

# When Executives are Healthy, Organizations are Healthy

Advisory Services for Executives, Annual Report 2019-2020



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# Message from the APEX CEO



I am pleased to share the Annual Report of the APEX Advisory Service for Executives for 2019-20, and encourage all public service executives to read it, and reflect on the issues that it presents.

The ASE is a vital service for the executive community as a free and confidential source of advice, information and support on a broad range of issues, from questions on career management and compensation, to addressing harassment, workplace conflict and personal well-being. For many clients, the ASE is the primary source of support when difficult issues arise, and they rely on ASE advisors for their knowledge, experience and compassion.

This year's report offers compelling insights into the most acute challenges faced by public service executives, most notably on mental health and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also highlights a number of recommendations on how we, as public service leaders, can strengthen resilience and civility in our workplaces.

I am proud of the work accomplished by Johanne LeBlanc and her team of ASE advisors, and grateful for the support of the Clerk and the Deputy community for this flagship APEX service. I also want to underscore to all public service executives that APEX and the ASE are here for you.

*Jacqueline Rigg*

Jacqueline Rigg

CEO

# Message from the Head of Advisory Services, Johanne LeBlanc



Dear executives,

For the third year in a row, I am once again pleased to present the APEX Advisory Services for Executives (ASE) annual report. Over those three years, I have had the good fortune to connect one-on-one with over 1,400 executives across the Public Service and this report gives a glimpse of their stories.

A record number of clients reached out to the ASE over this time, enabling me to grow the practice. Those who proactively sought our services are to be commended for seeking support to navigate very difficult situations. I hope you feel I have adequately represented your situations and concerns in this year's report.

This document offers an overview of the work environment and certain challenges of the executive cadre, the major themes reported by clients, pain points for which to watch, and recommendations for moving forward.

Satisfaction rates for the service are very high and the value of the ASE is felt across the public service.

As the year ended, the pandemic, which has had fundamental shifts on our personal and working lives and will have lasting impacts for the foreseeable future, was still ongoing.

The report also highlights a few additional challenges and issues surrounding COVID, touches on inclusion, and offers some suggested areas of improvement and focus to help make the future conditions of executives even better.

Executives of the Public Service should be very proud of their accomplishments and resiliency in adapting and leading in unprecedented ways. It has not come without consequences, and as a Canadian and your Head of Advisory Services, I thank you for your leadership and your contributions.

I wish to thank Jacqueline Rigg, APEX CEO, for the trust bestowed upon me to lead the ASE and oversee the team who provides confidential and independent advice to executives.

It remains a great privilege to head the APEX Advisory Services team. I hope you find this report informative.

*Johanne LeBlanc*

Johanne LeBlanc

Head of Advisory Services

# Executive Summary

The free and confidential service of the ASE is offered to all executives (clients) in the Federal Public Service, both in Canada and abroad. It continues to build its reputation for being a neutral and impartial place where executives seek advice, get information on, and explore options and strategies regarding their work-related situations.

Demand is growing steadily for the service; this year over 460 executives used the ASE, an increase of 13% from last year and an increase of 51% since 2017-2018. The number of client sessions has risen drastically, almost doubling (99.7% increase) over the last three years, rising from 612 sessions in 2017-2018 to a high of 1,222 in 2019-2020. The year-over-year session increase is 39% this fiscal year. In response to the sharp increase in demand, and taking into account suggestions made by clients, this and the previous year through our ASE satisfaction survey, we have more than doubled the number of advisors to keep up with demand.

The ASE satisfaction survey this year revealed a 98% positive satisfaction score. Notable suggestions for improvements this year include:

- promoting the services more broadly; and
- advocating for better natural justice and procedural fairness for executives involved in complaints.

A worrisome trend is the 60% of ASE clients (almost 280 executives) reporting health and mental health symptoms as a result of their work-related situations: another sharp increase from the 47% reported the previous year.

Harassment remains a significant issue for executives and 100% of clients in this category were having mild-to-severe health and mental health consequences as these situations unfolded. Thirty-two percent of clients in this category felt harassed by their superior; however, very few considered putting a formal complaint for fear of reprisal. Of the 68% remaining, most felt little concrete support from their organizations and procedural fairness was not uniformly dispensed.

Toxic environments and issues between executives and their superior create complexities for both and suggestions for improvements are found in the report.

At the root of many situations is a lack of civility in the executive ranks, and in a pandemic environment, where feelings of isolation are exacerbated, this is an additional challenge. When we treat others disrespectfully as executives and it is tolerated, it becomes the new baseline and the new norm. It also cascades down an organization and creates toxicity in the system. The health and mental health impacts on all public servants is felt deeply and progress on this front is compelling and necessary.

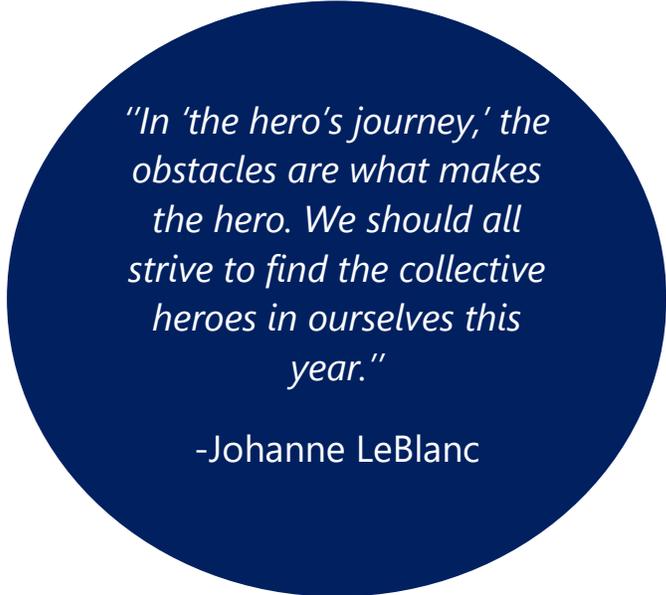
“We know there is a direct link between a high level of stress and workplace incivility” - 2018-2019 Ombudsman annual report- Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada

Client executives remain dissatisfied with the transparency and perceived fairness of performance and talent management processes and practices of their respective organizations. Compensation is once again a major dissatisfier, as increases lag three to four years behind all other employees and many executives earn less than their direct reports. This situation does little to attract the very best talent in our ranks and is seen as a sign of disrespect.

Inclusion will remain a major focus and executives must take the opportunities presented by movements such as Black Lives Matter to contribute to the conversation and concrete actions needed to significantly shift cultures within organizations and to take a whole-person perspective in order to advance inclusion. Our goal must be to ensure that everyone can bring their whole selves to work, have a sense of belonging, are respected and valued, and are able to contribute positively to their organization. Participating in APEX and other inclusion events is a great start. Executives, however, need to consider how their own biases and experiences may be shaping the work environment and take concrete action to build an organizational culture that is more inclusive.

Not all executives are created equal. Some of the more vulnerable are: newer executives, those returning from extended leave, those who are performance-managing employees, those nearing retirement eligibility, and those leading major transformations. More details are provided later in this report.

At the time of writing this report (September 2020), the pandemic is in full flare and it is obvious it is here to stay for longer than many of us anticipated. As it is top-of-mind, and the public service is halfway into the next fiscal year, this report will highlight some of the effects of the pandemic environment on our ASE clients, as we have seen them to date. Isolation, mental health, and managing remotely are but some of the impacts that heighten the challenges executives are already facing. As leaders, we are called upon to strike the balance between isolation and distancing while maintaining strong social connections and helping the Public Service be more resilient. We need to face our personal fears with courage and compassion and lead others to do so. If anything can test our leadership abilities in new ways, it is the current situation.



*"In 'the hero's journey,' the obstacles are what makes the hero. We should all strive to find the collective heroes in ourselves this year."*

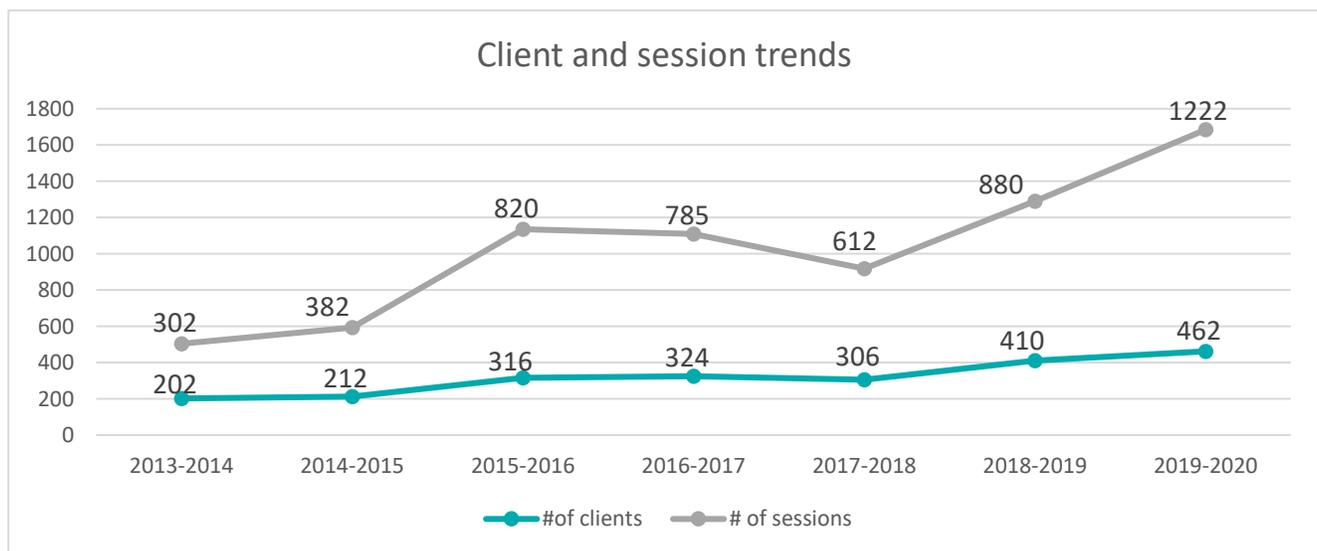
-Johanne LeBlanc

# Statistical Data for 2019-2020 Fiscal Year

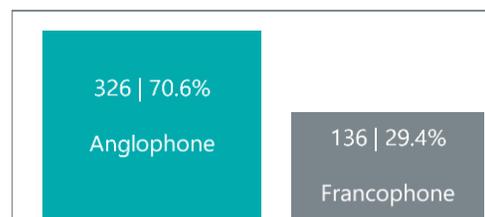
## Client Sessions

There were record numbers of executives accessing the service over a seven-year period (200 in 2013-2014 to 462 in 2019-2020). Over the last three years, the number of clients has increased from 306 to 410 to 462 in 2019-2020, representing a 51% increase in clients since 2017-2018 and a 13% increase in the last year.

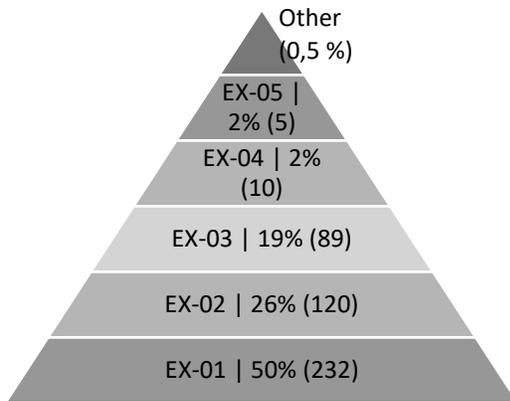
Equally important has been the rise in the number of client sessions, which have almost doubled over the last 3 years from 612 in 2017-2018, to 880 in 2018-2019, to a high of 1,222 in 2019-2020. This represents a 39% increase from last year and a 99.7% increase since 2017-2018. The rise in the number of clients and annual sessions is clearly depicted in this chart.



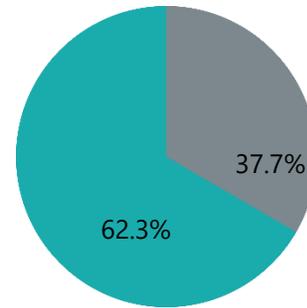
There were marginally more women than men accessing the ASE services, with 55% of clients identifying as female and 45% identifying as male.



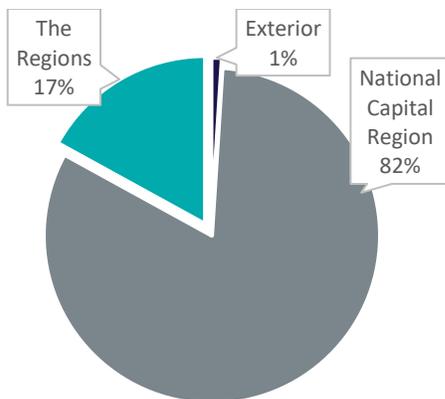
In terms of linguistic profile, although many clients are bilingual as required at the executive level, 71% identify as anglophone while 29% identify as francophone. This may be an area that can be further leveraged in future marketing and communications.



Over half of the clients are at the EX-01 level, 26% at the EX-02 level, 19% at the EX-03 level, 2% at the EX-04 and 05 levels with a very small percentage from other groups. These reflect the general distribution of executives across levels.



Almost two thirds of ASE clients are APEX members. 62.3% (288) clients were members of APEX, while 37.7% (174) clients were non-members.



An overwhelming percentage of clients (82%) are located in the National Capital Region, 17% were from regions, and only 1% were from outside Canada. One would expect the percentages to reflect the overall representation of executives (72%, 21.4% and 6.6% respectively); however, there is a 10% higher demand in the NCR. Perhaps better promotion of the ASE in regions is needed.

## Satisfaction Survey

The online client satisfaction survey results were again very positive this year. We achieved a 98% overall satisfaction rate; 99% of clients felt that the ASE understood their questions and concerns extremely well or very well. Ninety-eight percent were very likely or likely to use the service again and to refer other executives to do so. Suggestions or areas for improvement were: to ensure we always have enough capacity to fill the demand and for the service to be better known; and for APEX to advocate for better procedural fairness in the treatment of executives, especially in investigations and as respondents in complaints.

# Outreach

The ASE was very visible and active in advocating for executives this fiscal year. The Head of Advisory Services was invited by six departments and agencies to present the Advisory Services client realities at their senior management meetings. We also were presenters at the Canada School of Public Service New Director program, the University of Ottawa Certificate program in Public Sector Leadership and Governance, and the Institute on Governance's Executive Leadership Program (ELP).

The ASE is also connected to the ICMS and Ombudsman networks and active on LinkedIn and Twitter.



*"Johanne LeBlanc is very well suited for this position...she was responsive, knowledgeable, and empathetic. She put me at ease which allowed me to openly share my challenges and concerns and she provided me solid advice and guidance. The service provided far exceeded my expectations!"*

2019-2020 ASE client

# Most Frequent Reasons to Contact the ASE

## What We Heard - Detailed Client Issues

	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015
1	Health / Mental Health	Career Management/ Transitions	Career Management	Career Management	Career Management	Career Management
2	Harassment & Investigations	Relationship with a Superior (including harassment)	Investigations	Relationship with a Superior	Relationship with a Superior	Relationship with a Superior
3	Relationship with a Superior	Terms & Conditions	Terms & Conditions	Health	Harassment	Health (not including re-entry/duty to accommodate)
4	Career Management	Performance Management	Relationship with a Superior	Retirement	Health (not including re-entry/duty to accommodate)	Performance Management
5	Performance Management	Harassment (complaint from an employee)	Retirement	Terms & Conditions	Retirement	Terms & Conditions
6	Career Transitions	Disability issues	Health	Performance Management	Performance Management	Career Transitions
7	Terms & Conditions	Investigations	Performance Management	Harassment	Terms & Conditions	Staffing

# Findings: What We Heard From Employees Seeking Support For...

## Health and Mental Health

Heavy and growing workloads, rampant incivility, formal complaints, COVID, issues with their boss are but a few of the circumstances impacting executives across the Federal Public Service. In the ASE practice, there is a direct correlation between health and mental health and executives seeking advice in:

- harassment and investigations;
- relationship with superior; and
- performance management and transitions.

Virtually all executives seen by the ASE for one of these predominant issues were experiencing moderate-to-severe health and mental health symptoms. These were reported as insomnia, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, and a host of physical ailments, from feeling unsupported and isolated, to the extreme of clinical depression and having suicidal thoughts.



*Your support through all of this is so helpful - You bring just the right mix of knowledge, wisdom, and empathy to your clients.*

Although the three-year trend view is that executives pay attention to the health and mental health of their employees, there is little attention paid to ensuring the health and wellness of executives. This disconnect creates disappointment, concern, disengagement, and cynicism amongst executives.

In the ASE practice, we often see recurring scenarios, and this is one such example.

*Allow me to tell you the story of Fabiola. She has been an EX-01 for less than two years. She has eight direct reports, a few positions are vacant, and she has been progressively feeling more overwhelmed with a heavy workload and tight deliverables that seem to change frequently. She has begun having health issues, including not sleeping well, and works well over 55 hours per week. Despite working more, she sees no light at the end of the tunnel. Through discussions with her superior, she has filled the vacancies and has obtained a coach, but there seems to be few other concrete solutions offered. She feels there is no real openness to having more conversations on the subject. Despite the many positive changes that she has made to adopt healthier personal practices, to take a 'how to prioritize' course as well as the New Director's program, and to delegate more to her managers, she continues to have health issues. While Fabiola has done all she could, with help, to gain more control and find grounding and balance, her situation is progressively getting worse*

*and her family is noticing changes in her. Her normal reaction has been to work even more hours but that is still not enough. She has junior managers and has taken some of their loads to help them out. She fears some may get sick. The situation is now impacting her confidence and general disposition and she is becoming concerned about her performance and letting down her team and her boss. Fabiola is quickly heading for a burnout.*

*She decides she needs time off, as encouraged by some of her network. Away from the work environment, she begins to feel better and her symptoms lessen. She and others around her see that she is becoming her old self. Her leave ends, she comes back to work feeling strong. In a short period of time, however, her symptoms come back in full force.*

You may have made assumptions about Fabiola's story based on gender, lack of experience in the executive ranks, and other factors. Those assumptions would be incorrect. This story has been heard hundreds of times by the ASE for years from a diversity of executives from varying levels, ages, degrees of seniority, cultures, genders and home organizations. This story is systemic and epidemic. If there were two areas ASE would applaud the public service tackling to make life better for executives, the first would be the workload leading to burnout cycle, and the second would be improving procedural fairness.

*"Tremendously helpful and knowledgeable support. Empathetic, highly professional and discreet. I would recommend this organization to any Public Service executive seeking advice and guidance."  
2019-2020 ASE client*

Burnout is the body's proper response to chronic situational stress, according to [Dr. Christina Maslach](#), renowned expert on the subject. Based on her extensive research, she affirms that 'other than self-care, the solution to burnout is a focus on making the workplace less toxic'. Indeed, her position is that burnout is not just an individual issue but mostly an organizational one. She offers a diagnostic tool in her Maslach Burnout Inventory, as well as simple solutions to effectively attack the issue more broadly. Essentially, there is no one size fits all. The process is for teams (and here define teams as narrowly or broadly as you wish) to dialogue and remove work irritants for which they have control, around the six job areas she identified: workload, control, reward, fit of people to jobs, fairness, and values. Having the courage to have the dialogue and spending time on irritants, just on its own,

demonstrates to teams that leaders care and gives them hope. Without those, burnout will continue to be rampant.

Another significant comment from a great number of executives is the singular focus on results at the expense of people. Compassion is in short supply. In his book *'Dying for a Paycheck,'* Prof. Jeffrey Pfeffer asks the question "Is your workplace killing you?" He then makes a compelling argument, based on U.S. research through Stanford University, that workplaces are de-humanizing and making employees sick at the estimated annual cost of \$200 billion per year. While the same research was not done in Canada, it is not a stretch to imagine similar findings as 'results at all cost' becomes the norm. Prof. Pfeffer advocates for employers to take responsibility to address the 'social pollution' created by the workplace which he refers to in his research, namely: conflict, shift work, economic insecurity, long work hours, injustices, and unfairness.

## Harassment and Investigations



*“My advisor had very helpful information based on precedent. This allowed me to use an evidence-based approach to deal with harassment in my workplace and provided an idea of the most likely outcomes.”*

By far the single most needed reason to consult the ASE and the biggest jump in number from the previous fiscal year was Harassment and Investigations which plagued the ASE client base. Up from 29%, a whopping 48.5% of clients (224 executives) were in need of support in this category. One-third of these clients were feeling harassed by their superiors.

All 224 were suffering significant health and mental health issues directly related to being involved in these work-related situations. Most, if not all, were surprised when they received no help from their human resources branches to help prepare their responses and defence. It had not occurred to them that HR and Labour Relations would be in a conflict-of-interest in doing so. At that point, many felt alone and afraid. This is when those that knew about us turned to the ASE for help.

The majority of harassment complaints, where the executive was a respondent, came from employees described as being performance-managed and where there was an active labour relations file. Many clients felt they were doing the right thing and were shocked that a complaint was being investigated as the definition of harassment excludes performance management.

A very significant portion of executives involved in complaints and administrative investigations felt they were not granted procedural fairness in order to properly defend themselves and that they were being judged guilty by senior management at the outset. Examples of what led the executive to feel this way include being removed from their position as soon as a complaint or the investigation comes forward; having a negative reference to a complaint in their performance management agreement prior to a final report being produced; receiving a lower-than-expected performance rating prior to a final report, etc. The result of this kind of treatment by senior management caused great distress for executives and connecting with ASE early was a lifeline for them. Executives believe one is innocent until proven guilty and being treated otherwise violates their sense of fairness.

The story of Marc-André (this example is a composite of different cases brought to the ASE, with fictional names and details) seems an extreme one; unfortunately, over the years the ASE has heard and supported many executives in these and similar situations. It is a stretch to understand how any of this follows natural justice and procedural fairness.

*Marc-André is told one day by his manager that there are “serious allegations” against him and that effective immediately he will be removed from his position in order to protect all parties and placed on a special deployment for one year, pending an investigation. His boss tells him they will go through this process as quickly as possible but that he should not contact his team nor discuss this*

*with anyone. He is told he can access EAP for support. Marc-André is understandably devastated, in shock and worried about his career. He finds a way to tell his family and they are distraught. He is given a project which he works on diligently and as the days and week pass, he is beginning to show signs of health issues.*

*He is haunted by what the allegations may be and reviews the last year with his team in detail in his mind every waking moment. Understandably, he has insomnia. He is at a loss and there is no contact with his organization, other than his project. He then reaches out to a few of his most trusted network members for general support. Fortunately, one of his contacts directs him to the ASE.*

*Despite repeatedly contacting his manager and labour relations with process questions and to get an update on his case, he is either given a vague response or none at all. He is increasingly unwell and has consulted his medical practitioners. He is humiliated that many of his former team and colleagues reach out to him with concern and knows he cannot share with them what is going on. His sudden departure was announced in an email explaining that he is doing an important project, but he knows the rumour mill is alive and well and he is embarrassed. He does his best to complete his project work and put up a professional demeanor.*

***“There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn’t true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true.”***

**Soren Kierkegaard**

As noted above, this story is familiar to hundreds of executives. Generally, these stories end in one of two scenarios. One scenario is that an investigation is launched, allegations are finally given, the respondent prepares a defense with the help of the ASE, an interview is conducted leading up to a final report, allegations are determined to be either founded or not, and there are consequences to the executive for those founded allegations. Or secondly, a workplace assessment is done without the respondent executive, the report has findings against leadership (which goes against the underlying policies for workplace assessments which do not find fault with individuals and focusses only on the workplace and restoration as a unit), the executive is removed permanently from their position, and performance pay is impacted. An exit strategy is the only viable way out of this situation. In the former case ending, procedural fairness has been respected much more so than in the latter ending.

With the new policy suite in effect April 1, 2020 and Deputy Heads’ ability to retroactively change ratings and recuperate performance pay and increases where it is warranted, there is no need to give a poor rating to an executive prior to a final report with findings.

Executives managing a large and significant transformation are also particularly at risk of receiving complaints. These executives are accepting the challenge of leading a team through a big change where some team members will embrace, some will resist, and some will be on the fence about the changes. Often there are performance issues with some members and the executive is asked to address these. An executive knowingly accepting leadership of a team that has performance or other issues and who is given the agenda to make significant changes on the team are bound to get a strong reaction by resisters. If resisters

triangulate and mount a collective effort to oppose the changes, it may turn to criticizing the leader and may take the form of a harassment or workplace violence complaint, or members may go over that leader's head to their boss to complain.

On the receiving end, it feels like the executive was doing what was asked of them by senior management that knew resistance would be part of the challenges, and now the executive is left to defend themselves alone against a list of allegations. If the reaction of the supervisor is to do an informal "fact-finding" with only the few that came forward, or if the formal complaint predominantly or only uses those that have come forward as witnesses (and not the whole team), the conclusions may be skewed against the executive and not the change initiative that was mandated by senior management.

Additionally, this type of senior management reaction sends a strong signal to employees that ganging up and resisting change is acceptable. Executives who then have findings against them are distraught, and feel they are unsupported and have been treated unfairly. In these cases, the status quo, not the transformation, has won out.

As Bill C-65 comes into force this year and broadens the definition of harassment, we will most certainly see a continued increase in complaints. Thankfully, the changes also include shorter timelines for resolving and hopefully, more focus on restoration strategies.

## Relationship Issues with Superior

The relationship between an executive and their hierarchical superior is the essential building block of strong teams. Difficulties with that relationship creates dysfunction, distress, and an ineffective and unhealthy work environment for all. Employees know when their boss does not get along with his or her boss and it creates great instability and fear for them. If the tension is visible in large meetings, it is uncomfortable for employees to witness poor treatment towards their boss or colleagues and signals that respect is not important.

While conflict is normal between two or more people, strangely, we are not taught conflict competence skills and not dealing with it well erodes trust and worsens relationships over time.

Unfortunately, because of lack of skills in conflict competence and our tendency to find fault in others, we jump to the conclusion that the other person is wrong, and we are right. We then suffer from confirmation bias and only look for things to validate our faulty conclusion. When the boss of an executive realizes there are issues, they may turn to find fault with that executive instead of seeing it as a dynamic between two people where both contribute about 50%. This is a downward spiral with huge implications for that lower-level executive. The executive may get marginalized, performance managed, excluded, avoided, and told they are not the 'right fit' by their superior (with impacts to their performance ratings and career). Despite not being involved in the situation first-hand, the executive's superior is in a position to impact the executive's career in real ways, putting that executive at risk of suffering health and mental health repercussions. At the same time, the executive's superior may not experience any career impacts at all.



'The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.' - *Theodore Roosevelt*

*'It was extremely helpful (to come to the ASE). I felt hugely relieved afterwards to have a clear understanding of options and risks to help me make a decision on the path forward. As a new EX, I also learned a lot about dynamics among EXs and roles and responsibilities in complex HR situations.'*

2019-2020 ASE client



assumptions are all part of conflict competence. Seeking help from conflict experts when executives have relationship issues between themselves is a sign of strength. There are many examples of clients of the ASE who have done that with very positive results. Relationships were salvaged and situations defused.

Prof. Pfeffer has concluded that leaders describe themselves completely differently than they behave. He calls the phenomenon "aspirational preaching" (thinking more highly of ourselves than others do), as opposed to truth. We therefore need to be more careful when judging others and ask our network to give us real feedback on how we actually operate in order to be more self-aware and avoid the trap of "aspirational preaching."

## Career, Talent and Performance Management and Transitions

Career, Talent and Performance Management and Transitions are popular reasons why executives approach the ASE.

Irritants include not having meaningful discussions around career and talent and having no learning plans, not being informed early on enough that there are issues with their performance in a given year, and feeling forced to transition for a variety of reasons are the main issues facing clients in this category.

### Career

ASE clients in this category either are reflecting on their careers and want to discuss their options with an external resource or need help finding another position, generally in another organization or outside of the Public Service. Many executives have not looked for positions in a while, have not always maintained a healthy network, and, coupled with the fact that the majority of vacant Public Service executive positions are not posted, are unaware of opportunities across the Public Service. The ASE help them navigate these

waters. Career stagnation is also a popular sub-theme, and could be the result of being too specialized, having stayed too long in a job or an organization, or being in an area with few executive positions available. Other situations include a lack of fit with their current manager, lack of opportunity to develop, career progression, lack of support from management, false promises from their current organization and/or lack of clear and truthful conversations about potential and abilities.

All options are explored with clients, tools given, and tailored strategies are suggested. Many clients land other positions successfully following implementation of those strategies.

## **Talent**

There is frustration with what is seen as lack of transparency of the talent management process in their current organization. Specifically, many do not know where they stand in talent management discussions with senior management and the talent map placement and are not considered for other positions when they are deemed ready for movement. While we all understand that we are masters of our own destiny and that a talent map placement does not assure advancement, when their colleagues in the same category or external candidates are given promotional non-advertised positions frequently and ahead of them, executives question the credibility of the program.

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the use of non-advertised processes. While this is a valid hiring tool, overusing non-advertised processes is risky as it limits the pool of possible candidates to only those sought out, as well as sending messages that are often interpreted negatively by current staff regarding their career.

The new Directive on Performance and Talent Management for executives, which took effect April 1, 2020, is explicit with respect to needing to focus on talent management, learning plans, and communicating talent management discussion results and placement on the talent map to each executive. This should help with those transparency concerns noted by clients in this sub-category.

For the other issues raised, such as an executive being placed in a talent map category with which they do not agree, management should move them to a more realistic one or discuss their justification with the executive, to avoid creating false expectations. Communication of ratings, rationale, and staffing decisions is essential, and would help the executive better understand and address gaps to be ready for future opportunities. It is also perfectly acceptable to be placed in the category "well-placed in role," if the executive agrees and understands why. Not everyone wants to, or should, be moved up or moved laterally.

## **Performance**

This year, 65 executives did not agree with their performance assessment and rating, up from 40 the previous year (an increase of over 60%). In many instances, mid-year reviews and bilateral discussions had little to no indication of performance issues. A high number of these cases involved two different bosses; one at mid-year indicating all was on track followed by a new manager for year-end, where the executive and their new superior had a much different conversation. Some were respondents in harassment



*"Johanne a fourni un soutien hors pairs à notre groupe de 15 directeurs dans le cadre de notre initiative d'apprentissage. Elle nous a fait des témoignages avec candeur et nous a fourni beaucoup de conseils."*  
2019-2020 ASE client

complaints and believed the unexpected rating was related, despite the final report not being released. Some others were new executives unclear about how they were being measured, and why the practice in their organizations was to give a maximum of succeeded minus in the first year of an appointment.

Due to high workloads, many managers of executives do not make the necessary time to dedicate to on-board, coach and support their EXs. Also, as many new executives have not dealt with performance management issues or difficult labour relations situations, executives are seeking support not only from labour relations but their manager, peers, and networks as well. Without this support, new executives feel vulnerable, lack perspective and may react inappropriately to situations with employees resulting or exacerbating in conflictual situations.

Clarifying the rules for new executives and giving earlier clearer and written feedback of derailment while providing support and opportunities to improve performance would be beneficial. Also, since the new Policy on Performance and Talent Management for Executives authorizes Deputy Heads to retroactively revise performance ratings and recover performance pay where it is deemed unwarranted, it is not appropriate to lower a rating for an executive because there are allegations against them if a final report has not been received or if none of the allegations put forward have findings.



“APEX ASE is always my ‘go to’ whenever I am seeking advice, regardless of the issue.”

### Transition

Another frequent topic for our clients is transition to retirement or career changes. This includes situations where executives are told they are not the right ‘fit’ and need to find an alternate position elsewhere, have been struggling performance-wise and are job hunting, where they have complaint findings against them and need to find another position, or where there is a difficult relationship with their manager and the executive feels cast aside.

When the situation involves difficult relationships between executives and their bosses, senior managers one level up need to be looking carefully at the overarching situation for trends, turnover, and PSES results to determine if the issue is an isolated situation with one executive or is there a workplace situation that warrants a closer look.

In situations concerning the right fit, clear communication of strengths, provision of coaching and management support in finding a new position or transition to retirement is necessary. When support is provided, it maintains health and mental health of executives and eases the transition.

Assumptions can also be made by organizations or some managers that executives nearing retirement age, will retire at the earliest date possible. That assumption and individual goals should be discussed and validated with the executive, especially given the changes in the Directive on Terms and Conditions of Employment for Executives that have a phased-in consent-to-deploy component. According to Treasury Board demographic data, many executives work beyond this retirement milestone, and wish to do so in significant roles, and thus considered under talent management. Being included in the “transition to

retirement” category in the talent map may not be their desire and placing them on a special deployment unilaterally should be avoided. Special deployments tend to be roles without staff and budgets, and sometimes the at-risk pay and performance rating is lower because of those factors. This has financial implications at a time when the executive is trying to maximize their highest five years compensation to benefit their lifetime pension. If we truly wish to be as inclusive as possible, we need to stay away from agism and cherish the experiences of our most experienced executives in the most productive ways possible.

All executives in this category are suffering major health and mental health impacts (see the health and mental health section on page 9).

## Other overarching issues and conditions of executives in the PS

### Incivility

Acts of incivility in the executive cadre are unacceptable. They stem from one person losing control over their emotions. Justifying that we lost control because of someone else’s actions is futile and untrue. It is a lack of impulse control or, in character-based terms, temperance, on the part of the aggressor. It is also not a demonstration of resilience to accept poor treatment. Incivility is pervasive and damaging, Ombuds’ offices report it specifically as an issue to address.

In his 2018-2019 Shared Services Canada Ombudsman annual report under incivility, Luc Bégin wrote ‘Management must also not tolerate any unacceptable behavior by colleagues, superiors and subordinates. We must not remain silent and we must strengthen the obligation to act’.



“To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

In his 2018-2019 Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada Ombudsman annual report, Mario Baril dedicated a whole section to ‘Shortcomings regarding interpersonal relationships and lack of civility and respect in the workplace.

In their *Harvard Business Review* article “Ethical Breakdowns: Good people often let bad things happen. Why?’, Max Bazerman and Ann Tenbrunsel wrote about understanding how cognitive biases distort ethical decision-making. Their research outlines the slippery slope of allowing ourselves to find minor infractions acceptable, making us more likely to accept increasingly major infractions as long as each violation is only incrementally more serious than the preceding one. Could it be the same for acts of incivility? Has our slight tolerance become incrementally higher to the point we see today and now think it is acceptable?

### New Executives

Newer executives are at increased risk because the expectations of an executive and non-executive are much different, but they are not prepared for those differences, nor are those differences explained to

them; they generally have less experience dealing with very senior management and difficult situations; and, transitioning from a doer to more of a delegator is not innate. When newer executives understand that their role requires navigation of office politics, the reaction is often great shock. In their book *Being the Boss*, Linda Hill and Kent Lineback point out that the number one mistake made when one is the 'boss' is not wanting to play the game. The reason, they put forward, is a bias that internal politics are bad and a waste of time. They note that organizations are inherently political entities, and the Public Service is no different. Accepting that fact is key to an executive's success.

Having a senior mentor would help newer executives better adapt to and navigate the political and practical waters and demands of positions at that level.

### **Executives Returning from Sick Leave**

Executive level positions are very demanding. Returning from a long sick leave is challenging and requires a gradual return, which may be difficult to accommodate in the full executive role. The EX sometimes feels pressure to come back too soon or forgoes some part of the accommodation. This, however, is not a good strategy, as relapses do occur and recovery is more difficult. In gradual return-to-work situations, the transition role given to the returning executive is generally of a project nature. A returning executive is understandably feeling less confident, having been out of the workplace for a while, and needs time to reintegrate gracefully. Being out of the workplace also sometimes means that the manager of the executive has changed while he or she was on leave, and that executive is not known to them, adding to the stress. If the executive has been replaced on a temporary basis by someone chosen by the new manager, there may be the additional stress of competition; or the returning executive they may be deployed to another position or put on a special deployment. It will be interesting to see if more returning executives are put on special deployment once the consent-to-deploy condition of employment takes full force in April 2022.

Cases where there are permanent limitations are difficult, as the organization and the executive must find a mutually suitable new position (and sometimes one not at an executive level). These situations are delicate and should be handled with the best intentions and support for the executive and in a win-win outcome for both the executive and the organization.



“The ASE provides a very timely and caring approach which is not available to EXs elsewhere. For this I am very grateful.”

### **Inclusion**

There is no strength in surrounding ourselves only with like-minded teams. It creates weaker teams because there is no diversity. Having diverse teams encourages debate, creativity, and innovation which leads to increased productivity. It also helps us be better leaders.

In McKinsey & Company's "Women in the workplace 2019" report, they note that across demographics groups, when employees feel they have equal opportunity for advancement and think the system is fair, they are happier, more satisfied, stay longer, and are likelier to recommend the organization to others. Universally, they conclude, inclusion efforts are the key to fairness for everyone. What better goal could there be?

The same study finds that "From having their judgment challenged to being overlooked or being mistaken for someone at a more junior level, women are far more likely to experience this everyday discrimination..." Some groups of women face more types of microaggressions. Compared to other races and ethnicities, black women are the most likely to have their judgment questioned in their areas of expertise and be asked to prove their competence. Lesbian women, bisexual and women with disabilities are far more likely than other women to hear demeaning remarks about themselves or others like them and to feel like they cannot talk about their personal lives at work."

In addition, one in four women believe that their gender has played a role in missing out on a job, promotion, or a raise. Female ASE clients have raised this time and time again over the last three years. The Public Service certainly has work to do before women achieve parity with men.

The ASE regularly speaks with women about the need for good mentors and role models, and the need to devote time for some self-promotion and to put themselves first. Binary thinking of either 'I manage up or down, take credit or give it to others, am arrogant or self-effacing' has not served us well. One can deftly be both. Let's challenge our binary thoughts.

While the McKinsey study is U.S.-based, Canadian Public Service executive ranks are not currently diverse. According to the Treasury Board's own data, there are still gaps at the EX-04 and EX-05 levels in the PS for women, and, despite years of focus on EE, significant gaps at the executive level for all three other groups.

While diversity looks at a range of differences, such as, but not limited to, race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age, social class, and physical ability, a focus on inclusion considers involvement where all are valued, respected, and able to contribute. An inclusive culture creates a sense of belonging and values and respects the diversity that each individual brings to the team.

If we are to use the momentum of the last year, we as the leaders of the Public Service must look not only at increasing diversity but fundamentally shifting our focus to building inclusive cultures. Clearly, we need to do more.

### **Additional COVID-Related Pressures**

The "Respond, Recover, Thrive" framework in [Deloitte's COVID-19 white paper](#) clearly outlines the global challenge of needing to create a more resilient society and economy, and touches on what the government's role could be in support of that goal. We will be called upon, as executives, to do our part in shoring up our own resilience in order to effectively lead this new way.

Our ability to navigate through unprecedented times calls for new competencies, such as that of "uncertainty capability," as described by Nathan Furr in his [Harvard Business Review article](#). It is the ability to move beyond the fear and frustration of a situation and into the possibilities they create. Fostering a gratitude mindset, and not thinking in binary terms, are the keys to remaining positive. Otherwise, we will be saddled by only the crisis we are in, and wallow in relative deprivation.

Our [APEX Work and Health Survey of 2017](#) indicated that 35% of executives were working 55 hours per week or more and feeling overwhelmed. Workloads had been increasing steadily and we suspect results

would be worse as executives now have COVID-related duties. Our next survey should be telling on this front.

Time is in short supply for executives and working from home means we need to devote more of that precious time to consciously communicate and connect with our teams, colleagues, and bosses, as we do not 'run into them' walking in our workplaces. Not only does this add work, it increases feelings of isolation, blurs work and home boundaries, and invades our privacy. Our former commutes also meant we could decompress while travelling to and from the office. Most of us do not have that luxury any longer and risk not setting appropriate boundaries.

Managing remotely is particularly challenging for tracking productivity and work, managing performance and talent, recruiting and retaining, and coaching our more junior staff. Team moments need dedicated effort and feel emptier and less personal. It is more difficult to create a strong culture and social connections, especially for new members. All this additional work leaves no time for executive reflection and very little for self-care. "[When life is disrupted, we are more likely to ignore important aspects of self-care](#)," says Paula Allen, senior vice-president of research, analytics, and innovation at Morneau Shepell. Our health and mental health continue to be impacted in very real ways.

Clients of the ASE are no longer on the adrenaline high of early pandemic days and are now facing exhaustion and burnout. A recent [Morneau Shepell survey](#) of 3,000 Canadian workers indicates that motivation levels are lower for 36% of respondents than earlier in the pandemic. There seems to be little appetite and energy in the senior management ranks to address workload and priority issues, as Dr. Maslach would have us do, and executives feel raising them is interpreted as a sign of weakness.

Not being on work premises is not an antidote against harassment and, in fact, makes communications even more challenging, thereby impacting relationships. The result may be a continued increase in the number of such cases.

As we strive to stay connected, please remember that our success as executives depends on nurturing three networks: our own team, to help do our daily job; our strategic network, which helps use to anticipate and foresee, and our developmental network, which helps support leadership growth (such as mentors and coaches). As we are masters of our careers, these three networks are necessary for our success. Please make the time to feed all networks during this crisis.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

The best way to improve conditions for executives is to care enough to ask or hear them and the issues with which they are struggling, and to have the courage and compassion to find solutions together. Even small steps are a blessing. Having environments where we can speak truth without being deemed the problem is necessary for that to occur. In order to change things for executives, we need the determination not to be blind and not to be silent.

The toll on health and mental health of executives will continue to be very high if we do not tackle workloads head-on. Impacts may be devastating if the conversations with senior management remain one-sided and solutions are not sought, and where the human side of executives is neglected.

Executives do not want rhetoric on the critical issue of workload. Instead, they need to engage their boss and colleagues to find solutions and remove irritants. We have all the clues to do so in Dr. Maslach's work, and research tells us there are always possible improvements to explore.

As executives, we are employees first, and deserve the same level of respect, transparency, procedural fairness, compassion for health and mental issues and equity as we strive to afford to employees.

Let's return to a zero-tolerance for incivility at all levels. We have let that creep up and are paying the price. Improving in this area would have dramatic positive results as would ensuring procedural fairness to all those involved in complaints and referring them systematically to the ASE. Executives who have a supportive boss and the help of ASE during these trying times fare much better than others.

Until we achieve optimal inclusion, which is to embrace every single public servant for who they are, we need to keep progressing and pushing the envelope for all diversity groups and beyond. Black Lives Matter could be our blueprint to finally expand to all other groups, until we are one. We must strive not only to increase diversity in our ranks, but to build a Public Service where each and every one of us feel welcome, respected, valued, able to contribute meaningfully, with equal career opportunities and to bring our authentic self to the workplace each and every day!

Executives seeking help from the ASE have often shared how alone they have felt. Being an executive and rising in the ranks distances us from the employee level at the best of times. Living in an unprecedented pandemic time has increased cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and exacerbated feelings of isolation; we are not with our teams, our colleagues, our mentors, and bosses, and we do not feel we can share our true feelings with many. ASE is here for you.

Just before closing, an invitation to nurture a community mindset. Start with kindness to yourself, families, teams, organizations. As a whole, the Public Service will feel the positive ripple effects. We are all connected: COVID confirmed that in spades.

*And remember, in times of high anxiety and stress, it's more important than ever to safeguard your mental wellness. That includes stemming the tide of non-essential information and paring down your news consumption.*

In closing, in her book, *Willful Blindness*, Margaret Heffernan warns us of the dangers of ignoring the obvious or proven. It is a shock that despite unequivocal evidence, most of us choose not to see the irrefutable proof. She puts forth two reasons why that is. The first is we are taught to protect our self-image at all cost (so do not want to stand out and go out on limbs), and we are hardwired to be obedient,

especially in steep hierarchies. It is easier and safer to fall into willful ignorance or blindness for fear of jeopardizing the leadership ideology of supporting senior management, or risk suffering impacts to our careers, performance ratings, and reputation. The issues raised in this report are very real. We cannot afford to commit willful blindness now.

# Tools and Resources to Support Executives of the Public Service

The following tools and resources have been reviewed and compiled by APEX at the time of this report. They are also available on the APEX website.



## Advisory Services – Resource and Contact Lists

Visit [apex.gc.ca/advisory-services/](https://apex.gc.ca/advisory-services/) to view the compiled list of resource PDF pages which contain useful contacts and sources of information on the following topics:

- [Terms and conditions](#)
- [Career Management/Transitions](#)
- [Health and Mental Health](#)
- [Talent Management](#)
- [Harassment/Investigation](#)
- [Sick Leave/Return to Work](#)

Remember that an executive does not have to be an APEX member to use the Advisory services.



## Subscribe to the APEX Newsletter

The [APEX newsletter](#) features curated content that touches on topics such as mental health, inclusion, APEX initiatives, compensation and programming.



## The APEX Website

Visit [apex.gc.ca/resources/](https://apex.gc.ca/resources/) for a comprehensive list of resources developed by APEX on topics that range from talent management to leave entitlements for executives. It is a one-stop shop for members to read the APEX Guides Series which includes [the Guide for Executives](#), [the Guide to Leave Without Pay](#), and [the Guide to Retirement](#). The list of INFO-APEX publications includes [Pay and Leave Entitlement Implications of Changing Employer](#), [the Retirement Fact Sheet](#), and the 2-part publication, [Preparing for your Performance Review](#).

# 2020-2021 APEX Advisors



**Johanne LeBlanc**, Head of Advisory Services

Johanne LeBlanc is a bilingual, seasoned executive with over 30 years as a generalist human resources practitioner in the federal Public Service and private sector, both in Montréal and Ottawa. In her 14 years as an executive in the PS, she has worked in all HR domains for 7 departments and agencies. She has been at APEX since September 2017 and since that time has met with over 1,500 executives in her Advisory practice.



**Janet Wong**, APEX Advisor

Janet joined APEX in 2019 from the Department of National Defence. She has been a public servant for 29 years and has worked as a Director General in the areas of Learning, Human Resources, Procurement and Information Management.



**ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL EXECUTIVES  
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**ASSOCIATION PROFESSIONNELLE DES CADRES  
SUPÉRIEURS DE LA FONCTION PUBLIQUE DU CANADA**

75 Albert Street – Suite: 400, Ottawa, ON, K1P 5E7  
Telephone: 613-995-6252 | Fax: 613-943-8919 | E-mail: [info@apex.gc.ca](mailto:info@apex.gc.ca)