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A 'MAN'S BEST FRIEND' APPROACH TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Once upon a wonderland not too far from where you might reside right now, a hierarchy of systems influenced the way the kingdom's subjects related to the world around them. Each subject belonged to a particular group. Some groups were more elevated in status than others, with purity of bloodline having a lot to do with classification, alongside specialised rituals carried out each morning, such as pilgrimages to the kingdom's parks and prayerful poses made to show respect and honour to the Gods before taking a meal. Older occupants were usually superior to younger ones, at least until they were physically unable to maintain their status.

Although there were features common to all groups, the rules of each group governed its particular cultural identity. The behaviour of any group tended to reflect the rules it set in place. Hierarchies were established that were hard to dismantle.

The kingdom's subjects lived in a variety of rural and urban settings. Most subjects lived in specially designed silo-based dwellings. All would mark out a particular space they called their own and would patrol its boundaries to protect themselves from would be invaders.

Many did not venture far, spending much of their lives in their own back gardens. Some tended to clash with others, of the same or different variety, if they were introduced to a new environment, or they encountered threats to their status or a possible invasion of their territory. Inevitably, when two or more came together there would be a struggle for power. There were even containment polices for some. These subjects, when in company, were required to adorn themselves in facial and body apparatus designed to safeguard community members from their desire to control the environment that surrounded them.

There were possessive instincts, generally about a cherished item that they may have had for many years. It may have been well past its used by date but they would dig it out, play with it for a while and then put it back again for next time. For some reason even the most good-natured hated to relinquish the cherished item and found it extremely difficult to accept, if another took up its favourite resting spot.

Can you see yourself in the kingdom described above? The tale is actually about the humble household, want-to-be loyal, tail-wagging dog - 'man's best friend'. Nevertheless, perhaps human behaviour is comparable when confronted with the prospect of change to new ideas or working together with others in situations that could threaten comfort zones. There is much in human response to change that is consistent with animal behaviour. Alongside this is the resistance to change because those who hold privileged status consider it a threat to their power base.

The 'gentle modern cure to dog problems' stresses that simply pushing the old dog off the chair that it has been resting on for years can lead to a great deal of resentment on the dog's part. Snarls, curled lips, nips and even bites can result. The simple solution, according to Western and Western (1992), is to find a way, which makes the dog *want* to give up the articles or its comfortable chair.

Western et, al (1992) insist that it 'is essential when we look at a dog problem that we understand it from a dog's point of view. The secret to modifying the problem is to produce an alternative behaviour, which we find acceptable, and which the dog prefers to do. (p.50)'

Stakeholder types

There are of course many types of dogs, as there are many types of stakeholders in any one organisation, large or small. Analyse the descriptions below to see whether you can identify yourself as a particular type when you are faced with the prospects of having to change practices and move out of your comfort zone.

Stakeholder Type	Known to:
A	delve into all new adventures eagerly, without much thought. Any change of scenery adds colour to life. Generally a cheerful soul, very sociable, seeking pats from everyone.
B	hunt for new play things, destroying all old ones in the process. Can turn rubbish bins upside down at a moment's notice and leaves the mess on the ground.
C	'escape the lead' at every opportunity. Will adhere to the rules while you are watching but gone in a flash if they find the opportunity to escape.
D	scuttle away when faced with new situations. Will hide behind a chair until there is some assurance that the threat might be gone.
E	growl at the prospect of having to face a new situation. Even with enticements you generally have to pull this one by the lead all the way there and back again.
F	wince, scratch and ruminate on everything that could go wrong if they ventured out into the playground with the others. Often will not take action and will spend most of their time investigating the current flea statistics on their bodies.
G	seek out others to form a pack. These behaviours are designed to gain support to resist having to do something.
H	manipulate those with the lead to take a particular direction to suit their own needs.

Re-conceptualising the way we are doing things

Education in particular has always been very slow to respond to change at an institutional and a school level. We are however historically at a point in time where old models of schooling are past their use by date. The world of digital technologies and increased globalisation is impacting on the educational reform agenda.

Society in general is being challenged in many ways, and the nature of the challenges resonates with school leaders. A major part of their role is to weave in and out of dealing with the challenges on a daily basis and attempt to serve a broad client base, representative of students, parents, teachers and the wider community.

Changing expectations for schooling rest not only in the provision for learning but also in servicing the impact of increasing complexities of family structures and social relationships, new patterns of employment and underemployment and the increased mobility of families. Specialised skills are required to work in close partnerships to foster and monitor the development of young people as a whole. Building up new skill bases and introducing appropriate changes are not easy.

There can be hindrance, from those who lack commitment and view schooling through their own past experiences, and resist sharing responsibilities by deliberately adopting strategies to obstruct the values in place: for example, from parent representatives and also from teaching staff, who display Stakeholder Type G behaviour and form packs in the staff room or school car parks, to informally resist change over cups of much needed coffee or car bonnets.

Leading in a complex world

The problem facing educational leaders, whether they work from a policy or school perspective is ensuring they focus on the macro and micro aspects of providing the community with high quality education and social services. To effect meaningful change leaders need to have a broad conceptual understanding of global trends and agendas and create a climate for action and reflection in their own local contexts. Coupled with this is finding strategies to enthuse ‘change weary’ teachers, who have become sceptical of the Stakeholder Type B behaviour, as the different pedagogical fads come and go of changing governments and policy officials *hunting around for the latest way to improve outcomes and in the process turning out the remnants of the old ‘rubbish’ bins.*

Nevertheless, schools unwilling to meet changing expectations and which demonstrate over-attachment to known and familiar structures and practices will not be able to compete with other schools and will disadvantage their students, and in the longer term, their communities. For some ‘players’ in the current education system, the changes they are told are required seem too removed from the reality of their lives, and can often dismissed as shallow rhetoric –*it will never happen!* Like their fellow

tail-wagging companions there is a sense of contentment to *stroll in their own back gardens*, and with the average age of teachers reaching close to fifty many consider they will be able to get through without having to change too much.

So do school principals do as the dog trainers suggest and ‘find a way, which makes ‘man’s best friend’ *want* to give up the articles or the comfortable chair’ or take the more radical approach and heave him/her off and start again?

What goes wrong for those who wish to invest in and lead initiatives as they attempt to change the status quo?

Firstly, change management strategies are often handled poorly. There is generally acknowledgement that people fear change but very rarely, are ‘man’s best friend’ strategies put in place to nurture change and *build and bind new cultures* (Whiteley 1995) to which community members want to be loyal to and belong. There are not many leaders who do as Western et.al (1992) suggest and *understand it from a dog’s point of view*.

Secondly, ineffective consultation strategies are put in place in environments where those who do not want to let go of territories, which have served their egos and power bases well over a period of time, put up blockers to new ideas.

Thirdly, we cannot assume that all change is ‘good change,’ especially at the expense of a thriving culture. ‘Change for changes sake’ is perhaps like our trusty canine companions having to undergo the ritual of new tricks that don’t serve any purpose other than to reinforce the status quo. The degree to which things change needs to be kept in perspective with preserving a culture that has served a school community well.

Fourthly, traditional organisations often fail to connect with the importance of the organisation’s ‘vision and mission in the flow of events that results in the strategic planning process.’ Whitely (1995) asserts that change often gets managed at the strategic planning stage, ‘which is two stages too late’ (p.49). When there finally is engagement with planning it generally involves staff in the senior management group and outside experts, leaving the staff at the operational level feeling as though something has been ‘done to them.’ So begins the cycle of disenfranchisement and resentment.

Processes for making effective changes

Changing the structures and operational patterns of institutions and the minds of individuals, one of which could be the school principal, is easier said than done, and can be a slow process. There is little point in announcing, as a principal of a school that there is going to be change and expecting people will embrace the change because as a principal you are in the best position to inform everyone about best practice. Most people want to understand the positive outcomes that change will bring for them; otherwise they tend to display Stakeholder Type behaviours described on Page 2. There will be change, at a superficial level, if there are legislative requirements. Generally however, people have to be persuaded, offered some reward

and feel as though they have been involved in decision-making processes in order to commit to new directions.

Foremost at the heart of effective change is ensuring there is a vision and mission driving strategies. Whitely (1995) insists that vision and values should not be generated from strategies. The deep value foundations of the vision must be the drivers.

Some effective steps to put in place to effect positive change include:

- being cognisant of the requirements of all stakeholders, often with competing agendas - referred to as 'climate control' strategies and although 'risky' in destabilising a leader's own power base, opportunities for new ideas and directions are generated;
- maintaining and building on the existing culture to avoid destabilisation: for example, ritual and celebration opportunities to build positive energy.
- creating and maintaining flexible, inclusive and open consultative processes to connect and commit communities;
- avoiding a *top-down* management approach and finding ways to engage with staff at all levels of the organisation - can be challenging and quite difficult because it requires changing preferred ways of doing things;
- adopting new leadership models, including inclusive consultation processes that work towards ownership of policy and practices on a broader community base - often referred to as 360 degree approaches; and
- communicating, planning strategically, negotiating, and liaising effectively.

Starting points for effective change management

Leaders are more than likely to be successful if there is full engagement of the change process from its inception, as well as a building of trust in the organisation's capacity as a whole to move forward. Some strategies include:

- *Testing the water:* take a sample of staff across the organisation, as well as key stakeholders, and explore some strategies with them about new directions, making sure there is no definitive outcome at the *testing the water* stage. Note down ideas so they can be included in preliminary briefings to be developed at a later stage. Also record any misgivings so these can be identified as risks to the implementation of new initiatives.
- *Getting people ready:* Use opportunities at staff meetings to provide professional growth for staff by introducing new ideas and research, either local or global, and invite them to reflect on how ideas such as these would work in their own contexts.
- *Planning days:* Use planning days and 'a whole organisation approach' to reflect on past practices and identify areas that need to be modified – short and long term. Gauge what staff priorities appear to be as these are the areas that can be further developed.
- *Forming working groups:* Provide opportunities for staff to engage in debate with each other and with stakeholders and community members external to the organisation. This will enrich the overall process and prevent thinking from becoming too insular.

- *Developing a plan:* Ensure there is total engagement in the development of a plan and that there has been plenty of time for it to evolve into a working draft of ideas. Remember that evolving plans change. Staff members (including senior management) need to be aware that what was first proposed will more often than not be changed.
- *Consulting openly:* Ensure there is open consultation through establishing focus groups to work on issues arising in feedback. Use strategies such as listservs/discussion forums to ensure there are transparent processes for the feedback cycle. Be sure to have a closing off date so everyone is aware that a decision is impending.
- *Moving ideas forward:* When all documentation is summarised provide an opportunity for stakeholders to check that it reflects their ideas, concerns and issues accurately. Make sure there are recommendations in the final paper for voting purposes.
- *Celebrating the decision:* No matter how small the change, it is important to have some type of ritual or celebration to mark the change from design to development to implementation. It provides opportunities to reward those who have been involved.
- *Defining processes to move directions forward:* Stage the change so that staff members and the community feel they can embed any new requirements into existing practices. It may take longer to effect the change but will be far more effective as there can be reflection, evaluation and modification through an ongoing cyclic process.
- *Evaluating the impact of new initiatives:* There would need to be some measurement instruments identified before implementing new ideas so that after a period of time there can be an evaluation. Be honest about evaluation. Results from the evaluation should be reported back to the whole organisation, with opportunities for the community to respond and be a part of the modification process. If someone's ideas have not been implemented do not leave it hanging. Face them and explain the reasons for their omission, being sure to show how much the person and their skills are valued by the organisation.

Conclusion

It has often been said, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" or 'change is like arsenic – a little is medicinal but a lot will kill you.' Effective leaders take heed of these sayings and create consultative cultures that value a continued cycle of planning, action, reflection, evaluation and celebration of achievement together as a whole community. Successful models include these features in their dynamic learning cultures, which ensure that all those involved are prepared to support a cyclic process to adapt appropriately to a very fluid and complex world.

References

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