

Futures in Government: Use of Anticipatory Action Learning to explore Public Service Futures

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Public Service is having to change its very nature, in order to accommodate the changing needs of society, in a knowledge era. Since 1980, government bureaucracies have been struggling with pre-Industrial Age characteristics including: hierarchical structures; oligarchies (and resulting Peter's principle); specialization; rigidity; secretiveness; and trained incapacity. Whereas, changes in society, as it moves towards a Knowledge Age, demand of bureaucracies that they have: hetrarchical structures (flexibility and agility); knowledge at all levels of structure; partnerships both inter and intra governmental and with private enterprise; responsiveness; openness and accountability; and innovation.

Within government bureaucracies, this change has been felt dramatically in the past five years, and there is growing recognition of the need to look at issues coming to the fore, in this area of change, from a longer term perspective: a perspective not commonly used in Government bureaucracies, but paramount in futures studies.

Other than the need to look longer term at issues, public servants have one major difficulty when using anticipatory action learning. They are not used to being asked their opinions or contributing their prior knowledge, to their work. Use of "other knowledge" is not typically encouraged within bureaucratic structures, as it is seen as a direct threat to one of the fundamentals of a bureaucracy: the reliance on the way things have "always been done". Overcoming this inhibition, and the fear and anxiety contribution can cause participants, on a personal basis, is one of the benefits anticipatory action learning can bring to this changing environment; because it legitimises such input.

I began using anticipatory action learning with the training groups I facilitate, in my roles of business improvement and organisational development, within the Queensland Public Service, in 2000. These first workshops, formed the basis of work that I am undertaking for my Master's thesis, exploring the changing nature of government bureaucracies and plausible futures. Since that time, I have used various methods and tools associated with futures studies, to have staff think about, explore and design plausible and possible futures, through both formal and informal anticipatory action learning. We have covered the topics of the changing nature of government bureaucracies, processes, structures, systems, skills sets, generational change, fears and barriers, amongst others. These sessions have been both formal and informal and I have presented examples of each here for your consideration.

Workshops with Senior Queensland Public Servants

The members of the Strategic Management Network of the Queensland Public Service, in 2001, expressed a feeling of growing urgency for the need to be doing something, in an environment of a rapidly increasing rate of change, toward an outcome they couldn't identify. This frustration, being expressed by the network members, lead to a need to know what to do and how to react to the change in their work environment.

They reached an understanding that there would need to be change in how they themselves saw their future role as public servants, and how they would be seen by, and would relate to, both the internal public sector community and the general public, in the future. This change was evident to them through what they saw as requirements from Queensland society: that they, as public servants, show the agility and flexibility required of other sections of the community, to function in an open and accountable manner, in the current era. They expressed frustration that they had difficulty delivering these requirements, within a structure that, by nature, was contradicting these modern characteristics of government bureaucracies.

This then was the impetus for my thesis research.

The first phase, of the research undertaken, comprised a series of anticipatory action learning workshops that were conducted with participants who were members of the network.

The workshops, took into account participants' ways of knowing about the issues being generated and the possibility or probability of the futures proposed. The participants' 'ways of knowing' were essential to this research, as it required drawing on the tacit understanding of the memetics of their working environment, by the members of the Strategic Management Network and other public servants. Through their understanding of the Queensland Public Service environment, they could contribute information about its values, and cultural insights and intuitive information, which would otherwise have been unavailable.

The participants confirmed a number of ways in which they have knowledge of their environment. These were explored in the workshop, and included those gained: during their tenure as Queensland Public Servants; as citizens of Queensland in the 20th and 21st Centuries; as drafters of policy and legislation for the State of Queensland; and their engagement of the community in their public servant role. These ways of knowing included, along with their knowledge of legislation, statutory requirements and government reports:

- Observation and participation, in the ongoing changing environment, which is the Queensland Public Service; for example involvement in partnerships projects inclusive of both public and private sector; daily engagement of the Queensland community; ways in which they had adapted to change over the past 25 years, individually, as managers, and as part of the structure;
- Intuitive understanding of the different time and space perspectives which comprise Queensland, their living and workplace and the environment of their client base, during the 20th and 21st Centuries for example:
 - the different cultures which currently comprise Queensland, especially our indigenous communities, can have very different interpretations of time and space;
 - areas of the state outside of South East Queensland have many and varied means of coping with, or overcoming their physical remoteness (differences of approximately 15° longitude and 20° latitude) in terms of time and space; personal space differs, time zones differ, cultural time differs depending on distance from Brisbane and other major regional centres, distance North and West of the South East corner, and availability of infrastructure and assets;
- Understanding, as citizens of Queensland, the changing and diverse expectations of Queensland society, of its government entities entering the knowledge age; for example: computer literacy rates demand that the government explore e-media for communication, as well as traditional means; government needs to take a holistic view of events, rather than working from piecemeal silos; as society is taught to question, legitimate questions asked will require appropriate, open and accountable answers.

They added that they also considered their networks both intra-governmental, inter-governmental, with private and public enterprise, and outside the work environment, as additional sources of

knowledge. This knowledge was gained by the cross-fertilization of ideas and exchange of tacit knowledge within their personal and professional communities of interest.

In these workshops we produced a wealth of information by using:

- the futures triangle to explore major influences pushing, pulling or anchoring the Public Service; the accelerated rate of change is pulling bureaucracies from their foundational mores, society is pushing this change as it is required to maintain pace in the knowledge era and the structures and practices of bureaucracies are trying to anchor themselves and resist any change;
- metaphors of the future Queensland Public Service to look at our environment into the next 25 years; which included a wide range of visions from an impersonal concrete call centre to a small select group of experts in their field with the remainder of current function privatised;
- emerging issues analysis (viewing the more immediate future), especially emerging skills, and their feelings of imminent and future need to change; which included: analytical skills, especially those involved in counterfactual analysis, so that alternatives could be explored from the same data; consultative community engagement skills to allow for more genuine input; and exploring how to build in flexibility and agility to the Public Service;
- their desires and fears for a future Queensland Public Service; and which were mainly around the hope that in an effort to keep up with the pace of change that the Public Service didn't lose its customer service focus;
- future issues (a view of more distant emerging issues) for the Queensland Public Service.

This information has now been tested through a survey to the wider public service community and the assumptions and knowledge is being analysed to produce possible and plausible futures for the Queensland Public Service.

None of this would have been possible without the unique perspective senior public servants have of their environment.

Studies of Synchronous Contradictions

Some of the most exciting work, using anticipatory action learning has been around contradictions arising from these changing needs of society and the bureaucracies' need to respond in an agile and flexible manner (not typical characteristics of a bureaucracy).

Contradictions arise: when the characteristics on which government bureaucracies have been built over the millennia try to cope with the modern knowledge era societal needs: when there are no solutions to be had from the past; where quick solutions need to be found to respond in the current context; where skills are required in field where demand has outstripped supply in available workforce; and in numerous other situations. The major conflict is that between the public servants' ways of knowing as a bureaucrat and their ways of knowing in their current time and space in the 21st century.

I have conducted numerous short impromptu anticipatory action learning "workshops" on the subject. It is not difficult. Public Servants are only too willing to address these contradictions. Participation is easily had, once they realise there is genuine interest in their frustration and their ways of knowing about the issues. This work is as yet very informal and has mainly come from asking public servants at after work events or at social gatherings to engage in the experiment.

Their ways of knowing about these contradictions (awareness of them) vary. Usually they have a sense of "banging their heads against the brick wall" of bureaucracy; or having to take action and ask forgiveness later because they needed to respond in a timeframe; or knowing the number of

times they have proceeded because there was no precedent. From here it is not difficult to anticipate a future without these contradictions. What might it look like? How might it function? Will it be able to survive the change? What they learn from these impromptu sessions is that they are not alone and usually there are a few present who have encountered exactly the same situation and that there are future solutions.

At a recent conference (*The Big I*), conducted by the Senior Officers' Business Improvement Network, of the Queensland Government, I spoke about the work I was undertaking for my thesis. As part of my presentation which covered, among other things, the difference between the past traits and current required traits of government bureaucracies, I challenged the audience, of public servants, to use their ways of knowing as public servants to look for these contradictions. I was overwhelmed with the response from my colleagues. They documented so many contradictions that that I have begun to group them into categories. These are topics like:

- the need for alternatives to be generated but management not having time to pursue the differences;
- the need for knowledge to flow both ways between the Generations, but no means of doing so, and the entrenched belief that being younger equates with less experience;
- the Public Service is ageing rapidly, but it is now more difficult for school leavers to find the entry to the Public Service;
- the nature of work in Australia has changed considerably in the past 25 years yet the main priority in Public Service is for permanent full time positions;
- the Public Service acknowledges the Knowledge Age but there are few knowledge management systems in place other than those for document tracking, how do we collect tacit knowledge of Public Servants.

The Public Service has been through massive change in the past 25 years at the levels of day-to-day, social, and, to some extent world view activity and what we are currently experiencing is its struggle with metamorphosis of its mental models; its underlying myths and mores as a government bureaucracy. The next challenges will require more in-depth anticipatory action learning. The question now is how many contradictions can a bureaucratic structure sustain and for how long, before it succumbs to change, voluntarily or involuntarily?

There is no predictive answer to this question, however, through the use of anticipatory action learning programs using tools of futures study, we may be able to identify, and move toward, intrinsic change alternatives before uncontrolled collapse takes place, within the system.