Organisational change within DPI: Minimising (t)errors and seizing opportunities?

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Abstract

When government priorities change, departmental organisations like the Department of Primary Industries, Queensland (DPI) go through a transition phase characterised by uncertainty. This uncertainty affects staff morale and reduces productivity. Like other agency staff, extension officers need to realise that change is a natural event and that uncertainty is a normal phase in any change process. Extension officers should consider these changes as an opportunity to enhance their profession as a whole. They may even want to consider taking on a facilitating role to help manage organisational change. Extension officers need to take every opportunity to better understand changing client needs. This is the only way for extension to remain relevant.

Introduction

Like many of my colleagues in DPI, I wonder about what extension officers will be doing in ten years time. While on the one hand it is not uncommon to hear rumours about the demise of "extension" within the DPI, it is just as frequent to hear about the bright future and increasing responsibilities "extension officers working with communities" will have in regional Queensland! While rumours spread and concerns rise, one wonders about such as contradicting statement. What type of extension are we talking about? What exactly is at stake here? Are we talking about new extension roles because of internal and external contextual changes? Are we talking about having to establish new business networks because of gradual shifts in priorities? If change is about all of the above, what processes does DPI need to put in place for both staff and clients to adjust?

In order to find an answer to this question, I have divided my investigations into three parts. In the first part I tried to capture the main changes taking place within the Department, the impact this has on staff, the reasons why this may be occurring and why this is an important issue. Part One is hence a situation analysis. I then tried to explore the opportunities contextual changes may bring to extensionists, and what future roles they may be asked to play (Part Two). Undertaking such a futuring exercise is difficult considering some of the biases, which influence our current opinions, and the assumptions we unconsciously make as a result. It nevertheless helps identify important incongruencies between strategic, managerial and operational levels within DPI. Although these incongruencies may be transitional they help explain some of the frustrations and angst staff experience. These findings helped me unearth a series of recommendations summarised in Part Three. The main recommendation puts the onus on extension staff to use their training and experience to pro-actively seek, develop and maintain enhanced communication lines within their own (DPI) hierarchy as well as with external clients (existing or new).

Part 1 — Situational analysis

What are the latest institutional shifts within DPI?

In DPI's new corporate plan (2000-2005), Dr Warren Hoey highlighted the latest institutional shifts to be from:

- industry development to food and fibre chain development
- a supply orientation to a market demand orientation
- a production focus to a consumer focus
- enterprise development to community development

Extension officers are thus challenging farmers to think beyond the farm gate and to shed their "producer only" identity to take on the dual responsibilities of being "producers of food and fibre products" and "natural resource managers ".

At the same time, extension officers are also encouraged to form new partnerships with a wider range of community members instead of working with farmers only. This "whole of government, whole of community " approach is another new policy to address regional issues in a more coherent and effective way. Extension officers are hence developing and fostering new (vertical) networks along supply chains while simultaneously expanding (horizontal) partnerships with non-agricultural community actors (Murdoch 2001: 407).

As an illustration, in the inland region of the Burnett, extension officers working for the newly created Agency for Food and fibre Sciences (AFFS) within DPI are currently involved in areas as varied and distinct as:

- Urban and rural waste management,
- Information Technologies and Community needs
- Computer assisted technical assistance
- Supply chain analysis for new industries (and/or trying to add value to existing ones)
- Technical expertise to inform local and state governments in the contentious process of water and land allocation
- Fresh food markets and regional cuisine
- Creating think tanks for regional development, job creation and alternative land tenure systems,

What are the effects on individual extension officers?

This can be quite confusing for the officers themselves, for their traditional clients (farmers) who do not get the same technical services they were used to, and for those who generally want to understand what extension is. Whether you are a regional development officer, an information officer, or a program extension officer, your role becomes so varied it is sometimes hard to describe, hard to evaluate and even harder to promote. An additional difficulty is that the pace of (policy) change is escalating, leaving shorter and shorter periods for staff and clients to adjust.

It is not surprising then that extension officers are perceived as poor communicators and promoters of their skills because they can no longer explain what extension is in simple terms (Coutts, 2001:8, Van Beek 2001:11). Only those who have direct interaction with field officers know the wide spectrum of services offered.

It is quite paradoxical then that while some of the strengths of extensionists are in:

- Helping individuals and community groups understand the concepts and processes associated with change management and the cycle of Continuous Improvement and Innovation (Clarke et al 2001).
- Helping the same individuals and communities define the strategic issues that affect their quality of life and their businesses.
- And thus develop people's ability to make informed and critical decisions, and to act upon them.

...That extension officers haven't taken the opportunity to apply the same principles to rationalise the changes and uncertainties they are experiencing as a profession.

This could be because they:

- Feel more at ease concentrating on their (field) work rather than interacting with senior management.
- Feel powerless individually.
- Do not know how their job contributes to new priorities.
- Are becoming cynical about any new organisational change.

- Feel that the energy involved in reporting, evaluating and promoting their work increasingly curtails their ability to deliver on the ground

And/or all of the above!

Why is this an issue?

Like any other profession, extension officers have the choice to avoid the issue altogether or to take it as a constructive challenge and an opportunity for clarification, improved dialogue, renewal, creativity and strategic innovation. My position is obviously the latter. By taking up the challenge extension officers have a tremendous platform to:

- Better promote their track records,
- Be more at peace with who they are and what they stand for
- Be more transparent about what they do,
- Be confident about what they can offer and more realistic about their limitations
- And thus further the praxis and theories behind extension.

But there are also four important factors (or professional core values) that could influence our attitude to change:

1. Ethics: How can we dare train people about managing change if we are unable to cope with the changes within our own organisation?
2. Pragmatism: What is the use of all our training in empowerment, critical analysis, evaluation, change management, information systems and organisational changes if we cannot use it to our own benefit?
3. Ownership of the problem: We own the problem and the solution, nobody-else does. Nobody will improve the profile of extension officers on their behalf!
4. Pro-activity: Complaining and having a siege or victim mentality about how ungrateful the organisation is will get us nowhere. Putting forward constructive suggestions ourselves will test our ability to remain relevant.

Part 2 — So how can we remain relevant in the future?

Using critical analysis frameworks (Brookfield 1987 quoted in Macadam, 2000:587) we cannot engage in any professional introspection (let alone a futuring exercise) without first asking ourselves: *What is our capacity to sense and appreciate the significance of the assumptions, prejudices and biases we bring to a situation such as the current organisational change that we are experiencing within DPI?*

For example:

- How objective are we that from outside, DPI might be seen as over-resourced compared to education and health or small businesses, especially with reducing producer numbers?
- How realistic are we to recognise that some agricultural industries are sunset industries and are still attracting resources to the detriment of new high tech or promising enterprises because of the fact that they have long established networks (Meyer-Stamer 1995:8)?
- How pragmatic are we / how idealistic are we about the vision we bring to the industry? What is our capacity to imagine alternatives? Does it matter?

Addressing these questions may help us identify future opportunities for extension.

Extension has often been associated with carrying out government policy (Van Beek, 2001:10, Vanclay and Lawrence 1995:131) and/or making science into practice (T. Campbell pers com May 2001). Extension however is much broader than that. Nowadays extension officers pride themselves in their capacity to mobilise social capital, and create synergies. They have become experts at working at the interface of various professions, cultures, organisations, and/or in multi-disciplinary teams.

If one views extension as information (and skill) brokerage, there is no doubt that demand for strategic information, and context analysis is very much on the increase. Whether we become cyberspace extension officers (Eastdown quoted in Coutts, 2001: 7) or start working with consumer groups, accessing and synthesising information will be a skill much thought after.

Food safety and environmental issues have recently fostered a renewed connectedness between people and food, and people and landscapes (Hinrich C., 2000:1). This puts pressure on food producers and land managers as well as food processors. It also puts pressure on extension officers to help re-establish dialogue and understanding between all parties involved. Extension officers are thus looking at urban media, social events and other initiatives to help restore, enhance and promote the image of agriculture domestically and abroad.

What are the main limitations constraining extension officers' ability to engage in the changes ahead?

1. Incongruencies between current strategic-allocative and operational levels.
Within DPI most extension staff are already contracted out to deliver specific milestones. Operational staff are thus limited in their ability to embark on any changes until additional resources are made available or until they finish their externally funded projects. They will not be able to embark on new business alliances until they have formed new business relationships (K. Heit pers com 2001).

2. Leadership
As in any organisation staff become increasingly weary of applying new policies especially when a) these policies are designed by others, and b) officers are the ones at the coal face, interacting directly with the public. Changes will only be operational when leaders face not only their staff, but also the public and clients, and take responsibility for explaining the reasons and rationale behind the changes. For changes to occur you need both transformational leaders (with a vision) and transactional ones (those who can make it happen in reality by clarifying roles and tasks as well as solving problems) (Church et al, 1996:23).

3. Like rural communities, the extension world is not a homogenous professional community. Extension officers are varied and have different personalities and core values. In Queensland, most of the technical knowledge lies with the older generation of extension officers while the younger generation is more familiar with facilitation processes and change theories. This difference in perspective and knowledge can lead to internal tensions. The people with the technical knowledge base often question for instance content free facilitation services (Lew Markey pers com 2001). Changes in extension work will hence have different implications to different people and to different generations.

4. Like farmers, individual extension officers belong to different subcultures, networks and affinity groups and play different roles in these groups (Vanclay F and Lawrence G, 1995:86).
Although some of these roles and positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there are situations where loyalties are torn. Individuals feel caught between what farmers/clients define as a priority area and what the organisation/client decides is high priority! Murray (2001:525) has also observed this phenomenon when evaluating projects. She found that "workers' accountability to the policy maker, employer and funding body becomes more and more difficult to establish. This is a mounting issue in the DPI where (despite management reassurance) external-funding agencies' goals are not perceived as being yet aligned with new state agency directions. Officers find they have to juggle and play "*real politik*" and change their discourse depending who they are addressing. They vary their language depending on whether they are reporting to:

- the external funding agencies (which fund their salary and operating budget),
- the state agency administration (to whom they belong administratively and are also funded by)
- or rural communities (with whom they directly interact, live, work and socialise).

What would be the cost(s) of extension officers not accepting to change?

There are two obvious costs:

- Seeing rurality and extension (once again) re-configured by forces emanating from urban centres only instead of being a joint construction between rural and urban areas (Murdoch, 2000, 3).
- Transmitting negative impressions to our clients and/or managers because of our own inability to cope with contextual change thus losing our credibility as change agents or facilitators of change.

And a third one much more insidious:

- The human cost and lower productivity associated with burn out, stress, anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, low self-esteem, low staff morale, resignations and loss of talents.

How strong is our motivation to embark on new policies for extension?

One could assume that motivation to defend the usefulness and future relevance of extension is strong. But this might vary. Young officers might feel they do not have the political support and network for directly influencing senior managers or funding agencies. They might believe that their opportunities for innovating and accessing funds are limited (Fell 2001:508). They might feel powerless or scared to initiate interaction with senior managers. On the other hand extension officers who are very specialised in their field (and who may have experienced countless organisational changes) might feel uncertain about how relevant their expertise will be to the new government priorities. They might thus embark on a wait and see attitude. Stages of life, and experience with previous departmental changes (often up to 10 years) will thus alter the level of motivation to change.

Part 3 — Recommendations

From the situation analysis above and using a Continuous Improvement and Innovation approach (Clarke 2001), there seem to be six critical success factors (CFS) which could be instrumental in helping agricultural extension help itself. These six recommendations meet the criteria of potentially having tremendous impact while being within extension officers' individual ability to act.

1. The first key element is for extension officers to try to rationalise and articulate to managers what they are experiencing. They need to be open about their concerns rather than suppressing them. Some individuals have started doing this through their own line of management or informally with their peers. Others have recently taken their concerns directly to senior managers.

2. The extension community and management will have to recognise that change has different (negative, positive and neutral) outcomes for different individuals. This will vary depending on role, age, and personality. This will also vary depending on where you stand in terms of project funding.

3. Extension officers must be pro active in identifying where their skills and networks will be needed, instead of focusing on the reverse.

4. Extension officers need to consider enlarging their circle of influence and networks. They may want to specifically target senior managers, private and public funding bodies and the media. This is about managing upwards and externally rather than inwards. One of the outcomes might be that extension officers might have to accept to share the re-definition of extension with these stakeholders (Van Beek 2001).

5. As Staudt sternly remarks, without incentives for creativity and risk-taking, old patterns continue (1996:192) and reorganisation becomes a ritual, especially in public agencies (1996:197). Officers must thus lead the way in adopting an innovation and change culture. This implies accepting and being proud of the diversity within our ranks as well as praising colleagues for venturing into new and unknown areas instead of criticising them.

Finally:

6. Looking at literature on organisational change (Dubois, 1996:361), industrial policies, and rural sociology; there seems to be a consensus that most landslide economic and social changes still defy logic and are hardly predictable. Instead rural communities "seem to have a life of their own and rural

areas seem to follow their own stubborn logic of change" (Murdoch 2000, 2). The same applies to organisations. The future of extension with DPI will therefore depend just as much on extension officers having the appropriate attitudes and processes to manage change rather than about the specific content and directions of the changes to come.

How can this be done?

Extension officers will have to learn to:

- Manage upwards and externally.
  Officers might want to invite senior managers, influential media personalities at workshops so as to engage in a critical dialogue about the future of extension in a changing environment.

- Manage change as a process and an opportunity rather than as a constraint.
  Having internal workshops on how to manage change within the organisation or within work teams is crucial. It should be everybody's responsibility to make sure these workshops take place.

- Explore the processes and the contexts behind creativity and innovation.
  Nurture a new ideas culture rather than a can do attitude. Otherwise we will only do what we feel comfortable with and we will never stretch ourselves.

Conclusion

Rural sociologists who take a constructivist position often remind us agriculture is merely a socio-political construction governed by socio-political, cultural and economic forces (Vanclay and Lawrence, 1998:20). Within that school of thought, every phenomenon of work and employment (a market, a firm, an institution, an organisation, a rule, an agreement, a technique) is constructed by actors (Dubois 1996: 361). This implies agriculture, the sustainability of agricultural systems and agricultural extension will always be viewed differently depending on the majority perceptions and dominant social ethics of the time (Owen et al 2000). Such an approach is daunting for those who believe science and extension are increasingly becoming the art of interpretation and anticipation rather than the transfer of rigorously applied scientific principles and techniques (Robinson et al 2001). For others, it is quite empowering as it implies that every actor within a network can have an effect on the system and on how the system is perceived, or performs (Staudt K., 1996:191). This implies extension officers should feel confident they could play an influential role within the agency they belong to as well as the external context and wider networks they operate.

To conclude and to clarify the title of this article, Staudt writes reorganisations are fraught with terrors and opportunities (Selznick in Staudt 1996:197). In DPI, let's see if we/extension officers can minimise the (t)errors and seize the opportunities!

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