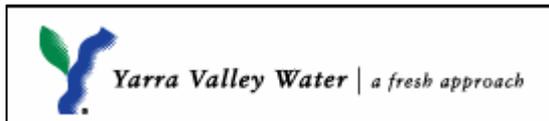


# Learning and Change for Sustainability at Yarra Valley Water



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A Case Study  
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## Introduction

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Yarra Valley Water (YVW) is widely recognised in Australia as a leader in corporate sustainability. The Victorian Government-owned water utility delivers water and sewerage services to over 1.6 million people in the northern and eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Its operating licence covers over 4000 square kilometres and it maintains a distribution network comprising over 16,000 kilometres of water and sewerage pipes. Operational challenges include the maintenance of aging water and sewage infrastructure in established areas and the development of new infrastructure in the rapidly expanding northern suburbs of Melbourne.

The organisation's capability and commitment to delivering sustainability outcomes has been demonstrated at a practical level through the implementation of innovative projects. Its contribution as a leader has been recognised through public sustainability awards at state, national and international levels. Stand-out sustainability projects include the design and management of:

- one of the largest recycled water systems in Australia at the Aurora residential development
- a pressure sewer system in the outer Melbourne suburb of Gembrook that was selected over a traditional centralised systems approach through innovative analysis of life-cycle environmental, social and financial costs and benefits
- a stormwater filtering and reuse project that is currently underway in a new industrial development at Kalkallo.

YVW's ability to consistently deliver innovative projects and to demonstrate sustainability leadership in the water industry is the outcome of a decade-long focus on organisational learning and change. This case study describes three inter-related aspects of YVW's approach:

1. **Organisational culture.** Since 2001 YVW have been implementing management initiatives to create a more open and collaborative organisational culture that has fostered innovation and creativity.
2. **Integration of *environment* as a strategic issue.** In 2003 YVW established "environment" as one of four key elements of the organisation's strategic intent and continue to integrate environmental considerations into core business decisions.
3. **Sustainability tools and approaches.** Since 2003 YVW have developed and integrated a number of sustainability tools and approaches, including The Natural Step, Life Cycle Analysis and stakeholder consultation, to support more effective decision-making at all levels of the organisation.

These three central aspects of the YVW approach have worked together to mutually reinforce ongoing and effective learning that has resulted in impressive business and sustainability outcomes. The three aspects are graphically demonstrated in Figure 1 and described throughout the case study.

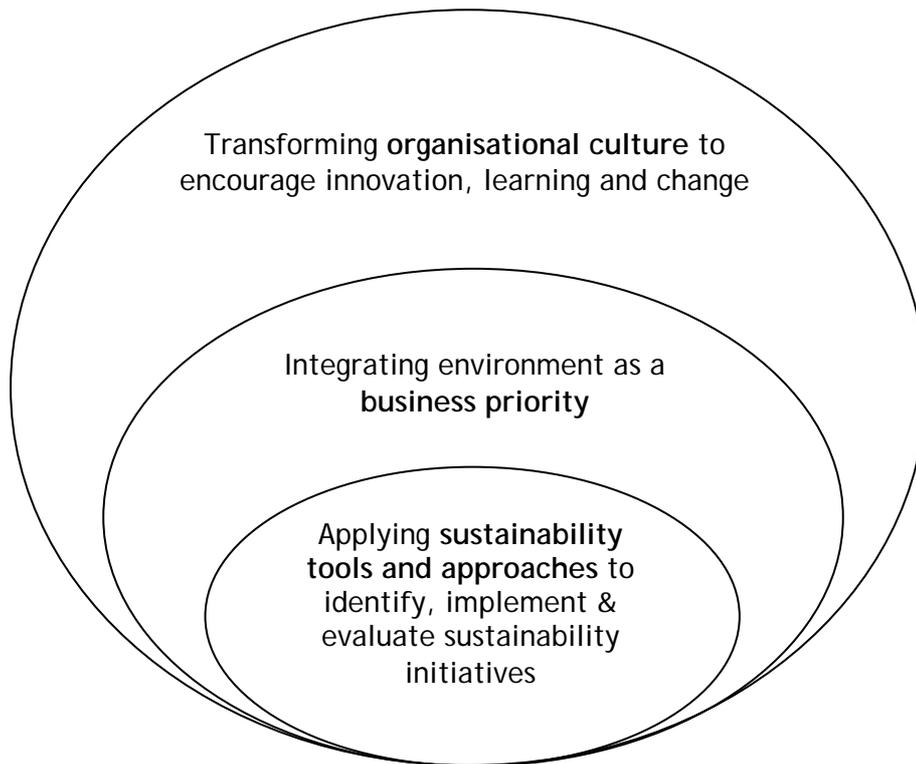


Figure 1: Interrelated aspects of organisational change for sustainability at Yarra Valley Water

## Methodology

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This case study is based on face-to-face interviews with 11 senior managers that were conducted in September 2009 by researchers from the University of Technology Sydney and ARIES, Macquarie University<sup>1</sup>. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. The interviews were transcribed and a qualitative analysis was undertaken to identify key themes. Publicly available case study material and presentations that have been made by YVW managers were also reviewed and incorporated into the analysis.

## Background

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Yarra Valley Water was established in 1995 at the start of a period of rationalisation in the Victorian water industry. At that time three water retailers were established and allocated exclusive operating areas in Melbourne. Historically YVW was part of Melbourne Water (1992 -1995) and the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (1890-1992) before that. The Victorian Government's intent in creating YVW and the other water retailers was to introduce competitive elements that would improve efficiency and service. At the time, the government was also

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<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

working through a process of privatising energy utilities. A change of government in 1999 diminished the possibility that water would be privatised and it remains a government-owned corporation.

The “comparative competition” regime introduced by the government, helped drive a customer service culture and improved business management systems. For example, in 1996 the company’s environmental management system was accredited under the ISO 14,001 environmental standard.

## Approaches to Learning and Change at YVW

### Creating a more innovative organisational culture

Organisational culture is often defined in simple terms as “the way we do things around here.” In 2001, there was a sense at YVW that to be successful the organisation needed to be more innovative in its approach. Developing a better understanding of the organisational culture and acting to improve it, was considered an important step in supporting greater innovation.

The cultural change program began with the management team completing an organisational culture questionnaire developed by an international consulting company, to determine the *preferred* culture for the organisation.

*Our goal was to build a high performance culture in which managers display constructive behaviours that facilitate high-quality problem solving and decision making, teamwork, productivity, and long-term effectiveness.*

(HR Manager quoted in Jones et al 2006 p194)

Management and employees then completed a second OCI questionnaire to determine the *actual* operating culture. The results highlighted that the *actual culture* was characterised as *defensive, avoidance-oriented, oppositional and competitive*. It was summed up by one senior manager in the following way:

*We were very competitive internally. The culture of the place was that you would set one group up against the other competing for budget in a very overt way, it was win /lose. So we were competing with each other, rather than with the water industry; so that was really unproductive.*

(MD, quoted in Jones et al p186).

This hierarchical and somewhat bureaucratic environment, with fairly authoritarian leadership, drove workplace practices such as:

- avoiding responsibility and action by delegating upwards
- avoiding and blocking new ideas
- using policy and procedures as a way of limiting change and innovation.

Perceiving the gap between the preferred and actual operating culture was somewhat disturbing for both management and staff. However, open communication of the survey results ensured that the challenges were not hidden and staff were encouraged to take responsibility for contributing to the development of a more constructive workplace culture.

Selected management initiatives were implemented to bridge the gap between the preferred and actual operating culture.

These included:

- development of an agreed set of organisational values
- active encouragement of problem-solving and project development through cross-functional work teams
- introduction of skip-level interviews which involved employees speaking with their manager's manager on a regular basis
- monthly meetings of staff from all levels with the Managing Director - all staff can volunteer to participate and 5 or 6 are randomly selected each month
- review of reward and recognition systems to ensure preferred cultural behaviours are encouraged
- annual "blue zone days" in which preferred cultural behaviours are explored and clarified through fun and engaging activities. "Blue Zone" refers to the constructive styles on the Organisational Culture Inventory which defined preferred cultural attributes.

Cultural surveys are conducted every two years and there has been a steady improvement towards a more open, collaborative and constructive organisational culture.

## Integrating *environment* as a strategic issue

In 2003, following the appointment of a new CEO, Tony Kelly, a series of collaborative staff workshops were held to develop a clearer sense of direction for YVW. Work had continued on changing the culture but a clear and agreed direction for the organisation was essential to focus staff effort. The changes already implemented in the culture meant that this sense of shared direction was much

easier to develop than it would have been in the earlier period characterised by intra-organisation competition. The strategic intent and aims were established as follows:

Yarra Valley Water's strategic intent is to lead the global water industry in serving the **customer** and the **environment**, supported by our high performing **business culture**, and continuously improving our **efficiency**.

By 2013, Yarra Valley Water aims to achieve the following outcomes:

**Customers** - Our customers recognise us as their best service provider and are engaged in what we advocate.

**Environment** - We provide services within the carrying capacity of nature and inspire others to do the same.

**Culture** - We have a vibrant workplace achieving exceptional business outcomes, successful partnerships and personal satisfaction.

**Efficiency** - We achieve our objectives at the lowest community cost and consistently met our shareholders expectations.

There were a number of important business drivers that led to the incorporation of environment as a strategic business issue.

These included:

- continuation of the drought which had started in 1999 and continues today
- community tensions over water planning and selection of "right" supply options
- changing expectations amongst customers regarding water savings and efficiency
- recognition of the potential environmental impacts resulting from the company's operations and the need to contribute effectively to what was clearly a global challenge.

By incorporating environmental responsibility as an explicit strategic objective, initiatives to improve environmental outcomes were actively encouraged. Environment became an important and legitimate focus for staff at YVW. It was decided that integration of environmental considerations should be encouraged wherever possible.

A turning point for Yarra Valley Water was learning that environmental focus and business success were mutually linked. The Natural Step was used to inform all employees of the importance of the environment, while exercises with the Management Team that analysed past, present, and future projects made transparent that projects could be selected that delivered both environmental and business value, and those were the ones that should be pursued.

*We started off with a very conscious decision that we will not have an environment or department, or one person doing it, so it's integrated into everyone's job*

(Manager, Research and Innovation)

Other ways in which environment was integrated into management practices included establishing specific targets and incorporating environmental responsibilities within job descriptions and performance management.

The bar had been set high and the challenge was to deliver results that demonstrated *leadership in the global water industry*. A consultant working with the management team at this early stage expressed the challenge in the following way to highlight the potential negative impact that a decision can have on an organisation's culture:

*Isn't life frustrating if you're always being hit over the head by the regulator. Isn't it more exciting for an organisation to be one step ahead of the regulator, and if you can see what's happening - well create your business in that space.*

It was recognised that conventional environmental management approaches of just setting goals would not be sufficient to achieve the goal of global leadership and recognition and management began the task of identifying and developing the tools and approaches that would be help YVW achieve this goal.

## Sustainability tools

Turning a strategic priority into practical initiatives saw YVW engage in organisational learning supported by a range of specific sustainability tools and mechanisms.

### The Natural Step

The first sustainability-oriented tool that was applied was *The Natural Step* (TNS). The objective of TNS is to create a shared understanding and language for sustainable development with the intent that this will, in turn, lead to improved sustainability outcomes. At its core are four scientifically based system principles.

## The Natural Step Principles

*In the sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...*

- 1. Concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust.*
- 2. Concentrations of substances produced by society.*
- 3. Degradation by physical means.*
- 4. And, in that society human needs are met worldwide. (Robèrt et al, 2002)*

A program was developed across YVW to build an understanding of the systems principles and to use them as a basis for decision-making.

One senior manager summed up the major benefits of TNS as:

*We used The Natural Step to help us understand what sustainability was. Back in 2002, sustainability was a vague concept. The scientific principles were particularly useful to us, as we are largely an engineering organisation, so the scientific language worked well. The Natural Step team at the time also had some very competent senior strategic thinkers that could engage our Executive. Their contribution and in particular their ability to show us how we could improve in environmental sustainability AND improve business value should not be underestimated.*

(See Pamminger and Crawford 2006)

Amongst the management team, however, there was some frustration that this approach was not leading to practical outcomes and was limited in its strategic application. MD Tony Kelly, expressed this as:

*Where we struggled with TNS is that it really didn't help us work out what we had to do on Monday. They gave us the beacon on the hill which was the thing to aim for, which was great and the principles are very sound I think, but after 18 months an unanswered question for us was, "What are we going to do tomorrow?"*

## Life Cycle Assessment

Following the introduction of TNS, Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) was trialled on a number of projects including the analysis of recycled water options and the environmental considerations associated with the use of water tanks. The aim of LCA is to take a more whole-systems approach to identify and evaluate the environmental impacts of products and services from raw materials extraction and processing through to end of life.

By working across a more extensive value chain, opportunities to identify and act to reduce environmental impacts are enhanced. This approach contrasts with traditional environmental assessment processes that typically focus on the operations more directly in control of one particular organisation. Traditional approaches such as these may eliminate significant opportunities to reduce environmental impact that may only be achieved through collaboration of the various stakeholders that make up that value chain. LCA avoids shifting problems from one organisation, geographical site or life cycle stage to another.

One of the reasons that LCA has been successful at YVW is that it aligns with the professional background of the employees. One manager summed this up as:

*We're a bunch of engineers and accountants and economists with this scientific training and all that sort of hoohah. We were looking for something that would give us something a bit more quantifiable in terms of an analysis. Upon adopting lifecycle assessment we're now able to quantify the amount of greenhouse gases emitted, the amount of nutrients discharged, and the other impacts that our servicing options might have. We can then identify the best option on an environmental basis.*

In simplified change management terms, its use meant that the wins became visible, motivating employee engagement with the change program.

The selection of the pressure sewer system rather than more traditional technologies in the Gembrook project came about as a result of the use of LCA and was associated with significant environmental, social and financial benefits over its life cycle. The Gembrook project provides a tangible example of how cultural change combined with the appropriate sustainability tools can create significantly improved business and sustainability outcomes. Its success has contributed to LCA now being the standard approach that is used to assess environmental impact and to inform key decisions.

In much the same way that the cultural survey tools such as the Organisational Culture Inventory provided data on the culture and supported the establishment of a more open, collaborative and innovative culture, LCA has broadened staff understanding of environmental impact. By quantifying these impacts more effectively and systematically than traditional environmental management tools, it has played an important role in changing the *technical* assumptions that inform significant decisions.

For example, when faced with implementing a sewerage system in suburbs such as Gembrook, the earlier YVW approach, informed by historical technical assumptions that bigger is better and a centralised system is easier and cheaper to maintain, would have been to install sewer pipes which all feed into a centralised system. In the old YVW culture, where new ideas were considered risky and actively discouraged, technical assumptions such as these would be less likely to be scrutinised. Indeed, behaviour that challenges assumptions and the status quo would typically be actively discouraged.

However, with YVW's more constructive culture in which *innovation* was actively encouraged and *environment* was a central part of the organisation's strategic intent, LCA provided a means to quantifiably measure the environmental, social and financial impacts of technical options over their life cycle.

## Collaborative learning through stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is now widely recognised as a mechanism by which organisations can learn and adapt to sustainability challenges. The culture change at YVW is associated with adoption of this approach as a means of bringing about change. Consistent with the historically risk averse and monopoly culture that had developed in the water sector, there had been significant trepidation when it came to relating with external stakeholders including customers, developers, government and organisations (such as catchment management authorities) that made up the water value chain. There has been a realisation that important sustainability outcomes have been achieved by effectively encouraging innovation and this has led to a significant shift in how YVW collaborates and engages with external stakeholders. YVW personnel can also see the potential for innovative solutions with stakeholders if the same principles are used.

For example, one manager describes an early situation where YVW were approached by a developer that was keen to incorporate recycled water into a development. This situation reflects the beginning of a major shift in YVW's approach to working with stakeholders.

*Typically our relationship with developers had been quite confrontational. But actually one of the key things that we did with a particular developer was to establish a partnership arrangement where there is open discussion and we get insights on what's driving the thinking of each party in the relationship. That was the first time that we worked together and we've been working that way ever since. Oh I guess that's a key way that our culture has changed. We now actually work with partners for a collective gain, and it also helps us collaborate on work in areas outside of our expertise, for example harvesting stormwater for drinking water delivers business benefits to us and also stream benefits, which is outside our business responsibility.*

YVW has also incorporated stakeholder views into a sophisticated sustainability tool that builds on the technical aspects highlighted by LCA. As one senior manager describes it:

*The sustainability assessment framework allows us to assess different options on a triple bottom line basis, so as well as the environmental impacts and the NPV (net present value) calculation we look at the impact on culture and on the customer as well.*

Another manager describes the benefits:

*I guess that's the exciting part of what we've done in the last few years is bring together the major players in the urban water cycle, and get highest level agreement that there's ... a prize for us all, and then get a philosophical agreement to work together and then stepping it down into working groups to actually find a different solution.*

## Linking culture, strategy and mechanisms for learning and change

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YVW is widely recognised as a sustainability leader in the water industry. Its success is the outcome of a decade-long and continuing focus on organisational learning and change.

There are many dimensions to YVW's approach to sustainability and organisational change. This case study has described YVW's approach and highlighted the important interconnection between three critical aspects of the change process:

1. **Organisational culture.** Through measurement, consultation and the effective implementation of a range of new management practices, the culture is more open, there is a high level of collaboration within and outside the organisation, and innovation is actively encouraged. This is essential for sustainability since it requires new attitudes, thinking and applications in order to achieve improved social and environmental outcomes. In particular the downplaying of hierarchy and status combined with appreciation rather than punishment of the open expression of ideas and feelings has led to an upward flow of innovative ideas within the organisation.
2. **Integration of *environment* as a strategic issue.** Since environment is communicated as an issue of strategic importance, staff are actively encouraged to integrate environmental considerations into the work that they do. Essentially, discretionary projects that deliver on all strategic elements will have a greater chance of success than those that do not, and to do this requires environmental deliverables. The incorporation of

environmental goals into KPIs has reinforced the view that YVW is serious about its intent in this area.

3. **Sustainability tools and mechanisms.** TNS, LCA and the incorporation of internal and external stakeholder perspectives into key decisions has improved the way in which sustainability impacts are measured and understood. This has supported a more systematic and informed approach to integrating environmental considerations into decision-making.

## Organisational learning

To deliver on key environmental strategies YVW needed, among many other things, to encourage its staff, and key stakeholders, to become passionate about the environment. The organisation needed an experiential process where people could see the link between personal and organisational decision-making, behavioural change and YVW impact on the environment.

The program design was particularly influenced by the YVW Executive Team, the “Sustainability Circle” (an internal environmental leadership group which met monthly), a team of Environmental “Champions”, and a local “Think Tank” (ESAC). This coalition provided a strong and resilient backbone of knowledge and advice for the “Passion” initiative.

The key components of the education program were:

- A program of speakers delivering inspirational environmental messages which encouraged innovation and engagement. These speakers included international and local experts, including YVW staff.
- An Environmental Sustainability Training Program.
- An intranet site with supporting information and tools.
- “The Passion Index”, a survey designed to help staff assess their own personal impact on the environment.
- A “World Environment Day” Expo of activities which invited staff to travel to work in an environmentally friendly way, create a huge environmental map of Melbourne, measure their ecological footprint, view educational videos and other stimulus material, and receive an indigenous plant for their efforts.

The combined influence of the range of measures implemented at YVW can be seen in the changing attitudes and assumptions that inform decision-making on both small and large projects. Some of the more significant shifts are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Shifting assumptions at YVW  
towards improved decision-making for sustainability**

Old Assumptions	New Understanding
Environment and business are a trade off	Environment integrates with strategy
Big centralised infrastructure systems are best	Decentralised systems can be more cost-effective and reduce environmental impact
Major environmental impact is water	Energy AND water are the major contributors to environmental impact
Customers only want cheap water	Customers will pay to reduce their carbon footprint
Stakeholder collaboration is “risky”	Broadening stakeholder engagement can create mutual benefit & reduce environmental impact

This case analysis of the learning and change for sustainability that occurred at YVW leads to some suggestions for information gathering around each of these three critical aspects of the change process that other organisations can employ in preparing for such an approach (Figure 1).

**Figure 2: Preparing the ground for change towards sustainability**

<p><b>Culture:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the characteristics of the current culture?</li> <li>• What aspects of culture support and hinder progress towards sustainability?</li> <li>• Is there a cultural change program currently in place?</li> <li>• Could sustainability initiatives be more closely connected with ongoing efforts designed to modify the existing organisational culture?</li> </ul> <p><b>Integration:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the organisation’s current strategic issues and challenges?</li> <li>• What priority is currently placed on sustainability?</li> <li>• Are there further opportunities to reframe sustainability issues in terms of business value or as a means of addressing some of the existing strategic challenges faced within the organisation?</li> </ul>
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#### **Sustainability tools and mechanisms:**

- What tools and organisational processes are most suited to the culture and sustainability challenges of the organisation?
- What has or hasn't worked previously? Why?
- Are there opportunities to trial new approaches on current or future projects?

## Conclusion

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For managers and teams charged with the challenge of implementing sustainability initiatives in other organisations, the level of resourcing, leadership and support that have been demonstrated in YVW's case may not be available. However, this case study demonstrates the importance of careful consideration by managers of creating an open and supportive culture of innovation, of the necessity of integrating sustainability into strategic planning and ongoing operations, of finding and implementing appropriate sustainability tools as well as focusing on both employee and stakeholder engagement. The case also illustrates the necessity of serious long-term organisational commitment to working towards sustainability rather than the fleeting adoption of short-term fixes or fads.

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## Appendix: Yarra Valley Water Awards

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### 2009-2010

Received a **High Commendation in the Management and Initiatives category of National Stormwater Excellence Awards** for the Kalkallo Harvesting and Reuse Project.

Received a **Stormwater Industry Association of Victoria Excellence Award** for our planned "Kalkallo Stormwater Harvesting and Reuse Project". The award was given in the "**master-planning and design**" category and recognised the work done in integrating stormwater design principles into the provision of YVW water, sewer and recycled water services.

**Finalist in two categories of the Banksia Environmental Awards; the Water Award and the Large Business Sustainability Award.** The Banksia Environmental Awards are regarded as the most prestigious environmental awards in Australia.

### 2008-2009

**Winner of the Premier's Sustainability Award for Large Business** for a research project to compare alternative service options such as recycled water, rainwater tanks and greywater recycling, with traditional centralised servicing in new developments.

**Sustainability Specialist Group Prize for Research Excellence (runner up) by the International Water Association.** The prize recognises excellence in scientific research relating to sustainable urban water management, and attracts entries from leading organisations all over the world.

### 2007-2008

**Finalist in the Greenhouse Challenge Plus 2007 awards** for Mitcham Green Office Strategy, which delivered substantial reductions in the use of energy, water and waste generated.

### 2006-2007

**Winner of International Water Association's Best Customer Account Award** in the Marketing and Communications category.

**Finalist in the United Nations Association of Australia World Environment Day Award** in the Triple Bottom Line category for the Gembrook Sewerage Servicing Strategy Case Study.

### 2005-2006

Received the **Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships (Large Business Award Victoria)** for YVW partnership with Kildonan Child and Family Services.

In September 2005, Yarra Valley Water won the **MIS (Managing Information Strategies) Innovation Award for Best Governance Initiative**, which recognises excellence in the use of information technology. The award was given for YVW work in the upgrading of our IT systems.

## 2004-2005

**Winners of State and National Service Excellence awards** for the Government sector from the Customer Service Institute of Australia,

Won the 2004 award for 'Best Change Management' from Australian Human Resources Magazine.

Australasian Risk Management Awards, securing two out of the five award categories, namely:

- The Award for Best Implementation of Risk Strategy
- The Award for Best IT Security Strategy.

Our Risk Manager, Frank Portelli was also a finalist in the Risk Manager of the Year category.

## 2003-2004

YVW the Customer Service Institute of Australia (CSIA) **Victorian and National Awards for Australian Service Excellence** in the Government category.

Finalist in Premier's Awards for **Business Sustainability** for our savewater!™ Efficiency Service.

In October 2003, YVW received the **Large Business Encouragement Award** for Victoria at the **Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships**.

**Won Victorian Call Centre of the Year and Victorian Teleprofessional of the Year.**

Yarra Valley Water was the winner of the **Geospatial Information Technology Association (GITA) Award for Excellence**.

Won awards for IT processes including the **Government Technology Productivity Award** and **Intergraph 100% Club Award**.

## 2002-2003

Recognised by the **Committee for Melbourne** in 2002 with one of their leading awards in sustainability.

YVW involvement with the **Young Achievement Australia (YAA)** program resulted in winning the scheme's ultimate award, **Company of the Year**, in November 2002.