

Dynamic Duo: change and choice

Andrea Flew

Introduction

This paper is a case study of change and choice encountered on a Donor-funded Education and Training Project in Vietnam. The case study focuses on action and reaction in the wake of an announcement by the Donor to radically change strategy within its bilateral aid programme to Vietnam, resulting in abrupt foreclosure of a Project. The announcement of the change in bilateral aid programme focus was unexpected, given the preceding eighteen months of activities focussed on extending the current Project for another phase. The sudden announcement initiated change in direction and operation of the Project. Reaction, events, how the project was restructured and what strategies developed to manage change and closure of activities are investigated in this paper.

Finalisation of activities, facilitation of staff departures, development and redeployment, as well as preparation for a transition phase to propose initiatives for commencement in mid-2003, are covered. I consider practice that occurred in the light of theory of change management from Whiteley (1995), and conclude with some insights gained through the experiences.

Background to the Project

The Vietnam-Australia Training (VAT) Project was implemented in 1997. The Project was conceived as a means of consolidating a number of training activities funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) through the bilateral aid programme in Vietnam. Initially, the VAT Project comprised two sub-projects: English Language and Technical Training. In addition, it incorporated the Legal Sector Training Project which was a three-year programme of training in English language and International Law. These two components were reassigned to English Language and Technical Training of the VAT Project on inception in October 1997.

At the time of inception of the VAT Project, Australia's bilateral assistance to Vietnam focussed on both economic and social development. The aim was to support Vietnam's re-integration to the international economy. Education was one of the sectors specifically targeted for assistance. As education and training were high priorities of the Government of Vietnam, a significant component of the bilateral programme was channelled into priorities for English language and technical training. Education and training activities of the Project were aimed at

meeting Vietnam's urgent need for upgrading the technical and professional skills of senior and middle-level officers in the public sector in support of the country's transition towards a socialist market economy.

The Project was established with a goal "to support the Government of Vietnam's Human Resource Development objectives through the provision of appropriate English language and Technical skills training to Government employees and applicants to Australian Development Scholarships (ADS). The aim of the Project was to "focus on providing high quality learning opportunities to individuals who will in turn be better equipped to contribute to the work of their respective agencies." (Project Design Document: 1996).

The Project commenced with two sites: one for Technical Training, led by the Team Leader; and one for English Language, managed by the Deputy Team Leader. At each site, training rooms and offices were renovated. The Ministry of Planning and Investment was the site for Technical Training, with one training room and an office. Ten kilometres away, the English language arm was located at the Hanoi University of Foreign Studies where the Project developed a facility, renovating a four-storey building to create training rooms and Vietnam's first open-access

education library, academic and administrative offices). After three years of operations, Technical Training relocated to the site of the Centre on the University campus. This decision was made in light of economies of scale and creation of a consolidated management structure. The co-location of English language and Technical Training led to renaming the training facility as The VAT Centre, and to restructuring leadership roles with the Project team located at one site.

Organisational Structure

Two counterpart Ministries of the Government of Vietnam were the partner agencies in planning and implementing education and training: The Ministry of Planning and Investment partnered the project for Technical Training; and the Ministry of Education and Training for English language education. Priorities for training activities were established each year through the Project Management Committees of these two partner Agencies.

The VAT Project grew from an initial staff of five into a medium-sized organisation, numbering up to fifty-three full-time staff at the Centre, augmented with short-term consultants for Technical Training courses that were conducted at the Centre and in provincial areas of Vietnam. A bicultural team of academic, administrative, library, ancillary and managerial personnel constituted the organisational structure.

The Project was organic. As funds became available through the bilateral programme to Vietnam, training activities and staff grew. The organisational structure of the Project expanded as activities increased and contracted when there were less, and the style of management changed with the appointments of incumbents. On announcement of the decision of change in policy for the bilateral programme in Vietnam and the consequent closure of Project activities, management restructure of the organisation occurred.

This restructuring became a key element of managing the process of finalising training activities, dissolving the community of the Project as an organisation. In addition, it was a time of preparing for continuation of one training activity to be continued during the transition phase to a proposed new Project.

The Case Study

Five years ago, the Vietnam-Australia Training Project was established through the bilateral aid programme in Vietnam. This education and training project in

Vietnam was designed to meet “the human resource development objectives of the Government of Vietnam” (PDD: 1996). The focus of the Project was to deliver “high quality targeted training programmes to officials of the Government of Vietnam and to applicants of Australian Development Scholarships (ADS)” (PDD: 1996).

The Vietnam-Australia Training Project has conducted education and training activities with more than 5000 participants over the past five years. Short courses in technical training areas account for half this number, and intensive English language training participants account for the latter. Education and training activities were carried out both at the Centre in Hanoi and in many provinces in Vietnam.

During 2000, preparations began for the conduct of the Mid-Term Review of Project activities. In 2001, three teams to review different aspects of the Project were appointed and deployed to Vietnam. Review teams carried out appraisals of Project goals and objectives and training activities; an audit of assets and expenditure was conducted, and an analysis of gender and development policy within training activities was undertaken. The outcomes of the reviews concluded that the Project should be extended for a further five-year phase.

In March 2002, High-level consultations between the governments of Vietnam and Australia resulted in a major shift in bilateral funding. Agreement was reached to remove education from the bilateral aid programme to Vietnam, and to channel bilateral funding to governance and rural development for the next five-year cycle. The announcement of this shift in focus for the bilateral programme in Vietnam resulted in foreclosure of the Vietnam-Australia Training Project, against expectations of a continuing five-year phase.

Change in direction: initial reactions, initial effects

Consequently, the direction given to the Vietnam-Australia Training Project was to finalise activities by year's end. This shift in policy unleashed a great deal of criticism and anger amongst Project staff towards management and towards the Donor. The announcement of this decision was made while I was in absentia. When I returned to the workplace to assume leadership of the Project for this phase of closure, I encountered a wall of emotions.

A change in direction of policy can have hard-hitting impact on an organisation. Especially so when the change in policy is sudden. In this instance, there

was shock, anger and outrage. These emotions are initially explosive. Their airing was essential to moving beyond and into action. Resentment and passive resistance needed to be attended to, and it was a question of how best to approach dispersion.

It became imperative to develop an approach in the workplace for this decision to be positively ingested and ultimately for move towards its implementation. The first action taken was to call a full Project meeting with all staff where it was acknowledged that even though the policy decision might well have left us feeling aghast, it was a decision taken in a sphere beyond our control. It was of vital importance that a statement of clarification of change in policy resulted in Project closure. The importance of clarification lay in the perception of the staff that the decision to close was non-negotiable.

Further, it was of great importance to identify that the decision in policy shift was no reflection of the value of their work. There was a sense of dismay and lack of validation for work accomplished. Personnel voiced feelings of persecution, disaffirmation, and of being undermined in their work. It was important to vent these emotions within public and private encounters within the organisation. By doing so, the organisation could re-establish identity as a community involved in change. Making the policy decision explicit enabled staff (academic, administrative, support and management) to comprehend that we were united in living a shared and shocked reality that touched each team member.

To close the Project effectively, we needed to redevelop our identity as a community capable of moving from a reactive to a pro-active state in the wake of a policy decision.

While the Project faced a clear directive to exit, there was a proviso for one programme to be extended, thus requisite staffing of a limited number of positions would occur. This further muddied the waters with competition. The organisation faced the challenge of how to put into motion the finalisation of most activities and extending one programme at the same time.

Becoming active: Setting the stage to exit

How do we strategically complete when the announcement of closure is sudden? How do we strategically halt expectations of continuing employment as a result of spending the previous eighteen months involved in planning for the next five years? How do we strategically finish activities? How do we alleviate a feeling amongst staff of being bludgeoned by a policy which seemed to undermine and fail to affirm their

accomplishments? An Exit Committee comprising managers of each key area was established. This Committee comprised all managers and this management structure effected a shared responsibility for planning and implementing strategies for effective closure. The presence of each manager enabled us all to develop insights into perceptions, intersections and diversity of the areas of key responsibility across the Project.

The Committee, made up of Vietnamese and Australian managers, met regularly for several months on a weekly basis. We agreed to take responsibility for drafting exit strategies for each key area, and involved English language development with Vietnamese managers. The process of analysing practice to identify strategies for effective hand-over and closure proved to be affirming. We found ourselves embarked on a process which proved to be remarkably healthy and extremely beneficial in terms of affirming staff and their achievements on the Project. This in turn led to planning for cessation of activities. Bringing all managers together let each area and all staff become involved in identifying where we were as a Project team, what we had accomplished up to now, how we had accomplished it and who was responsible.

The process of reflection, analysing practice, and deconstruction of accomplishments shed light on the achievements of the Project, and helped the staff to feel positive about the accomplishments. This resulted in positive feelings, and led to planning and preparing for dissolution of the organisation from the perspective of acknowledging achievements.

To determine strategies required for the dissolution of a community of personnel who constitute an organisation, we involved the staff and drew on their resourcefulness. Bringing together managers from each area of the project, engaging their energy served to reconstruct community identity. On reflecting upon the impact of the process of weekly meetings, the outcome of being charged with responsibility motivated action. The process allowed us to enter into managing change. We were able to begin active deconstruction of our community that came about through the positive valuing that occurred through reflection upon accomplishments achieved during the Project.

In the weeks spent in discussing and reviewing strategies, we were able to refine our thoughts and perceptions, and conceptions for action. We moved from reactive to active states. In turn, this enabled us to engage more effectively and process more efficiently the emotion of response with all staff

members. We were able to view the picture of all components of the Project and the process of interaction enabled us to knit together and construct meaning in planning the implementation of change.

Listening and discussing amongst staff in formal and informal situations became a vital means of unleashing creativity and developing perspectives to deal with changing circumstances. Talking over lunch, discussing over coffee whilst photocopying resources in the corridors, attending formal meetings, fulfilling surveys to appraise project activities, each of these mediums of dialogue served to identify achievements and develop strategies to finalise activities effectively. Acknowledging and involving all staff, creating approaches to manage change and establish strategic priorities came into being. The evolutionary nature of change was evidenced.

Inducting stakeholders into effecting change

Including the stakeholders in the process of closure of education and training activities became necessary. The donor prioritised sustainability. However there was little scope for sustainability to be introduced when finalisation was enacted. The stakeholders needed to be part of the developing and processing of procedures to quit activities with minimal negative impact.

Workshops with trainers in specific technical areas were identified as for training to continue. To maintain continuity, provision of materials developed by the Project was another strategy for handing over of resources. Such resources needed to go into the hands of those who can utilise them. Thus, workshops with trainers became an effective utilisation of resources.

The development of databases of experienced and skilled Vietnamese personnel who had conducted training was compiled.

Avenues for dissemination of Project knowledge led to papers developed of key achievements of the project. These achievements evolved into models of education and training, bicultural teams, an open access education library and systems to support provision of activities.

The Donor Agency and the Government of Vietnam had to be brought into the process of closure. Negotiations, discussion and advice on how to proceed and ensure continuity for one programme also took place. Identifying and seeking to minimise risks and discussing strategies with stakeholders were vital elements in the preparation for the transition.

Strategic participation in organisational change Training

One strategy that proved particularly valuable in building confidence amongst team members was the provision of training in how to move on to new positions. This proved to be a very rewarding and insightful experience for many staff members as the process empowered them with confidence to seek new beginnings. The Project hired a consultant to conduct training in resume writing and interview skills with all staff members. The fact that an outside consultant came into the organisation was also an added benefit. As a newcomer to the community of the workplace, the consultant was able to stimulate reflection and thus induce insights into the value of skills and knowledge that members possessed. The development of skills and knowledge in interviews enabled members to recognise gains, identify expertise and increase their confidence in perceiving new opportunities.

Task distribution in the wake of departures

The flow of departures increased over time. This impacted on the attitude and nerve of the community. As more personnel progressed to new beginnings, more responsibilities and tasks became reallocated amongst those of us remaining. The bittersweet mixture of gladness for new beginnings and sadness of departures was highlighted in every farewell event.

More training-on-the-job became necessary as staff assumed new responsibilities with the reallocation of duties. The strategy to reallocate duties amongst staff remaining was chosen as the most efficient strategy to accomplish tasks given the reducing timeframe of the Project. The option to recruit new staff members was discussed but decided against for several reasons. Given the market for employment in Vietnam, it was predicted that identifying temporary staff members would prove challenging. In fact, as training activities scaled down, there was a progressively diminishing workload. In the context of less demands on time, the challenge to continue to feel motivated in the workplace was upon us. It proved much more challenging to keep motivation charged in the face of dwindling numbers of personnel and dwindling activities for training to be organised. Redistribution of duties was thus decided to be the most effective measure to take.

This redistribution of tasks amongst staff members resulted in some very positive outcomes. It gave opportunities to remaining staff to obtain new skills on the job and diversify their experiences.

It placed those responsible for the training with new and stimulating responsibilities to perform. It resulted in staff feeling affirmed as they trained others and it induced an enthusiastic attitude for new beginners as they took up tasks. Ultimately it was perceived that with multi-skills, staff could find opportunities for other positions, outside the Project.

Extension phase to bridge projects

The decision to extend the Project for a five-month period helped to provide a small number of staff with continued employment. Selection and confirmation of incumbents to fulfil these positions served to unify the community in change as it clearly identified who would remain and who would leave. Decisions were being made as the weeks and months passed. It proved to be a time of empowerment and pro-action once community identity was clearly established.

From practice to theory

When considering theory in the light of practice encountered in winding down this Project, I considered Whiteley's (1995) core values model. Whiteley proposes the core values model for managing change. It appeared to me that the model offers theoretical insights into experiences lived on the Project to mirror that of an organisation whether it is undergoing change to create or change for dissolution. The *core values model* posits that in order to build the culture of an organisation, engagement between the individual's sets of values and management's sets of values needs to become interactive and co-joined. The core values model perceives the dynamism and continuous evolution of values and vision. The model captures these as essential and fundamental ingredients of workplace culture. Tapping into and facilitating the creation of shared mindsets and assumptions is the responsibility of managers. The co-joining of these sets of beliefs enables formation of a common identity. Common identity leads to developing the mission and values of an organisation. *"Both sets of values need to be taken into account when negotiating a shared reality of what the organisation should be doing, why it should be doing it and how it should be doing it (Whiteley, 1995: 42)."*

Negotiating shared realities is a constant process of communication. At the time of the announcement to finalise activities, it was necessary for the Project staff members as an organisation to reformulate the what and how and why of the Project. The Project is staffed with a bicultural team of Vietnamese and

international personnel, and the work culture of the Project grew over the five years of its life. This bicultural team has produced a working culture that embodies the dynamics of intercultural communications. Working in a bicultural team involves understanding how to negotiate expectations, utilising opportunities to develop perceptions and deepen understanding of collaborative endeavour across cultures.

In terms of managing change, cultivation of commitment and unity amongst team members is just as vital for closure to be effected as it is for the commencement of Projects. In closing, the Project had to strategically manage dissolution of community that had evolved and created its own identity during the Project. In closing, we had to deconstruct this identity. Some of the lessons learned included:

- In order to finalise activities effectively, planning closure is essential;
- Critical reflective analysis permeates the process of strategic planning;
- Formulating and articulating an approach to closure highlights the context of a workplace, an appreciation of its culture, its achievements and practices;
- Strategic planning that stems from shared goals is crucial to managing the processes of change for finalisation of activities and orientation towards new endeavours;
- In order to effect a smooth transition to a new project, a vision of its operations is essential to planning for implementation;
- The ebb and flow of change brings reconciliation as stages are reached and decisions are taken. Once reconciled to the idea of change, the ripples on the pond spread wider and more deeply with personnel becoming actively engaged in the change process. The project community begins to expand horizons, seeking new opportunities;
- As the contraction in numbers of staff occurs through progressive departures to new opportunities, recognition grows with insights into what and how the community had evolved;
- With increasing numbers of departures of personnel, redistribution of duties and retraining of incumbents serve to open opportunities to motivate and affirm staff members for their continuing contributions as well as to gain new skills;
- Constant communications take place and shape in formal and informal ways. In terms of manag-

ing change, it is of vital importance to acknowledge this process as constantly forming and reforming over time. Actively listening and talking with personnel is vital to managing change within an organisation. Listening and discussing how to scale down activities, facilitate staff departures and lateral movements, prepare for transition to new Projects involves all members in the workplace. Dialogue offers opportunities to construct and to share responsibilities for change and facilitation in the workplace;

- Managing change requires managers to facilitate staff involvement in the process of learning to change;
- Managing a changing environment requires an astute ability to listen, high levels of tolerance for ambiguity, enduring patience and the alacrity to be decisive;
- Maintaining motivation is a serious challenge in the face of scaling down activities. Actively encouraging staff to optimise skills diversification is a practical and effective means of maintaining momentum in the workplace;
- It is just as vital to lead a finish as it is to lead a beginning. Facilitating the development of team spirit and commitment to finalising activities is essential to effecting closure.

Conclusion

Over the months, numerous activities have ceased. Closure looms. Preparations for finalisation occur. A handover strategy is now being planned. Action and decisiveness bring clarity. Disposal of assets, structuring and staffing an extension phase for five months, celebrating departures of personnel to new beginnings and roles in other organisations all became the norm of life in the workplace as the project scaled down activities. "A community in dissolution" has become a catch-phrase to describe the process of winding-down. Challenge in change unleashes dynamics that impel critical self-reflection. Consistent reflection upon action and reaction evolves in members of a community when personnel are encouraged to discover, voice experiences and perceptions and plan decisively for action.

The dynamic duo of change and choice mimics Batman and Robin rescues following battles fought! Change evolves through experiences encountered. The process of managing change is organic. It is important to acknowledge its constant genesis. The experiences encountered along the course of change these past months have led to an understanding that managing change requires commitment and perseverance. Living change relies on fostering a sense of discovery, building energies to participate in the process of change and developing capacity to decide with confidence when new beginnings beckon.

References

- AusAID, 1996. *Project Design Document for The Vietnam-Australia Training Project*.
- Whiteley, A. 1995. *Managing Change*. South Melbourne: Macmillan Education Ltd.

Andrea Flew, Ms., works with The Vietnam - Australia Training Project in Hanoi. This Project has been funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and is scheduled to conclude in May 2003. The Project has funded education and training activities in English language acquisition, Teacher Training and Technical Training.