

Creativity, Complexity and Organisation in the DPI&F Ecology

J. Vargese & G. Ching

Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPI&F)

The Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPI&F) exists within an agricultural ecology. CEO, Jim Varghese will discuss how the Department actively uses generative dialogue to enhance inquiry, discovery and collaboration to build social capital and deliver its strategic priorities. The presentation will illustrate how social capital is grounded in the innovative three frame methodology of achieving excellent performance through strategic relationships and alignment to deliver public value. Case applications referred to in the presentation will include:

- The Gladstone Oil Spill;
- Review of the shark safety program;
- Community development and leadership at Lockhart River.

These will highlight the collaboration to develop commitments of multiple stakeholders and leverage insight to support public values, solve problems of collective action and indeed social capital.

Introduction

The Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPI&F) exists within an agricultural ecology. With ecology studying the interactions between living organisms and their environment, agricultural ecology examines the ecology of agricultural systems and the natural resources required to sustain them. Within this context, I will discuss how the Department actively uses generative dialogue to enhance inquiry, discovery and collaboration to build social capital and deliver its strategic priorities as existing within an agricultural ecology. The presentation will illustrate how social capital is grounded in the innovative three frame methodology of achieving excellent performance through strategic relationships and alignment. I will present three distinct stories to illustrate the DPI&F approach and successes to sustaining social and natural capital. These are:

- The Gladstone Oil Spill;
- Review of the shark safety program;
- Community development and leadership at Lockhart River.

These stories will highlight the collaboration to develop commitments of multiple stakeholders and leverage insight to support social capital, solve problems through collective action and build sustainable, productive relationships.

Harvard University Professor, Mark Moore Moore provides the idea of a strategic triangle with the intersection of legitimacy and support, public value and

organisational capabilities as essential in strategic management in Government.

He challenges public managers to imagine and articulate a vision of public value that can command legitimacy and support and is operationally doable in the domain for which they have responsibility.

This framework helps us as a public manager to connect what we believe is valuable and requires public resources, with improved ways of understanding our public value and how we connect with them.

In all of these cases, I have employed the principals of The Three Frames approach as a “human living system” to support social and natural capital development and to maximise public value. They illustrate the norms, networks and relationships that enable:

- Information flows
- Norms of reciprocity (mutual aid) that connect people who are diverse
- Collective action
- Broader identities and solidarity that help translate an "I" perspective into a "we" perspective.

So what is the three frames?

The three frames

Consistent with the ideas of social capital, this approach combines the three interacting learning frames:

- The relationship frame aims to build and sustain a safe, trusting, non-threatening environment in which people feel able to share their thoughts, feelings and values honestly with others;
- The performance frame looks at what we want to achieve and provides a clear and measurable picture of what we want and need to achieve to meet our goals; and
- The alignment frame looks at the relationship between or within an organisation and its members and identifies any blockages that are stopping them from achieving the goals as set out in the performance frame.

In applying the three frames, I use dialogue-based learning circles to gather together people with diverse interests to share information, ideas and perspective, build constructive relationships on behalf of achieving high performance results. These “critical friends” may include representatives from industry, local, Commonwealth and State Government, the private sector and the tertiary sector etc. and staff from my Department.

There are sometimes complementarities and tensions within these dialogues but they provide the space for questioning and reflection to help reach some answers together.

The ground rules for engagement in these dialogues, which support creating a safe and trusting environment include:

- We welcome multiple viewpoints and maximum interaction
- Our behaviours encourage co-operation with and acceptance of others
- We inquire, explore and learn about shared issues.

I support the idea of inquiry through dialogue and the work of pioneering leadership thinker Meg Wheatley who suggests:

“Invite in everyone who care to work on what’s possible. Know that creative solutions come from new connections. Be intrigued by the difference you hear and expect to be surprised.”

Wheatley (2001:1) introduces the notion of human living systems to create successful organizational change. She suggests that it is valuable to start with the assumption that people, like all life, are creative and good at change. Machines on the contrary cannot tolerate great variance and are established to run in certain environments. They have no flexibility or resiliency to deal with extraordinary levels of change. She argues that if you think of an organisation as a living system, then it has the capacity for great flexibility and resiliency and the ability to adapt, to change and to grow. She argues that once we stop treating organizations and people as machines, we move into the paradigm of living systems. They do not require to be engineered, tuned and repaired at a technical level without reference to its human and social context.

Stories

Story 1: The Gladstone Oil Spill

The first story I’d like to share to demonstrate these ideas at work is that of the Gladstone oil spill.

Seafood is considered an icon in Queensland, with the industry worth a total of \$xx on the domestic and export markets. When a tug boat collided with a bulk carrier during berthing operations at Gladstone Harbour just before midnight on 24 January, spilling about 25 tonnes of heavy fuel oil (bunker plus kerosene or diesel), DPI&F and other government partners took quick action to re-open markets to seafood from Gladstone Harbour to limit the immediate environmental impact on sensitive seagrasses and mangroves as well as local dolphins and dugong populations and the social implications for the local community.

The Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries, myself and the department’s Deputy Director-General Fisheries travelled to Gladstone to meet with local stakeholders in a Dialogue for Action forum to discuss an appropriate strategy to re-assure consumers and the community. Participants, from which Harvard University Mark Moore describes as the authorising environment to give legitimacy and support, included the Member for Gladstone, the Mayor of the City of Gladstone, chairman of Gladstone Shire, a representative from the Shire of Calliope and the Gladstone Port Authority.

After an insightful dialogue, the participants agreed to three key issues in developing an action plan:

- testing of seafood samples to ensure all fisheries products caught in Gladstone Harbour were safe to eat;
- an efficient and effective claims process for all affected businesses;
- a communication campaign to reassure the public that Queensland seafood was safe to eat.

While Queensland Transport managed the actual oil spill clean-up — about 4kmn wide and 20km long — the DPI&F-led Queensland Government Food Incident Response Group (FIRG) coordinated and managed a stringent sampling and laboratory-testing program for all commercial catches of prawns, crabs, finfish and scallops coming into Gladstone Harbour, as well as a targeted sampling program in the areas hardest hit by the spill. Live trout fishing operators were also targeted.

The logistics of coordinating the sampling program proved to be challenging. To ensure minimal impact on the industry, samples were collected from commercial operators in Gladstone almost as soon as they arrived in port. These samples then had to be appropriately packaged, tagged, and immediately sent to Brisbane for laboratory testing for tainting and oil contaminants to ensure they were suitable for sale. Commercial and recreational fishers were asked to avoid the area until tests confirmed all seafood was safe.

In total, laboratory tests on more than 100 samples during the first three weeks following the oil spill confirmed there was no evidence of contamination or tainting and that the seafood was safe to eat. There were also no confirmed reports of dead fish or birds.

In addition, the department, through FIRG, quickly introduced a communication strategy to inform the industry about the sampling program and its progress. An advertising campaign alerted the local community of the steps being taken and to reassure them of the quality of the area's seafood, while a wider communication campaign targeting key industry stakeholders both within and outside Queensland focussed on the quality of the State's seafood.

Thanks to the efficiency of the response from the commercial fishing industry and other stakeholders in the local area, and government agencies, all commercial fishers were fully operating as normal within xx days of the spill.

Story 2: Review of the shark safety program

The second story also relates to an issue of the natural ecology.

For the past 44 years, Queensland has had a Shark Safety Program in place to minimise the risk to beach swimmers from the threat of shark attack.

The effectiveness of the program was publicly questioned after the death of a 21-year-old Queensland girl at Amity Point on North Stradbroke Island, just off the Brisbane coastline, on 7 January 2006 — the first fatality from a shark attack on a protected beach in Queensland in more than four decades.

The Queensland Government and DPI&F, which manages the Shark Safety Program, responded quickly to the tragedy and initiated a state-wide review of the program.

The department first conducted a Dialogue for Action forum with key

stakeholders in March to discuss the program and issues impacting on it. Stakeholders representing six government agencies, environmental groups, Gold Coast City Council and Redlands Shire Council, CSIRO (for its maritime research knowledge), tourism bodies and surf lifesaving associations participated in the forum. Interstate counterpart, the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries also took part.

After the three hours of dialogue, all xx participants agreed that the forum was highly valuable in gathering collective and divergent views and appreciated the opportunity to come together as a group. They found a common ground and understanding of the challenges and what was possible to maintain an effective Shark Safety Program.

The review report found the Shark Safety Program was effective and offered swimmers the best available protection from shark attack. The report said while the netting and drum-line program had a minor impact on whales and other vulnerable species, the Government must make swimmer safety its priority.

To ensure swimmers were better educated about sharks and understood the practical steps for swimmer safety these initiatives were put in place:

- presenting swimmer safety information in such a way that it is suitable for use in schools;
- working even more closely with Surf Lifesaving Queensland in its education activities and with local government and tourism bodies;
- increasing advertising and community service announcements for swimmer safety, especially during holiday periods.

Story 3: Community development and leadership at Lockhart River

The last story I will share is one that I am particularly encouraged by and brings me great personal satisfaction. Unlike the two previous stories, it refers more to the human ecology and living systems of a community. It relates to my responsibility as the Government Champion for the Lockhart River community located more than 780 km north of Cairns with 800 residents. The Lockhart River community presents its own set of unique challenges, diversity and opportunities for creating social capital as a remote indigenous Queensland community. People here experience significant economic and social disadvantage.

As the Government champion, I knew that to be able to add value I needed to gain legitimacy and support with the community.

I achieved this through building key relationships and using dialogue-based Learning Circles for improved ways of shared understanding, learning and taking action together.

I worked on building trust and collaboration within the community as a foundation for action.

Since 2002, the Lockhart River Council, the community, representatives from the State and Federal governments have participated in regular Learning Circles.

From the very beginning, I was conscious of not following a trend of flying in, conducting a meeting, and flying out the same day.

Each time I visit, and I have visited the community on 12 different occasions, I stay a couple of days either camping at an outstation, such as Doti's Camp at Chillli Beach, or staying with the community. In essence the Learning Circles provide an opportunity for up to 80 people to sit together to discuss areas of concern, whether they be health, education, housing or justice.

This gives me time to share meals and engage in other daily activities that enable the community to get to know me as a person and allow me the opportunity to find out what they are thinking through numerous informal conversations.

These occur every three or four months. Importantly, they are not just events. Work continues in between the Learning Circles to ensure the conversations continue and agreed actions are taken. They have produced positive, tangible results in the community including:

- The development of the Lockhart River Community Plan;
- The creation of the Lockhart River Fishing company known as "Puchiwu", in a community where there is no history of small business;
- Providing local employment, for the first time at Lockhart River, seven new community houses are being built using local labour;
- The production of a CD called "Music of Lockhart" which is a mix of traditional, contemporary and church music.

While, I led these Learning Circles, the community with increased social cohesion now own them and insist that this is the way they want to engage with us. My colleague, Denise Hagan observes that there is renewed enthusiasm in the community for dealing with challenges as well as a reduction in conflict and criticism. It would suggest that the social capital created by the dialogues enhances the community in terms of its wellbeing, access to resources and ability to cope with the issues that face them.

Reflection

Each of these stories had a distinct complexity and challenge. They provide the practices and routines that engage people in learning and to find the courage to speak their truths. Dialogue through learning circles proved to be versatile, applicable at many levels and in all kinds of issues. The use of creative approaches grounded in dialogue and social and natural capital provided a way forward and productive, sustainable outcomes. These outcomes became the property of the groups and its communities rather than owned by individuals.

Beyond these examples, some 60? learning circles have been held in DPI&F as a primary method for how we do business. In fact, the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries, Tim Mulherrin, himself facilitates industry dialogues with examples including Cyclone Larry, the Fishing Industry and Sugar Cane SMUT.

They are also used for dialogues on individual staff and the Department's achievements as a review mechanism. Similarly, representatives of industry, across Government, academia are invited to participate in the dialogues to add to the richness of conversation and perspectives. This is unique and innovative approach to

the traditional performance management systems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the words of the Lockhart River community, I think, sum up the power of social and natural capital and the use of dialogue to nurture engagement and achieve results:

*“You-me working together, not standing alone.
You-me it’s up to us, we have got to help one another.
You-me I know we can do it.”*

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