

## **“Getting Things Done Quickly ... And Well!”** **– Particularly in the Public Sector**

**A note from Battiston Consulting 10 November 2010**

*“For around five to six months, I was like God....I could get anything done quickly!*

*But then the system started re-asserting itself. People asked ‘why wasn’t I told about this’... or said ‘you can’t do that, it needs different approvals’.*

*What I want to know is, if things can be done quickly in an emergency, why can’t they be done quickly all the time?”*

These words were spoken by the former CE of the Woods and Forests Department in the South Australian Government following the 1983 Ash Wednesday Bushfires. To explain:

On Ash Wednesday, February 16, 1983, around 21 000 hectares of pine plantations were burnt in major bushfires in South Australia – representing a significant proportion of the total area of plantation in the State. To lose it completely would have made a substantial dent in the State’s ability to provide a continuing supply of timber for processing – in sawmilling, plywood, paper etc – with adverse economic and employment impacts.

But, if burnt pine logs can be harvested quickly, and kept wet, they can be stored for some years, and can continue to be used successfully. So, a major requirement arising from the bushfires was to be able to store large quantities of harvested logs either in a body of water (lakes or swamps) or under sprinkler systems pumping ground water, so that they could be sent progressively to processing plants over the next few years.

Getting the necessary facilities up and running to enable this was a matter of urgency, and the various government agencies and private sector partners were mobilised very rapidly to store successfully the vast majority of salvaged logs.

But, as the CE said, after a short time “the system started to re-assert itself”.

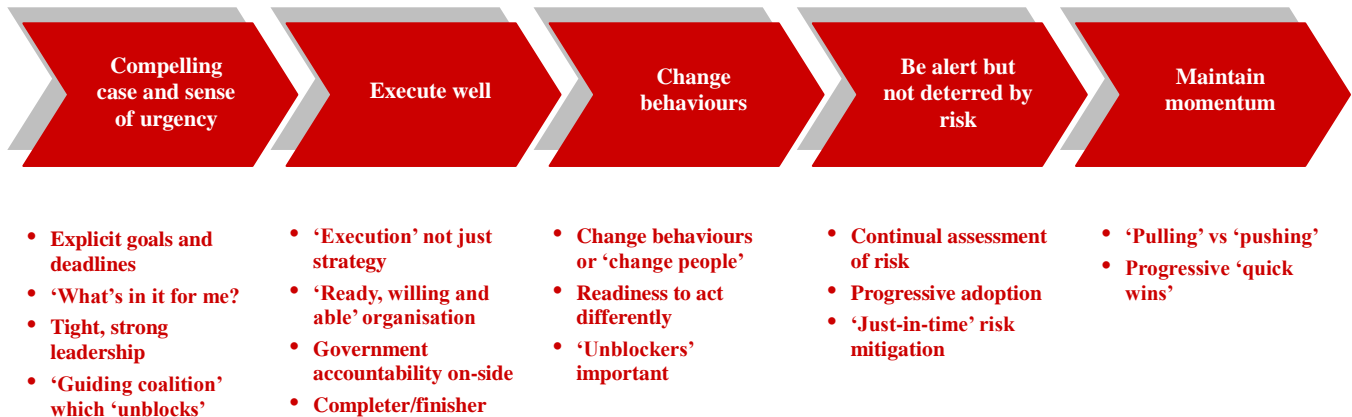
### **SOME KEY REQUIREMENTS**

So, how can things be done quickly in the public sector without the system re-asserting itself?

Some key requirements can be considered:

1. Articulate a compelling case and a sense of urgency;
2. Focus on executing well – always keeping in mind the end goal;
3. Change the behaviour of those involved – or ‘change the people’;
4. Be alert to risk – but not deterred; and,
5. Maintain momentum.

## Getting things done quickly .... and well!



### #1 – Articulate a compelling case and a sense of urgency

A ‘compelling case’ and ‘sense of urgency’ are pretty easily made when salvaging burnt pine logs following a devastating bushfire.

The same could also be said for the ‘financial stimulus package’ in response to the recent Global Financial Crisis – but more of that example later.

But, in less dramatic circumstances, how does one create a compelling case and a sense of urgency? Especially given the current views of the media and society generally which are perhaps best summed up by Porteus<sup>1</sup>.

*“... in Australia, ... we sit back in judgement, deciding whether (someone else) a politician, head of department or corporation has actually ‘performed’ sufficiently well. In most cases, we judge that they have not – **and so we support and perpetuate a system that ensures that they cannot** (emphasis added). Bad outcomes are some-one else’s fault ... (and) with the emergence of an increasingly blame-based ethos, it is not surprising that politicians and the bureaucracy are risk-averse”.*



Making a ‘compelling case’, and instilling a ‘sense of urgency’, therefore calls for executive stakeholders to be very explicit about the goals they are after, and to be able to articulate clearly their rationale and benefits – and, to enlist the enthusiasm of their people, they need to be able to spell out ‘what’s in it for me?’.

This requires ‘cutting through the background noise’ to ensure that priorities are not confused by mixed signals and lack of clarity about the principle objectives – not always easy given the number of stakeholders involved, and the clamour of media and special interest groups.

*The American folk-singer Pete Seeger once said "Any darn fool can make something complex; it takes a genius to make something simple."*

<sup>1</sup> Porteous, P. 2005, “It’s Not My Problem, Mate! – Leading in Uncertainty”, Public Administration Today, March – June, 2005

In contrast to most private sector bodies, the public sector generally has greater ambiguity of goals because of the wide range of interested parties it needs to consider, and the relatively short time frame of both parliamentary terms, and the, always prevalent, media 'news cycle'.

Put another way, it requires tight and strong leadership from the team of executive stakeholders to advocate for the required outcomes, and to become 'unblockers' to ensure that unnecessary obstacles are removed.

As John P Kotter, in his book "Leading Change" says, "*successful change is 70 to 90 percent leadership and only 10 to 30 percent management.*"<sup>2</sup>

In Kotter's framework for successful change, the team of executive stakeholders forms the "powerful guiding coalition" for leading change.

### **Lesson #2 – Focus on executing well – always keeping in mind the end goal**

A clear distinction needs to be made between "strategy" and "execution".

Mankins and Steele<sup>3</sup>, in researching the gap between strategy and performance, found that "*companies on average deliver only 63% of the financial performance their strategies promise.*"

They then go on to say "*leaders . . . (often) opt to change direction when they really should focus the organisation on execution. The result: wasted energy, lost time, and continued underperformance.*"

Take the case of the 'financial stimulus package' put in place by the Federal Government in 2008-9 to mitigate potential effects of the Global Financial Crisis.

One can debate the validity of some of the strategies adopted (for example: the "Home Insulation Package" – the so-called "pink batts" scheme; and the "Building the Education Revolution" scheme), but it is pretty clear from media and other reports, that the execution of these strategies left much to be desired. One has to ask whether too much reliance was placed on people responsible for the policy development, rather than getting strong operationally-focused people in place.

Good execution requires that the organisation is "ready, willing, and able" to do the job. It must have:

- The "right" people – the specific human knowledge, experience, skills and capability to do the job;
- The "right" leadership – capable of mobilising all levels of the organisation to achieve the job and ensuring the required teamwork;
- The "right" systems – to support the rapid decision-making required to achieve the job in the short time frame demanded – even if they are manually based 'paper-stuffing' systems.

Taking time at the start of a project to get the organisation "ready, willing, and able" to execute the job properly, potentially will save a lot of waste, angst, and underperformance later – and give a better chance of achieving short timelines.



<sup>2</sup> John P. Kotter 1996. "Leading Change". Harvard Business Press page 26

<sup>3</sup> Mankins & Steele. "Turning Great Strategy into Great Performance". Harvard Business Review, July-August, 2005.

The 'guiding coalition' (executive stakeholders) needs to ensure, at the outset, that there is 'alignment' between the goals and the organisation's capabilities - even if it means drawing resources from elsewhere to improve the chances of success later.

In the context of government, this must include getting the necessary probity, procurement, central agency, legal, and promotional expertise 'on-side', so that necessary matters can be speedily dealt with.

In its financial stimulus package, the Rudd government formed the so-called 'gang of four' (the Prime Minister, Deputy PM, Treasurer, and Finance Minister) in a bid to 'get the work done quickly'. However, it left other people, important for the successful implementation of the initiatives, sidelined, and, many would say that it showed.

Key capabilities required in the team executing the initiative to ensure things are done quickly, and successfully, include a 'completer/finisher' – to make sure actions are followed through and 'tied off' before moving on to the next stage.

### **Lesson #3 - Change the behaviour of those involved – or 'change the people'**

Getting things done more rapidly than 'normal' requires all those involved in the project to change their behaviour from what is 'normal'.



But, in a large bureaucracy – whether private or public sector – this is easier said than done – often compared with 'changing direction on the Titanic'!

Sometimes, if the behaviour of people cannot easily be changed, it is necessary to 'change the people'.

Qantas recognised this when it set up Jetstar to compete more vigorously with the lower cost airline Virgin Blue. The culture, systems, work practices, skills and infrastructure of the parent airline, Qantas, were too set in their ways to enable it quickly to adopt the necessary changes to ensure it did not lose market share to the newcomer, Virgin. So, it set up a completely new unit/organisation to do so.

In a similar way, frustrated with delays in getting infrastructure and development projects under way, the South Australian Government established its Office of Major Projects and Infrastructure (OMPI) to identify strategic infrastructure priorities coordinate infrastructure planning and development across government, and facilitate timely delivery of key projects.

It has taken responsibility for project oversight and implementation from a number of other Government agencies – ensuring their more rapid implementation.

This is not to say that getting anything done quickly requires the setting up of a new organisation structure, unit, or project team in every case.

However, it is necessary to ensure that there is an environment created which *requires people to act differently*, and, if a new unit is not to be formed, this is often more easily achieved by getting small parts of an organisation to work on specific, concrete, high priority initiatives which will underpin the changed behaviours needed.

And, the 'unblockers', referred to earlier, become very critical to ensure that the 'system doesn't continually reassert itself' by placing otherwise 'normal' processes in the way of achieving the goals required.

**Lesson #4 – Be alert to risk – but not deterred**

In the case of the financial stimulus packages, experience has shown that more attention could have been paid to the assessment and management of risk.

But, in wishing to get things done quickly, there may be a concern that too much of a focus on risk assessment and management could result in lengthy delays and missing of deadlines.

This doesn't have to be so.

Continual assessment of risk as the initiative is implemented, and the progressive adoption of 'just-in-time' risk management approaches as it proceeds can mitigate risk, while ensuring momentum is maintained.

**Lesson #5 – Maintaining momentum**

There is a fine line between 'pulling' and 'pushing' to ensure that momentum towards quick completion is maintained. A balance of both is required.

'Pulling' occurs where ambitions are announced in advance, and interested parties assume high expectations for a rapid result. Those charged with delivering, are therefore under some pressure to achieve the expected deadlines.

On the other hand, 'pushing' relies on the delivery team setting its own timelines and working to achieve them, without the pressure of externally imposed deadlines.

Over-reliance on 'pulling' can result in those engaged in the project feeling like they are working in a 'goldfish bowl' – open to regular, and often uninformed scrutiny. Pressures to cut corners, or to accept less satisfactory outcomes can result. Arguably, this style may have contributed to some of the problems with the Rudd government financial stimulus package implementation.

If the 'pushing' style is adopted, those involved may be tempted to take more time than may really be needed to achieve the required goals – just to make sure!

So, a fine balance between the two styles is required, and the 'tension' which may arise in achieving this balance can be the stimulus for more innovative approaches to implementation – for example, a method of contracting which may be more collaborative rather than typically adversarial.

One way of achieving this balance of styles is to ensure that the initiative can be assessed by gaining some progressive 'quick wins'. This builds confidence of both those involved in the implementation, as well as the interested parties looking on.

**Getting things done quickly – and well**



Successful rapid implementation of initiatives requires a few key factors to be in place – strong leadership from the ‘guiding coalition’ of executive stakeholders is a must.

And, the team required to implement the initiative needs the necessary knowledge and capability – covering areas such as operational, technical, finance, HR, procurement, and very importantly risk assessment and management.

But, arguably, the most telling factor is to ensure that the team members selected have the leadership, and the personal attributes, skills and experience to operate in a ‘changed’ way – able to execute the task, trying out new approaches, while keeping their ‘eye on the ball’, and preventing the ‘system reasserting itself’.

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At Battiston Consulting our goal is to help our clients solve their business and IT problems and drive valuable outcomes. Our clients benefit from our effective approach to problem solving, our adoption of best practices, our goal of making our clients successful, our ability to transfer knowledge and capabilities, and our business-based approach to delivering advice and leveraging experience.