

LEADERS NEED TO GO FISHING FOR CHANGE

Richard Searle www.searleburke.com richard@searleburke.com

Change takes organisation. I witnessed this myself a few years ago when I did some work with senior management of the Marine Park Authority which looks after the Great Barrier Reef. They had a big problem. Research showed that recreational fishing by up to one million Queenslanders across the two and a half thousand kilometre reef was threatening extinction of its native and exotic fish species.

The Authority wanted to extend its regulatory control from five percent to twenty five percent of the reef and to restrict fishing in order to restore spawning grounds. The then Federal Liberal Government and State Labor Government were not impressed (“you want us to upset a million voters?”). Market research offered even less comfort – many respondents were antagonistic to this “government bureaucracy” and some even accused them of being foreigners from the World Bank, apparently confused by the World Heritage Listing of the reef!

The core of the Authorities’ change strategy was to use dialogue – hundreds and hundreds of town hall meetings were held throughout Queensland over a two year period. The whole organisation was mobilized into campaign mode. Critical research was conducted in conjunction with the local University. Friends were courted in both the State and Federal Governments. Allies were cultivated among the local tourism industry, and respected environmental organisations and research institutions, and the local media. Two

years later the Authority received a very different reception in the halls of power.

Many strategic change initiatives in corporations fail to deliver on their promise. Senior managers often blame it on flawed “strategic thinking” or not enough attention to “strategy execution”. These may indeed be important but my experience is that the one essential ingredient which is often missing is appropriate leadership.

The problem with conventional strategy approaches is that they treat change as largely technical. Some change is basically technical, but you hardly need a strategy to deal with most of it. Strategy (and leadership) is really needed for what Ron Heifetz calls the “adaptive challenges”, the important ones for which we don’t have ready-made solutions and which will require a whole range of players to learn something new, or change, or take responsibility for solving. In some organisations the more that the challenges facing them are adaptive, the more they bash out their performance reviews, process improvements and six sigma programs to look busy and allay their anxiety.

At the same time, many senior managers can get inspired to do their leadership differently, to change their organisations for the better and to be creative about their problems, but over time they feel beaten down by the resistance and the system. Sometimes they lose their inspiration and enthusiasm for leadership itself or revert to a flawed command and control technique instead. These managers often have been too naïve, and not strategic or organised enough about their leadership initiatives, to get any traction with their change agendas. Leadership work and Strategy work sit very well together, but neither seems to flourish and bear lasting fruit without the other.

With any sustainable strategic change initiative in an organisation there will be an implicit leadership process and dialogue. The early step in this process is to build a core group and win the support of key parties who can see the possibility of change and who are willing to Commit to it. The next step is to get this group along with other key stakeholders who make up the system to start to Listen genuinely to each other. Then it is possible to get these parties to be willing to Learn from each other. The next step is to get the parties to Work Together on key issues and possible solutions. At this stage Change becomes possible – change in attitudes, practices, behaviours, positions, norms, beliefs and even values. Now parties can start to move forward together Creating new approaches and solutions to the challenge. The final stage is to gain a firm Commitment to fully realizing the new future.

But this leadership dialogue is not enough – there also needs to be a lot of organising and strategy work. Allies need to be found or won over. Critics need to be engaged, negotiations conducted with interested and influential parties, and strategies developed for dealing with die-hard opponents. If we have authority or access to authority we need to use it wisely to encourage the best environment for change, to communicate information, to challenge pre-existing norms and values, to keep focusing attention on the need for change and the prize, and to craft a decision making process which offers the best chance of mobilizing the greatest number of supporters. Whether we do or don't have much formal authority we need to build our informal authority, and to find ways of challenging powerful supporters of the status quo in ways which are influential rather than reactivating.

Inspiration and aspiration are good – organisation is critical!

