Short paper presentation: You may prefer a traditional oral presentation rather than a poster. The format is 20 min presentation plus five minutes discussion. Your contribution should also be available in paper form and will be included in the conference proceeding published electronically. Submit a draft of the paper. You will have the opportunity to refine it.

Leadership: Understanding you get worse before you get better

I started as CEO of the Kangaroo Island Health Service (located off the coast of South Australia) on 14 October 2003. When asked at my job interview how long I planned to stay I said I thought a five year plan, that it would probably take me three years to understand and learn, before I would effectively put back into the system. Both my predecessors had left after 2.5 and 3.5 years, perhaps I should have considered why.

The Kangaroo Island Health Service is a highly complex government public health service located on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. The population is about 4,500 and it is considered remote with the only access by plane or ferry. The Public Health Sector is going through significant reform.

The problem was that I didn’t really believe I’d need three years to learn because I’d been in middle management for eight years in a different organisation and I knew what a CEO needed to do and I’d completed a degree in Business Management, a leadership course and read the Fifth Discipline so I knew exactly what was needed. I knew all about learning organisations and I was confident I could deliver and had better skills and knowledge than my predecessors.

If you are thinking I was heading for a fall – you’re right. I quickly revised my plan in my mind to a seven plan but even that didn’t help.

It wasn’t a fall as a slide into a personal pit as I gradually became aware of how much I simply didn’t know. People were helpful, but things became worse when I found out how much knowledge the organisation had either never had or had lost through staff turnover and needed to develop. At the same time significant change and reform were on the way.

For example for the first year I lived happily with the delusion that the Corporate Policy Manual in my office was understood and adhered to by all staff. No one else actually knew it existed. I knew that vision, roles and goals and plans are significant tools required by all organisations. Did I check that these were in place? – no I assumed they were and maybe needed some updating – how did I find out – the hard way!

We went through an exercise of strategic planning. I went around the island meeting with groups to get community and external feedback. It was to be excellent, the Chair of the Board and I had a powerpoint presentation explaining what was happening in health and to gather feedback. Maybe two people would turn up at each site. Cynics suggested it was because so much was being dictated they didn’t really have opportunity for input. But my energy did not flag. I put together a plan and delivered it to government.
Was this plan real? Useful? owned by all? No. It took me more time to realise that. My only defence for being a slow learner was the complexity of the organisation.

I also lived with the happy delusion that the financial systems were in place and everyone knew and understood and had the skills for their roles in the finance team. Did I ask? Did I check - no – I assumed.

Financial crisis hit. We got through by going out and asking for help from the greater systems. Trouble with this was I asked the senior experts to come over from the department – they were so expert they could neither comprehend my or the organisations lack of knowledge nor explain to us what was happening.

Meanwhile the Management Team got the message about the financial situation. The Regional Department of Health told me to cut spending and salaries and wages. We did. It was painful. Staff were putting in extra hours to cover shifts, we developed a stores/supply role to try and gather information and organise stores and supplies - critical in the health industry because everything is expensive and everyone wants the best.

There was advice and reviews everywhere – experts kept saying “we can advise you broadly but you have to add in your local knowledge as we don’t really know the details” Neither did we. By my second year in the role the total Management Team experience amounted to 5 years.

I realised feedback was an issue so I set up a complaints process for internal and external consumers. It was taken up by staff reporting a myriad of issues from stores to interpersonal grievances to lack of support by managers.

We got into more and more of a spin reacting and managing events and knowing we were never getting to the real issues. The cynics took the floor consuming time and energy of managers in responding rather than getting on with what we really needed.

By a stroke of good fortune and a connection across the globe the Regional General Manager met a consultant who taught thinking skills. The RGM engaged him to come and teach us some of DeBono’s methods to help us through the reforms. The timing of this was unbelievably good for us as we had the help we needed to bring the whole community together and develop and strong shared vision which is now the foundation for our way forward. Trust the people was the message for me and it was spot on. I had to completely let go and wait for the community and staff to develop the vision. Leadership by being brave enough to let go and respect - a new concept in action for me because I felt that I should do that – it was a great relief.

That vision is helping to give the ground for the systems improvements we are slowly (achingly slowly) making. It also helps to deal with the cynics because we can refer back to it and it is powerful because it was written by the community not me.
We are developing as a learning organisation and a team but it is not quick and some people have had or are going to go because it doesn’t suit them. That’s tough in a small community. It is like a complete breakdown of the old organisation and a new one is growing. We have the vision. We still don’t really know how to use it well but that is coming along.

The vision very useful last year when the health region we worked within was to be dissolved. I decided to recommend to the Board that my position became an Executive Officer position and that the Area Manager be appointed as the Chief Executive Officer. This was a scandalous thing to do in the eyes of some. It would result in loss of representation for the organisation in the bigger health system. We would no longer control our own destiny they said. Conversely, I saw we desperately needed more support and recognition that we are part of a greater system and we needed more representation given the reforms and changes coming. I looked at the vision and realised that this action was one we needed. I didn’t really want to loose the title of CEO but I needed more assistance in dealing with the government and it would have been arrogant of me to assume I could best represent the needs of the organisation. This turned out to be the best decision. As a result we now have more resources and our financial on going crisis’s have been resolved. Why didn’t I do it sooner?– because it took me that long to understand and see the issues confidently.

We have more work to do on how we expect people to behave – in a respectful manner – you can’t have a learning organisation if some people think they are better or more worthy than others. This understanding is growing and gradually, slowly we are seeing change. Very slowly we are building and learning about the systems we need and want to have in place and that we must do it ourselves.

The hardest thing is to let go and recognise we all have to learn, it’s easy to apply to others but not to myself – I don’t much like making mistakes. I like to get things right but I have learned the hard way that making mistakes is the best form of learning for me as well.

It feels like things are getting better and sometimes we suddenly find others are looking to us for an idea for a solution which means, on reflection, that we are doing some things really well.

This is really on overview of the past three years. There are so many stories I could share and I will refine this over the next few months with some more painful stories of direct experience. Like having developed a mentoring/coaching relationship why did I decide I needed to “grow up” and do without at a crucial stage? And why did I loose it over the budget position last Christmas and come in from leave and decide to redo how we were meeting as a management team without consulting with the others – a sudden burst of authoritarian behaviour because I panicked because I felt I should have been able to fix something I couldn’t!