

Managing and valuing an important resource - AMOs

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen an unprecedented upheaval in all areas of the public sector. Reform and change are constantly placed before managers at all levels. Demands for greater efficiency and productivity are used as driving factors for privatisation, benchmarking, contracting of services and process redesign. Whilst the aims of these programs may not be intrinsically unhelpful, it is clear to anyone who has been a 'victim' of many of these drives that an essential component of reform seems to be overlooked - the impact of change on people. This presentation looks at the need to consider the human factor in change programs. It examines some of the emerging management philosophies that attempt to 'rehumanise' work and internal organisational dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

In opening this presentation it may be useful to give a thumbnail sketch of my background and management experience. I am not a local government product and I have never worked in an animal management role - so how can I address this topic with any credibility?

Briefly I have served in the Defence environment for 20 years - an experience shared by a significant number of ranger and animal management officer staff. My last position was officer in command of the Royal Australian Navy family support services in Western Australia. I have worked in the non government sector where I developed a family support organisation, comprising six independent units, from the ground up. During my career I have spent much of my time working in a voluntary capacity in community organisations. I have just spent three years at the City of Rockingham as a strategic planning officer with major responsibilities for organisational change, including line management responsibility for ranger services, and I am now coming to terms with the demands of being a Chief Executive Officer in a small council. My primary qualifications are in Psychology and Sociology - hence my interest in people and their behaviour.

Over many years of moving between management jobs in a variety of settings, I have seen reforms of all kinds. I have also seen what reform can do to people when it is badly handled - the casualties can be costly. The fallout is generally caused by poor management systems that cannot adapt to change in a way which preserves our most valuable resource - our people. Most large organisations have some sort of clichè written on a strategic plan, covered in dust, which says words to the effect that 'people are our most valuable resource'. It would be interesting to take a survey of the members here to see who has seen such a saying, and who has actually experienced its implementation in reality.

Today I would like to address some of the issues relating to the management of people in this current context of change.

GETTING THE BEST RESULTS

The aim of reform in all its disguises is to achieve 'best practice' - whatever that may mean in your particular business. This is a reasonable aim and it has been espoused in many organisations throughout the world. You have already heard an address on this topic at this conference and I will not attempt to repeat the definitions of 'best practice'. I do want to ask however, how we go about achieving best practice in our dealings with our employees, peers and managers. I firmly believe that there are some basic principles that we must use to motivate and reward our staff if we wish to attain long lasting benefits for our services.

These principles are not complex - they are disarmingly simple and can be found in the writings of many of the world's greatest works of wisdom literature. Two examples are - the principle of sowing and reaping, and the principle of doing unto others as though you were the others.

Mix these principles with some basic values like openness, integrity, honesty and perseverance and you start to see the foundation for what I want to put to you today.

It may seem strange that such issues are raised in a talk on modern management ideas - these concepts might be more expected from a treatise on ethics, philosophy or some form of religious dissertation, yet they are becoming more openly recognised by modern proponents of management theory. To understand why, we need to look no further than the past 100 years or so of management practice and more probably some of our own experiences - especially if we have been in the workplace for the past 20 years or so.

The industrial revolution was characterised by what is known as Newtonian thinking - this basically implied that once you had designed a work process you could not allow people to tinker with it because they would spoil it. As a result, work was embedded in strict rules, time watching, mindless production line processes and an attitude that seemed to expect workers to leave their brains outside when they arrived for work.

This rigid and hierarchical system found its way into most work environments and especially the public sector where incredibly restrictive practices and monolithic organisational structures were developed to control every aspect of the work environment. Managers were paid to provide solutions to problems that they often did not understand and consultation with the people 'on the job' was unheard of. Needless to say innovation was scorned as interference and the gap between management and the shop floor became institutionalised. Typical characteristics of the industrial relations scene were mistrust, little or no communication, resentment and polarisation. This became accepted as 'the way things are'.

Fortunately, some voices were crying in the wilderness and they were eventually heard as the management revolution gathered momentum. The notion that we should actually listen to people who were doing the work, in case they had some ideas as to how it could be done better, triggered the 'quality' revolution. Small teams began to change the face of industry - particularly in Japan - and the western industrial world slowly began to wake up. Consultation, teamwork, customer focus, innovation and technology gave a number of 'smart' companies a leading edge in the international market. Competition became a buzzword then economic rationalism was born.

The outcome of this has been the push to restructure government services to introduce a competitive environment, the 'level playing field' and increased efficiencies.

My principal point is that this has had an adverse effect on many employees who have experienced unnecessary stress and, in extreme cases, loss of employment, as a result of an ideologically driven program of reform.

This has impacted on AMOs and rangers in many areas. Proposals to contract out ranger services introduce private patrol services and cut costs are common. How can these processes be better managed to protect the interests of current practitioners?

Having given a fairly lengthy account of what has been happening, let me turn to some relevant issues for us to consider if we wish to see successful change in our environment.

Firstly, let me acknowledge the need for change in this as in every public sector workplace. On joining local government a few years ago I was amazed at the culture of the sector, where inefficiency was paramount. The root cause of much of this inefficiency was, however, the basic management systems that were in place. The thrust to reform often expects change at the coal face, but with an expectation that the old regime can continue to operate and somehow claim the credit for better outcomes.

There are some basic principles for managing change which I will mention - I suspect that they are well known to most of us but they can be applied to change in any context and on any scale:

- the need for a clear vision of where the change is leading;
- ownership of the vision by all stakeholders;
- a clear implementation plan;
- continuous communication;
- ongoing evaluation and re-evaluation;
- adequate resourcing; and
- an understanding of the impact on the people involved.

It is this last issue that seems to be so easily overlooked and which causes the greatest difficulty in making sustainable change work. The normal reaction to change is 'fight or flight' because it is viewed as a threat to the individual's security. Unless this response is anticipated and managed the best laid plans for reform will founder.

To put these clearly into context let us examine the characteristics of the AMO/ranger role in its present setting:

- it has a high level of statutory responsibility;
- it has frequent interface with the public - often in potentially confrontational settings;
- it carries significant physical risks;
- it has high visibility;
- working hours are often irregular; and
- administrative and other resources are often inadequate.

The outcome of this combination of factors, unless a high level of management support is available, is a potential for high levels of occupational stress. This is typical of an emergency service job profile. It is a well documented fact that the people who gravitate to this kind of work generally have a high capacity to cope with this issue - but they are still human.

When individuals who are under stress (even if they are perceived to be coping adequately) are told that their jobs are at risk (or they perceive that this is possible) and that major change is looming in the workplace, this can be enough to cause significant personal dysfunction.

Any change that is introduced without adequate preparation of the people involved will be resented and resisted - this is a straightforward outcome of the psychology of personal change.

The result of this dysfunction is an officer who will find it extremely difficult to deal with the public in any situation involving confrontation. This may lead to incidents of complaint against the officer, which reinforces a management view that he or she is performing badly, and a downwards spiral of the workplace relationship leading in the worst case to severe confrontation and termination of employment.

In the context of the AMO role it is essential that all the implications of change are worked through step by step with the officers until they have assimilated the need for the change and have developed a strategy to implement it themselves.

The strategy should result in:

- clear policy direction in relation to any changes in responsibility;
- regular monitoring and review of the progress being made;
- evaluation of the individual's response to the change;
- a clear commitment, from management, of resources to facilitate the change; and
- an open recognition of improvements and positive gains resulting from the change.

The primary issues for management to embrace in addressing change relate to the qualities and values that I listed in my introduction. In essence, modern management has to adjust to a view of the workplace that embraces:

- the development of trust and a recognition of the inherent value of the worker as an individual;
- a preparedness to offer guidance, leadership and positive reinforcement (praise) frequently;
- an acknowledgment that the person who performs the job will usually have the best ideas on how it should be done;
- open and honest communication - the ability to give reasoned responses to requests;
- recognition of the special demands of certain aspects of the AMO role and a commitment to provide training and resources to equip personnel to deal with those demands; and
- provision of special support in situations where the psychological pressures of the task are having an adverse effect on individuals.

SUMMARY

In this brief presentation I have attempted to show that one of the most significant factors in the effective management of change is a positive approach to the nurturing of the individuals involved. AMOs and rangers often face significant stress in their roles. The impact of further stress will never produce the results which management wishes to achieve unless this is handled in a professional and caring manner. The implementation of change must be viewed as a partnership between all stakeholders if the goal of best practice is to be achieved.

Note: this is an abridged version of the complete presentation that will include expanded reference to many of the main points

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