

## **The Chain of Command Model: A Case Study of One Organisation's Journey to Re-Value Public Affairs**

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**Abstract:** In the 21st century organisations need to be effective managers of their relationships with key stakeholders, be they customers, employees, government, media or local communities. However, the management function charged with facilitating this process, public affairs, is often run as an auxiliary activity rather than as core business. Even in progressive organisations where the public affairs function is valued and the public affairs specialists' voices are heard at senior management level, there is still difficulty justifying the function's contribution to the bottom line.

A new model of public affairs has been developed by the Australian Defence Force's Defence Public Affairs Branch that re-values the staff function of public affairs and places the responsibility for achieving public affairs objectives with line management. In the new structure all commanders must manage public affairs as a fundamental business practice in the same way they manage ammunition, personnel and their operational objectives. The message is essentially that the management of issues, media and ultimately the reputation of the organisation, is everyone's business. This paper follows the journey Defence Public Affairs travelled to develop the model and examines if it holds any lessons for the public affairs function in the corporate sector.

**Keywords:** Public affairs/public relations, Issues Management, organisation effectiveness

Gaining a seat at the senior management table is seen as the ultimate goal of many public affairs professionals (Gregory, 2004). Achievement of this goal signifies that the function so often undermined by its lineage (specifically its roots in publicity and press agency), has finally achieved a reputable status and is a valued part of business.

Despite public affairs gaining this position in increasing numbers (Lindsay, 2003), organisations continue to make poor public affairs decisions that impact negatively on their reputations. Despite the 'seat at the table', many public affairs professionals continue to deal with crises, rather than have the opportunity to resolve the problems as issues long before they've reached the crisis stage. There remains a lack of acceptance of the function by line management who see public affairs as an irritating necessity, a waste of valuable resources (Allen, 2004) or a dumping ground for difficult problems (Jaques, 2000). Finally, despite a seat at the table, public affairs continues to struggle to justify its contribution to the organisation's bottom line.

Australian Defence Public Affairs (ADPA) has developed a model that integrates public affairs processes and responsibility into the existing management structure, so that achieving public affairs outcomes becomes everyone's business. In essence, DPA has re-discovered the staff function of public affairs (Cutlip, Centre & Broom, 2006). The model removes the focus from public affairs senior managers sitting at the management table and instead, empowers all managers with the public affairs responsibility. Although public affairs remains an area of staff specialisation, it has also

become a central business objective on which all managers must deliver. It shifts the responsibility for achieving public affairs outcomes to line management. This case study will examine the journey Defence Public Affairs travelled to develop the model and examines if it holds any lessons for the public affairs function in the corporate sector.<sup>1</sup>

### **The State of Public Affairs**

Public Affairs in Australia is a 'hybrid' model (Allen, 2005:359) of what was previously called public relations or communications functions in large organisations. The function has grown from two distinct clusters of historical development (Allen, 1999): firstly, public relations activities such as media management, external communications, internal communications, publicity, events and publications; and secondly, from government and regulatory affairs activities by which companies monitor legislative and regulatory arrangements and, where appropriate, pursue their interests. The two approaches have become increasingly integrated into a holistic approach reflecting recognition that all of these tactics are part of the same process of 'winning social and political mandate from the community' (Allen, 1999:3).

Importantly, the focus has shifted from an outward focus by organisations to stakeholders, to finding and interpreting messages from stakeholders to the organisation. The public affairs function uses its 'boundary spanning' (Kitchen, 1997:14) role to counsel management and influence corporate planning and activity so as to best align corporate and community interests. Cutlip, Centre & Broom (2006) call public affairs a staff function, taking the definition from the line-staff management model that originated in the military but is now used in many large organisations. At its most simple, line functions or management include the organisation's product and profit-producing functions. Staff functions, in contrast, are those that advise and assist line executives, for example, human resources and legal departments (2006:58).

Public affairs, like public relations, resists comprehensive definition and so is often described in terms of processes and responsibilities. For example Finlay (1994) describes public affairs as three key functions: managing change, defining the organisation's role in society and setting the corporate vision and purpose. Allen believes that the public affairs function, at current best practice "combines both sophisticated communication and influencing strategy and processes (internal and external) with analysis and management of the external social and political issues that affect a business – by doing so it contributes at a high level to the achievement of the company's business imperatives" (1999:3).

Central to the value contributed by public affairs (PA) is its involvement in strategic decision making at an organisational level. However, Steiner & Black's (2000) survey of the public relations function in Australian corporate organisations suggests that most Australian organisations then saw only a limited role for PR professionals in corporate strategic planning. "Instead, public relations professionals continue to serve primarily as communicators of corporate views and actions rather than as shapers of those views and actions" (2000:70).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was developed based on the knowledge of the model's architect, the Director General of Defence Public Affairs during this period, now retired Brigadier General, Mike Hannan, and research conducted by Zoe Hibbert, who has a six year educational and professional relationship with ADF through Charles Sturt University.

A more recent survey of Australian corporate organisations conducted in 2003 confirms that the strategic value of the public affairs function is increasingly recognised by business and that PA departments continue to focus on aligning internal and external strategies with the major strategic drivers of the business (Lindsay, 2003:3).

Lindsay reports that 69% of respondents said their PA departments participated in the strategic planning process for their businesses. Seventy nine percent of respondents regularly prepared its own strategic plan although only 45% have formally linked this to the corporate strategic plan (2003:3).

The survey's author identifies reputation management as a key force driving the increased perception of public affairs in organisations. "The introduction of triple bottom line reporting has provided an impetus for the PA function. The need to demonstrate performance against criteria other than financial outputs forces organisations to measure their intangibles" (2003:3). The 2003 survey reports that 75% of senior public affairs practitioners are members of their organisation's senior management committee, an increase from 64% in 2000. The public affairs function still retains the responsibility for managing issues and crises despite some indications that organisations are recognising this as a shared responsibility.

Although the survey indicates growing recognition by organisations of the value of public affairs, there remain many challenges, often driven by opposition from line management. Allen (2004:1) believes that perception of business managers towards public affairs is still based on old models of public relations and one-way asymmetrical communication, rather than the strategic and integrated business approach adopted by modern practitioners. Commonly held assumptions about the public affairs role includes resentment towards the head office PA team because they are either too isolated or too parochial and too expensive; and that they provide a peripheral service which is expensive and time wasting (2004:1).

Often the public affairs function is poorly resourced, yet charged with the task of achieving significant changes to the organisation's reputation. In essence, the function is tasked to manage the interface between the organisation and its stakeholders, yet does not have the corporate knowledge, control of the products or the budget to achieve such goals without the will of line management.

One of the key factors determining the structure of PA in any organisation is its relative complexity (Wilcox & Cameron, 2005:99). Large complex organisations are more likely than smaller firms to include PA in the policy making process because they are more sensitive to policy issues and public attitudes and to establishing a solid corporate identity. In such organisations the power and authority of PR is quite high, because the organisation recognises the PA benefit to the corporate bottom line. The opposite is also true. Small-scale low complexity organisations feel few public pressures and little governmental regulatory interest, hence the PR function has little input into management decision making and policy formation (2005:99). Mezner believes it is vital that the PA model 'matches or fits' the organisation's structure, PA strategy and socio-political environment because it "cannot be evaluated in a vacuum" (2005:193).

### **Development of The ADF Public Affairs Model**

The ADF public affairs model has evolved over time, and its development provides some insights into how the organisation has thought about the

function. The shift has taken six years, and there have been several iterations of the model over this time.

### **Model 1 – The Media Relations Function**

The modern version of Australian Defence Public Affairs (DPA) grew from the Army's media unit which was staffed by public relations officers and tasked to service the media. DPA's mission was constrained by Defence's limited understanding of the higher levels of public affairs and the ADF's culture during the late 90s. Commanders were generally suspicious of the media, viewing them as either 'bastards who were out to get Defence' or deliverers of 'good news stories' (public affairs officer, 2005, pers.comms., March 25). The public affairs teams were poorly resourced and the function was not valued by senior command, as demonstrated by their exclusion from decision making in important ADF operations, such as the 1999 operations in support of East Timor.

Public Affairs planning for Timor was an afterthought with limited resources provided at the last minute. Having been excluded from the planning process, the PA organisation did not have a plan beyond a general belief that it should service the media and 'sell' good stories. As the operation developed, there was a gradual realisation that an improved method of directing the PA effort was needed.

The commander of the East Timor operation, then Major General Peter Cosgrove (later Chief of Australian Defence Forces 2002-2005), intuitively understood the need to win the hearts and minds of the Australian people, and the need to influence the attitudes of the world community. His personal approach to the media was run almost disconnected from the efforts of the remainder of the PA effort.

Overall, the media's needs were catered for by the PA organisation during Timor. Media were embedded and had open access to the troops and commanders. Indeed, media have commented in recent times that coverage of the Timor conflict is a high point in the ADF/media relationship (Hibbert, 2004). However, the national objectives of Australia were poorly served by ADF's PA effort. The Indonesian news agency ANTARA consistently provided the world with images and words that told their opposing story. Apart from the effort of Commander Cosgrove, the same level of national involvement was missing from Timor.

### **Model 2 – A Seat at The Table Model**

At about the same time as the deployment to Timor, a new centralised and independent public affairs function was developed within the Department of Defence, under the sanction of the Secretary of Defence, the most senior public servant within the department.

Central to the new model was a redefinition of the purpose of DPA and its relationship with the media. If the original DPA model had the media at the centre of the world, the new model reversed that notion and placed the focus on the organisation. PA sought to make itself an arm of the organisation, working entirely to the organisation's agenda.

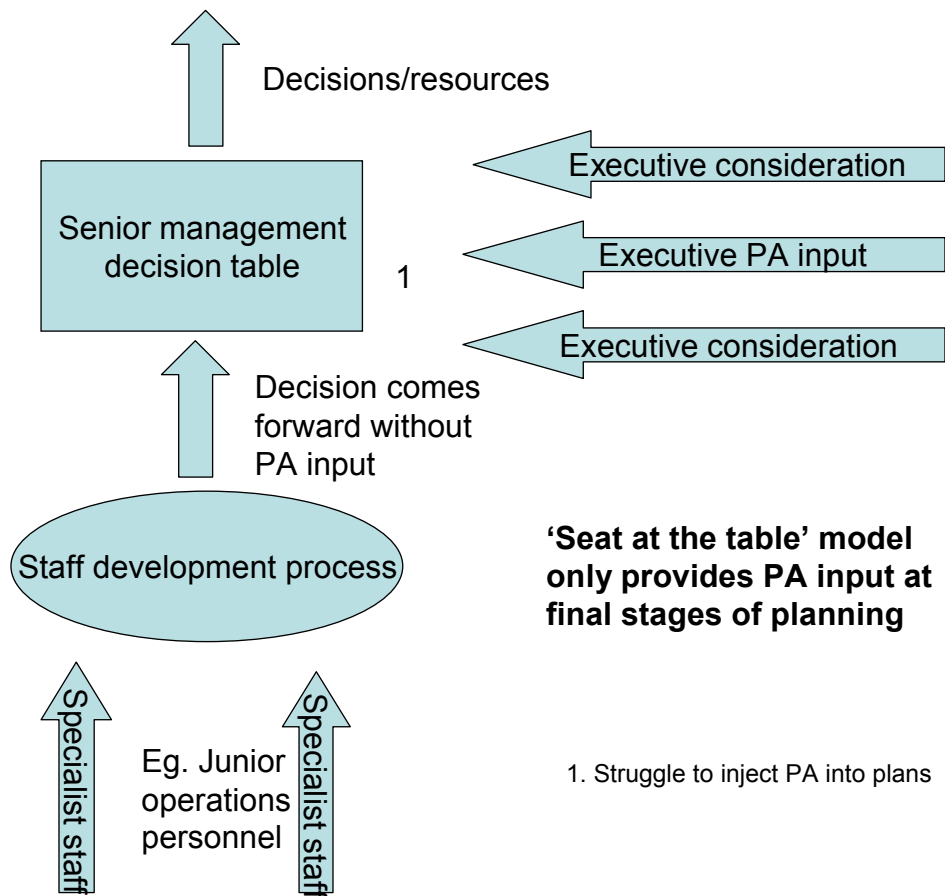
The new PA model had been gathered under a single command (or management) and was provided with independent status within the organisation. This elevated the PA function from a minor support function to an independent player, given equal status with the operational elements of the organisation and reported only to the most senior (Secretary) element of Defence. This had the effect of giving PA an independent agenda and life.

As the Secretary's creation, the centralised, direct report PA organisation was intended as a spearhead of reform. That is, the Secretary intended that the new PA organisation set an agenda for the remainder of the organisation by controlling what each element of the organisation had to say and specifying the context. In theory, the PA approach of the various elements of Defence would be forced to work to a centrally directed agenda.

The centralised independent organisation was a failure because it didn't recognise that the central operational areas set the agenda and that the PA organisation did not control the resources needed to do the job. These were controlled by the operating divisions (including the powerful Navy, Army and Air Force) and were directed to the priorities of the operating divisions. The central independent public affairs organisation got "a seat at the table" but did not achieve success. There were several reasons that access to decision making and the dominant coalition could not be translated into results. Firstly, the head of the organisation was a specialist PA officer and therefore lacked credibility operating as part of the higher command. The three services have powerful cultures and a strong sense of their own position in the nation's defence. The new PA organisation had not earned a place as an equal partner in Defence business. As a specialist, the new head of the organisation was an "outsider" who was seen by many as not understanding the business of Defence.

The second reason related to the nature of decision making in a big, complex organisation. In Defence, issues are often extremely complex and bounded by government political constraints and decision making reflects this. Issues are worked heavily at the staff level before coming forward for decision. That is, all considerations are included in the planning before the decision making begins. This includes all support services such as medical, supply, legal and so on as well as the actual operating elements of the force (see diagram 1). In addition, other elements of government are widely consulted as part of the preparation for decision making.

As a centralised independent organisation, the PA organisation had largely excluded itself from the staff planning process. By centralising staff that had previously been out-posted to operating organisations, the PA staff did not participate in the planning phase for operations and only had input at the late stages of decision making.



**Diagram 1. 'Seat at the table' model only provide PA input at final stages of planning.**

**Model 3 – PA as A Chain of Command Function**

Developed in 2003 (although not fully implemented until 2004), the new model reflected a different way of thinking about the Defence PA problem.

The new model sought to:

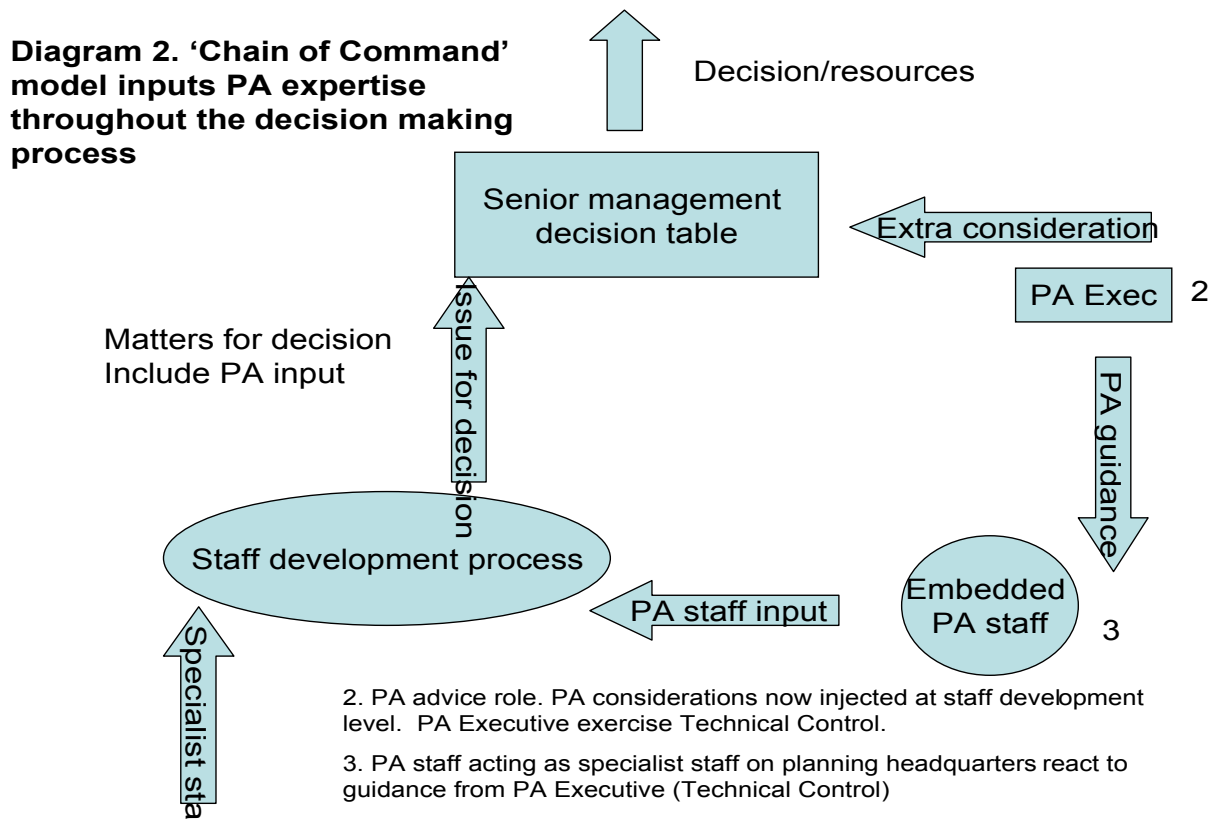
1. Make PA directly accountable to Defence objectives in the same way as other operational support functions;
2. Place PA at the centre of operational planning so that it would be considered and resourced from the inception of a new enterprise;
3. Make the most powerful managers in the organisation take responsibility for PA outcomes in the same way that they were required to accept responsibility for operational and financial outcomes;
4. Functionally reorganise the limited PA assets to provide the maximum direct support to functional areas and direct resources away from the centralised function; and
5. Provide some useful career structures for PA officers to reduce the need for lateral recruitment. This was intended to increase the level of specialist knowledge in areas being supported by PA.

The final and most important element of the new model was to strategically locate public affairs in a part of the organisation that would allow it to be part of the action and increase its interdependency with the operators. The search for a new home for PA coincided with the formation of a new Chief of Staff Branch within Defence. The new central coordinating organisation was selected as the best compromise location for PA.

To understand the positioning it is important to consider ADF command and control arrangements. For the ADF, there are two types of control: Operational Control and Technical Control. Operational Control is the "what is to be done" part of control. For example, a commander will tell an engineer under their command what is to be done; build that bridge, repair that structure. The commander may take advice from the engineer but it will always be the commander's decision what is done.

Technical Control is the "how it is to be done" part. The commander doesn't tell the engineer how to build the bridge or repair the structure. The engineer has a technical chain of command going back to the Chief Engineer to provide technical supervision. The commander assumes that the Chief Engineer will ensure the engineer is using correct technical method and equipment. The commander is in control of what is to be done and owns the resources.

The same applies to PA. Under the 'seat at the table' model, the central agency provided both Operational Control and Technical Control. It was ineffective because it had no way of exercising Operational Control. Under the new 'chain of command' model, Operational Control is ceded to Line Management, Technical Control remains with the head of public affairs, Director General Public Affairs (DGPA), located within the Secretary of Defence and Chief of the Defence Force's main co-ordinating group. Therefore, when the Secretary of Defence or the Chief of Defence Force issues an operational PA directive to subordinate line managers based on DGPA advice, the subordinate line manager would action this using their PA staff. The PA staff officer would take their direction from the line manager, but would turn to DGPA for technical guidance on how the operational objective is to be achieved (see diagram 2).



**Diagram 2. 'Chain of Command' model inputs PA expertise throughout the decision making process.**

The new model had at its heart the following elements of philosophy. Firstly, that commanders and managers are responsible for PA and that PA officers support commanders and managers. Secondly, that staff officers (specialist support staff who are not responsible for the outcome of a program and do not control resources for the program) are not commanders or line managers and are not responsible for PA outcomes. Thirdly, there is no separate PA communication chain or report chain. All PA communications is through the command or line management chain. That is not to say that PA officers do not communicate directly on all manner of professional matters. Rather it refers to the direct PA reporting related to an operation or incident. And finally, PA officers are part of the planning and operational staff at each level and are part of the planning process at each level.

In short, the PA organisation abandoned its pretence of independence and become a servant of the organisation by becoming “just another support branch”.

The first test of the new arrangements was the Australian operation to prepare for operations in Iraq in 2003, including the preparatory deployment of troops to the area. Although the PA structure remained apparently independent, quick and dramatic changes to the way in which it worked, ceded responsibility for PA to commanders and pushed PA officers into the planning staff. While the centralised PA structure remained theoretically in place, the PA staff were directed to work in new, staff, roles. The start of planning for operations in Iraq provided a catalyst for change. This became the first operation ever with PA planning fully integrated from the beginning. PA was considered on the same basis as any other component of planning, resources were allocated in competition with other priorities, and a comprehensive national approach was taken for the first time.

### **How Does It Work?**

The model is very simple in concept. PA becomes a function in support of the commander or line manager. It is the manager who is responsible for PA outcomes and, therefore, PA resources and performance. PA takes no independent action and has no voice of its own. Commanders and line managers are given guidance on what part they are to play in providing the message as part of their normal operational tasking. They are also given the PA resources to assist them to achieve that outcome. According to the model's architect, there are no PA issues. All issues are management issues.

The development of the chain of command model was evolutionary and many mistakes occurred along the way. An outcome of that evolutionary process was the creation of a set of underlying principles which DPA recommends as essential to the successful implementation of the new approach:

1. Give managers and commanders the responsibility formally. Include it in the objectives for the job;
2. Give the managers and commanders the PA resources to do the job;
3. Give the managers and commanders the guidance needed to do the job;
4. Ensure that the line management communications chain is linked into PA. That is, it is the main conduit for PA information. This ensures that there is only one voice in a complex situation and that everyone gets the same message;

5. Link up the PA staff who support commanders to ensure that they are properly co-ordinated and have effective technical control from the most senior PA officer;
6. Make the PA staff get behind their manager or commander. It was important to convince them that they don't have a purpose of their own. PA is there to serve the business.

In practice the new model works by integrating PA into the daily business of planning and acting that is central to business. By taking away the special status of PA, it becomes part of everyday life and is not apart from it.

Senior managers give directives to subordinate managers that include PA outcomes and allocate the resources to achieve those outcomes. PA outcomes are then to be achieved by the subordinate managers. The PA manager is not responsible for PA outcomes, but is responsible for providing support to the responsible manager.

DPA believes this resolves the issue about a seat at the table. Quite simply, PA is represented at every table under this model. A specialist PA officer may not, however, represent it.

### **The Model in Practice**

By the time of the Boxing Day Tsunami of 26 December 2004, the new model for PA had been bedded down with both process and organisational structure re-organised. The tsunami relief effort was, as a consequence, a relatively seamless PA operation for Defence. PA was included in the earliest planning for Australian Defence support to tsunami victims. Despite the desperately short time to respond, PA resources were included in initial planning and PA staff were among the first on the ground in the disaster area.

More importantly, the PA effort was quickly organised around the strategic outcomes implicit in the national commitment of resources. The degree to which the audience for the Australian story was segmented towards strategic ends is demonstrated by the early adoption of an Indonesian language component of the Defence web site dealing with the relief effort.

An internal review of the operation's relative success confirmed that although PA had ceased to have the independence of a stand-alone branch of Defence, its influence and impact had improved (Director General, DPA, 2005, pers. comms., January 30).

### **Model Benefits**

The benefit of the model is cohesiveness in the business because PA becomes part of the mainstream operations of the organisation, reducing conflict with managers. It still causes problems, but the internecine conflicts identified by Allen (2004) that characterise PA/line management relations disappear with obvious benefits.

There are also significant flow-on advantages in the cohesiveness of the organisation's story. Line managers know their business and are in the best position to make decisions about the overall strategic approach to solving a problem provided they are given the right advice. This model includes the structure to provide advice into the main decision making effort in a palatable and recognisable way. It is a clear demonstration of Mezner's notion of a 'good fit' between organisational structure, PA strategy and socio-political environment (2005:193).

The model also provides a solution to one of the greatest challenges facing PA personnel; finding out who owns an issue. Jaques believes that the person who has most to lose if the issue goes wrong is the issue owner (2000:36) such as the CEO, the sales manager or the commander in chief,

yet it often falls to the public affairs person to resolve the issue. The DPA model makes it clear that responsibility for issues lies with commanders/line managers. Support and expertise is provided by public affairs staff to the issues manager, but the lines of responsibility and allocation of resources lie clearly with the commander/line manager. Importantly, the model is based on a fundamental assumption: that public affairs expertise is necessary to the long term strategic management of the organisation. It is this fact that ensures the model enhances the strategic value of PA, rather than turning it into a tactical responsibility. In the model, PA support is provided at all levels and is linked across the organisation. The CEO has strategic focus and is supported by the appropriate level of the PA organisation. That senior level PA support formulates the PA guidance for the subordinate managers and ensures that it is focussed on the strategic organisational issues and not the tactical.

A final benefit of the model is that it may resolve the ongoing problem of measuring public affairs performance (Fleisher, 2005:145): because all public affairs objectives are aligned with organisational objectives, the achievement of public affairs objectives is recognised as contributing to the organisation's bottom line. It is recognised throughout the business that achievement of these objectives results in a stronger organisation that is aligned with its key stakeholders (Grunig and Hon, 1997:8). Evaluation of PA outcomes for the Iraq Operation demonstrated that the model was highly effective in delivering organisational objectives (MPA, 2003).

### **Limitations**

The ADF is a unique organisation; it deals with all arms of government, manages tens of thousands of personnel, has both public servants and enlisted staff, has the capacity to use lethal force and recognises the need to win public support for its activities. The size and complexity of the organisation means that its public affairs challenges are much greater than most corporations and the model may be overly complex for smaller organisations. Such a complex organisation will also recognise the necessity of the public affairs function (Cutlip, Centre & Broom, 2006:58).

The greatest limitation of the model is that it requires corporate will and commitment from the highest levels to be supported within the organisation. Should the dominant coalition not recognise the value of public affairs, it will not provide the necessary scaffolding within the organisation for the model to function effectively. It may also be undermined by line management, who resent having to achieve objectives related to public affairs, and by public affairs professionals who may be seeking personal power and self aggrandisement ahead of organisational goals. Constant vigilance is required to ensure that the chain of command is adhered to, and the temptation to develop 'informal' communication channels is avoided.

### **Conclusion**

The ADF model is a highly specialised structure that fits a unique and complex organisation. However it does provide an insight into an integrated public affairs function that is embraced by managers and recognised as a value-adding service to the organisation's overall objectives.

The model has a number of assumptions that hold lessons for private organisations: Firstly, that successful public affairs is central to the achievement of business success and must be supported from the highest levels of the organisation. Secondly, that achievement of public affairs objectives must be measurable outcomes for all business managers, and

finally, that PA provides the advice and support so that managers can better manage.

Together, these assumptions provided an environment within which public affairs is embraced and utilised at its broadest capacity, allowing it to provide strategic advantage to the organisation. This approach nurtures a robust organisation that is attuned to its social environment so that planning decisions can be made early, rather than presented late as mature problems, at the management table.

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