Six Months in a Leaky Boat (T. Finn, 1982)

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INTRODUCTION

Change is considered to be a constant in organisations with only the rate and reasons changing (Oakland and Tanner, 2007; Senior, 2002). The need for change is clear: to stay the same when everything around and within is shifting would be to lead to certain failure over time. However, despite the vast array of literature, tools and consultants available to support change, the majority are still unsuccessful (Higgs and Rowland, 2005). Early research was seeking to find a predictable model of change (Senior, 2002; Kotter, 1996) which was treating organisations, and those who worked within them, as machines that could be managed in a precise way (Morgan, 1986). Subsequently, there was a view that a clear linear model was not possible and that, owing to the complexity of each situation, a more contextual approach would be required. Nevertheless, there was still a desire to establish which factors were most likely to affect change more positively. It is widely accepted that people are crucial to effective change in a variety of ways: as individuals they influence outcomes both as the leaders and the implementers of the change (Higgs and Rowland, 2005) and as a group their skills, knowledge and ability become a crucial resource that enables organisations to develop and deliver their core business (Barney, 1991; Jones, 2001; Zaugg and Thom, 2002). Consequently, research has been focussed in these areas, considering how areas such as leadership, capability and human capital can enable or reduce effective change implementation. Initially this paper will consider how change is affected by those working within organisations and the potential impact of employment relationships upon change. It will then use a qualitative case to explore how the analysis of context matters in terms of the employment relationship present within an organisation if there is to be successful change. In the case employees described their organisation as a 'leaky boat' and the metaphor will be used to discuss the findings and consider the implications.

EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS AND CHANGE

Employment relations in its simplest terms considers the relationship between management and workers within an organisation, especially how these two sets of ideas are structured and administered in order to achieve the multiple goals and outcomes required by both sides of this association (Gallie, White, Yuan and Tomlinson, 1998). It is clear that how such a relationship is undertaken must have significant impacts upon organisational outcomes as, where there is inequity in a relationship, it creates uncertainty and concern as to the future (Atchison 1991; Rousseau, 1994); the likelihood of poor organizational citizenship behaviours increases (Shore and Tetrick, 1994) and the possibility for change reduces as there is less feeling of support or partnership in the relationship being undertaken (Lepak and Snell; 1999).

A perspective of human capital, an important, manageable and, potentially, changeable resource which has a direct relationship between the way human capital is managed and the organisational outcomes (Barney, 1991; Haesli and Boxall, 2005) should lead to change being undertaken in ways that develop or maintain positive, contextually relevant, employment relationships. Lepak and Snell (1999) identified four forms of human resources architecture (alliance, contract, internal development and acquisition) and argue that each of the four has a different form of employment relationship. What forms this architecture is the way that the leadership perceives the human resources and its contribution to the organisation. For example, where the employees are seen as allies the system will be collaborative and the relationship will be partnering, whereas if there is a contract mentality on the part of management there will be a compliance focus and the employment relationship will be transactional and easily breached. If, as is often claimed, there needs to be employee 'buy-in' for effective change, then the lack of a

real relationship will recue the opportunities for change success. Consequently, the perception of the human resource contribution by the leadership will directly affect the form of employment relationship and the potential for change success.

CHANGE LEADERSHIP

That change is dependent upon the success of the leadership is well documented (Beer, Russell and Eisenstat, 1991; Graetz, 2000; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Their role is to set the vision and goals for the organisation to achieve and to create a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996), to develop structures that support the desired outcomes (Waddell, Cummings and Worley, 2007) and to communicate and demonstrate the desired new behaviours that will lead to and support change (Graetz, 2000; refs) and to develop and support cultures appropriate for change (Lakomski, 2001). Increasingly it is argued that there is a need for "distributed leadership" where practice is "distributed over leaders, followers and their situation and incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals" (Spillane et al., 2001 in Harris et al., 2007, p. 338). In this concept the functions of the leader are shared across a range of individuals and the task is achieved via the interactions of the individuals leading to leadership across a group (Harris et al., 2007; Yukl, 2002). This will enable greater buy in from those involved in change (Platow et al., 1998), greater organisational flexibility (Harris, 2004; Grint, 2005) faster and more effective change and increased capacity building (Harris et al., 2007), and better decision making (Whitby, 2006). Such leadership would enable the ongoing support of new organisational systems that are there to develop and reinforce the desired changes. What is certain is that where there has been one form of human resource architecture or leadership style, any alteration would need to be undertaken with great care or it would be seen to breach the psychological contract held by employees and actively reduce the possibilities of organisational change. We will now use a case to demonstrate how contextually inappropriate leadership led to breaches in the psychological contract and, thereby, a breaking down of an effective employment relationship.

METHODOLOGY

The subject of this research and its epistemological underpinnings align it with a qualitative approach with the focus upon exploration and the development of insights (Creswell 2003; Strauss and Corbin 1998 ; Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Creswell, 1994). The findings are based upon empirical data gathered from a case study of a service-based organisation. An original investigation established the organisational context and the positive psychological contracts of employees at time 1. A set of follow up interviews were undertaken at time 2 determining the changes that had occurred and their implications. The data was collected using an ethnographic approach of in-depth semi-structured interviews with a variety of organisational stakeholders. Similar questions were asked in both the initial and follow up stages of the data collection to the same 15 participants, 40% of the population. Two of the previously interviewed participants had resigned from the organisation, but agreed to follow up sessions. The interviews lasted between 30 – 45 minutes per session. The data was transcribed, enabling an analysis using thematic coding to be used in NVIVO (Pandit, 1996) as an initial analysis tool. During the process of coding the data several themes began to emerge, which permitted a range of issues to be explored. In this paper, the themes that will be highlighted are those that relate to the nature, rate and speed of organisational change and their implications for the employees and the organisation. A major metaphorical theme which emerged out of the data was "six months in a leaky boat"; this has been selected as the focus for the analysis.

CONTEXT

This paper concerns a three year period of change beginning when three Admirals (Owner/Directors) bought a new boat for their fleet. The new addition was put under the command of a Vice Admiral who currently commanded the 'best' boat in the fleet. On the surface this organisation looked like all the other boats in the fleet. However, it had a different a

team of officers and crew who provided service to two distinct types of customers, whereas all the other organisations in the group had only one type of customer and provided one type of service. The interview data indicated that the boat began to sail into uncharted waters through this lack of organisational understanding with terms such as "*the wild seas of change*" frequently used by participants to explain the turbulence that had occurred during this time. In addition to these continual aspects of change, the participants discussed three revolutionary periods of changes when two long term leaders resigned, with one participant noting "*we keep losing our leaders*". After the first two years and six months of continuous change, the first two captains appointed had resigned in turn and a third Captain had been appointed. At this time the employees were positive and responded with support, enthusiasm and commitment for the new Captain. Still, this change was to be short lived and the theme of staff turnover continued as less than nine months later, all but one of the senior management team, including the third Captain, had their contracts terminated. The new and fourth Captain's mission was to get the control of the boat to ensure its smooth sailing. However, it is an unpleasant fact that boats can leak (have problems) when in rough seas, as that is when that boats are put under maximum stress and duress. Therefore, the first thing that the Vice Admiral and Captain needed to do was to plug any existing leaks and to prevent any new ones.

STOPPING THE LEAKS? MORE SPEED, MORE POWER AND ROCKING THE BOAT

When the Vice Admiral gave an order to speed up the boat, the crew were given the 'Yo-Heave-Ho' by the Captain; an act perceived by the participants as being, if you speed up the ship you will temporarily stop the boat from sinking, the three Admirals would not notice the incoming water and management would be able to find and plug the leaks. Speed would create an image to the world that the boat was still afloat and changes were reaping the rewards of control; internally, however, it was opined that the leaks were getting bigger and harder to plug. The rate of change was increased through the arbitrary implementation of corporate policy and the inclusion of more rules and processes with one participant noting that "*head office don't follow* [them] *anyway*".

Moreover, it was determined by management that the structure and hierarchy of the 'best boat' and the new boat were similar; therefore, the changes would not be complicated. However, a major difference was that previous leaders had reduced the power differentials within the organisation (Bongsoon and Connelley, 2002). The new leadership kept control over the boat and increased the power differentials thereby rocking the boat. The speed of the boat was also increased through a closed door culture whereby decisions were made through the use of an autocratic management style, to impose order and gain control of the boat. Crew noted that no discussion was held and no feedback loops were in place when change was made. As a result of this lack of distributed leadership, one participant described what would have been a part of the normal growth and change of any organisation as a chaotic change: "*the centralis*[ation] *of employees and customers records through a tailor made, untested database service system has lead to chaos... customers records and details are missing, products and services changed without notifications… we have no voice, no one listens to us*".

Rocking the boat in conjunction with speed continued as a strategy employed to disguise the leaks in the boat which raised the issues of busyness and lack of time: "*We are all so busy with changes all the time we don't have time to do anything else*". Others felt they were losing their sea legs when the boat was rocked, if on shaky ground, "*we would not notice that the boat was leaking*". Management thought they were plugging the leaks to get control of the ship by trying to restructure the shape of the ship, when what they did was create more leaks. Supplementary to the unintended creation of leaks was the perception by Officers and Crew that there was deliberate deconstruction of teamwork, trust and co-operation amongst staff, departments and between workers and management. Individual employees were given advice by the Vice Admiral and new Captain, as an example "y*ou should pick the side that you are on, the old team or the new one*" and "*the remaining senior manager is venomous and in one week will be sacked*". Administration staff also stated that "*…we have been told that we are not to provide*

you [an original member of the management] *or your staff with any* [administration] *support what so ever"* and *"we are not to do anything for the remaining senior manager and their team"*.

More speed was added by means of other forms of deconstruction and *"chaos"* (Rizzuto and Maloney, 2008): the management made its physical presence felt through the movement in the workplace, this in turn created bigger leaks. *"My adjunct office and four other offices were cleared out, no one was notified, faculty member's personal resources and papers were lost and thrown out. On my investigation of this matter, I was directed to a consultant who was implementing operational rooms' division changes. All five adjunct offices were targeted and supposed to be made up for student rooms, on reflection I now know they were not completed for at least two more months, they have no bathrooms and have only been used once for the two career week students... When I asked [the Captain], he explained, that [the Vice Admiral] said this had to be done and so be it. Academic staff offices are to be made into customer rooms with …Customer details were lost, all my files and file notes are missing, my personal resources were lost, fifteen years of [work] just thrown out - all my … materials missing, my stationary stolen or tossed out, and my learning props and materials gone missing... I am very upset and I got no assistance or response from any member for the management team, they would not even speak to me. I was just ignored".* Deconstruction and reconstruction though this method of chaos not only destroyed the management worker relationship but it enlarged existing leaks, making them harder to plug.

What appeared to participants as newly created leaks seemed celebrated and ignored by management at the same time. Previously in this organisation there has *been "a tradition of farewelling staff when they leave who move to other* [boats]… *in a positive manner and spirit of camaraderie, wishing them well"* in their new ship. One long-term Officer, employed prior to the 'new management' taking over, who was a department co-ordinator and had been working in the organisation for 12 years resigned but none of the new management team was prepared to do anything for the farewell: *"in fact they just ignored and did not acknowledge his contribution or leaving"* and *"another Officer had to do all the organizing and undertake the speeches the* [Captain] *took no interest"*. Another participant noted. *"I had to do all the operational tasks and then when it came to doing the* [farewell] *speech, the* [Captain] *would not even speak at the gathering, and say farewell. He did not even attend the event".* On the other hand, when any employees resigned who had been hired by the 'new management', a great deal of effort was put into saying goodbye and wishing them well*: "We have had six farewells of employees who have been here for less than three months".*

STAFF TURNOVER AND PLUGGING THE LEAKS

One of the major leaks that emerged from the interview data was loss of corporate knowledge and *"good people".* As the rate of change increased, the rate of staff turnover increased by over four times that of the same two and half year period prior. The crew were aware that there were some existing leaks in the boat, and staff leaving was a major leak. In addition to the full time staff turnover reaching an all time high, there was also an increase in casual staff turnover, which no longer allowed management to supplement their full time labour base when required in peak trading times. As such, management began the job of plugging the leaks.

In the follow up interviews with the crew, examples of unpaid, inexperienced or unqualified personnel were discussed as forms of plugging the leaks. In some cases, the young Officers and crew were only being paid at trainee rates, not paid at all or employment contract rates had been reduced significantly. Some customers were used as unpaid crewmembers; they commented that management used them to fill the staffing gaps/leaks. *"we have been put onto night work … with no notice and no training… to cover staff shifts the management could not cover…they just don't have anyone else to do it".* Paid crew also commented on additional duties given to them that were greatly beyond their duty statements, role, salary and positional authority. *"...There are no finance staff on* [the boat] *to sort out customer's* [financial] *issues, payments and funds,* [as trainees] *we have been instructed and are expected to deal with*

customers and their finance issues"; "Previously we as… [Customer service] staff had been advised by the by [the Captain], that finance and customer services must be kept as separate sections… This time we were told that we must tell the customers to pay up in one week or they will not be able to [use facilities'] ". Thus the analysis revealed that, when some leaks were being plugged, other leaks were being created.

As the Captain proceeded with his strategy, more employees resigned. Comments made by staff revealed that some staff, once stable, became unhappy and resigned causing additional leaks. One young Officer noted, "*many of the new staff are less qualified than what is required… existing contracts have been ignored and changed".* Another participant noted *that "… my contract rate was negotiated with me and I began* [working] *in all good faith. When it came time to sign the contract the rate was reduced by 55%...I spoke with the Captain of the ship and he said he simply could not afford to pay me the average rate of pay that is the standard"* in this area. This left other full time crew members to take up the slack, creating additional pressure and more leaks, "*I was asked to pick up more* [work] *as we could not afford to pay someone else".* Some staff were terminated or forced out and management were not able to fill these positions: one example noted by participants; "*the organisation has had three Executive Chefs in three months"* … [and] "*two purchasing Officers in five months".* One employee made the following comments on resignation. "*I am disgusted by the lack of integrity by the management of the organisation",* and another staff member noted that the "*work and its environment had been made intolerable, …there are so many barriers and blocks to me doing my work on a daily basis that it Is just not worth the hassle".* The crew's perceptions were that management made any long term crew 'walk the plank'. In two cases staff, went on sick leave and did not return, resigned and left the sinking ship. , This resulted in increased leaks or poor organizational citizenship (Shore and Tetrick, 1994): "*I don't care what they do anymore,* [the other Officers]*… I only worry about what I do; they are too young and inexperienced to be* [Officers]. *They can barely do supervision and …set ups… There is a favourite of the* [new Captain] *and she is all talk…all the time… the new Captain does not act or support us* [old Staff] *or take any interest or action in the business when I am on shift".* The crew felt that they were on turbulent waters with no support leading to increased feelings of fear and no buy in where change was concerned.

Other employment relations issues were raised by participants about the leadership of the new Captain, when he ignored existing employment contracts for two crewmembers and one Officer. The Officer was explicit in the interview, "*new management has not lived up to the contract conditions, in my contract…there was a clause that the company would pay for me to undertake a MBA course, they ignored this and did not fulfil the conditions of the contract signed".* This rocking of the boat by management created an uncertain relationship for the future (Atchison 1991; Rousseau, 1994) and, as a result he resigned. His comments reflect that he was "*disgusted by the lack of integrity"* by the Captain in not honouring his contact terms and conditions with the firm. *…"here, there is no transparency, closed doors practice all the time, if things were discussed instead of a few people holding court and making decisions in isolation and …being underhand …more transparency is needed like it used to be when I started".* This statement demonstrates a clear lack of trust and low levels of relationship building by management in trying to make change. It seemed easier when plugging leaks to remove perceived obstacles rather than building a relationship or to change your approach when making change. This resulted in creating more leaks through lack of trust and respect.

FILLING THE HOLES WITH MONEY

Participant's perceptions also reflected awareness that new management were plugging the leaks in the boat with money, that they had a treasure chest of gold: "*A large amount of money ($400,000) has been spent since the new Captain took over in 4 weeks… Previous to this, in October the …*[old] *management were told that they could not to spend any of the capital and furniture fittings and equipment budgets... and indeed they were asked to save $500,000 dollars on top of this".* Additional statements about "*splashing out money"* or "*throwing buckets*

of money" in to block the holes were raised by the participants. Other forms of plugging holes with money are themed as incentives: *"The new Officers are paid more than local industry rates to induce them to come to the organisation…whilst current staffs, doing the same job rates are being reduced considerably".* On one occasion, stakeholders' (participants) were gathered together and a speech given by the Vice Admiral and Captain, leading them and the customers to believe that due to the most recent management changes the all their problems would be fixed and the boat would keep afloat. However, the data indicated that, in fact, many stakeholders noted reduced quality products and customer service with concerns regarding *"lack of trade"* and *"low customer numbers"* and the *"potential closure of the business".* One interviewee made comment that the products such as food and other services such as room cleaning *"were far worse than they had ever been … food is getting worse… I cannot eat it* [the food] *at all and there is no point in saying anything; everyone is tired if saying anything. If it was not for the strong educational service we would have walked out… the* [organisation] *is cutting costs, by providing very poor quality and quantity of food,* [customers] *are unable to have their rooms cleaned for up to four weeks at a time, as they could not find staff to assist… we are just not listened to".*

CULTURAL LEAKS, LEADERSHIP AND PLUGS

In addition cultural norms and practices put into practice from the 'Admirals ship' to plug leaks made the situation worst. The 'best ship' cultural norms played out in other ways that added to leaks in the boat. There appears to be one set of rules for one part of the ships crew and a different set for the others. One Officer noted the "*new* [Captain] *manages through friendship…that he seems to favour people and treat them as friends".* It was noted by participants that on several occasions that It was unfair, that the new captain, Officers and crew are consuming *"whatever 'they' want to eat and drink into our dining area* [and]… *when we as customers do not have access to the same quality of food and drinks… We [customers] have lime cordial – we make up ourselves and sub standard food and they bring out great looking food and sit with us or at the next table".* The Captain also speed up the ship, rocked the boat and created more leaks, by not only privileging the new staff in the above manner but also *"by only sitting in public areas with the new staff, this occurred three times in the first two weeks"* of the new management and staff arriving. "*When I was the duty Officer on deck, theft, favouritism and inequity occurred in favour of the new Officers who come from the* [Admirals ship…new] *graduates most of them… On three occasions they took alcoholic drinks for the 'mother ship'* crew *…and did not pay for them…the Captain supported and promoted this behaviour and as such segregated the new staff from old staff.* as this type of behaviour was not previously accepted.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion it is obvious that change is necessary in today's business environment; the context, goals, image and organisational culture and people in the business are amongst some of the considerations when planning change strategy. It is essential that any situational change strategy or model to be used by organisations undertaking change in similar circumstances should give the manager a clear understanding the nature of the leaks; as fixing perceived problems with inappropriate solutions will not augur well for success. Any strategy used should include observation, analysis in order to understand the gaps in the business (Waddell et al., 2007). As can be seen from the case study checking a boat for leaks is easy. Just start opening things up and looking, identifying the leaks is also easy, the leader looks for rust, warping and dents in the hull. On the other hand, determining the reason and nature of the leaks is much more difficult this takes time and relationship building as the future of the boat hangs on repairing the hull correctly. It follows that this is vital process to successful change management process.

The rate of change, the methods of making change and the leader's role are equally important to the process. Firstly, it is the leader's role to consider the type and style of leadership needed

to move the organisation forward; understanding this as a type of leak, pending the goals of the organisation is of high importance as otherwise the potential dangers of the wrong change adoption will not be clear. There is a need for awareness by managers of the impact of change upon employment relationships and to evaluate the current management style; in this case if management had planned smaller steps of change, then the goal is to change the leadership/ management approaches and style in order to manage the business successfully might have been more successful. In this case study there was a need to maintain distributed leadership where employees have 'buy in' and the power differentials are limited or low, empowering individuals and groups to be a part of the change, and as not to create more leaks as did the more dominating styles used above. If it had not existed previously the requirement might not have existed, but the change in style was a perceived breach of the psychological contract.

Increasing the speed to give the appearance that change is happening fast and being implemented by rocking the boat, physical movement and reorganisation, the implementation of corporate policy or centralising systems does little to enhance the chances of successful change. The additional pressure created by replacing old staff with new created the loss of corporate knowledge and instigated staff turnover at an unsustainable level, creating employment relations problems. More thought and planning of stages, the timing, the rate and speed of change needed to be brought to the surface.

It can be argued that this case demonstrates little that is new. What is does provide is clear evidence of how fast an organisation which had an extremely positive psychological contract and set of employment relationships, can be altered to become what many employees now consider to be a dysfunctional organisation. The use of the leaky boat metaphor can be used to consider wt what point an organisation can no longer, feasibly, stay afloat. Careful staff planning and an understanding of both internal culture and external contexts and community within which they will be working would assist change managers in protecting the reputation and image of the organisation, in order to attract staff. Pacing the rate of change within different organisational frameworks, structures and staff to meet both organisational goals and manage change is fundamental to any model of change used. Fixing problems and making change by injecting money into the business is only successful if the manager is fixing the right leaks with the right change management strategy and the stakeholders in the business see value as it solves their problems. This reinforces a clear understanding of the leaks, the rate and pace of change and the most fitting leadership style in order to make organisational change successful. If poor identification of the leaks and the wrong method of plugging the leak is being used, then follow the advice of Warren Buffet, if you "should you find yourself in a chronically leaking boat, energy devoted to changing vessels is likely to be more productive than energy devoted to patching leaks" (in Clarke, 2007).

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