

CASE STUDY

# Engaging staff to build sustainable water services into the future

Environmental impacts place enormous pressure on the water industry, they can be difficult to predict and usually can't be controlled, only managed. Nobody foresaw the duration or the devastation of the Victorian droughts. In stark contrast the recent floods in Queensland and Victoria had the industry working around the clock to provide assistance and support. Being adaptive and informed is mandatory during these challenging times.

Coliban Water and Barwon Water are two examples of organisations who have been effected by change. A strategic approach has allowed them to succeed during times of uncertainty. This case study explores their stories.

## Coliban Water a success story



Coliban Water (Coliban) spans across 20% of central and northern Victoria and services over 140,000 customers comprising of

residential, commercial and rural clients. The drought was a serious challenge for Coliban and the pressure on staff was huge.

“There was a time when colleagues changed out of work clothes before they went to the supermarket so people wouldn't stop and talk to them about the water crisis. It was a very difficult time,” recalls Bianca Brown, Manager People & Performance, Coliban Water.

In 2009 Coliban Water ran the Insync Surveys Organisational Alignment survey (OAS), not only had the drought impacted on staff but there were a number of other issues that lay under the surface. The survey captured the thoughts and feelings of staff and mapped them against the organisational strategy.

“An ‘all staff’ day was held to present the results and put all of the issues on the table. We presented a clear picture and acknowledged the changes that needed to be made. It was a tough day but the long term benefits have been felt by everyone.

“Line managers have been key in the success of turning around satisfaction and moral. Our managers are motivating and encouraging.

“ The industry as a whole is evolving and becoming more strategic. The challenge in taking this step is to inform, involve and ensure everyone is aligned and engaged with the same vision. ”

Bianca Brown  
Manager People & Performance, Coliban Water





They infect staff with their energy to make positive changes.

“People now feel they have a voice. It’s very rewarding to see people step up and be accountable particularly during times of change. I really enjoy working around happy, confident people who laugh out loud!” concluded Brown.

### **Targeted training and improved communications make a big impact**

Coliban Water ran a subsequent OAS in 2010 and as a result a training framework was introduced. “Every training course is targeted and staff are not just attending generic industry seminars. They make training matter, which impacts on their everyday work,” said Brown.

Effective communication was also another area of focus that was uncovered in the OAS. “We have opened up the lines of communication with an open door policy, allowing staff to have a say and acknowledge people as being heard. We are also mindful of highlighting what’s not working so we can make improvements.”

“People have a level of comfort that it’s ok

to make changes and they feel supported for being brave,” said Brown.

## **Barwon Water under goes a cultural overhaul**



### **Departmental focus for change**

Barwon Water is the largest regional water business in Victoria with 400 staff and a turnover of \$150 million. They first ran an OAS in 2008. The survey was targeted to the engineering department due to an unusual spike in the attrition rate of 21%, partly due to the skills shortage within the sector. The OAS uncovered a number of clear drivers for the high staff turnover issue. Misalignment of the department with the rest of the organisation rated highly as did income parity.

Post survey focus groups were held to dig deeper into the outcomes. One very effective initiative that resulted is a performance incentive program. “Only high performers qualify for the program. The message was clear, step up or walk away. It’s only the high performers who qualify for the program. Impact on the engagement of this group of employees has had a fundamental shift and the increased outputs and efficiencies have been amazing,” said Melissa Stephens, General Manager Organisational Development, Barwon Water.

“A major benefit from these initiatives was staff turnover in this group of employees dropping to 8% in the first year and 4% the following, which has had large financial benefits to the business in regards to increased operating efficiencies and real savings due to employee retention.”

### **Whole of organisation approach pays off**

As a catalyst for positive change an all staff OAS was rolled out. “The initial results were not good which was unexpected and also a real eye-opener. This was the first time staff had the opportunity to be heard in this format they had a lot they wanted to share with us” commented Stephens.

Employee reference groups were formed after the survey results were analysed and

“ Insync Surveys provide clear results and clarity around issues that need to be investigated by us. ”

*Melissa Stephens, General Manager Organisational Development, Barwon Water*

## *Crisis brings successful innovation*

The Victorian drought which spanned 14 years had an unprecedented impact on the industry.

“The drought brought about a new level of concern for all our stakeholders. It was a time in which we tapped into innovative ideas from our staff, to develop and improve services to our customers and the community. We collated data through various avenues, such as surveys, focus groups and public forums. This collaborative approach produced enormous reward.

“One such example was last year when one very smart idea saved us just under \$2 million. As an organisation we are constantly being challenged with external and internal demands the role of innovation is critical.

“We are always encouraging and recognising people for their ability to think outside the box,” says Melissa Stephens, General Manager Organisational Development, Barwon Water.

they were split into key focus areas such as behaviour, innovation, communications, operations and capital growth. "It became clearer that policies were either not transparent or had not been documented. Communication was not consistent across the organisation and some departments expressed they felt they were operating in isolation.

"An enormous amount of work took place to impact these first results and in 2010 the survey results were dramatically different. All areas had improved and alignment of staff was ranked in the top 10% quartile as a result of our new Strategic Intent. Importantly, Insync Surveys benchmarked our results against similar organisations which gave external perspective to our data.

*Organisational culture is vital during times of uncertainty*

Glenelg Hopkins



Glenelg Hopkins, a Catchment Management Authority who during a time of much uncertainty have been able to maintain a strong positive culture with staff. Management have been faced with the challenge of keeping pace with new decisions from key stakeholders and ensuring the organisation is resilient and prepared for the future.

"We have recently been faced with organisational restructures and staff morale is paramount during periods of change. Open communication channels and effective management updates to staff are two key initiatives that have a huge positive impact," says Tania Elliott, Human Resources Co-ordinator, Glenelg Hopkins CMA

## *Customer consultation is key*

Barwon Water was faced with public backlash during the recent droughts. The importance of collaboration with customers to manage change was key during this period.

"Barwon were seen to be playing 'Big Brother' to look after customers and make everything ok, but that was not the reality of the situation. We took an approach of collaboration to gain insight from customers and allow opinions to be heard. A customer perception survey and a number of public forums allowed us to understand customer expectations and fears. It was important for us to give the public a voice during this stressful time.

"Based on our successful approach during the drought we will ensure the lines of communication are open and collaboration with our community and customers is a priority and underpins our 5 year Strategic Intent. Ensuring expectations are managed and people are heard during future change, such as price increases, is imperative," says Melissa Stephens, General Manager Organisational Development, Barwon Water.

"All of our efforts added up to Barwon becoming a values based, high performing organisation armed to succeed in times of change," concluded Stephens.

In 2010 Barwon Water was publicly awarded for their positive cultural changes through the Australian Business Awards in the "recommended employer" category.

## About Insync Surveys

We are proud to work with water organisations right across Australia and our "trophy cabinet" of clients is a testament to our great relationships and professional work. We have worked with some of the largest organisations in the Asia Pacific and many water organisations including: North East Water, GWM Water, Veolia Water, NT Power & Water, Wannon Water, Coliban Water and Barwon Water.

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