

Floods, Faculties and Successfully Surfing the Waves of Change

Martin McCarron, Jo Allbutt
Queensland University of Technology

Problems are only opportunities in work clothes – Henry J. Kaiser

2011 had a difficult birth in Queensland. Brisbane experienced an unprecedented and unplanned for flood event and many parts of the rest of the state were affected by floods or cyclones. The scale of the disaster was potentially overwhelming. But the aftermath brought out something in the people of Brisbane that many had feared was lost. An ability to cope in the face of adversity emerged in the form of immense resourcefulness and ingenuity. A community spirit re-surfaced. Neighbors and strangers helped one another for no other gain than to help get the city working again. Tools were sourced from loose networks of volunteers, transportation systems repurposed to deploy vast armies of residents who simply wanted to help.

The university too was affected – buildings shut, staff sent home, equipment relocated ahead of rapidly rising waters, vital plant isolated, IT systems failed-over and Data Centers powered down. At the local level crisis was averted and panic avoided by the resourcefulness and innovation of staff galvanised by a clear common purpose. Staff remained unfazed while setting up shop on a different campus, squatting in computer laboratories and using all resources at hand to continue to respond to questions, get students enrolled and help them ease into their new world of university life.

In many ways, it was the unprecedented scale of the environmental challenge and the seeming impossibility of the task of recovery that opened the door to innovative ideas, resourcefulness and the emergence of creative solutions.

The lessons learned from confronting the floods have given us insights that inform our response to major organisational challenges. During 2011 QUT initiated an organisational restructure unprecedented in its scale. The dimensions of the change included; consolidating four faculties into three resulting in the establishment of two super faculties; the building of a new \$230 million precinct to house a new institute, high end research and new learning and teaching spaces. All of this coupled with the all too familiar resource constraints, shrinking budgets, reduced staffing levels and the subsequent loss of institutional knowledge. The year ended with organisational structure in place, staff nominated to positions and a very long to do list.

For us, the scope of the ambition for the Science and Engineering Faculty was clear however the detailed plans were not yet in place, processes were not rationalised, systems were yet to be integrated and teams still to be formed. Like any major organisational change in its early stages anxiety and fear were at risk of taking hold. Awareness of the need for change was present; the knowledge of what it would look like was not.

Buoyed by our experience during the floods a clear determination to cope together emerged. A sense of optimism existed along with the certainty that if we didn't yet know how we would, we knew we COULD successfully navigate the challenges of transformation.

We will explain the myriad responses including a few key issues for example; ignoring organisational boundaries, the student experience remaining front and center of all we do and previously fiercely guarded territory being challenged and relinquished.

While the 'act of God' in January last year brought destruction and heartbreak to so many, it also precipitated a number of changes for the better in our city and on our campuses. This talk will explore how we are fostering this spirit in our organisational change and highlight some of the green shoots taking hold.