

Too much change

'Change is more complex than optimistic managers think' — Rosabeth Moss Kanter 1992.

Remember Alice in Wonderland's croquet game — the one which degenerates into chaos because the Queen keeps changing the rules? Many employees probably feel like the players as their organisations continue to impose upheaval after upheaval.

Change usually needs to happen. But there are good and bad approaches to it. This is again emphasised in a new study, *When too much change is never enough*, Woodlane 1997, ISBN 1 875680 45 5. Authors Bodi, Maggs and Edgar, from the Centre for Workplace Culture Change, say that many Australian organisations are caught in a perpetual cycle of new management fads as they try to keep pace with competitors. But their people become increasingly cynical and disillusioned as fads are applied like recipes from an endless cookbook. Little useful change is achieved.

The authors say there is a marked bias in the literature of change management toward what Professor Fred Hilmer has dubbed instant-coffee solutions. So that, while most good bookshops carry a host of titles offering models for change, their contents reveal an alarming absence of diversity. Most are offering the same fad-based approach. And they are overwhelmingly focussed on large American multinational companies. Small wonder that when transplanted to a very different environment their models rarely succeed. As another commentator has memorably concluded: 'they have as much impact on operational and financial results as a ceremonial rain dance has on the weather'.

The authors of this book have set out deliberately to redress the imbalance. They seek not only to go beyond the buzzwords, but also to bring Australian experiences to the fore. On that basis alone, the book is worth the attention of Australian managers. It is reassuring to hear that some of our small to medium enterprises are using rather more than instant coffee in their recipes for organisational revival. The research unearths a number which have achieved real change using 'fad-free' programs.

The study offers no prescription for effective change management. Every context is different the authors say. But they contend the successes they have found all demonstrate three important themes. First, they have avoided the trap of fad surfing: 'the practice of riding the crest of the latest management panacea and then paddling out again just in time to ride the next one'. This does not mean none has adopted popular management techniques. Many have, but they have used them as tools to be adapted to their own specific

needs in their own particular context, rather than as instant plug-in solutions. Change has been carefully considered, planned and implemented in a way which has produced tangible outcomes and benefits for them.

Secondly, they have adopted the dictum that management is the art of the pilot and not the autopilot. This, the authors say, involves having the courage to manage in an age of instant answers. They say the critical managerial tasks are selecting a course from among the many options available, ensuring their choices make up a coherent whole and making adaptations and changes in course when they are needed — and then learning from their experiences.

Thirdly, the successful companies have accepted that organisations which aspire to fundamental change must change the fundamentals. Managers in these enterprises share a preparedness to review continually the basic features of their businesses. They have consistently adapted them to changing circumstances. But they have done so by balancing the need for change with the need for continuity. In other words, they have recognised that a prerequisite for adding value is maintenance of the existing strengths of the enterprise.

While application of these generic concepts is a yardstick for success, the study is at pains to emphasise that they must be combined with detailed attention to the organisational and industry context in which the manager is operating.

There is great pressure on many senior librarians to focus more closely on management concepts. At one end of the spectrum, this can involve superficial urgings that the library manager adopt many of the alleged panaceas which dominate the current management literature. At a more profound level, are more rational proposals for development of fresh attitudes, knowledge and skills to create library-specific management principles which can drive new ideas and improvement in library services. A fine example of this latter approach can be found in Professor Margaret Kinnell's paper on management training for librarians, presented to the 1997 British Public Library Authorities Conference (see *Public Library Journal* 13/1 1998, pp 11–16). She argues strongly that if public libraries are to be winners, and not losers, in a rapidly changing environment, their leaders must be equipped with appropriate management skills and knowledge to develop practical visions for the future of their services. A pre-occupation with fads and fashions will not provide those skills. But the thoughtful, more substantial approach advocated in *When too much change is never enough* just might. ■



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