

## Change and the journey of HR: some reflections

by Terry Fewtrell

It is an accepted fact of modern life that **change is ever constant**. The world is wired and instantaneous. Things happen and responses and reactions follow immediately. The cycle goes on with ever increasing rapidity. In such a world we all try to maintain our balance and try to make sense of things around us. To do that we cling to core values, fundamental principles or the anchor points of our lives.

Organisations are much the same as individuals. They exist to achieve outcomes, advance causes or deliver services. The context in which they do these things is subject to the same **vortex of speed and change**. Events move fast. Markets change and often erupt. It has become fashionable in recent times to talk about the 'dynamic organisation', that thrives on chaos (to borrow a phrase) and is able to re-invent itself many times over to survive and take advantage of the evolving environment. A more recent descriptor is 'chaordic'— meaning an organisation that deliberately seeks to be infinitely innovative and adaptable by using loosely linked elements. But the organisations that hover around this end of the spectrum still need a relatively stable centre core that provides a reference point for vision, values and operating principles.

Much of the literature in this field derives from private sector contexts, but has application in differing ways to the public sector. Looking back over the past 10 years alone there has been **enormous movement in the context and focus of Australian Public Service agencies**. The successive initiatives of commercialisation, privatisation, contestability, outsourcing, devolution, accountability and outputs/outcomes frameworks have all had major impacts on how agencies see their roles and respond to them. Change in the APS, viewed from this vantage point bears out the truth of Nelson Mandela's observation.

*'There is  
nothing like  
returning  
to a place  
that remains  
unchanged to  
find the ways  
in which  
you yourself  
have altered.'*

*Nelson Mandela  
(Long Walk to Freedom)*

However for many of us as we stand in the middle of constant change, the perspective is more confusing. Often it seems like change for the sake of change or a case of re-inventing the past. Changes to legislative frameworks and government policy initiatives have resulted in significant shifts in accountabilities for agency heads and the flexibilities that agencies have to fashion their approaches. What is becoming clearer by the day is **the varying mosaic that emerges** as organisations are at different points along the spectrum on all sorts of issues and area. Given the devolution that has occurred this is probably as it should be. The APS no longer operates on the 'one size fits all' principle. It is completely logical that starting from the objectives of an individual agency and considering the environment in which it functions, the business capabilities and strategies to be adopted will be tailor made to suit that requirement. What is more intriguing however is **the nature of 'the dance' that agencies are prepared to have** with the freedoms that come with flexibilities.

The recent **MAC Report on Organisational Renewal provides an interesting pivot point** in the broader context. The MAC's investigation and report was driven by recognition that there were challenging factors in the operating environment facing APS agencies. These factors included the likely impact of a significant number of more mature employees leaving the service and exercising the options provided by superannuation and alternative work/ life opportunities and the perceived move away from APS employment as a career choice to one of perhaps a series of career phases. While these are service-wide issues which the MAC has approached in a global way, its prescriptions are invariably agency focussed. The report makes a lot of very useful suggestions, a good number of which are dependant upon the flexibilities that agencies now have to **customise their workforce planning** and approaches.

Some agencies still find themselves in the situation where they continue to have the bulk of their HR frameworks locked into a certified agreement. For instance in the area of rewards and recognition, the real scope that many agencies have to be **innovative and responsive** is limited or restricted. Others having jettisoned much of the restrictive framework are now retreating feeling the need for greater consistency and uniformity. To continue the metaphor of the dance, while many remain in the circle for the traditional barn dance, others have stepped off into an engaging waltz or foxtrot with individuals and just a **few have ventured into a seductive tango**. Even more fascinating is the seeming retreat by some of the last mentioned group from the overtly flirtatious back to the more conventional.

Another example is in the outsourcing/insourcing conundrum. Earlier brave efforts to package out the provision of most HR functions have led to some serious thinking on whether the focus on the strategically important has been lost altogether. **Others grapple with the notion of what really is strategic** to them and how it might best be considered and progressed. There is growing acceptance that in many instances an outside provider will rarely be able to comprehend instinctively what issues are key and crucial for the future positioning of the organisation. Often it requires an intimate knowledge and understanding of the operating environment to be able to leverage a truly effective HR strategy. This is not surprising given the need for the essential linkage back to business planning and organisational goals. This leads management to ponder how an organisation might grow and retain the strategic HR contribution that a particular agency values.

So what does all this tell us? In reality very little, apart from the fact that organisations are forever changing and adapting to their stakeholders and situations. That change is constant. But it is not change that re-invents the past or relies on fashion. **It builds on what has been learned** from the organisation's journey to that point. The fact is that it is not just the organisation that is changing. There are global learnings and applications drawn from research and industry knowledge. New perspectives and insights that take account of the changes in society, inform and guide our thinking. For instance the characteristics of generations X and Y do need to be factored into considerations around attracting and retaining the right mix of organisational capabilities.

The MAC report's emphasis on workforce planning highlights the need for agencies to develop their own response to organisational needs and market conditions. It invokes **workforce planning as an effective decision science** around the management of HR, one that can enlighten business thinking and enable business objectives. Workforce planning pulls together a number of steps that any successful organisation would have undertaken, it

adds context and rigour and ensures a focus on the achievement of agency objectives. It is a blueprint for organising people to meet the complexities and demands of contemporary business, public or private.

But workforce planning is not the only mechanism for taking advantage of evolving knowledge and learning. Increasing interest is being shown by departments and agencies in the **role of the executive coach**. Coaching is enjoying a rising profile as an intervention that has advantages for both the individual and the organisation. It is in many ways a HR practice that is in harmony with the values of the time, being able to deliver benefits for the organisation while focussed on and tailored to the interests and needs of the individual – **a synthesis of the collective and the individual**.

Organisational Renewal as a term is probably close to the mark. It implies growth and new life but also a continuation of the valued past. Renewal is clearly not revolution. It is far more challenging and subtle. It requires a degree of ferment and fizz – a sort of chemistry out of which the organisation learns, adapts, imports, discards and moves forward.

*The MAC Report on Organisational Renewal is available on the Australian Public Service Commission website: [www.apsc.gov.au/mac/organisationrenewal.htm](http://www.apsc.gov.au/mac/organisationrenewal.htm)*



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