changingorganisations

This is December 2009's newsletter, Changing Organisations, for my clients and other professionals interested in organisational change.

This month's **changingorganisations** is in four parts:

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Eight Things 2009 Has Taught Me (Or Confirmed for Me) About Change

Approaching the end of 2009, it is a bit of a shock to realise that this newsletter has also been going nearly a year now! Also, the milestone of finishing my doctoral degree two years ago is starting to retreat into becoming part of the "recent" past rather than the "immediate recent" past.

This year I have learnt a lot from six new clients I've not worked with before. Here are eight things I have learnt or had confirmed this year, in no particular order

1. There are multiple perspectives on any issue. Many times the people involved don't know what the other perspectives are. Sensitive topics are often discussed only "in the shadows," i.e. in private settings with certain trusted others. People see the shouting which has a great impact ("unprofessional"), but not the reason for the shouting (e.g. frustration built up over time). They see colleagues seemingly getting away with things, but don't see the often laborious performance management processes happening (necessarily) in the background. Making these different perspectives known more widely can help people see the situation differently and thus respond differently. This allows the possibility for people to move out of "ruts," deeply habitual or "stuck" patterns of relating. I have seen many examples this year of how people's view of the "facts" can change, with discussion, some time to reflect, and further discussion. It seems important to me in organisational change not to close off the opportunity for further discussion, even with someone who seems entrenched, vocal and angry about an issue.

2. Misunderstandings often occur – people will make mistakes, including me and including you. When this happens, the sooner you spot the mistake, apologise and clear the air, and provide correct information, the sooner you can move on in some sort of working relationship. The other person may not "get over it" straight away, but in many business settings people are willing to give you another shot if you clean up any mess you make as you go along. Especially if you can demonstrate what your intent was and that you have acted as soon as you recognised there was a problem.

3. Power is not an absolute. Even the most powerful and feared of managers cannot "decree" that all problems will be fixed. It is how people respond to these decrees (or intentions of the manager) that determines how effective these intentions (instructions) will be. This means managers have to take the time to negotiate with their people, what their intentions mean. I have seen a number of examples this year where managers have not spent time discussing genuinely with their people how the desired changes will impact on them. There is a tendency for the power of the position to lead the manager to say "here's what needs to happen" and then expect their people to adapt. Doing this, the managers dissociate themselves from any potentially unsavoury consequences of these actions. For example, it is much easier to say to a team leader that they should change the schedules of their team than it is to listen carefully to the team manager and help them to work out how to change the schedules without upsetting everyone. After all, what if the manager cannot work out how to do it?

4. Power is a function of the relative need that each party has for the other. This relative need is in balance and shifts over time. At some times, e.g. when it comes to performance reviews, the team member might feel a greater need for the manager. By contrast, at times of staff shortage or additional workload, the manager might feel more need for the team member. Power is not so much a matter of one person holding absolute power over another. This means you have to be thinking about the relative need people have for each other when you are in a change situation. It is valuable to take the time to analyse the effects of power relating in your organisation – where has the balance of power been in the past, and what direction is it moving in now?

5. Communications processes are often considered as "what the most powerful want to tell the others." This is often encapsulated in the idea of "key messages" that is so seductive to communications professionals and project teams. By default this approach ends up being one way communication. After all, in the term "key messages" there is no concept of "key responses." As the manager of a change initiative of whatever scale, provide opportunities for people to tell you what they really think. Make sure you listen to

them. And make sure there aren't any inadvertent punishments (from their point of view) that will be incurred if they tell you their real thoughts. For example, if they tell you that they have doubts about the effectiveness of the issue, don't write them off as "resistant" and then avoid giving them interesting projects that you would have previously given them. After all, the alternative is that they will tell others what they really think, and not you. Believe me, it's much better for you, if they tell you. So seek to understand and explore with them those things that appear as resistance.

6. Things done poorly by predecessors or others in the past can leave legacies of mistrust. Sometimes, people can say things that make you wonder "where did that come from?" I've had two projects this year in which people have attributed to current managers ("management") sins that were actually related to past managers, rather than the incumbents. People sometimes do not seem to separate out past wrongs done to them by managers who are no longer around, especially if they feel that somehow you have done something that is unfair to them. If you are a manager with a predecessor who has left a legacy of unfulfilled promises, then you have to work much harder with your people to create the kind of mutual trust you desire.

7. I hope that you have not been in a workplace where accusations of workplace bullying occur. I have consulted to several such workplaces now. Where people are in deep seated conflict, then the situations are often accompanied by each party accusing the other of bullying them. My perspective is that organisational politics consists of the daily exercise of power, involving people negotiating, discussing, being polite or impolite to each other, revealing, concealing, pulling rank, delegating and so on. This is how humans in organisations negotiate what they are doing together. When these day to day negotiations break down and it becomes apparent to one party that they cannot go on together, this is experienced as violent. Hence the accusations of bullying that accompany intense organisational conflict. These political processes enable organisations to flourish and get things done. The breakdown of these political negotiations is experienced as violent. When bullying accusations arise in deep seated or long standing conflict situations, the challenge is to find ways for the parties to continue to work together. This is an area where services such as mediation or EAP can really add value, if they are seen in this way. But the challenge is nevertheless a political one. It's not a matter of attempting to "rise above" politics, which is simply not possible.

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8. As well as my usual experience of goodwill from managers and staff in the projects I've been involved in, I've also found myself in situations this year where people have been very upset by organisational proposals, addressing their managers or me with varying degrees of hostility, often in open forums, but sometimes one on one. Misunderstanding and personal threat are behind such reactions. It can be quite challenging when this happens, so it's no wonder so many consultation processes for restructures or other contentious proposals omit any requirement for face to face discussion and rely on written proposals and written feedback to say they have fulfilled the requirements for "consultation." This written approach is much more comfortable for the "coalition of the powerful" and the project teams and HR people they hire. Nevertheless, I have found that fronting up to staff about contentious proposals or issues and being calm when others are not is very powerful. Remaining calm, rather than becoming activated by the emotions of others, and continuing to discuss the issues raised rather than reacting to attack has had great results. I've later had feedback from people who initially shouted or attacked me or the ideas I represent saying how they can now see what was intended, but couldn't at the time. This confirms for me that people's feelings change over time, as their perspectives change. Therefore it makes sense to work with the range of different perspectives of issues. And believe me, with any complex issues, there will be a range of perspectives you can work with.

As a final thought, there are often situations where people are questioning your change proposal, sometimes in very sharp terms. While it appears they may be trying to undermine or challenge your proposal, this is not necessarily the case, even if they seem highly critical, are angry or divert discussion to seemingly irrelevant issues.

They may also be genuinely thinking about how they will take up the proposal, how it will affect them and what they will have to do with their teams to maintain their relationships and get the desired results. And it might seem quite difficult or even impossible to them, at that moment, to see how the change proposal could be successful.

I faced several of these situations this year, where people were upset and seemed unable to address the issues I was raising on behalf of my sponsor in the organisation. It has been confirmed for me that it works best to assume that questions about your desired change are genuine enquiries into the change, and to respond accordingly. This has enabled me to respond graciously and facilitatively to what could be seen as personal attacks. If you treat such questions as resistance and respond as such, then you are assuming that the other party is damaged, that there is something wrong with them. You immediately appear defensive and it then becomes very hard to work together with the other parties to achieve your organisational change objectives. Again, it becomes apparent that there is value in remaining calm while others around are not.

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Hot Off the changingorganisations Blog

This month, changingorganisations focused on the world of managing NGOs (non-government organisations) and funding these NGOs – which are two sides of the same coin. NGOs, constituted under specific legislation, have primary accountability to members or service recipients, not to a government agency with whom they might establish a service contract, which covers only a part of the service cost. Government agencies therefore frequently characterise NGOs has having confused or unclear priorities. My colleague Chris Mowles, who has held very senior positions in NGOs in international development and consulted widely around the world to NGOs points out that the move to contract-oriented relationships assumes that anyone could fulfil the contract and past relationships count for little.

In New Zealand, if you are a provider of services to the NZ government, then you have to go through a standard contracting approach which assumes that any provider could provide the services. In fact, if you have provided services before and know the organisation and people involved, then you have to ignore or negate these relationships and prior knowledge of the organisation in the process of entering into contracts with government entities. I'll be blogging further about this early next year.

New Website and Newsletter Format

My new website is nearly ready (text and images currently going through review and edit) as is an associated new look and name for this newsletter for 2010. The blog will continue in its current format and provocative content about organisational change. The new website will be my "online corporate brochure" with ongoing white papers, videos and news will be updated frequently. Plus, look out for "What The…?! Change Experiences You Wish Were Not True" with true horror stories from readers about organisational change.

I expect to announce the new website going live in January's newsletter.

Very shortly there will also have a new format and name for this newsletter, differentiating it from the blog. Look out next month for "Stephen's Standpoint," a brand new look and feel, and a first for me, a prize draw.

In the Press

I was recently cited in the US magazine One + in freelance journalist Dalia Fahmy's article Living the Language of Business. She interviewed moi, about how meeting planners can be more strategic, by including opportunities for informal communication such as small group discussions

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or mingling opportunities for senior managers, rather than focusing so much on formal presentations.

Alison Donaldson, the editor of the special November edition of UK magazine Organisations and People, which is themed "Writing Futures," asked me to write about my experience of blogging. Subsequently, my article "Blogging to Build a Body of Work," has just been released in this UK journal. While a subscription is required to see the whole edition, you can click here to see the content of my article.

Conclusion

We certainly haven't had an early summer. Lots of rained out tennis matches this year – why does it always rain on a Saturday? But this spring rain has made the grass grow abundantly, both in the paddocks where we want it to, and in the lawns, which quickly look like paddocks if we're not careful. The two colts have just had gelding operations and are recuperating quietly in our one flat paddock.

Seasons greetings to you, your family and your team at work. I wish you some reflective time at the end of the year, some family time and enjoyment without guilt, and some contemplation of exciting things in the year ahead.

Regards,

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Clients say…
"Stephen always delivers what is asked of him without exception. He does it in a way that I can just say 'this is what needs to happen' and he goes away and makes it happen. We set a timeline and he meets it. I don't have to worry about how he meets it, I just know he will."

Karen Eriksen
Senior Project Manager
Ministry of Justice

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