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Caring in a culture of change

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Caring in a Culture of Change

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ABSTRACT

Rural and remote health care workers and organisations are, like other workers and workplaces, faced with the massive change that has resulted from globalisation and its sequelae. The 'turbulent' or 'whitewater' environment in which we find ourselves requires considerable powers of adaptation both at an individual and an organisational level if either are to survive into the next millennium. This paper describes the findings of recent research and other lines of evidence about the sorts of things with which adapting organisations are concerning themselves. It also identifies some key conditions that appear essential to enable effective change and their application to the rural and remote health care sector. The key concept underpinning the creation of a caring culture of change is the development of individual and organisational Capability which can only occur with appropriate learning, and management processes and practices.

THE TURBULENT ENVIRONMENT

As we approach the dawn of the new millennium Australian workplaces are undergoing unprecedented overhauling in the face of the global economy. The environment in which organisations now find themselves has been called turbulent (Emery & Trist, 1965) which is characterised by rapid change in the way organisations operate, structure themselves, and relate to each. Over the past 15 years or so federal governments have responded with a variety of sweeping micro and macro economic reforms aimed at making Australia more competitive. Both public and private sector organisations have been forced to reconsider how they will survive and, as a result, have implemented wide-ranging new adaptive processes.

Ford (1998) has summarised the recent literature on organisational development towards the new millennium by articulating the key conceptual shifts that are required to develop the modern workplace. These are as follows:

<i>From</i>	<i>To</i>
Property Focus	Business and User Focus
Internal Focus	Customer Focus
Rigidity	Adaptation
Traditional Work Practice	Dynamic Work Organisation
Functional Divisions	Integration and Cohesion
Individuals	Self-Managing Teams and Networks
Designated Areas	Shared Learning Spaces
Functional Skilling	Open Learning
Off the job Training	Continuous Real Time Learning

Hard Copy	Soft Copy (paper vs paperless)
Technical Systems	Socio-Technical Systems
Waste Disposal	Conservation/Recycling
Environmental Health and Safety Tokenism	Environmental Health and Safety
	Innovation
Barriers to the Disabled	Disabled Friendly

Organisations have embraced networking and partnerships with other organisations; outsourcing; quality and customer focus; effective industrial relations; the shift of organisational structures away from the traditional hierarchy; self-managing teams; multiskilling; competency-based training; the change of management structure and function; streamlining towards central organisational goals; and flexibility and rapid response.

Health care organisations have not been immune from this turbulence. In fact, like much of the public sector health has, since the early 1980's borne the brunt of financial improvement programs designed to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Confrontation with financial pressure and major organisational change has a considerable effect on organisational culture. Suddenly stability and security is threatened not only in terms of jobs, which is real enough, but in terms of having to adjust to new ways of working. There is a considerable literature about how people and organisations react to change that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it appears true that change does not come easily and that any change process has to be carefully managed to avoid the high levels of distress that result from a failure to take adequate care.

Maintaining a culture of caring in an adapting environment is a major management task. Recent lines of evidence (Hase, Malloch and Cairns, 1998; Hase and Davis, 1998) from organisations that have successfully managed enormous change suggest that there are some things that can be done to effectively adapt. These adaptive processes appear to be based on the need to make major paradigm shifts about the way in which we understand organisations, management and people.

CAPABILITY

The organising concept for these adaptive processes is Capability. Briefly, the idea of developing Capable people was developed in the United Kingdom in recognition of the need to transform British industry. More recently in Australia, we have been applying the idea to organisational capability. Capability has been described (Stephenson, 1992; 1996) as the capacity to:

- apply competencies to new situations rather than to just the familiar;
- be creative;
- work well in teams;
- know how to learn;

- have justified confidence in one's abilities; and
- take appropriate and effective action in a diverse and changing environment.

It is the combination of skills, knowledge, values and self-esteem which enables adaptation to change.

Two important issues relating to organisational culture arise from the development of Capable people and Capable organisations. These are the creation of a culture in which people can learn to develop these features of Capability and in which Capability can be allowed to be expressed. It is understanding how these conditions come about that requires important paradigm shifts in our beliefs about how people learn and about our management practices.

Traditional education and training, and management are primarily passive on the part of the recipient. The initiative is with the educator and the manager. Underpinning this is the belief that people need to have their learning organised for them to enable generalisation, and that they are best controlled. Contrary to this view is the belief that people can make sense of the world themselves and that they can initiate, in other words they can be Capable. A culture of caring is concerned with creating a high quality of working life which comes from empowering people through the elements of Capability described above.

In practical terms the development of Capable people is reflected in concepts such as Action Learning, Learner Managed Learning (Graves, 1993), the idea of the Learning Organisation (Argiris and Schon, 1978; 1996), and Work Based Learning (Hase, 1998; Stephenson, 1993). The enabling of Capability is reflected in leadership which according to Long (1998, p4):

“...seem more likely to be able to adapt to changes in organisational structure and, in fact to concentrate more on enabling people to perform than on controlling people.”

Recent research undertaken with a number of Australian organisations undergoing major change has shown that there is an increasing awareness being translated into action of the need to embrace many aspects of Capability.

MANAGING THE CHANGING ORGANISATION

This research which has involved case studies of a diverse range of public and private and sector organisations which display a number of characteristics which are summarised below. A more complete description of the research and of Capability can be found in Hase, Malloch and Cairns (1998).

- i. Recognition by all levels of staff of the enormous complexity and ongoing nature of organisational change and development that affects all levels of the organisation. This recognition involves an appropriate commitment of time, energy and resources.

- ii. A CEO who unambiguously supports a vision of the future consistent with many of the elements of Capability. This support means that resistance can be overcome and that innovators and ‘champions for change’ could thrive.
- iii. Organisations that adapt well have a number of champions whose role is to consistently lead, motivate, actively support and remind others of the vision and the direction of change. These people might undertake innovative or strategic change projects. Again they serve as paradigm pioneers.
- iv. Skilled leaders (rather than ‘managers’) who have an excellent grasp of the ‘soft’ or people-oriented skills associated with leadership. This finding is consistent with other literature including the Karpin Report that suggests Australia needs to improve leadership/management training. Leaders also have the capacity to manage the complexity of change and its effects on people.
- v. Humans find change difficult and threatening, preferring instead certainty and predictability. Thus, we have found that providing a supportive environment helps people adapt thereby overcoming resistance to change, whilst encouraging the learning of new skills and taking of risks.
- vi. Working in flatter rather than hierarchical structures in which the focus of teamwork or even self-managing teams empowers people, enables them to learn effectively, increases ownership of organisational purpose, increases communication, and improves quality of working life. In the organisations we have investigated there is a strong recognition that teams enable rapid adaptation to changing circumstances. Teams learn faster and more efficiently than individuals.
- vii. Adequate reward systems that provide for the intrinsic and extrinsic needs of people. Intrinsic rewards are seen as being actively involved in decisions about work, having access to the right information, and training opportunities: these issues largely centre on feelings of empowerment. Extrinsic rewards, such as financial and other benefits are often articulated in an enterprise bargaining agreement.
- viii. Members of the organisation feel that individual elements (such as being valued and encouraging self-esteem) are embedded in the organisation's operations with a resultant perception of real empowerment being evident to all. People want to feel that their abilities are recognised and used.
- ix. Along with modern agreements, adaptable organisations also have good workplace policies and practices that emphasise collaboration and partnerships. These policies guide and support the practices of sound human relations.
- x. Effective communication is an almost universal priority for any organisation. Changing organisations seem to have the capacity to ensure effective communication throughout the whole organisation. Clearly this is helped by teams and flatter management structures, and a culture in which people are valued with good leadership. Nonetheless fundamental effects of good communication on a person’s sense of ownership of organisational goals, quality

of working life, commitment, and capability, cannot be stressed enough. Effective, clear, free flowing and timely communication is critical to an organisation's level of flexibility, and coordination.

- xi. The capacity to harvest, organise, distribute and develop knowledge through processes that have become known as the 'learning organisation' seems to be a key factor in an organisation's capacity to manoeuvre. Most changing and highly responsive organisations we have looked at vary in the extent to which they could be called learning organisations but most have some commitment to the concept, realising its value.
- xii. Performance evaluation which is perceived by staff to be carried out clearly and equitably.
- xiii. The provision of time and resources for staff learning and development.

CONCLUSION

Capability is a holistic concept that places a new perspective on managing change and on developing a Capable workforce. In addition, it is about providing a high quality of working life for people by empowering them. A culture of caring promotes the development and the expression of human capacity which increases self-esteem and self-worth, potential antidotes to stress in a turbulent environment.

However, enabling Capability requires Capable leaders who have the skills to facilitate learning, build self-confidence, lead teams, trust, not be afraid of creativity, and take calculated risks. It also requires management systems that are not bureaucratic but based on the needs of people and the development of a Capable workforce.

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