

Shifting for success

by Terry Fewtrell

We shift everyday! In our work environments we press the shift key virtually every time we sit at our keyboards or laptops. We may think nothing of it, but the shift key is a power key that gives us leverage. When combined with another key it has the effect of changing the character from its normal function. You see shifting is powerful and sometimes we really do need to ‘go there’.

The world of business and organisational change is of course much more dynamic and complex than simply using a keyboard. But the analogy holds true none the less. There are times when a shift of organisational focus and direction is necessary and must be managed. Sometimes this occurs because of external factors about which we have little control. In other cases it is possible to anticipate and shape the change to support other strategic agendas. For the public sector, a change of government presents all these scenarios — the imperative for change and the opportunity to drive new agendas.

A newly elected government often means fundamental change at the policy, portfolio, organisational and service delivery levels. Pursuing these new directions can also require a significant emphasis on cultural change and getting that Shift key effect can involve several steps happening in combination. To ensure that the change overall is effective it is critical that there be:

- effective analysis
- appropriate strategies
- clear planning and organisation
- personalised change to make it meaningful to the individual’s work role
- overall synthesised and coherent initiatives.

*“Thus times do
shift – each thing
his turn does hold
New things succeed,
as former things
grow old”*

Robert Herrick
(1591 – 1674)
English poet

These elements are key parts of the Yellow Edge *Shifting for Success* approach, which is based on extensive experience in working with agencies to negotiate and leverage change to achieve objectives. They apply to all manner of change initiatives from the big canvas organisational re-shaping to the detailed job re-design projects. Another way of thinking about the elements of the *Shifting for Success* approach is set out in the diagram below.

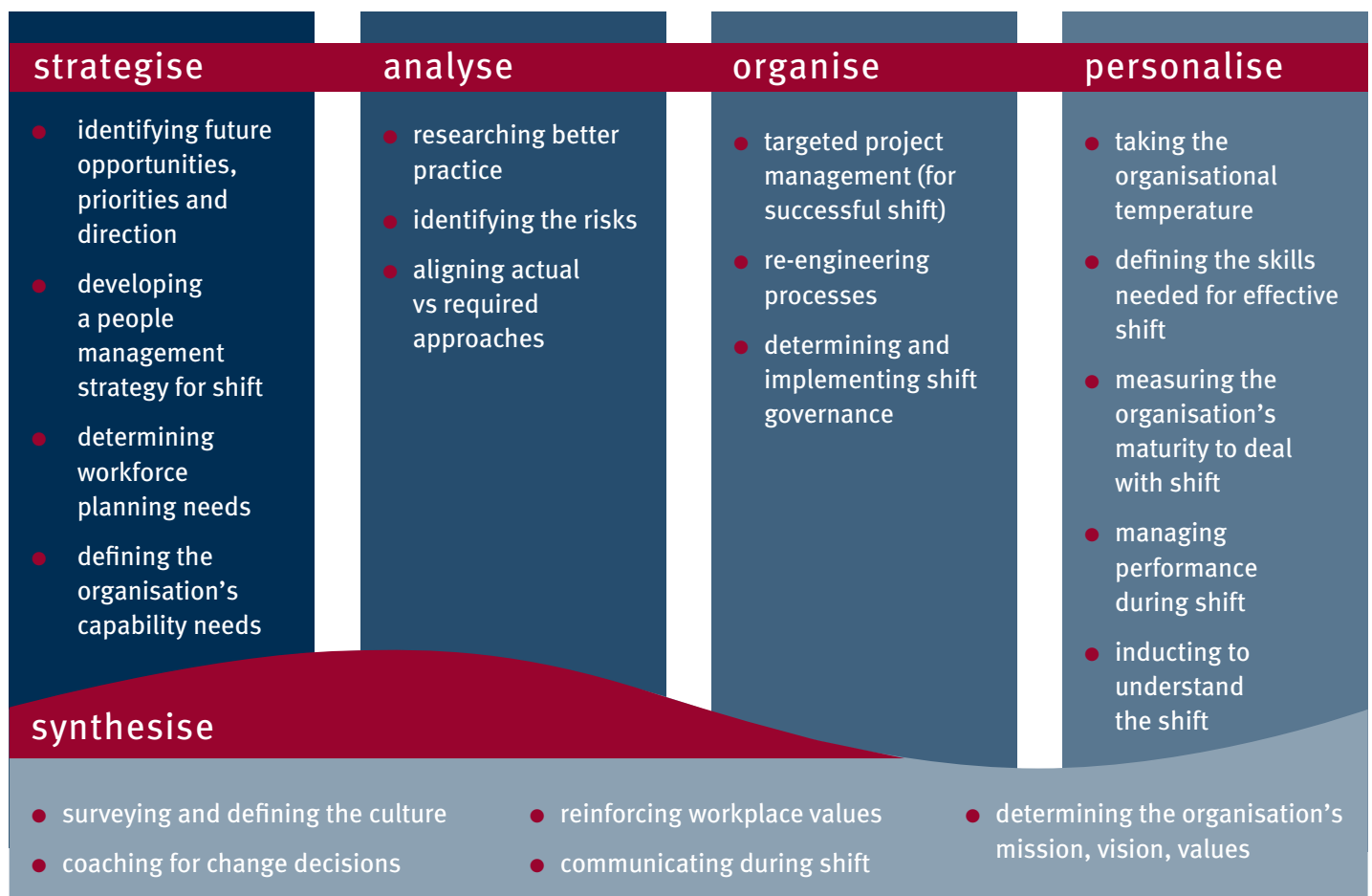
Typically post election changes, particularly with new governments, derive from the Administrative Arrangements Orders that carve the broad shape of the bureaucratic machinery in response to the policy agenda articulated at the election. But this rather dry skeleton of portfolio and departmental structures and relationships needs to be enlivened by the flesh and sinews of prime ministerial expectations, minister and ministerial office relationships and linkages across agencies to ensure whole of government policy and service delivery responses. Typically all of these

factors provide the imperative for shift and the foundations on which organisational structures and performance will be based. In many instances they are the starting points for more detailed agency planning and implementation of change.

In responding to broad change it is often at the next level that the key strategies are put into place. Questions that need to be answered include:

- What is the objective of the new policy?
- How can it be most effectively implemented?
- What changes are necessary to procedures and operational/service delivery arrangements?
- What is the culture that we need for the changes to be effective?
- How do we get from where we are to what we want?

All of these questions require answers that must be applied at the more detailed levels of the organisation. For instance there needs to be clarity around divisional roles and the focus



and deliverables of individual branches and work teams. Ideally this requires management to face honestly the character of their organisation. In this way broad based change, such as that which comes with machinery of government changes, provides the opportunity to address and resolve what may have previously seemed perennial and intractable problems. Managers need to have the breadth of vision and the insight to grasp these opportunities, and others that will result in the better overall positioning of the organisation to successfully negotiate future challenges.

Quite apart from these sorts of corporate considerations there is the fundamental need to engage with, reassure and bring along the essential component of the organisation — its people. It is part of the nature of organisations that in times of major change the rumour mill operates with ruthless regularity. Part of management's key tasks must be to render the rumour mill redundant by virtue of a proactive and credible communications strategy, one based on openness, transparency and timely information.

Part of garnering the credibility for such programs lies in the recognition of the support and assistance that staff may need to embark on new directions or implement changed approaches. There are several tools available to assist in this process, such as measuring the organisation's current capabilities, workforce profile, skill needs and broad corporate temperature and maturity. Quantitative tools that measure and calibrate what is needed to shift organisational performance, don't just facilitate development and skills transfers, they also reinforce to staff that they are not being taken for granted and are actively supported.

It is critical that organisation leaders work through the many issues and questions in an orderly and productive way so that they are poised to move decisively when the opportunities arrive. There are no set intervention tools or instruments that apply in every situation. Rather an approach that is sensitive to local differences and accesses a

variety of tools and strategies is more likely to lead to productive outcomes. A proven business partner, especially one that understands the dynamics and nuances of machinery of government changes, can add real value.

One of the great challenges of the major change environment is the difficulty inherent in driving an organisation and its people in a new direction, while still needing to ensure that the business-as-usual outputs are delivered. Critical to resolving this tension is the importance of the change leader being visible and clearly aware of the difficulties, while also being accessible and supportive. This requires more than just charismatic leadership and unique personal attributes. It

needs to be underpinned by simple organisational strategies that are transparent and flexible.

In the midst of significant change it is also possible to overlook the fact that a key part of the public sector role is continuity. It is the public sector that facilitates the change but it ought also to be the keeper of the on-going national interest and story. This has been one of the key learnings of recent APS experience. Reiterating and reinforcing fundamental APS values and maintaining accurate records are part of the yeast that binds a professional and respected public service. In the 21st century as much as at any earlier time there is a need to blend traditional APS values

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with reform and change initiatives. Shifting in these circumstances therefore requires a level of insight and nuance that can only come from a deep appreciation of the role of public service and the importance of the correct balance between responsiveness and proper process.

Shifting for Success involves a range of steps that can lead an organisation through a period of change, while taking advantage of the opportunities that always accompany change. Experience with a range of organisations suggests that there are no 'one size fits all' solutions. Rather each case requires its own individual focus and review. The use of a partner in responding to major change, such as that which can flow from a change of government, can help optimise

the leverage of a corporate shift and make the difference between guiding and controlling change or being overwhelmed by its surge. Based on its intimate understanding of government and its record of working successfully with departments and agencies, Yellow Edge has harnessed the learning of that experience to provide a package of insights and tools that can help organisations take advantage of the opportunities provided by times of change. In short Yellow Edge is a proven 'shift key' partner.

To learn more about Yellow Edge's *Shifting for Success* model, contact Kerry Martin, Director, Yellow Edge or telephone 02 6273 0168 or kerry.martin@yellowedge.com.au or John Robinson at john.robinson@yellowedge.com.au

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