

# **Mentoring Three Local Association Staff: Our Experiences With Being Integrative and Sometimes Innovative**

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**We report our experiences with an association of local service providers as we under took mentoring, capability development and cultural transformation (mentoring for short) of their three senior staff in their project facilitation skills, on top of their existing very good policy, management and project management skills. The aim of our intervention was to extend the driving and the success of their business strategy. Most, if not all, of the separate component parts that we use to be integrative in how we do our work in mentoring the three staff are well proven (not new). But we do claim that at least one way in which we combine the separate component parts, is in fact innovative. Specifically, the way we combine separate parts to make the link between inputs and outcomes achieved. The experiences reported are those relevant to the Systems Conference. Experiences related to other aspects of our work, are reported elsewhere.**

## **Introduction**

**W**e have experiences regarding our work with an association of local service providers as they make concrete steps towards closer cooperation with some of their main local stakeholders so that they, in fact, become partners.

We see these concrete steps towards closer cooperation as one of the early stages in the medium term process to successfully develop a local industrial cluster.

The association's core business since 1994 is implementing and managing projects that are largely about teaching technical skills. The project officers have very good project management skills.

In this paper we report on our experiences from our work with three senior fulltime association staff. The aim of our intervention was to extend the driving and the success of their business strategy by improving their project facilitation skills, on top of their existing very good policy, management and project management skills.

We see the project facilitation skills first, as the main building block and second, as the general framework for closer cooperation and increased value adding onto existing organizational tasks and activities.

Most, if not all, of the separate component parts that we use to be integrative in how we do our work in mentoring the three staff are well proven (not new).

But we do claim that at least one way in which we combine the separate component parts, is in fact innovative. Specifically, the way we combine separate parts to make the link between inputs and outcomes achieved. We usually call this

link the value adding onto existing organizational tasks and activities.

The experiences that we report in this paper are those relevant to the Systems Conference. Experiences related to other aspects of our work, like for example aspects directly related to improvements that could help increase local service provider wellbeing, are reported elsewhere.

The paper has two parts:

- A very brief outline of the context for our work with the three association staff.
- An outline of a few aspects of our experiences that are most relevant to the participants at the Systems Conference:
  1. Being Integrative. We use the project facilitation skills to integrate all aspects of our intervention.
  2. Being Innovative. We combine known separate parts in an innovative way to make the link between inputs and outcomes achieved. We usually name this link as value adding.
  3. Active listening as an all-pervasive process of interaction between the four of us (The three Division staff and my self).
  4. Active listening as a vehicle for improving project facilitation skills between the four of us.
  5. Value adding as the outcome from improving project facilitation skills.

### **The context for our work with the three association staff**

**I**n this section we outline the context of our work with the three staff. The aim of this section is to give the background and the context for our experiences in the next section. The main take home message from this context section is that the context within which we were interacting with the three staff is, and always has been, a very good working environment with high staff morale, in which all staff are strongly encouraged to be good project managers. In practice this environment can be divided into two parts:

- That part that is relatively stable, like for example salaries.
- Second, that part that is very dynamic, with significant opportunity to be proactive to unexpected opportunities, like for example to be offered extra funding from an unexpected source.

The main aspects of the context are:

1. The association of local service providers reported in this paper is the Townsville Division of General Practice. Its members are most of the General Practitioners who practice in Townsville. The Division has been in operation successfully since 1994. Its core activity to date has been largely about teaching technical skills to General Practitioners and to staff that work with the General Practitioners.

2. We now want to place the Division in such a position so that it will have an increasing role, along with a few other stakeholders, in being the main drivers of the success of our future industrial cluster. To date, most of the successful industrial clusters, both in Australia and overseas, have been in manufacturing industry. One of the next challenges for industrial clustering proponents, practitioners and researchers is the development of industrial clusters of organisations that are mainly service providers, rather than mainly manufacturers.
3. We want our Townsville cooperation between the Townsville Division of General Practice, the State Development Centre Townsville (which is part of the Department of State Development Trade and Innovation, Queensland) and the School of Business at James Cook University, to be at the forefront of these developments. When we started our work with the Division in mid 2005 our challenge was how do we help the Division to awaken itself to the realization of the extraordinary opportunity that it had within its grasp? And to do this without triggering the negative side effects that often come associated with such undertakings.
4. Some of the important aspects of why we felt that “the Division had an extraordinary opportunity within its grasp” are:
  - a. A well-established reputation of being a reliable organisation in the delivery of its core business.
  - b. A well structured and experienced governance structure that includes a Board of Directors, a CEO and an Operations Manager.
  - c. A recently established partnership arrangement with four other Regional Divisions of General Practice covering all of North Queensland to pursue projects of mutual interest.
  - d. A well-established and experienced local Regional Economic Development agency, the State Development Centre Townsville.
  - e. A well-established and experienced local Regional University, James Cook University.
5. From the start we acknowledged that our challenge to successfully develop a local industrial cluster was unlikely to succeed if we used a reductionist approach. Rather we started from our evidence from our observed reality that the combination of health and regional economic development was likely to be about the most complex system that we could have picked to work on. But, we were very lucky:
  - a. To have access to well developed human capital in the form of the appropriate combination of staff skills and staff experience and
  - b. To be operating in a work environment with the appropriate level of organisational flexibility, executive decision making and senior staff buy-in that got us to where we are now.
6. What really makes the work that we do in the Townsville Division of General Practice, different is that the Division’s relationships are maintained irrespective of the ‘Grant or Project’ funding, and that the relationships help us move

towards solutions as a team, providing mutual support as required, and picking up grant and project funding as it becomes available, to progress already identified and agreed objectives.

7. The literature related to the various aspects of our work in the Townsville Division of General Practice is relatively extensive. However, we are not aware of any literature that reports on projects similar to ours. This extensive literature is covered in 11 papers presented recently (August 2006) to the SEGRA 2006 Conference. The Conference link is <http://www.managementsolutions.net.au/segra/index.html>. For details on the papers please see the attached Technical Appendix.
8. The literature related to the various systems thinking aspects of our experience in the Townsville Division of General Practice is relatively extensive. However, we have largely followed the well know authors, like for example: For example Checkland and Scholes (1990), Flood (1990), Senge (1990) Maani and Cavana (2000). For details please see Monypenny (2001).
9. So given that the conference is designed so that papers can be mentored and can evolve I have included a few references that have the literature rather than to include the literature directly here. These are: Monypenny (2001); Monypenny & Mellor (2005). The full papers are available by request from Richard.Monypenny@jcu.edu.au

To close this context section, we would like to reinforce the idea of a very dynamic and invigorating context within which we were interacting with the three staff. The next section looks at a few aspects of our experiences.

## **A few aspects of our experiences**

**I**n this section we outline our main experiences. The main take home message from this experiences section is that any valid evaluation of our intervention needs to include the real dynamics of the system that underlie the normal activities of The Townsville Division of General Practice. We acknowledge that it is probably very difficult to create such a dynamic system from scratch but it is certainly very invigorating to have the opportunity to actively participate in such an intervention.

The main aspects of our experiences are:

1. Being Integrative. We use the project facilitation skills to integrate all aspects of our intervention.
  - a. First, we use project facilitation skills as the main building block for creating closer cooperation and increased value adding for local service providers.
  - b. Second, we use project facilitation skills as the framework with which the association integrates its activities in order to focus effort on creating closer cooperation and increased value adding for the association.
  - c. We chose project facilitation skills as the integrative concept because:

- i. The Division is largely a project based organisation and all project officers have good project management skills.
  - ii. The concept of project facilitation is an easy extension from the already well understood concept of project management.
- 2. Being Innovative. We are especially proud when we look at the way we combine different well known components to make the link (or the relationship) between inputs used and the outcomes achieved. We usually name this link as value adding. What our innovation has really done is:
  - a. To give an overall reason for pulling together many apparently disjointed skills and tools. Like for example active listening, value adding, individual and personal coaching, walk the talk (or other similar), insiders vs outsiders (or similar), etc.
  - b. To deliver the use and application of this innovation in real time, in real Division decision-making, in real resource demanding situations, in real trade-off situations.
  - c. To use our innovation by choice and proactively rather than reactively.
- 3. Active listening as an all-pervasive process of interaction between the four of us (The three Division staff and my self).
  - a. Yes, active listening is often seen as what some people pretend to do when they do not really want to listen. What we did was much harder to do. It is like when you do a Google search for something simple like .... and three hours later you are still finding interesting aspects that are related and relevant to where you started but with many more new opportunities to follow up.
  - b. Small group skills support active listening very well, especially as the group goes through the stages of development: forming, storming, norming and performing (or similar).
- 4. Active listening as a vehicle for improving project facilitation skills between the four of us.
  - a. The driver of this experience was the staff's interest to hear something different. That is, driven by yes it is working but there must be something else?
  - b. Supported by my interest to understand where they were at individually and as a group of three.
    - i. To have successful communication and growth we needed to have a shared starting point, a common interest. It is difficult for two to share if they have little in common.
    - ii. My strategy is to learn where they are at, not that they need to learn where I am at.
- 5. Value adding as the outcome from improving our project facilitation skills.
  - a. Get in with what they want then work on what they really need.
  - b. Systems thinking (action research, experiential learning or similar) that

- supports the reality that every thing is related to every thing.
- c. That we usually underestimate the complexity of the systems that we study.
  - d. That learning is important, that is once we have finished a given intervention, if we had to do it again we would do it differently.
6. The outcome or conclusion from our mentoring, capability development and cultural transformation (mentoring for short) of the three senior staff in their project facilitation skills, has been extremely successful. This success can be indicated in that:
- a. The regular organizational meetings of the three senior staff are now automatically run using their improved project facilitation skills. Rather than the normal meeting format used in the past.
  - b. The value adding onto existing organizational tasks and activities is now a regular consideration in decision making in allocating resources to organizational tasks and activities.
7. In summary, the take home messages from our experiences are:
- a. Dynamic and invigorating. Given that the Division is such a complex, dynamic system and it is very invigorating to work in, the main outcomes from our experiences are very different from the main outcomes that we would expect from our experiences from a less dynamic and invigorating work place.
  - b. Congruent management. Given that the Division is a complex, dynamic and invigorating work place, the management and leadership style and all intervention activities need to be congruent. This is especially important for internal staff in relation to external consultants that are brought into the Division to do a specific task.
  - c. Learning from our experience. Given that the Division is such a complex, dynamic and invigorating work place, we are successful largely because we are part of a well functioning system. We did not have to create the well functioning system we just had to help it to be more successful.
  - d. Our advice to others. Given that the Division is such a complex, dynamic and invigorating work place, from our experiences, we acknowledge that success comes not just from our own skills and efforts but from the summation of all aspects of the system. Our contribution is usually, but a small part. In the medium term it is unwise to let success go to our head.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Technical appendix: A short review of some of the relevant literature

The literature related to various aspects of our work in the Townsville Division of General Practice is relatively extensive. However, we are not aware of any literature that reports on projects similar to ours.

One significant spillover of our work in the Townsville Division of General Practice is the writing of a number of papers related to the current interests of the Division. These papers can be divided into two groups.

- First those that review some of the aspects of the extensive literature that is more relevant to the Division's current interests. These are papers 1-5 below.
- Second, those that report various aspects of the Division's activities. These are papers 6-10 below.

Currently (October 2006) 10 of these papers are in various stages of being DEST refereed by SEGRA . The Conference link is <http://www.management-solutions.net.au/segra/index.html>. The full papers are available by request from [Richard.Monypenny@jcu.edu.au](mailto:Richard.Monypenny@jcu.edu.au) A brief abstract of each of these papers is also included.

### 1. International Trade and Local Regional Development (Bano and Monypenny)

Our research interest is the intersection of the following three different but related areas of study:

- a. The provision of local primary health care services.
- b. The understanding of those aspects of the regional economic development literature that are relevant to the international trade in primary health care services.
- c. The understanding of those aspects of the international trade literature that are relevant to the international trade in primary health care services.

This paper reports the outcome of a project that reviews the literature on the following aspects of international trade:

- a. Intra and inter-industry trade.
- b. Intra-industry trade indices.
- c. The demand similarity theory.
- d. Economies of scale, product differentiation and market structure models.
- e. Research and development expenditure, human capital, and the technological and the product life cycle models.
- f. Trade diversion and trade creation.

## **2. Comparative Advantage (Castorina and Monypenny)**

A good understanding of the literature on comparative advantage is seen as a precursor to increasing cooperation between stakeholders, especially in industries linked to international trade. Increased cooperation between stakeholders is seen as one of the early stages in the development process that might lead in the medium term to the establishment of a formal cooperation agreement or to an industrial cluster.

It is widely believed by economists that comparative advantage is a key determinant of international production and trade patterns. Gaining a deeper understanding of the concept of comparative advantage enables regions or countries to increase their welfare by exporting in those goods in which they know they have a comparative advantage.

In Section II we review the evolution of trade theory from Classical to neo-classical and then to Modern theory. Section III is a practical application of determining comparative advantage.

## **3. The Knowledge Economy and Local Mainly Service Industries (Jenkinson and Monypenny)**

This paper reports on the outcome of a project to review the literature on cluster development as related to the knowledge economy. The paper has three parts:

- a. A brief review of the literature on both Porter's Cluster Theory and on the evolution that has taken place post Porter.
- b. An outline of the differences and the similarities between the application of the above literature to mainly manufacturing industries and to mainly service industries. We place a strong focus on what can be relatively easily transferred from manufacturing to service industries and what is likely to be far more difficult to transfer to service industries.
- c. A brief discussion of the main advantages and disadvantages of using the above literature to support an application to local primary health care.
  - i. Good theoretical concept and capture of cross-disciplinary concepts.
  - ii. Problems with applications.

## **4. Has the Diamond Lost its Sparkle: An analysis of Porter's Cluster Theory (Jenkinson and Monypenny)**

This paper reports on the outcome of a project to review the literature on Porter's Cluster Theory. The paper considers the development of a key aspect of Michael E



Porter's competitiveness theory, that is, cluster theory. The paper has four parts:

- a. Development of Porter's Cluster Theory and the consideration of economic theories leading up to 1990 Cluster Theory by Porter.
- b. Porter's theory – Diamond Model & Porter's definition.
- c. Post Porter Cluster Evolution:
- d. Advantages / Disadvantages

### **5. Industrial Clustering (Lines and Monypenny)**

The performance of the national economy is a composite of the performance of regions within the nation. It is now relatively well understood that the performance of the region is largely influenced by the strength and performance of local industry clusters.

Industrial clustering and 'cluster theory' has in recent times emerged as a leading economic policy widely accepted for increasing industrial efficiency.

This paper is the outcome of a project to review the literature on both the positives and the negatives from industrial clustering. A good understanding of the literature on industrial clustering is seen as a precursor to increasing cooperation between stakeholders. Increased cooperation between stakeholders is seen as one of the early stages in the development process that might lead in the medium term (say 8-12 years) to the establishment of a formal cooperation agreement or to an industrial cluster.

### **6. The Business of Health (Mellor and Monypenny)**

This paper reports the outcome of a project to better understand the economic drivers of the local industry of the Business of Health. The paper is divided into the following three sections:

- a. We review the significance of the Health Sector from a business perspective and we address a range of relevant issues.
- b. We briefly outline the main differences and similarities between the Business of Health and the other significant local business sectors.
- c. We briefly outline a few of the main reasons in support of the role of the Business of Health as a contributor to the forces of local regional development.

We conclude, that to date significantly more emphasis has been placed on other sectors of similar overall contribution like for example minerals processing and that this paper could be a starting point so that one of the next sectors to receive increased focus of the forces for regional development, could be the Business of Health.

### **7. A Baseline for Progress (Arlett and Monypenny)**

Progress since the establishment of the Townsville Division of General Practice in 1994 has been significant. But it has been difficult to establish just how significant the improvements have been because a Baseline was not established at that time.

This paper reports the outcome of a project to now establish such a Baseline.

Our aim in determining our local progress is to identify what has worked well locally and what still needs our aggregate attention so that we can continue to improve our whole of community outcomes. The paper is divided into the three sections:

- a. The sources and attributes of both primary population health data and data on wider measures of wellbeing.
- b. A brief review of the literature of the evaluation of progress from baseline data in primary health care.
- c. A brief review of the perceived priorities of local stakeholders about the variables best used to measure progress.

### **8. Sustaining Competitive Advantage in the Primary Health Care by Working Together (Randall and Monypenny)**

This paper reports on a project to review of literature on the characteristics of regional clusters and the involvement required by individuals, organizations and the region to transform the challenges of a rapidly changing competitive environment into a sustainable, competitive advantage, creating value to cultivate a vibrant, healthy regional economy.

Based on the findings from the review of the literature, the paper looks at the Townsville/Thuringowa primary health care sector for examples of the characteristics of regional clusters.

Finally, we conclude and we make recommendations for further research that might help cultivate a vibrant, healthy regional economy. We focus specially on assisting practitioners in the primary health sector. A significant first step is a regional needs analysis.

### **9. The Combination of Private and Social Capital in the Primary Care Sector (Scheuber and Monypenny)**

We report the outcome of a project to highlight issues that present when time limited taxpayer funds are provided to the private health sector in attempts to drive the reform agenda of the Australian Health System. We see that these issues have implications for local regional development.

We focus on the Primary Care Sector which is particularly influenced by the Australian Government's Health Service Delivery policies and implementation strategies. These policies and implementation strategies are designed to meet health service delivery needs at the broadest of levels.

The example that we use to present the issues is the work that we have undertaken in the Townsville Division of General Practice to establish a regional After Hours Primary Medical Care Service.

In concluding, the paper states that developing a local working partnership and complementarity between the private and social contribution is easier when there is an effective mechanism for expressing and arriving at appropriate policy decisions. In our case one of the local organisations that can continue to facilitate these ongoing relationships in the Townsville Division of General Practice.

## **10. Managing Frequent Flyers: Developing and Maintaining Improved Relationships in Local Service Delivery (Scheuber and Monypenny)**

We report the outcome of a project to better understand the difficulty of developing and maintaining improved relationships in local service delivery. We see these relationships as important building blocks in the early stages of the development process towards increased cooperation used for regional development. We have three positive take home messages:

- a. We accept that positive relationships take time to build;
- b. We accept that there are significant differences in terminology used between organisations;
- c. We focus on whole of community outcomes to ensure that all opportunity costs and benefits are considered in the planning.

To close this Technical Appendix, on a short review of some of the relevant literature, we see that a significant spillover of our work with the Townsville Division of General Practice is being able to make available these papers to other interested parties, like the participants at this Systems Conference.

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