Organising for Accountability in the New Zealand Department of Conservation

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Abstract

The 1995 tragedy at Cave Creek on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island caused wide ranging reviews and public debate about the fundamental reason for the disaster. One important characteristic of the debate at the time was the inability to reconcile the differing explanations for how such a tragedy could have occurred. Pursuing these differing views would lead to different analyses of the problems and their solutions. Over the subsequent years it has become clear that these different views have at their root, contrasting paradigms of thinking - linear and systemic. Although the Noble inquiry identified a primary cause of the failure as systemic, the lack of public understanding of the paradigm has meant that many people remain wedded to the idea of direct blame. Following the tragedy the Department has engaged in an expanding process of improvement. This has proceeded through a number of cycles and phases extending across the organisation and achieving deeper levels of insight over time. This process has moved beyond the specific responses to the tragedy to illuminating the complex inter-relationships within organisations of structures, technical systems, procedures, human motivation and initiative. This paper describes these processes of learning and improvement and highlights the next level of challenges faced by the Department.

The views expressed in this paper are the personal observations of Keith Johnston and Peter Cooper and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Conservation (DoC).

The First Seven Years

The Department of Conservation was formed in 1987 as a result of the first round of the mid-to late-1980's restructuring of the New Zealand public sector. The Department was set up to manage New Zealand's protected natural and historic heritage and drew together staff from 6 previous government agencies. The task of creating a new unified organisation with a single purpose out of the three main parent agencies, each with different purposes, structures and cultures, was difficult. It was far from complete when the new department was subjected to a full restructuring eighteen months later. This restructuring followed a financial crisis in 1988 and took place in 1989 and 1990. It removed a tier of management (principally to reduce overhead costs) but reconfirmed the emphasis on decentralisation and the matrix structure of the organisation.

In the new matrix structure (which was consistent with organisational thinking and structures of the time) the 14 conservancies were managed by regional conservators reporting directly to the Director General. Nine head office directors and a number of other head office managers had responsibility for providing policy advice and overseeing functional issues across the organisation.

The unsettling effects of the establishment and the restructuring of DoC on staff and their performance was compounded by the fact that in its first three and a half years the Department had three Director Generals (and substantial periods with an Acting Director General) and four ministers.

In 1990 a new Director General was appointed with instructions to concentrate, in particular, on bringing the Department's financial performance up to government standards and improving the management within the Department of issues that were politically sensitive. To address these and other pressing systems issues, while providing staff with the job stability necessary to begin again to focus on their work, he decided to make no further changes to the structure of the organisation. A number of changes were made to systems and standards. These included strengthening of the Department's financial management, the introduction of a comprehensive annual business planning process and the articulation of a clear high-level strategic direction for the Department. These were recognised in external reviews of the Department as being significant improvements. With hindsight, however, it can be seen that some of the advances, such as the business planning system were factors that, although necessary to meet external requirements, would constrain the Department's development.

Beyond the Cave Creek Tragedy - Cycles of Improvement

On 28 April 1995, the collapse of a viewing platform built by the Department on the West Coast of the South Island resulted in the deaths of 14 people. The subsequent commission of inquiry ³ and review of the Department ⁴ focused on accountability in terms of the individuals involved. However, Judge Noble also noted that whilst the primary cause of the collapse "was that the platform was not constructed in accordance with sound building practice", "substantial systemic failure was the pre-eminent secondary cause of the collapse."

Judge Noble presented the finding of systemic failure in the context of the way the Department had failed to ensure an adequate structure was built at the particular site. However the tragedy sparked processes of improvement within the Department that have gone way beyond the events surrounding Cave Creek or weaknesses identified by the tragedy. These processes can be seen as operating at different layers, circling outward across the Department's work. There is not a

finishing point to this work; it is a process of continuous learning and improvement which involves both reaching out to affect new areas and cycling back to review progress and apply new insights to areas that may already have been "addressed". Over time, these improvement cycles (listed below) have reached further across the fields of DoC's work and achieved deeper impacts. It is these cycles, their impacts and inter-connections, that are the focus of this paper.

Cycles of Improvement

- 1. Post-tragedy response Development of an improved project management system for visitor structures:
- 2. Expansion of project management approach across other DoC functions; and achieving compliance with all recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry and State Services Commissioner's review;
- 3. Recognition of the need to change the whole DoC "system":
 - a) Changes to DoC structure,
 - b) New strategy, further extensive systems changes,
 - c) Skills, staff and style changes; revisiting systems changes, strategy and shared values;
- 4. Next level of organisational analysis and improvements understanding dynamic interactions and feedbacks within DoC and in the external environment.

First and Second Cycles

In the period following the Cave Creek tragedy and during the conducting of the subsequent Commission of Inquiry, the Department, working with consultants, developed a new and more comprehensive project management system for the development of visitor structures. This was commented on favourably by the Judge. As implementation of this system began, a parallel process was begun to extend project management approach consistently across all the Department's main operational areas..

As the terms of reference for the Commission of Inquiry had been limited to the collapse of the particular platform, at its conclusion the State Services Commissioner instituted a wider ranging inquiry, led by a prominent private sector manager, into the state of the Department's management systems across the country and the performance of the chief executive. This review concluded that the Department's systems were comparable to those in other public sector agencies, that the chief executive had performed well and had project management systems in place at the time in the West Coast conservancy been followed the tragedy would have not occurred.

The Review conducted for the SSC and the Commission of Inquiry both made a number of recommendations for improvements. Inasmuch as these could be delivered on by the Department, these were complied with quickly and in full. Along with the implementation of the improved Quality Conservation Management system the Department had done enough to provide important safeguards against any future systems avoidance. This could have been the end of the process.

The process of change did not end at this point because the Director General was not satisfied that the changes made would be sufficient to ensure quality performance across the range of the Department's work or that enough had been done to be assured that, over time, public confidence in the Department could be rebuilt. With the agreement of the then Minister, he sought the assistance of three private sector business leaders experienced in the management of quality

improvement in complex organisations to work as an oversight group and advise on the overall efficacy of the approach the Department was taking.

This group reported in June 1996 that "it will be ineffectual and inefficient to attempt to introduce a sound QCM system without also focusing on important organisation and policy/procedure issues". This paved the way for the third cycle of improvement work – the re-forming of the whole of the DoC "system".

In July 1996, a study of the organisation was conducted to uncover the key systemic performance issues. This "organisational diagnostic" examined the impact of the structure and systems of organisation on the working relationships between people within it. This was a turning point because it was the first time that the effectiveness of the organisation had been comprehensively analysed in this way.

This expansion of the scope of the changes envisaged for the Department took DoC into a more contentious and higher risk environment. The introduction of the changes, in the face of predictable resistance, concern and questioning as to their necessity was difficult. It was made more complex due to the co-incidence of an uncertain political environment as New Zealand made the transition to a new form of voting and the creation of a coalition government. The DoC changes could not have been put in place without strong and committed leadership from the then Director General. The continuation of this work and the building of a philosophy of improvement across the Department has been based on the drive of the current Director General.

Organisational Diagnostic

The organisational diagnostic provided a systemic view of the whole Department. It found a lack of line management had been inherent in the matrix design of 1987 that had been confirmed in the 1989/90 restructuring. To address issues of control across the matrix structure central control systems were developed over time in the form of:

- A detailed business planning system with work across the country organised into 8000 projects,
- The allocation of new monies through nationally coordinated priority funds
- A consensual management approach that involved national advice and often coordination of operational delivery and was consequently interventionist and time-consuming, and
- A particular focus on more central involvement in managing community relations and political issues (the latter of which could grow quickly from local to national issues of direct concern to Ministers).

These control systems had the effect of centralising decisions but did not provide adequate control because of the degree of autonomy of Regional Conservators. The Department was not capable of ensuring the effective implementation of and ongoing compliance to appropriate uniform standards and procedures.

A further consequence of the combination of autonomy and centralised control of funding was diminished accountability of both Conservators and Field Centre Managers. Without any regular means of reviewing performance there was no systemic means to control the behaviour of the organisation.

The control systems that did exist interacted with the matrix structure of the organisation and external factors to also constrain the progress of the Department. Take the case of business

planning, the strongest of the Department's systems. It was designed to ensure the highest priority conservation work was being done and that these outputs could be clearly purchased by the Minister and progress could be reported on this work. The system was successful in enabling the Department to make significant progress toward achieving these objectives. The system was also a constraint. It was very detailed, made more complex by having to operate in a matrix system and it became a strong centralising force when combined with changes in the allocation of monies.

An extended period of budget reductions in the late 80s and early 90s meant that business planning at the conservancy and field centre level involved spending increasing amounts on allocating decreasing amounts of time and money and then reporting on what was done. When new money became available its allocation was tightly focused and centrally controlled. These factors meant that managers with responsibility for delivery had very little discretion. What discretion they did enjoy was more difficult to exercise because of a lack of national strategic directions, although good progress had been made on this at the vision and goals level.

The Department found it difficult to provide this clear national direction because there was so much "churning" at Head Office. "Churning", the back and forwards re-working of material, occurred because of the number of Head Office divisions (each with a different agenda), the way the urgent usually crowds out the important, the extent of Head Office involvement in coordinating delivery actions and overseeing compliance, and the focus on detail across the system. The ability to provide clear national direction was also limited because Ministers were generally reluctant to approve reductions in any outputs.

More detail was also added to the business planning system because the lack of line management meant business planning became a surrogate management system.

These factors had two significant effects:

- While there were large amounts of staff time going into setting priorities in conservancies and
 in reporting requirements, the core of the system was the centralised allocation of resources
 through detailed priorities set and/or reviewed in Head Office and broadly agreed with the
 Ministers.
- The centralising factors also encouraged game-playing behaviours to win or control resources (in the absence of clear authorities) and counter-productive tensions in the Department.

This example illustrates the way a potentially strong system constrained the Department because of the ways it interacted with other aspects of the organisation.

In a national operational organisation, the matrix structure created significant difficulties. As illustrated in fig 1, from the Director General's perspective, 24 direct reports (14 Regional Conservators and 10 Head Office positions) obviated his ability to personally ensure accountability. The impact of the consensual approach on Conservators was to confuse the Director General's authority. Accountability for contentious issues was confused by the joint accountability of the matrix structure; the Regional Conservator being responsible for issues within his or her geographic area and the relevant Head Office director being responsible for issues in their area of functional responsibility.

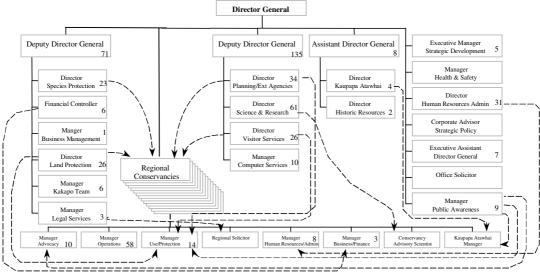


Fig 1 Operation of the DoC structure in June 1996

In the performance of their roles, Regional Conservators were required to balance the sometimes competing advice of Head Office directors, financial constraints and the requirements of the field. The inefficiencies and delays generated sluggish overall performance and some of the Department's customers expressed concern at the impact on their businesses.

The diagnostic led to the conclusion that the Department of Conservation would find it difficult to implement the proposed quality control system, Quality Conservation Management (QCM) unless significant structural and operational change took place. The lack of "line management would not enable the Department to control the implementation of quality standards.

Table 1 summarises the results of the Diagnostic. It is based in the McKinsey Seven S model for viewing organisational performance. The only "S" not included is Shared Values for which the Department was thought to be well equipped.

Area	Situation	Outcomes
Strategy Structure	 Good vision, beginnings of strategies Priorities hard to define A missing level of line management and its appropriate staff support Very large staff groups with mixed responsibilities for policy, external relations and operations 	 Weak managerial accountability and authority resulting in Need to use informal forms of control Ad hoc behaviours Over control through budget system Inability to get SOPs applied across all conservancies Large amounts of resources applied to External relations Accounting Human resources
Systems	All powerful 8000 project business planning system Weak ability to enforce standard operating procedures into the conservancies No effective operating review of conservators Overwhelming adhocracy of external relations	
Skills	Low on directive or line managerial skills at HO level	
Staff	Large staff groups	_
Style	Cooperative and consensual at HO, sometimes consensual in Conservancy offices, autonomy at the Conservancy level	

Table 1 : Results of Organisational Diagnostic

Cultural Influences on Change and Improved Performance

The creation of the Department was the result of the combination of two political forces:

- a) a campaign by non-government environment and recreation organisations fixed to combine all the conservation functions through a number of Government agencies in one agency with a strong conservation mandate; and
- b) the changes led by the Treasury to extract productive businesses from government departments (e.g. forestry and land development).

Much of the Department's work is inherently controversial because of the underlying tensions between conservation and development. The execution of its legislative mandate requires an adversarial approach in some instances. On the other hand, the value of its work is widely appreciated by many New Zealanders. In this environment, it is no surprise that some commercial interests sought to limit the range of DoC's activity and that green political forces staunchly defended it.

The Cave Creek tragedy provided ammunition for those opposed to DoC's activities, with the subsequent public debate, as many before had been, being highly political. The response of the Department and conservation and recreation groups was to strengthen resistance to changes that threatened the overall mandate of the organisation and in particular the highly-valued capacity to integrate all the conservation management functions at a local and national level. This latter feature puts New Zealand at the leading edge of conservation management internationally.

The consequence was a system of organisation that was very stable and resistant to change. There were four cultural barriers to improved performance:

- Commitment to conservation and colleagues led to:
 - managers not confronting performance issues because of the risk of removing their own support systems;
 - a determination "to do something about it" when faced with a conservation problem whether a quality job could be done or not; and
 - making do with internal resources because, in the short term, staff hours were more available than dollars to buy particular expertise.
- Accountability was diffused to such an extent that individual responsibility to act was not clear.
- Performance was reduced through aversion to risk.
- Attention was paid to detail at the expense of efficiency and effectiveness.

Other aspects of the culture enabled change. These included:

- The horror of staff at the Cave Creek tragedy.
- The existence of a clear and agreed conservation vision.
- Senior management being clear about the importance of integrated conservation management and aware of the wider threats to this approach and the organisation.
- Acceptance that it was better for DoC to manage change processes and be able to retain the integrated approach.
- General acceptance of the need for greater accountability, quality management systems, stronger line management and devolved responsibilities away from the centre.

Strategy for Change – The Third Cycle of Improvement

The strategy for change comprised six sequenced actions.

- 1. Creating a devolved structure that provided strong operational line management, each level having a clearly defined and **separate** role from adjacent levels, was designed to enable accountability to be established. [See Organisational Chart]
- 2. The management of numerous and diverse community relations issues was altered to ensure resolution (as much as possible at local levels) without undermining the managerial hierarchy and where necessary ensuring an appropriate service to the Minister. This applied leverage by reducing the pervasive political impact of managing "adverse political events"
- 3. The disciplined institution of standard operating procedures was designed to reduce risk by improving the clarity of how to perform tasks. Reducing the perceived need for centralised control is essential to increasing discretion and enhancing personally felt responsibility.
- 4. Regular manager-employee reviews of system performance were designed to provide the mechanism for disciplined compliance and monitoring of controls. Increased focus on performance of the system complemented the structural changes by constantly clarifying the role of line managers.
- 5. A strategic business plan was prepared to provide coherent direction and clearer linkages between the higher-level departmental strategies and specific on-the-ground priorities.
- 6. Following the structural changes and establishment of new management teams, a shift in leadership style through the organisation was required for individual performance issues to be confronted.

Both the integrated application of a range of changes and their sequencing was important to success. The structural change formed the first phase of this cycle of systemic improvement (listed as 3(a) earlier). It was the essential first step to unravel the complex mix of roles, break down existing power relationships and provide new line management roles. The reduction of 'churning' released energy and resources to drive the change especially in the regions.

The second phase of this cycle of improvement involved actions 2-5 listed above. Implementation of systemic performance reviews (the Operating Review System) closely followed the structural change to re-inforce the new style of operation. This was essential to provide ongoing pressure for change to counter-balance the strongly embedded resistance. It also served to move beyond a focus on vast quantities of detail to regular managerial prioritisation of important issues.

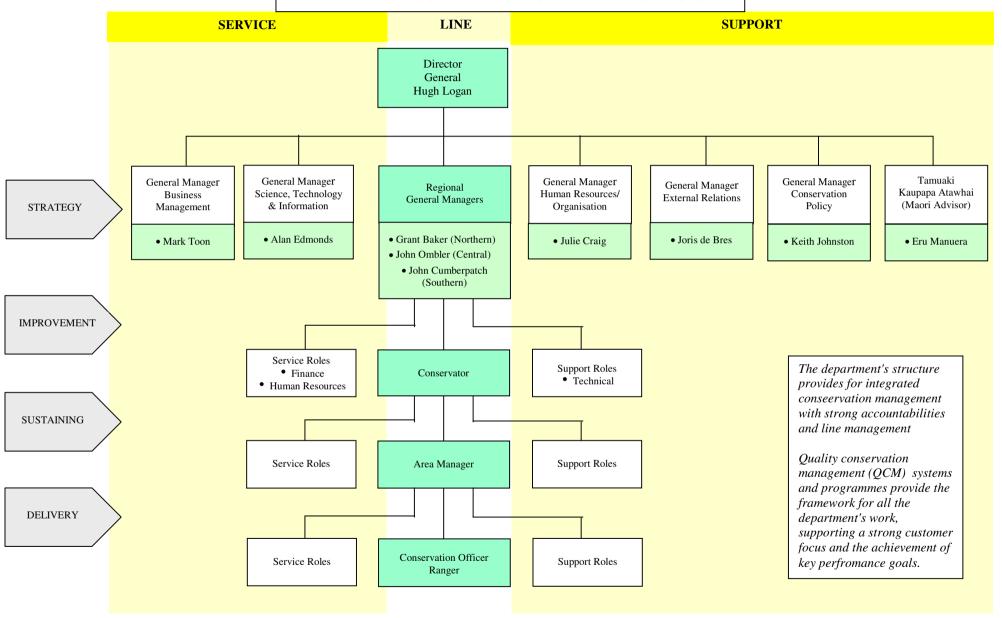
The third phase of this improvement cycle focused on changes in style and management skills to improve performance and revisited systems and strategies.

Current Status of Organisational Health

All components of the above strategy have been implemented or are underway and progress towards improved performance of the whole system was reviewed in an "Organisational Health Check" twelve months after completion of the structural changes. There has also been a number of external reviews of Departmental performance.

The main objective of the internal "Organisational Health Check" was to identify the three to five key actions that would continue to drive the change. This recognises the ongoing nature of systemic improvement and the health checks will be an annual event.

DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION - ORGANISATION STRUCTURE



From an internal perspective, the general result of the Health Check was positive, staff believed the restructuring has been successful. They felt increased accountability for their actions and reported a better understanding of their individual roles. The key actions identified were to:

- Further clarify staff roles;
- Improve the management of performance;
- Be certain that decisions are being made at the right level in the organisation;
- Strengthen the capacity of regional offices to improve performance across DoC; and
- Reduce overheads.

The Fourth Cycle of Improvement – Managing Interacting Dynamics

Further improvement will now depend on a deeper understanding of a number of environmental and systemic challenges. The interaction between internal and external dynamics create situations where the outcomes are often different to those intended:

Unintended Consequences of Public Service Transparency

The democratic transparency of the public service driven by public accountability through the political system and access to information (eg through the Official Information Act) are both short-term processes. This drives a public focus on direct causes and effects rather than longer term, systemic improvement. Knowing that information will shortly be made public encourages behaviour that demonstrates that the situation in question is under control. The focus is on quick fixes rather than more systematic approaches that accept the uncertainties involved and contexts that may defy easy explanation, Changes to achieve long-term systemic improvements can also involve initial reductions in performance before the improvements emerge. The short term public focus mitigates against such systemic improvement and drives risk-averse behaviours especially for an agency whose work is naturally controversial.

Internal Dynamics driven by Financial Pressures

DOC's work is done against a background of wide-spread and ongoing ecosystem degradation. The enormity of the task of arresting the combined impact of natural predators and human activity is obvious to the staff of DoC. The limited funding available to do this work and the commitment of many staff to do as much as possible creates a poverty trap with pervasive consequences.

Limited funding combined with the commitment to preserve jobs internally drives internal resourcefulness and a reluctance to use external resources. Staff hours are more available, in the short term, than operating dollars. The pursuit of low cost alternatives has traditionally overridden best quality (and usually higher priced) approaches. This strong cultural driver was in a contributor to the situation that resulted in the Cave Creek tragedy.

This frugality is deeply ingrained in DoC's culture, it is an underlying value of environmentalism and is a strong community expectation. It occurs throughout the Department in formal and informal systems including staff selection, internal communications and the shared values of the organisation. Changing this is a long term project that started with the implementation of Quality Conservation Management (QCM), was supported by structural change and continues to be driven by changes to internal systems of control.

This issue would persist, even if conservation funding were to be increased significantly. The problem is the need to shift from an external and internal culture of doing as much as possible with whatever is available to ensuring that the highest priority tasks are done to agreed quality standards.

Entrenched aversion to confronting issues

The history of the Department encompasses the political tension between environmental and economic goals of government. DoC's right to exist has come under question from time to time. Aspects of the Department's work are controversial and this is often felt directly by staff in the small communities where many live and work. Staff are often, themselves, strongly committed to conservation. A consequence of these factors has been the evolution of a strong sense of family within the Department. In an environment where external issues impact on individuals, and mutual dependence is part of working in small teams, a strong sense of unity is required for mutual support. In this family context it is often difficult for individuals (manager – staff member) to confront performance issues.

Drive to centralisation caused by purchase paradigm.

The purchaser/provider split in the public sector identifies the Minister as the primary customer of the department representing the public of New Zealand. The Minister's short term monitor of Departmental performance is the feedback received in the form of Ministerial correspondence and the issues raised with him by Ministerial and Parliamentary colleagues, which, in turn, stem from correspondence or direct representation on issues. Thus a strong feedback loop exists between the level of adverse political events and the level of confidence that the Minister has in the Department. The natural short term Departmental reaction to this is to use centralised controls to "manage" political risks.

The detailed reporting on performance, occasioned by the purchase agreement, also prompts centralisation. The details, which mean less and less the more they are aggregated, encourage intervention by central managers into the business of delivery. But, without an understanding of the context in which delivery decisions were made, it is difficult for these managers to add value at a distance to how conservation services are being delivered.

The pressure to centralise is directly opposed to establishing accountability at the individual level. If decisions are made centrally, then authority is removed from decentralised staff who are closest to the situation at hand and who have the local information. The issues that then arise relate to quality, and, where appropriate, national consistency. The Department's quality system depends on standard processes and the timely judgement of individuals within clear authority limits.

The Department needs to ensure delivery decisions are made as locally as possible, while communicating through the line and with the Minister's office on issues as they threaten to arise. In the design of the restructured Department specific provision was made for managing these opposing pressures. Beyond DoC, modification of the purchase paradigm by central government agencies to place it in the context of public ownership would provide an enhanced environment for improved performance.

Managing Dynamic Complexity

The interaction of forces described above creates a strong pressure on the department to get it right first time. This is turn places emphasis on detail – having every i dotted and every t crossed.

With the emphasis on competency to manage detail, there is little to encourage the development of competency to manage the dynamic ways these and other factors interact and the impacts on the natural and social environment.

The challenge then, is to show how the assumption of direct cause and effect is in some cases producing the opposite result from that expected. Contrary to expectations, a pure approach to purchase without attention to ownership reduces performance, transparency drives risk aversion and lowers performance, direct pressure on performance increases resistance to the systems that encourage improved performance.

With the substantial progress that has been made, the Department is now well placed to address these more complex challenges. The next steps involve DoC identifying and taking actions that will support cycles of positive feedback to provide better conservation results. These cycles need to be robust, to withstand the impacts of the inevitable variations in the natural and human environment. Some of the cycles occur outside the Department, some are internal and others overlap the boundaries.

The World Outside

The Department needs to be able to more clearly demonstrate that it is adding value for New Zealanders through the effective management of their conservation heritage. This means being able to describe the condition of conservation and recreation assets and how management will improve that condition (or slow its decline) in ways that the public value. Managers need to know what the public want and to describe how their conservation heritage is changing and what can be done to meet the public's desires. This means being able to describe attainable conservation outcomes, the relative value these outcomes represent for the cost of achieving them and show that this value is being achieved.

Demonstrating that value is being added through conservation management is complicated by our limited understanding of the state of the heritage, the functioning of natural systems and the often long timescales involved.

Despite these difficulties, continued improvement in these areas will lead to positive feedback from the public, directly to the Department and indirectly through the Minister, providing the conditions for ongoing public investment in conservation management.

In the public sector as a whole, a key step to performance improvement will be achieved through the government, through the Minister, focusing on its ownership rather than its purchase role. A change from the dominance of the purchase paradigm is critical to enable a shift from cause and effect to systemic design. As owner, the government is concerned with understanding how investments in capacity can improve total outcomes rather than trying to define in detail the outputs required. DoC's ability to show clearly how it is able to achieve conservation outcomes in cost-effective ways is critical to reaching a position where central agencies and Ministers have confidence that outcome achievement can be accounted for.

Dynamics Within DoC

Within the Department improvements in national performance will need to focus on the actions suggested below and build an understanding of how these actions interrelate:

- Develop the capacity to understand and communicate how the natural and human-made systems DoC works with function and interact and ways to build this evolving understanding into departmental decision making as a matter of course;
- Recognise the general public and specific groups in the community as "customers", understand what conservation services they value and attend to performance at a detailed level. This requires that individuals at the local level have sufficient discretion to act responsibly before issues arise. In turn this requires a devolution of power which can only be achieved progressively as systems are improved and central agencies and Head Office gain confidence in the discretion of staff at the local level
- Change the Department's culture so that there is a stronger expectation the performance will be managed effectively. In this, managers and staff will be clear about how the work of individuals and teams contributes to the total organisational performance; exceptional work will be well rewarded, poor performance will be dealt with effectively;
- Integrate control systems within DoC so that they operate consistently and staff receive clear signals about what is required of them This requires a step-by-step redesigning of systems using a coherent design approach that improves understanding of the way specific parts of the system interact and the overall dynamic effects.

We believe each of these changes is important. But more important is the growth within the organisation of a culture of inquiry, learning and improvement toward achieving better conservation results for the New Zealand public (whose heritage it is and who, in the main, pay the bills). In this environment, each staff member will have confidence that the rest of the organisation is doing its job to the best of their colleague's abilities. The individual staff member's focus will then be on their contribution and how it fits into the overall scheme of things. They will understand what is expected of them, have thought through and discussed with their manager how they will deliver and feel personally responsible for the results of their work and, in the case of managers, their team's work. And they will be looking for ways to improve that contribution for the greater good. Staff will be proud to belong to an organisation that is publicly recognised as a leader in conservation achievement and public service. They will gain satisfaction from achieving their tasks as they contribute to the whole.

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