Know. Manage. Build

Know our community

Manage our needs

Build a better tomorrow

Table of Contents

💡 **Look for these lightbulbs throughout the document, for ideas to consider**.

Message from the APEX CEO

I am pleased to share the Annual Report of the APEX Advisory Service for Executives for 2020-2021, 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 report offers a compelling view into the most acute challenges faced by public service executives. Once again health and mental health tops the list. Early this year, we will be sharing the results of the Executive Health and Wellness Study which will expand on this important topic. The Annual Report of the APEX Advisory Services highlights the issues of vulnerable executives, provides executives at all levels with the opportunity to reflect on scenarios that are unfortunately all too common and provides thought provoking insights on how to navigate the future.

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.

Carl Trottier

Carl Trottier

CEO

Message from the
Head of Advisory Services, Johanne LeBlanc

Dear executives,

I am pleased to present this year's annual APEX Advisory Services for Executives (ASE), and my 5th as Head of the section. Over those past 5 years, we have provided advice to over 2,300 executives across the Public Service and this report gives a glimpse of their collective stories.

A record number of clients reached out to the ASE this fiscal, and we have heard the additional difficulties the pandemic has added to their already challenging roles. Those who proactively sought our services are commended for seeking support to navigate their issues instead of suffering in isolation.

This document offers an overview of our client situations, pain points, and offers a glimpse into some underlying causes and recommendations which could be tackled to make life better for all.

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

Executives of the Public Service should be very proud of their contributions in leading teams that perform important work for Canadians. If I had one area that I feel strongly needs to be addressed as a collective, it would be burnout. Burnout is not an individual executive issue; it is a work environment one.

I wish to thank Jacqueline Rigg, APEX CEO, for the trust bestowed upon me to lead the ASE and for my team of amazing women advisors.

It remains a great privilege to head the APEX Advisory Services. I hope you find this report informative. It has been an honour for us to serve you and make a difference, one executive at a time.

Johanne LeBlanc

Head of Advisory Services

Executive Summary

> "The ASE provides a service that is highly responsive, professional, and delivered with care. They offer a lifeline to executives that is reassuring and I was confident that they genuinely had my best interest in mind." ASE Client

The confidential service of the ASE is offered to all executives (clients) in the federal public service, both in Canada and abroad. Its reputation for being a neutral and impartial place where executives seek advice, obtain information, and explore options and strategies regarding their work-related situations. This Report will inform you about key and strategic issues concerning the health and wellness of executives. The document is divided into five sections. In the first section, we share statistical information allowing you to understand the data behind the analysis. Section 2 provides historical trends of the key executive issues/situations brought to the ASE. Section 3 outlines overall findings while Section 4 provides detailed information on vulnerable groups. To demonstrate real situations, Section 5 includes a sample of case studies. The final Section of the Report is our conclusion and recommendations. The Appendix includes tools and resources.

ASE demand continues to increase and nearly 500 executive clients connected with us for support this year. Our mandate is to support all executives and currently 41% of our clients are not APEX members. The client distribution across levels is similar to the general distribution of executives across levels - 51%, 23%, and 22% were at the EX-01, EX-02 and EX-03 level respectively. The EX-04 and EX-05 levels represent 3% with a very small percentage from other groups. There were more women than men accessing the ASE services, with 58% of clients identifying as female and 41% identifying as male. An overwhelming percentage of clients (83%) are located in the National Capital Region, 16% were from regions, and only 1% were from outside Canada. One would expect the percentages to reflect the overall representation of executives in the federal public service (72%, 21% and 4% respectively); however, there is a 10% higher demand in the NCR.

Over the last 5 years, the number of clients has increased from 324 in 2016-2017 to a record high of almost 500 in 2020-2021 which is a 52% increase. In addition, the complexity of the issues, continues to increase resulting in 1315 sessions with clients in 2020-2021. This represents a 68% increase in the number of client sessions over the last 5 years. The ASE survey revealed a 99% positive satisfaction score.

The top issues facing executives, for the second year in a row, continues to be physical and mental health. A full 55% of clients reported feeling physical and or mental health symptoms as a result of their work-related situations. The top three **work-related** issues continue to be: *relationship issues with the boss* (including harassment), *harassment complaints from employees and investigations*, and *career management* (at 38%, 30% and 22%, respectively).

The executive community is in need of significant interventions on multiple fronts. To augment and support the public service, APEX has adjusted programming, increased resources and expanded outreach to meet the growing needs of the community. Specific and customized interventions have been made for entry level executives and employment equity groups. The ASE Report drives APEX's tactical plan as a result, we have launched an entire new portfolio to support entry level executives with interventions ranging from mentoring circles, wellness experts and onboarding advice, tools and resources. Our outreach has grown exponentially as we maximize virtual opportunities to assist executives nationally and internationally. In support of employment equity groups, APEX has amplified its voice by sitting on Diversity and Inclusion Deputy Committees and embarking on Health and Wellness research which addresses the sense of belonging, a key detractor of productivity and job satisfaction.
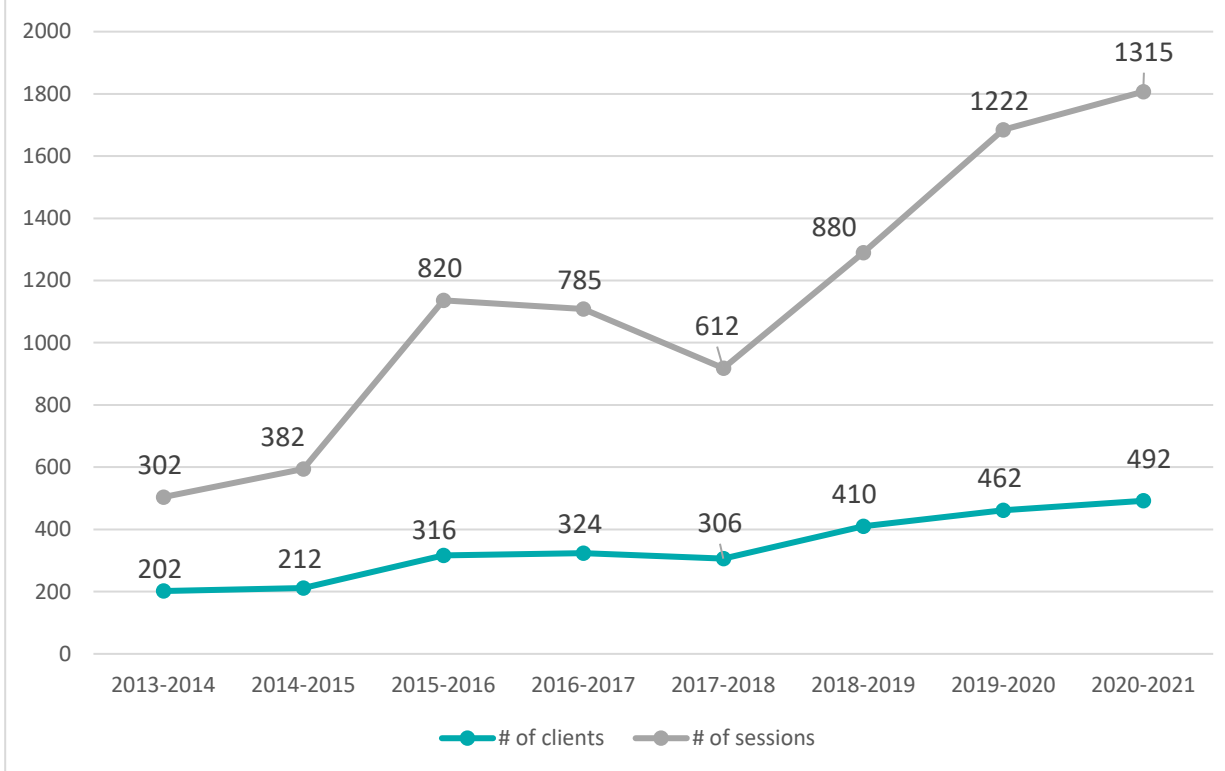
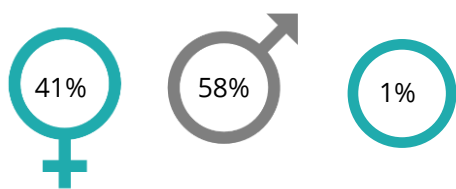# Section 1: Statistical Data for 2020-2021 Fiscal Year

Client Sessions

There were record numbers of executives accessing the service over the last eight years (200 in 2013-2014 to 492 in 2020-2021). The graph below shows the exponential rise in number of clients over this time period with demand more than doubling. This is a result of more executives being aware of the services and also an increase in overall demand. Over the last five years, the number of clients has increased from 324 in 2016-2017 to 492 in 2020-2021, representing a 52% increase in clients since 2017-2018 and a 6.5% increase in the last year.

Equally important has been the rise in the number of client sessions, which has quadrupled over the last eight years from 302 session in 2013-2014 to a high of 1,315 in 2020-2021. Over the last 5 years, the number of sessions has increased by 68% and have increased in the last year by 7.6%. The number of clients and annual sessions in the current year is expected to surpass even the 2020-2021 fiscal year.

Client and Session Trends

| Year	# of clients	# of sessions
2013-2014	202	302
2014-2015	212	382
2015-2016	316	820
2016-2017	324	785
2017-2018	306	612
2018-2019	410	880
2019-2020	462	1222
2020-2021	492	1315

Clients by Gender

41%   58%   1%

There were more women than men accessing the ASE services, with 58% of clients identifying as female and 41% identifying as male.

Language of Preference by %

|	Anglophone	Francophone
	71	28
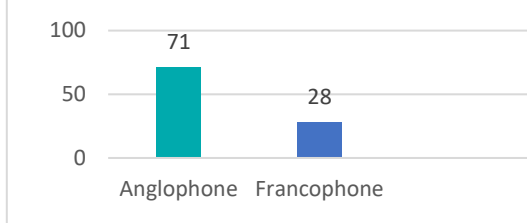
In terms of linguistic profile, although many clients are bilingual as required at the executive level, 71% identify as anglophone while 28% identify as francophone and 1% identify as either. This may be an area that can be further leveraged in future marketing and communications.

Clients by Level

Others | 1%

EX-05 | 0.4% (2)

EX-04 | 2.8% (14)

EX-03 | 22% (109)

EX-02 | 23% (112)

EX-01 | 50% (250)
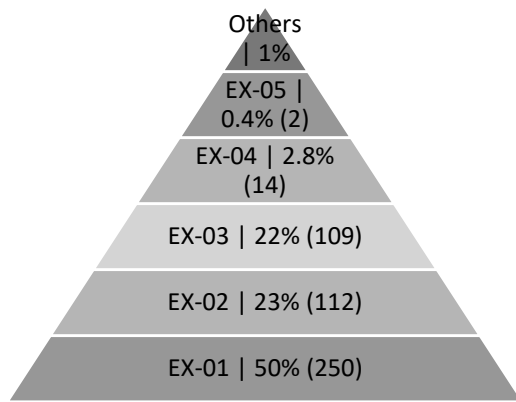
50% of the clients are at the EX-01 level, 23% at the EX-02 level, 22% at the EX-03 level, 3% at the EX-04 and EX-05 levels with a very small percentage from other groups. These reflect

Member Status

41%   59%
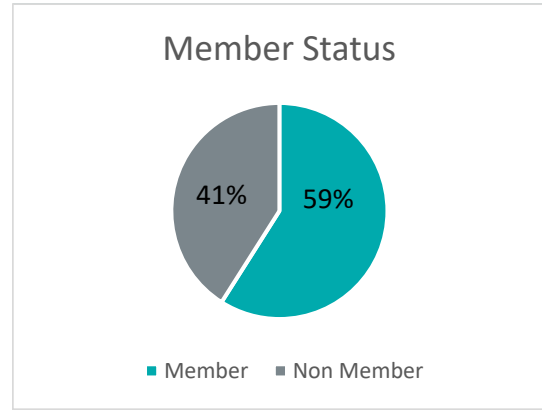
■ Member   ■ Non Member

Almost two thirds of ASE clients are APEX members. 59% (289) clients were members of APEX, while 41% (203) clients were non-members.

Client's Location
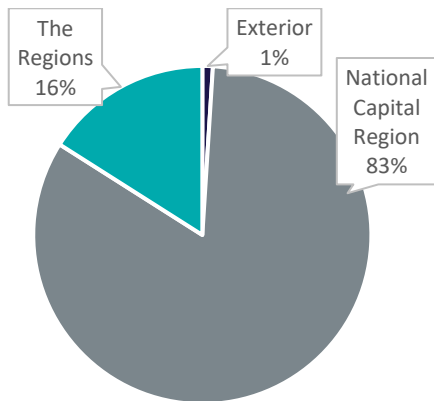
The Regions 16%

Exterior 1%

National Capital Region 83%

An overwhelming percentage of clients (83%) are located in the National Capital Region, 16% were from regions, and only 1% were from outside Canada. One would expect the percentages to reflect the overall representation of executives in the federal public service (72%, 21% and 4% 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 99% overall satisfaction rate; 99% of clients felt that the ASE understood their questions and concerns extremely well or very well. 99% were very likely or likely to use the service again and to refer other executives to do so. Other than ensuring the service is broadly promoted to all executives in the public service, no other elements for improvements were brought forth.

> "The assistance provided was essential, professional, and offered support during the worst experience of my professional career when I could not discuss the situation with anyone in my work life. I will never forget the support I received and will forever sing the praises of APEX and its advisors! " ASE Client

Outreach

The ASE was very visible and active in advocating for executives this fiscal year. The Head of Advisory Services presented to over 860 executives in 13 different venues to address the ASE clients' realities at their senior management meetings. These presentations included discussions with regional councils, ombuds networks, and large and small departments and agencies. The number of executive public servant connections to the Head of Advisory Services increased by 25% this year. The ASE is active on LinkedIn and Twitter, sharing thought provoking articles and information for executives.

Section 2: Historical Trends of EX Issues

What We Heard - Detailed Client Issues

The following table summarizes the most frequent reasons for which clients contact the ASE. The top issues facing executives, for the second year in a row, continues to be physical and mental health. A full 55% of clients reported feeling physical and or mental health symptoms as a result of their work-related situations. The top three **work-related** issues continue to be: *relationship issues with the boss* (including harassment), *harassment complaints from employees and investigations*, and *career management* (at 38%, 30% and 22%, respectively).

	2020-2021	*2019-2020*	*2018-2019*	*2017-2018*	*2016-2017*	*2015-2016*
1	Health / Mental Health	Health / Mental Health	Career Management/ Transitions	Career Management	Career Management	Career Management
2	Relationship with Boss and Harassment by Boss	Harassment & Investigations	Relationship with a Superior (including harassment)	Investigations	Relationship with a Superior	Relationship with a Superior
3	Harassment Complaint from Employee & Investigations	Relationship with a Superior	Terms & Conditions	Terms & Conditions	Health	Harassment
4	Career Management	Career Management	Performance Management	Relationship with a Superior	Retirement	Health (not including re-entry/duty to accommodate)
5	Terms and Conditions	Performance Management	Harassment (complaint from an employee)	Retirement	Terms & Conditions	Retirement
6	Performance Management – Ex's Own Review	Career Transitions	Disability issues	Health	Performance Management	Performance Management
7	Values and Ethics	Terms & Conditions	Investigations	Performance Management	Harassment	Terms & Conditions

Section 3: Health and Mental Health: General Findings

Many clients feel that every day is an endless series of video meetings, countless hours in front of a screen, little time for family, self, and real work, and they still feel that they are not accomplishing or doing enough. Time is in short supply for executives and working from home means they need to devote more of that precious time to consciously communicate and connect with their teams, colleagues, and bosses. Not only does this add work, but it also increases feelings of isolation, blurs work and home boundaries, and invades their privacy. They are experiencing brain fog as a collective, where small tasks become enormous, and they may have a harder time focusing and making decisions. This certainly impacts their well-being, performance, and self-esteem.

Consider the data:

- According to a recent survey of global leaders, exhaustion levels are at record highs, putting at risk the post pandemic recovery (Deloitte-Lifeworks 2021). 82% finish work feeling mentally or physically exhausted;
- 59% are unable to relax or pause activity;
- 49% have difficulties sleeping;
- 51% of respondents are considering leaving, retiring, or downshifting from their current organization or position. Among those, 16% are considering demotions out of leadership.

Observation: Multiple clients of the ASE have discussed voluntary demotions with us each week since the pandemic hit the six-month mark. This phenomenon was extremely rare prior to COVID 19. This strongly indicates to us that those executives are at their breaking point and are looking for concrete ways out.

In our recent APEX Work and Health Study, EX-01's and EX-02's are languishing, as opposed to the EX-03's that are faring better and EX 04-05's who are defined as coping (despite having the highest workloads and high rates of incivility). EX-01's and EX-02's are the most diverse, have highest burnout rates, workload issues, intent to leave, and lowest level of decision latitude.

Observation: EX-04's and EX-05's are in an environment where they seem to tolerate incivility and they are coping. If they assume their reality to be good and shared, they are disconnected from the lower-level experiences of their executive cadre. This would lead them to believe that all is well and that there are no issues that need to be worked on collectively within their organization. Therefore, if one executive comes to them struggling, they would tend to believe that the fault is with that executive and not systematic. As well, they may not perceive incivility as an issue needing to be addressed or they are reticent to tackle it, which only makes the situation worse. What we condone we codify.

Reflection: Without validating with the more junior executives what their world looks like, the more senior executives miss the opportunity to close an important blind spot, may misjudge more junior executives, and do not address incivility in their own ranks.

In his book Igniting the Third Factor, Dr. Peter Jensen brings forth that "The most important variable in the mental health equation is the relationship employees have with their direct supervisor". He further

states that "people cannot spend time adjusting to the idiosyncrasies or lack of skill of their leaders and still be exceptional performers". And yet, relationship issues with the boss are the second highest work-related theme raised by clients and it causes much pain in the system.

Reflection: Reading the above, how would you rate your relationship with your boss? Have you experienced needing to adjust to the bosses' idiosyncrasies or is the boss adjusting down as well?

"Very fruitful discussion that gave me ideas and creative solutions."

ASE Client

In her book 'The Burnout Epidemic,' Dr. Jennifer Moss notes that 89% of people report their work life is getting worse. Only 2% of participants rated their well-being as excellent (these results are the worst they have been in recorded studies). She also found that 74% say since COVID, this is the loneliest time of their lives. Social isolation has serious consequences for individuals. John Cacioppo, coauthor of Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection, emphasizes its tremendous impact on psychological and physical health and longevity. Research by Sarah Pressman, of the University of California, Irvine, corroborates his work and demonstrates that while obesity reduces longevity by 20%, drinking by 30%, and smoking by 50%, **loneliness reduces it by a whopping 70%**. Millennials and those living alone are faring worst in terms of loneliness globally and we do not yet understand the impacts of this reality in the longer term.

Reflection: Do you or your executive employees live alone or suffer from loneliness? Have you raised this topic? separately or as a team? Is burnout discussed with your boss? As a boss, asking your team "what can I (or we) do to make your next week (or other timeline) better?" is often all that is needed.

2019 the World Health Organization (WHO) officially inducted burnout into the existing negative work-related syndromes, professional people still struggle hard to find the proper balance and boundaries between work and non-work. Technology renders us reachable at any time. This never-ending compulsion or toxic productivity has diminishing returns. "Toxic productivity occurs when an individual has an unhealthy obsession with being productive and constantly on the go." Kruti Quazi, clinical Director of Sesh tells us.

Reflection: Do you have healthy boundaries as an executive? Do you encourage and respect boundaries for your executive employees? Is it time to investigate digital detoxing and changing your habits?

Another phenomenon we encounter are clients feeling they must tow the positive line; regardless of how they truly feel. In fact, they are very reticent to share their true feelings as they feel there is no openness to do so and it will be seen as weakness, by their boss. While positivity seems good on the surface, pushed to the extreme it is toxic.

Toxic positivity involves dismissing negative emotions and responding to distress with false reassurances rather than empathy. It comes from feeling uncomfortable with negative emotions. It is often well-intentioned but can cause alienation and a feeling of disconnection because it inhibits people from feeling perfectly normal emotions which, if left unchecked, it can lead to longer-lasting deeper issues such as anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and burnout. In our clients, it translates as them believing they are not coping. When the truth is, they are not being validated and this is creating cognitive dissonance. The solution is for the system (their boss and their organization) to be open and realistic, accept the emotions and difficulties and spend time trying to make life better rather than

dismissing the emotions altogether. As it takes 18-24 months for a person to regain health after a burnout, it is an organizational imperative to support employees and to help them to avoid burnout. ([Dr. Christina Maslach,](#))

Observation: Tackling burnout as an <u>organizational issue</u> is key. In the ASE, we feel many executives of the public service are living toxic productivity and positivity, to the detriment of their health.

Reflection: When your EXs have "performance issues" or struggle, could an underlying cause to pursue with them be exhaustion and burnout?

How can we improve our well-being? Many of us have been taught and believe that putting ourselves first is selfish, self-centered, or self-indulgent, especially for women who are socialized to put the needs of others first. Our belief is that we need to be self-critical in order to motivate ourselves to do better. In fact, research on self-compassion demonstrates this to be the opposite. The work done by Dr. Kristin Neff concludes that those who master self-compassion are far more resilient and have stronger mental health well-being.

Reflection: Take the Self-compassion test (https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-test/)

Section 4: Vulnerabilities

The vulnerabilities are a combination of people-centric issues and organizational situations/culture.

Executive Leadership

In the ASE, a top theme in the last 5 years has been relationship issues with their superiors. Because issues with a superior can lead to significant career consequences for the executive, these cases are particularly distressing and cause serious mental and physical health issues. The clients report that the way they are treated by their superiors ranges from unskilled to disrespectful all the way to harassing, and the reported cases are on the rise since COVID. While it is true that executives and their superiors have both been feeling the heavy impacts of the pandemic and tolerance and mental health has taken a hit, since the EX-04's and EX-05's are fairing much better than their EX-01's and EX-02's, perhaps the more senior EX's do not understand what the issue is and quickly turn to criticizing the lower levels because they may not feel the same pain (APEX Employee Work and Health Study(EWHS)).

Notwithstanding the above, there have historically been traits in superiors that our clients feel are less than optimal.

In their article Why are Servant Leaders so Rare? Psychologist Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic suggests that many leaders achieve their position by being self-centered, overconfident, narcissistic, arrogant, manipulative and risk-prone. They go on to refer to another article which states that "people who get ahead tend to be either current high performers or those who appear most leader-like. Sadly, neither of these traits correlates well with servant leadership. Servant leadership is seen as the ultimate form of leadership. It further notes the following important traits of this style of leader: empathy, compassion, vulnerability, gratitude, positivity, awareness, and self-care. (article Sept 22, 2020, by Tera Allas and Bill Schaninger).

In their book entitled *The Multiplier Effect*, Wisemean, Allen and Foster describe two opposite types of leaders: The first drains intelligence, energy, and capability from their people and needs to be the smartest person in the room. They are considered **Diminishers**. The second use their abilities to amplify and recognize the capabilities of their team members. They are considered **Multipliers**.

Reflection: Given the above; Which type of superior are you? Which category does your superior fall into? Which type describes your best superiors?

In a book by Dr. Denis Cauvier entitled "Bullet Proof" he contends that "most leaders lack the skills to facilitate difficult conversations and that 80% of staff turnover is related to unsatisfactory workplace relationships (Saratoga Institute research finding). The same review, highlights that trust will be leadership's leading indicator in the next normal. It goes on to note that 'Building trust rests on employees seeing how supervisors and organizational leaders care about their work-related concerns and well-being.' and 'asking for input and communicating a response to it leads to employees feeling heard and not feeling dismissed by pat explanations and other standard replies".

Reflection: Do you often feel dismissed by your superior or coworkers?

Gallup research contends that only one in ten people possesses the necessary traits that great managers exhibit, traits that include building relationships that create trust, open dialogue, and transparency. True humility is when someone has an accurate assessment of both their strengths and weaknesses.

Why do we tolerate non-people-centric superiors? Here might be a clue. In the Harvard Business Review entitled "Stop Making Excuses for Toxic Bosses", McLean, Courtright, Smith and Yim (January 2021 study) conclude that abusive bosses will appear to repent for their unacceptable behaviour and we give them a free pass but the behaviour tends to get even worse over time. They coin the term that abusive bosses 'fake nice' not 'make nice' after a rampage because there are concerned only about their social image and "on covering up their bad behaviour through manipulative ingratiation and self-promotion, not on actually changing their toxic behaviour". They are, as well, masters of managing up.

Dr. Liane Davey, a conflict expert, describes the impact pf bullying as "it's a horrible, destructive power game that will leave the target in crisis, the witnesses in distress and the team in ruins." and goes on to state "When bystanders are unimpressed by the bully's attempts at a power grab and instead intervene, almost all bullying stops."

Observation: In the ASE, we have few clients who have people-centric superiors. Unfortunately, many of our clients have superiors who tend to use fear as a leading tactic.

Reflection: What type of superior have you experienced most? What if we stood united against bullying?

Inclusion

Inclusion is curiosity (a learning and open stance) leading to competence (improved cultural and diversity sophistication) which rests on an unwavering belief that every person is worthy, unique, and deserving of respect. Inclusion is not an us and them, it is not favouring anyone or any group above others. It is a mindset based on a profound knowledge that until all of us are doing well, none of us are doing well.

According to a survey done in October 2020, 50% of the 1,500 working Canadians who belong to a visible ethnic minority believe their background is not represented within the makeup of their management team. (Despite diversity efforts, discrimination still a problem: Survey article by Jim Wilson November 25, 2020). This discourages people from coming forward for those roles and prolongs the unhealthy status quo and its inevitable cycle of inequity.

Organizations that signal to all levels of executives that they need to be cohesive at all costs under the guise of alignment, are encouraging dysfunction. It is one thing to present a concerted front for employees but quite another to stifle opinion and not feel free to challenge the status quo respectfully, among ourselves. If we accept Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory, we could postulate that subliming individual opinion among the EX-ranks is weakening inclusion on top of creating toxicity and decreasing productivity. Its premise is that we have both a need to be inclusive and to be distinct. It purports that to be inclusive, organizations must respect uniqueness and create belonging. The absence of either of these two renders inclusion, among other things, impossible.

We tend to believe the way we see the world (and therefore base our decisions on) is shared broadly by others; it is not. We each see the world through our unique lens of our experiences, thinking

habits, biases, and assumptions. Not one person, therefore, sees the world the same. Left unmanaged, this 'way' may disadvantage certain employees and continue to marginalize the contribution of others. We can only break this cycle if we are aware of it and choose to act-think, differently.

While real progress on inclusion seems daunting and overwhelming, we firmly established though the pandemic, how swift and profound a global transformation can be when it is our number one priority as a collective.

Reflection: If we put as much level of effort on the inclusion file as on COVID-19, what could we achieve in short order?

Which of these behaviours do you see occurring in your organization and what actions are you taking to change your organization?

- Negatively labelling women who demonstrate traits considered acceptable and even strengths, in men.
- Believing women are too emotional.
- Considering it routine (no big deal) when francophones are not welcome to speak in their native language.
- Viewing all older white males as part of 'the good old boy's club'.
- Seeing introverts as not action oriented or slow to make decisions
- Viewing forceful individuals as strong and good leaders.
- Thinking that executives close to retirement are coasting, not innovative, and not interested in growing and learning.
- Assuming that people-centric leaders do not get the same or better results than task-focussed ones.
- Thinking that all disabilities are visible.
- Thinking differently abled executives all need costly accommodations.
- Believing racialized and Indigenous executives are sensitive rather than others are not sensitive enough.
- Thinking LGBTQ members do not have as many family obligations.

Women

> " it took me quite a while to develop a voice. Now that I have one, I am not going to be silent ". Madeleine Albright

Women represent approximately 49.5% of the worldwide population on earth and we are without a doubt, equal to men, although globally we are not treated that way, including in Canada. In the public service, we have been 'focussing' on equality for women for decades, with inconsistent results. It seems obvious that if we cannot achieve parity with such large numbers of us over such a long time period, it is not very encouraging for other smaller groups. Clearly, we need to do more and differently.

While the McKinsey study is U.S.-based, Canadian Public Service executive ranks are not currently diverse.

On the inclusion front, significant progress is needed. 'Although we have seen important gains since 2016, women are still significantly underrepresented at all levels of management. In addition, women continue to have a worse day-to-day experience at work. Women of colour and those with traditionally marginalized identities are especially likely to face disrespectful and 'othering' behaviour". (McKinsey: Women and Work 2021).

In their special *Women in the Workplace 2021* report, McKinsey note that women in corporate America are even more burned out than they were last year and increasingly more so than men. The survey of more than 65,000 workers reveals that women are "rising to the moment as stronger leaders and taking on the extra work that comes with this: compared with men at the same level, women are doing more to support their teams and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Yet, this critical work is going unrecognized and unrewarded by most companies". It continues, "while all women are more likely than men to face microaggressions that undermine them professionally-such as being interrupted and having their judgment questioned-women of colour often experience these at a higher rate. In fact, they go on to state that "There is also a disconnect between companies growing commitment to racial equity and the lack of improvement we see in the day-to-day experiences of women of color. The latter face similar types and frequencies of microaggressions as they did 2 years ago".

Dr. Christine. Neff, author of the book "Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women can Harness Kindness to Speak up, Claim their Power and Thrive" (Harper Wave 2021), emphasizes "People do not like women who are competent and fierce or who stand up for their ideas because they assume that a competent woman is not nurturing, and we like nurturing women".

This could explain well the threat of competent women and that superiors may end up not embracing that competence but turning it into a negative. In our female clients, we hear time and again the disheartening performance discussions of labelling strong women as aggressive, opinionated, bossy, overly frank, uncaring (in less than endearing ways) where we may call the same traits demonstrated

by men in positive terms such as 'driven', 'assertive', 'he suffers no fools" etc. Kristin advances the idea that women, unlike men, need to balance our fierceness and tenderness because we are not allowed to be just as fierce as men.

Reflection: As the superior of executive women, do you hold some of these biases? Do you expect men to be available to work late? Do you expect women to be more nurturing? Do you define similar behaviours differently for men and women?

Catalyst March 2021 edition entitled Welcoming Women Back to Work "Few workplace resources account for the unique challenges faced by women, and that's a problem" said Tiana Field-Ridley, a Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) implementation specialist.

Observation: Work at home has been particularly challenging for public service executive women clients with young children. Increased microaggressions concerning childcare duties, and lack of boundaries and balance has been devastating on their mental health. They have put up and do not feel they can even voice their concerns, never mind address them in any concrete way. Most are exploring solutions on their own, including demotions, as a way out of what they consider a hopeless situation.

"The path forward is clear, companies need to take bold steps to address burnout at the organizational level. They need to recognize and reward the women leaders who are driving progress and they need to do the deep cultural work required to create a workplace where all women and all racialized workers feel valued". (McKinsey, Special Women in the Workplace Survey 2021)

> "My advice to colleagues would be to reach out earlier than I did. The advice and support I received would have helped a lot sooner had I only reached out'' ASE Client

New Executives

The last year has been very difficult for new executives. Not only were they adapting to the challenges and demands of being an executive but also doing so in a pandemic virtual environment. Many new executives onboarded during COVID and have yet to meet their superiors or their teams in person. The ability for these new executives to form meaningful connections with their colleagues and teams has been impacted. This situation has been compounded by issues such as increased tempo of operations, long hours of work, increased mental health issues within their teams and the executives own, concerns regarding budgets, vaccinations and new additions to executive terms and conditions such as special deployments.

New executives often hesitate to talk about their own health and wellness issues or the challenges they are facing as they want to be seen as competent and capable at the new level. Their senior managers are seized with departmental priorities, their workload and the health and wellness of

the overall team that they may not realize that their new executives are struggling and hesitant to ask for support.

In 2020, the survey of new executives showed us that only 22% of survey respondents received formal on-boarding, only 50% were familiar with the Directive on Terms and Conditions and the Directive on Performance and Talent Management and 33% were aware of the services offered by the ASE. In the past, many new executives learned the "rules of being an executive." from their more seasoned colleagues via coffee chats and water cooler conversations. Given the virtual reality, these conversations have been reduced to yet another Zoom call or are just not happening. Their managers have been equally impacted by the volume of work, leaving very little time to support their new executives as they develop in these roles.

Normally, the connections that these executives create at the executive level, greatly assist them to navigate their new roles, provide a needed sounding board to discover best practices, to discuss challenges and hear how their peers have tackled similar issues. This gap has left new executives feeling isolated; isolated from their teams as they are now "management", isolated from their managers with whom bilat discussions may be infrequent and virtual and without the normal support network of their peers.

The demands of work, the lack of work and life balance, their own health and wellness, the lack of support from senior management who are seized with the health and wellness of the rank and file, challenging work environments and compensation practices that are lagging the rest of the public service has left many executives questioning the decision to become an executive.

"

"The Advisor was really listening, asking the right questions, providing examples to help me understand my options and how to recover from the difficult situation." - ASE Client

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 superiors, 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 11).

Organizations

As leaders, our survival and that of our teams depends on our connectedness, which is fundamentally people-centric.

According to Gallup's research, people-centric organizations **outperform their competitors**, because they care about their employees, are proactive about employee growth and development, take their ideas seriously and fully utilize their strengths. It **revolves around its people and considers their specific needs**. Using human-centered design can help craft our hybrid workplaces, starting with intentionally hearing about the desires and pain points of employees (including executives).

"The more that there's a feeling that people can express how they are feeling at work … the sooner you will get to that highly productive model that takes the best of remote work and hybrid work." (The future of Federal Work by Megan McConnell (McKinsey)).

How to spot a non people-centric executive culture? Ask the question: What happens to executives when they challenge the status quo? (Job interview article by Timothy R. Clark). And again, how do you know if a culture of fear exists? (Dori Meinert) One telling sign is when meeting, participants sit quietly. Fear also creates sub-optimal productivity and reek havoc on well-being.

Reflection: What would your answers to those questions posed above be?

In a recent article by McKinsey, research has shown that companies in Europe want HR policies focussed on a return to 'human'. 98% of Chief Human Resources Officers surveyed in Europe has shown that "companies are rethinking the employee experience in ways that respect individual differences, while they also adapt to rapidly changing circumstances". (Article by McKinsey & Company dated June 4, 2021, entitled 'Back to Human; Why HR leaders want to focus on people again".)

Observation: Clients of the ASE wholeheartedly agree the human factor for executives seems to have taken a back seat of late in their organizations. Although there is an overall focus on the health and well-being of employees, often times we forget that our senior leaders need support just as much and sometimes even more.

Reflection: Thinking of your organization, do you concur with the observation?

In their analysis of a survey of 14,500 workers, it was concluded by Doctors Zorana Ivcecic and Robin Stern, that **trust** will be leadership's leading indicator in the next normal. It goes on to note that 'Building trust rests on employees seeing how supervisors and organizational leaders care about their work-related concerns and well-being.' and 'asking for input and communicating a response to it leads to employees feeling heard and not feeling dismissed by pat explanations and other standard replies'. (Harvard Business Review May 17, 2021, by Doctors Zorana Ivcevic and Robin Stern). The same review finds that workers report working to their full potential when... they are willing to ask questions and feel safe doing so and they are not overwhelmed with rules about how the work must be done or with unproductive meetings.

Reflection: Does your current organization encourage its executives to freely voice how they feel? Does your superior show concern for your well-being? Has she or he asked you how they can help you? Do you trust them? Do you foster trust with your direct reports?

A multitude of ASE clients throughout the years have described workplace cultures that operate reactively, with fear and results-at-all cost cultures, where the human side is not much of a consideration. Why is that? One hurdle is the implicit attitude at work that professionalism demands that we ignore our emotions. Organizational research over the last decades provides ample evidence that this is a misguided assumption, and the most adept leaders use a wide aperture to gather emotional information that they need to deal well with their employee's emotional needs. (*Why Leaders Need a Triple Focus* article by Daniel Goleman (September 15, 2021).

Section 5: Client Stories - Putting it all together

All names and details have been changed and are stories we have heard hundreds of times. Change the name, gender, culture, age, years of service and the results are all the same.

1. Franca has been an executive for 6 years. She is seasoned and has been with her department for over 10 years. Her performance ratings have been above average, and she is a change agent. Values-based, loyal, competent, resilient, she is seen as ready for advancement. Her superior needs her to transform the structure and culture of her organization, realign priorities, fill a significant number of vacancies, and manage poor performers. Over time, she makes long strides in her mandate and wins over some of her team, but others are displeased (especially those being performance-managed). While she feels good about her accomplishments and has a very good mid-year with her superior, things go downhill quickly thereafter, and she wonders why. Unknown to her, some of her displeased team members go see her colleagues or her superior to complain, putting a wedge in her relationship with them. Conversations are no longer as positive, and she is told about gaps in her performance that never came up before. She is confused because she does not know where all of this is coming from, and her superior is not forthcoming despite her asking. Her disgruntled staff seem to be getting bolder. Finally, she receives a surprise letter in a meeting with her superior and labour relations that there is a complaint against her and is advised that allegations will be sent to her. She is in complete shock.

All she was trying to do is what senior management expected and what she believed was her responsibility and duty. Now she must defend herself against a version of reality that she does not share. She believes that she is being mobbed by the resistors and she feels betrayed by her superior who did not send her employees back to her for resolution of the conflict. Now those employees are being validated by the superior and no longer respect her authority. She herself feels harassed. She is also disillusioned, embarrassed and cannot work with these people knowing they are undermining her. She is put on a special deployment. She feels she is being treated as though guilty although the complaint process is not even underway. Her health and mental health have taken a nosedive, her performance rating is being impacted, and she feels that her thus far brilliant career may very well be over and that she will not be able to recover from this situation. The lower performance rating alone is making her feel that she cannot be hired elsewhere, and she feels trapped. She questions the public service system and is exploring a demotion out of the executive ranks.

Reflection: Was there a different reaction her superior could have taken to be more supportive? How could her superior have handled this differently? What support could the superior have provided to both the employees and the executive to resolve the situation?

2. Koda has been an executive for 2 years. The first year he was learning the ropes of his new executive position. He is proud to be an executive. His team is functioning effectively, but his superior wants him to take on a much more assertive approach with his team similar to his own style and the style of his predecessor. Koda is not comfortable with this style of management. Koda grew up in a community that made decisions in a more participative style with a deep respect for the wisdom of others. Koda does not believe that he has to be loud, pound the table or to micromanage his team to gain their respect. In fact, since he has taken over, the team has seemed much happier and through his style of leadership have provided a number of innovative solutions that had plagued the unit for years. The superior however keeps insisting that Koda is "too soft" on his team members. During a recent bilat, his superior told him that he is too close to his team and treats them more like peers. His superior is concerned that his team will not respect his authority and would walk all over him. Despite Koda advising his superior, about the solutions that have come forward, his superior is insisting that he needs to 'get tough with his staff', although no specifics are raised as issues. Koda loves the work, his team and is proud of how far they have come over the last 2 years but is concerned about how his style of leadership will be portrayed by his superior in terms of his upcoming performance management agreement, his talent placement, and his career.

Reflection: In your organization, do you value and make room for different styles of leadership? Are you expecting your managers to mirror the way you do things or the way things have always been done or are you open to new ways of leading that will allow your team to unleash their creativity?

3. Nabil is a seasoned executive who has been leading a successful team he built years ago. He has traditionally had solid performance ratings and in talent discussions with his superior, has always indicated how happy he is in this position. His talent map indicates 'well placed in role'. In the last bilat with his superior, the latter indicated that he wanted Nabil to work on an important horizontal file for his ADM, on a special deployment. He asked Nabil to think it over and they would continue the conversation and discuss next steps at the next bilat but that the change would be effective soon. Nabil left the meeting dazed, confused, angry and worried. While his superior had asked Nabil previously whether he had retirement plans, Nabil said he did not and that he was perfectly happy doing his job for the foreseeable future. Despite Nabil's

arguments to stay in his current position, his superior was unwavering, and Nabil ended up on a special deployment, working alone, and trying to move a file that was not of interest for him and for which he had no functional authority. His performance rating for that year was impacted because he had no staff nor budget in his new temporary job. He eventually left on retirement which was not how he wanted to end his career and left feeling that the organization for which he had worked so hard for many years had let him down.

Reflection: While the situation may appear to have resolved, is it the best way to exit a long and distinguished career feeling you were pushed out? What more could Nabil have contributed had he been allowed to stay as he wished? Is it fair (inclusive) to treat our seasoned employees in this manner? What message does this give existing employees and future employees regarding how management treats their older employees? Would you want to work for this organization?

4. A brilliant new female executive that has been assessed as high potential is not well. She has an extremely heavy workload and lots of direct reports and she has young school-aged children at home. She is attempting to set boundaries as she is feeling very overwhelmed. She is new to the department and new to her role. She is afraid to disappoint her superior and her team but the strain of trying to do it all is impacting her sleep, her mental health, her effectiveness, and her performance. She is the target of well-meaning micro-aggressions almost on a daily basis. She tried to have a conversation with her DG and was made to feel as if she is the issue and not much can be done about workload, nor balance, from an organizational perspective. She feels isolated as if she is the only one experiencing these challenges. Her male counterparts do not seem to have the same challenges and comment on her absences to drive her children to school or when they see them on video team meetings. She feels that with a bit more flexibility from her superior and less comments from her peers, she may be able to keep all the balls in the air but after her last encounter she is hesitant to approach her superior yet again. She feels trapped and her health is worrying her. She is also concerned about her performance review and rating. She is wondering if being an EX is for her.

Reflection: How could the superior have been more open to listening to the challenges being experienced by the executive? Was the superior a help or a hindrance in this situation? If the superior had supported her and encouraged the director to take care of herself first, how would the outcome be different? How would it have impacted the productivity and health of the executive? What messages would the superior have sent to the entire team?

The above examples all contain inclusion components and are riddled with unconscious and conscious biases. Do any of these stories resonate with you?

💡 Section 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Without a doubt, the past few years and the uncertain future of work presents unique leadership challenges that continue to test executives and put their success at risk. As the recent APEX EWHS (Executive Work and Health Study) confirms, the realities of the EX 01's and EX 02's are different than the higher levels and needs attention. The former are the working level executives, sandwiched between managers and senior executives; they are doers. Their concern for their team members means they buffer and take more on themselves, with less support than more senior managers. This puts them in a very precarious position and impacts their health and well-being.

The toll on health and mental health of all executives will continue to be very high if we do not tackle workloads of the EX-01's andEX-02's (in particular) 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.

For senior executives, do not give up easily on your junior executives if there are issues. They need some coaching time and mentorship from you. When things seem to be going awry, accept responsibility for your share of the derailment and seek the help of the multitude of experts in conflict before considering parting ways. The investment in salvaging the relationship; not needing to find a replacement and causing team disruption, will be worthwhile, not to mention the newfound skills in dealing with conflict that you will put to use in all other relationships in your life. Consider also whether any performance issues may be related to burnout or some other condition.

Organizations that are providing all executives with the context, guidance, tools, and autonomy to minimize frustration and make their jobs meaningful and psychologically safe, (which is the absence of interpersonal fear as a driver of behaviour), are creating conditions for success of their EX-cadre. With burnout levels at an all time high and stress and anxiety a leading cause of ill health, the emotional health of executives becomes particularly important. Tools such as [Guarding Minds at Work](#) can help executives lead their teams through a process to uncover irritants and set up an action plan to address those. This is an especially good tool for senior executives with EX direct reports.

Strong leaders buffer their teams, stand up for and support them, allow others to shine, are open to different ideas and are able to connect emotionally with others. Connecting, gives team members permission to speak freely about how we are really feeling, encouragement to set limits and boundaries, disconnect, tackle workloads as a collective and make maximum use of flexibilities. These are all solutions within reach if senior executives engage in these conversations with their executives. Rhetoric is not helpful.

On the setting limits, boundaries, and disconnecting front, the Ontario proposal of introducing a right-to-disconnect legislation is allowing those conversations to occur. Also, efforts by some organizations in setting new standards such as 25-minute time meeting maximums, no-gathering Fridays, and setting protocols for core hours to connect and emergency communication plans at other times are all good examples of the realization that we need down time to be healthy.

As well, in order to have the best executive workforce, we need to significantly bolster organizational resilience, which rests on fostering diversity in which everyone feels included and can perform at their

best. Cultural training and ensuring your management team reflects the diversity around you (and more) are concrete steps that will make a difference in our progress towards inclusion.

As we navigate the intricacies of a hybrid workforce, we wonder what impact it will have on the actual flexibilities afforded to executives (especially women executives with small children). We suspect that without the tangible support of senior management i.e., them role-modeling a hybrid workweek, executives throughout the public service will feel the peer and other unsaid pressures to return fulltime to the office. Feelings of missing out, not being seen as ambitious, being outside the inner circle, not being considered for promotions or acting opportunities will weaken any resolve to be inclusive of this model. Should that happen, it will add to the perspective of many executives that there are double standards. We fear that women executives with young children may not benefit from the fluid type of support they will need to flourish. If they do not get it, we will lose their amazing contributions and weaken our overall public service leadership.

For the reasons articulated in this report, we recommend that the best way to be safe, valued, and happy as an executive is to report to a leader who is self-aware, authentic, caring and feels safe in their organization. Also, controlling your agenda aggressively, minimizing meetings and videos as much as possible, as well as nurturing your networks, setting healthy boundaries, and putting yourself first are key to your success.

And finally, we recommend adopting respect for all as your leadership foundation. All healthy relationships (including with yourself) are based on respect. Without respect, there can be nothing.

"knowing what must be done does away with fear." -Rosa Parks

Appendix A

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 our website to view a list of resources and tools 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 https://apex.gc.ca/tools-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 for Changing Employer, the Retirement Fact Sheet, and the 2-part publication, Preparing for your Performance Review.

2021-2022 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 15 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 2,000 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 30 years and has worked as a Director General in the areas of Learning, Human Resources, Procurement, and Information Management.