

Conflict: government and policy team

Government



Case Study3 : The Poisoned Chalice: By Matthew McDonald, University of New South Wales Joseph had been a team leader for two years and felt he was ready to take the next step in his public service career. He had begun his career as a graduate trainee in the Department of Agriculture after completing a double degree in commerce and environmental science. After his traineeship he was offered permanency as a policy officer, eventually rising to the post of team leader. As a team leader Joseph felt he had gained the trust and respect of his four staff members and had learnt the basic skills of being a manager.

Joseph applied for various management positions within his own department without success. Undeterred, he applied for a position in another government department responsible for environment and heritage and was successful. The role involved taking over the position of manager of a “Taskforce” that had been set up five months previously. The taskforce was made up of 10 team members responsible for developing and implementing a set of government policies and programs designed to assist primary producers to manage better the environmental threats to their land.

Joseph couldn't have been happier with his new promotion and he looked forward to applying what he had learned as a team leader to the challenges of his new post. The taskforce itself was divided into two teams. The first team- “ the policy team” was responsible for developing policies in consultation with the minister's office that would underpin the programs to be eventually rolled out all over the country. This team was made up of highly experienced members. The second team- “ the implementation team” was responsible for implementing the policies developed by the policy team.

The job of the implementation team was to deal with the logistic of implementing the programs and working with the numerous stakeholders involved. For Joseph, everything started put well in his new position. He gradually got to know each of the team members, who seemed skilled and competent in each of their roles. He also began to understand better the job that the taskforce was required to do. However, as the days turned into weeks some major problems in the taskforce began to appear.

The first major problem was that other sections within the department were unhelpful and difficult to deal with when he made requests of them or sought to initiate collaborations. When he asked his staff why this was the case, the most common response was that the department had “ had it in” for the taskforce as posing a threat to their own positions. The bad blood between the taskforce and the rest of the department made Joseph’s position vary difficult because he and his staff were heavily reliant on other areas of the department for their expertise, advice and assistance in order to manage the project successfully.

The second major problem was the taskforce itself, Joseph began to realize that the two teams were highly antagonistic towards each other. This was evident in taskforce meetings, where there was an obvious hostility between them. Joseph also discovered that very little had been achieved since the taskforce was setup, and found that it was now well behind the government’s schedule. However, the full implications of Joseph’s predicament became apparent only after a revealing conversation with Alison, a junior member of the implementation team, while working back late one evening.

Alison told Joseph that the previous manager of the taskforce, John, had left the position because of the problems associated with it, everything had started out well; however, then the policy team had begun to treat the implementation team as inferior because the implementation team members were younger in age, were less experienced and had made a major blunder in the first few weeks by getting a national farmers' union offside. After this blunder the policy team had begun to refer to the implementation team as 'the idiots'.

The policy team had also taken a superior attitude towards members of other sections within the department because of their close relationship with the minister's office. This problem came to a head after a chain of emails had been leaked to the rest of the department by a member of the implementation team, who had inadvertently received them, in the emails, members of the policy team had made disparaging remarks about people from other section with whom they had been working, this had created a furors in the department.

As a result, a number of formal complaints about members of the policy team had been made. Instead of dealing with this and the other problem associated with the taskforce, the previous manager, John, had closeted himself away in his office, hoping they would go away. Realizing that events were starting to get out of control, John's manager, Max, had stepped in to try and sort out the situation. He had done this by speaking with all of the taskforce members both individually and as a group.

This had made a difference for a short time: however, the antagonism between the two teams in the taskforce had eventually returned, and it had

seemed the nothing could be done to repair the damage inflicted by the leaking of the emails. It was at this point that John had resigned. Due to the taint that hung over the taskforce, no one in the department had been willing to apply for the now vacant position of taskforce manager. After speaking with Alison, Joseph realized he had been handed a “poisoned chalice” that nobody else wanted.

He became very worried that the taskforce would not meet the departments’ and the government’s objectives and timelines, and the he would be blamed for its failure, adversely affecting his long-term career and future promotion prospects. Discussion Questions 1. Using the “model of conflict processes”, identify the sources of conflict between the policy team and the implementation team. 2. Were Max’s actions appropriate in this situation? If so, why? If not, what should he have done instead? 3. What actions should Joseph take to ensure that the taskforce meets the government’s objectives and timelines?