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TRUST AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT NEEDS: AN AUSTRALIAN WATERFRONT STUDY

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**TRUST AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT NEEDS:
AN AUSTRALIAN WATERFRONT STUDY**

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Trust and Communication Development Needs: An Australian Waterfront Study

Abstract

This paper examines how the findings of a wider research effort, designed to examine the effect of change processes on the waterfront in Fremantle, Western Australia, gave rise to another research project. This second research project is described in full as an action research. The paper presents the objectives, content method and outcomes as well as the processes followed throughout the project. The Enterprise Communication Committee was not created for the action research program but it was able to define both trust and communication. A home produced mechanism for developing trust and communication was constructed together with a commitment to carry on action learning within the organisation. This is the waterfront - with no history of development and no exposure to theory. The group members identified a need, produced a set of working definitions, a methodology and an enthusiastic commitment to action.

Key Words: *Waterfront reform, Enterprise Based Agreement, Action research, Trust building, Communication, Grounded Theory.*

Trust and Communication Development Needs: An Australian Waterfront Study

The Development Setting

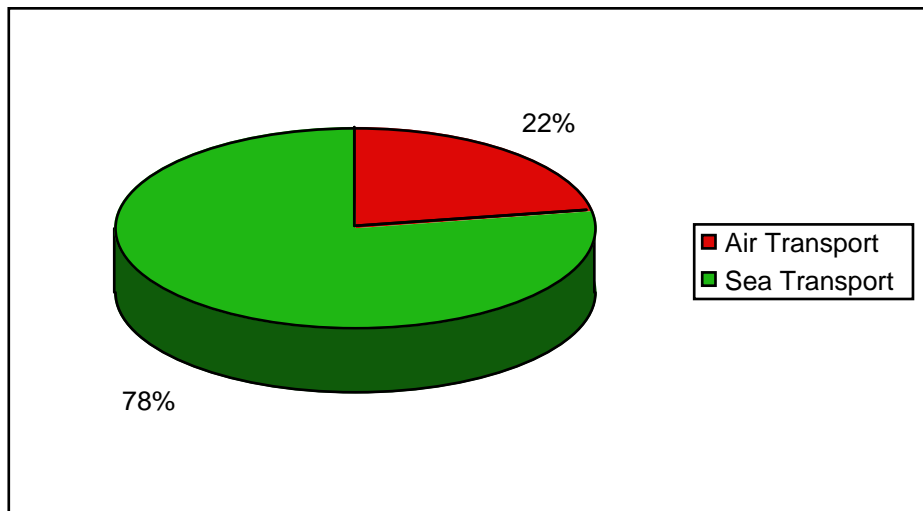
When change is viewed as a journey (Marshak 1993) research efforts to examine the path taken require that the journey process be reflected in the methodology and the outcomes. In the collaborative research which is the focus of this paper, the grounded methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967) used for the research design allowed data to emerge that produced some surprises for the research team. Not least of these was the emphasis placed on two values, trust and communication as latent development needs for both workers and managers. It was the significance and strength of opinion evidenced on these issues that prompted the research team to extend the study to include an action research intervention (Chisholm and Eldon 1993). The aim was to leave the organisation with a self-generated and practical methodology for trust-building and supportive communication. This was a risky undertaking. First, the original brief, while it did include providing the organisation with a research instrument that it could use in the future, it did not specify direct intervention. Secondly, the role of workers in this setting as designers of solutions to behavioural problems was new and untested. Traditionally there had been no scope for such problem solving development (Sheridan 1994). The study began soon after radical changes were introduced to the workplace arrangements. These changes threw the workforce and management headlong into the challenge of facing such problems and seeking appropriate solutions. There was a greater likelihood of failure here than in the 'normal' organisation where an element of risk was part of the culture. Because of the formative stage of worker-management relations, failure might have had destructive consequences.

The Study

The case organisation was Conaust Ltd (Fremantle, Western Australia), a member of the multinational P&O shipping group. The 1991 Enterprise Based Agreement (EBA) was introduced by Conaust in Fremantle as part of an Australia-wide waterfront industry reform process that culminated in the change from industry to enterprise based management in the stevedoring industry. The waterfront, which had been under critical scrutiny for several decades, like the docks in the British environment, became a target for government supported radical reform. This was characterised by the shift from Industry to Enterprise control in Australia, and the abolition of the Labour Dock Scheme in Britain (Turnbull and Weston 1993; Turnbull 1992; Finney 1990; Inter-State Commission 1989).

There are several distinguishing features about the history of the waterfront both in Australia and Britain that present unusual challenges for employee relations and management development (Turnbull and Weston 1993; Turnbull 1992; Curtain and Matthews 1990). Stevedoring has always been a key part of the value chain of the waterfront task. Stevedores (wharfies and dockers) plan and execute the loading and unloading of all kinds of cargo and containers from a wide variety of ships. Table I shows the importance of sea transport to Australia (Bureau of Industry Economics 1995).

Table I
Importance of Sea Transport



Considering that Australia is a nation whose inheritance was founded on sea trade and stevedoring, there is little suggestion in its history and infrastructure, of an industry that grew and matured in terms of management and employee relationships. There were several reasons for this. First, and importantly, there was union controlled industry-based management, in the Australian case the powerful Waterfront Workers Federation (WWF), now known as the Maritime Union of Australia and often simply referred to as 'the union'. Secondly, there was the waterfront employers' strategy of casualism to meet the considerable variation in supply and demand for shipping services. These two together produced an unusual situation. As part of industry regulation, the WWF controlled the register of employees allowed to work on the docks. It also controlled recruitment and selection, staffing levels, allocation of labour, safety training and discipline. (The story provided in one of the research interviews of the wharfie who was sacked by management and sent by the union to be his own replacement seemed typical of union labour management strategy). Employers, through casualism, indicated that there was no continuous investment in wharfies. Not only could wharfies be sent to other employers, often competitors, but they may never become part of a consolidated team or workforce for one employer. When asked about pre-EBA loyalty there was an unhesitating

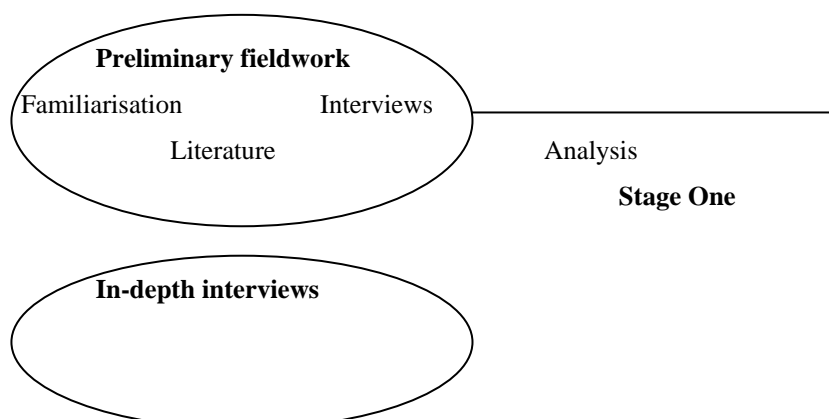
reply from wharfies that loyalty was to the union and to the wharfie society. The union, then, was the wharfies' voice (Whitfield, Marginson and Brown 1994).

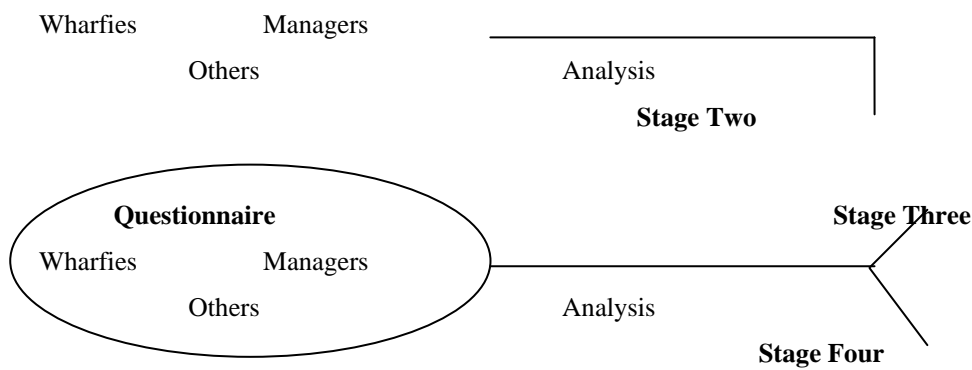
The ability of the union to speak and act for wharfies was supported by the literature (Deery et al 1994; Sheridan 1994; Griffiths 1989). Also well documented was the war-like situation between the union and employers spanning over a century and becoming a way of life and a well-reinforced culture. The ebb and flow of waterfront economics put either the union or the employer in a power situation, each taking full advantage when the market was in its favour. Somehow within this, wharfies seemed not to have figured, at least in the sense of giving voice to their own work-related needs and preferences. Given such a history of being automatically excluded from much of the planning of their own working lives, becoming proficient at diagnosing needs 'from the shop floor' would be a difficult yet necessary exercise.

Data collection and analysis

A qualitative study was designed and the fieldwork was conducted with the help and collaboration of Conaust Ltd (Fremantle). The organisation shared an interest with the research team to gather perceptions from inside the organisation about change as it was happening around the EBA. The research was designed in three stages as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research Design





The first stage comprised familiarisation with the research context, the chief aims being to determine what was relevant and to become familiar with the language and other modes of expression that would make waterfront respondents feel comfortable. Site visits, interviews with waterfront staff, Conaust senior staff, union officials and others (such as the former Prime Minister Mr Hawke) served to produce a sound basis for questioning. In stage two, in-depth interviews were held with thirteen managers, fortyseven wharfies and seven others. Following analysis of these, a questionnaire was administered with thirtyeight questions of which thirteen were open ended, eight were scaled and paired in terms of importance and degree, and the rest were stand alone scaled questions. The quantitative survey was designed to cross check the selection of categories of apparent importance. The fourth stage was an action research designed to start off the process of developing a methodology for trust-building and supportive communication. The action research which is the subject of this paper, emerged from the findings.

Data analysis was helped by three electronic aids, NUD.IST™ (Richards 1996), MORE™ (Baron et al 1990) and COPE™ (Jones 1995; Eden 1991). NUD.IST™ allowed indexing, retrieval and taxonomic manipulation of the data. MORE™ was excellent for presenting the taxonomy in outline form and COPE™ was useful throughout the research by helping make sense of categories and connections through the production of cognitive maps.

Pre action research findings

Three areas were identified, *background* to and history of the EBA, *tangibles* and *intangibles*.

Across the three areas, dominant categories emerged, as below.

trust building	rejuvenate the workforce	productivity
communication	unions	change processes
safety	site consultative committee	lifestyle
multiskilling	bosses	responsibility
training	organisational culture	the client role
machinery	government	future

An expanded set of data on some of the intangible categories was gathered by a follow-up questionnaire. Though there was evidence that things were not as they had been prior to the reform there were two categories that emerged as very important yet not being done as well as desired. They were trust-building and communication, see Tables II and III. The need to examine these two categories together was often borne out in the anecdotal evidence of the frequently made observations around the workplace that if trust is to be developed it is dependent on communication, but effective communication is equally dependent on well established trust in a relationship.

Table II

The Importance of Being Able to Trust Management in What they Say and Do

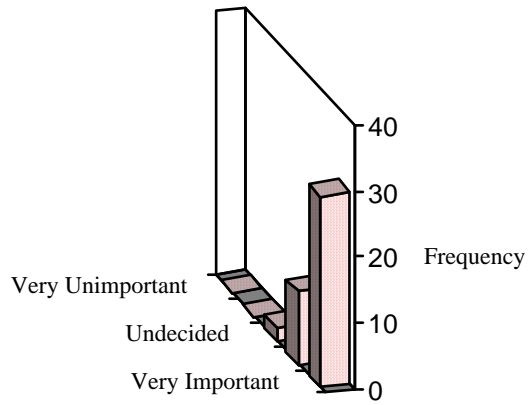
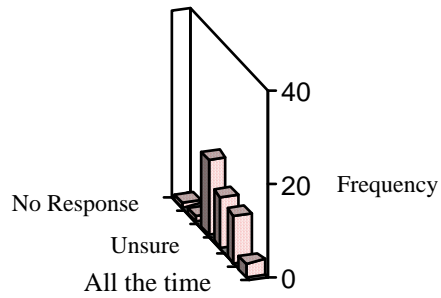


Table III

I [Can] Trust Management To Do What They Say They Will Do



Action Research

Action research (Greenwood et al 1994; Bion 1961) has been promoted as being able to accommodate theory whilst allowing participatory goal oriented activity. De Cock (1994) points out that within the positivist paradigm the relationship between theory and action research practice would be more difficult to defend. The constructivist paradigm with its paradigmic loyalty to the interpretivist framework provided an epistemologically sound basis for both the wider study and the action research stage (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The enquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language of the social actors.(Schwandt 1994)

Bateson (1972:320) claims that all qualitative researchers are philosophers in that “universal sense in which all human beings ... are guided by highly abstract principles”. In this study, an unexpected outcome of another larger process, a team of managers and workers from the stevedoring industry generated data telling them that there were two values both prized and sought after: trust and communication. These two values were promoted with greater strength of feeling and significance than other more tangible aspects of the workplace such as training, multiskilling or remuneration. Managers and workers were willing to join in an action research intervention to further study development needs on both sides.

One of the earliest data collection activities in the research was monitoring the Site Consultative Committee (SCC). Towards the end of the study this body had been replaced by the Enterprise Communications Committee (ECC). The principal difference between the two bodies being that in the case of the SCC there was no provision for union contribution to the process and in the newly formed ECC there was. In the traditional waterfront setting there had been a complete absence of opportunity for managers and wharfies to develop methodologies for relationship building. In the course of the various meetings held with management during

the research exercise an understanding developed that the research team were also a resource which could assist in addressing some of the identified needs. The action research undertaken was useful because there was an explicit commitment for the researchers to lead the way in producing methodologies that could be used independently by the organisation. Here was one concrete example that was put into immediate use.

Action research: objectives

The overall objectives set for the project were:

To examine how ECC members see trust and communication happening in the workplace.

To examine how trust and communication behaviour can be improved.

Put in place a self designed and implemented monitoring mechanism.

Action research phases

These phases followed the typical action research plan (Moch et al 1994).

Diagnosis

Indications of concerns about trust and communication emerged all the way through each of the stages.

Second level diagnosis supported the initial findings.

Action Planning

An "in case of need" action plan was incorporated into the research arrangements with the company.

As a result of a presentation to managers and a communication to wharfies, suggestions were made to proceed with an action research intervention.

A newly formed "Communications Group", superseding a Site Consultative Committee (constructed as a communication device for the EBA) accepted the opportunity offered by the researchers.

Action Taking

Session one with the communications group, confirmed the diagnosis and agreement that a participative action plan was needed and identified communicating supportively as the study topic for session two.

Session two focussed on communicating supportively.

Session three produced the definitions of trust and communication. The mechanism for future use by the group was designed. An action plan for assessing participating observer role was also introduced.

Findings

Definitions of trust and communication were produced by the group.

A mechanism was designed and implemented by the group for future use without outside facilitation.

Evaluating

The members of the group evaluated how the objectives had been met.

They participated in evaluating the participating observer role.

Assessed how and when they could make use of what was produced.

Evaluated the participating observer role.

It is important to note that the action research study was offered on a voluntary basis (Moch et al 1994). Throughout the entire project there was an emphasis placed on voluntary participation and choice. When a group with a formal identity in the workplace was involved, steps were taken to allow individuals to exercise a choice in the matter. There were times when individuals exercised that choice by saying “No” to the invitation to be involved. Consistent with this policy, the offer to work with the Enterprise Communications Committee was first discussed with management and then made in writing to the ECC. Plans to go ahead with the action research were always dependent on the agreement by ECC members.

The mix of management and workers presented a new learning arrangement. There were two factors which enhanced the project. These were the dedication to the reform process espoused by all members of the group and the importance placed on trust and communication (T&C). Because of the group’s relative newness to management development programmes the “T&C” activities followed a structured workshop design.

Internal arrangement meant that over the three sessions there was some interchange of personnel but there was always a group of eight or nine people coming from the same areas of the workforce, typically three managers and six workers. This arrangement called for careful assessment of the situation at the outset. People moving in and out of the group needed to be informed and efforts made to avoid any sense of alienation that could arise.

Outline Of Sessions

Each session was structured with its own objectives, (content) method and outcomes.

Session One Objectives

At the end of session one ECC members would be able to:

- Examine and state the objectives of the action research program.

- Devise the framework for discussing communications (Whetton and Cameron 1991)

Prepare for discussion on communication attributes.

Session One Method - content (1 hour)

Activity one: Set ground rules including the agreement to communicate what was happening to colleagues back in the workplace or office.

Present for validation and any modification, the objectives of the action research and the role of the researcher as participant observer.

Activity two: Use the cognitive mapping process to convey data collected on trust and communication in the wider study.

Using this stimulus (each person) will write about either trust or communication and present their work to the group. The group will construct cognitive maps (Buzan 1993) using the written data.

Activity three: Four topics for exploring trust and communication will be discussed and evaluated. ECC members will choose one of these topics for further study.

Activity four: Action research objectives (see activity one) will be revisited and reconfirmed.

ECC members will be asked to become participant observers in their own work setting, observing communication and trust to be reported in session three.

Session One Outcomes

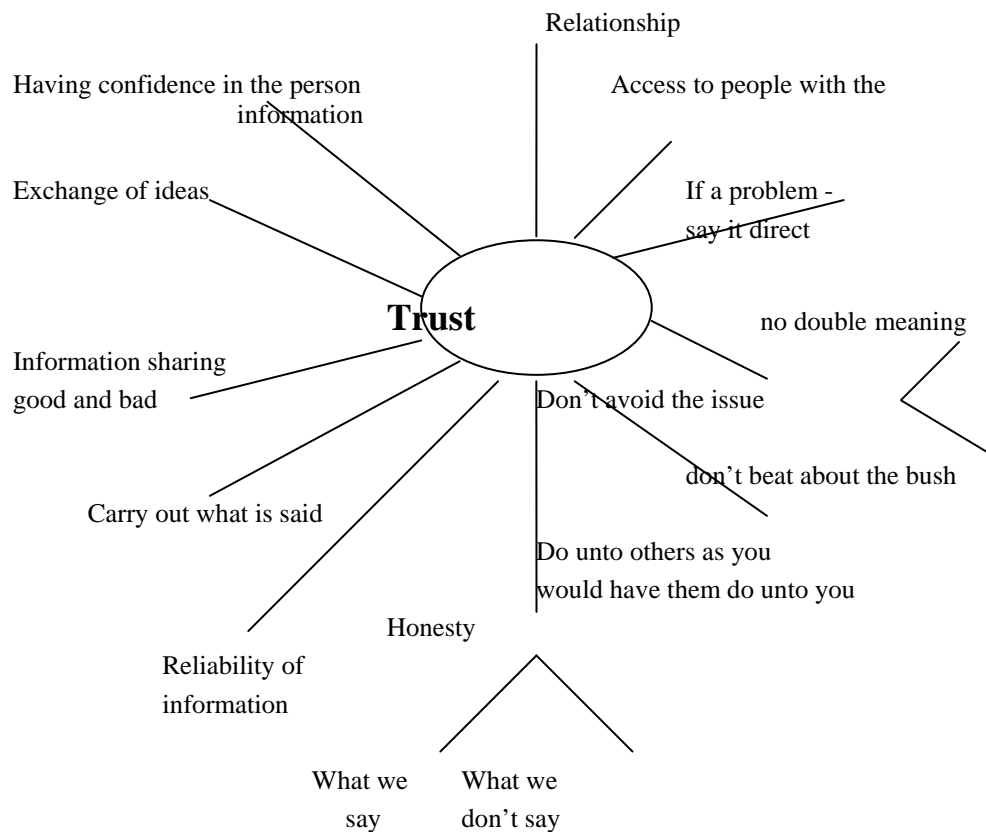
At the conclusion of session one the following was achieved:

Ratification of the objectives for the course.

ECC members familiarised themselves with the data already gathered from the workforce in the wider study on the categories trust and communication.

Diagnostic information was provided for workforce colleagues enabling continuity in future sessions in the case of replacements. (See Figure 2 Working Towards a Definition of Trust).

Figure 2: Working Towards a Definition of Trust



Communicating supportively was chosen as the study topic for the next session.

ECC members committed themselves to gathering data to be used later in the project.

Session Two Objectives

At the end of session two, ECC members would be able to:

Describe the basics of the Whetten and Cameron (1991) supportive communication model.

Discuss the eight most important attributes of communicating supportively as ranked by the group.

Discuss and identify examples from the workplace of positive and negative instances of supportive communication.

Discuss and decide on one area where wharfies can improve.

Discuss and decide on one area where managers can improve.

Take back to the workplace the task of identifying and commenting on examples of defensiveness and disconfirmation.

Bring to the next session examples of high trust behaviours.

Session Two Method - content (1 hour)

Activity one: Revisit the communication model with free-flowing interruption and discussion.

Activity two: The group will draw on examples from the workplace to illustrate various attributes of communicating supportively.

Activity three: Sub groups will prioritise supportive communication attributes.

Activity four: ECC members will be asked to select an area of communication where workers and managers respectively can improve.

Activity five: ECC members will be asked to make observations and report back in session three, on examples of defensiveness and disconfirmation in the workplace.

Session Two Outcomes

At the conclusion of session two the following was achieved:

ECC members identified examples in the workplace of the eight attributes of communicating supportively.

ECC members ranked these same attributes in order of priority for their workplace.

Prioritised List of Elements for Communicating Supportively

**with two elements combined to make a total of 7.*

1. Listening
2. Problem Oriented
3. Descriptive / Disjunctive *
4. Specific
5. Validates
6. Congruent
7. Owned

ECC members identified need to achieve better ways of giving and receiving communication about equipment..

ECC members committed themselves to identifying and commenting on examples of defensiveness and disconfirmation in communication as well as trust behaviours in the workplace.

Session Three Objectives

By the end of session three ECC members will:

Produce definitions of Trust and Communication

Design a mechanism for monitoring behaviours.

Provide an action plan (Tyson 1989)

Reflect and comment on the methodology and outcomes of the action research programme.

Session Three Method - content (1 hour)

Activity one: Brainstorm examples of defensiveness and disconfirmation in communication. Discuss and revise the signs for both.

Activity two: Brainstorm example of trust. Revisit the data developed in mind maps (session one). Make use of the mind maps (Buzan 1993) to produce the definitions of trust and communication.

Activity three: Develop a mechanism for tackling trust building and defensive or disconfirming communication in the workplace.

Activity four: Present Action Plan (Tyson 1989) as an evaluative process and have members apply this process to the session with focus on the participating observer role.

Activity five: Evaluating the stated objectives for the entire action research.

Session Three Outcomes

At the conclusion of session three the following was achieved:

Produced definitions of trust and communication.

Developed a mechanism for dealing with trust and communication in the workplace.

Made use of the action plan with a commitment to make use of it in the day to day situations in the workplace.

Evaluated the group's efforts to address the stated objectives for this project.

Process - Method

A structured process was designed for the three-session action research intervention. Ideas from Whetten and Cameron (1991) and Tyson (1989) were used to present the Enterprise Communication Committee members with a concrete set of terms and activities within which to model their own emerging ideas.

Whetten and Cameron's (1991) model for supportive communication was presented in the spirit of a stimulus for ideas, otherwise as a shell to be filled with the attributes identified by the ECC as it developed ideas and examples. Tyson's (1989) framework on group process and dynamics was adapted for the participants to begin discriminating behaviours in group meetings. This was considered to be an essential part of the programme in both form and substance. The researcher took the role of a participant observer and by the third session felt confident enough to involve the group in the process.

Figure 3: Card for Action Plan

<u>Action Plan (adapted from Tyson's model)</u>	
Arrival:	Are members chatting, milling around, getting seated or are they hanging back? Are some members forming their own little groups?

	Are some members being shut out?
Organisation:	What is the interest level?
	Is the group dominated or railroaded (pressure groups)?
	What is the climate? chaotic? hostile? warm? supportive? productive?
	energetic?
Task:	Is attention focussed or scattered?
	Are records being kept?
	Is information being collected? shared? processed? evaluated?
Maintenance:	Are members supporting or valuing each other?
	Are dissenters or minorities being listened to?
	Is the group moving towards solutions? Moving towards crisis?
	Returning to stability?

Examples of comments included:

- Arrival** “members arrived around the same time and were comfortably chatting until the chairman indicated that the meeting needed to push ahead - and in less time than allowed. Responses were immediate and cooperative”.
- Organisation** “members are organising around the task immediately. Keen to ‘get on with it’ and also to begin discussing homework. No evidence of any ground rules being set.”
- Task** “a goal oriented approach with many task rules in evidence such as clarification, discussion, keeping on track. At the outset there was a sense of ‘we know how to communicate [others] need this more than we do’. This attitude was somewhat diluted with the urgency of the goal. Following the problem solving activity, interest and ownership of the task changed dramatically.
- Maintenance** “One member tired, seems disillusioned. It transpires that he has been “double heading” probably working some sixteen to eighteen hours. Others support and value him. He takes a short rest and his involvement and motivation is markedly improved. During the discussion on whether descriptive and conjunctive communication are really one, the group was cohesive and decisive”

As a value-added and to celebrate the need of, and use for, authentic contributions, a laminated card was produced by the researchers as in Figure 3, for the final session. Members demonstrated that this was a useful tool by making ready use of the laminated card during the session even though the same information was also available on sheets of paper.

The process was designed for facilitator redundancy in the sense of input and content rather than monitoring and process. It was important that the final outcomes of the project encompass three elements. There should be *willingness* on the part of the group to make use of the mechanism they had produced. The mechanism had to be logistically *manageable* within the constraints of both time and personnel. The process also had to be *achievable* in terms of the

skills required for its productive use. The sessions were built into the regular meeting times set for the group. Before the first session the facilitator was invited to remain with the group for the entire meeting process. By session two and three there was evidence that members were both willing and able to implement what they examined and produced in the study sessions. There was ample evidence of efforts during the meeting process to draw on what 'we were just doing with ...'. The unsolicited efforts of the group to do this was a clear indication that what was being offered to the group was manageable and achievable with lessening intervention. It also gave a clear signal that the group was willing to implement what they were learning and developing for themselves. That ECC members were already using the work they produced was heartening and augured well for continuing benefits in terms of development.

Process Outcomes

The aim was to leave the Enterprise Communications Committee with a workable methodology for two areas, trust and communication, identified by the research as important and not currently being done too well. This process left the ECC members with tangible results in the form of their definitions and the mechanism they had developed and used in the course of the project. The definition for trust read *Having faith in the reliability of individuals / groups and the equipment*. The definition for communication was *A two way system between individuals/groups with a full understanding of what is being communicated*.

The self-styled mechanism for use in the workplace was produced by examining the processes that had worked effectively for the group in their study sessions. The elements of the mechanism were, (1) collecting data by making use of the *collective memory*, (2) Collating the data by *brainstorming* and recording, (3) Analysing the data in *small group discussions*, (4) Presenting the findings of each group in the form of *solution/statements* and (5) *Collectively*

combining and adjusting these findings to arrive at a conclusion that all members of the group own.

Because this action research was a journey there was difficulty in imposing criterion-based evaluation. Other indicators needed to be sought to ascertain the value of the session. More natural indicators were readily evident. These included almost immediate use of the terminology to the point of being incorporated into their conversations sometimes with causal, positive, negative, morally unacceptable overtones.

In examining the stated overall objectives, participants agreed that objectives for the project had indeed been achieved. This had been done by means of discussion, use of concrete examples from the workplace and applying a process for arriving at consensus, particularly when producing the definitions and the mechanism. In examining the content of the program group members commented on the importance of this type of learning program. A readiness on the part of group members to identify a range of situations where things learnt in the program could be applied in the workplace was a strong positive outcome signalling the practical benefits of the research for the participants.

Conclusion

A learner oriented experience in which the learner is a principal contributor to setting objectives and content engenders a high level of motivation and ultimately ownership of the outcomes. The action research programme proved to be a valuable addition to the change process. It is too early to tell how successful the experience has been. From the research team's point of view, the generative aim was realised. From the group's point of view a participatory, goal-oriented activity was a useful and productive exercise. It enabled the group members to explore the opportunities available to them to develop the two values that they themselves

nominated as of importance and requiring improvement. In this particular action research effort the team completed the exercise with a sense of empowerment and purpose with a clear commitment to the results of their research effort.

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