



**Tools Training Strategy Facilitation**

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## 10 Tactics for the Organisational Insurgent

*Some tactics for leading change from below*

In the bookshops there are shelves of books on 'organisational change' and 'learning organisations'. But they are all written for the CEO - or someone who has the power to set the agenda.

What about the rest of us? How do you change an organisation from the bottom...or the middle? In the absence of any guidance I've felt free to invent '10 rules for the organisational insurgent'.

I've never worked in a big organisation, but as a consultant I've observed the workings of scores of councils and government departments and agencies. Is there a healthy heirarchical organisation? I don't know. I know there are a lot of Dilbert organisations. You know, kind where power is an end in itself, where creative thinking is banned, where risk-taking is punishable by excommunication or death and information flow is two-way: orders down, data up.

Heirarchies are about control. Control in a modern organisation works primarily through rules and the control of information.

Large organisations are, however, never a single hierarchy. They are more like medieval Europe: a competing ecology of principalities and fiefdoms, each presided over by a data-lord or guildmaster.

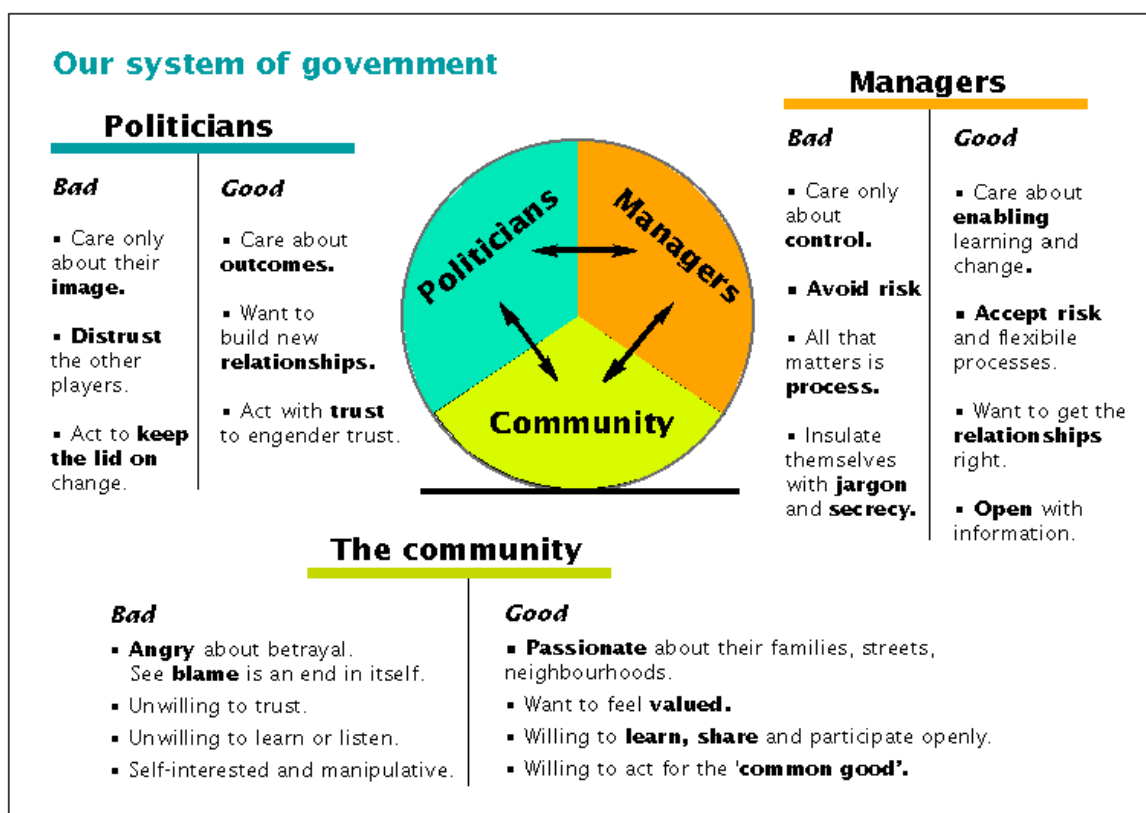
Information is the real currency inside each of these petty heirarchies. I know you all know this, but I'll remind you anyway: In a pathological organisation (or petty fiefdom):

- a) You often can't get the information you need.
- b) You often can't act on the information you get because some frightened person above you thinks they don't have enough information.

- c) You can't make sense of the information you see because it is written in 'code' only comprehensible by someone higher up the organisation.
- d) You are forced to adopt an obscure jargon that even you don't understand in order to protect the organization from the dangers of public disclosure.
- e) Relationships with the public and politician leaders are so tense that a risk management mentality rules.

Because hierarchical organisations tend to be closed boxes, the stimulus for organisational change inevitably originates *outside the organisation*. This is an essential insight. Fortunately organisations don't exist in a vacuum. There are part of rich ecologies involving politics, the community and other organisations. The secret of a change agent (and the measure of their success) is how effectively they bring the outside world into an organisation.

I'm interested in government organisations like councils, state agencies and departments. Here is a model that might explain the difference between a pathological and a healthy government organisation. In a healthy organisation there is balance between three interests: the political 'masters', the internal managers, and the external publics or 'stakeholders'.



When the players mesh together, good government becomes a self-sustaining system, because the players generate benefits for each other.

- Politicians can show courageous leadership because their community actively supports them.
- Managers are able to take risks because politicians and the community shared the decisions (and hence the responsibility).
- Members of the community have incentives to participate because they are treated as partners.

But when the players work in isolation, bad government happens.

The classic pathology of local government is fear and disrespect between the players. When this happens politicians burn out and fall prey to lobbyists and developers. Managers avoid effort and risk and retreat into their disciplines. The community feels betrayed and gets cynical and angry. Bad and mediocre decisions get made and the players are confirmed in their mutual suspicions, prejudice and ignorance.

So good government needs four things: active citizens, responsive managers, courageous politicians, and *spaces* where they can meet, interact, find common ground, shift from fixed positions, and discover imaginative solutions to difficult social problems.

All of this should suggest some tactics for the organisational insurgent:

### **1) Take risks**

In a fearful organisation, your ultimate weapon is fearlessness. In the absence of genuine power, your willingness to take risks may be your one real tactical advantage:

"My advice is: take chances but do it properly." (words spoken by a senior council manager)

Doing something which has never been done before, bending some rule, 'going public', investing in a new program or service, working across professional boundaries, and trusting the community - these are examples of risks that change agents need to take to achieve their goals.

Even better advice is to 'head for the smoke'. Every organisation has crises and the crises are where change is most likely, and where resources are most likely to be obtained (e.g. Auckland City Council's drainage infrastructure crisis became an opportunity for managers advocating a radical on-site water management strategy.)

### **2) Own some important data**

If information is organisational power, what information do you own?

It's good to generate some information that other power-holders in your organisation can benefit from but are bad at interpreting. The obvious kind of information for change agents is information about 'the community' (after all that should be their area of expertise). Not just customer service data: but networks, relationships and detailed info about what makes people tick: like surveys of community values and behaviours, focus group studies, or a 'people's panel'.

### **3) Own an important process**

Organisations are notoriously bad at learning, thinking, facilitating, and running productive community participation processes. Why not become your organisation's experts in these mystery zones? Once your capabilities are recognised, you will be indispensable.

### **4) Harness corporate jealousy**

Never underestimate the power of jealousy and competition in government. Remind council managers how 'successful' other councils managers and teams are, and you might achieve wonders.

### **5) Be your own brand**

To market yourself and your unique services inside and outside your organisation, you'll need a 'brand'. A brand is shorthand for the strengths you represent. It's a symbol or phrase whose profile grows with each initiative or communication you produce. It is said that a brand 'owns a word or phase in the minds of its customers'. What words do you own in the mind of your organisation? Examples I can think of are: 'The Enviro Change Team'. 'The Clean Green Team', 'The Australian Municipal Energy Improvement Facility'.

### **6) Link with other insurgents**

Your organisation probably has plenty of other change champions. Get together. Form a club. Get drunk together. Become a power in your own right. Organise lunchtime talks. Use the group to demonstrate intellectual leadership in your organisation (that might not be very hard). Get together after work. Make an email list to share ideas.

### **7) Break out of the corporate bubble: find your external allies**

Divide and conquer is a classic organisational control technique. But you have friends out there - in the community and in other agencies. Get out of the office. Build relationships. Get to know others, as people and as groups with common aims. Find out ways to share information and skills and work together. Run joint projects.

### **8) Develop your communication arts**

Organisational panjandrums tend to be appalling communicators. It's a game you can easily trounce them at. So do some training in *human* communication (presentation, facilitation and negotiation, conflict resolution) as well as the usual channels (face-to-face events, Reader Friendly design, and media management). Get into audience-centred communication. Pre-test everything you produce on members of the audience. Be observant and collect samples of 'good stuff'. Advocate the importance of INVESTING in communication.

### **9) Get into leadership**

Get acquainted with some literature on leadership and 'learning organisations'. If your own staff and colleagues are loyal to you, then winning battles with management won't be that hard.

### **10) Choreograph the common good**

And finally we need to realise that our little change programs are just parts of bigger society-wide change programs. 'Sustainability', however you interpret it, requires fundamental transformations in human systems, and a surprising number of people, inside and outside our organisations know that and may be willing to work with us.

Genuine collaborate, however, only works when the players to OWN their own projects. That means they need a chance to deliberate, make choices and share control over decisions.

Hence our best work may be as FACILITATORS of change spaces where diverse players (politicians, managers, citizens) come together, learn from each other, discover that working together can be a surprisingly inspiring experience and find the support and optimism they need to take a few risks.

And lastly I want to say...keep your spirits up. Someone said 'only bad stuff happens fast'. Good things usually take plenty of time. Sometimes they take so long we wonder whether any change is happening at all. But one day you'll look back and you'll see that all your hard work has really changed the world. And you'll be amazed.

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APPENDIX:

## On leadership

Good leadership is the basis of any successful change project.

So what is good leadership?

Someone said that ‘you know good leadership has happened when everyone says “we did that” ’.

Here are some qualities of an ideal leader.

- Is honest and open.
- Is willing to challenge the status quo and pioneer new approaches to doing things. Is an early adopter of innovation. Values experimentation and risk-taking.
- Is passionate, enthusiastic and optimistic.
- Is imaginative. Encourages other people to imagine. Builds other people’s ideas into an inclusive vision.
- Listens. Understands the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the people they want to enlist.
- Is an enabler. Lets the people own the process. ‘We’ not ‘me’. Builds confidence. Delegates. Trusts people. Rewards creativity and initiative. Celebrates success.
- Loves people. Is kind. Puts the people before the vision.
- Is humble. They are there to serve and support.

- From Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 1995

Good leaders make supportive and rewarding environments where people can grow in the skills, knowledge and confidence required for their roles: until they are ready to move on to other roles.

Of course all this are the opposite of ‘management’ which tends to be cold, aloof, analytical, ruthless, unconcerned with consent, risk-averse, focused on control, and so on.