

Adopting best practice

Organisations today are searching for a blueprint that will enable them to operate successfully in a constantly changing environment characterised by competition for available customers and resources; demand for both new and improved services; and a constant push for better rewards and greater job satisfaction for employees.

Everyone is searching for a change-management strategy to best suit their own needs.

Newcastle City Council as part of an evolutionary process, decided, in October 1993, to adopt 'World's best practice' as its change mechanism involving management and employees working together, continuously reviewing customer requirements, determining appropriate work practices and setting achievable performance standards.

In adopting an integrated, corporate approach to service provision the Council has involved all areas of activity, including Newcastle Region Library units, in a change process that should ultimately transcend divisional and activity centre boundaries.

The basic tenet of the process is the adoption of a productivity culture that focuses on continuous improvement at all levels; the acquisition and application of broader skills for employees; and maximum involvement in and accountability of employees for their work performance.

Put simply it means finding the 'best way' of doing things—changing the way work is organised in order to remove barriers to productivity and enable individuals and teams to improve performance. The rule is simplicity, flexibility and effectiveness.

Best Practice has become the way Council works at all levels in order to fulfil its reason for being — to identify and meet the requirements of customers, both internal and external.

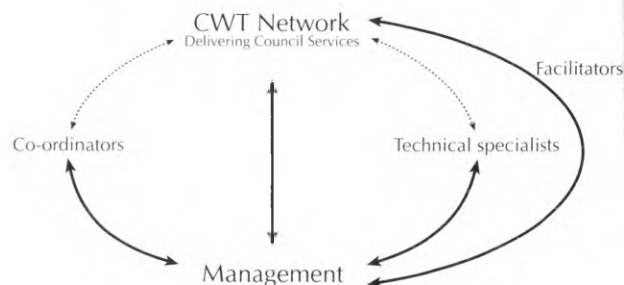
An initial part of the change process has been the formation of a Cellular Work Team (CWT) network of ninety-three teams

cross the entire operations of Council, including ten from the Library Service.

Each CWT is defined as a multi-functional unit organised around a complete piece of work. Initial training covered best practice and team building concepts, interpersonal skills, developing key performance indicators and problem solving.

Teams are developing partnerships with their major customer groups, negotiating service standards and determining

Best Practice Structure



appropriate methods to achieve desired results. In the process, competencies needed by team members are identified and training program planned and scheduled. Each team has assumed accountability for the work it produces and is committed to continuous performance review and productivity improvement.

In adopting the team approach, it was acknowledged that, to be successful, teams had to be given as much self-management as would be practical and possible. A supportive management structure designed to encourage the development of 'empowered' teams was introduced as a result of a middle management benchmarking project. This project, undertaken by a representative group of middle managers from across Council operations, investigated the role of managers in team based organisations and recommended a structure of:

1. *Managers* responsible for:

- providing direction, support and assistance to teams but not involved in day-to-day activities
- long term planning and resource strategies
- identifying problems and helping to determine solutions
- assisting in defining team boundaries and expanding responsibilities.

2. *Co-ordinators* responsible for:

- working with a number of teams with similar functions
- developing co-operation and consistency in service provision
- providing training and guidance for team members, particularly team leaders, in the initial stages of the change.

3. *Technical specialists* responsible for:

- acting as internal consultants to both managers and teams
- providing advice on technical matters and process evaluation and refinement
- undertaking special projects/research

To support the change process internal *Facilitators* have the responsibility for promoting the principles and concepts of best practice within the Council.

Within a simple and flexible framework managers, co-ordinators and technical specialists combine to provide a comprehensive support system. Facilitators provide on-going direction and encouragement for continuous change.

Implementing a change program on an all encompassing basis as undertaken by Newcastle City Council requires patience, commitment and perseverance. We are now 20 months into what we knew would be a long and bumpy road for all concerned. Each stage reached has been a significant milestone. Changing from our familiar, traditional management styles and work practices to the unfamiliar but flexible approach needed to support employee empowerment is unpredictable and stressful but the opportunities unveiled makes accepting the continuing challenge worthwhile.

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Australian Library and Information Association

Study Grant Award for 1996

The Australian Library and Information Association is making funds available each year to support practising librarians and library technicians wishing to undertake a study project. The number of awards in any year will depend upon the funds available and the estimated costs of proposals received. The Association's intention in offering study grants is to provide an opportunity for librarians and library technicians to undertake projects they would otherwise be unable to do because of the time and costs involved.

Application forms and details of the terms and conditions of the Award are available from ALIA National Office and applications for an award should reach the Membership Officer, ALIA, PO Box E441, Queen Victoria Terrace, ACT 2600, e-mail gillian.colledge@alia.org.au, or telephone (06) 285 1877 by **1 September 1995**.