HIDDEN
OBSERVATIONS

People and Workplaces — The Good,
The Bad and The Scary

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For 20 years we've been designing learning courses and materials for organisations. To celebrate our 20-year milestone, we opened our vault of organisational stories and observations that we've collected over the years. I hope you enjoy the stories. These stories are delivered in random order and I hope you take away some ideas for yourself, your family, your team and your organisation

How to use this book

The best way to read this book is in a relaxed manner. Some of these observations should prompt immediate ideas for you. Other ideas might hijack your attention in the middle of the night. There are also extra tools and resources recommended after some of the articles. So relax, pull up a comfortable chair and you'll be finished this book in about 2 hours. Feel free to get in touch with me with any "aha" moments. I'm always delighted to hear from readers and my best contact is nkennedy@preftrain.com.

About the Author

Niall Kennedy has been designing leadership capabilities for the past 20 years. Working closely with organisations has given Niall an intimate insight into how organisation's struggle.

This is Niall's 4th book and its written in an informal, informative and intimate manner.

Some organisations that Niall has delivered very successful projects for are Boeing, Dept of Defence, SA Ambulance, NSW Police, BHP Billiton, Lend Lease, Red Cross, Cummins, Brisbane City Council, Shire of Esperance, Newcrest Mining, Dept of Justice, Balonne Shire Council, Guide Dogs, Shell, Hastings Deering, Tas Gas, WA Fire and Emergency Services Academy, Energy Australia…

Born in Ireland, Niall has a Masters Degree in Marketing and has lived in Australia for the past 21 years after studying leadership styles in Ireland, France, USA, UK and The Netherlands.

Dedication

Dedicated to my family whom I love. I'm not sure if you can ever beat the feeling of coming home from work to a loving family.

We lost a few very good people recently:
Bernie and Peter Morris (my In Laws) and my Aunty Jo.

Introduction

The idea for this book began before the last election. A man from the Australian Bureau of Statistics was talking on the radio about the roll-out of the new electronic voting system.

Apparently the system had been tested rigorously and would revolutionise the way Australia voted.

The humble voting booth would soon be a dinosaur.

As I listened, I thought it can't be that fool-proof. Obviously it's going to be a magnet/trophy for every hacker in the world so I posted an article the night before the rollout predicting that the system would not work.

I was correct.

It was an embarrassment and disaster. Even the Prime Minister of Australia was furious. He threw a few barbs at IBM and ABS for the fiasco.

So this book will give you more hidden observations about how things work and how things fail.

I hope you like these hidden observations.

Contents

Dolphin Tails

Maybe it's time to shutter every workplace window in case someone gets sunburn at their desk. Lately there has been a rush of organisations making joke policies. Other organisations are clamping down on "idle workplace chatter". Alas "how was your weekend?" is in the firing line. It's too personal and inquisitive in one organisation. So the pattern seems to be "taking away" and "banning things". Of course the problem is that humans need to interact. Humans are a herd animal. You don't see the cows in the fields standing alone and not giving each other the odd "moo". That's the problem. Your innocuous "moo" is interpreted as offensive by someone else so a "few moo" policy is enacted to reduce communications. So let's look at what can happen if you keeping fixing and meddling with minor things.

A chief scientist is out on a boat. He's very excited as he's made a contraption that can actually communicate with the dolphins. The contraption changes the human voice into the dolphin voice and vice versa. "How are you?" asked the scientist. "We're great"

reply the pod of dolphins. "We like our freedom and we have great times together jumping in the waves". The scientist was ecstatic and the next day he took his young daughter out to see and hear the dolphins. She had a great day admiring the dolphins at play.

Months later a dolphin being interviewed complains of a bit of "salt in the eye". A team of scientists build a massive ocean desal plant (that works) and remove 90% of the salt from the sea. Another dolphin complains of a fractured flipper from crashing into another dolphin on a big wave. The scientist introduces a "strictly one dolphin per wave" policy. Two cheeky dolphins broke the rule and swam together on one wave. Those dolphins got their marching/swimming orders.

The scientists continued to fix and tinker with all the dolphin problems in the ocean. Some other memorable fixes were as follows:

- "Cold Desking" — This meant the dolphins could plan their day's activities in a more structured manner

- "Blowhole Benchmarking" — A reward scheme was introduced for dolphins who reduced blowhole emissions

- "Rostrum Rostering" — A clever IT scalable breakthrough to issue "dive-n-dine" restrictions

The following year, the scientist invited his daughter back out to sea. He excitedly showed her all the advances that had been made since her first visit. "What do you think darling?" asked the scientist. She replied, "Why aren't the dolphins smiling any more daddy?"

Blaming other people

I was at an organisation recently when all the computers malfunctioned. It was chaotic to say the least. Everyone was out of their chairs stomping around. After a short while, everyone was trying to figure out who was to blame. There was a handyman fixing a floorboard and he became the target. When he pointed out there were no cables near the floorboard, the blame then shifted to IT. IT told everyone that there was a notice that Smart Meters were soon to be installed. So, the power company got inundated with angry calls.

I reckon I was there for an hour and it was difficult to believe how angry the people were, and how quick they were to jump to conclusions. I found out a few days later that the actual cause was an engineer who put in the wrong code. As soon as he entered the wrong code he knew he'd made a mistake. But because the culture of the organisation was a "blame and intimidate" culture, he wasn't game enough to put his hand up.

So whose fault was it really? Any organisation that doesn't make

mistakes is doomed. I chatted to an organisational psychologist and she suggested that the real culprit is the "Senior Management Team".

They should have removed the blame culture. By removing the blame culture, people would not feel the need to hide their mistakes. Here is a quick test for you.

When an error occurs in your workplace, do you immediately look for who is to blame? Surely a better strategy would be to figure out 'how can we ensure this error does not reoccur'.

My uncle worked for a large confectionery company in Dublin. When there was a production fault, he was often held to blame regardless of whether he was the cause or not. When he felt wronged, he'd make sure the machinery didn't work for days on end. Imagine how many more chocolate bars would have been produced if they didn't blame my Uncle.

Change Apathy

Last March we were working with a large health organisation. They were preparing for some major changes and had engaged a change management trainer to run sessions for staff and managers. The executive team contacted us as they'd just finished the pilot program and were concerned that the change management training wasn't up to date. So we had a quick scan of the materials and they were so old they could have been written by Adam or Eve.

So the health organisation was in a bit of a bind as they'd signed the contract to run X amount of sessions. The workbooks were awful. They'd been photocopied so many times that some pages were unreadable. All the fonts were different as bits and pieces had been inserted over the years. If there were 2 pages that were paginated in sequence then we couldn't find them. So, we were brought in as the consultants to help update the materials with newer peer reviewed change models etc.

Sounds straightforward! The trainer had a hissy fit. He maintained that his materials were up to date and state of the art.

So we highlighted missing pages, archaic models, defunct examples from the 70's and 80's (nothing from the 90's to now).

But we were getting nowhere. And then I pulled out this line. "Tony, it's a bit ironic that your message is that organisations must be constantly changing and adapting, yet you haven't changed your training materials in over 25 years".

His response trumped mine. "You are correct — everything in the world needs to constantly change and the only exception to this universal rule is my workbooks. They never change".

So there you go. Tony got paid out not to train. And we learned that Tony's workbooks never ever change.

Think Time

If "fear of change" is an issue for you or your organisation then here are some ideas:

- As a group, flesh out the change challenges ahead. Just go to our website preftrain.com and type "change" into the search bar for a Change Management course.

- Read the book *The Knowing Doing Gap* by Pfeffer and Sutton. Its not an easy read, but you'll understand organisational change apathy.

Checkmate Whingeing

I had a problem with my neighbour parking her car willy-nilly on our nature strip. I reckon I'm a good neighbour, but she likes my shaded nature strip particularly in summer so her car doesn't get so hot. So she abandons her driveway and her nature strip for my nature strip.

The problem really only arises on hot days so it hasn't been a continuous dispute. I did knock on her door and ask her not to park there. A couple of weeks later the car returned to my nature strip. Then I tried to move a massive rock towards the spot. I ran out of puff on that one and nearly got it the whole way. So then she angled her car differently. Then I planted the cheapest plant I could find. She waited until it died a couple of weeks later and then continued to park in her preferred spot.

One day coming home, I'd admit I was hot, tired and irritable. And there was her car again parked on my nature strip. So I internally whinged again. Has she no manners? Why do I have to look at her car etc etc.

And then I got my idea that night. "Checkmate Whinging". I needed to either fall over and accept the situation or checkmate it. Otherwise I was always going to be whingeing to myself. So I gathered multiple big rocks and placed them on my nature strip. Now there is nowhere for her to park! It's a checkmate. The cost is that I'll likely have an angry neighbour but the situation is over. So I'll leave you with some thoughts.

What do you internally whinge about? Make a list and then make a checkmate move and decide if it's worth the price. If it's not then maybe just learn to accept it and stop internally whingeing.

Here are some examples:

I hate my job — **Checkmate** — Quit.

The kids treat me like a bank withdrawal — **Checkmate** — Tell them you won't give them any extra money no matter how many times they ask.

My in-laws always criticise my cooking — **Checkmate** — Don't cook for them again. Order the cheapest pizza you can find and get it loaded up with everything that your in-laws don't like.