

# From 'resolving grievances' to 'a culture of constructive communication': Really taking the heat out of Victorian Public Sector workplace issues

A presentation by David Moore, Nicole Cullen and Lynne Witynski  
LEADR CONFERENCE  
11 September 2009

## 1. Introduction

In 2008, the Victorian State Services Authority (SSA) released a Discussion Paper entitled *Taking the Heat out of Workplace Issues*. The Paper has provoked discussion about how to reduce destructive disputes, grievances and conflict in Victorian public sector workplaces and has evolved into a "project" prompting collaborative action across the sector.

This presentation will focus on "action learning" as a means to shift the prevailing "rights focused" culture of organisations in the Victorian public sector towards promoting positive communications and relationships within the workplace.

## 2. Background - grievances and disputes within Victorian Public Sector workplaces

Some background facts relating to Victorian public sector workplaces;

- workers compensation claims are increasingly based on stress-related injuries and much of that stress is associated with unresolved conflict.<sup>1</sup>
- Most of the issues resulting in complaints and grievances could have been resolved through earlier intervention.<sup>2</sup>
- A recent sector-wide survey of organisations in the Victorian public sector showed that employees are lacking confidence that their organisation can resolve disputes. This is notwithstanding the availability of policies on how grievances should be handled and disputes resolved.<sup>3</sup>

In all of this, the public sector does not differ greatly from the private sector. Researchers and practitioners have long suggested that unresolved conflict is among the largest reducible cost in organisations. Managers are estimated to spend half their time managing workplace conflict.<sup>4</sup> Commonly, staff members are not supported to manage concerns effectively. Formal grievances are common. Many who lodge a complaint still feel aggrieved even if the official 'resolution' is in their favour.

The systems in place for resolving workplace conflict are arguably ineffective and in need of overhaul.

<sup>1</sup> c.f. WorkSafe Victoria, Public Sector & Community Services Division, 2007, *Stresswise- Preventing Work-related stress, A guide for employers in the public sector*, <http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/WorkSafe/Home/Forms+and+Publications/Publications/Stresswise>

<sup>2</sup> c.f. State Service Authority, 2008 *Taking the Heat out of Workplace Issues Discussion Paper*  
[http://www.ssa.vic.gov.au/CA2571410025903D/WebObj/PSSC\\_Discussion\\_Takingtheheat/\\$File/PSSC\\_Discussion\\_Takingtheheat.pdf](http://www.ssa.vic.gov.au/CA2571410025903D/WebObj/PSSC_Discussion_Takingtheheat/$File/PSSC_Discussion_Takingtheheat.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> State Service Authority, 2007, *The State of the Public Sector In Victoria 2006-2007*,  
[http://www.ssa.vic.gov.au/CA2571410025903D/WebObj/statevps/\\$File/statevps.pdf](http://www.ssa.vic.gov.au/CA2571410025903D/WebObj/statevps/$File/statevps.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> c.f. Thomas, R., 2002, "Conflict Management Systems: A Methodology for Addressing the Cost of Conflict in the Workplace",  
<http://www.mediate.com/articles/thomasR.cfm>

### 3. Making the business case for change

Although staff surveys suggest that Victorian public sector organisations could do more to prevent and reduce conflict and managers lament the amount of time lost responding to conflict, the business case for ‘purchasing conflict reduction’ is universally under-developed and consequently has not yet prompted comprehensive systemic change.

This may be because of the complexity of calculating the cost of conflict and the fact that tools for making the calculation are not commonly available. Another approach to achieve the same outcome, namely “action learning” is emerging.

### 4. Action Research Project

A core group of Victorian public sector colleagues with an interest in ADR have been meeting regularly since August 2008. Participants at each of these network meetings have developed strategies for change and have then reviewed changes at subsequent meetings. In effect, this network is involved in an Action Research Project. Each meeting (i) reviews lessons, (ii) generates a refined set of tactics, and (iii) seeks to apply some of these tactics before the next meeting. From the second half of 2009, the project has included demonstration projects for taking the heat out of workplace issues in several Victorian public sector Departments. For example, one organisation demonstrated a matrix it had developed for assessing the risk of conflict and making strategic decisions about conflict management. This model was made available for other organisations to adapt and utilise. Participants in the project have come to value the action learning approach and importantly, it appears to be culturally appropriate within the Victorian public sector.



### 5. Development of a Guide for Developing Conflict Resilient Workplaces

Another outcome of the project was the development of a Guide for Developing Conflict Resilient Workplaces. The Guide was developed in consultation with the Victorian public sector network and it offers a strategy of appropriate **responses to** workplace conflict, an emphasis on **reduction of** conflict and a **reframing of** emphasis towards skills and processes that promote constructive communications within workplaces.

During the development of the Guide, the network offered helpful observations such as;-

- It is crucial to identify impediments to cultural and structural change in the organisation.
- Any approach to reform needs to be congruent with the existing organisational culture.
- Where a lead agency is offering any sort of guidance to adaptive organisational change, it is also important to provide a succinct explanation of how to use the guide.
- We need to be mindful of what we ourselves – as professionals - need to consider in order to take responsibility for change. For example, how can we learn to consider information that challenges / disconfirms our current views / ways of seeing things?
- Any materials that are designed to support professionals “Taking the Heat out of Workplace Issues” need to have clear, overarching visuals.

## 6. Start with root cause analysis, then shift the language and responsibility

A solid diagnostic tool can help determine the root causes of conflict, and so identify which process, or combination of processes, is most likely to help resolve the presenting issues. Once an organisation begins to identify root causes of conflict in *individual* cases, managers may also look for *patterns* across multiple cases. They may ask:

- What sort of early interventions could resolve the greatest number of problems?
- What could have prevented a situation from becoming *problematic* in the first place?
- What would it take for people in this organisation to have more constructive interactions, working relationships, and group dynamics?
- What would it take to shift organisational culture beyond responding to, and preventing, disputes and conflict?
- What initiatives would promote an organisational culture that is characterised by more positive communication and working relations?

These questions represent a fundamental shift in emphasis, from:

- *Reacting to negative* features of a system, through
- *Preventing* negative features of a system, through
- *Promoting positive* features of a system.

This shift in emphasis is necessary if Victorian public sector organisations are to move towards a more collaborative culture where the heat is taken out of workplace issues through discussion and “interests focussed” dialogue.

## 7. Summary

A new approach to taking the heat out of workplace issues is emerging across the Victorian public sector. This approach:

- refines our *understanding* of workplace disputes and conflicts;
- shifts the *focus, language* and *methods* used to analyse workplace issues;
- involves a shift in who is accountable for taking the heat out of workplace issues.

**For more information (and a copy of the Project Report and Guide to Developing Conflict Resilient Workplaces) see [www.ssa.vic.gov.au](http://www.ssa.vic.gov.au)**