



Tools Training Strategy Facilitation

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Paper for Coast to Coast Conference, Melbourne 2006 (v2)

The power of buzz

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I believe that 'change work' involves communicating three kinds of knowledge:

1) Universal knowledge: general propositions created by experts, like "50% of smokers will die prematurely". The great weakness of this kind of knowledge is that, because the information is generic, people can always say "even if it's true, it doesn't apply to me". In other words, it's easily defeated by human beings' almost infinite capacity for denial.

2) Forensic knowledge: personalised information, like "This CT scan shows your lungs are diseased". This can often overcome an individual's capacity for denial because it is specifically about them and no one else.

3) Collaborative buzz: dialogue between peers that creates highly localised 'enabling' knowledge that in turn builds self-efficacy and confidence. For instance: "I found that patches really helped me quit". "Yeah but don't they cost a lot." "Not really, I claim them on my health insurance." etc...

Of these three, I believe that collaborative buzz appears is the most powerful tool for change. Yet it's one that receives very little credit.

I'll illustrate the role of collaborative buzz with two examples. One from my long-running research project. The other from a recent evaluation of a change program with graziers.

Change may be inherently social

My private research project involves analysing stories of personal change of participants in my training courses. The complete paper is on the web. ¹

Perhaps the most fascinating finding was when I asked people to tell the story about what *triggered* them to adopt new behaviours.

In a surprising 75% of cases, the triggers for change were interactions with other people rather than interactions with information. Amazingly, sources of objective, universal information barely featured in as triggers of personal voluntary change. ²

Here are some examples of what participants said triggered the adoption of a new practice, change or behaviour:

"I had a terrible moment with the deputy principal." (changed jobs)

"A friend said 'I'll do it with you'." (walking after work)

"I talked to a friend who was into body building." (going to the gym)

"My wife talked to be about the pesticides we use the home."

"A friend motivated me." (took up sport)

"The trigger was - my mum."

"A friend invited me to attend club meetings." (joined a service club)

"A friend purchased a worm farm and gave it to me."

"I friend introduced me to a book on coaching."

"Relationships were getting worse at home." (accepted of husband's work choice)

"During conflict with another it became blindingly clear what I had to do." (left her husband)

"Strong critique of the way I go about my life by a close friend." (focused more on her son)

¹ It's at www.enablingchange.com.au/Voluntary_change.pdf

² Information often had some role in the overall equation of change, but was not itself a triggering force.

"Friends joined and invited us to take our children." (joined surf club)

"My partner calculated how many times we had used the car this month, and what it cost." (sold car)

"A friend said 'Just go'." (started yoga)

As you can see, interactions with significant people – friends, family, workmates - featured centrally in the moment of change. In fact, interactions with significant others were reported in 75% of cases. What were the qualities of these significant people? If I had to characterise them I'd say:

- they were individuals who strongly believed in an alternative, hopeful, future;
- they were credible to the actor;
- they asked or prodded the actor to change;
- they were part of the actor's circle, people the actor had to go on living with.

As a shorthand, I'd describe these others as 'passionate-similar-connected-respected'.

This has powerful implications for our work as change agents. It suggests that change may be an inherently social process mediated by special conversations between people who are already connected to each other.

A facilitator can mobilise peer buzz

An insight into the power of buzz came from a recent evaluation of a project that aimed to encourage graziers in the Monaro to adopt a sustainable grazing practice.

I used video interviews (which were great because I could happily watch them again and again and learn more each time, and because they showed body language and expressions in a way that a written transcript doesn't).

As I listened to graziers' stories, it became clear that the most influential moments in the change program occurred during facilitated workshops which included walks on participating properties. What was powerful about these events was not the talks from experts, but facilitated and informal discussions between participants themselves.

The graziers were very aware of this. Some were scathing of 'top-down' presentations by experts, and easily identified the words of peers as being the influential learning moments.

"We went to a weeds day put on by the department. We went to that meeting and they were there to tell us what ways were there to control weeds. They had a room full of knowledge and they got nothing out of us."

"I've been to days where you sit there are they just talk up the front. If there's no interaction...they just give you a pile of paper and you go home. If you interact a bit more you remember specific points that are relevant to your business... If it's all your neighbours...well you remember that so-and-so said that... You don't forget your neighbour's name and if he says something you remember what he [said]."

"education is...going out and looking at results. People want to touch and feel. We want to go and see that paddock and say 'did this really work?' It's alright on a blackboard or computer but people want to see it really happening."

- Monaro graziers

I've decided to christen this kind of conversation 'collaborative buzz', or 'peer buzz' for short. It happens where peers get together to discuss practical solutions to common problems.

Conclusion: Some implications for change agents

If conversations with peers are vital to the process of change, what does it say about our work as change agents?

A few implications seem clear:

- the kind of 'information' that may best enable change may not be in our power to hold or transmit. It may have to be created anew in every situation by discussion between people who actually have to implement the change in their businesses or lives. If this is the case, then we need to be facilitators of dialogues, not just communicators of generic knowledge;
- if change depends on people meeting people and working together on common problems, then our most important work may be as choreographers of interactive events;

- if people are prodded into action by their peers, then we should aim to mix people-who-have-done-it with people-who-are-thinking-about-it;
- if all this is true then it suggests the basic principles of a change program are similar to the basic principles of adult learning (see box).

Principles of adult learning

Adults are motivated to learn by what:

- is perceived as relevant;
- builds on previous experience;
- actively involves them and is participatory;
- is problem focused;
- enables them to take responsibility for their learning;
- can be applied in practice immediately;
- involves a cycle of action and reflection;
- is based on mutual respect and trust.

From Knowles, M. 1990 *The Adult Learner: a neglected species*, Gulf Publishing, Houston.