

BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE DEPUTY MINISTER **IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PRODUCTS WRITTEN BY OFFICIALS**

Purpose:

The purpose of this briefing note is to present options and a recommendation to improve the quality of products written by departmental officials for the Minister and Deputy Minister.

Background:

Successive Ministers have complained about briefing products produced by the department and, over time, steps have been taken to improve the quality of service. In 2005, Corporate Services developed templates, manuals and examples of best practices for briefing and correspondence services. These tools were placed on the intranet and are available to all staff. At that time, accountability for content and quality control was formally delegated to Assistant Deputy Ministers' Offices to avoid having all review and quality control pushed up into the Deputy Minister's Office.

Current Situation:

Since the arrival of the new Minister, his Chief of Staff has expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of products in general and is asking that steps be taken to improve the department's service to the Minister. Although some Branches provide better service than others, the Minister reportedly is concerned about the overall quality of Cabinet briefing notes, Question Period (QP) cards and Ministerial Correspondence. Exempt staff members have provided the Deputy's Executive Assistant with specific examples of unsatisfactory products and identify the following problems:

- **Cabinet Briefing** notes are generally too long and too technocratic. They do not provide adequate intelligence on central agency or portfolio partner positions. They often just summarize Memoranda to Cabinet information on other government departments (OGDs) positions, without providing details. There are no speaking points provided in our Cabinet briefing note packages.
- **QP Cards** are too long, they arrive too late and the speaking points do not reflect sensitivity of the political nature of the QP forum. Minister's Office staff must rewrite the speaking points, do not provide the changes to the department and are uncomfortable providing the Minister with hurried, last minute changes on complex issues.
- **Ministerial Correspondence** is late, too bureaucratic and poorly written. It does not reflect the Minister's style and he does not like the content of many of the replies. At the present time, more than 75% of correspondence produced by the department is returned, at least once, for revision and changes.

Options:

Option 1: Direct ADMs to assess and address the problems in their individual Branches.

- The advantage of this option is it is consistent with current ADM accountabilities for content and quality control of all products originating in their Branches. It is also the cheapest approach.
- The disadvantage is this would basically maintain the status quo, which is not working. This option would not satisfy the expectations of the Minister's Office; ADMs and their office staff are regarded as being part of the problem.

Option 2: Introduce centralized writing unit services for Cabinet Briefing, QP Cards and Ministerial Correspondence.

- The advantage of this option is it provides one-window of service and expertise for writing, reviewing and revising ministerial products. It would provide consistency, more effective quality control and improved products; as well as demonstrating a significant response to the problem.
- The disadvantages are this model undermines ADM accountability for content and enables the department to continue to produce poor quality products which would be reviewed and cleaned up in the central writing unit(s). There are significant costs associated with this option (an estimated \$2.5 million a year for salary and operating costs to staff and maintain centralized cabinet briefing, QP and ministerial correspondence writing services).

Option 3: Use corporate funds to hire a consultant to provide department-wide training on Cabinet Briefing, QP and Ministerial Correspondence

- The advantage of this option is it would provide broad based training as well as additional targeted attention in problem Branches requiring more training. It can be framed to ADMs as providing them with centrally funded support to improve their Branches' performance. It is cheaper than developing centralized writing services, yet would indicate to the Minister's Office we are taking specific and targeted action to improve performance. Revised and detailed training tools can be posted on the intranet.
- The disadvantages are one-off training sessions may not be enough, they will cost approximately \$1,000 a day and could require as many as 20 group sessions (\$20,000) to cover all staff. If the consultant reviews and revises our current tools (manuals, templates, best practices etc) this will cost even more. Staff may be reluctant to attend, cite work pressures as reason not to and may have to be directed by their ADMs to participate.

Recommendation:

Option 3 is recommended.