Enabling Improvement by Unleashing the Power of Collaboration

Richard Blayden – Previously Associate & Principal Consultant, Hatch Associates, Australia

The Problem

There always has been, and perhaps always will be inconsistency in the level of success achieved by improvement initiatives in the areas of operations and maintenance. Sometimes improvement flows naturally. Sometimes, achieving improvement is like running knee-deep in mud, consuming enormous effort but making little progress.

The extent to which that inconsistency is dependant on the quality of the improvement initiative itself, the leadership at the time, or the buy-in of the people involved is arguably not well researched. However, one fact does remain above all else. If the people involved don't understand the initiative, or if their attitude is such that they either don't support it, or don't collaborate effectively in their support of it, then the initiative is unlikely to be successful.
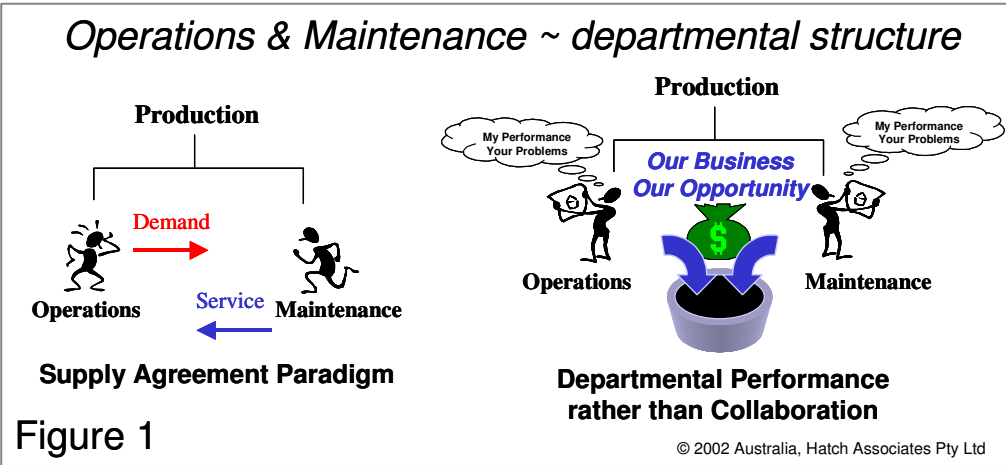
Collaboration and Teamwork

Effective collaboration is easily visible in many aspects of life. One excellent example is a quick look at the most successful sports teams - the AFL and NRL premiers, the Wallabies, the World Cup soccer champions and many more. One dreadful example is the curse of the terrorist networks that plague the World. Each of these teams and/or networks displays a similar characteristic. It is the willingness of the people involved to work together within a framework of mutually agreed guidelines (organization structure and process) to achieve their mutually idealised outcomes.

Much has been researched and written about team performance and the differences between high performing and "ordinary" teams. We will not repeat that work here except to highlight a key aspect about life in a team. Take for example, the best World Cup soccer team. Do you see eleven players each of whom has ten customers? The simple answer is no! You see eleven players each of whom has complete trust in the other ten and is prepared to pass the ball and support the team play to achieve the team goal of winning the match. Put simply, the members of the team can rely on each other – always.
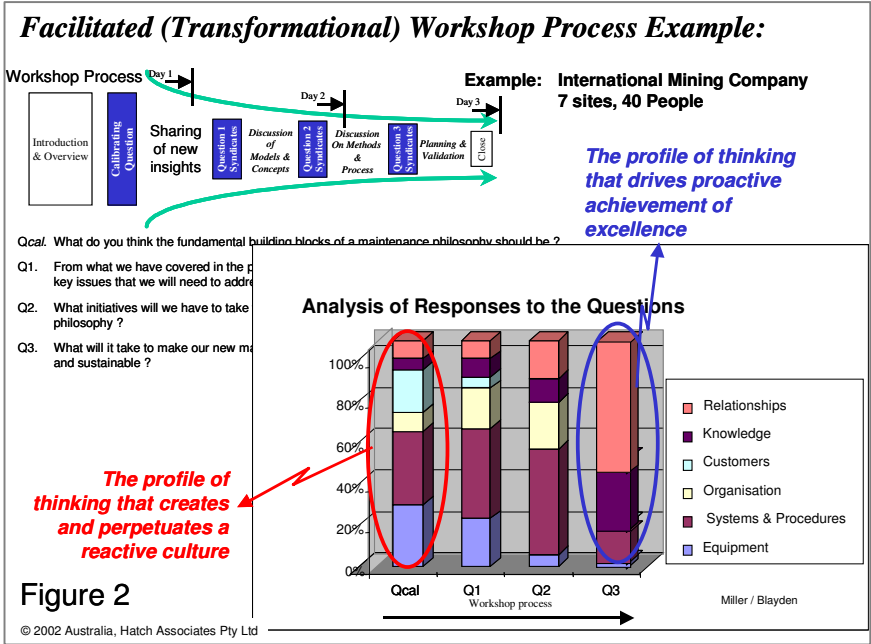
But when we look at our own organizations, we usually see a typical departmental structure with a myriad of customer/supplier relationships. Sometimes these relationships are cemented in supply agreements developed out of Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy. More commonly, they are simply there as an outcome of the traditional organization design paradigms held by the people in charge.

Unfortunately, such paradigms, together with the departmental objectives and performance measures (and expectations) they nurture, often inhibit reliable and consistent collaboration between departments. Sometimes, they can even promote and reward departmental performance oriented behaviours above the behaviours that would otherwise lead to improvement in overall business performance (see Figure 1)

Figure 1

Operations & Maintenance ~ departmental structure

Supply Agreement Paradigm

Departmental Performance rather than Collaboration

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Challenging the Paradigms

A process for successfully challenging paradigms is illustrated in the case where Hatch were retained to facilitate discussion between a number of people coming together from several different mine sites (spanning several countries) with the aim of collectively agreeing upon a unified "maintenance philosophy". Our approach in these instances is to lead the participants through a facilitated discussion and reflection process (workshop) to derive answers to a series of focusing questions. The specific questions are set to suit the nature of the requirement and are sequenced between sessions of sharing new insights and reflecting on actual situational information. The facilitated workshop process and the case study outcomes are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Facilitated (Transformational) Workshop Process Example:

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Following this workshop, we analysed all the answers to the focusing questions (as developed by the participants during syndicate breakout sessions) and categorised them by affinity grouping into issues associated with "Relationships", "Knowledge", "Customers", "Organization", "Systems and Procedures", and "Equipment".

The results of this analysis are most interesting in that they display an almost complete inversion in the profile of thinking from the "before" (our calibrating question – what do we think now) to the "after" (our final question about what behaviours need to displayed to make the implementation of the new philosophy sustainable).

The most dramatic change was in the growing emphasis on *relationships* (collaboration) and *knowledge* (measurement ~ and understanding of root cause) over the traditional aspects of *equipment*, *systems and procedures*, and *organizational accountability* (make someone responsible then hold them to account).

It was here that we first realised that the concept of the internal "*customer*" had disappeared in favour of improved *relationships* and *knowledge*. **Could the paradigm of the internal "*customer*" be redundant in the context of a wholly collaborative environment?**

We have found that many other important issues can arise during the application of this facilitated-discussion technique. With some careful forethought in the sequence and wording of the questions, the process can also surface many of the issues that would otherwise remain as hidden barriers to the successful implementation of an improvement initiative – such as a new system, technique or improved business process.

Another classic case was where the people employed in a site maintenance department felt that they had no obligation whatever to support or initiate any improvement – why should they when the people in the "other" department across the road "sat around drinking tea and talking all day". The problem here was one of assumptions and perceptions rather than fact – and the situation was perpetuated due to poor interaction and communications. In reality, the people in the apparently "lazy department" spent a lot of time in discussing and diagnosing process failures and working up solutions; a high value-adding activity - knowledge work rather than visible manual work.

Imagine how much money that company could have wasted trying to implement solution-oriented improvements if such firmly entrenched "invisible barriers" were left un-addressed.

The way forward is relatively simple (but like common sense, not very common) – open discussion between departmental teams to understand each other's contribution and dispel the inappropriate assumptions that block progress.

Although simple discussion will help groups to understand each other's current businesses, we have found that a more formal facilitated-discussion process is required to establish long-term collaboration. The intent is to generate a level of convergence on what the common goals are, how people will contribute (in terms of outputs and behaviours) towards achieving those goals, and what business processes will be followed to enable sustainable achievement of those goals. This is a closed loop process with continuous reinforcement of the collaborative approach (Figure 3).

Facilitated Discussion - Building a Collaborative Environment:

Figure 3

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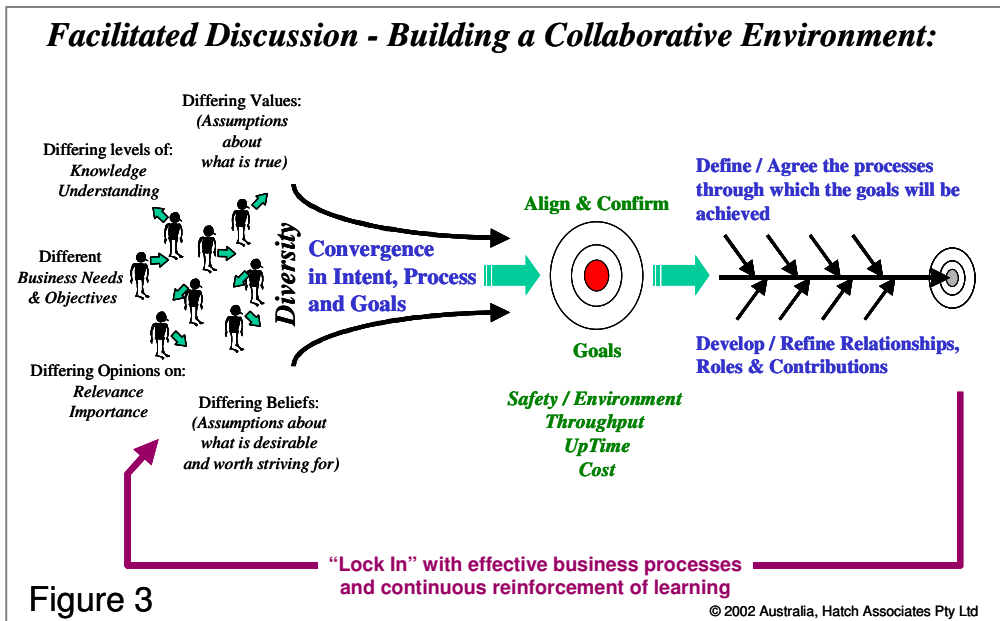
Enabling Structural Change

We have found the issue of collaboration to be critical in facilitating major organizational change – particularly where the emotive issues of rationalising, outsourcing and potential downsizing come into play. Such instances include the integration of independent businesses into a single business unit, and the restructuring of an organization where a culmination of external and internal issues were likely to sink the business if radical change was not achieved within a relatively short time.

In these instances, our approach is to work with a team (working group) comprising shop floor, union, supervisory and management representatives in a collaborative and open communication and analysis process. The pivotal starting point is that there are no pre-defined agenda or solutions, no secrets, and no barriers to communication other than to protect information that is either personal or sensitive to the business – everything will be done openly and from first principles.

Typically, the work starts with a team building exercise where, as well as setting the ground rules for team interaction, we explore and address the issues and concerns directly affecting the team members. We then take that process a step further by identifying all of the other people who are either directly or indirectly involved or impacted by the potential change and establish all the issues or questions that need to be addressed and answered to keep everyone engaged in the process.

From that basis, we begin the analysis of the current situation – researching and validating issues and transforming the information found into a series of wall-posters that are displayed in an open work area. As the analysis proceeds and observations are made, and as recommendations emerge, we post every bit of information up on the wall. Throughout the process, every employee is at liberty to view what we are doing and

question what is going on. In this way, everybody is drawn into a common context of the facts and issues. They see everybody else's concerns, and they start to understand the alternatives, and how different possible outcomes might affect themselves, other employees, the community, the environment and the business. They start moving from a culture of blaming each other to recognising common threats and opportunities.

This openness of communication and the free access to information that highlights what is happening builds a spirit of collaboration. Even where people have an intense dislike for the concepts of radical change, they can still be enrolled in the process to both influence it where they can, and just as importantly, to police it and make sure it remains fair, open and honest. This collaborative process has precipitated major industrial and organizational change (eg: 85% of recommended actions were implemented in 12 months) without any directly related industrial action. This is in significant contrast to the many negotiated (confrontational) situations that have plagued organizations in the past.

This raises an interesting challenge. **If this level of radical change can be precipitated through a collaborative approach, then is the concept of "*negotiation*" becoming redundant** in the same way that the concept of the internal "*customer*" might also be approaching its "use by date" in a wholly collaborative (networking) context?

Enabling Improvement

Through experience we have learned an important lesson: No matter how good the improvement initiative is, if it is not well understood and perceived as both relevant and beneficial by all the people involved, it will most likely be confronted with a potentially overwhelming degree of resistance (inertia) within the organization.

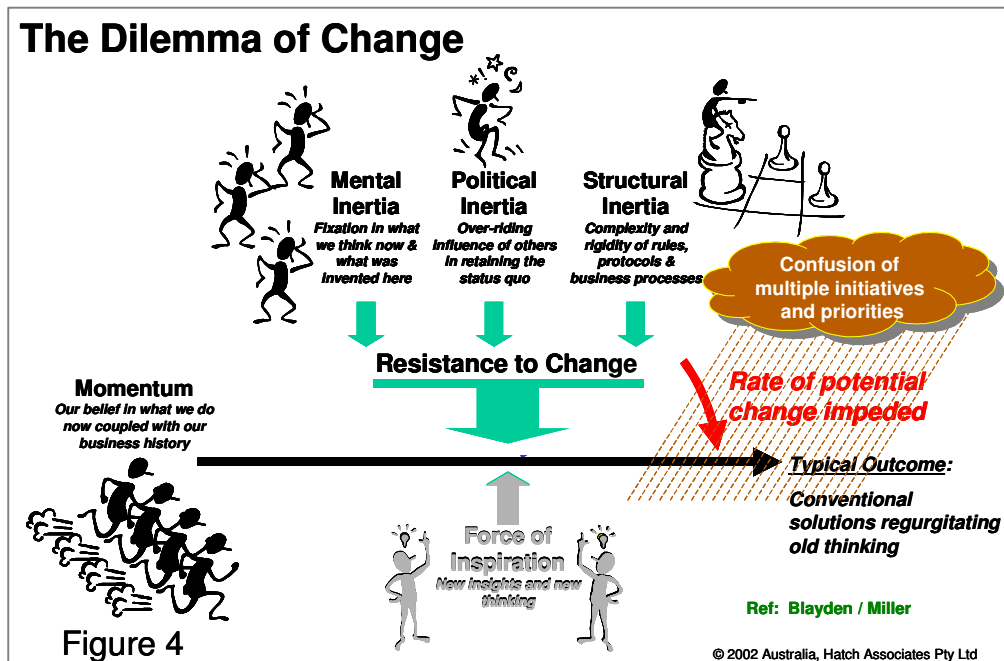Under these conditions, most improvement initiatives eventually fail to fulfil their expectations (see Figure 4).

The Dilemma of Change

Mental Inertia
Fixation in what we think now & what was invented here

Political Inertia
Over-riding influence of others in retaining the status quo

Structural Inertia
Complexity and rigidity of rules, protocols & business processes

Confusion of multiple initiatives and priorities

Resistance to Change

Momentum
Our belief in what we do now coupled with our business history

Rate of potential change impeded

Typical Outcome:

Conventional solutions regurgitating old thinking

Force of Inspiration
New insights and new thinking

Ref: Blayden / Miller

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Figure 4

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Rather than pushing the improvement initiative as a management directed "*solution*", we have found that engaging people (through our facilitated discussion techniques) in the situation can seed both the realization of the need to improve, and a collaborative approach to addressing that need. When the level of collaboration reaches a sufficient "critical mass", it naturally establishes an internal leadership "pull" that can upset the organizational inertia and unblock the pathway to accelerated improvement (Figure 5).

Figure 5
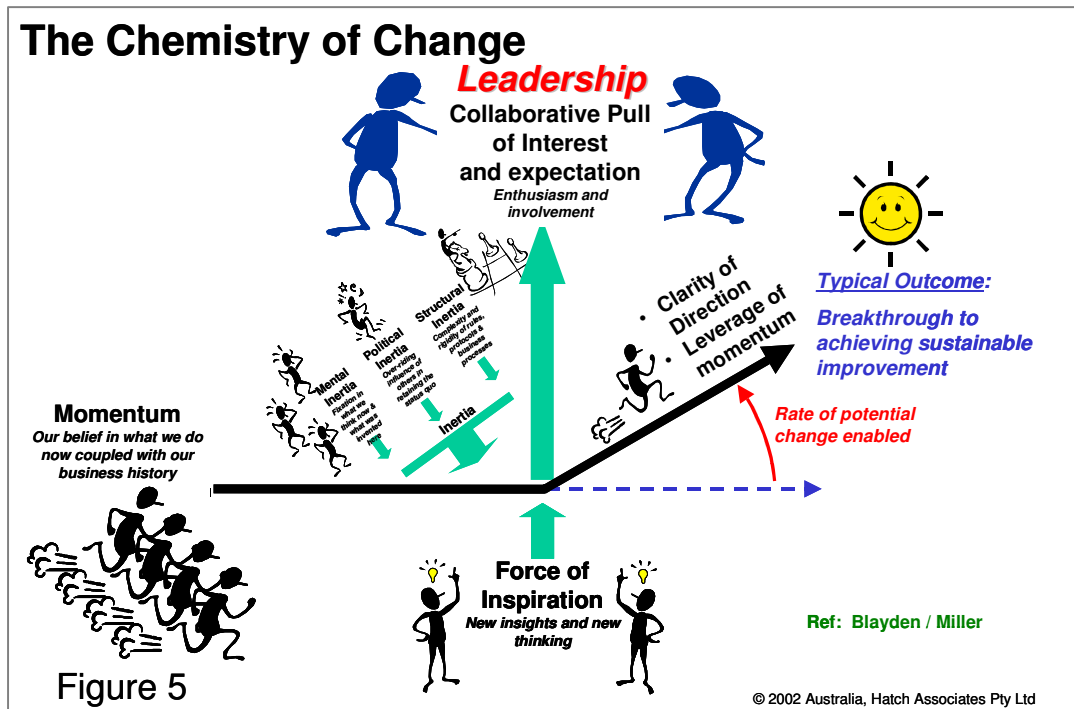
A big advantage is that this approach also activates the collective skills and imagination of the people involved - either in adapting to "best practice" or more commonly, by innovating and implementing something better!

Note: *I would like to acknowledge the value of working with my friends and colleagues Frank Miller, Gareth Jones, Mike Coles, Ross Parslow, David Jenkins, Steven Badman, Ian King and the rest of the Hatch Consulting Team over the past few years in our endeavours to better understand and facilitate successful organizational change.*

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