

“THE MANY FACES OF CHANGE”

**SUMMARY OF AN AUSTRALIAN HUMAN
RESOURCES INSTITUTE SYMPOSIUM**

Coolum, Queensland, Australia
May 1997

by

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A slightly edited version of this summary was published
in the July 1997 edition of AHRI's monthly journal "*HR Monthly*"

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What do William Bridges, Ian Kiernan, Amanda Vanstone, Byron Rigby, Lyn Russell, Tex Skuthorpe and Peter McCloy all have in common? They are all successful initiators and managers of change - at the national, community, organisational or individual levels. On 17 May, they were also fellow speakers at AHRI’s symposium on change held at the Hyatt Regency Coolum.

The “Many Faces of Change” Symposium brought together people from a wide variety of backgrounds, each at the leading edge of change in their field, to share their wisdom and their “tool kits” for managing change more effectively. During the day, speakers and delegates attempted to enhance their current change management strategies by integrating the wisdom of the different contributors to the Symposium into a new paradigm for more effectively managing change in Australia.

I don’t think that anyone came away from Coolum with a new, packaged change management paradigm. However, delegates and speakers alike did come away saying things like:

- “I feel overloaded with new ideas”
- “The breadth of thinking was amazing”
- “It will take me days to work through what I have heard”
- “Thank you for inviting me to be part of it”
- “Why don’t we get together again to.....”
- “What a great day!”

They also said: “How on earth are you going to summarise all this”? After some agonised reflection on this question, I decided that it is not possible to faithfully summarise the day in any factual way (you simply had to be there). Rather, I have attempted here to describe my memories of the Symposium and the ideas that have stuck with me and which continue to disturb my previous thinking on change. In the process, I will also relay some of the important “learnings” that were reported by participants at the Symposium’s conclusion.

The Key Themes Inherent in Effective Change

Theme 1: Stories, symbols, and metaphors

As the day unfolded, it became clear that we, the Symposium participants, were being influenced most by the personal stories of the speakers. Stories of why they became motivated to attempt the changes they made happen; stories of how they created their theories of change and transition; stories of how they overcame difficulties in following through on their change initiatives; stories of allies coming to their assistance and providing critical expertise, resources or personal support.

Several of the speakers reported using stories or paintings as part of their “tool kits” for getting diverse people committed to a proposed change process. We heard Ian Kiernan relate

his experiences of mid-ocean pollution in the BOC single-handed yacht race as a trigger for his initiative to “Clean Up Australia”. We heard William Bridges (the organisational consultant) present his theory of change and transition by reference to the stories of Moses leading his people to the promised land; and to the tale of the Wizard of Oz; and to the Oedipus myth. We heard of how Kayt Raymond (a strategic planning consultant) had used paintings to draw a consensus out of more than 60 stakeholders involved in putting together the 25 year strategic plan for the Great Barrier Reef. We heard how Tex Skuthorpe uses paintings to get farmers and Aboriginal communities working together to plan forest development. Lyn Russell (the public sector executive) started a major change at Brisbane City Council by asking councillors to paint their vision for the city.

So, it may be the case that successful leaders effect change by painting pictures or telling stories (word pictures) - images that move people at an emotional level and that stick with us - rather than simply offering rational arguments, data and tangible rewards.

Many of the stories relayed at the Symposium contained symbols or metaphors that have the power to shape how we think and act; e.g. Bill Bridges and Byron Rigby (the psychiatrist) both used analogies with living systems in talking about change rather than the typical “product” imagery of the industrial age. Hence, change is seen as a normal and ever-present part of life, as representing a timeless flow of dying and new birth (much as the cells of our body die and are renewed) rather than as something that is disconnected from us, something threatening and therefore something to be resisted.

As Bill Bridges said: “We often make the mistake of thinking of change as an output that is to be produced from a set of inputs via some sort of linear production process”. The significance of the symbols or metaphors we adopt can be seen if we apply this “product” metaphor to our own lives. We are then led to see ourselves as moving through a “production phase” (childhood, schooling) and into an “operational phase” (where we do work and get maintained when we break down) and then into a phase of deterioration and obsolescence (where we are retired or retrenched, etc). However, if we adopt an organic metaphor then we are led to see each phase of life (or career, or family, or relationship) as building on an earlier phase, progressing to maturity, then providing the wisdom and resources for the next generation or phase of life. This sequence is embedded in Bill Bridges’ theory of transitions as comprising three phases; i.e. endings, a “neutral zone” in which we are transformed in some way in readiness for the third phase, the new beginning. This power of this way of looking at the human experience of change (the “transition”) as a crucial complement to the linear sequence of actions that comprise the typical plan for change had a strong impact on the thinking of many of us at the Symposium.

Indeed, our Symposium presenters seem to be successful, in part, because they change the frameworks that people use to think about things and the new thinking requires us to behave in new ways. There is no coercion involved; nor very little requirement for extrinsic rewards for doing things differently. For example, Ian Kiernan and his small organising team for “Clean Up Australia” put 85% of their resources into communicating the story and the vision and only 15% into operational machinery. And 40,000 people turned up to the initial clean up campaign in 1989. Their thinking had changed and they wanted to come. Allies who had the needed resources (local Councils, corporate sponsors and community groups) volunteered what the campaign needed to get the job done. There are some powerful lessons there for me.

Theme 2: Passion and Persistence

In a way, this theme is related to the previous one. Indeed, all of the themes of successful change are intertwined into a complex fabric of success. Remove one of the threads and the whole change process may unravel.

Successful change leaders are passionate about what they are doing. Their commitment to their vision and the changes needed to bring it about is a wholehearted expression of who they are and what they believe in. They are not pushing for change because it is “best practice” or because our competitors are doing it or because it is in the strategic plan or because it is government policy - they are pushing for changes they believe in at a deep personal level. This personal commitment and passion infuses their stories, engages us as allies, and builds confidence that the change initiative will be followed through by the leaders *personally* - because it genuinely matters to them.

Just listening to the Symposium speakers, you know that they are not going to be easily distracted or discouraged from pursuing their visions and following through on their change initiatives. Ian Kiernan will “clean up the world”; Amanda Vanstone will create more vocal consumers of higher education who will be more likely to demand higher levels of performance from Australia’s universities. You can see that they genuinely care about improving the world we live in and it is this that engages us at an emotional level (even if our heads may be able to give us a list of reasons why what they are doing may not work).

The second part of this theme is persistence - persistence, resilience and tireless repetition of “the message” calling for change. Many of our speakers told of days or months of doing the hard graft of selling their vision and building commitment to it. When Ian Kiernan was rebuffed by a potential sponsor for “Clean Up” campaign he would live out the organisation’s policy of “never give up, never take ‘no’ for an answer”. He would re-frame the message in a way that was more likely to arouse the desired response and pitch again. Lyn Russell worked tirelessly through hundreds of interviews, briefings and training sessions, and months of negotiations in guiding the development of the innovative Enterprise Bargaining Agreement that transformed Brisbane City Council.

The learning here is that change does not come about by sending a memo, wordsmithing a plan for others to implement, publishing a vision statement, or conducting a one-off senior executive “road show” or inspirational corporate video. If the change matters to you, then you roll up your sleeves and get involved in the real work that is involved. You do not get distracted and you do not give up. And the fact that you are seen to be doing this is what attracts allies and persuades the doubters.

Finally, Amanda Vanstone cautioned the Symposium participants: “Never believe that the changes you have made are the end of change”. There is always another wave breaking on the shore. This is both the good news and the bad news!

Theme 3: Broaden Your Perspective But Keep Your Ear to the Ground

This theme emerges out of a number of comments made by speakers during the Symposium. First, Bill Bridges commented that he learns more that is helpful to him as a change/transition consultant from reading the daily newspapers than he does from reading the works of any

theorist or change “expert”. “I want to know what I am dealing with”, he said. Bill also suggested that we could learn a great deal about managing change from examining periods in history of great change. Psychology, anthropology and mythology also had much to teach us about managing change. Bill’s message seems to be: “learn about change management from a wide variety of sources other than the popular management texts of the ‘80s and ‘90s”. This was, in fact, the message that inspired the “Many Faces of Change” Symposium in the first place.

Lyn Russell emphasised the importance of ongoing consultation with all affected parties in the planning and implementation stages of change. This ensures that change stays grounded in the reality of people’s needs, skills, hopes and fears. Brisbane City Council also influenced the unions to work participatively with management by taking them to visit capital cities in other States to see how they had managed change. After learning about the directive approach that had been used to transform Melbourne Council, union representatives decided that they wanted to play a more constructive role in guiding the change process in Brisbane.

Amanda Vanstone stressed the importance of “knowing your adversaries” and being clear whether they are opposing you because of a determination to defend an entrenched position of self-interest or whether they are merely apprehensive about the change and its impact on them. We will come back to her advice for dealing with each of these two very different groups a little later.

Tex Skuthorpe (the Aboriginal artist and educator) and Peter McCloy (the trainer and writer on Aboriginal society) both commented on the importance of taking an intergenerational perspective when planning changes. In working to move beyond the management of recurring conflicts between Aboriginal communities and (white) rural land holders, Tex poses the question: “What sort of community do you want this to be in 60 years’ time”? Sometimes he invites children from each “side” in a conflict to state what they see happening to the land around them. In another forum, Richard Neville (the futurist, speaker and author) has told the apocryphal story of the CEO of a major Japanese corporation who challenged his strategic planning consultant with the question: “I don’t want you to leave this room until we have thought through what this company will be doing in 3000 years’ time”. Armed with this vision, the CEO believed it would then be easy to plan for the next 5, 10 or 25 years.

The message running through all these threads seems to be: “successful change managers do whatever they can to shift themselves and the people around them as far beyond their current perspectives and immediate concerns as they can”. Having access to many lenses increases the likelihood that we will see things clearly. However, we must continually use the lenses that are available to us (and, indeed, the channels for all our senses) to understand the world we are attempting to influence.

Theme 4: Trust, Partnerships, Mutual Respect and Responsibility

This theme is all about the relationships that successful change agents strive to build with the people around them. During the Symposium, it was clear that Ian Kiernan and Tex Skuthorpe work on the assumption that people will take responsibility for improving their world (making changes) if only they can show them how to look at it in new ways - ways that raise awareness of issues and which also foster the formation of partnerships and alliances that can

generate hope, energy and creativity in the short term and lead on to the creation of desired outcomes for all parties in the medium and longer terms.

I noted that when Ian and Tex used the word “responsibility”, they were usually talking about people’s responsibility to each other, to future generations, or for the land. They did not focus on people’s responsibility to do certain things or to produce certain outputs (this being the typical focus when “responsibility” is mentioned in a work context). The actions took care of themselves when people came to share a vision of the future and started to see themselves as allies rather than as adversaries or powerless bystanders.

In describing the lengths her Department went to provide a “safety net” for staff who would lose their jobs as part of the changes she was introducing, Senator Vanstone was also acknowledging her responsibility to those who were negatively affected (at least in the short term) by her actions as a leader of change.

Byron Rigby raised an often overlooked dimension of this relationship theme; viz our relationship with our self and, in particular, with our brain. Byron’s session at the Symposium was more of a mind expanding experience rather than a linear presentation and as such is difficult to summarise. But, I did note his comments that: “My brain is more intelligent than I am - after all it governs my liver, my heart, blinking, replacing my bone cells every three months.... The same intelligence that governs the universe is embedded in our brains. I want some of that”! He suggested several ways (e.g. meditation) in which we can get to know our brain better and access more of its potential power.

Coming via a totally different path, Tex Skuthorpe also talked about respecting the wisdom that is within us and the wisdom that is in others (particularly the wisdom of “the elders” in a community).

Discovering the power within oneself was also a thread raised explicitly by Ian Kiernan. As a result of his success in single handed yacht races he came to believe that he could tackle almost anything.

Ian also stressed other threads to the relationship theme; viz. the importance of trust, teamwork and partnerships in effecting major change. His clean up campaigns drew upon the communication and public relations expertise of an established team of experts who had helped him raise funds for his around-the-world yacht races. The campaigns also depended crucially for their success on a three-way partnership between government, business and the community. Ian said that his Clean Up organisation sees itself as being in the communication business. I would add that they are also in the business of building trusting and trusted partnerships.

Amanda Vanstone’s and Lyn Russell’s stories added more evidence of the importance of building trust between the change agent and the key power-holders affected by change. Senator Vanstone emphasised the importance of being “straight and up-front” with people (she was advised by some to be otherwise in her dealings with Cabinet and University Vice Chancellors). Lyn Russell provided examples of communication and consultative structures between management, unions and employees that served to share information and foster mutual understanding and respect. Some idea can be gained of the resources that were put into these structures at Brisbane City Council by noting that over 200 internal facilitators were trained to aid the communication flow during the change period.

The lesson: communication and relationships are two critical points of focus for successful change agents. They put sustained and significant personal effort into getting these right, leaving others to focus on actions, outputs and measurement of outcomes.

Theme 5: Get “A Bigger Bat“ or A Bigger Carrot

It might seem that the Symposium did not deal with the realities of power, resistance to change, and the use of rewards and incentives in motivating and driving change. As explained in Theme 1, these factors did not seem to be the key points of focus for successful leaders in times of change. However, they were discussed.

For example, Amanda Vanstone emphasised the importance of knowing your adversaries and of distinguishing between those who are defending entrenched self-interest and those who are merely apprehensive about the impact of change. With the latter you enter into open and honest dialogue, you offer support, you “make as many concessions as you can”. However, in dealing with the former, Senator Vanstone’s advice was: “If they threaten you with a big bat, then you have to come back at them with an even bigger bat”. She explained how she made it known that she had developed contingency plans for forcing change in the higher education system that would have been even more unpalatable for Vice Chancellors if they had not gone along with her proposals to raise HECS fees for university students, reduce budgeted forward estimates, allow universities to offer 25% of places in courses to full-fee paying students, as well as providing incentives for universities to enrol more than the budgeted number of students. This comprehensive package of carrots and sticks was accepted by universities as preferable to the “bigger bat” of across the board cuts in their budgets.

Theme 6: Celebrations and Other Rites of Passage

In a way, this theme brings us back to some of the threads involved in Theme 1. Bill Bridges, Byron Rigby and Tex Skuthorpe said it in different ways but the message was the same: “Celebrations assist change”. They can be celebrations of the past that has served us well but which now must be left behind as we move forward; or celebrations of our progress in navigating the “neutral zone” (the time in between “leaving home” and arriving in the “promised land”); or celebrations of achieving key aspects of our shared vision. Taking a lead from Aboriginal elders like Tex Skuthorpe, we might simply decide that surviving, together, the trials of an extended “neutral zone” is enough cause for celebration.

We might also note here, that Tex Skuthorpe’s community required its young adolescent boys to spend years travelling to all 27 neighbouring communities to learn their languages, customs, laws and religions as part of the rite of passage into manhood. Each community visited would give each boy a sacred object which in turn made sacred the boy to whom it was given. Surely, this was a good educational process for developing people who could manage change, appreciate diversity and live in harmony with those around them. It stands in sharp contrast to our traditional white school system that cuts children off from the world around them in “class rooms”; emphasises getting the “right” answers to questions posed by those in authority; fosters competition as a model of “doing good”; and leaves our young adults with nothing more sacred than a graduation certificate which we hope prospective employers will worship when we apply for a job.