Here's how problems can FADE away

Wendy Pryor takes on challenging development project

It is obvious to all our customers that the State Library of Victoria is undergoing extensive and noisy redevelopment. But at the same time we are improving internal systems and processes to enhance the library's much needed physical redevelopment.

For the past year I have enjoyed a challenging secondment from the reference desk to the position of organisational development project officer.

The 'organisational development' part of the title embraces broad, systematic staff development to enhance a changing organisation. The 'project officer' part relates to the position's project-based nature.

The projects were all nominated by staff and were conducted under the broad umbrella of Total Quality Management. The TQM umbrella was first raised when staff attended quality awareness workshops during the previous year.

One of the goals of my position was to assess the effectiveness of structured problem-solving teams.

The problem-solving process we tested is called the FADE cycle and is an integral part of the quality action teams program marketed by an American-based company, ODI. The FADE cycle consists of four phases: focus, analyse, develop and execute; each phase comprising activities that result in a product.

Activities are centred around the use of tools or small structured exercises, chosen by the group facilitator to organise and focus the thoughts of the team.

Team members can play different roles but in this experimental stage my greatest input was as facilitator or 'slave driver in kid gloves' as one victim expressed it!

Focus: the product is a written statement of the problem, which could usefully be called a 'challenge'. It is quite difficult to take time to articulate a problem, especially if it is pressing, but all team members have discussed their task and know exactly why they are meeting each time. Others in the organisation also know precisely what the team has set out to do, so a problem statement can be displayed each time the team meets.

Analyse: Here the team learns as much as possible about the problem before attempting to solve it. Hard data such as surveys and statistics as well as intuition and feelings are important. The products of this phase are baseline data and a list of most influential factors.

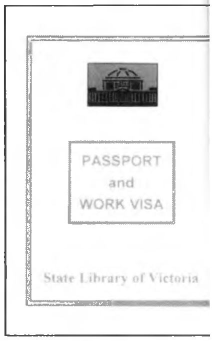
Develop: Team members finally are permitted to suggest solutions. These may be blindingly obvious after the analyse phase or may need some creativity. Products of the phase are a solution and an implementation plan.

Execute: Finally, the solution is implemented. Team members gain organisational commitment for their solutions, execute their plan and monitor its impact. Thus, as well as producing a change the group can measure its effectiveness. The group may then decide to make more changes that result in extra improvements.

Team members become problem analysts, statisticians, creative whizzes, marketing experts and project managers as they examine problems, form solutions and sell the changes to their colleagues, which gives them a chance to shine in a variety of activities.

Creating a process: induction and familiarisation schemes

Twelve brave souls met late in 1993 to begin developing a new induction process. Meetings took place for one hour once a week with a break throughout January 1994.



Seven of the most brave and dedicated gathered to present their process, solutions and action plans to senior management in May 1994. Acceptance was immediate and in August the scheme was implemented.

The induction team included representatives from all levels and sections, with a mix of new and established staff members. Initially, they shared an impassioned and revealing discussion of their own arrivals in the organisation. They then developed a working definition of induction and defined the underlying basis for the scheme.

The problem was expressed as follows:
The Team decided to solve all parts of the problem, including future and retrospective induction and to treat all employees equally, even if they were temporary.

In 'analyse' phase we wanted to ask potential new staff about their induction needs. This was impossible so we asked ourselves what new staff members should feel and what they should know. Each time we identified a necessary feeling or item of knowledge we asked ourselves what knowledge is to be gained? What activity will achieve this? Who should conduct it? At what stage of induction? To whom is it appropriate? How will the activity be recorded? How will attendance be rewarded? How will effectiveness be monitored?

The enormous table of answers which resulted formed the basis of our scheme. During 'develop' phase we

Current state	Impact	Desired state
Three hundred library staff have experienced a variety of induction processes.	Some feel confusion about their role and purpose. Some feel positive assimilation.	All staff to feel welcome, confident and professional in their role.
Incoming staff receive uniform information from personnel but the information is not built on.	Lack of perception about the library's role.	Reinforcement by supervisors to encourage a shared perception of the library's role.
Incoming staff are not well-integrated into the structure of the library and knowledge of their role within it.	Confusion as to role and purpose. Misunderstandings of other sections. Poor liaison and work flow.	Each staff member to have a sense of the work and workings of the organisation.
Museum customer service officers know little about the library.	Poor service and extra work for library staff due to poor referrals.	Provide accurate library information to the public.

designed four parts of what became our induction and familiarisation schemes:

1. A new staff preparation checklist to be sent to a supervisor before the arrival of a new staff member to prepare for a smooth, comfortable welcome.
2. A welcome package to be given to each new employee comprising a folder with a large 'welcome' sticker and containing information about the library and conditions of employment.
3. An induction checklist for new staff pinpointing essential information with the supervisor contributing much of the information. The checklist does not take the place of specific job training.
4. The passport and work visa, a small booklet listing regularly repeated familiarisation tours of each section in the library. Each page of the passport describes one of 12 tours and can be stamped after each tour. A reward to be given on completion of the passport, providing an opportunity for all staff members to update their knowledge of other sections and to gain experience taking tours.

Gaining organisational commitment was the first activity of 'execute' phase. Our presentation to senior management included a role play, overhead transparencies, audience participation, written and verbal reports. It also explored the organisational benefits of solving the problem as well as extensive action plans for implementation, evaluation and publicity for all staff.

'Execute' phase closely followed the action plans, with everyone assuming an area of responsibility. This phase included composing and printing the passports and checklists and producing guidelines for sections giving tours, regular progress reports for all staff and development of evaluation surveys. The surveys will be given to passport users as they finish and to non-users after one year.

(right) State library staff enjoying passport tours

The final result is a mature and thorough program precisely tailored to the requirements of an institution in flux. Emphasis is deliberately on the needs of the new employee rather than the simple convenience of the organisation but should result in a net gain for the organisation.

The checklists will help new staff to feel welcome and nurtured. The passport familiarisation scheme acknowledges the importance of an organisational overview for every employee and provides an opportunity to gain that overview.

Thanks to Helen Tait and Leigh Maynes for their advice and help with the facilitation. Thanks to Adrian Flint for the photography at short notice. ■

Wendy Pryor has just accepted an appointment as Social Science Librarian at the Coburg Campus of RMIT

Problem solving teams: an overview

Like any change management tool, problem solving teams are no magic cure for the ills of an organisation. Much depends on their sensitive, appropriate and consistent application, the positive reinforcement of achievements and implementation within a context of vibrant and clear strategic goals.

These teams are useful when an issue can be solved by the concentrated attention of a group, when a solution is not obvious or when the causes of a problem are unknown. Teams also can be effective when functional conflicts impede the selection of the best course of action for the organisation.

Even if massive organisational change is the goal, initial teams will strongly reflect prevailing cultural strengths and limitations, which may disappoint participants who feel ready to change the world! But the teams can solve problems and get work done. Given the solution of enough problems in line with organisational goals, the rest should follow.

Teams operate differently from staff consultation; they are more akin to true delegation. Further, communication outside any working team is essential, especially if changes proposed will alter the working lives of colleagues. Selling and explaining solutions in an appropriate way is naturally a part of this communication process.

Best of all, the FADE cycle and others like it provide a coat hanger on which to hang a quality initiative.