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Serco study reveals that the key to improving public services lies in holding managers more accountable, while giving them greater freedom to manage.

The way to increase performance of public servants is to give managers freedom to manage their people, while holding them directly accountable for performance and protecting their commitment to public service, according to new research.

The in-depth survey investigates the personal experiences of senior managers of public services, and reflects the experience Serco, one of the world's largest service companies, has gained transferring some 20,000 former public servants to the private sector over 40 years.

The report also highlights that it is vital for the private sector to nurture a public service ethos and to ensure managers do not surrender their sense of public duty.

"Good People, Good Systems", based on research conducted by the Serco Institute (the policy think-tank of leading service company Serco Group plc) involved in-depth interviews among thirteen of Serco's senior managers who collectively have more than 200 years experience in the public sector across science management, health and education services, prison management, public transport, local government leisure facilities and housing administration services.

The research sought to establish why the same people, when charged with doing essentially the same job, can deliver better results in the private sector than in the public sector.

Gary L. Sturgess, Executive Director of the Serco Institute, said: "What public service managements told us was that in moving to the private sector, they were more able to build and manage their own teams, they were given greater clarity of mission and they had greater flexibility to respond to emerging problems. One of the common themes was that there was less inappropriate bureaucratic and political interference and a greater willingness to take responsibility for service improvement."

"The evidence also suggests that private sector managers supervise employees with serious performance problems more closely than they did when they were in the public sector. Overall, the problem with modern government appears to be the systems, not the people. Competition and contracting creates a different environment for making decisions and taking risks – one that enables people to get on with delivering efficient and effective public services."

It is hoped the report, entitled "Good People, Good Systems", will stimulate a debate about how to improve the quality of services to the public.

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Notes to editors:

- Serco is one of the world's largest service companies operating on a global basis in a diverse range of sectors, including defence, aerospace, and science, public transport and traffic management, health and education, justice and local government.
- In December 2004 Serco was named as Britain's most admired support services company and 6th most admired British company overall in the Management Today magazine survey.
- Gary L. Sturgess was Cabinet Secretary in the NSW Government under Nick Greiner from 1988 to 1992.