

Creating Adaptable and Innovative Organisations: A Summary of Discussions from the AIPM Masterclass

by Joseph Schafer and Victoria Herrington.

Editor's Introduction

On Thursday 17th March 2016 the AIPM held a masterclass on 'Creating Adaptable and Innovative Organisations', drawing on the expertise of Visiting Scholar from the United States, Professor Joseph Schafer. The one day Masterclass involved formal presentations from Professor Schafer, group discussions and debate amongst Masterclass participants, and a 'panel of experts in change' comprising two Assistant Commissioners: Assistant Commissioner Carlene York from NSW Police Force; and Assistant Commissioner Luke Cornelius from Victoria Police. The Masterclass was attended by 41 people drawn from 13 organisations.

In a departure from our normal format, this document captures in summary the key themes that were touched on during the day. While the summary is necessarily brief, further reading is recommended at the end of this document.

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It is a truism that the *only constant is change* and police leaders and governments alike will talk about the need for organisational agility and (ambi)dexterity (Herrington and Colvin, 2016) in the face of shifting environmental sands.

Professor Schafer added to this imperative for organisational change by characterising policing as being "in crisis", citing the converging influences of a crisis in public confidence, legitimacy, and trust (evidenced in the US through recent high profile use of force incidents and the community response); economics; political and legal standing; recruitment and retention; the changing nature of communities; and the changing nature of crime.

But change is not a new phenomena, and "the history of policing is a history of change and evolution" (Schafer, Varano, & Meyers, forthcoming), although there remains a perception that achieving organisational change in policing is akin to "bending granite" (Guyot, 1979). The workshop explored why this inherent contradiction may exist, identifying the difference between *adaptive* and *purposive* change.

Adaptive change is the change that comes about by necessity in our organisations. Perhaps new legislation is passed or new crimes emerge that

need to be dealt with. This is the kind of change that police organisations are used to, and are familiar - if not always entirely comfortable - with. Purposive change on the other hand is less urgent, can be aspirational, and can focus on preparing the organisation for a future that is not yet upon us. It is this change that can be very easily, if erroneously, dismissed as change for change's sake, and as such it is perhaps this type of change that Guyot is referring to when she characterises it as "bending granite".

Purposive change is important for police organizations if they are to continue to make inroads into being *efficient*, *effective* and *equitable*. These 'Three Es' are useful when organisations and their leaders are thinking about 'preferable futures' and how they would like their organisations to change. By articulating what a *preferable future* might look like for their organisation, leaders can more clearly see the structural, functional, and workforce changes required.

An organisation that works effectively: A participant view

Those familiar with the AIPM will understand that the learning philosophy adopted is highly reflective, interactive, and designed to prepare partic-

ipants for embedding new thinking, approaches, and understandings in the workplace (AIPM, 2013).

To this end the Masterclass involved a series of small group activities in which participants were encouraged to brainstorm and debate ideas about change. The first of these activities focused on the question: *what would my organisation look like if it were working better?*

Key themes that emerged from these discussions were that our organisations needed to be appealing places to work that embraced innovative thinking, experimentation with new ideas and approaches, had a lower level of resistance to change, and were much more comfortable with technological advances.

Participants envisaged organisations that had a clarity of mission and vision. That their organisations appreciated the need and value of true multi-agency approaches that rested on collaboration and a diversity of ideas.

This led into the next question: *So what is holding our organisations back from achieving these?*

Participants saw a generalised apathy or reluctance to make change happen in our organisations; with low enthusiasm, energy and engagement borne of disappointment from a lack of delivery on change promises.

Change, it was suggested, “flip-flopped” with little clear vision about how the change was going to



improve organisational effectiveness, efficiency and equity. A risk averse culture - perhaps resulting from a perception of low risk appetite on the outside, and a lack of organisational trust to encourage new thinking on the inside the organisation - was seen as contributing to a lack of effective change.

A third point raised in discussions was a preoccu-

pation with measuring activity and outcomes in police organisations, and the counterproductive effect this may have on moving toward a more agile and innovative approaches. Timelines for “success” are truncated in highly politicised (small and big ‘p’) environments and understanding “what success is” was thought limited to that which could be readily measured easily and quickly.

Participant focus then shifted to what could be done to help our organisations better prepare for change: *what needs to be done to ‘prepare the field’ for organisational change?*

Three interrelated themes were evident in the group discussions: leadership; communication; and trust. Masterclass participants highlighted that a different type of leadership was needed in order to better prepare an organisation for change. Specifically shared, rather than traditional hierarchical and authoritarian leadership styles were felt to be better able to engender the engagement required as a precursor of successful change.

Directly related to this was the motion of better communication, both top-down, and bottom up, and for organisations to engage in meaningful dialogue about change and the needs of the organisation in working toward efficiency, effectiveness and equity, inside the organisation, as well as with those outside.

To this end communication was less about one party telling (or convincing) the other party about a change goal or initiative, and more about both parties being *co-producers* in the change efforts required.

Underpinning both of these first two issues was a need for trust. Simply trust consists of *benevolence* (belief that the other party will not harm you), *integrity* (the other party will do what they say they will do), and *competence* (the other party has the ability to do what they say they will do). If any or all of these components are lacking there will be low levels of trust. Low trust environments do not inspire people to think innovatively, yet being a participant in change requires exactly that. So a key question is how organisations can engender greater internal and external trust.

Organisational Change: An Assistant Commissioner's View

The themes of adaptive and purposive change were threaded through the stories and reflections shared by Assistant Commissioners York and Cornelius on the Q&A panel. Both recognised that change was something that police organisations dealt with regularly “and as cops we make it work”. But both also referred to the unintended consequences of change: sometimes unanticipated positives, sometimes negative outcomes from poorly executed or poorly thought through change.



Assistant Commissioners Cornelius and York

Creating the narrative about change was seen as an important part of a leader's role. We were reminded of the Sigmoid Curve, the S shaped curve that has been used to describe the natural life cycle of everything from the British and Russian Empires, to corporate rise and decline, and even love affairs (Handy, 1994).

It is used frequently in change management texts as a way to describe how change has a natural life cycle including a period of reduced performance or effectiveness immediately following the

change as it beds in, followed by an improvement in performance, beyond that if the organisation had stayed on the same trajectory, to an ultimate tailing off as the change initiative outlives its usefulness in a new environment. Handy argues that the trick to successful successive change is to realise that a new change initiative will eventually be needed, and it is important not to wait until performance, based on old ways of doing things, has started to tail off before initialising the next 'S' curve.

Instead Handy suggests that a new phase of change be instigated at *Point A* (see Figure 1), which allow the resources and energy of the continued upward momentum of previous 'business' to help carry the new change through its period of reduced performance and instability.

Of course, the challenge for those in leadership positions is that at *Point A*, very few people can see a need for change. To all intents and purposes the system appears to be working well. Thus the case for change is much easier to make at *Point B* once the decline has started, although leaving it this late makes the job of catching another upswing more difficult.

As such the role of the leader is to create the narrative to explain the need for change before that need becomes all too apparent and ever more difficult to implement. As the environment demands more organisational change more frequently the length of each curve cycle becomes shorter. Where each curve may have been decades in the

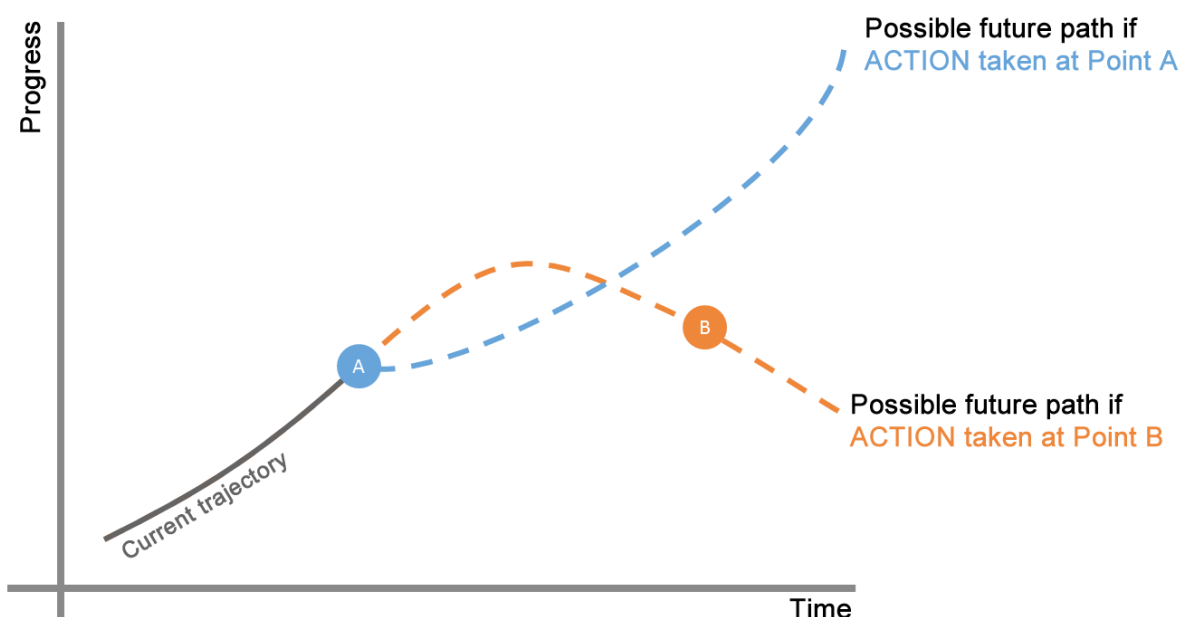


Figure 1: the Sigmoid Curve

making in the past, in more recent times years, or months define each cycle. Which can feed into perceptions of constant change, or change 'flip flops', although rather than contradictory endeavours, these are a symptom of contracted change cycles and the need for organisations to adapt ever more frequently to their changing environment.

The Assistant Commissioner panel concluded with a reflection on the difference between *adapted* and *adaptive* systems. The former is characterised by being highly attuned to its environmental conditions. It is "built" to fit the current environment optimally. But as those conditions change the adapted system is unable to keep up. It falls out of sync with its environment and eventually "dies out". Adaptive systems by contrast are able to change with the conditions.

Police organisations generally are, and need to be, adaptive systems, but we must remain mindful of what adaptations we are at risk of clinging to from the past, and consider how well they serve our new environment(s).

My role in change: A participant view

The final theme for the day focused on the "I" in

organisational change, and asked participants to consider their own role in change. The "technology adoption curve" was first mooted by Rogers (2003) to explain uptake of technological innovation, but it can apply equally well to other sorts of innovations – including change – in organisations. Participants were asked to consider where they sat on the curve in the most recent change initiative that they had been privy to in their organisations, and why (see Figure 2).

Although there is a perception of resistance to change in organisations, true "laggards" generally comprise a small overall percentage of organisational members, with most people involved and engaged in one way or another in change.

Reflecting on their own experiences of change, participants explored: *what can I do to improve the success rate in implementing and institutionalising change?*

Three key themes came through the discussions, including the need to be a participant in the change process. Staying positive, connected, and communicative were thought to be important. As leaders, participants felt that fostering ideas from "below" could help, as well as remaining empathetic to – and engaged with – those impacted

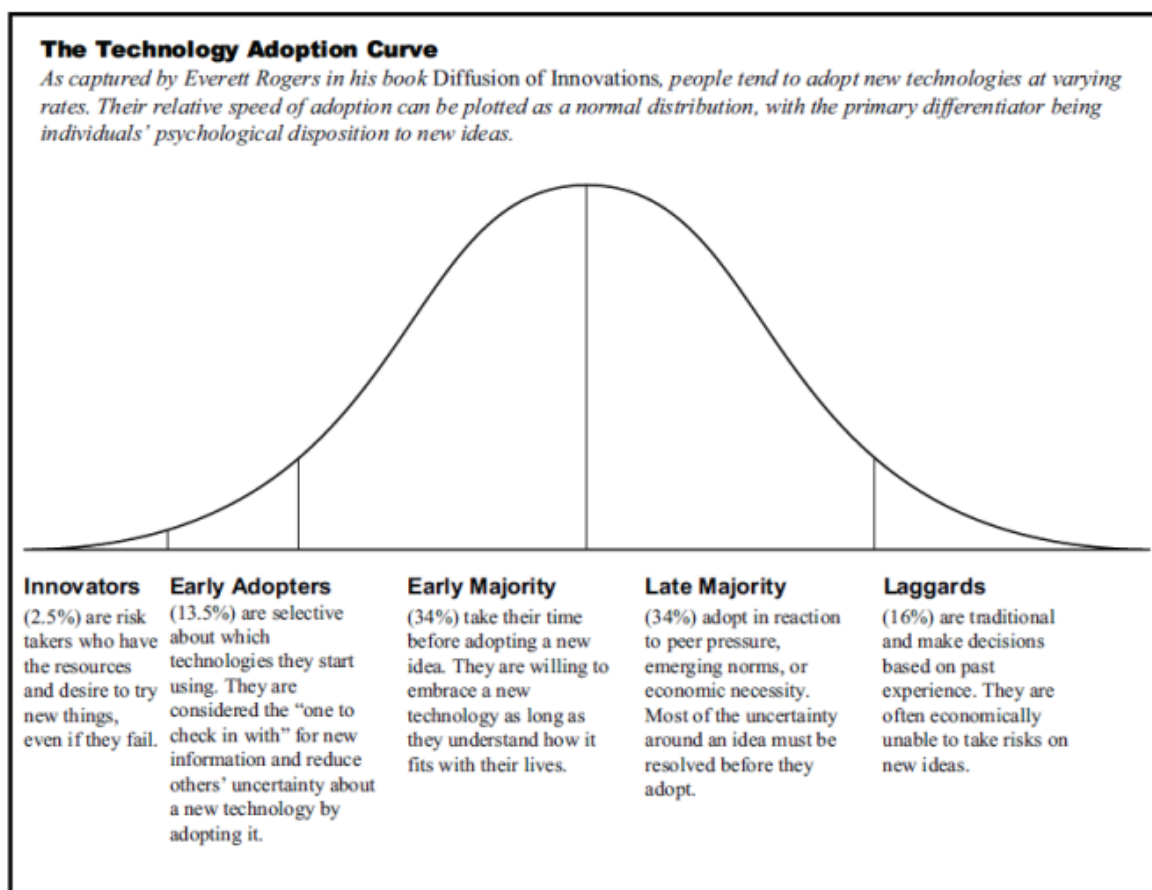


Figure 2: Roger's Technology Adoption Curve

directly by any change.

A second theme was the need to hold people to account and to recognize and reward the behavior that the organisations needed to see. This did not preclude experimenting, testing, and being open to failure, which were thought important parts of the change mindset. Rather it focused on the need for sustained effort in change, and an appreciation that implementation was not the same as institutionalising change, and that there was continued work in motivating and monitoring change across the life of the endeavor.

The third theme to emerge was recognising the importance of diversity. Rather than a demographic characterisation of diversity in terms of gender or ethnicity, diversity was explored in terms of ideas and perspectives. And in that, recognizing that “naysayers” may have a legitimate point worth considering, as much as the innovators and early adopters of change.

Why do change efforts fail?

The day was bought to a close by Professor Schafer reflecting on why so many change efforts seem to fail. Drawing on data collected from police personnel in the United States Schafer concluded that this was largely because the architects of change had failed to engage the “four Cs”: that is, a failure to communicate, consult, collaborate and to build consensus about change.

Change is more likely to fail when change agents do not communicate answers to the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions associated with that process. Why is change necessary? What will it accomplish? How does a vision of change translate into actual practice?

Architects of change need to consult with those effected by that process, as well as those who have relevant expertise. Change needs to be something done *with* employees, rather than *to* employees. By collaboratively engaging relevant employees, partners, and citizens in the process of planning and implementing change, the resulting processes are more likely to be appropriate, accurate, and successful. These collaborations can engender a consensus that change, even when difficult and painful, is the right path to take.

Winning the “hearts and minds” of employees

can ensure workers understand the change and believe it is necessary and appropriate. The absence of the four Cs increases the likelihood that change will be ill-conceived, misunderstood, subverted, or a failure.

Professor Schafer reviewed findings from research conducted with participants attending the FBI National Academy program and the Masterclass participants shared their perspectives and experiences, reaffirming many had encountered the same circumstances with change efforts in their organisations.

FURTHER READING

For more on Prof Schafer’s thoughts about organisational change see the [short video recorded during his stay at AIPM](#)

See also Schafer, J., Varano, S., & Myers, R. (forthcoming). *Organizational change in policing: Understanding the process of advancing professionalism and reforming practice*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

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