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**ADR and restructuring organisations**

Organisational meltdown: managing the restructure of an organisation through a period of intense conflict

Peter Condliffe

It started out as a simple job. It turned into a year-long process involving the complete restructuring of the organisation which had initially engaged me. I was to be occupied in what became a life and death struggle for its continued existence. Along the way I was involved in, among other things, a number of grievances between staff, countless Board meetings, the rewriting of job descriptions and policy documents, public meetings, and several related mediations. However, the main intervention was the restructuring of the school's organisation. This was achieved through a process of consultation, report writing and adoption throughout the key elements of the school. This article provides a brief overview of some of these things.

My initial job had been to facilitate a meeting of 30 to 40 staff in a private school who were experiencing some difficulties. My brief was to create some 'communication pathways' between several conflicted groupings within the school. Because of the initial success of this process and the confidence and trust it engendered within the school I was subsequently asked to intervene at a much deeper level to ensure that the conflicts occurring could be managed more comprehensively.

Initial terms

When I entered into my terms of reference and contact of engagement with the school it was important to ensure that I had the support of the Board. I understood and sensed that I would be encountering quite a deal of resistance to the change effort and wanted to ensure that I had a secure base from which to launch it. Once this was established I proceeded to interview a cross-section of staff involved in the various conflicts identified. There were several other key matters requiring careful consideration in

the change effort. These included careful examination of previous change efforts, taking careful note of the language being used, critically assessing my own values/assumptions and making them explicit, and also ensuring that any change had to occur across a number of identified levels. In a fundamental way I developed a model of change for the school that attempted to be compatible with its underlying ethos and needs as an organisation.

Past efforts

The school had attempted to restructure itself and deal with various intense conflicts between staff which had enveloped much of the school community. All such attempts had been largely unsuccessful. However, they did provide vital and important information for the task I was given. What was striking about these attempts to deal with the problems in the school is that they focused primarily upon process and values. In my view, there needed to be an equal consideration of a number of other elements which were important to my eventual proposal to make significant change.

Language

One thing that was striking about the description of the school in various forums and in the documentation provided to me was the emphasis placed upon 'consensual decision-making'. The school was stated to operate in a 'collegial manner' and to represent a 'democratic/republican form'. This was also typically described as an 'organic' rather than a 'hierarchical' way of managing so as to encourage widespread participation and sense of responsibility. The potent symbolism of these descriptions and their actual manifestations had to be carefully

understood and managed.

Assumptions

There were a number of key assumptions that I made and communicated in developing the proposal for change. These included: First, that, whole school change is necessary for long-term change to be effected. Second, that the perceptions of participants of their experiences in developing and implanting change are of value. Third, that school change is influenced by events in the external environment.

Working across different levels: developing a model to understand and develop the change effort

As part of my engagement with the school I had to leave my law and ADR texts behind me for a while and plunge into the relatively unfamiliar world of the education organisation as a target of change. My previous training and experience as a teacher and academic started to pay some dividends here. I quickly came to the conclusion that any change at the school had to take account of and operate across a number of different levels. Adapting Starratt's (1993) model of the School as an 'onion,' as further developed by Daniels (2001), there were a number of levels conceptualised that required consideration in the change effort. This is described in the following diagram, 'The School Change Model'. This model became the 'centrepiece' of the change effort and was used extensively throughout.

At the core of the model are the *values and visions* that underpin the actions of school members. The next layer out from this represents the fundamental area of interaction in the school — that between *teachers and students*. It is near



the centre of the model for the simple reason that any change in the school has to take account of and be of benefit to this particular level. The next level is the *internal politics of the school* which represents the exercise of power and leadership by individuals and groups. It is in this level where most of the conflict occurred within the school. The fourth layer is the *organisation*. Within this layer various models for organisational change and planning were considered. It is within this layer that I considered that the conflict generated within the internal politics of school have their genesis. The outer or final layer represents the school *culture*. It is represented as a force for the future and change, but it also represents the possibility of stability. Including this layer was important in bringing in parents to the change effort.

It is not the intention of this brief article to explore each of the levels of this model in any detail. However, it was important that all school members eventually become acquainted with some of these key concepts.

Values

Values are important as both a source and motivator for change. Also, it became apparent that any change should be congruent with the strongly-held philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of practice within this organisation: see Goodlad (1975). The various groups and individuals who were taking leadership positions or were stakeholders and their value systems were crucial in this area as well: Chui, Sharp and McCormick (1996).

Teachers and students

The teachers and students level was crucial because it was here where the change to structures had to become apparent in the outcomes sought to be affected. It is obviously a key area of relationships in any school and any change which does not have benefit in this area is probably not worth the effort. As Barber (1997) commented:

It's time to recognize that reforming structures alone will not bring about real change, least of all in education, where quality depends so heavily on a chaotic part of personal interaction [p 160].

Any restructuring of the school has to allow these relatively 'chaotic

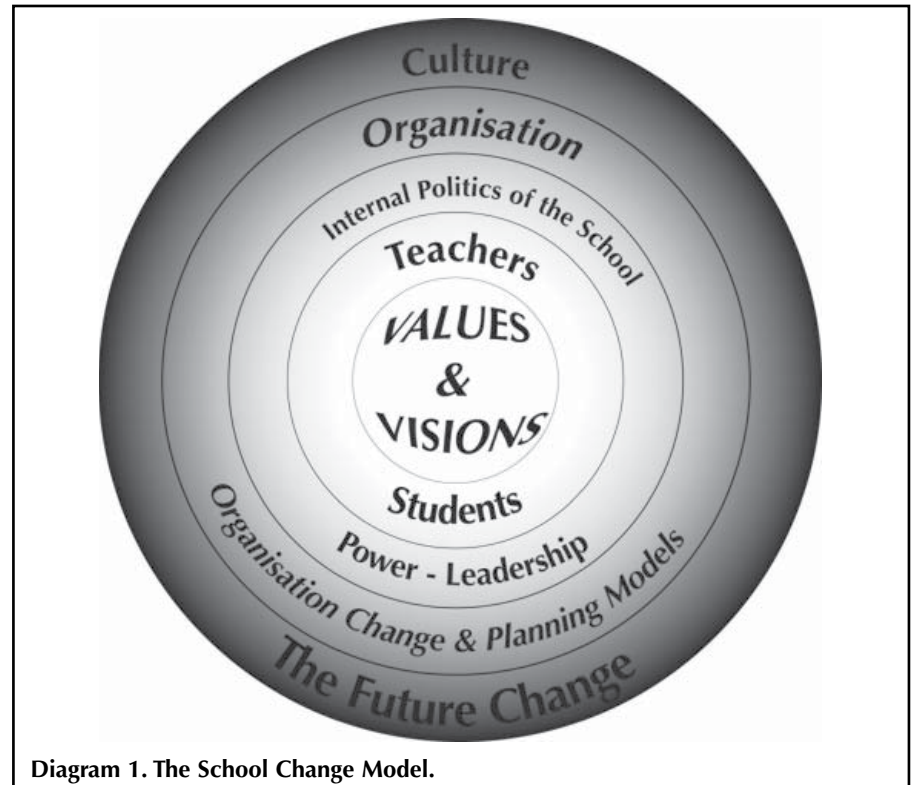


Diagram 1. The School Change Model.

relationships' to flourish and remain positive. It was my view that teachers needed encouragement and 'space' for this area to flourish and further this needs to be balanced against 'collegiate norming'. In other words, there was a need for support of the teaching and student bodies for the changes in structure to have long-term and positive benefits. The viability of the proposed changes and the amount of resistance encountered would depend very much on the perception of the school's teachers whose role would be largely to implement them.

Internal politics

The next layer from the centre of the model is the internal politics of the school. This level is largely to do with decision-making and the way in which power and leadership are exercised. As Cooper (1988) stated:

To the extent that participation in the profession, in decision making, in the rights of power and control helps children, then professional culture will have meaning. That being the benchmark, the effort will not be self-serving [p 54].

It was at this level that conflict has largely shown itself. The fulcrum had been around decision-making processes. This is not to say that it is necessarily because of the way in which decisions

were made (that is, process issues) that these conflicts have become so intense. Rather, it was possible to speculate that the conflicts had reached a level where the school had in some respects become dysfunctional because of the organisational structures which have developed. These dynamics are described below in some further detail.

It is at the internal politics level that various confrontations and interactions within the school community have been played out. It is to be expected and natural that there would have been a certain level of conflict. This in itself would not necessarily be a bad thing and in most organisations it spurs creativity and helpful change. In any organisation there will be different perspectives on power, goals, ideologies, interests, political activity and control. The management of the conflicts that occur around these various aspects of internal politics will be crucial in maintaining organisational cohesion and help: see Ball (1987). However, if the conflict is badly managed then trust will necessary fall off within the group and efforts to make meaningful changes will become more and more difficult.

In the environment in which this school found itself it was crucial that the various leadership elements take a central role in managing the conflict productively.



Table 1.

Name of Possible Framework	Brief Description
Organisational Development	A framework developed from business contexts, which tends to apply behavioural science using system improvement and self-analytic methods. It usually evolves around a planned intervention including values, goals, planning, practice and evaluation.
Total Quality Management (TQM)	TQM is another business-derived change theory that attempts to move beyond traditional hierarchical systems and instead develops structural forms that focus on empowering staff. Focus is usually on needs, processes, continual small changes and involvement of all staff.
Systems Based Approach	The organisation is viewed as a behavioural system comprising various levels. Interdependencies between various levels are a crucial consideration. Teamwork and participation are usually regarded as central in this framework.
Evolutionary Planning	This model emphasises selecting broad and multiple goals but in a framework which gives some emphasis to ambiguity. Incremental change is important as is learning from experience.
Self-Managed Model	This model emphasises planning, shared decision making, and being responsive to the environment through a continuous process of evaluation and updating of goals.

Redeveloping trust in the teacher group was going to be the most significant aspect of developing school leadership in the future in this school. Developing more appropriate structures would assist in this endeavour but by itself, in my view, could not achieve organisational peace. There would be a need for a strong leadership group to develop which could re-establish a sufficient level of trust across the broader organisation.

I described this need in terms of ‘transformative leadership’ in the way in which Lakomski (1995) described it:

... developing teachers’ (and students’) potential, altering awareness, introducing vision and mission and generally transforming the organisation and its members [p 211].

In the longer term this type of leadership would need to be balanced by broadening the leadership potential of the whole teacher group. ‘The leadership’ was as Blackmore and colleagues (1996) described:

... have a sense of direction which they communicate but do not impose on others and they can be persuaded to change their minds when convinced ... consult and are committed to democratic practice as much as is possible... make difficult decisions but justify them openly to those

affected and provide alternative ways of doing things. They share responsibility and power ... encourage individuals and groups to work collaboratively and ‘lead’ [p 15].

In other words the new leadership that would need to emerge out of the conflicts and crisis besetting the school would have to energise all levels of the school.

Organisation

The next level is organisation. One can look at the organisation as a whole and see ways of changing and planning around the structures and systems that can be described. There are various frameworks which one could use to develop a model for intervention. These include *organisational development, total quality management, a systems approach, evolutionary planning and self-managing models*.

I describe each approach briefly in Table 1.

Although my favourite is the evolutionary approach, elements of all approaches were adapted to the change effort and in particular the management of the range of conflicts that had emerged.

It was my view that the genesis of the conflicts was essentially in this level of the school. In simple terms

the administrative (that is the non-teaching and pedagogical functions) and teaching systems in the school rather than complementing and assisting each other in their respective roles have instead become oppositional and entered into a relatively long term and intense rivalry around decision-making on various issues. As the conflict had developed and positions hardened, the conflict has degenerated into a series of interpersonal clashes which have masked the underlying structural failures in the organisation. A new ‘administrative team’ (composed largely of former teachers several of whom were brought in from outside) had been set up to deal with emerging problems in managing the day-to-day affairs of the school but had found itself propelled, due to a lack of appropriate role-definition and a resultant lack of authority, into areas of decision-making which have increasingly been resisted by the traditional centre of decision-making in the school: the teachers.

In a sense this new body had moved to fill a vacuum, but in a culture not prepared or organised to accept this and without adequate organisational adjustment. In turn, the other key parts of the school organisation, centred in the teaching staff, resisted this encroachment on decision-making by asserting the traditional leadership function of teachers.

As the conflict had developed, more and more individuals within the school community were drawn into it. The dynamics were described as increasingly complex and somewhat chaotic. The organisation underwent considerable, unplanned and sometimes traumatic change. There was evidence of all of the following integers of conflict. There was group polarization, ‘run away norms’ (a tendency to impose ‘right thinking’ on new people joining the organisation), ‘contentious group goals’ (a tendency for various sub-groups to organise themselves around the conflict), militant leaders and militant sub-groups. The presence of all of these integers in the conflict indicated a high and intense level of dysfunctional conflict which required some significant and ongoing management: see Condliffe (1999) and (2002).

It was because of the presence of these various integers of intense conflict that a significant change in structures was



called for. These were not only meant to be implemented in the short-term but evaluated in the mid- to long-term. The core of the proposed change was to clearly subordinate the administrative functions to the academic functions of the school.

This was to be achieved through the disbandment of the relatively new administrative system which had been set up and its replacement with several new positions to lead both the teaching and administrative wings. Administration was separated from the teaching and curriculum functions but made clearly accountable. Teaching bodies could no longer involve themselves in administration. No longer would administrators have a role in academic and curriculum matters but be solely concerned with business administration. The link between the two functions of teaching and administration was a new leadership group. Clear lines of reporting and accountability were built into new position descriptions and policies.

'Internal management' structures were set up for the new organisational groupings so as to guide elections to positions, meeting processes and the like. The new leadership group was to be the key link to the Board, which itself was provided with new meeting protocols.

Culture

The final layer of the model is culture. Culture is the shared values and symbols within the school community. I saw it, in this context, as a somewhat elusive concept particularly bound up with school leadership and the educational philosophy of the school. Proposed changes in the school needed to take account of this cultural level and in a sense the culture of the school had to change as well. At the same time it was readily apparent that the school needed to retain its particular identification with certain values and attitudes that attached to these. This provided not only a sense of identify but a sense of connectiveness to the past which could and can fortify the organisation against an uncertain future.

Stages of intervention

As we moved to change the school and its structures so that it could emerge out of this period of dysfunctional conflict the process was rather conventionally

seen and described as a series of stages which have to be gone through. These are *entry*, *planning*, *implementation*, *evaluation* and *institutionalisation*.

Entry is the initial engagement of a meaningful change agent in the process and involves scouting the parameters of the various elements of the conflict and the issues being faced by the organisation. It also involves a level of diagnosis of the problems.

Planning involves setting time-lines and objectives and putting forward the diagnosed scheme. Implementation involves the actual action phase of the change putting in place the new personal structures and processes. Evaluation involves ongoing feedback to designated elements and evaluating changes as a result. Institutionalisation is the process of formerly accepting the changes into the 'whole organisation' as relatively permanent. Each stage of the change process was seen as a recurring cycle of activity and it was emphasised that we must be prepared to go back as well as forward.

Resistance

It was to be expected that throughout these various phases various levels of resistance were met and had to be managed. Also, it was necessary for the proposed plan, which centred on structural change, to be modified as feedback was received and contingencies, which may not have been foreseen, were encountered. The change process is a complex one and the prime leadership elements being developed had to be prepared to work at a number of levels and across the whole school community to ensure that the change was successful. It was essential for the management of the school, as embodied in the Board and in the new managerial structures, to support the changes.

Conclusion

This article outlines only the beginning of those changes needed to be made in this school. There will need to be further changes as the process moves forward. A review of the changes indicated overall success in restoring relative harmony in the school, and better management and decision-making. The school is working again in a functional and productive way. Interestingly, the return of peace has revealed the true extent of the

damage done by the preceding period of extreme conflict. But this is another story. Importantly the school has moved forward and been able to confront the resistance and conflicts that have newly emerged. There is still much to be done but with patience, the appointment of the right staff, some luck, and the traditions inherent in its type of education providing the backbone, the school has and will continue to become a better place for staff and students. Meanwhile I can softly tip-toe away and get on with reading law books and the occasional ADR tome. ●

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