owned by network members in 2017 and 2018.
- The commitment to working in unison and the related commitment to engaging widely and deeply across the agency have resulted in bringing strategy work to life and embedding it across the agency.

That the agency today benefits from a living strategy that is cohesive, well integrated and being implemented on an ongoing basis is a direct consequence of a senior management network that is highly collaborative, supportive and working with unified purpose. Through its focused strategic leadership, the network devised a strategy process that directly engaged over 40 per cent of the workforce. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the innards of the strategy process, it is worth drawing attention to the manner in which engagement unfolded over time.

The network devised a robust strategy process from the ground up. As originally envisaged, strategy work progressed through a series of phases which were labelled as 'forming, fashioning, focusing, fusing, and finishing'. Each phase had a distinct cluster of technically focused activities along with a related set of people-focused activities. With regards to the execution of technically focused activities, the focus was always on teams, teams, teams and more teams as the principal mechanism through which to get work done. Every aspect of strategy work was attended to and progressed in a team environment.

With regards to the execution of people-focused activities, the emphasis was always on maximising the developmental opportunities for individuals and groups engaged in strategy work across the agency. This involved a mix of interventions ranging from workshops, masterclasses, supports for coordination teams and harnessing the power of peers. The emphases on peer coaching, mentoring, review, evaluation and learning were highly distinctive facets of the strategy process. Engagement in all aspects of the strategy work was, and remains, extensive and purposeful.

Of course, the positive leadership of the senior management network has resulted in the robust *Strategic Plan 2016–2020*, where each action is owned by a member of the network. The highly distributed leadership model underpinning strategy implementation is both novel and effective. It is one of the most powerful mechanisms available to support the diffusion of strategic goals, objectives, actions and outcomes throughout any organisation. It avoids the pitfall of having responsibility for strategy implementation rest with an

organisational unit that does not have the authority or resources to forge ahead with implementation.

The subgroups of the senior management network engaged in the overall coordination of strategy work, both development and implementation, made a vital contribution to ensuring that strategy processes were firmly grounded, deeply embedded and always focused on achieving purposeful and meaningful outcomes. Such groups also made a unique contribution to the ongoing evolution and development of the senior management network itself. These groups developed the ability to address the twin demands of achieving excellence in strategy work and excellence in network formation and functioning.

Since imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, it is instructive to reflect on how the benefits of senior managers working in unison are increasingly desired at other levels and by other groups across the agency. During the process of developing the *Human Resource Development Strategy (2017–2021)*, many workshop participants expressed a desire to both capture and replicate at other levels the spillover benefits of the senior management network. The same desire to capture these effects was expressed in the foundation work underpinning the development of the strategy review process in 2017 and 2018.

In summary then, the nurturing of the new senior management network and its enabling role in pursuing excellence in strategy work has charted a new path for the agency. Unlike the past where strategies were seen as something the agency had, today strategy work is viewed as key to effecting fundamental reform and change. It is seen as high-value work that makes a real difference to the agency and the stakeholders it serves. Senior managers are committed, strategy processes are robust and sound, strategy work is real, and engagement is deep and wide.

## **Leadership work**

While the commitment to working collaboratively in shaping the agency's *Strategic Plan 2016–2020* marked the beginning of the senior management network's programme of cross-organisational work, early success here paved the way for the addition of a new work stream. With the formal transition to strategy implementation in 2016, the senior management network extended its programme of cross-organisational work to incorporate a new focus on leadership

development that harnessed the agency's recent work on core values and placed it at the centre of future leadership development initiatives. This focus on leadership development was a key priority with supporting actions emerging from the *Strategic Plan 2016–2020*.

Of course, it is only fair to say that significant work in the area of leadership development had already been underway since the formation of the new senior management network in late 2014. From the outset, the director general had been actively engaged in strengthening and renewing the network at every possible opportunity. Key interventions here included the provision of direct support to senior managers due to engage in role transitions, career-related supports for managers seeking to chart their future career options, supports for managers coordinating significant streams of work on behalf of the network, and a range of additional supports to strengthen key aspects of strategy work.

The interventions noted above were progressed in an environment where the agency already had a good range of leadership and management supports in place. The strength of the agency in this regard was clearly evident in the foundation work progressed in support of the *Human Resource Development Strategy (2017–2021)*. The view from participants in all strategy development workshops was that the agency was very strong in its commitment to its people.

By way of building on and extending its current suite of commitments in support of leadership development, the senior management network decided to embrace a cultural lens when advancing this development agenda. The choice of a cultural lens was intentional since the concept of culture embodies the deeper set of beliefs, values and assumptions that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups in organisations. By way of pursuing an affirmative agenda for development and change, the senior management network focused on the values dimension of culture with a view to aligning any future leadership development interventions with the agency's core values.

While the desire to better align future leadership development interventions with the agency's core values first emerged from the strategy development process in support of the *Strategic Plan 2016–2020*, the translation of that desire into meaningful, purposeful and sustainable behavioural change was always going to be demanding. In diagnostic data collected to support the transition from corporate strategy development to the development of the *Human Resource Development Strategy (2017–2021)*, key features of the agency's people landscape were drawn into sharp focus.

The essential challenge emerging from the diagnostic data for all senior managers across the agency in 2016 was to balance the twin demands of achieving excellence in technical work and excellence in people management and development. The agency has a strong reputation in its core technical work and its people are technically excellent. But the price of such excellence is that many senior managers have yet to excel in the areas of people management and development. The diagnostic data pointed to a wide range of people and organisation issues that have permeated the agency's landscape over an enduring period.

By way of transitioning to an environment where every manager can better balance the twin demands of achieving excellence in technical work and excellence in people management and development, the senior management network believed that senior managers must lead the way by becoming role models of behavioural change. With an explicit focus on learning by doing and learning in action, the senior management network engaged in a series of workshops focused on translating aspects of the agency's core values into a small number of well-defined cultural characteristics, along with guiding principles and supporting behaviours deemed essential to embedding these characteristics over time.

This stream of cross-organisational work has been significant. It has resulted in the senior management network favouring the creation of an organisational climate where all managers behave in ways best characterised as collaborative, supportive and working with purpose. These three cultural characteristics have been further elaborated through the development of guiding principles along with the promotion and adoption of supporting behaviours. Through this focus on cultural characteristics and related behaviours, the senior management network has created an effective mechanism by which it can better align its leadership development interventions with the core values of the agency. It has in effect made aspects of its culture real and meaningful, and it has made it easier to pursue purposeful and meaningful change. This is rather similar to the manner in which the senior management network has made strategy real.

This stream of cross-organisational work was always going to be more demanding and require patience and perseverance over an enduring period. Senior managers have achieved significant levels of status and prestige and have often advanced their careers even in the absence of excellence in people management and development. Established patterns of behaviour that regularly give priority attention

to the core technical work of the organisation are not easy to rebalance. It takes time, patience and a great deal of energy and psychological resources to bring about desired behavioural change even on a gradual and incremental basis.

By focusing on three distinct cultural characteristics that resonate deeply with senior managers, the agency has created an environment in which it can nurture excellence in people management and development over time. Of course, this will require the gathering of baseline data to establish how well managers are performing in terms of being collaborative, being supportive and working with purpose. In a manner similar to the employee engagement surveys across the civil service, these baseline data can be used to shape an affirmative organisation development strategy that nurtures these cultural characteristics and embeds related behaviours over time.

The capturing of these baseline data is central to nurturing the three cultural characteristics over time. The senior management network is fully aware that the day-to-day and moment-to-moment actions of all senior managers must be fully aligned with the commitment to being collaborative, being supportive and working with purpose. Patterns of behaviour consistent with the cultural characteristics must be fully evident at all levels, including the work of the senior management network, the work of the board, the work of office-based senior management teams and the work of all teams across the agency. Managers who behave in ways that are incongruent with these cultural characteristics will be challenged by their peers. They will also be supported as they commit to living the core values of the agency on a routine basis.

By way of building on and extending the work completed thus far in the area of cultural characteristics, the agency is now in an increasingly strong position to weave these characteristics through all its future development interventions. The characteristics make sense and are actionable at multiple levels, including individual, team, function and organisation. All future development strategies must draw heavily on these cultural characteristics as defining elements in shaping an agenda that has a sustainable impact on the agency, its climate, its people and its work system.

By way of embedding the agency's three cultural characteristics in the senior management network's ongoing programme of cross-organisational work, the network in 2017 and 2018 co-created and co-owned a new mid-term strategy review process which sought in part to

achieve greater alignment between the three cultural characteristics and the strategy review work being proposed across the agency. Here the focus was on achieving alignment between the agency's three cultural characteristics, the related guiding principles that should inform the work of senior managers in the mid-term strategy review and the distinctive behaviours which should be used to embed these principles in the strategy review process.

## **Management development**

The senior management network inhabits a unique space within the agency's organisational landscape. Its form and function are distinctive, and it does not in any way cut across the work of either the board or office-based senior management teams. Its emergent, fluid and organic nature has contributed to the development of senior managers between 2014 and 2018. More specifically, network members identify the following developmental opportunities associated with network participation:

- The network contributes directly to the development of a cross-organisational view of the agency and its work for all senior managers.
- The network strengthens and extends the collaborative capabilities and capacity of all senior managers through sharing of information, sharing of personal contacts and connections, and sharing of resources.
- The network supports the adoption of positive behaviours in support of every senior manager being collaborative, being supportive and working with purpose.
- The network offers opportunities for subgroups to lead out in coordination of particular work streams.
- The network and the manner in which it operates contribute to informal learning on a sustained basis.
- The network offers many high-quality opportunities for peer support, peer review, peer evaluation and peer learning.
- The network offers opportunities for senior managers to constructively challenge and support the development of each other.

Undoubtedly, the senior management network's programme of work thus far in the areas of strategy and leadership has contributed directly

to capability building in these areas of professional practice. It has strengthened the role of senior managers as agents of development and change across the agency. More specifically, it has contributed directly to strengthening many of the top six leadership competencies for senior public service managers, which include (i) creating vision and strategy, (ii) leading innovation and change, (iii) mobilising and empowering people, (iv) building coalitions and partnerships, (v) exemplifying personal drive for results, and (vi) upholding integrity and respect (McDonagh, in press (c)).

Looking towards the future, members of the senior management network are aware of enhanced developmental opportunities associated with network participation. For the most part, these relate to harnessing the power of peers as reflected in peer coaching, peer mentoring, peer evaluation, peer review and peer learning. Network participation, which some believe should now be extended beyond the most senior eighteen managers, offers unrivalled opportunities for tapping into the streams of wisdom, knowledge, skill and expertise which flow among network members. It also offers opportunities to tap into key relational networks.

## **Lessons learned**

Within the senior management network, managers recognise that the evolution and development of the network have underpinned the transformational shift which has taken place at senior management level between 2014 and 2018. No senior manager would wish to return to the pre-network era, which was characterised by a significant degree of disjointedness between directors and programme managers along with the lack of a coherent and unified voice shared amongst all eighteen senior managers. Senior managers have a distinct preference for the environment fostered by the network, an environment which is increasingly collaborative, supportive and purposeful. Indeed, the network is a good role model for the three cultural characteristics which have been the centrepiece of the leadership work thus far.

The evolution and development of the senior management network within the EPA offer a range of interesting insights and lessons for government organisations intent on creating an increasingly integrated and cohesive senior management group. They include:

- The evolution and development of a senior management network offer a powerful mechanism to foster coherence and integration at senior management levels in government organisations.
- Network participation supports the exchange of critical wisdom, knowledge, skill and expertise; the building of relationships and personal networks; and the sharing of resources in support of collaborative working.
- Network participation contributes directly to the development of leadership competencies for senior managers. It also contributes to distributed leadership throughout such organisations.
- Engaging in critical cross-organisational work is key to infusing the network with passion and purpose whilst also contributing to a whole-of-organisation view for all senior managers.
- Co-creating and co-owning the strategic development of the organisation is best accomplished through deep engagement at all levels across the organisation.
- Harnessing the power of peers is central to the ongoing vibrancy and health of the network.
- Network formation and functioning is significantly enhanced when the most senior executive officer is the network sponsor and when there is an identifiable subgroup that is retaining a keen eye on network development over time.

Beyond the above, the senior management network's commitment to excellence in strategy work has been educational between 2014 and 2018, and it holds great promise. Drawing on the experience of the network, Appendix I presents a distillation of good strategy work practices and their distinctive added value.

### **The journey ahead**

The EPA strives to be a learning organisation that readily embraces creativity, innovation and the pursuit of excellence in administrative reform. The formation and functioning of its senior management network is a prime example of such creativity and innovation. The benefits which have flowed to date have been significant and have been central to embedding both passion and purpose in the network and its related cross-organisational work.

As the network takes stock of progress to date and contemplates the years ahead, four questions appear to capture the heartbeat of network members at this time (as evidenced in the recent one-to-one interviews with senior managers):

- Should the ongoing formation and functioning of the network continue to be guided by its organic, fluid, dynamic and emergent nature?
- How can the perceived benefits of the senior management network be reproduced at other levels and amongst other groups across the agency?
- Should the network's programme of cross-organisational work be extended to incorporate a new emphasis on the implementation of the agency's *Human Resource Development Strategy (2017–2021)*?
- Does the collaborative capacity of the network need to be further strengthened in order to better meet increasing demands for resource sharing, which is a natural byproduct of collaborative working?

As the senior management network considers the questions posed above, it will naturally transition into the next phase of its evolution in the year ahead.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the difficult environment in which the government's *Public Service Reform Plan* was launched in 2011 and having due regard for the related challenges confronting a significant number of state bodies, this case study illustrates the power of positive leadership in times of significant change. It demonstrates how, even in the most challenging set of circumstances, senior managers can choose to embrace the challenge of transformational change with passion and purpose. It reveals the power of senior managers working in unison and it clarifies the benefits of engaging, enabling and empowering an organisation's people in shaping its future direction.

While the proposed merger of EPA–RPII was clearly the catalyst for transformational change, it was detailed attention to the transformational journey and related transformational shifts that contributed to achieving such positive outcomes. The transformational shift for eighteen senior managers, underpinned by the evolution and development of a senior management network, represents one of the most significant shifts in the EPA's transformational journey. It paved the way for a rich stream of benefits, many of which were not necessarily foreseen at the network's genesis, and which have flown across the agency's landscape. The transformational journey has been invaluable. It has left a positive imprint on all involved.

The case study illustrates the power of senior managers working in ways that are highly collaborative, supportive and purposeful. It demonstrates how focusing on the positive and commending all that is excellent releases the hidden potential of an organisation and its people in times of significant change. It draws attention to harnessing the hidden power and potential of peers in times of renewal and reform. The case study offers interesting insights and lessons for senior managers in government organisations, not least for members of the EPA's senior management network as it contemplates its own future direction and development in the months ahead.

## Appendix I:

### The value-adding nature of good strategy work practices

<i>Good strategy work practices</i>	<i>Distinctive added value</i>
1 Fostering a highly coordinated and integrated approach to strategy work, including all development and execution activities.	Coherent strategy framework, supporting action plans, implementation arrangements, implementation roadmaps and resourcing plans.
2 Nurturing a holistic approach to strategy work at corporate, business and functional levels.	Coherent family of strategies that are fully aligned and integrated and which promote affirmative and purposeful change across the organisation.
3 Developing an organisation that is fit for purpose and ready to deliver on its core vision, mission and mandate.	Reconfiguration of functions, resources and capabilities in order to promote swift strategy execution.
4 Translating strategy into a prioritised portfolio of change programmes and change projects.	Alignment of strategy, change programmes and change projects to promote speedy strategy execution.
5 Harnessing the collective leadership capacity and capability of all senior and middle managers across the organisation.	Development of senior and middle management networks where all managers work in unison in shaping the strategic direction and development of the organisation.
6 Adopting a values-based approach to all strategy work.	Enlivening, enriching and embedding the organisation's core values.
7 Fostering an approach to strategy work that emphasises co-creation, co-ownership and co-leadership at all levels across the organisation.	Promotes deep engagement and widespread ownership, and encourages distributed leadership in support of strategy development and execution.
8 Developing a pattern of strong social relationships and networks across the organisation.	Embeds a commitment to promoting organisational health and renewal on an ongoing basis.
9 Linking strategy work to development goals and objectives of all managers involved.	Enhancing system-wide coordination capacity and capabilities.

**Appendix I: (contd.)**

**The value-adding nature of good strategy work practices**

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	<i>Good strategy work practices</i>	<i>Distinctive added value</i>
10	Promoting the discipline and practice of continuous evaluation.	Strategies and action plans are always current and living.

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