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EMPLOYMENT TIMES

MAKING OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR

Winds of change run into reality

Barack Obama and his advisers have a lot to answer for. In a way that defines the sloganeering global village, they turned the eye-glazing jargon of management consultants into the world's most potent political shorthand.

From Kurdistan to Tasmania, Japan to Iran, London to Sydney and an alarming number of places in between, "change" is the preferred political buzzword. Trying to find the similarities between Yukio Hatoyama, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, David Cameron, Nun al-Baki, Will Hodgman, Nick Clegg and Barry O'Farrell would test most people.

Yet each uses the promise of change: from the slavish, "Yes, we can change it", and banal, "Real change". To the action words, "Vote for change" and our very own "Start the change", from touchy feely, "Change that works for you", to the order, "Change". It is hard to imagine that a single word has so captured and defined a mood since the French Revolution and its slurring trio - liberte, egalite, fraternite.

For much of the first year of his presidency, the promise Obama would deliver "change we can believe in" was looking dangerously like something that would galvanise another generation of cynical disengagement. Then within a week he delivered healthcare reforms, freed up \$75 billion to increase access to tertiary education and found a way to agree with the Russians and reduce the number of nuclear weapons threatening the planet. Not a bad week at the office.

But every sinew of Obama's reforms is stretched by the reality of how they were won - the result of hard, complex, number-crunching work inspired by heart-breaking stories, but fraught with compromise, fear, uncertainty and ugly recriminations.

Yet ultimately faith in that exceptionalist American sentiment, "we don't fear the future... we shape it", prevailed. As the President said in his



First speech after the healthcare legislation won the votes it needed to become law. "This legislation will not fix everything that ails our healthcare system. But it moves us decisively in the right direction. This is what change looks like."

Obama is such a skilful politician he always knew that changing anything as complex as the American health system would require painstaking, incremental work on wicked problems. Making it happen required political leadership coupled with strategic policy development and ability to deliver.

The NSW Liberal leader, Barry O'Farrell, is promising a "radical change of attitude that flicks the switch from stagnation to action". It is hard to disagree with the sentiment, but making it happen, cutting through the vested interests, will demand deep knowledge, steady leadership and a public service able to do the hard, detailed work of strategy and implementation.

The reality is that change that lasts builds on what has gone before. As the tortuous, angry path to health reforms in America showed on the news most nights, there is no magic wand that can be waved without blood being shed.

This preference for fundamental, yet incremental, change is captured in the blueprint for the Australian public service, Ahead of the Game, released in Canberra this week.

It is a comprehensive and careful document, the product of detailed knowledge of the history and theory of effective public management - tempered with the compromises of political reality.

Goodbye job security, hello flexibility

Few people I meet in Sydney seem to have full-time jobs of the old-fashioned nine-to-five kind. Those I meet - doctors, graphic designers, teachers, journalists, sales assistants - often seem to be part-time, casual, freelance, self-employed, or on contract.

All the combinations of how to click into the work world are played out here. It's a place of flux and motion, one which styles itself as a global city and has more of a global way of doing things - fast, loose and transitory - than other Australian cities.

Many people appear as if poised for flight - they'll do one thing for a while, then they'll do something else, somewhere else. It is part of the Sydney character to have half an ear cocked, half a bag packed, ready for the next.

I meet a freelance animator in her thirties who says: "I've always been able to get work", before she acknowledges that there has always been money for projects in the 10 years she has been working.

I meet a subcontracting clown doctor in a labour-hire web, hired on a daily rate by a multinational that makes chocolates and donates her services to the Children's Hospital at Randwick.

And over dinner, she and a freelance graphic designer, both women in their forties, talk about their jobs in the way they may have talked about men. How it's



good for now, but it's also insecure. What about when they are old and grey? Or when times turn bad? Who will look after them? The clown doctor's part-time work intrudes into the rest of her life. "There's emails every day so you have to follow up - it seeps in. There are a lot of part-time employees and you get emails from them at 10pm and you think why are they [at work] so late?"

The designer misses superannuation, but the only jobs she has been offered have been casual or contract - work that doesn't include super. She is on the second tier of the workforce. "If I enjoyed the job and someone offered me full-time I would jump at it. Companies want short-term contractors."

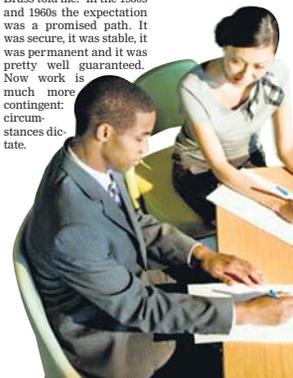
Workers are not expected to stay long with one company any more, and find it easy to leave because they feel no ties or loyalty. Who is creating this restlessness, them or us?

Charles Brass, a former HR manager at Ford, saw first-hand the weakening of industrial relations in

"Some circumstances are determined by individuals, so you now have young people saying, 'Stuff you, I don't want to work for you', and you now have employers saying, 'Stuff you, I don't want you to work for me'."

"The good thing is people are not locked into something just serving out time because it's all you have. The downside clearly is people find it more and more difficult to economically survive because they can't attach themselves to work in a way that attracts lenders of money - and even renting - because they don't look stable enough."

One of the dilemmas of the modern world is that there are not enough jobs," Brass told me. "In the 1950s and 1960s the expectation was a promised path. It was secure, it was stable, it was permanent and it was pretty well guaranteed. Now work is much more contingent - circumstances dictate."



There is no such thing as failure

There is no such thing as failure - only feedback - we can learn from our failures. Do not let apparent failures beat you up, learn from them. As humans, we tend to be harder on ourselves than others are. A small child learning to walk never fails to get up and try and try and try until success is achieved. It is the same in life: every failure is a step closer to success.

Emotions are notoriously fickle: to let your emotions be your rule of success or failure is asking for trouble. Do not listen to what we would call failures. They chose to learn from these and move toward their goal. The last of the human freedoms is to choose your attitude in whatever circumstance you may find yourself.

Your inner circle: Many successful men and women throughout history and up to the present day have a trusted inner-circle of friends and advisors. Choose this inner-circle with great care and wisdom.

Choice: It is all down to choice. That is your attitude toward failure and success. Many of those who succeed have a track record littered with what we would call failures. They chose to learn from these and move toward their goal. The last of the human freedoms is to choose your attitude in whatever circumstance you may find yourself.

Issue or pursuit? The more you aim for something the more likely you are to miss it. Put quite simply success must happen. This is why the successful entrepreneur makes it look easy - they just let it happen. Do not care for success so much as following your principles, working toward the future and eventually success will be their with you - precisely because you forgot to aim for it.

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The Culture ... Manager's dilemma; Using power vs exhibiting power

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Not only will it help retain top performers, it provides a blueprint of what attributes to look for in applicants.

Sample questions might be:

- Are you being compensated fairly?
- Are your benefits comparable to those of the company's competitors?
- Does the company value your work?
- Are you getting the training you need?
- Does open communication exist in the company?
- Do you feel challenged?
- Do your values match those of the company?

You might notice that a culture audit asks questions typically asked during an exit interview! Why ask these important questions after the company has already lost its investment in an employee. Audits uncover potential friction points as well as sources of synergy, and generate possibilities for internal process improvements within the organization. By uncovering trouble spots in advance, the audit encourages fun and creative ways for improving the already-existing culture.

Such creativity can be as boundless. Growth oriented companies are notorious for coming up with notably unusual ways to improve the work environment: off-site retreats, impromptu recognition programs, and the creative use of office space are all examples of how companies implement creative ideas to build their culture. These are just a few of the ideas often generated from the insights gleaned in a culture audit.

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By Nishantha Kamaladasa, CEO, Distance Learning Centre Ltd.

Power is the most important tool a manager has in guiding people under him. It is the ability to power legitimately with assuming (physically post as the manager. As per the regulations of the institutions he could exercise this power to make people perform their duties and if not to punish them make them to quit or to remove them.

This power could be shown (in various forms) and used (in various ways), rather it could be shown or used.

Managers in this part of the world choose to show the power than use it; where as managers in the West and the Far East mostly use it than show it. Could this be one reason why we are poor and less developed?

Showing power against using it.

To drive this point, I would like you to imagine what could happen in a train when the inspectors catch a person without a ticket. More often passenger would be bullied and scolded, if such a thing happens in our soil. If he pleads for mercy and sympathy, showing his weak and incapable soul he could win the heart of the inspector; he could get out of the situation even without a punishment. In the West the passenger will be called "Sir" and politely asked to pay the penalty. He has no option but to succumb to the punishment.

There is a famous saying that those dogs who bark loud aren't the type who bites. They bark because they are scared to bite;

scared of the consequences of biting. Use of power is associated with risk.

The same thing applies to the managers. Managers don't use power because they are scared about the consequences (physically and morally). Hence they show power in all its manifestations but rarely use it, even nominally.

Showing power, hence, is very much related with the inclination to avoid uncertainty; to put it in another way to avoid risk (both physical and moral risk).

In this part of the world, people are likely to avoid risk than facing it, whenever they have an option; in spite of risk bringing better returns. Farmers refusing to cultivate any cash crop other than rice, many people agitating for government jobs, larger group willing to move in to town planning even with a lesser salary, popular belief that known devil is better than the unknown god, can be given as evidence.

Risk is high in collectivistic and caring societies. In addition they also know that the risk in taking action against an individual (especially one that is sympathized by others) is higher, in a society where collectivistic and caring cultural attributes prevail.

In collectivistic societies a person is not an isolated individual but a member of a larger group, which normally take care of its members in spite of what he did, provided the member is loyal to the group. Hence a manager taking action against a subordinate often has to face the challenges of the group, which could be



quite threatening (physically). The members of the group consider it as a threat to the whole group than to a single individual.

We witness hospital staff, university students and private bus drivers getting in to streets agitating against the authorities when their colleagues are punished for errand deeds.

In a caring society a person who is weak and incapable has to be looked after no matter what he/she does. If any one tries to punish a weak individual there is a moral risk in addition to the physical risk. Society would blame the manager (authorities) for the same.

Very often we see people who are alcoholic and engage in errand deeds as a result are tolerated and sympathetically looked at even in very formal institutions.

Power shown is power

Power Distance

Show of power is not only done in every action. It is shown in the office settings, resource allocation and in every communication and transaction. A distance is maintained by the superior with the subordinate and subordinate also make sure that the same distance is maintained by him too; there is a show of superiority and inferiority by maintaining this distance. The subtle message given by the subordinate is that I show my inferiority and I expect you to look after this weak and obedient soul. The message given by the superior is I am ready to protect you, you being very loyal and obliging. This invisible and very primitive agreement is in force in most institutions. A superior or subordinate who violates this agreement will be reprimanded, by the group or the superior, respectively. Superior entering in to this agreement has to surrender his powers to the group. Power takes a "visible" form and hence is without "energy"; its usable form.

This is why very few in this part of the world are punished for errand work and especially for negligence. If one looks at carefully you find most of the time people who are punished normally, are people who have failed to be a part of a larger group or had not been loyal to the group or the leader.

Errors and omissions happen - No one is held responsible. No wonder why very few people are found fault for corruption and bribery by the Commission for Corruption and Bribery and also why no politician who has done errand work end up in jail, though political platforms are full of stories about wrong doings by the politicians. But on the other hand we also find politicians going to jail for failure to stay obedient, not toeing the line of the group and the leader; not showing the respect or not maintaining the distance with their superiors.

Larger characteristics are responsible. What we discuss here does not stem necessarily from flaws of individuals but due to our cultural characteristics, which we all share. Hence the attempt here is not to point fingers on one or other agency or individual, but to raise it as a larger issue.

