Change Management Strategies for High-Performing VET Organisations

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Introduction

This paper demonstrates that, at a time of considerable change within the vocational education and training (VET) sector, some VET managers involved in Framing the Future projects are using sophisticated change management strategies to effect organisational change. The change management strategies include creating a readiness for change, overcoming resistance, developing political support and sustaining momentum for the changes. The use of change management strategies leads to ongoing benefits from involvement in Framing the Future projects, particularly enabling organisations to become high-performing. High-performing organisations are characterised by ‘creativity, innovation, flexibility and competitiveness’ (BCA, 2000, p.1).

Framing the Future is a major staff development initiative of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), designed to support the implementation of the National Training Framework (NTF). Since 1997 over 20,000 VET practitioners have participated in the program. The program was renamed Reframing the Future in 2001.

Methodology

The research that informs this paper is drawn from two recent reports. Firstly, the paper draws on the research in High-skilled High-performing VET (Mitchell & Young, 2001). The aim of the study was to provide a strategic planning approach for change management and staff development activities, to build the capacity of the vocational education and training (VET) sector, to support the achievement of a fully integrated national training system.

The methodology for the project involved an analysis of the international literature and current VET research on change management and staff development, interviews with the full range of VET stakeholders from States and Territories, public and private RTOs and other representative organisations, from key decision makers to front-line delivery staff; the widespread dissemination of a Discussion Paper, as the basis for focus groups around Australia and an email survey; and the convening of nine focus groups in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Hobart, attended by 102 participants.

Secondly, the paper draws on Evidence of High-skilled VET Practitioners and High-performing VET Organisations (Mitchell & Wood, 2001). This study reports on research conducted on the long-term impacts of projects funded by Framing the Future in 1999 and 2000.

Using twenty four case studies and the results of interviews and an extensive survey, the report provides evidence of high-skilled VET practitioners and high-performing VET organisations who ensure that their involvement in Framing the Future projects leads to long-term gains, particularly in support of the implementation of the NTF. The study also provides evidence of the ways in which VET organisations use their high-performing characteristics to bring about long-term change, through participation in the staff development program Framing the Future.

Background

Set out below is the case for VET organisations needing to be high-performing and the role for change management strategies if VET organisations are to become high-performing.
The need for high-performing VET organisations

The VET sector is inextricably linked to the forces that impact on VET industry clients, such as globalisation, new forms of business alliances and the rapid adoption of information and communication technologies. Dr Ken Moss, in the Business Council of Australia’s report on workplace reform (BCA, 2000), recently set out a range of questions and challenges facing Australia; a set of challenges that the VET sector needs to assist industry to meet. He also provides a description of high-performing enterprises:

How can Australian enterprises grasp and create new opportunities emerging from globalisation, technological change and the knowledge economy? How can we create leading, high-performance workplaces that are characterised by creativity, innovation, flexibility and competitiveness? Workplaces where people choose to work and give freely of their energies and feel a sense of achievement, satisfaction, individual purpose and security. Where there is synergy between personal missions and work challenges, and organisational achievement. And where the workplace sense of community contributes to social cohesion. (p.1)

Recent researchers (Waterhouse et al, 1999; Marginson, 2000; Robinson, 2000) argue that VET providers cannot stand still and watch while other enterprises respond to globalisation and other forces. Waterhouse et al (1999) suggest that VET providers need to meet the same challenges faced by their organisational clients:

Diversity and creativity is increasingly required of VET in meeting the requirement of organisations to nurture employees with high appetite for new learning and making contribution within empowered teams working in a flexible environment - individual and collective competence is sought. VET providers are faced with similar challenges, in respect of their staff, as applies to the individuals and organisations which they serve. (in ANTA, 2001)

Enterprises are under pressure to respond to a wide range of forces such as globalisation and e-commerce. The resulting organisational change produces a fluid and challenging environment for the implementation of the National Training Framework (NTF), as the NTF requires robust relationships between VET providers and enterprise clients of VET, both of whom are undergoing change. Hence, extensive and ongoing change management is required within both enterprises and VET organisations.

If VET organisations are themselves to become high-performing firms, so that they can assist their enterprise clients to become high-performing, they will need to review the practices that may have suited a protected Australian market for VET, as prevailed before the introduction of a competitive training market, and to develop new practices. This is a change management challenge.

Most TAFE Institutes, in contrast to most private VET providers, are faced not only with responding to the pressures that emerged in the late 1990s; they also need to continually critique and refine organisational structures and staffing cohorts that were established before the introduction of the NTF. Thomke (in Marginson, 2000, p.12) suggests that most organisations fail at innovation because it requires a departure from old organisational routines and design knowledge. The pressure on TAFE Institutes in the late 1990s to respond to a rapidly changing external environment, while at the same time changing internally themselves, requires skilled and flexible staff and capable managers.

Waterhouse et al (1999), Marginson (2000) and others identify organisational trends emerging in the late 1990s that can be expected to impact on VET organisations. These trends have change management implications for VET organisations that strive to become high-performing. The trends include organisations outsourcing work that is not core business; a reduced number of permanent staff and increased numbers of casual staff and short-term consultants; the increased use of teams; and improvements in IT infrastructure, to enable staff to become competent in the use of information and communications technologies.
The need for change management

Change management is briefly defined as the deliberate use of strategies to manage change within an organisation, to suit the particular organisation’s context and the type of change required. While there are different approaches to change management, such as the planned and the emergent approaches, to undertake change management requires a conscious, deliberate choice of strategies (Burnes, 1996, p.173), even if the chosen strategy is to use experimentation and continuous adaptation to changing circumstances.

Cummins and Worley (1997, p.153) note that contemporary approaches to change management aim at creating visions and desired futures, gaining political support for them and managing the transition of the organisation toward them. Cummins and Worley (1997, p.168) suggest that change agents must carry out five kinds of activities when planning and implementing changes:

- Creating readiness for change and overcoming resistance to change
- Creating a vision, by articulating a compelling reason for the change
- Developing political support for the change
- Managing the transition of the organisation from its current state to the desired state
- Sustaining momentum for the changes so they are carried to completion.

In comparison to these five activities, Kotter (1996), another leading change management theorist, provides an alternative eight-stage model for producing change in organisations:

- Establishing a sense of urgency
- Creating the guiding coalition
- Developing a vision and strategy
- Communicating the change vision
- Empowering broad-based action
- Generating short-term wins
- Consolidating gains and producing more change
- Anchoring new approaches in the culture.

These change management models provide a general framework from which to analyse the actions of VET practitioners managing Framing the Future projects.

In the context of the National Training Framework, managing change creates many new challenges for managers in VET. While it is sensible to make use of all personnel in organising change (Marginson, 2000, p.12), Viljoen (1997) considers that managers are ‘the custodians of change’ and that a ‘key leadership role is to initiate and orchestrate change processes within the context of the strategic needs of the organisation.’ (p.114) Hence, the primary responsibility for change management in VET falls to the managers in the sector. Burnes (1996) argues that

> Whatever particular form change takes and whatever objectives it seeks to achieve, organisations cannot expect to achieve success unless those responsible for managing it understand the different approaches on offer and can match them to their circumstances and preferences. (p.173)

Harris et al (2000a) believe that VET managers are reactive, not proactive, in managing change, evidenced, for them, by what they consider to be the lack of planning for staff development in VET. However, the following case studies provide an insight into VET organisations in which managers are actively involved in managing change and are positively affecting the move to providing training under the National Training Framework.
**Findings**

Following are key findings about change management strategies used by participants in Framing the Future projects in three case studies.

**Case study: Northern Territory University**

For participants at the Northern Territory University, involvement in the Framing the Future projects was generally positive. As shown below, learning and development were encouraged and this facilitative approach enabled participants to meet the challenges of implementing the National Training Framework, beyond the finish of the Framing the Future project. Change management strategies used to assist this organisational change were a key to the effectiveness of the projects in 1999 and 2000.

The Northern Territory University (NTU) is a dual sector institution with 14,000 students overall and 10,000 students as part of the TAFE sector, twenty per cent of whom are indigenous. The University teaches across regional and remote areas of the Northern Territory at Tennant Creek, Jabiru, Katherine and Nhulunbuy as well as in Darwin, with this broad geographical area creating many challenges for the institution on a day-to-day basis.

For Antoine Barnaart, Pro Vice-Chancellor of the TAFE sector of NTU, Framing the Future has been a successful strategy to assist staff in meeting the challenges of implementing the National Training Framework within their organisation. During 1999 and 2000, NTU ran five Framing the Future projects concentrating on fashion industry training, agricultural training and tourism and hospitality. While many of the impacts of the projects are localised to those who participated, Antoine has increasingly found that the knowledge and expertise that the participants gain is spreading out to other people within the organisation.

For Antoine Barnaart, the key to the success of the Framing the Future projects lies in sound management:

> There needs to be a strong administrative framework backing up the projects as well as the opportunity for good mentoring and support for the project participants.

Part of Antoine Barnaart’s role at NTU is in coordinating staff professional development activities across the organisation. As a result, he was able to ensure that a staff member from his office provided administrative support for the Framing the Future projects that were conducted in 1999, 2000 and 2001. This enabled project participants to concentrate on the issues and challenges to be addressed as part of implementing the NTF.

Antoine Barnaart’s office also provided mentoring for Framing the Future participants. Because the office coordinated the range of projects each year, they were able to provide participants with advice and support based on a sound understanding of Framing the Future and the work-based learning methodology it championed.

In each project Antoine Barnaart believes that two types of learning take place. There is the ‘technical learning’ where participants develop certain skills such as how to apply Recognition of Prior Learning or how to assess certain competencies within Training Packages. In addition, there is ‘professional learning’ where participants are encouraged to develop their team building skills, their communication skills and their time management and project management skills. Through this ‘professional learning’, Antoine has seen individuals gain confidence and motivation.

Because of the evidence of these types of learning, Antoine Barnaart believes that Framing the Future can have a real impact on VET practitioners and organisations across Australia. Instead of spending the money allocated to research and development in VET on large projects, the small, individual project approach taken by Framing the Future ensures the involvement of grass-roots VET practitioners who are able to structure the projects to really meet their needs. Antoine Barnaart concludes:

> Framing the Future shows staff that a lot can be achieved even with limited resources. As more people are involved in Framing the Future projects, there will be more evidence of the impacts that it is having on VET practitioners and organisations throughout Australia.
The long-term impacts of the Framing the Future projects conducted by Northern Territory University—particularly the knowledge and expertise gained—are increasingly spreading out to other people within the organisation. These significant flow-on effects will be strengthened as more people participate in subsequent Framing the Future projects and share their experiences with colleagues within and across organisations. These flow-on effects are a powerful aid to change management.

At NTU, the skills used by key managers in providing support and guidance to the Framing the Future project participants contributed to the effectiveness of the staff development. The change management skills included:

- Created readiness for change by encouraging professional development activities
- Managed organisational transition from its current state to the desired state.

**Case study: Issues of Access for the Deaf Education Network**

Framing the Future activities undertaken by the Deaf Education Network in Sydney saw VET practitioners customising the Certificate II in Information Technology to suit deaf and hearing impaired learners. By permanently improving communication in the organisation, the Framing the Future project had a positive long-term impact on this training provider.

The Deaf Education Network is a small community-based provider in suburban Sydney that offers accredited training to deaf and hearing impaired adult learners. A large number of the teachers are themselves deaf or hearing impaired and communicate via Auslan (Australian Sign Language), hence implementing Training Packages presents teachers at DEN with many challenges. As Auslan has no written mode, English is viewed as a second language, increasing the difficulties of interpreting and delivering Training Packages.

In 1999, the Deaf Education Network conducted two Framing the Future projects. The first project aimed to assist trainers to develop appropriate strategies to customise the Certificate II in Information Technology for deaf and hearing impaired learners. When the group started the project, however, they realised that this was too big an aim as the language used in the Training Package needed to be modified to allow deaf and hearing impaired teachers and learners to access it more easily. Consequently, the second project they conducted in 1999 helped to demystify Training Packages by developing ‘Plain English’ glossaries of the language used in the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.

Framing the Future offered a unique opportunity for the organisation to focus on professional development. Workbased action learning is ideal for the teachers at the Deaf Education Network who work best in small groups and who assess information visually and experientially. One participant noted that:

> The regular team meetings have been overwhelmingly successful, breaking down individual isolation and resulting in the sharing of ideas, resources, strategies and information about students.

This professional interaction had an important impact on the project participants at the time the project was conducted and, according to their final report, it also reinforced to the organisation the importance of continuing professional development.

Sue-Anne Randazzo from the Deaf Education Network considers that the most important long-term impact of their involvement in Framing the Future was the increase in effective communication within the organisation:

> Through the project, participants realised that they needed time to communicate their needs to managers and they set out to develop appropriate and effective lines of communication that had not previously existed.

This increased emphasis on regular, effective communication is still part of the organisation today, months after the Framing the Future project ended.

The experiences of the Deaf Education Network provide an example of an organisation faced
with considerable challenges in implementing the National Training Framework. The key to
overcoming the impediments faced by individuals within the organisation was communication,
which presented real challenges for deaf and hearing impaired teachers and learners. Framing
the Future encouraged the development of more effective communication across all levels within
the organisation. This case study reinforces the importance of effective, regular and appropriate
communication strategies as a means of managing change, particularly as a means of ‘creating a
readiness for change and overcoming resistance to change’ (Cummins and Worley, 1997).

The following change management skills were used to realise long-term benefits within the Deaf
Education Network:

- Overcame resistance and created readiness for change through addressing various
  impediments to change
- Managed the organisation’s transition to the desired state by developing better
  communication strategies.

**Case study: Brisbane Institute of TAFE**

Sandra Lawrence and Judy Maggiolo from the Brisbane Institute of TAFE ‘never quite know
what issues’ they are going to uncover when they embark on a Framing the Future project.
Through allowing staff to openly discuss the issues they are facing, Framing the Future has
helped Brisbane Institute of TAFE to make the transition to providing training under Training
Packages. The following case study shows that making this transition is difficult, but that through
confronting and managing change much has been achieved.

Sandra Lawrence and Judy Maggiolo have been involved in Framing the Future projects at Brisbane
Institute of TAFE since 1998. For them Framing the Future provides mechanisms to assist staff at Brisbane
Institute to make the difficult transition from the old training system to the National Training Framework.
Sandra Lawrence explains:

> We really get into our projects and we use them as a means of challenging people, of forcing issues
> and of getting participants to face the realities of the VET environment.

Brisbane Institute is a large Institute made up of three campuses: Grovelly which focuses on Horticulture
and Animal Sciences; Ithaca which focuses on Construction and Light Manufacturing; and Gateway which
is the oldest trade college in Brisbane. Sandra Lawrence and Judy Maggiolo believe that there are many
issues facing the Institute ranging from funding matters to a sense amongst teachers and trainers that under
the National Training Framework their roles are changing and their responsibilities are shifting. A
particular challenge for teachers and trainers, in Judy Maggiolo’s view, is the change from the prescriptive
nature of training under curriculum to the more flexible approach encouraged under Training Packages.

In this environment, Framing the Future has been critical in facilitating change and has had many long-term
impacts across the Institute. The projects conducted in 1999 and 2000 were made up of staff from different
levels within the organisation, including teachers, managers and administrative staff. This has meant that
staff are becoming more aware of the roles of their colleagues at different levels and are establishing
cross-structural communication.

Gathering staff at different levels has also been used as a vehicle to generate debate and discussion about
challenges and issues. This has, at times, required expert facilitation from Judy Maggiolo and Sandra
Lawrence, but because of their on-going involvement with Framing the Future they feel confident that this
approach is successful. Judy Maggiolo and Sandra Lawrence believe that:

> Framing the Future is not about going out and smelling the roses. We really adopt a warts and all
> approach to the projects and as such we really uncover the issues that participants are facing. We are
> able to get a good balance in our projects between skills development and discussion of systems issues
> and we feel strongly that without Framing the Future, the difficulties of transition would have been
> more pronounced.
Change management is not an easy undertaking, demonstrated by the experiences of VET practitioners from Brisbane Institute. Teachers and trainers at the Institute are faced with changing roles and responsibilities and need to be guided and supported in order to make the transition necessary to the National Training Framework. Successful transition relies heavily on communication strategies and, through the Framing the Future project, individuals within the Institute were able to discuss and debate change with colleagues at different levels within the organisation. To ensure that this debate and discussion remained focused and productive, VET practitioners within Brisbane Institute relied on some of the strategies identified by Kotter (1996) – namely developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, and empowering broad-based action. The use of these strategies ensures that the Framing the Future project will have impacts over the long-term.

In addition to these strategies, VET practitioners were able to challenge staff to face change head-on through the use of the following range of change management skills:

- Challenged staff to overcome the difficulties and problems associated with change
- Uncovered underlying critical issues and impediments to change by generating open discussion and debate
- Provided expert facilitation in order to guide debate and discussion.

Discussion

While recognising that considerable change needs to take place within VET sector organisations for them to optimally respond to the National Training Framework and the changing external environment, the case studies presented in this paper provide good practice examples of the change management skills of some VET practitioners. These practitioners, who in both cases have positions of management, are the ‘custodians of change’ and have key leadership roles in ‘initiating and orchestrating change processes within the context of the strategic needs of their organisations (Viljoen, 1997, p. 114). These highly skilled professionals also ensure that the benefits of undertaking a Framing the Future project continue to be experienced, long after the project concludes.

Finally, the use of change management strategies by VET practitioners is assisting VET organisations to become ‘high-performing’, that is, to be characterised by ‘creativity, innovation, flexibility and competitiveness’ (BCA, 2000, p.1).
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