

# **Multiple views: bridging complacency and action in implementing a strategic plan in a VET Organisation**

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## **Abstract**

The increasingly competitive and changing VET environment brings significant change to the way large training organisations operate. Strategic plans are well documented as useful tools for communicating and focusing long term organisational effort to achieve specific goals. Strategic targets are, however, often difficult to achieve in a large government organisation with policy and procedural imperatives.

In our first study of the implementation of a strategic plan in a large VET organisation, we examined the influence of workplace practice and the wider influence of workplace culture on the roll-out of the plan. The study explored the nature of staff engagement with changes to priorities brought about by this new strategic plan. The study also mapped staff engagement against three interrelated yet somewhat opposing arguments in organisational change management theory. The mapping process indicated various links between workplace practice and the three theoretical arguments which included a range of staff approaches to and understanding of the need for communication, a need for a sense of urgency, and relevance in managing strategic plan targets. We looked at these arguments in the context of teaching sections in a large TAFE college.

We later conducted a workshop with a number of vocational practitioners from around Australia and we also conducted several more interviews with staff at the case college. This provided a wide range of perspectives on the implementation and management of strategic plans in vocational education settings. We found that while some managers felt constrained and ill equipped to manage set targets for their areas, others had begun to implement strategies which were proving useful and successful. Through this paper we share some of the concerns and successes of participants and we also outline some of what we have learned in looking back over our first and second studies and anticipate what we might find in looking forward.

## **Introduction**

The current VET environment is significantly influenced by two key drivers; policy change at Commonwealth and State Government levels and industry demand for training to meet the challenges of the global and financial crisis. In order to achieve a more qualified workforce and fill potential labour market shortages, Commonwealth and State Governments have introduced a number of reforms for vocational education and training.

These reforms include the setting of targets to increase student recognition of work experience, increase completion of trade apprenticeships, increase completion of higher level qualifications and increase training and retraining options for existing workers. In addition to new targets, Commonwealth and State Governments have also specified a range of complex compliance and reporting requirements for VET organisations. Publicly funded Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) including TAFE NSW now need to adjust business strategies and delivery practices to meet these targets and to comply with new reporting requirements. Further, in 2010 the Commonwealth Government commissioned a report on the state of vocational education and training in Australia. Key discussion points indicated proposals for a more focussed approach to supporting apprentices and trainees, particularly in skill shortage areas. The report also indicated a need to build the VET workforce capability to meet new and emerging challenges in delivering VET training, and the need for new ways of funding VET training. The overall focus of the paper was informed by a call for a reconceptualisation of VET training in Australia. Considered together, the changing VET environment has created a significant sense of tension in State government RTOs such as TAFE NSW along with a rethinking of the current positioning in the vocational education market. These tensions and 'rethinkings' have caused a number of changes in the culture and purpose of State Government vocational education and training and changes to the way its services are perceived within the VET market.

TAFE NSW has enjoyed a long tradition of providing vocational training for young people to learn a trade and prepare for employment. In recent decades TAFE NSW has expanded training services to incorporate vocational training in non-trade 'professional' courses and higher qualifications to prepare learners for entry into higher education and for evolving new careers. These changes accord with the NSW State Plan 2005-2010 and the NSW Strategic Plan for Vocational Education and Training 2005 - 2008 which, call for the vocational training sector to more concertedly focus resources on developing workforce capability.

The current financial environment for TAFE NSW Institutes is one of consistently diminishing recurrent government funding and an expectation that Institutes develop their own commercial business expertise to build commercial funds. Institutes need to more effectively manage costs associated with providing the extensive range of vocational training expected by the government, community and businesses. At the same time, TAFE NSW Institutes are expected to meet State Government strategic targets in provision of training and to support learners to meet their ever increasing expectations of training. In 2009, strategic targets for TAFE NSW Institutes included for example, increases in the number of older workers with qualifications at Certificate III and above and increases in the amount of Recognition services provided. TAFE NSW Institutes are also required to increase the amount of course delivery in workplaces and increase workplace assessment. In response to these strategies TAFE NSW Institutes have developed their own Strategic Plans to address State and Commonwealth targets and also to guide the growth of their commercial business revenue streams.

In 2009, we looked at the implementation of an Institute Strategic Plan in one large TAFE NSW college in NSW. We looked specifically at the implementation process and the difficulties experienced by a range of staff in implementing change and in addressing specific targets. We found that overall, staff experienced difficulties engaging with some of the changes put forward by managers and what, at the time, was required of them to operate differently. We noted a significant lack of connection between the organisation's expectations of staff and the level of actual engagement and ability of staff to take appropriate and effective actions to embrace the required changes. We noted also, a need to look more closely at what could be the cause of such a lack of connection.

In late 2010 we looked at how the implementation of the Strategic Plan at the case college had progressed since 2009. We also asked questions to a group of VET practitioners working in different contexts in different areas of NSW and other states in Australia, about their experiences of implementing significant changes in their organisations. In the next section we discuss outcomes of this second look at implementing strategic plans and change in large VET organisations and go on to propose a way forward for future VET organisations and others, in implementing significant cultural change through strategic plans.

### **The Stage One Study and background to the Stage Two study**

This study follows our initial study conducted in 2009 which looked at a range of issues, including successes and difficulties in implementing a strategic plan in a large VET organisation in Australia. We concluded in this first stage study that difficulties arise in the implementation of strategic plans when there are disconnections between organisational expectations and staff engagement. Published strategies and targets are difficult to effectively address when staff have little interest or capacity to make the required contributions to the targets set by management. We found the causes of much of the lack engagement included low levels of staff concern for meeting targets, low level sense of urgency, lack of capacity to implement changes, lack of understanding of the need for change and in some cases, a fundamental disagreement with the objectives of some of the changes required. (Carter & Ellis-Gulli 2010). The cultural change required to move the organisation from its relatively static foundations of guaranteed government funded support and the reliance on traditional modes of training and management into a more responsive business focussed organisation were disorienting and discomfiting for staff (Carter & Ellis-Gulli 2010). The new 'edu- business' focused way of working, as we called it, and a number of physical alterations made to the college as a result of government funding initiatives, had literally, in some cases, 'shaken the ground', for many college staff.

A number of teachers and middle managers were found to be facing significant changes in not only course content (what to teach) but also teaching methodologies (how to teach) and the types of students now entering vocational courses (who to teach). We found that changes associated with the new strategic targets had created anxiety among many middle level managers and practitioners and we suggested this was one of the main

causes for some of the disengagement with implementing the new strategic directions at the college.

### **The focus of this Stage Two study**

In this new study, we examine the implementation of the strategic plan in the same organisation, six months after the initial launch of the Plan. We look at the experiences of the college manager and a small number of teachers who are responsible for implementing the strategy in this college. We also look at the experiences of a number of managers and teachers in implementing strategic plans in other VET organisations as a way to compare and contrast the experiences of those involved in the first study. We used these sample experiences to build an indicative picture of actual teacher and manager perspectives, their thoughts and practices, concerns and successes. We looked back briefly on what we learned from the Stage One study to inform this next stage. We use this learning to build a better understanding of the experiences of college teachers and managers in implementing strategic change and in managing in the new 'edu-business' environment. In this new 'Stage Two' study we use what we have learned from the Stage One study to make suggestions for ways to build bridges between 'complacency and action'; to make suggestions for VET colleges to 'move and shake' ways forward into the new business operating environment. We outline a range of issues which act to assist and constrain implementation of significant organisational change which involves middle level managers. We look at how these issues will be useful for future change management planning purposes in vocational colleges.

In the next section we look at literature relating to the issues of managing strategic plans and managing change in large organisations. Our study is guided by insights drawn from recent studies on topics such as engaging staff in strategic planning and how successful outcomes can be achieved.

### **Literature which provides background and context to our study**

Common to change management literature is the suggestion that effective organisational changes are often made in incremental steps in alignment with organisational strategic plans, human resource strategies, clear communication strategies and the committed involvement of staff. Strategic change requires integration of processes of planning, visioning, communicating and implementing significant changes to the way business is organised and conducted (Burnes 1996; Stace & Dunphy 2004). The way businesses manipulate their strategies and redefine their organisational architectures to meet the challenges of changing business environments is critical to their ongoing success. So too is the way organisations adjust their operational strategies to meet the challenges of multiple business contexts. Contemporary organisations often find themselves challenged by the dual demands of managing both differentiation and integration of business strategies (Nadler & Tushman 1999). It is therefore important for organisations undergoing significant change to be able to develop strategies to manage ongoing and changeable practices.

A sense of urgency, the perception among workers that planned changes are relevant to them and their work and a desire among staff to participate and support change are critical success factors in implementing change in organisations (Burnes 1996; Hiatt 2006; Mitchell & Young 2002). Good leadership, an appropriate model of change, some room for negotiation and compromise and well planned communication mechanisms are crucial for building the support of the workforce (Stewart & Kringas 2003). Successful change management programs also require 'effective management of uncertainty' through proactive communication and establishment of trust (DiFonso & Bordia 1998).

Strategic communication however, is a two way engagement between the organisation and workers with the aim of involving workers in and providing feedback on early core ideas (Stace & Dunphy 2004). Further, they suggest a successful change management strategy incorporates a close alignment of not only strategic directions with planned changes but also close alignment with the human resources strategy (Stace & Dunphy 2004). Critical to communication processes therefore are the ways in which workers are enabled to engage with change strategies, contribute effectively to the development of ideas and give and receive feedback in the process of their 'everyday' on-the-job work. It is clear from change management literature that successful change in organisations requires commitment at all levels and is facilitated by changes in behaviours of individuals and groups who make up the organisation (Burnes 1996). A key element of successful change is how strategies engage and support people within the organisation.

As Burnes (2006) suggests, large scale change can easily lose focus on the purpose and relevance of change to many involved, particularly for organisations operating in dynamic and uncertain times. An effective model for managing change is one which enables strategies to be varied to achieve optimum fit with the changing environment (Stace and Dunphy 1993 in Burnes 1996). Small incremental steps in managing change however, allow the organisation to assess the change process and make adjustments when and where necessary.

Important also to managing organisational change is the role managers play in interpreting and communicating strategies and guiding and modelling acceptance of these changes. Managers can make significant contributions to engaging staff and developing worker's core competencies such as understanding organisational strategies and becoming engaged and involved with change. Managers can play important roles in facilitating individual and collective learning strategies to assist workers to develop on-the-job skills and knowledge and moreover, to create conditions which support ongoing worker learning (Carter 2009; Carter & Ellis-Gulli 2010; Macneil 2001). We argue that the creation and management of authentic opportunities for workers to build not only knowledge and skills but also awareness and understanding of their roles in bringing about organisational change, are imperative steps in the process of managing and implementing strategic changes in organisations.

Like most strategic change however, challenges and disruptions brought about by the implementation of new strategies and new ways of working can create tensions among

staff and within the broader workplace community. In some cases, significant changes to usual work practices can be resisted by workers for a range of reasons. In our first study we noted reasons for resistance to change involved issues such as a perception of lack of support from senior managers, a lack of understanding of what is required to make required changes and personal disagreement with principles of some of the required changes (Carter & Ellis-Gulli 2010). Resistance to change has also been noted by Clayton (et al 2008) who suggest that people in organisations bring with them pre-existing histories and resources which can act to constrain a change process. They also noted that inertia to change is common in organisations (Clayton et al. 2008). They describe the subcultures or 'tribes' which exist within large training institutions can create a hierarchy of competing allegiances that work against a macro organisational culture and loyalty. For example, the loyalty of a teacher of accounting is first and foremost placed with the profession of accountancy. An accounting teacher's loyalty in the second instance, is likely to be with other teachers of accounting within the teaching discipline and in the third instance, loyalties may align with the immediate place of work (campus, college). An accounting teacher may form a distant relationship with the broader organisation if, or as opportunities arise. This observation therefore suggests that in order to achieve some level of Institutional change, the change process may need to be addressed in the early stages with teachers and head teachers in the context of their own teaching section within the organisation; relevance to discipline being a critical element of the change approach in a training organisation.

The importance of clear communication in implementing new strategies in organisations is noted by Stewart and Kringas (2003). However, their view is that in literature there is a tendency to blame employee resistance for failures of implementation of strategic plans. They suggest that in reality, failures can be attributed, not necessarily to workers, but rather, to the communication skills and strategies of senior managers. In their view, senior managers are often unwilling or unable to explain to others just what they are doing in terms of implementing change. Senior managers they suggest, lack skills in communicating reasons for change and what the changes will mean for workers and the wider organisation. Stewart and Kringas (2003, pp.686) found that in their studies of change, workers were generally accepting if change was well explained, clearly communicated and the pace was not too fast. They found that workers need to be able to see 'real alignment' between their day to day jobs and the values proclaimed by management. When workers 'balked' at implementing changes, it tended to be because change initiatives seemed disjointed, faddish or poorly thought through. They also suggest that if the model for change is well designed, a shift in values will 'happen anyway'. If a cultural change is based on a sense of a 'bad culture' this gives managers little to work with and also it tends to alienate workers (Stewart & Kringas 2003).

The need for strong leadership in managing change is also noted in much of the change management literature and is reiterated in a range of recent management and organisational development related studies (Fenwick 2007; Stewart & Kringas 2003). In a case study looking at the way businesses in Canada and the US apply sustainable organisational practices, Fenwick (2007) found ecological sustainability of businesses requires clear communication and demonstration of commitment from leaders. It also

requires educating workers and customers in ways that make sense to them within their own communities and interests, and, further, acknowledgement that sustainability is learned through everyday practice and interaction as people share, question, tinker and invent. This is a phenomenon described as 'emergence'; a central part of learning in an ecological model (Davis and Sumara 2005; Lange 2001 in Fenwick, 2007, p. 643). Fenwick goes on to say that leaders alone will not convert attitudes to a commitment but rather, a focus on learning can help foster understanding and active participation in sustainable practices within an organisation.

Clearly, managing change in organisations is a complex process of 'selling' an idea to others and supporting the process of change through continuous and clear communication with high levels of relevance to discipline and organisational objectives. An overarching theme in change management literature is however, the need for a continuing commitment from senior managers to the change process and effective communication to enable workers to align their contributions to the wider organisational strategy. We see these and similar issues emerge in our Stage Two study and some alternative approaches by managers which challenge these observations.

## **Method**

Data informing this Stage Two study was gathered and analysed using a case study strategy (Yin 2003). Semi- structure interviews were conducted with a senior college manager and two TAFE NSW head teachers. Ideas were also gathered from discussions with VET practitioners who attended a workshop conducted at a national conference in 2010. We also looked at a range of organisational documents including a recent snapshot survey (*Pulse on the My Voice Survey 2010*) conducted by the Institute within which this college is located. The workshop included participants involved in various roles in VET education in a number of metropolitan and regional locations in different States of Australia. The recent 'snap-shot' of staff perceptions on change was conducted with a sample of 190 staff (from a total population of 5,000 staff) employed in a wide range of positions within the organisation. This survey followed the same format and contained the same questions as the original whole of organisation 'MyVoice' survey conducted in 2009. Similarly, the '*Pulse on the My Voice Survey 2010*' survey was a primarily quantitative study with a small number of free text responses provided by participants.

### *Structure of the workshop*

The workshop was designed to provide an opportunity for us to share our findings from the first stage of the study and to generate discussion about how strategic plans are implemented in other organisations.

The workshop commenced with a brief presentation of the background and rationale for both stages of the study. The workshop included brief presentations from four panel members about their experiences of managing and implementing strategies and business practise to address strategic targets set by the Institute. The workshop was presented in

three stages. Firstly, the perspective of the organisation's director of strategic planning set the scene with an overall view of the planning process and how organisational objectives were set. Secondly, the director of a large vocational college provided an overview of issues encountered at the management level. This was followed by brief overviews of the experiences of two head teachers in implementing a mandated strategic organisational plan.

The brief presentations were designed to raise distinctive experiences and to generate discussion among those attending the workshop. The perspectives of panel members and workshop participants were analysed in light of prevailing organisational requirements, Government reforms and recent literatures in the area of change management, vocational training and strategic planning.

## **Findings and discussion**

Data from the '*Pulse on the My Voice Survey 2010*' survey, workshop and interview with a senior college manager and head teachers were analysed and sorted into themes relating to three key issues, that are 'difficulties with implementing changes', 'engaging staff in implementing strategies to address targets', and 'what we have learned and ways forward'. We expand on these themes in the next section.

### *1. Difficulties experienced by college staff with implementing changes: addressing strategic plan targets (manager's perspective; head teacher perspective)*

Results of the recent '*Pulse on the MyVoice Survey 2010*', interviews and conference workshop indicated a range of difficulties and issues experienced by staff representing a 'vertical slice' of the organisation. Difficulties still being experienced by staff include:

- a) communication from senior managers, and
- b) a lack of explanation and consultation with staff

Analysis of data suggests a range of issues still need to be addressed, including:

- a) improvement in communications between managers and staff and between staff groups
- b) increase in communication and consultation from management to staff about changes affecting staff
- c) more transparency about the future of the Institute
- d) more inclusive practices, collaboration and consideration of problems encountered by head teachers.
- e) more autonomy in decision making at a college level
- f) concerns that teachers are becoming 'revenue raisers' rather than 'teachers'
- g) concerns that staff efforts to be entrepreneurial are being fettered by the rule of other centrally managed units

These responses continue to show a disconnection between the organisation's expected level of engagement from staff and what is actually being demonstrated by staff. The



response from the *Pulse Survey* reiterated findings from the Stage One study which indicated some teachers, six months on, are still either unable or unwilling to address the strategic targets set by the organisation. In some cases, staff continue to feel that their allocated targets contradict their personal philosophies of vocational education. Many believe vocational training is a public service and obligation, and as such some teachers continue to be fundamentally opposed to building commercial revenue from training.

### *2. Engaging staff in implementing strategies to address targets (the experiences of others and ways to do this – from interviews, the Pulse survey and the workshop)*

The Pulse survey, workshop and semi-structured interviews indicated staff continued to be challenged by decisions made at both a college and organisational level. Data suggests a need:

- a) for more tangible and relevant allocation of targets at the teaching section level.
- b) to package targets for teaching sections in a way that resonates with teachers and relevant business and industry fields
- c) for targets to be discussed and allocated at teaching section levels so that critical relevant issues can be raised before targets are allocated.
- d) for a process that maps strengths of particular teaching sections to specific targets rather than measuring all sections against all strategic targets. Some teaching sections are ill equipped to address some of the allocated targets.

The structured interviews with Head Teachers conducted in January of 2011 showed a much greater awareness among Head teachers of the strategic targets and the relationship that the Strategic Plan had with the section's annual business plans. The Head Teachers showed a clear understanding of the need to engage not just themselves but also their teachers with the directions of the organisation. Head Teachers indicated they actually found benefit from having a numeric target that they felt was achievable and owned by them. They also stated that they had had an opportunity to negotiate with other sections about which of the targets they could more effectively report against.

### *3. What we have learned and ways forward?*

As a result of difficulties identified from the Stage One Study, the College manager presented a summary of progress on addressing strategic targets to the College senior staff at the end of the academic year in 2010. The presentation included not only the progress of the college but also the progress of each teaching section in meeting targets. The urgency, particularly the financial implications of not meeting the strategic targets was also reiterated to staff. The report was noted to have significantly raised awareness among staff of the need for all staff to engage with and actively seek to make changes to the way they work, in order to not only address targets but to begin to modify the way they work to benefit students and the organisation as a whole. In looking back, we noted the presentation had the effect of alerting some teachers into taking more concerted actions in their sections to, for example, deliver courses in workplaces, provide recognition services and increase or engage in commercial training.

The key challenges identified in the early stages of the implementation of the plan at this college, was the inability of some teaching sections to be able to address some of the targets. Sections responsible for teaching foundation courses in literacy and numeracy for example, found significant difficulty in addressing targets to increase recognition and workplace delivery. Teachers feel that targets for these types of services are simply unsuitable and unrealistic. Students in these programs generally are not employed, have no relevant work experience nor have attained any previous qualifications. Several sections also expressed their concern for granting large scale recognition which would deplete viable classes in some specialist areas. Clearly the initial implementation and communication strategy advocating a whole of college approach to addressing all of the targets was inappropriate and largely unachievable for some sections of the college.

Noting these difficulties, a senior manager subsequently put in place a process of consultation with head teachers with the aim of identifying priorities and achievable targets for particular disciplines. In 2011 teaching sections were reallocated targets to align with their strengths and to capabilities. The college labelled this as a 'cascading' model of communication and allocation of specific targets. An example of the cascading model was applied to a section teaching foundation skill courses where workplace delivery and recognition was not practiced and could not therefore contribute to workplace delivery or recognition targets. In consultation with head teachers and teachers, the management team negotiated a viable alternative target for these sections. The alternative was to reassign targets to make successful bids for contestable Government funding. This was a more realistic and achievable process and is seen as a more effective and appropriate way to contribute to targets to build revenue.

The study also found that as a result of reflections on their initial implementation strategy, the college management team had begun to more actively communicate requirements to teacher in a more clear and understandable way. The management team have begun to assist teachers by 'walking teachers through' the Strategic Plan targets and carefully explaining what each target means in both the short and longer term for teaching sections and students. The college management team have implemented what they call an 'Educational Review' process to facilitate the 'cascading communication model' and to provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss issues, concerns and possible solutions. As a result of this new 'cascading' model of target allocation and the new level of understanding established among managers and head teachers, educational staff, now appear to be more aware of and focused on making changes to their practices to contribute more effectively to allocated targets. This aligns well with literature which suggests strategic change requires 'buy-in' and commitment from stakeholders and clear communication about expectations from management (Fenwick 2007). However, while college management appear to have embraced the changes required to move from that of a provider of training services to operate more like a self funded business, many of the college staff have indicated they need more time to adjust to make the required level of connection with this new 'edu-business' environment.

## **Conclusion**

In the Stage One study we found the communication mechanisms deployed by senior managers to disseminate information about strategic targets to staff had been at marginally successful in sending messages to head teachers. However, we found that information about the Institute's Strategic Plan had failed to effectively move beyond head teachers to teachers and other staff. We suggested this may have been attributed to a lack of perceived personal relevance to teachers and a lack of a sense of urgency surrounding the need for change. Literature suggests this is not unusual in large public sector organisations. The Stage Two study, particularly, data from interviews conducted at the same college one year later, showed a far greater level of engagement and 'buy-in' from staff at levels below head teacher. We attribute this to a far more active and transparent model of communication from the middle level managers. We anticipate the change was most likely due to the process of revising how targets are allocated to teaching sections. Rather than allocating targets to all teaching sections, the revised process included broad consultation with staff and the subsequent allocation of specific and relevant targets according to the capabilities and strengths of each section. The notion of addressing targets in a more focused way created a greater sense among teachers that targets were more tangible and achievable. The consultative nature of the allocation process increased the levels of cooperation and engagement among staff in the later stages of the implementation in 2010 and in early 2011.

In reviewing the process of communication and implementation of a strategic plan and its implications for stakeholders, much as been learned by managers and teachers at this college. Drawing on the experiences acquired during both stages of the implementation of the plan, we anticipate the college will now be encouraged to continue to adapt strategic targets with a view to more effectively contributing to organisational business strategies. In future years, it is anticipated the college will look forward to improved performance against targets as a result of the implementation of the new 'cascading model' of communication and specific target allocations. The learning from evaluating a process of significant change and impact has resulted in a reduction in staff disengagement and complacency. It has also led to improved level of understanding and engagement by teachers and, overall, a more effective contribution to the sustainability of the college through the now more concerted effort to address strategic targets. The organisation is now in a better position to contribute to furthering vocational education as both a service and an edu-business.

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