

# Reflecting on the Dynamics of Our Intervention

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**We are working with three senior staff of an association of local service providers to help them make concrete steps towards closer cooperation and increased value adding, as part of a medium term process to successfully develop a local industrial cluster. In providing this help to senior staff we use project facilitation skills in two complementary ways:**

- **First, we use facilitation skills as the main building block for creating closer cooperation and increased value adding for local service providers.**
- **Second, we use 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.**

**In this paper we report on our reflections on the dynamics of our intervention in the association that are relevant to the Systems Conference. Reflections related to other aspects of our work are reported elsewhere.**

## Introduction

**W**e are working with three senior staff of an association of local service providers to help them make concrete steps towards closer cooperation and increased value adding, as part of a medium term process to successfully develop a local industrial cluster. The benefits (and the costs) from this process will accrue both to local service providers and to service recipients. Participation in the process has two stages: Initial participation will include local service providers. Later, in a second stage, participation is expected to naturally extend along the supply chain to both suppliers and to service recipients. 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 reflections that are most relevant to the participants at the Systems Conference:
  1. Maintaining staff support for our intervention, given that the dynamics from our intervention range from negative to very positive.
  2. Keeping a boundary between those staff who participate in “walk the talk” and those who do not.
  3. Maintaining a manageable demand on resources.
  4. Prioritizing projects to work on.

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

In 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 reflections 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. To date, most of the successful industrial clusters, both in Australia and overseas, have been in manufacturing industry.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. When we started this project 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?
8. And to do this without triggering the negative side effects that often come associated with such undertakings.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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. One significant spillover of our work is the writing of a number of papers related to the current interests of the Division. As of July, 2006 10 of these papers are in various stages of being submitted to the SEGRA Conference for refereeing. The Conference link is <http://www.managementsolutions.net.au/segra/index.html>

For details on the papers please see the technical appendix of Monypenny (2006 - paper titled "Mentoring three local association staff" in this proceedings).

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 reflections.

## A few aspects of our reflections

In this section we outline our main reflections. The main take home message from this reflections 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 reflections are:

1. Maintaining staff support for our intervention, given that the dynamics from our intervention range from negative to very positive.
  - a. Intervention in any organisation can have expected and unexpected positive and negative outcomes and side effects.
  - b. When we started working at the Division we looked at ways to help reduce the negatives from our intervention. After reflection we chose to work with a small group of staff (three) and to use the well developed “group skills” that two of the people have. We also used these group skills to decide not to change the people in the group for the duration of the intervention. In practice this was from about October 2005 until June 2006.
  - c. We also used our group skills to reinforce discernment within the group. Initially this was only discernment directly related to the intervention. However, over time the discernment naturally extended to most aspects of our work activities.
  - d. Now looking back, we realize that nearly all the negative aspects that arose were converted into positives or were neutralized, some more easily than others.
  - e. Now, after reflection, we are ready to start a similar process with the rest of the staff to bring them up to speed on how they can take advantage of what we have learnt during the intervention, in their own project. We expect this process to run relatively smoothly.
2. Keeping a boundary between those staff who participate in “walk the talk” and those who do not.
  - a. Intervention in an organisation always creates a divide between those who participate and those who do not. This divide can create significant negative side effects from an intervention. The Division has two characteristics that we used to our advantage in this case.
    - First, the Division has an open work office design. This helps “walk the talk” conversations to be very inclusive.
    - Second, many of the Division’s project staff only spends certain, and largely fixed days in the office. The rest of their time is spent in the field. Upon reflection initially we restricted intervention time to Thursdays before lunch. However, over time the intervention time naturally extended to times that were

appropriate to the activities undertaken.

- b. Now, after reflection, we are ready to start a similar process with the rest of the staff. Our current plans are to fold the two processes (the negatives and the walk the talk) into one regular and relatively widely inclusive process that, with time, we expect will run smoothly and just naturally evolve as required.
2. Maintaining a manageable demand on resources.
    - a. Let me re-cap:
      - i. The work that we are currently doing in the Townsville Division of General Practice is part of a medium term process to successfully develop a local industrial cluster.
      - ii. The Division has a well established core activity that is largely about teaching technical skills to General Practitioners and to staff that work with the General Practitioners.
    - b. Participating in the development of an industrial cluster and the on-going core activities both regularly need resources for their activities. The management of both demand expectations and of actual demand on resources require considerable time, staff energy and actual resources it's self.
    - c. When we started working in the Division we made a special effort to regularly discuss the issue of realistic resource expectations. On reflection, we appear to have been successful.
  4. Prioritizing projects to work on.
    - a. Intervention in any organisation usually creates the need for increased effort to be allocated to prioritizing of projects so that the organization can keep a manageable demand on resources. This is especially the case when a given intervention has already been allocated additional resources. The reality is that these additional resources, especially with the benefit of hindsight, often turn out to be insufficient.
    - b. We spend considerable effort in reflection about the congruence, between the demand on resources and the wider Division goals and priorities. This item is an important item for reflection because historically the Division went through difficult times because the Division's efforts were significantly driven by a grant based existence. That is, you apply for a grant because you can. Once you have a grant you need to produce the deliverable. But, there was little concern about how or if the activities undertaken did or did not fit into an overall medium term plan or goal.
    - c. Now, after reflection, we are very focused on keeping appropriate processes in place to maintain our congruence between our demand for resources and our wider Division goals. Our current process involves ongoing communication between relevant parties. This is usually staff, senior staff, the Chair of the Board and the regular Board meetings.

- d. I have used the word “ongoing” rather than regular because of our observed reality that the Division is a complex, dynamic and invigorating system to work in. This usually requires relatively short response times.
  - e. One aspect of this issue upon which we need to keep a running brief is balancing our effort spent on current core activities and effort spent on current peripheral activities that could become core activities in the medium term.
  - f. Our current process is an informal but on-going monitoring of resource demands by senior staff in consultation with others as required.
  - g. Now, after reflection, our current plans are to continue with this same process because it works well and it is well understood by the main stakeholders in the process. We expect this aspect of the Division to run smoothly into the foreseeable future.
5. In summary, the take home messages from our reflections 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 reflection are very different from the main outcome that we would expect from our reflections 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, upon reflection, 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.

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