Exploring the Hypothetical as an intervention tool for organisation communication, using the case study of Centrelink as the basis for the exploration

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of a change management intervention tool described here as the 'Hypothetical'. This tool is not described in organisation literature, but many of its functions and features can be found in theories relating to, for example, organisational communication, change management, leadership and team dynamics. The Hypothetical does, however, appear as a discussion forum in the popular media. In the 1980s and 1990s, the high profile television program, *Hypotheticals*, hosted by Geoffrey Robertson QC, dramatised decision-making processes, and teased out some of the moral dilemmas inherent in social and political problems, utilising high profile panelists from the social, political and business elites. In the 1990s, the Hypothetical made a transition from the television screen to the management meeting room and the executive suite. The researcher of this study has similarly used the Hypothetical in his capacity as a communications consultant for a number of public and private client organisations.

With this background, this study was undertaken to explore the Hypothetical and to identify those functions and features that define its appropriateness as an intervention for organisational communication and change. The findings from this study are founded on two aspects — a review of relevant organisation literature, and data from the presentation of a specific Hypothetical intervention to the public organisation Centrelink Queensland.

The Hypothetical tool, as identified in this study, is a one-off, 90 minute performance — involving a facilitator, audience, and members of a panel who represent the organisation — in which semi-fictitious storylines are meant to symbolise elements in the cultural life of the organisation. The study also identifies a Hypothetical process in which research methods that are applied, before and after the intervention performance, help to identify the functions and features of the intervention.

The features of the Hypothetical, as an intervention are viewed through the lens of Goffman's (1959) classic theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, where the organisation is conceptualised as 'theatre', and the motivations and actions of its members are interpreted through the symbolism of theatrical performance and interaction. The study also draws on

symbolic convergence theory to explain what happens inside an organisation through the language, conflicts and shared cultural experiences of its members.

The Centrelink Hypothetical in this study reflects aspects of the shared organisational culture, and presents its fictitious storylines in the context of dialogues between its panelists. The panelists are representatives of their organisation and are heard reflecting the values of that organisation's culture. Consequently, the analysis of text through the Hypothetical transcript — the deciphering of shared narratives, mindsets, motivations and visions of the future, and so forth — forms a significant aspect of the study for conceptualising Centrelink organisational culture, and for identifying how problems of communication and change have become embedded in that culture. More specifically, it is through the Centrelink Hypothetical that this study seeks to identify the functions of the Hypothetical and to determine how they may contribute solutions to Centrelink's management problems.

The literature consulted for this study reveals that the Hypothetical is closely allied, as an intervention process, with the relatively new management practice of scenario planning. It is scenario planning that attempts to build a generative learning capability within organisations — a continuously looping process of deep learning that takes place within each organisation's unique strategic conversation. This study draws on scenario planning to identify similar performance features within the Hypothetical process — stimulating the organisation to be responsive to, and to embrace, change; finding appropriate methods of communication; identifying and modifying mental models.

This study also highlights a significant difference between the scenario planning process and the Hypothetical. Emerging literature in management psychology asserts the importance of the emotionally intelligent team, which demonstrates its social skills and empathy. However, the driving force behind scenario planning is 'the business idea', or the organisation's mental model and what drives it, and there is little or no attention paid to the importance of emotional capabilities in the scenario planning literature.

Findings from the Centrelink case demonstrate that a significant dimension of the Hypothetical experience is the impact of symbolically convergent scripted roles and the

related capacity to utilise emotional intelligence. Consequently, this study recommends that suitable emotional frameworks be employed throughout the Hypothetical process to help discern appropriate members' behaviours and suggest how the combination of such behaviours may be used to enhance the organisation's future generative learning process.

Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

> *The subject matter (of hypotheticals) is serious and often highly technical… Rigorous research is necessary to identify the crucial issues, to find expressive yet accurate language to expound them, and imaginary yet realistic dilemmas to dramatise them*. (Robertson, 1987, p. v)

1.1 Introduction

Organisational decision-making in the 21st century is increasingly taking place in an environment of dynamic change and uncertainty. Those who must make important decisions are having to do so with only one certainty, and that is that nothing stays the same for very long. Once managers decide to make changes within their organisation, they must necessarily communicate those changes to the people who will implement them. That's why interventions like the Hypothetical, the subject of this thesis, are useful tools for thinking clearly about the multitude of factors that may affect those desired changes. The willingness to face a series of often provocative, 'what-if' stories, engages managers in a rare opportunity to 'suspend' the reality of their daily organisational lives. Stepping into a Hypothetical future is a way of seeing beyond their current range of vision, a way of thinking their way forward, of dealing with uncertainty and keeping them thinking as they move.

1. 2 Purposes of the study

A search of the Internet will reveal the world-wide marketing and use of the *Hypothetical* throughout organisations, teaching establishments and the corporate world for a variety of reasons — intellectual debate, learning skills, analysis of corporate issues and the exploration of solutions for organisational change. However, a search of academic literature reveals no references to the use of the Hypothetical as an organisation intervention tool. Consequently, this study starts the process of identifying the functions of the Hypothetical and establishing a place for it as an intervention within organisational communication and management literature.

Therefore, the research problem which gave rise to this study is defined as:

To identify the functions and features of the Hypothetical as an intervention for organisational communication and change; using a Centrelink case as the basis for exploration.

The problem, as posed, reveals two aspects of the study — the relevance of the Hypothetical as a generic intervention tool for organisational communication, and the impact of the Hypothetical on the specific case study organisation, Centrelink.

To further clarify the research problem, the findings in this exploratory study will be presented in the context of four research questions:

Research Question 1.

What are the generic features, functions and performance aspects of the Hypothetical tool which help explain its use as an intervention in organisational settings?

Research Question 2.

How does the Hypothetical function as an intervention process for helping facilitate change in an organisational setting?

Research Question 3.

What are the perceived organisational problems and solutions in the Centrelink case as revealed through the Hypothetical intervention process?

Research Question 4.

Drawing on findings from the example of the Centrelink intervention, in what ways can the Hypothetical intervention process provide solutions in successful change management situations?

1. 3 Defining the Hypothetical

It is important, at the outset, to define what is meant by a number of words and terms used in the context of this study:

Hypothetical — the noun, spelt with a capital 'H' is used to describe the organisation intervention tool, or the broadcast television program.

Hypothetical intervention tool — refers to a single, Hypothetical presentation; the 90-120 minute interactive presentation by a facilitator with a panel of 10-12 people and an audience of their peers.

Hypothetical intervention process — refers to the range of selected research methods, including the Hypothetical presentation, that are applied in an organisational setting for the purpose of addressing the organisation's stated problems.

Centrelink case — the study conducted inside Centrelink Queensland utilizing the Hypothetical intervention process. Centrelink is a Commonwealth Government organisation providing social service outcomes for the Australian public.

Hypothetical stories — are the semi-fictitious events, situations and human interactions that make up the Hypothetical intervention tool. They are based on real organisational events and happenings as revealed through prior research methods.

Scenario — is the entire 90-120 minute 'drama' that includes various stories, dramatic interactions and staged conversations that occur between the panelists and between the facilitator and the panelists. The scenario is the sum of the various individual stories and is the centrepiece of the Hypothetical presentation.

1. 4 The Hypothetical as intervention

The aim of this research study is to examine the role and impact of the Hypothetical as a communication intervention in range of organisational settings. In keeping with an

interpretivist orientation of much recent social science research (Weick, 1983; Neuman, 2000), processes of verbal and written interaction and other phenomena within a single case study will be examined and explained (Putnam, 1983). It will be assumed that the Hypothetical is a functioning interaction strategy for organisational change management; apart from applying that strategy in a qualitative study of the Commonwealth social service organisation, Centrelink, it will also be the object of this study.

This particular case has been chosen because senior management of Centrelink requested that this researcher examine internal organisational communication on a number of levels. Senior managers in Centrelink Queensland believe that the various strategies used to communicate within the organisation, particularly between middle management, are failing to support pre-determined goals or objectives of the organisation.

The Centrelink case study is, therefore, an attempt to explore the use of the Hypothetical as an intervention for examining communication practices and, consequently, to examine the capability of the Hypothetical to help promote change in a large bureaucracy. More specifically, the research seeks to discover on what levels the Hypothetical, as an emerging tool of change management, is able to contribute to the process of improving organisational communication within the organisation's management environment. The Centrelink case study will also provide an opportunity to analyse and understand the role of the Hypothetical through a genuine organisational setting. In order to achieve this, prior to undertaking the case study, the researcher asked Centrelink management a number of questions to help define the scope and purpose of the proposed intervention. One of those questions sought to establish the goals of the Hypothetical: issues that need to be addressed and those that should be avoided. Centrelink's written response was:

Issues that need to be addressed:

- Improve understanding of services and support offered by its Brisbane-based head office, known in Centrelink as Area Support Office (ASO).

- Making visible the invisible work done by ASO.

- Identify areas where Area Support Office can improve service to the Customer Service Centres, or suburban offices, otherwise known internally as the "Network".

- Identify areas where partnerships can be formed or improved (between the Network and ASO). (see Appendix 1)

No issues were identified that were to be avoided. However, a follow-up interview determined that the 'Centrelink Career Information Centre' and the 'Business Manager job description' were to be avoided, as they were issues under review within the organisation.

1. 5 Background: From television to organisational intervention

This researcher first gained experience of the Hypothetical in 1987 as executive producer of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation television series, 'Geoffrey Robertson's Hypothetical'. The original concept for a television program, using the Hypothetical, came from the United Kingdom in the late 1970s, with Sir Denis Foreman, the then chairman of Granada Television (Robertson, 1986). Sir Denis had witnessed a series of private conferences at the Ford Foundation in the US utilising the Hypothetical format, and it was he who conceived the television program.

The televised Hypothetical came to Australia and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in the early 1980s under the guidance of one of its UK presenters, barrister Geoffrey Robertson. While producing the Robertson series for the ABC, this researcher envisaged more structured outcomes for the format than simply television entertainment. The result of this decision was to take the outcomes to targeted communities. Consequently, in consultation with the Commonwealth Government, the researcher re-developed a number of broadcast Hypotheticals into video and print resources for secondary education students (Berry 1987, 1988, 1989). [1]

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[1] Between 1987 and 1990, several of these resources were funded by Commonwealth Government departments, approved as curriculum resources by state education departments, and distributed free to all secondary schools

Once the Hypothetical series was concluded on ABC Television, the researcher saw further uses of the Hypothetical as a teaching and learning medium, particularly through adapting the television program format for presentation in the Australian workplace. From the early 1990s, the researcher has utilised the Hypothetical primarily to explore issues of communication and management within commercial organisations and bureaucracies. Such issues have included:

- the challenge of corporatisation within the telecommunications industry (Telstra);
- middle management resistance to change (Centrelink);
- the future of Queensland's family-based dairy industry (Dairyfarmers Organisation);
- the future of Australian tourism (Australian Tourism Industry Association); and
- advertising and ethics (Australian Association of National Advertisers).

1. 6 Socrates and the Hypothetical

The use of the *hypothetical* style of debate and analysis for deconstructing complex social, political and philosophical issues goes back to ancient Greek history. In approximately 400 AD, Socrates tried to detect errors in conventional views about knowledge and truth by what

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in Australia. The themes of these resources included drugs of addiction, the Australian constitution, foreign aid and human rights issues (see Appendix 2). Each self contained resource pack held a video tape of the re-formatted television program, and print modules which related to the video segments. The video segments were designed to stimulate the student's thought processes, and each print module utilised additional research materials about the resource theme to enable students to pursue their own lines of inquiry.

was then the new method of hypothetical argument. Harvey (1962, p. 399) claimed that Socrates analysed the definitions of such values as virtue, truth and honour, by case studies, in order to reveal contradictions in the results. This analysis was conducted via a group of citizens, and employed a systematic question and answer format; each point in succession was accepted or rejected by the particular panelist. During this intellectual exercise, Socrates played the neutral part of the facilitator who pretended to know nothing himself, but drew out truths which he believed were latent in the minds of the group. He made use of simple stories, irony, and occasionally myths, to illustrate a specific point and to seek from each group member how, and more importantly why, they would react if those imaginary stories and situations ever happened to them (Harvey, 1962):

> In other words, [Socrates] developed the hypothetical as a means of drawing out ethical rules and testing their value: are they merely an ad hoc response to emotions generated by a particular set of facts, or can they be applied consistently to other fact situations which are logically similar? (Robertson, 1991, p. 1)

Garner's (2000) examination of Socratic teaching in legal education, within the Harvard Law School tradition, identified the requirement for students to participate in their own learning. Garner (2000) concluded that the Socratic method makes the student resourceful in seeking remedies for problems posed: "it makes him question the validity and applicability of every generalization. It develops toughness and resilience of mind and the capacity and willingness to form and act upon his considered judgment in important situations" (p. 3). The downside of this learning process is what Garner calls the game of "hide the ball" (p. 2). In the context of the Hypothetical, the facilitator hides the ball; posing questions to their panelists to which only they know the answers, or at least know the various difficulties bound up in answering them. For Garner, the danger in the Socratic method is the emphasis on the brutal defeat of the student in favour of the all-knowing facilitator. The student can gain little from this learning process and indeed, according to Garner (2000), it fails to build on his or her cumulative knowledge.

According to Robertson (1991) and Garner (2000), Socratic debate and hypothetical case studies have continued to be used by the legal profession to draw out intellectual or moral

principles and to test their value in case law. The framework of each Hypothetical uses similar case-based reasoning which involves justifying a conclusion about a problem by drawing an analogy to a similar past case and arguing that the problem should be decided in the same way (Ashley, 1990). Adversarial case-based reasoning in the legal profession has reached such a high level of sophistication that computer software programs have been designed specifically to test legal arguments. For example, Ashley (1990) describes a commercially available computer software program called *Hypo* — a case-based reasoning program that draws simple, factual analogies between the particular problem and precedents. *Hypo* distinguishes between precedents, cites counter examples, and poses hypothetical variations of the problem to steer lawyers to focus on important additional facts that would strengthen or weaken their arguments. In a similar way, the organisational Hypothetical uses made-up cases, organisational myths and stories to present opposing options and opinions, in order to replicate the complexities of organisational decision-making.

1. 7 Format of the Hypothetical

Each formal script of a Hypothetical contains a number of issues and stories which focus on an overall theme. This fictional script is created from actual events and situations gathered by researching the contemporary history of the organisation. These events are woven into a storyline that reflects aspects of the organisation's culture, (albeit in a concentrated and intense form), as faithfully as possible, to the panelists. The *acting out* of the hypothetical, with its 10-14 panelists, may take between 90 and 120 minutes. Depending on the verisimilitude of the storyline and the credibility of the panelists' roles, they will accept the storyline as the metaphor for their organisation and role play the various dramatic events and dilemmas presented to them.

In one sense, the Hypothetical may be seen as a theatrical experience — there is a fictional script with players who act out parts in the play script and within a predetermined time frame. Also, incorporated into this dramatic experience is the aspect of entertainment for those invited to watch the unfolding *drama*. However, while the traditional stage drama may well incorporate didactic themes, it rarely if ever invites both players and audience to be involved in exploring and resolving those themes. Nevertheless, traditional stage drama has a long

tradition as social commentary and political activism, and it has been used extensively to illuminate issues in the workplace or as discussion starters at conferences or training seminars (Nichols, 1990). Professional staff at Curtin University's School of Communication have used theatrical performance to raise contentious issues for professional organisations and private companies. Skilled theatre arts dramatists have been able to research and uncover organisational problems then, through characterisation and dramatic stories, to articulate those problems and point to solutions. These theatre arts productions at Curtin were not devised as a clinical approach to organisational problems. Its originator was using basic Brechtian epic narrative scenes in a metaphorical way to illuminate organisational dilemmas and lead the audience through a process of self discovery (Nichols, 1990, p. 130).

However, the Hypothetical, as studied in this research project, reaches beyond simple performance. Audience and players both interact and are encouraged to explore, and resolve together, their shared organisational dilemmas. The Hypothetical scenario has been conceptualized by this researcher from the consultant's perspective, as a metaphor to highlight, to examine and to facilitate change in the organisation. Unlike traditional drama, the Hypothetical anticipates that both panelists and audience will become actors in their own drama, so that they make sense of the 'real' situations in which they find themselves.

1.8 Background: The Hypothetical and Centrelink

Centrelink is Australia's primary agency for social services, delivering about 140 products and services to around 6.3 million Australians on behalf of about 20 Commonwealth and state client agencies. It is the Commonwealth Government's national platform for the delivery of its social service policies and so Centrelink touches on the most intimate aspects of people's personal and working lives, their relationships and health. Consequently, it is an organisation that is committed to a strong privacy culture so as to protect the rights of its customers, the relationship between its staff and customers, and the rights of its staff. For example, Centrelink logs and records all accesses by Centrelink staff to the computer databases. This process can substantiate whether a customer's privacy has actually been breached though an unauthorised or improper access to customer records. The strong culture of privacy within Centrelink has an impact on the use of outside consultants. Centrelink

policy restricts the use of consultants to circumstances where the required expertise is unavailable inside the organisation, or from within the Australian public service. Outside consultants are generally employed on discrete and short-term tasks and they are bound by Commonwealth privacy legislation, under the aegis of the Privacy Commissioner.

Centrelink Queensland has a centrally located (Brisbane) Area Support Office (ASO) which provides a range of support services to the Area's 24 Customer Service Centres (shop fronts) stretching from Bundaberg to south Brisbane. These support services and reporting relationships are indicated in Diagram I and include staff and business support, privacy investigation, systems support and IT, compliance and support for the range of family and childcare benefit programs.

This researcher was approached in August 2001 by senior management within Centrelink Queensland to produce a Hypothetical that focused on improving communication amongst the Queensland management group. The Hypothetical was to concentrate on the relationship between the Brisbane-based 'head office' or Area Support Office (ASO) and what is known internally within Centrelink as 'the network' — shop front offices providing across-the-counter Centrelink services to the public. These shop fronts are known as Customer Service Centres (CSC). In one sense, the dilemma being posed could be regarded as a traditional, head office versus branch office conflict, where each believed the other was unable and even unwilling to see their point of view. However, it was soon apparent that the problem was more subtle. Confusions, misunderstandings and frustrations between the two groups had arisen through an overall lack of effective communication following reorganisation and efficiency changes within Centrelink. The two groups had gradually lost sight of their respective roles and the ways they could access each other. In effect, the organisational map had changed, and many staff in both the ASO and the CSCs had lost their sense of direction.

Area Brisbane is the main administrative component of Centrelink Queensland. In management terms, Area Brisbane comprises an Area Executive, Area Support Office, a Compliance unit and 24 Customer Service Centres grouped into geographical clusters.

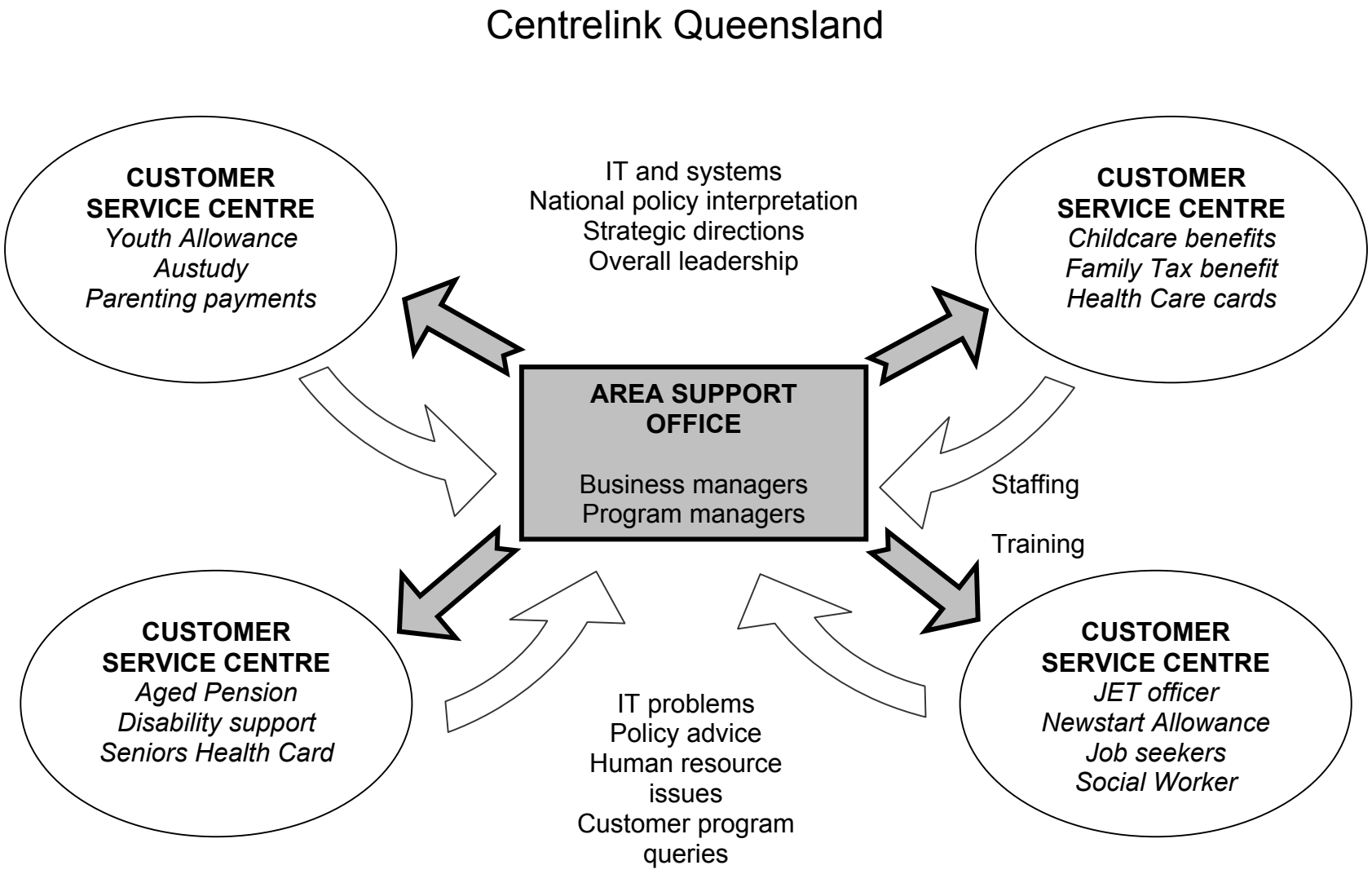

Diagram II: Reporting relationships between the Area Support Office and Customer Service Centres

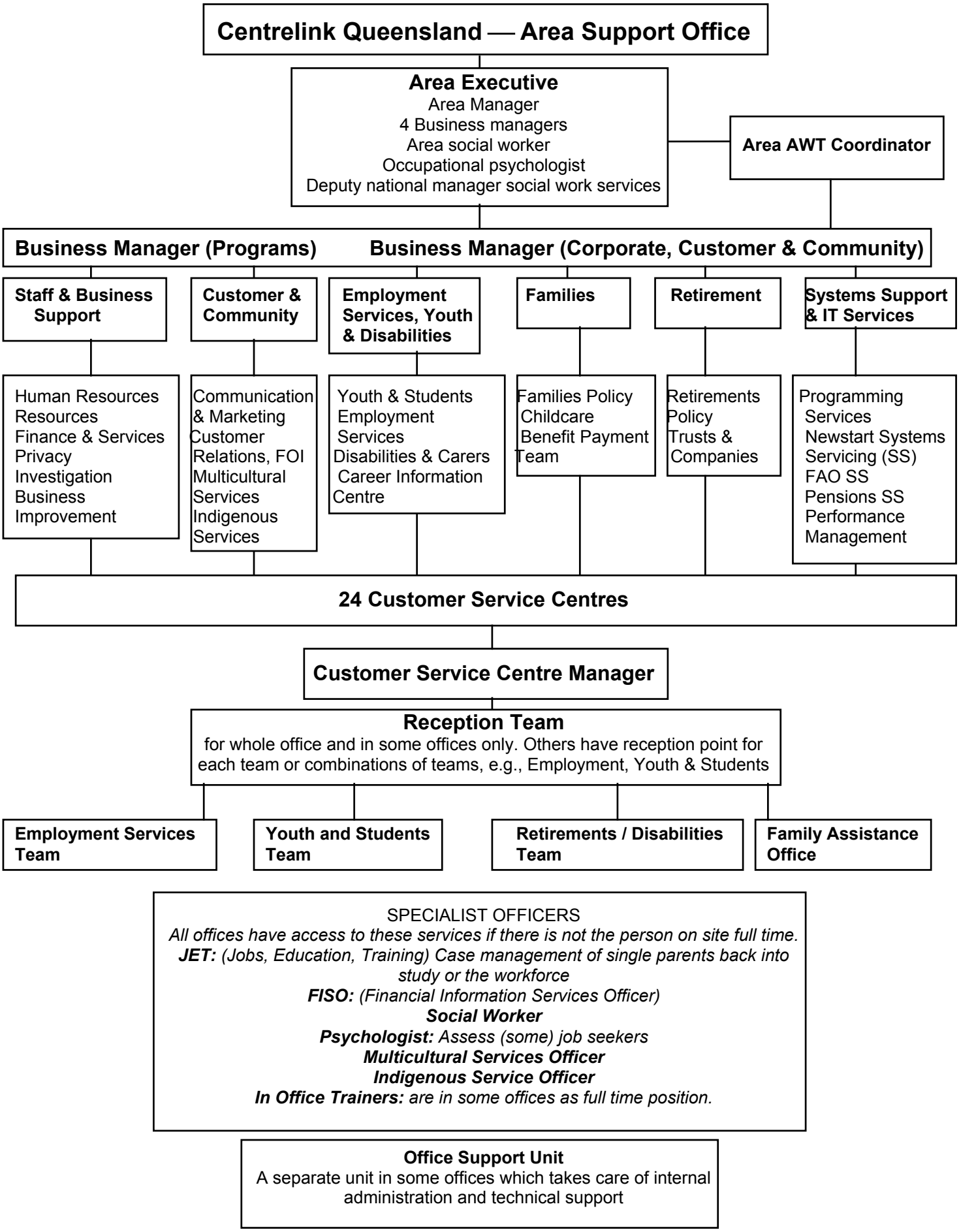

Diagram II: Area Support Office and Customer Service Centre network for Area Brisbane

Geographically, Area Brisbane reaches from south Brisbane to Bundaberg and west to Kingaroy. Almost 2000 staff deal with a customer base of 700,000 people over an area of 24,000 kilometres. More than 300 staff operate Centrelink's Brisbane call centre, with another 90 operating the Maryborough call centre.

In broad terms, the Area Support Office provides administrative and policy support in the areas of systems, staff and business, customer and community, employment youth and disabilities, retirements, trusts and companies, families and child care, salary and administration budgets. The Area Support Office has 144 staff, most of whom are based in Centrelink's head office in the Commonwealth Centre in Creek Street, Brisbane. Of the 24 Customer Service Centres in Area Brisbane, a typical office would employ 90 staff who provide a range of services including retirements, employment, disability, youth, students and single parents (Diagram II). Centrelink not only offers a range of payments, but also provides referrals to job matching, career counselling, literacy and numeracy training, a quick connection to emergency community support, and many other service options that help people facing change in their lives (Centrelink, 2001-2, p. 1).

The intention of creating a Hypothetical, as an intervention in Centrelink, was to focus on senior management within Area Brisbane (ASO) who believe that the Customer Service Centre (CSC) staff, and particularly Team Leaders, do not fully appreciate the value of the ASO and its component parts. They want greater visibility for the ASO, with more two-way communication between CSCs and ASO staff. They also want CSCs to have a clearer idea of where to go for the appropriate support and for ASO staff to focus more tightly on CSC outcomes.

A Hypothetical was conducted with a panel consisting of program managers from the ASO and several team leaders from selected Customer Service Centres. An audience of the panelists' peers was present as observers, and they were questioned, from time to time as the Hypothetical storyline progressed, on the reactions and decisions being made by the members of the panel. The aim of the intervention was to identify the reasons for a perception of low visibility of the Area Support Office within the network and how that perception can be

corrected. The Hypothetical examined key issues such as internal communication processes, human and IT resources, training, workload and staff perceptions.

1.9 Direction of the study

The study has been structured so that it provides answers to key questions relating to the purpose of the thesis: what is already known about the subject and how the current investigation relates to other similar work; what are the original findings and their wider significance; what has been achieved in terms of the study questions and objectives; and what are the recommendations if any, from the findings (Cryer, 2000). The remaining four chapters of the study are presented in the following way:

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature that informs this study and identifies theories of management, organisation and organisational communication that help to locate the Hypothetical as an intervention tool. The literature review is therefore central to this study, not just as a perspective on the intervention, and to identify gaps in the literature, but also to 'place' the tool within the current body of literature.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology used for this interpretive social research study; the research design and reasons for selected data collection methods are explained; and an explanation of the risks and limitations involved in the specific setting are provided. A sequential approach was applied to the data gathering methods, allowing this researcher to use pre-Hypothetical data collection to inform the writing of the Hypothetical intervention storylines. Data from post-Hypothetical methods were used to pursue solutions highlighted during the intervention, as well as for analysis of performance features of the Hypothetical tool and overall intervention process.

Chapter 4 provides the key research findings from each of the data collection methods. The findings are presented so as to describe the two aspects of this study — the features and functions of the Hypothetical intervention, and how those features and functions affect the exploration of organisational communication and change dilemmas within the

Centrelink case. The implications of the findings are discussed specifically in light of the Centrelink case and more generally in the context of the informing literature.

Chapter 5 draws conclusions from the research findings, as they apply to the outcomes of the Hypothetical process and Centrelink and about the generic features of the Hypothetical as an intervention tool and as a process consisting of a number of organisational research methods. Recommendations are made throughout this chapter about potential future applications of the Hypothetical and how its features and functions may be refined and improved for future interventions like the Centrelink case. It is also argued throughout this chapter, and is the central thesis of this study, that the Hypothetical can be usefully defined through the role of language and symbolic convergence theory, and within the contemporary management practice of scenario planning. More importantly, it has been observed through this study that the structure and functions of the Hypothetical focus it towards the exploration of attributes of emotional intelligence amongst its panelists; a function which is absent from scenario planning literature reviewed for this study.

Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study is an exploration and a description of how the Hypothetical is used as an intervention to examine the processes of management and communication within an organisation. In this context, the study attempts to determine how the Hypothetical functions as a change management strategy and as a valuable adjunct to other communication and change management strategies and practices.

Consequently, this chapter reviews the relevant organisation literature to help the researcher define and locate the Hypothetical within the context of existing interventions. Just as importantly, the literature has been consulted to help identify what functions the Hypothetical tool is performing, primarily in the context of organisation communication. Consequently, this review seeks analyses of organisation that relate to the function of communication by its members. Also, the study adopts the view that effective communication is at the core of what the study describes as the well-functioning organisation (Bordow & More, 1991; Hearn, Graham & Rooney, 2002; Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Seo, 2000; Neher, 1996; Senge, 1992).

This chapter explores the significance of communication to the organisation, and examines the contention, primarily by Bordow and More (1991) and Dixon (1996), that organisations use communication to give meaning to their members' lives. That meaning may be conveyed through a range of methods examined in this chapter, including the use of interventions such as the Hypothetical.

This study also explores the Hypothetical as an intervention tool for change in organisations by using organisational elites — managers and leaders — as participants in the intervention. Consequently, this chapter explores the nature of management and leadership and how power plays, norms and behaviours, that managers and leaders engender, may affect the members' performance and the overall cultural life of the organisation.

Because the Hypothetical tool utilises semi-fictitious stories to drive the intervention and to drill into organisational problems, this chapter explores the significance of story-telling and, more importantly, how members will often make sense of their organisation through sharing stories and key communication episodes that are commonly articulated within the group or the organisation as a whole (Bormann, 1989). This chapter reveals that the fictitious and theatrical framework of the Hypothetical tool finds resonance in Bormann's (1989) theory of symbolic convergence as well as Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism, where the theatrical environment of the Hypothetical becomes a useful metaphor for revealing organisational life.

Finally, this chapter follows through on the contention that the well-functioning organisation is fundamentally the sum of its communication processes, by showing how the generative benefits of 'the learning organisation' (Agyris & Schon, 1978; Freedman, 1992; Senge, 1992) are central to the success of contemporary scenario planning. It is scenario planning literature that reveals many of the features of the Hypothetical as an intervention tool, and suggests that the Hypothetical may be able to supplement scenario planning outcomes through the exploration of emotional competence.

2.2 The Hypothetical and the well-functioning organisation

In order to understand the function of the Hypothetical as an intervention, it is important to examine the organisational environment into which the Hypothetical is introduced and operates. The Hypothetical tool, as it is defined in this study, is employed to explore aspects of an organisation's communication regime that are thought to be malfunctioning and to highlight ways of improving organisational systems and behaviours. It is important, therefore, to be clear about the essential differences between communication practices that contribute to, and enhance what may be called a well-functioning organisation, and those practices that work against such an organisation.

In their radical rethinking of communication theory, Taylor and Every (2000) attempt to define organisation as the mix of conversational and textual communicative activities that, when seen together, define the identity we have of an organisation. Taylor and Every (2000)

actually see organisation as a form of life and as never being "present to itself" (p. 325) because: " in the act of making itself present — presenting itself to itself — it has changed, and so the achievement of itself as an entity is indefinitely deferred" (p. 325). A number of other scholars attempt to qualify this concept of the organisation as a living organisation, ever-changing and ever redefining itself. They regard the learning of new knowledge through effective communication as the corporate glue that binds, draws together and defines the organisation (Bordow & More, 1991; Goldhaber, 1993; Hearn, Graham & Rooney, 2002; Irwin & Moore, 1994; Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Seo, 2000; Neher, 1996; Senge, 1992; Therin, 2003). The Hypothetical operates from the basic scholarship premise that everything about an organisation — what it does, what it stands for, what it is — depends ultimately upon communication. Bordow and More (1991) identify communication processes within an organisation as being about relationships, not about things or attributes. Taylor and Every (2000) claim that organisation is always realised in conversation, and Larkin and Larkin (1994) put it even more plainly: "Communication is not a thing. Communication is an interaction. The goal is not to make things but to cause successful interactions" (p. 91). Consequently, a Hypothetical panel can, in one sense, simulate and stimulate such interactions between organisational members. How well such interactions may be achieved, will depend on the careful mix of people on the panel who are at different levels, and have differing degrees of power and leadership within the organisation, as well as on the structuring of the Hypothetical itself.

For an organisation to function well, using what Larkin and Larkin (1994) call "successful interactions" (p. 91), it is important to recognise the significance of formal and informal communication activities (Irwin & Moore, 1994). These activities include how well cooperative action in groups is functioning (Schein, 1987); the existence of organisational communication networks and sub-groups in the form of alliances, clusters and cliques (Bolman & Deal, 1991); and from the symbolic convergence perspective, which will be explored later in this chapter, the way employees use language, myth, symbolism, ritual, beliefs, stories and values to communicate amongst themselves (Bormann, 1989; Lewis, 2000). In this context, it is important to be aware of the kinds of information that employees want and believe they need, and how they want this information communicated.

If it is accepted that communication drives the well-functioning organisation, it is necessary to ask what it is that the organisation communicates that contributes to its effectiveness. A number of organisation scholars have questioned why one organisation can function well while another malfunctions. Systems thinkers like Senge (1992), Van der Heijden (1996) and Ringland (1998), claim that it is the *learning organisation* that is likely to be the most successful in the volatile contemporary business world. Agyris and Schon (1978) first used the term 'learning organisations' to assert that well-functioning organisations change themselves in response to experience. In recent years, various researchers have sought to extend and link successful organisational learning to such notions as innovation (Therin, 2003), emotion and politics (Seo, 2003), emotional intelligence (Gowing, 2001), action learning (Marquardt, 1999), and value-based leadership (Masalin, 2003).

While Senge (1992) and others regard effective communication as contributing to good organisational health, other writers go further to claim that an effective communication system helps define and sustain that organisation (Dixon 1996). Dixon views the communication process as implicit to the well-functioning organisation: "The central factors of communication, passing, sharing and co-creating meaning and the creation and substantiation of relatedness, are built into the processes of structural alignment … Thus communication begins to define organisation as well as mediate between people" (p. 9).

Senge (1992) articulates five major elements or disciplines as the core of what he regards as a healthy, learning organisation and, by definition therefore, a well-functioning organisation (systems thinking, personal mastery, mental modes, building shared vision and team learning). Later, Goh (1998) synthesized research on the learning organisation and offers five core strategic building blocks or guidelines to help practicing managers implement a learning organisation:

> **Mission and Vision** — clarity and employee support of the mission, strategy and espoused values of the organisation.
>
> **Leadership** — leadership that is perceived as empowering employees, encouraging an experimenting culture, and showing strong commitment to the organisation.

Experimentation — a strong culture of experimentation that is rewarded and supported at all levels in the organisation.

Transfer of Knowledge — the ability of an organisation to transfer knowledge within and from outside the organisation and to learn from failures.

Teamwork and Cooperation — an emphasis on teamwork and group problem-solving as the mode of operation and for developing innovative ideas". (Goh, 1998, p.195)

Goh (1998) considers these building blocks as interdependent and mutually supportive conditions in a learning organisation. They provide a useful template for the researcher who is examining an organisation's culture in order to resolve how to apply a Hypothetical as an intervention.

Senge (1992) points out that "the organisations that will truly excel in the future will be those that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organisation" (p. 4). Senge contends that 'adaptive' or survival learning is not enough these days. An organisation must subscribe to 'generative' learning, a process that "enhances our capacity to create" (p. 14). An organisation that is continually exploring, developing and re-creating its future is an organisation that, according to Senge's thesis, is continually open to change, and therefore always prepared to re-invent itself. It is within such a 'generative' learning environment that the Hypothetical would appear to find a place, because it is an instrument that seeks to test and challenge the status quo of an organisation — both its management practices and the way that management communicates those practices to other organisational members.

The well-functioning organisation must employ specific strategies if it is to fully develop generative learning within its members (Goh, 1998). For the learning organisation to function well, claims Senge (1991), its members must change basic patterns of thinking and interacting: "This is what disciplines are all about; changing our patterns of thinking and interacting so that learning can be a way of life rather than an episodic event" (p. 38). Almost ten years earlier, Deetz and Kersten (1983) had realised that if organisations were to avoid internal domination and the closing off of patterns of thinking, members have to be educated

"to participate in the perpetual task of creating organisational forms to accomplish a variety of human interests" (p. 171).

For Senge (1992) and Goh (1998), the passion for creating a learning organisation has to start with small groups of people who form around shared commitments; groups who are really committed to something larger than themselves and larger than their own personal desires. Individual members should also recognise what Wack (1985b) called "the world of perceptions" (p. 140) and De Geus (1988) and Senge (1992) describe as their "mental models". Mental models are the deep-seated assumptions and generalizations often guiding members' actions according to Senge, (1992, p. 175). It may be necessary to change mental models from time to time if generative learning within the organisation is to be truly effective.

Through its carefully selected panelists, the Hypothetical scenario works at challenging these mental models — particularly when they are seen to be at odds with the organisation's desired outcomes. It is possible, says Senge (1992), to work with such mental models, much like turning a mirror inwards, in order to hold them up to rigorous scrutiny. "It also includes the ability to carry on 'learningful' conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others" (p. 9).

A well-functioning organisation needs genuine vision, according to Senge (1992), if it is to produce its 'learningful' (p. 9) conversations: "The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared 'pictures of the future' that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance" (p. 9). One of the skills needed for unearthing a shared vision is effective team learning and this cannot happen, says Senge (1992), without dialogue, or what he calls "the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'" (p. 10). Within this discipline of dialogue, team members have to be aware of how learning can be undermined by the negative ways that teams interact and play off against each other. Senge's (1992) overarching discipline is 'systems thinking', which counteracts such negativity and applies a logical framework to an organisation's various structures; what the author calls, "invisible fabrics of interrelated actions" (p. 7). It is

systems thinking which unites the other generative learning strategies and provides a platform from which they can function.

2.3 Communication and shared meaning

In order to understand the interventionist role of the Hypothetical when it is used in an organisational setting, it is useful to pursue the notion that all organisations are substantially governed by the communication process. Communication is therefore central to any analysis of how an organisation works (Bordow & More, 1991), and how the organisation activates an ongoing learning process (Senge, 1992; Van der Heijden, 2001). Bordow and More (1991) define organisational communication as a system of actions "sustained through the shared meaning made by its participants" (p. 4). This definition of shared meaning aligns with Senge's definition of shared vision which is arrived at within the organisation by a number of traditional methods and devices. Dixon (1996) also emphasises that the essence of communication is meaning, and like Senge's (1992) shared meaning, Dixon (1996) claims there is one common meaning when it is shared or endorsed by all those involved (p. 2). Similarly, Buller and McEvoy (1999) argue that "shared mindsets" (p. 334) are achieved when senior managers in an organisation develop consensus on an appropriate agenda of human relations and ethics. Bordow and More (1991) see this process as ongoing "sense making" (p. 12) which, in the long run, leads to desired outcomes for the organisation.

This view of organisational communication as ongoing attempts at shared meaning between members, provides a starting point for studying the performance of the Hypothetical. Each Hypothetical scenario is created from an amalgam of issues, challenges and problems facing specific people within an organisation at any given time. As such, it is able to tap into the organisational communication cycle which is a "seamless, information environment" (Bordow & More, 1991, pp. 24-26). The Hypothetical may expose motivations for behaviours and past actions, by panel members, that have helped create and maintain mental models and shared meanings. If so, it is a significant function of the Hypothetical, because, as Dixon (1996) claims, the level of 'engagement' between organisation members determines the overall quality and strength of organisational communication.

Understanding what happens in the Centrelink Hypothetical can also be enhanced by recognising what Dixon (1996) calls the "serial" (p. 10) nature of communication. Dixon identifies real-life communication as serial in nature, rather like a television soap opera, and similarly, the individual themes within the Centrelink Hypothetical scenario may be seen as several snapshots, or a number of slices through the corporate culture of the organisation which are concentrated within the two hour performance.

2.4 Communication and language

Language is clearly central to the communication process and for making sense of the material and socially-constructed realities within the organisation in which its members can be said to speak its particular language. Hearn *et al*. (2002) assert that organisations need to "plot a path over time through a complex linguistic and material landscape" (p. 67) if they are to deal with change agendas associated with restructuring, or new policy pathways. While accepting the serial nature of Dixon's material landscape, they argue that we can only understand organisational actions by understanding the language in which they are expressed: "The current shape of society is largely the result of choices in languaging. The limits to change are in language, not materiality" (*ibid*, p. 63).

The Senge (1992) discipline of team learning also stresses the importance of dialogue amongst organisational members who must "participate in this pool of common meaning" (p.242). Shared meaning can only be achieved, claims Senge, when individuals can suspend their personal assumptions in the interests of group dialogue and the achievement of a free flow of meaning between people. "The result is a free exploration that brings to the surface the full depth of people's experience and thought, and yet can move beyond their individual views" (Senge, 1992, p. 241).

This notion of achieving shared meaning through group dialogue also points to the way the Hypothetical intervention tool functions. The theory of dialogics asserts the importance of the relationship between speaker and listener, and key language theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) see all dialogues as social interaction and inherently containing struggles of competing interests. In this context, Bakhtin's dialogic approach can help explain the process

that occurs in the Hypothetical. For example, Bakhtin views all social dialogues as different speech genres, depending on the context. Consequently, each distinct organisational culture will develop its own particular speech genre: "Speech genres organise our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words" (Morris, 1996, p. 23).

One of the challenges in creating credible storylines for the Hypothetical is inventing appropriate incidents from real-life events that can be mutually acceptable to panelists, as representing the culture in which they operate, and through which they can meaningfully communicate to make sense of their organisation. As Hearn *et al*. (2002 confirm: "the fundamental role for managers is … to shape and create contexts in which appropriate forms of self-referencing, self organisation, and self-transformation can occur so that desirable innovative patterns can emerge, while coherence and identity are sustained" (p. 67).

While recognizing the need for constant self-referencing through language within the organisation, Senge (1992) alerts us to the fact that fixed belief systems or mental models can have a negative, as well as a positive, influence within the organisation. Deeply entrenched beliefs about what can or cannot be achieved may lead to outmoded organisational practices and poor performance, particularly if perpetuated in a top-down management regime. In other words, when mental models are hidden, they can be pervasive and influential throughout an organisation, leading to stagnation in organisational change.

If an organisation wishes to de-construct mental models in order to shift management thinking and introduce a change environment, then there are two useful skills central to this task: reflection and inquiry — "slowing down our thinking processes to become more aware of how we form our mental models … and holding conversations where we openly share views and develop knowledge about each other's assumptions" (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith & Kleiner, 1994, p. 237). Senge *et al*. appear to be pointing to the use of scenarios or creative dialogues to enable organisations to break through an organisation's current mental models and allow them to explore innovations for future action.

Scholars offer a number of other theories to help members locate shared meaning through behaviours and team working within their particular organisational setting. These theories include the formulation of corporate strategy (Mintzberg, 1987; Goh, 1998), group norms and behaviour (Feldman, 1984; Pech, 2001), the functioning of groups and teamwork (Shea & Guzzo, 1987; Fisher, Hunter & Macrossan, 1997; Proctor & Mueller, 2000; Foy 1999), conflict resolution (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Tillett, 1999), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002a; Gowing, 2001; Salovey, Hsee & Mayer, 2001; De Dreu, West, Fisher & MacCurtain, 2001), transformational leadership (Kotter, 1990; Mant, 1997; Bolman & Deal; 1991; Schein, 1992; Arnold, Barling & Kelloway, 2001; Hackman, 2002), and organisational culture (Lewis, 2000; Schein, 1992; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992).

2.5 Communication and organisational performance

As already stated, this study adopts an interpretive approach because, in terms of the Centrelink case, it is an approach that allows for an understanding of the lived experiences or 'socially created meanings' of those people who constitute the organisation (Freedman, 1992; Neher, 1996; Putnam, 1983). The Hypothetical panel is often selected from the levels of middle and senior management — the organisational 'elites' — who are likely to have an understanding of, and commitment to, 'socially created meanings'. It has already been suggested that the interpretive approach is particularly appropriate to organisational communication research because, by treating the organisation as the social construction of reality, organising comes to be understood as a process of communicating (Putnam, 1983), and indeed, as has already been noted, the process of communicating defines the quality of the organisation (Bordow & More, 1991; Hearn *et al*., 2002; Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Senge, 1992; Taylor & Every, 2002; Trujillo, 1983). The researcher is therefore led to explore the relationship between communication and organisational performance because the Hypothetical tool appears to have a role in helping to define that relationship.

If the claim that the organisation is essentially defined by its communication is accepted (Bordow & More, 1991; Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Senge, 1992; Goh, 1998; Buller & McEvoy, 1999; Hearn *et al*., 2002; Taylor & Every, 2000; Therin, 2003), then the performance of the

organisation must be measured primarily by how communication functions within the organisation. So, in order to appreciate the effectiveness of its communication regime, the researcher must understand how the organisation functions. Processes of decision-making are considered crucial by many scholars to this understanding of the organisation (Tompkins & Cheney, 1983; Kotter, 1990; Hackman, 2002; Goleman *et al*., 2002b; Manz & Neek, 1995). Dixon (1996) for example, subscribes to Likert's four systems of organisational type (autocratic, paternalistic, consultative and participative) to help define operational styles. An autocratic style has the CEO and managers 'own meaning' and telling workers what to think. A paternalistic style has a similar tight ownership of corporate meaning, but it is explained and rationalised. Ownership of meaning is also retained in the consultative style, but the CEO and senior managers listen and discuss options before taking decisions. The participative style is the only one where common meanings of the person's function within the organisation are mutually negotiated (Dixon, 1996, p. 3). It will be important to identify if, and how well, all four levels of communication are operating for Centrelink's internal communication system. For example, if shared meanings flourish in middle management without a defined and unifying common meaning to articulate say, customer service principles, ethics, or social justice, then the communication system, and by association the organisation itself, may be malfunctioning.

Centrelink middle managers have identified a number of intersecting communication issues affecting the efficiency of the organisation's Area Support Office and the way it interacts with its stakeholders, its Customer Service Centre staff. Many of Centrelink's problems are identified by its management as communication related, and it has already been noted that a number of scholars regard organisational performance as resting ultimately upon communication. Consequently, communication theorists offer a number of ways of improving organisational performance. While communication technologies may be regarded as one of the most tangible ways of bringing added breadth and depth to organisational communication, Goldhaber (1993), views communication as a human phenomenon. He asserts that when communication problems occur within an organisation, they are usually people problems. His straightforward solution is to ensure that people are trained, and he examines communication technologies (hardware and software) in the context of improving organisational performance and output. When viewed as a communication tool under the

Goldhaber definition, the Hypothetical can be used along with other training tools to improve certain communication skills like listening, providing feedback, making decisions, solving problems and resolving conflicts.

Role playing is one of the intervention tools bearing similarities to the Hypothetical for improving communication skills. It is a performance technique that can be used for gaining insight into one's own behaviour, as well as understanding the behaviour of one's peers in the workplace (Tillett, 1999; Neher, 1996; Kentish, 1995; Kaye, 1996). Goldhaber (1993) sees great merit in role playing for the examination and teaching of behaviour within an organisational setting. Also, like the Hypothetical, analysis of role plays and role performances can provide useful information about the overall performance of the organisation itself.

An essential feature of role playing is the occasional switching of roles, a device particularly useful in resolving conflict situations (Goldhaber, 1993, p. 391). Asking a person to act out the personality, or role of another, is a powerful strategy for exploring behavioural difficulties (Tillett, 1999). But this is not how role play functions within the Hypothetical scenario. Traditional role play allows participants to literally *play act* or to act out roles which are literally outside the scope of the actor's experience. This may help the player to understand another's point of view, but it may also inhibit those who see play acting as silly, overly dramatic and focusing on method rather than insightful analysis of the situation (Goldhaber, 1993, p. 392). Hypothetical *actors* on the other hand, play themselves, or at least act out roles that are safely within the orbit of their professional experience. Consequently, the focus is on resolving organisational dilemmas and not on the individual's performance (Tillett, 1999).

2.6 The Hypothetical and the symbolic frame

The identification of the symbols and signs in the workplace that trigger organisational action, or entrench group norms is the focus for much interpretive social theory (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Bormann, 1989; Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Feldman, 1984; Frost, 1987; Lewis, 2000; Norton & Brenders, 1996; Putnam, 1983). Bolman and Deal (1991) describe a 'symbolic frame' through which one may view organisational cultures shaped by rituals,

ceremonies, stories, heroes and myths (p. 15). Lewis (2000) sees a similar symbolic frame or pattern in organisational culture. It is the: "basic assumptions that people in an organisation hold and share about that organisation. Those assumptions are implied in their shared feelings, beliefs and values and embodied in symbols, processes, forms and some aspects of pattern group behaviour" (p. 123).

The symbolic frame treats organisations variously as tribes, theatre or carnivals. Organisation becomes theatre when "various actors play out the drama inside the organisation, while outside audiences form impressions based on what they see occurring onstage" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 15). The perception of organisations through a symbolic frame and the focus on story-telling to explain organisational behaviour and culture, is widely articulated in the literature (Schein, 1992; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992; Bormann, 1989; Kaye, 1996; Senge, 1992). The symbolic frame is able to provide valuable insights into organisational communication and how it is functioning. Like Bolman & Deal (1991), Pacanowsky and Trujillo (1992) argue strongly for perceiving the organisation as a tribe rather than a mechanistic construct. They see every organisation as having its own culture and its own way of talking about what it is doing. They use the term "communicative performance" to describe an on-going cultural process: "We suggest that scholars of organisational culture consider communication in organisations as cultural 'performances'" (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992, pp. 102-3). Consequently, the researcher who uses an organisation intervention such as the Hypothetical is likely to benefit from first identifying a particular organisation's layers of cultural performance such as male-female relationships, the frequency of staff meetings, how corporate directives are issued, in order that dialogues, conversations and stories that are created for the intervention, have credibility and impact with the Hypothetical players.

2.7 Making meaning through story-telling

As already noted, an important element of the symbolic frame for analysing organisational communication, is the significance of story-telling. The main purpose of story-telling is to convert information and facts into stories that help members make sense of their organisation (Kaye, 1996; Lewis, 2000; Tillett, 1999; Van der Heijden, 1996). "Stories are the tools by

which organisational members communicate — they are like measuring instruments that indicate the state of the organisation's health" (Kaye, 1996, p. 31). Essentially, Kaye's (1996) thesis is that communication between members within the organisation is really meaning-making through the creation of images. Therefore, organisational story-tellers need to understand that the images they construct become the meanings that determine their actions towards each other. Kaye (1996) sees the role of story-telling as the process of communicating, revitalising and, if necessary, changing the culture of organisations by relating individual and corporate values.

The Hypothetical scenario writer applies this theory of meaning-making through story-telling by researching organisational stories and reformulating a number of them into recognisable scenarios for panel members. Kaye (1996) emphasises the link between managing change and managing communication and notes that any changes in the culture of the organisation are most probably attributable to powerful and persuasive stories. The Hypothetical script weaves together stories from organisational events and actions in order to hypothesise change scenarios, and as Kaye (1996) notes, "some of these stories are bound to occasion emotional reactions among the story-tellers" (p. 118). When groups begin to think of themselves as separate entities and ignore or misunderstand what is happening in other parts of the organisation, the group's story-telling and mythologies can deviate considerably from the pervasive myths of the entire system (Kaye, 1996). If we take this one step further, Kaye (1996) speaks of a shadowy side of organisational culture. He says there are factors that affect, either positively or negatively, organisational productivity, but these factors are not found in organisational charts or manuals, and are often not discussed in the formal or official forums of the organisation.

One of the challenges for the Hypothetical scenario writer is to highlight, after thorough research and appropriate scripting, any such *covert* activity or organisational dysfunction, for instance the formation of internal power cliques or pressure groups: pockets within the organisation where certain forms of communication do not penetrate.

A number of scholars draw the same link between story-telling and the members' need to create shared understandings of their organisation. Senge (1992) refers to building a shared

vision through the creation of mental models. Dixon (1996) talks of meaning-making through the structural alignment of its members' dialogue. Schein (1992) identifies a group's culture as a regular pattern of shared basic assumptions, and Pacanowsky & Trujillo (1992) describe the way successive episodes of cultural interaction through "collegial" and "corporate" story-telling by organisational members produce "enculturation" or, "those processes by which organisational members acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to behave as competent members" (p. 115).

An explanation for this group meaning-making through story telling is to be found in the sociological theory of symbolic convergence. Symbolic convergence explains the conflicts, motivations and general quality of life within an organisation. It explains many of the beliefs, values and assumptions held by an organisation's members (Bormann, 1989). According to Bormann, one of the theory's major exponents, this group organisational culture, or shared experiences is described as shared group fantasies. He uses 'fantasy' as a technical term to mean a contrived story with many facets, and not to mean something imaginary:

> The sharing of group fantasies accounts for how two cohesive task-oriented units can explain the very same events in very different fashion. Group X's story is that the failure of their joint project with Group Z stems from Group Z's failure to do their job on time. Whereas Group Z shares an interpretive fantasy in which Group X's contrariness in not communicating their deadlines clearly to Group Z brought about the failure. (p. 105)

In Bormann's (1989) view, the symbolic convergence theory of communication reveals how the sharing of group fantasies, such as shown in the above example, provides the key communication episodes that create a common social reality and accomplish sense making for employees. When a majority of organisation members share and pass on these fantasies, it is likely they trigger "fantasy chaining" (p. 121) and therefore succeed in generating an organisational saga or the organisation's 'big picture' (*ibid*). What organisation members are doing in the example above, claims Bormann, is the creative interpretation of events to fulfill a psychological or rhetorical need. When the various shared fantasies are brought together into the big picture, they give "a participant a broader view of the organisation and its relationship to the external environment, of the various subdivisions and units of the

organisation, and of their place in the scheme of things" (p. 114). Bormann (l989) calls this the organisation's rhetorical vision and it echoes Bolman and Deal's (1991) symbolic frame in which members encase commonly held beliefs or fantasies that "provide a shared basis for understanding events and for moving ahead" (p. 275).

The telling of stories and the construction of fictional scenarios has been widely recognised as an effective group learning strategy because stories involve the learner as a participant in the learning process (Kentish, 1995). In 1994, Kentish had his final year education students, at the University of Ballarat write a Hypothetical based on local environmental issues. The scenario incorporated social, political and economic elements. According to Kentish (1995), his students enhanced their communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills. He also noted how they assumed the responsibility for learning and achieved a greater knowledge of the interdisciplinary nature of environmental issues through their development and implementation of the Hypothetical. No other similar studies were found in the literature, and Kentish (1995) also acknowledges the imprecision of this student project: "self reflective (student) journals provided an important mechanism for self-evaluation but it is acknowledged they create problems of validation and evaluation within the normal framework of student assessment" (p. 24).

Kentish (1995) was looking for ways for his students to engage in experiential learning, and he asserted that the use of simulation through the Hypothetical can create the experiential learning environment he wanted. He determined that the Hypothetical "provided opportunities for personal reflection on experiences that can be tested within the 'safety' of the simulation" (Kentish, 1995, p. 21). By the word "safety", Kentish (1995) means that participants in a simulation game have the opportunity to step outside tried and tested paradigms to postulate ideas and concepts that may be considered provocative and controversial in a real life setting. He recognises that, at the core of all Hypothetical scenarios, there must be problem-solving and decision-making activities. The other important observation made by Kentish was that "hypotheticals are role-plays of the possible more than an analysis of the actual" (Kentish, 1995, p. 22). He wanted his students to create and operate a problem-solving process because it involved the assessment of alternative solutions which can only be achieved through compromise, trade-offs and value judgments.

The ability of the Hypothetical to reveal such conceptual linkages and relationships was also identified by Cook (1998) as being preferable to more traditional learning methods. His aim was to have his university students achieve insights into the relationships between science, technology and society. "I emphasised the need for sharing and cooperation. Students were required to meet regularly to share information and keep abreast of developments" (p. 3). As with Kentish's (1995) observations through classroom practice, Cook's emphasis was on the discovery of solutions, not the achievement of debating points. And like Kentish, Cook (1998) makes no general claims for his observations. Issues such as the exploitation of oil reserves on the Great Barrier Reef, censorship of the Internet and nuclear power in Australia were posed, not as simple learning exercises, but as a way of studying a bigger picture: "…how government and big business, how public opinion, how developments in science and technology and how a consideration of ethics influence progress" (p. 2).

It is possible to confuse the use of simple fictitious play-acting with the more complex role of the Hypothetical scenarios, and there have been attempts to equate the teaching of basic skills through scenarios with the painting of the 'bigger picture' through the Hypothetical described by Cook. In his secondary school workbook, Cameron (1995) uses fictitious workplace stories to stimulate discussion around the strengths and weaknesses of appropriate management styles as well as how to improve workplace communication and team spirit. However, there is no attempt to define the role of the Hypothetical in this process beyond the creation of simple, fictional workplace situations. There is no team story-telling or development of these scenarios which Cameron simply grades in levels of organisational complexity. The important distinction to be made here is that the story telling within the Hypothetical is a learning environment, where panelists reveal to themselves, through discussion, interaction and resolution, key dilemmas and challenges (Robertson, 1987). This is the same environment in which Kentish (1995) seeks experiential learning and conclusions arrived at through exploration by his students. Cameron also provides fictitious storylines, but they are only tackled by his students in a formal debating context. Students must arrive at the 'correct' mix of management skills, not through the learning experience of role play but simply as a cognitive test. The two classroom observations of Cook and Cameron further help illuminate how the Hypothetical stimulates players to *learn from experience* through fictional scenario role play, rather than simply test their intellectual abilities in logic and deduction.

The aim of the Hypothetical scenario, as conceptualized for this study, is to provide an experiential learning environment in which panelists each have meaningful parts within the scenario, and to create a script which is based on events and issues familiar to the panelists. The fundamental activity of the Hypothetical story-telling experience is to make meaning from the various scenario dilemmas: "the way organisational members make sense of their social and material realities stems from the human tendency to want to understand events in terms of people enacting purposive scenarios" (Bormann, 1989, p. 104). Dixon (1996) expresses the same concept of shared fantasies but as "each person … fully engaged in the other's realization of self in action" (p. 146). In Dixon's view, "when communication is at the level of transfer of ideas, it is a mediating variable, linking the members of the organisations" (p. 155). On the positive side, this can lead to an intense personal commitment between people. The literature suggests that a Hypothetical, such as the Centrelink intervention, provides the opportunity to uncover the negative fantasy types in the context of misunderstandings surrounding the Area Support Office. For example, if it was revealed that several Customer Service Centre team leaders share the same view, that city-based ASO staff do not understand the pressures of the suburban office environment, then how and why they share this view can be conceived of as a shared fantasy which the Hypothetical can explore and resolve.

2.8 The theatre and organisational meaning

One of the most common metaphors applied to the exploration of organisational communication is the vocabulary of the theatre (Goffman, 1959; Mangham, 1978; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992; Trujillo, 1983; Weick, 1985). Taylor and Every (2000) conceptualise organisational life as a product of ongoing enactment. Pacanowsky and Trujillo (1992) develop the theme of communication through theatrical performance and see communication in organisations as cultural performances. Senge (1992) echoes this view in his assertion that organisational communication, or performances, are ongoing 'dialogues' between a number of participants. The communication dialogue is ongoing and is an enculturation process: information, meaning and values are founded on what has come before. It is this sense of organisational history that guides present dialogue and builds upon the organisational members' shared meaning (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992, p. 115).

The Theatre Arts department at Curtin University has been involved for some years in the use of theatrical techniques as part of "the educational and inspirational activities provided for their staff by corporations and other institutions" (Nichols, 1990, p. 125). As a senior lecturer in theatre arts, Nichols has occasionally been asked to devise *business shows* for corporate and institutional clients, often as centrepiece discussion starters for conferences. Taking a similar analytical starting point to the researcher of this study, Nichols sets out to describe the particular organisational problem and then uses his entertaining theatrical presentation "to articulate the disease" (p. 127). Nichols employs the morality play paradigm, used to good effect by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who turned his didactic writing against what he saw as greed and corruption in capitalist society (Dickson, 1992). Similarly, the Nichols' characters and their actions become metaphors for organisational dilemmas and their solutions. As with the Hypothetical scenario, Nichols (1990) uses fictional story-telling based upon real events and processes of the organisation. And, just like an organisational dilemma in the Hypothetical, "we had to articulate it theatrically and then offer not a solution but a possible consequence" (p. 130).

The Nichols "business show" uses all the tools of traditional morality theatre — entertain, amuse, be thought-provoking and didactic (Nichols, 1990). However, unlike the Hypothetical, its characters are entirely fictional (Wise Old Manager, Spirit of Public Health, etc.), although the parts they play are familiar to organisational members who form the audience. The Nichols scenario does not require participation from organisational members except during the research phase for the play and approval of the script. By contrast, the Hypothetical requires participation of members in the performance and interaction with the audience for a thorough examination and understanding of organisational problems. It is also important, for the reactive spontaneity and creative playing out of these storylines, that panelists have no prior knowledge of the scenario contents or the direction of the various storylines.

This projection of organisation as theatre is conceptualised within symbolic interactionism, one of the major theoretical frameworks of sociology. In the 1920s, Erving Goffman was one of the earliest sociologists to explore symbolic interactionism. He recognised the human need for face-to-face interactions to achieve effective communication. In every situation involving

communication between individuals, he said, those individuals assume roles (Goffman, 1959). In that sense, Goffman also recognises the symbolic interactionist environment in which the Hypothetical is played out. He says that as we interact and communicate, we assume and play roles upon a stage and with an audience.

The modern organisation as theatre is a conceptualisation which helps explain the impact of the Hypothetical as a management tool for influencing change. Organisational structures "…are part of the organisational theatre; an ongoing expressive drama that entertains, creates meaning, and portrays the organisation to itself" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 274). Consequently, the Hypothetical can be understood as one formal attempt to examine the features of the Goffman 'stage', with its audience and interacting players displaying many of the underlying rules and rituals which govern their working relationships. In creating fictional interactions or role plays between panelists, the Hypothetical encourages them to communicate and reveal perceptions of each other, and then to *act* on those perceptions within the boundaries of the semi-fictitious stories.

After the Hypothetical *theatre* is concluded, evaluation of its outcomes is a useful tool for assessing aims and goals, and as a trigger perhaps for substantial change to take place. That theatre may also provide the dramatic space to confront established values and practices and, as Bolman and Deal (1991) assert, "evaluation results help people re-label old practices, provide opportunities for adventure outside the normal routine, and foster new beliefs" (p. 285). However, whenever the Hypothetical attempts evaluations, it faces, as Bolman and Deal (1991) further note, the challenge of over- simplification: "Evaluations may also serve as a means for reducing complex social problems to a choice between relatively well-defined alternatives" (p. 284). As an evaluation process, the Hypothetical is attempting to reduce complex issues into manageable concepts. However, it is important not to give those involved a false sense of security by perhaps suggesting that they have a clear understanding of all the issues involved. This study seeks to explore whether the Hypothetical is an incisive tool for highlighting organisational problems, and its limitations as a one-off performance. The Hypothetical intervention may reveal different ways that organisational members could deal with their problems, but a complete evaluation of these problems, and how effective the

intervention is in highlighting them, will be informed by the guiding literature and the post-Hypothetical strategies and interventions included in this study.

Bormann (1989) explains that when there are large groups within an organisation who share certain issues, they create what he calls an 'organisational saga'. "When there are substantial communities within an organisation committed to different organisational sagas you can anticipate battles over policy, mission, decisions relating to future commitments, budget allocations, hiring and firing of employees, and so forth" (p. 116). For Bormann (1989), an organisational saga includes the "shared fantasies, rhetorical visions and stories of achievements, events, goals and ideal states of the entire organisation" (p. 115). Bormann (1989) asserts that symbolic convergence theory can provide a level of understanding of what happens in an organisation and why it has happened. He says it can explain the conflicts, lack of commitment, motivations and the general quality of life within the culture (p. 114). As will also be noted later, this is a theory which helps this researcher to detect qualities of emotional engagement and the process of committing to symbols in Hypothetical panelists for, as Bormann (1989) asserts: "Symbolic convergence … also explains how individuals come to share a common sentiment or emotional engagement and commitment to symbols" (p. 102).

It will be argued that an understanding of the importance of emotional intelligence is important for the evaluation of organisational problem-solving. This study reports research that asserts there is a set of skills or competencies that are organised around a framework of emotional intelligence; competencies which are essential to the achievement of effective working relationships. Symbolic convergence and symbolic interactionism offer a lens through which this researcher is able to observe organisational life, through the symbolic framework of theatre, and to discern organisation members' shared narratives and emotional competencies, which are played out on the particular organisational stage.

2.9 The organisation and its managers

So far, this chapter has provided theoretical frameworks to help define what is understood in this study by organisation, and the importance within organisations of communication. Also, symbolic interactionism and symbolic convergence offer useful templates of organisational

life against which the performance of the Hypothetical can be evaluated. However, it is important to examine those individuals who become the Hypothetical panelists, because they are selected to represent the organisation — they are the managers and leaders who determine the cultural life and performance of the organisation. In one sense, the outcomes of the intervention are evaluated by how these selected managers and leaders interact and confront their environment as Hypothetical panelists, and how they take that learning back into organisational life.

In recent years, scholars who have focused on organisational performance have diverged down a number of paths, including the twin pursuits of management and leadership research. This divergence of interest has, nevertheless, led organisation scholars to generally agree on one aspect: there is a difference between the person who would be a manager and the person who would be a leader (Belbin, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Doh, 2003; Hackman, 2002; Jablin, 1979; Kotter, 1990; Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Senge, 1992). Consequently, if the Hypothetical intervention is used to assess organisational performance, then an understanding of certain key management and leadership skills and the competencies of its members is required. An appreciation of how those competencies are exercised in improving and correcting organisational performance is also important.

The manager of the modern organisation projects an image of "fast-paced activity characterized by brevity, variety and fragmentation" (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996, p. 64). This is a perspective endorsed by Mintzberg's (1973) significant seminal insights into the roles of the manager. His behavioural study of managers revealed that they will choose to be active rather than to think and plan. This leads to the perspective of management as performance, with all the symbolism inherent in such performances (an aspect that will be explored later in this chapter). However, the manager as *action man* — the image of someone who is given human and material resources with which to create a productive business enterprise — is confirmed by a number of scholars (Goh, 1998; Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996; Jablin, 1979; Kotter, 1990; Mant, 1997; Pugh, Hickson & Hinings, 1976; Shea & Guzzo, 1987).

One of the 20th century's key management theorists was Peter Drucker who focused on the issue of managerial effectiveness. He saw two dimensions to the task of management —

economy and time. The economic dimension is the most important, as managers are judged primarily for economic performance. However, managers must always think of the impact of their decisions on the present, the short-term and long-term future (Pugh *et al*., 1976). Consequently, it is the economic imperative that constrains the manager to examine and organise human and material resources to achieve a satisfactory economic performance, what Kotter (1990) describes more specifically as bringing "a degree of order and consistency to key dimensions like the quality and profitability of products" (p.104).

The contemporary practitioner's view of the manager's role does not always equate with the theoretical perspectives. Hilmer and Donaldson (1996) observe that managers rarely plan, decide or study, and if these activities are undertaken at all in an organisation, they are leadership roles. Managers are clearly there to *manage*, but they are, in one sense, prisoners of the systems they manage because they are often unable to come to grips with the dynamic and detailed complexities of the contemporary organisation that true leadership entails (Freedman, 1992; Senge, 1992).

While managers may be prisoners of the system they manage, the nature of top-down organisations means they control the organisational messages that generate the changes they require of their employees. Larkin and Larkin's (1994) research makes it clear from whom employees want to hear such messages, and that face-to-face communication is the delivery method preferred by employees if management expects them to act as directed. Mintzberg's (1973) seminal study of managers reveals that managers also prefer to communicate orally, even indulging in gossip and hearsay, rather than use the written word. Reflecting Goffman's (1959) emphasis on symbolism and performance, Trujillo (1983) asserts the significance of these verbal "interpersonal performances" (p. 78) by managers in cementing their influence with employees, or what he calls the "sociability" of smooth working relationships. Jablin (1979) and Larkin and Larkin's (1994) research reveal that employees see messages between supervisor and employees as more credible, particularly if they are conveyed by word of mouth.

Managers need to do more than choose the appropriate medium to communicate effectively. As was noted in the earlier discussion of language and dialogics, messages have meanings

that go beyond the basic content, and it is important to formally deconstruct both the message and the medium in order to differentiate between the literal meaning of the message from its intentions and its ultimate effects (Dixon, 1996; Hearn *et al*., 2002; Kotter, 1990; Smeltzer, 1991). Smeltzer cites speech act theory to explain that, for employees, it is the context in which the communication is made that is more important than the content. Like Larkin and Larkin (1994), Smeltzer (1991) focuses on the context of communication. For example, the timing of a particular message, he says, means more to staff than communication style. "Employees want as much information, as soon as possible. Management should not always wait until the whole story is together or until the ideal time" (Smeltzer, 1991, p. 22).

In the context of this study, it is important to examine, in the Centrelink Hypothetical intervention, how panelists as managers communicate with each other. For example, the storylines should test whether managers are prisoners of the system they manage — are they hostages to organisational sagas, or are they willing to communicate views and take decisions without necessarily knowing all the ramifications of an issue or being able to caucus other members first.

2.10 Communication through leadership

The focus on managers and team leaders as panelists for the Centrelink Hypothetical intervention tool indicates the importance of being clear about what managers and leaders do and don't do, particularly when panelists' roles are being assigned and storylines are being created. Leadership literature generally delineates crucial differences between managers and leaders (Clancy &Webber, 1997; Freedman, 1992; Gowing, 2001; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1987; Schein, 1992). Schein (1992) for example, claims that "leaders create and change cultures, while managers and administrators live with them" (p. 5). He draws this distinction in order to show that when an organisation is under such challenges, a leader may be a manager but a manager is not necessarily a leader. When the culture is malfunctioning, then it is the leader who must read the situation and correct it. The issue of leadership and culture will be examined later in this chapter.

Despite the lack of precision about leadership traits, a number of organisational clinicians are prepared to specify certain qualities — even though they may not care to prioritise such qualities — they believe an effective leader should have: facilitation, coordination, consensus building, inspiration, self discipline, timing, focus and balance (Foy, 1999; Hackman, 2002; Doh, 2003). Clearly, these traits may be shared by effective managers and leaders alike, but the traditional view of the leader is as the person who sets the direction, makes the key decisions and energises the workforce. However, there is a growing move towards viewing the leader as a designer, steward and teacher (Clancy & Webber, 1997; Freedman, 1992; Senge, 1992). Whether or not this is true for all leadership models, the modern leader is certainly responsible for building organisations and for corporate learning (Senge, 1992, p. 340). Leadership must also focus on the relationship of the subordinate to the leader (Jablin, 1979) and the use of the leader's power to locate the role of the leader within the organisation (Frost, 1987).

As already noted, many scholars, while trying to locate the role of the leader within the organisational culture, are reluctant to tie down leadership to a rigid and abstract list of leadership traits (Hackman, 2002; Clancy & Webber, 1997; Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996). Freedman (1992) attributes this reluctance to the contemporary rejection of reductionism in management thought: "breaking things down into isolated parts in order to better control them" (p. 28). The Mant notion that effective leadership is about empowerment and the instilling of motivation in constituents necessarily implies effective communication from the leader. Like Bolman and Deal (1991), Senge (1992) and Freedman (1992), Mant (1997) acknowledges the difficulty of defining good judgment in a leader; we just know it when we see it, he says. But it is intelligent leaders who are adept at the pursuit of organisational goals and, through effective communication, are able to stimulate a significant number of organisational constituents to apply their skills to the pursuit of the same goals (Mant, 1997).

Despite this reluctance by scholars to define tight prescriptions for leadership, there has been widespread acceptance of two broad concepts — *transactional* and *transformational* — leadership (Burns, 1978). Burns' (1978) key work on leadership styles defined transformational leaders as those who can raise others to higher levels of motivation and achievement. This equates with Mant's (1997) concept of empowerment and motivation. By

contrast, transactional leadership seeks to motivate followers by appealing to their own self-interest. It aims to motivate by an exchange process whereby organisational leaders exchange status and wages for the work effort of the employee. This equates with Mant's (1997) simple binary, or "Will I win?" concept. While transactional leadership focuses on performance outcomes — the results that are produced to achieve business objectives — transformational leaders energise and motivate individuals to deliver their best efforts and ideas, according to overall organisational objectives (Bass, 1996, 1998).

Contemporary organisations continue to utilise both styles of leadership, depending on desired outcomes (Shinn, 2003). But the reliance on a top-down exchange of self interests between leader and employee is more frequently replaced with a focus on the 'greater good' of the organisation (Bass, 1996). While the leader's ability to mediate between organisational members is considered paramount, the leader's facilitation of teams or groups throughout the organisation is also important. The transformational leader must be clear about team or organisational outcomes and provide the working environment in which they can be achieved:

> team leadership … at its best … is a shared activity. Anyone and everyone who clarifies a team's directions, or improves its structure, or secures organisational supports for it, or provides coaching that improves its performance processes is providing team leadership. (Hackman, 2002, p. 211)

What is significant about transformational leadership is that one of its guiding ideas is *chaos*; this Senge (1992) concept embraces the enormous number of interconnections, relationships and dependencies that often resist categorizing in the contemporary organisation. In discussing their model for leadership, Clancy and Webber (1997) assert that the modern leader must function in an environment of "transformational quakes" (p. 227) and, for them, the key quality of the 21st century "critical leader" is empathy: "That is to help! — Critical Leaders help the organisation to adapt and grow, and they help their people to be the best that they can be" (p. 227). Kotter (2002) asserts that getting the best out of people, getting them to make cultural changes and making those changes stick, distinguishes the strong

transformational leader from the weak. He emphasises the leader's crucial competencies of motivation and empathy:

> Successful change leaders identify a problem in one part of the change process or a solution to a problem. Then they show this to people in ways that are as concrete as possible. They show with a vehicle you can see, hear or touch … change leaders make their points that are as emotionally engaging and compelling as possible… change leaders show people the truth with a variety of creative live presentations and events (p. 180)

Kotter (2002) asserts that people will change what they do "because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings … both thinking and feeling are essential, and both are found in successful organisations, but the heart of change is in the emotions" (pp. 1-2).

This distinction, between the leader who functions by engaging hearts and minds on the one hand, and the leader who exchanges labour for some material reward on the other, is a most important one when it comes to selecting Hypothetical panelists and for determining the issues that will be presented through the intervention. For example, a balance of leadership styles may be sought for an organisation, or one style may be required over another. Also, the intervention may seek to determine which style is likely to engender key desired outcomes from organisational members such as commitment, involvement, loyalty and performance (Bass, 1998).

2.11 No leadership without power

In their seminal paper, 'Organisational Communication as Cultural Performance', Pacanowsky and Trujillo (1992) assert that "any broad discussion of organisational communication must inevitably deal with issues of "power", "control", and "influence" (p. 113). While organisational leaders clearly exercise power, control and influence, Pacanowsky and Trujillo insist these constructs are very loose, and their individual relevance depends on the organisational culture in which they are being used. The difficulty of defining power in leadership is shared by Bolman and Deal (1991) who subscribe to a transformational leadership approach to power. They consider power to be about perception, where individuals have power if others believe they have, and leadership tends to be less a matter of action than

of appearance. Bolman and Deal (1991) assert there are three distinct actions common to all leaders: having the ability to get others to do what you want; being able to motivate people to get things done; and providing people with a vision. Indeed, they assert that vision is the only quality of effective leadership that is common in studies of good leadership (p. 405).

This delicate balance between an authoritative use of power and the transformational skills of motivation and empathy may be more effectively achieved through carefully managing the organisation's means of communication. Frost (1987) argues that "communication provides the means through which power can be exercised, developed, maintained and enhanced" (p. 507). So, the timing of the delivery of information not only affects the impact and meaning of the messages, but it also highlights how power in the hands of management can be used to choose the time and place to deliver information (Dixon, 1996; Kreps, 1990; Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Senge, 1992; Smeltzer, 1991).

This deliberate manipulation of communication is an important consideration in terms of the Hypothetical dynamic. Panelists are usually chosen not only for their qualities of leadership, their past achievements and influence, but for their ability to think quickly and to communicate, particularly at the verbal level. As Frost (1987) asserts, "Individuals who are skilled in the use of power are more likely than others to embed that power in their communications with others" (p. 515).

A number of conversations or dialogues are built into the Hypothetical script in which panelists are asked to negotiate with each other over issues, problems or organisational strategies. In triggering such conversations, it is possible to observe panelists employing what Frost (1987) calls 'influence strategies', for example, gaining other panelists' support through bargaining, assertiveness, appeals to altruism and circumvention (p. 522).

2.12 The leader's power and conflict resolution

A significant aspect of the exercising of power by managers and leaders is the ability to diffuse conflict within the organisation. The ability of a manager or leader to manage conflict by negotiating and resolving disagreements is widely seen as demonstrating an overall

emotional competency (Gowing, 2001, p. 111). As will be seen later in this chapter, it is crucial for all those in leadership roles, to manage their emotions "which is thought to be a major factor in determining how effectively intellectual abilities can be marshaled" (Salovey *et al*., 2001). Raelin's (1986) study reveals how professionals are most likely to come into conflict in an organisation. For example, a cosmopolitan or big city predisposition versus that of people with a local orientation is a conflict factor that will be explored in the Centrelink case — between the Area Support Office (*city /head office*) and Customer Service Centres (*local offices*), and between the Brisbane Area Support Office (*local or state perspective*), and the National Support Office in Canberra *(big city or cosmopolitan perspective)*. Raelin (1986) also asserts there is inherent conflict where training creates aspirations amongst employees that certain organisational goals can be achieved and their own personal goals may be advanced (p. 15). Older workers develop stronger work values than younger ones, according to Raelin (1986), and conflict may occur if they realise their opportunities for upward mobility are being thwarted, particularly in a strong hierarchical organisation. All of these potential conflict factors should be explored in the Centrelink case.

Apart from the potential conflict between individual organisational members and their management, Jehn and Mannix (2001) define three types of organisational conflict within, and between, groups — relationship, task and process conflict. However, Jehn and Mannix (2001) also hypothesise, from their longitudinal study of higher group performance, that high-performing groups have lower levels of relationship conflict throughout all phases of group interaction than do low-performing groups. This hypothesis provides a useful framework for identifying communication problems within Centrelink (Research Question 3), and some insight into providing answers to those problems (Research Question 4).

2.13 Leadership and organisational culture

A number of writers argue for a perspective on leadership in which organisational 'mindset', or culture, is determined by the quality of leadership (Buller & McEvoy, 1999; Feldman, 1984; Kotter, 1990; Lewis, 2000; Mintzberg, 1987; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Transformational leaders are perceived as guides, mentors and facilitators of an organisational culture that is both envisioned by the leader, and also partly shaped by the

special qualities of the organisation and its members (Lewis, 2000). Following this argument, a recognisably strong organisational culture is inseparable from enlightened leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Pacanowsky & Trujillo 1992; Schein, 1992; Senge, 1992; Van der Heijden, 2001).

Like leadership, *culture* is an organisational term which some theorists have difficulty in defining. It may be thought, for example, that organisations are really a collection of various subcultures, created by different self-interests (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992). Culture may also imply structural stability, and deal with matters that organisational constituents share or hold in common (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1992), or again, it may indicate "processes by which organisational members acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to behave as competent members" (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992, p. 115). Lewis (2000) questions whether it is the prerogative of managers or leaders to try to change organisational culture by trying to change people's feelings, beliefs and values. She also queries whether or not culture is a useful management tool, because it is a vague concept and we do not know: "whether it is observable forms or underlying shared meanings, whether it is fixed or can be changed, how it is created and transmitted, and how it might be studied and diagnosed" (p. 132).

Schein (1992) is also concerned with the way that culture and leadership are combined, and how communication is used to support and develop this relationship: "Managers live in cultures and often are instrumental in creating, developing, and destroying cultures. It is therefore mandatory that managers understand what they are dealing with and what they are doing when they attempt to manage culture" (p. xv). An understanding of organisational culture and how leadership may be used to change aspects of that culture is an important consideration for this study. Research Question 3 specifically seeks to discover the problems — cultural or otherwise — that Centrelink management believe need to be changed and how the Hypothetical can be used to explore this dimension.

2.14 Leaders and their emotional capabilities

The understanding of leadership and its impact on the organisation, and on organisational communication in particular, has been substantially influenced in the past ten years or so by scholarly research into behaviours and emotional intelligence. Leadership and management literature clearly spell out that the truly effective leader needs a host of cognitive skills. But there are those who believe that leaders also need the ability to understand the key interrelationships that influence behaviour in complex systems over time (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Freedman, 1992; Hackman, 2002; Goleman *et al*., 2002a; Manz & Neck, 1995; Senge, 1990). For Dixon (1996), there is a need for one overarching leadership quality: "behavioural flexibility" (p. 7), not only in the leaders themselves, but in handling the behaviour of others.

Goleman (1995, 1998) asserts that there is a great divide in leadership competencies between the mind and the heart, or more technically between cognition and emotion. His research has altered conventional thinking on leadership intelligence by asserting that, quite apart from cognitive skills, a leader's key personality traits can lead to measurable success or failure. Goleman is one of several leading scholars who assert that a leader with emotional maturity or emotional intelligence will have a number of key skills: envisioning, inventive negotiation, decision-making, mediation and other interpersonal skills (De Dreu *et al*., 2001; Goleman, 1998; Gowing, 2001; Hackman, 2002; Salovey *et al*., 2001). Goleman (2002b) goes on to divide leadership into six styles: visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting and commanding and asserts that a leader has need of each of these styles (Goleman *et al*., 2002b; Shinn, 2003). He adds that effective leaders will recognise that they cannot function without a clear understanding of their own emotional skills and an understanding of the feelings of the people around them (Shinn, 2003, p. 19).

Goleman and others have made significant contributions to an understanding of the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership, particularly the development of key competencies that define emotional intelligence. These competencies have been tested in key studies against organisational performance, for example:

> the heads of divisions of PepsiCo Worldwide were evaluated on these same competencies. What researchers found was that those who had more strengths in this domain outperformed

> their revenue targets by 15 to 20 percent, and those who had the fewest strengths underperformed by about the same margin. (Shinn, 2003, p. 20)

For Goleman (1998), the emotionally competent leader can combine thought and feeling. Consequently, there is a need to understand the literature on emotional competence if Hypothetical participants are to be selected who can deal with this complexity. An awareness of emotional competence frameworks also has relevance for the playing out of the Hypothetical scenario, where storylines draw out and reveal the emotional investment that panelists may have placed in particular issues and in their own personal agendas.

Centrelink's internal literature confirms its adherence to transformational leadership and team efficacy, or what Goleman *et al*. (2002a, p. 176) call "resonance building leadership styles".

Centrelink seeks out 'leading behaviours' from its employees and Hackman (2002) defines such behaviours as: "knowing some things, knowing how to do some things, having emotional maturity and having a measure of personal courage" (p. 222). The consideration of 'leading behaviours' will assist this Hypothetical researcher when the attributes of panelists are being reviewed prior to the intervention, and for analysis afterwards. For example, it has also been noted that Centrelink adheres to the principle of strong teamwork, a concept, according to Goh (1998), in which employees bring their collective skills and knowledge to bear on problems to develop innovative ideas for the organisation.

Apart from observing the positive behavioural traits of its panelists, analysis of the Hypothetical tool should also identify negative behaviours in individual and group performance. For example, such negative behaviours may include 'in-group' favouritism and a tendency to discriminate in favour of one's own 'in-group', and therefore against the members of 'out-groups (De Dreu *et al*., 2001), wasted time, frustration, destructive conflict, poor decisions and the reinforcing of conformist norms of poor performance (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Arnold *et al*., 2001), and the contention that teamwork provides empowerment: "Teams are as controlling of employees as hierarchical management ever was" (Manz & Neck, 1995, p. 163).

This literature review has revealed that the well-functioning organisation may be defined by the quality of its communication processes, as well as by the qualities of its managers and leaders in creating a generative learning environment. Intrinsic to an organisation's ability to learn and re-learn is the recognition, as shown through this review, that communication is central to that learning process. The review has also sought to identify the theories and workplace applications in which the Hypothetical may be usefully located and tested as an intervention tool. Consequently, it is now important to more closely define the *learning* framework in which the Hypothetical functions and to define what it is the Hypothetical achieves as a communication tool within that learning framework.

2.15 The Hypothetical as a strategy for organisational change

It has been noted earlier that the cultural life of an organisation is explained and advanced through "communicative performances" (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992, p. 102). In many organisations, these performances become more formalised into corporate strategies for example, for advancing growth and change.

Social science research, and management research in particular, apply many definitions of 'strategy' beyond the traditional sense of a plan, or consciously intended course of action (Mintzberg, 1987). But a clear meaning of strategy is important in this study, particularly in understanding the way managers and leaders define and implement strategies within their organisation. For Mintzberg (1987), strategy remains a concept or an abstraction which exists "only in the minds of interested parties" (p. 123). Within organisations, though, strategies are needed not only to set direction, focus effort and define who or what they are, but to provide consistency: "… in order to aid cognition, to satisfy intrinsic needs for order, and to promote efficiency under conditions of stability, by concentrating resources and exploiting past learning" (Mintzberg, 1987, pp. 135-9). So, this concept of strategy as "past learning" not only informs our understanding of mental models, but also the other key building blocks of the learning organisation — vision, team working, leadership and the transfer of knowledge. Effective team-working is generally considered to be 'strategic', in that it relates to organisational performance (Proctor & Mueller, 2000) and the effective team leader is the one who, in the sense of strategy, shapes and shares a vision, which gives relevance to the

work of other members (Belbin, 1993). Consequently, in this study 'strategy' will be explored from the perspective of Centrelink management's need to affect change, and also how the application of the Hypothetical tool may become a strategy and a catalyst for such change.

2.16 The Hypothetical and scenario planning

One of the tools most recently developed for tackling the uncertainties of the future and resolving decisions over organisational strategy, is scenario planning. It is also argued in this study that the use of scenario planning as a management strategy, or intervention tool for guiding future directions, is closest in function to the Hypothetical. In his analysis of scenario planning, Robbins (1995) argues that it goes beyond simple, data-based forecasting or strategy plans, "to communicate vividly the meaning and impact of events in a way that clarifies the message and captures the attention of decision makers" (p. 1). Robbins (1995) and others (for example, Van der Heijden, 2001; Fahey & Randall, 1998; Ringland, 2002; Schwartz, 1996) assert that what makes scenario planning different to traditional plans and strategies is that in the contemporary globalised world, sophisticated data sets can so quickly be made redundant by changing conditions. Scenario planning does not attempt a *best possible* forecast, but offers a number of forecasts or futures, and their implications for the organisation.

According to Van der Heijden (2001) organisational *dialogue* or *communicative performances* form the all-important core of scenario planning. Van der Heijden is one of the key authors of this relatively new strategic planning model, and he sets out a strategy for dealing with the volatility of contemporary organisational life. Van der Heijden (2001) presents scenario planning as a complete approach to the implementation and management of corporate strategy founded upon organisational learning, and, like Robbins (1995), he claims scenario planning "distinguishes itself from other more traditional approaches to strategic planning through its explicit approach to ambiguity and uncertainty in the strategic question" (Van der Heijden, 2001, p. 7). Traditional forecasting assumes that one can predict a single future that has a definable shape and outcome. Scenario planners assert that in the contemporary world we cannot rely on a single, definable future, based purely on statistical

summaries. Scenario planning offers several scenarios with several possible futures, and "a scenario is much more a conceptual description of a future, based on cause and effect" (*ibid*, p. 102).

The reliance on scenario planning can be traced back to World War II, when allied forces imagined possible enemy strategies and prepared alternative plans. Scenario planning has been described as a story-telling workshop and has only been recognised as a legitimate organisational forecasting technique in the past thirty years. Planners (including Van der Heijden) within the Royal Dutch Shell Company claim to be the originators of scenario planning.[2] Shell planners emphasised the importance of working with uncertainty as a key structural feature of planning future business strategy (Wack, 1985a). They reasoned that, with a sound analysis of reality, managers can cope with structuring uncertainty into their business strategies. But "a willingness to face uncertainty and to understand the forces driving it requires an almost revolutionary transformation in a large organisation" (Wack, 1985a, p. 74). The Shell use of scenario planning in the 1970s was conducted on a global scale, involving transnational issues and major economic forces. Shell learnt to separate predetermined issues from significant uncertainties in order to focus on realistic planning assumptions. They argued that if you use only predetermined elements of a problem, you arrive at traditional futuring or forecasts, which may end up being wrong. In Wack's view, scenario planning must integrate the decision-maker and the scenario if it is to have any

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[2] In the early 1970s, the company developed scenario planning as a technique to cope with the predicted 1973 oil crisis. It helped managers to look at economic options and to "structure uncertainty" (Wack, 1985a, p. 74). In practical terms, this meant rolling out a series of intellectually quantified designs, constantly informed by managerial perceptions of relevant markets. Shell survived and prospered through the Middle East oil crisis because they punted on an era of slow growth and accordingly hedged their business plans (Wack, 1985b). At that time, Shell's strategic decisions came down to a choice of three scenario plans, and while they chose a constrained growth scenario, the rest of the oil industry based strategic decisions on boom or bust predictions.

value: “I mean the point at which the scenario really touches a chord in the manager’s mind — the moment at which it has real meaning for him or her” (Wack, 1985b, p. 139).

Scenario planning, according to its Shell originators, must deal with two worlds — fact and perceptions (Wack, 1985b, p. 140). In this way, the scenario planning process appears closest to the internal process of the Hypothetical where panelists must deal with facts as well as calling on perceptions in the minds of its players. In both interventions the players assess and weigh the critical importance of uncertainties as they move towards the formation of strategies for action. The Hypothetical is a single performance but for the scenario planner there are several separate, scenario episodes that produce plans, reveal information and uncover perceptions that, when brought together, lead to fresh perceptions about new ways forward. Wack believes this is a truly transformational process for senior managers, that leads to “strategic insights beyond the mind’s previous reach” (Wack, 1985b, p. 140). It is also a crucial and significant interpretation of the process at work within the scenario planning process for the purpose of this study.

Scenario plans are usually first discussed in a number of pre-arranged, small SWOT groups where the facilitator teases out views about the environment in which the organisation wishes to operate i.e., the ‘Business Idea’. (Van der Heijden, 2001; Ringland, 1998; Schwartz, 1996; Fahey & Randall, 1998). The SWOT group analysis is supported by individual, open-ended interviews from carefully selected members of management. Essentially, the interviewer is seeking to establish a close rapport in order to elicit feelings about good and bad world views: positive spins, uncertainties and fears about the organisation’s future. The scenario planner uses this research material to make up the scenario agenda. “A scenario agenda is a list of typically up to four or five broad themes or areas of interest in the business environment where it has become clear that the project has the potential of helping the client” (Van der Heijden, 2001, p. 156). Van der Heijden (2001) stipulates a number of principles that should dictate the form and content of the scenarios:

- At least two scenarios are needed to reflect uncertainty. More than four has proven organizationally impractical.

- Each of the scenarios must be plausible. That means that they must grow logically (in a cause/effect way) from the past and the present.

- They must be internally consistent. That means that events within a scenario must be related through cause/effect lines of argument which cannot be flawed.

- They must be relevant to the issues of concern to the client. They must provide useful, comprehensive and challenging idea generators and test conditions, against which the client can consider future business plans, strategies and direction.

- The scenarios must produce a new and original perspective on the client's issues. (p. 187)

The methodology for the presentation of scenarios via this model has no time limit, and, in fact, the scenario process can continue over days, weeks and months (Ringland, 1998; Fahey & Randall, 1998). The trained researcher will write a range of scenarios which are given to each member of the various groups, with or without additional research data obtained through the earlier SWOT process. A trained facilitator coordinates the *findings* of the groups, providing analysis at the end of the process (Van der Heijden, 2001, pp. 212-220).

The Hypothetical — as it has been developed and defined in this study— is, on the other hand, usually a one-off performance, professionally facilitated, with a carefully selected panel of between 12 and 18 people. Like scenario planning, the Hypothetical consists of several organisational *issues* that have been established through prior research and interviews inside the organisation. Once the issues have been delineated and the scenario written, the issues are explored through the panel via the facilitator, and within a fixed time limit (usually between 90 and 120 minutes). No 'answers' are sought, but it is a reactive process; the panelists react to what they hear, as issues are pitched and argued by the facilitator. Panelists will articulate their responses, sometimes supplemented by comments and views of an audience of peers. The

facilitator will provide analysis of the issues as discussed by the groups, either immediately as a de-briefing session, or some time later through a formal report.

2.17 Scenario planning and the strategic conversation

The essential organisational component for any scenario to work effectively, according to Van der Heijden (2001), is the "strategic conversation" (pp. 41-2). He asserts that scenarios must grow out of the platform of the organisation's ongoing strategic conversation, and it is only by accessing the mental models, assumptions and shared visions of its stakeholders that the scenario can have any meaning and value. As has been noted earlier in this chapter, a number of authors acknowledge the importance of the learning organisation (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Freedman, 1992; Senge, 1992), and it is Van der Heijden's (2001) strategic conversation that is the means by which organisations can maintain and stimulate that ongoing learning process.

Van der Heijden (2001), Fahey and Randall (1998) and Ringland (2002) adopt the processual view of organisational learning: that learning is not an incidental or episodic mental activity, but a process that is continuous. The processual approach to strategy ensures that the full range of human skills are accessed and used to improve the organisation. Van der Heijden (2001) also subscribes to David Kolb's theory of learning that defines these skill groups into: "obtaining experience, reflection, mental model building and action" (p. 37). These skill types are represented on what Kolb calls a Learning Loop (Kolb, 1991) and in Diagram III they are matched against the learning processes of the Hypothetical intervention.

The processualists assert that organisational members should get into this loop which links action, perception and thinking towards continual learning. The learning loop rationale is similar to Senge's (1992) systems thinking which helps build the learning organisation. The learning loop concept originated with action science scholars, in particular Argyris and Schon (1978) who focus on interventions aimed at promoting individual learning and effectiveness between individuals. Goh (1998) calls this

process an organisation's "transfer of knowledge" (p. 195). In each case, the emphasis is on the process of individual learning within the organisation: "Team members need to be able to suspend disbelief, think the unthinkable, and let intuition and premonitions flow freely. Therefore, a necessary skill in team members is tolerance for ambiguity" (Van der Heijden, 2001, p. 183). Single-loop learning occurs when organisational members try to correct the mismatches between actions and intended outcomes, "simply by changing their actions when the governing values or assumptions that underlie those actions are not open to change" (Seo, 2003, p. 7). Van der Heijden (2001) fuses this notion with double-loop learning, which refers to the governing values or assumptions themselves that need to be changed if changes in action are to follow. However, while he advocates "some tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 183), he does not recognise a third dimension of organisational learning — triple-loop learning (Seo, 2003) — which goes to the core of an organisation's meaning-making. When core values are clear to an organisation's members the organisation functions effectively, often without the need for leadership (Goleman *et al*., 2002a). Triple-loop learning "seeks to uncover the social traditions and norms where the individual governing values are nested and to actively link them with individual awareness and action" (Seo, 2003, pp. 7-8).

The style of the Hypothetical intervention is to drill down into the social traditions and individual governing values of an organisation, in order to more effectively perform its interventionist role. The literature does not reveal that scenario planning performs this role. Diagram III illustrates the link between the organisation's various levels of meaning-making with the interventionist role of the Hypothetical. It shows how the Hypothetical can be utilised to help focus on the problematic governing values and embedded tradition systems that may remain untouched by single- and double-loop learning.

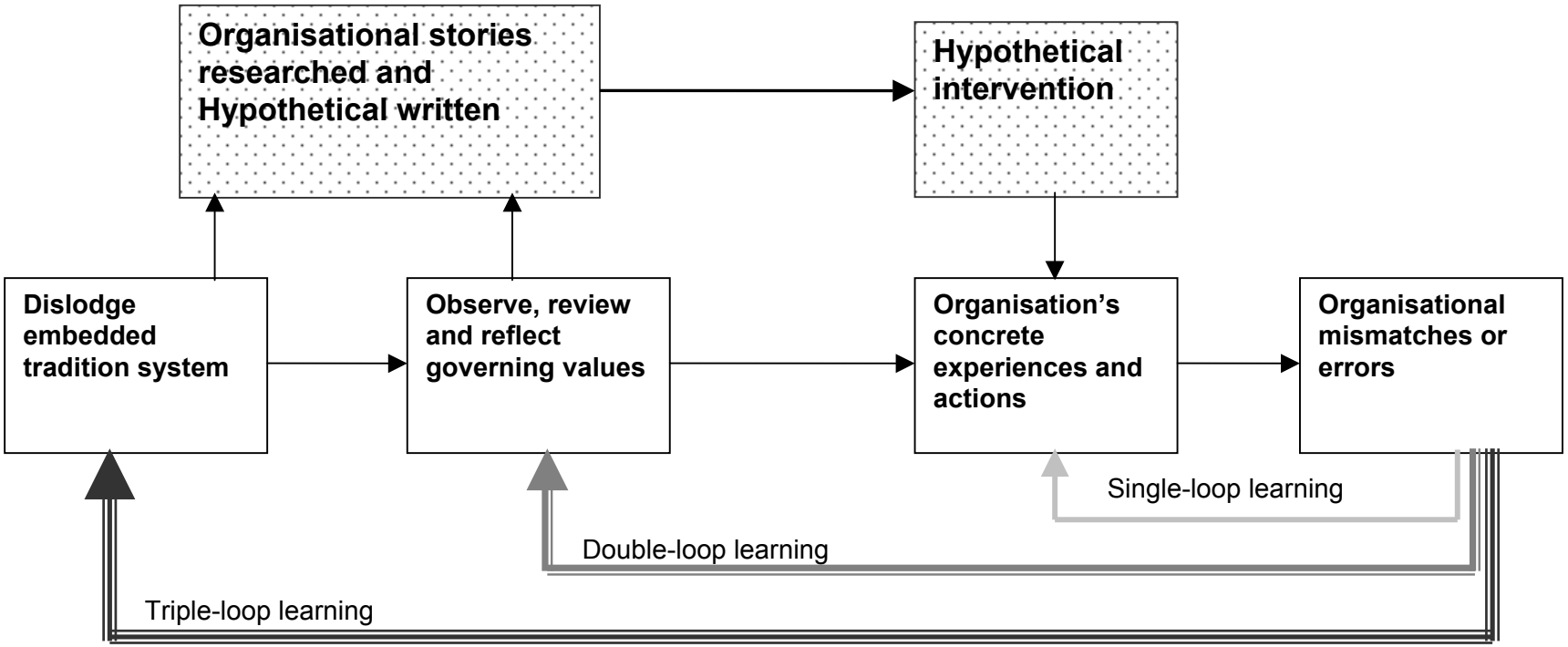

Diagram III: The Hypothetical and Triple-Loop Learning

Like scenario planning, the Hypothetical seeks to discover, through the *strategic conversation*, how and from where organisational problems arise. Both tools probe the unpredictable and the unexpected, or what Senge (1994) calls "the willingness to touch the dangerous" (p. 375). But the significant point of difference between the scenario plan and the Hypothetical is that the effective facilitator of the Hypothetical is constantly urging panelists towards articulating those moral, ethical, and philosophical principles against which they often choose to make decisions. Nowhere in the scenario planning literature are there moral, ethical and philosophical dilemmas to be resolved. By contrast, Geoffrey Robertson (1986) claims of the Hypothetical television series that:

> Some of the best moments come when participants are driven by the flow of the debate to step out of character, and to take a course fraught with political or professional difficulty, yet courageous and correct within the context of the case as it has developed. (p. ix)

Robbins (1995) claims there are just five categories of discussion in scenario planning — social, economic, political, technological and/or environmental (p. 2). While these categories may also offer a logistical framework for a Hypothetical scenario, what this study seeks to explore is whether it is through the complex matrix of emotions, behaviours and personal value systems that the Hypothetical decision-making process can be distinguished from that of scenario planning. This is the fundamental difference to be explored between the two intervention processes and, given the discussion earlier in this chapter of the importance of emotional intelligence in decision-makers, it may be possible to demonstrate through this study that it is the Hypothetical which provides this important perspective of organisation. One is led to ask: Do scenario planners truly believe that scenarios can stimulate organisational learning through the juggling of policy, economic, demographic and other quantifiable settings alone, or should scenarios also confront and incorporate our emotional capabilities and personal value systems? Kleiner states that scenario must, "move past the concerns which people think they have to the concerns which truly motivate them" (Senge *et al*., 1994, p. 276). But Kleiner provides no examples of those truly motivating concerns that are likely to make his scenario an intensely personal experience. Is it still largely observing an intellectual exercise, or is each player truly challenged as an individual? Is each individual's value system being tested in terms of ethical, moral and philosophical

uncertainties, or are Kleiner's "uncertainties" simply impersonal organisational settings which are not, "the concerns which truly motivate them?

One answer to this series of questions comes from Van der Heijden (2001): "However sophisticated the tools, if there is no significant effect on assumptions, values and mental models, people will quickly fall back into their old habit of asking 'Tell me what will happen'" (p. 21). As was noted earlier in this chapter, scenario planning, according to the Shell originators, must deal with these two worlds — fact and perceptions (Wack, 1985b, p. 140). Scenario planning is a communication tool which allows the participants to *perceive* different futures. But the important point to re-emphasise in locating the Hypothetical in relation to the scenario planning literature is that *perception* is a cognitive function, not an emotional response. Goleman's emotional competence framework reveals the complex mix of emotional competencies needed by "individuals who have not only the intellectual abilities to meet the cognitive challenges of leadership but also the emotional capabilities to inspire and empathise with others" (Gowing, 2001, p. 85). Nowhere in the scenario planning literature is it demonstrated that scenario planners, or participants, need the personal competencies spelt out by Gowing (2001) — self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills — to help them think their way forward.

2.18 Conclusion

The contemporary organisation can be seen as diverse, segmented and decentralised, rather than monolithic (Weick, 1985; Gardenswartz; 1998); it is often more self-managing than managed, and is more a living organism than a machine (Senge, 1990, 1991). Indeed, the speed of technology development and its impact upon the rate of internal and external communication processes have encouraged some scholars to view the organisation as being governed by *chaos*, where small changes can have huge repercussions on organisations (Freedman, 1992; Senge 1990). In this dynamic, and often unpredictable, organisational environment, Weick (1985) argues for intuition and hunches, quick responses and trial and error: "Don't treat rationality as a universal prescription. If you live by rationality alone, you lose options" (p. 132). However, successful learning organisations become successful more by design than by chance (Goh, 1998; Seo, 2003; Senge, 1990,1991; Van der Heijden, 2001).

While learning organisations are willing to accept the importance of trial and error, they also put in place core strategic building blocks around it:

- Mission and Vision.
- Leadership.
- Experimentation.
- Transfer of Knowledge.
- Teamwork and Cooperation.

For intervention processes to function meaningfully, they require a thorough understanding of how the organisation functions and the nature of the *strategic conversation* that already exists within it. Organisation communication literature suggests, and this study will explore, that when intervention processes like the Hypothetical are used, they may break into the strategic conversation in order to challenge mental models (strategies, policies, attitudes) and contribute to a successful reframing of the organisation. Organisation communication literature also reveals to what degree the strategic conversation is structured or unstructured; that is, to what degree are the mental models of organisation members shaped by formal or informal communication processes. The learning organisation is responsive to change and, indeed, embraces change as an organisational strategy. It also recognises the need to break out of outdated mental models and to find appropriate methods of communication so as to ensure this re-modeling or reframing process is effective for the organisation and for its members. (Bolman & Deal, 1991; de Geus, 1988; Fahey & Randall, 1998; Goh, 1998; Seo, 2003; Senge, 1992; Van der Heijden, 2001; Wack, 1985b). This study will use the informing literature to explore the various communication processes within Centrelink and establish whether this reframing process is occurring in the Centrelink case through the use of the Hypothetical intervention.

An understanding of how communication circulates through an organisation, and of who has power and authority over the lines of communication, will lead to the strategic conversation. Drawing on theories of symbolic interactionism will help lead the researcher along this path and explain the setting and the performance aspects of the organisation and its members. Scenario planning, on the other hand, provides an intellectual framework for explaining the design and presentation of the Hypothetical. It enables the researcher to locate the organisational environment in which the Hypothetical operates and how, as a learning and teaching tool, it fits into the organisational learning loop. Importantly, scenario planning methodology also helps to conceptualise the Hypothetical in terms of intended outcomes. For example, whether it can help to improve overall communication processes on a management or planning level, or in the deeper territory of mental modeling and *setting directions*, the Hypothetical may contribute to a more comprehensive process of management re-framing.

Chapter Three: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

It is important in this social science research study to identify an appropriate research methodology for understanding what it is the Hypothetical is doing in the context of an organisation's communication regime. German sociologist Max Weber argued that social science was the study of social action that had a meaning or a purpose. He said that we need to learn the personal reasons or motives that shape a person's internal feelings if we are to discover what guides their decisions to act in particular ways (Weber, 1981). One of the ways of understanding social action is through the study of hermeneutics or interpretive social science. For the organisational communication researcher seeking a defined role for the Hypothetical, hermeneutics provides a useful perspective. It emphasises a detailed reading of text, in the form of conversation, written words or pictures, in order to tease out the various layers of meaning and messaging within the communication episodes of the organisation.

The Hypothetical is driven by dialogue and fictionalised communication episodes involving its panel members, and it is these oral communication episodes, as well as other subtle, non-verbal communication activities, that provide the detail for interpreting interactions between organisational members. Consequently, analysis of the Hypothetical appropriately falls within the scope of interpretive social research, the aim of which is to develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings (Neuman, 2000). Putnam (1983) divides the interpretive approach into two distinct traditions — naturalistic and critical (p. 53). Naturalistic research seeks to describe and to understand organisational reality without necessarily questioning what it can or should be (Putnam, 1983). Neher (1996) interprets naturalistic analysis as "descriptions and interpretations of the meanings of organisational messages, leading to an understanding of organisational life that would be accepted by members as valid and understandable" (p. 337).

The prime interpretive need in this study is to understand and explain the Hypothetical intervention process, so the interpretive observer or researcher is looking for patterns within the organisation, in an effort to provide some meaning and enable the organisation to make

required changes (Neher, 1996). The interpretive researcher is not limited to any particular methodology or theoretical approach, but lets the initial problem suggest the most appropriate research methods that will reveal discernible patterns within the organisation (Neher, 1996; Neuman, 2000).

It is not uncommon, where there is a desire to change a particular organisational community (such as Centrelink), to employ an action science approach (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Seo, 2003; Neuman, 2000). The findings of action, or applied, research are often used by management to solve specific management problems currently experienced in the organisation (Sekaran, 2000; Neuman, 2000). Neuman (2000) cites a number of common characteristics of action research:

1. those who are being studied participate in the research process;
2. research incorporates ordinary or popular knowledge;
3. research focuses on power with a goal of empowerment;
4. research seeks to raise consciousness or increase awareness; and
5. research is tied directly to political action. (p. 25)

Neuman (2000) explains the fifth characteristic through those researchers who try to advance a social cause or improve conditions by expanding public awareness. Such researchers, he says, are explicitly political not value neutral (p. 25). The Centrelink intervention, which is the focus of this thesis, is attempting to resolve — to some degree — each of the organisational aims (above), apart from number five. Another feature of applied research projects like the Centrelink intervention, is that clients may demand confidentiality (Neuman, 2000); consequently, the outcomes are unlikely to enter the public domain because they frequently involve controversial issues and organisational conflict. Unlike the scientific rigour of basic or pure research, action research is often constrained by an applied setting and demands for timely results. While such an approach does not imply research of poor or doubtful quality, it does emphasise the primary concern of the researcher/consultant to

deliver generalised findings and practical solutions to management's areas of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Seo, 2003; Masalin, 2003; Neuman, 2000; Sekaran, 2000).

Argyris and Schon (1978) developed the tools of action science in the 1970s to deal with organisational problems. Their research revealed the extent to which organisational members trap themselves in defensive routines, consequently insulating their mental models from examination. In a perverse way, such members protect themselves from difficult learning situations (that is, they hold fast to their mental models), and so fail to learn how to produce the results they really want. The Argyris and Schon approach of tackling mental models through reflection and inquiry has been developed and adapted by a number of scholars, some of whom have refined his concept of *the learning organisation* (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Freedman, 1992; Goh, 1998; Kotter, 1990; Marquardt, 1999; Seo, 2003; Senge, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994; Taylor & Every, 2000; Van der Heijden, 1996). The processes involved in delivering *the learning organisation* are a focus for this case study research methodology.

3.2 Research paradigm

Edgar Schein is one of the most significant scholars and clinicians to articulate the kind of in-field case study typified in this thesis. Schein's (1987) approach is to chart the *modus operandi* for the work of both clinicians and ethnographers. Clinicians, says Schein, are invited to enter an organisation by someone in that organisation acting on its behalf, in order to seek some kind of help. He cites several of his own case studies, with American companies, in which, having been invited inside an organisation, he describes opportunities to observe, to meet key players, to interview and to intervene:

> Clinicians must therefore 'intervene' with diagnostic or provocative questions, with interpretations, suggestions, or recommendations in order to elicit a response from the client. The nature of that response then becomes primary diagnostic data for determining what may really be going on. (*ibid*, p. 221)

The researcher of the Centrelink case study was similarly invited as a clinician to enter the organisation and to offer help with organisation-identified communication problems. The clinical intervention in Centrelink had two aspects: initial diagnostic research through

interview and discussion and so forth, and the Hypothetical, which utilised what Schein (1987) calls the "primary diagnostic data" (p. 221) from the initial research, to determine what was going on within Centrelink management. Through the composition and content of the scenario, the Hypothetical was able to elicit suggestions and recommendations for solutions to management's problems. An important element of this clinical intervention paradigm is what Schein (1987) calls the "action research" (p. 227) model. In other words, the seeds of the diagnosis exist within the process of learning about the organisation and its problems, another important feature of the Centrelink case study (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Marquardt, 1999; Seo, 2003; Senge, 1990). Schein (1987) asserts that:

> The clinician starts with an action research model of the organisation built on the assumption that the only way to understand an organisation is to change it, and that the only way to understanding therefore, lies through deliberate intervention and the deciphering of the responses to the intervention. (p. 222)

The main client representative in the Centrelink case study was a senior manager who, once she had clarified the purpose of the Hypothetical with the researcher, advised management above and below her rank of the nature of the proposed intervention. Open access to the target group was vital for the researcher. It is not that the client in any way wished to *sanitise* the researcher's pathway into the organisation, or in any way attempt to put a *fence* around the Hypothetical. But it was important that parameters were established and acknowledged by everyone associated with the project. The researcher's intervention had to be sanctioned and accepted by the organisation for it to be effective; Schein (1987) calls this "being evaluated as a potential helper" (p. 219). The client conveyed to this researcher, in her verbal brief, that she clearly wished to avoid an outcome that might be both unproductive and negative in its impact on the organisation. Such concerns have some validity, because an essential element of the Hypothetical process is that no-one involved in playing the scenario, has any idea of the roles they might be expected to play, or the issues to be played out. It is this element of surprise and unpredictability that has the potential to contribute so much to the dynamic of the Hypothetical process. Also, it is possible for the researcher to discover sensitive, or even 'no go' areas, which may become divisive and unproductive if incorporated into the Hypothetical scenario. An example of such a previous experience with a Centrelink

Hypothetical, which supports this analysis will be discussed in Chapter 4 (see: 4.2 The Boys Club).

3.3 Research methods

No academic literature was found that specifically described the role of the Hypothetical (as defined in this study), as a clinical intervention for issues of organisational communication in a management setting. So, apart from the need to define that role, it was also necessary to explore and explain the perceived communication problems within Centrelink, using this intervention tool. Consequently, it was decided to use a triangulation of research methods in order to cast different perspectives on the role and performance characteristics of the Hypothetical.

Neuman (2000) says there are several types of triangulation for "observing something from different angles or viewpoints … to get a fix on its true location" (p. 124). The Neuman (2000) "triangulation of method" (p. 125) is used where qualitative and quantitative styles of research and data are mixed. The following three main measures, along with a number of supplementary measures, were chosen:

1. A qualitative and quantitative questionnaire of a sample of managers and middle managers within the Centrelink Queensland/Area Brisbane management population.

2. Application of a Hypothetical intervention tool with a smaller sample of Centrelink managers and middle managers.

3. Post-Hypothetical field interviews with several senior managers identified as 'elites'.

The questionnaire was considered a key research method for focusing quickly on the population sample and seeking their views of the organisation. Analysis of the questionnaire findings enabled this researcher to more closely define the organisational problems that needed to be addressed in the Hypothetical storylines. The third main research measure (elite interviews) was intended not only to shed further light on the organisational problems

highlighted during the intervention performance, but to assist this researcher gain a clearer understanding of the functions and features of the Hypothetical.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) identify the importance of participation in the setting and direct observation in qualitative research projects, and, given the emphasis on communication issues with this proposed intervention, it would have been desirable to have some time examining the practical dynamics of communication within the Area Support Office and several Customer Service Centres. However, this researcher was limited in the amount of access and time provided by the client for participating in Centrelink workplace settings. Access was limited to arranged interview periods, meetings and casual conversations at Head Office, and visits to two Customer Service Centres. During the latter visits, it was possible to listen and observe, for short periods of time, the interaction between Centrelink staff and customers, as well as to gain a sense of how the offices were laid out for the provision of services. Head Office visits were governed by the constraints of formal appointments with specific individuals. While strict security surrounded these visits, it was possible to observe the layout of floors, the working atmosphere, interaction of staff and the predominantly compartmentalised, IT-dominated, work areas.

Further observations on the importance of participation in the setting and direct observation are made in Chapter 4 of this study.

3.4 Preliminary data collection

Research projects that are based on business themes, and where the researcher is an outsider from the particular organisation, require familiarity with that organisation as a pre-requisite (Sakaran, 2000). This researcher has now conducted three interventions as a communication consultant for Centrelink, a media workshop and two Hypotheticals. Four years before the start of the Centrelink case that forms the focus of this study, the researcher was asked to research and conduct a one-day media workshop for Centrelink Queensland managers (Customer Service Centres). Research for this workshop involved gaining a basic understanding of Centrelink and its business milieu. As Sakaran (2000) suggests, the researcher needed to know:

- The origin and history of the company — when it came into being, business it is in, rate of growth, ownership and control.

- Size in terms of employees, assets or both.

- Charter — purpose and ideology.

- Location – regional, national or other.

- Resources — human and others.

- Interdependent relationships with other institutions and the external environment.

- Financial position during the previous 5 to 10 years, and relevant financial data. (p. 57)

Preparation for the media workshop also involved research into a number of confidential personal customer files in order to create credible stories on which to base examples of media confrontation for the managers to deal with.

The researcher's knowledge of Centrelink increased when later asked to conduct the first Hypothetical with Centrelink Queensland around the issue of the functioning of management clusters. The senior management team was, at that time, resistant to the introduction of clustering offices in the Area Brisbane region, despite claimed advantages of savings in operating costs and staff resources. The researcher conducted interviews of selected staff at middle and upper management levels, over a ten-week period, and field notes were made of each contact with Centrelink. Two years later, the clustering of offices in Area Brisbane has become an accepted management and cost-saving strategy. The second Hypothetical for Centrelink therefore forms the third intervention by this researcher, and it is this latter intervention that is the focus of this study.

3.5 Data collection methods

The data collection methods for the current study were arranged with specific outcomes in mind for the client, and are listed below by method and outcome.

Table 1: Data collection methods and specific intended outcomes

METHOD	OUTCOME
Document Analysis: Centrelink internal documents and public documents	• Identifies the nature of the organisation • Helps identify the nature of the problem
Pre-Hypothetical Interviews with Panelists and some Audience members	• Identifies the key 'players' • Provides data for roles for each player • Identifies organisational issues • Identifies communication issues
Pre- Hypothetical Questionnaire For Panelists and Audience	• Provides a profile of 'population' • Identifies attitudes to workplace • Identifies communication issues
Hypothetical Panel and Audience	• Identifies communication and organisational issues • Highlights key issues of disparity between CSOs and ASO staff • Highlights potential solutions
Post-Hypothetical De-briefing Group discussion	• Provides prioritization of issues • Offers ways forward • Highlights unexpected issues, surprises in relationships and communication 'myths'

Table continued from previous page	
'Elite' Interviews with ASO senior managers (x 5)	• Provides for issues management review • Provides for revision of 'mental models' • Identifies perceived strengths and weaknesses of Hypothetical
Internal Documentation Post-Hypothetical, relating to the intervention process	• Identifies perceived strengths and weaknesses in the Hypothetical • Reflects impact of the intervention

3.5.1 Document analysis

As mentioned earlier, Sekaran (2000, p. 57) stresses the importance of being well acquainted with the background of the organisation, before even conducting the first interview with its members. Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (1999) consider the research of archival data as "a method for describing and interpreting the artifacts of a society or social group" (p. 117). The researcher of the Centrelink case study accessed both internal and public documents to gain an understanding of the scope and depth of this massive Commonwealth bureaucracy. Internal documentation was limited to specific information about Area Brisbane:

- Area Brisbane Profile;
- business improvement plans;
- Intranet home pages; and
- minutes of Leading Directions Management Committee.

External documentation was used to gain an understanding of the Centrelink profile being presented to the Australian public, and to gain a sense of the *messages* being sent out to Centrelink customers. This material included:

- *Centrelink Annual Report*
- 'Strategic Directions 2001-2006'
- *About Centrelink* (corporate booklet)
- *Centrelink Information (a guide to payments and services)*
- Our Business Our Future (strategic framework)
- Australians Working Together (detailed social program pack)
- *People* and *Community* public relations magazines and media releases

3.5.2 Pre-Hypothetical questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to engage the sampling frame of the Centrelink population who would be chosen to take part in the Hypothetical, either as panelists or in the audience. The questionnaire was completed before the Hypothetical was presented. The respondents were being asked to rate the quality of communication within Centrelink and the questionnaire was both voluntary and anonymous. The respondents to the questionnaire were a non-random sample, in that all members of the sampling frame (within the chosen population) — CSC team leaders, CSC managers and ASO program managers — were asked to participate (total: approx 200). What was considered more important than a pre-determined sample size, was that all members within the relevant frame were targeted. Ninety-six responses were received, which represents a 48 per cent response rate, with a fairly even gender balance — 46 from male employees and 50 from females. A draft of the questions was submitted to QUT's Faculty of Business Research Advisor for clarification of such matters such as bias, sequence, clarity and face validity (Appendix 2). The aim of the questionnaire was to establish:

- a demographic profile of those within the sampling frame;

- the perceived competency of those surveyed, with Centrelink computer software;
- how information is primarily sent and received between the Area Support Office and Customer Service Centres;
- the preferred ways of receiving information by those within the sampling frame;
- the most effective means of communication by those within the sampling frame;
- a climate for suggesting improvements to internal communication;
- whether or not CSCs believe they can rely on getting help from the ASO; and
- some good and bad experiences of the ASO by CSCs.

Five of the 14 questions where it was necessary to determine how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with a particular situation in their workplace used the Likert attitudinal scale. Given the superior/subordinate relationship between CSC Team leaders and ASO managers, the survey posed two questions separately to CSO and ASO staff, regarding work pressures and opportunities for peer discussion (questions 7, 8, 9, 10). It was intended that part of the questionnaire should provide a quantitative measure against which one could test the impact of the Hypothetical. For example, if there was a strong perception through the questionnaire that the ASO does not respond quickly enough to CSC calls for help, then the researcher could incorporate this into a Hypothetical storyline and consequently tease out this communication problem during the presentation. Similarly, if CSCs said they prefer e-mail as the main mode of internal communication, then the Hypothetical should be able to test this generalised preference.

In keeping with traditional questionnaire layout, a number of demographic questions were asked first to help respondents feel comfortable with the instrument (Neuman, 2000). For example, the years that people had worked at Centrelink was important data, in that extensive experience and familiarity with Centrelink systems and programs would tend to influence the

way people regarded the adequacy of internal communication. Related to this question of years of experience was a question that asked respondents how well they understood the various roles and functions of the Area Support Office: *3. I broadly understand the roles of the Area Support Office* — (strongly disagree to strongly agree scale). This question attempted to relate comprehension of the ASO's functions with criticisms of the ASO for inadequate communications systems. In other words, was there a relationship between a weak understanding of the roles of the ASO and criticism of the ASO for poor communication and vice versa? Was the ASO's failure to communicate effectively about itself actually contributing to the lack of understanding of its roles?

One way of focusing more clearly on perceptions of poor communication was to define the key methods used by the ASO to communicate with its employees and which methods employees most preferred. Consequently, respondents were asked:

4. *The most frequent way I receive information from the Area Support Office is via: e-mail, internal mail, phone calls, Intranet home pages, other employees in my office, my manager, other*.

and

5. What would be the most preferred way you would like to receive information from Area Support Office — e-mail, Internet mail, my manager, phone calls, meetings, training/workshops, other?

Having completed the structured responses, the last two questions in the survey sought open-ended or unstructured responses. Respondents were asked to provide examples of good and bad experiences they had had with Area Support Office. The questions were designed to flush out those issues that may have sparked the request for the Hypothetical in the first place. What was hoped for were descriptions of common experiences, repeated episodes or stories, that reveal patterns of behaviour within the specific workplace areas. The benefits of open-ended questions include richness of detail, creativity, self-expression, unanticipated findings and definition of the respondent's frame of reference (Neuman, 2000; Marshall & Rossman,

1999; Sekaran, 2000). Neuman (2000) also suggests that unstructured questions have distinct disadavantages: different respondents give different degrees of detail in their answers, coding their responses is difficult, respondents often lose direction or misinterpret the question, and answers from articulate and highly literate respondents tend to be favoured during analysis (p. 261). The Centrelink respondents, while giving different degrees of detail, were generally well focused in answering the questions and displayed a high level of literacy and detailed workplace knowledge.

3.5.3 Pre-Hypothetical interviews

In the Centrelink case, this researcher is identified as a clinician (Schein, 1987) and therefore was an interventionist seeking specific information from organisational members in order to address the client's needs and offer solutions. As already noted, Schein (1987) describes his *action research* model, in which the researcher must find out what is going on inside the organisation. The Centrelink researcher needed to establish an intimacy with employees, who were essentially being asked to articulate their criticisms of the system, and presumably would want to criticise ways their superiors were ordering that system. Given the sensitivity of such a process, it was essential, in order to flush out the various issues involved, to gain approval at the highest level of senior management for the in-depth interviewing required at several levels of the organisation. The researcher had several meetings at Head Office with members of Area Brisbane's executive team to establish *ground rules* for the research and for the thematic content of the Hypothetical scenario. The Area Brisbane manager gave approval in writing, and the researcher provided assurances of confidentiality for all material provided by Centrelink employees. It was also agreed that at least four senior managers would become a close *reference group* for the researcher. These senior managers would advise all relevant employees involved in the Hypothetical that they were to be as cooperative and as open as possible in assisting the researcher.

In consultation with the 'reference group', 13 staff members were finally selected for the Hypothetical panel. This selection came from the sampling frame of ASO managers, CSC managers and team leaders. In their prescriptions for scenario learning with key organisations, Fahey and Randall (1998) suggest that an open-ended interviewing technique

is crucial for tackling the first stage of uncertainty in an organisation. (In the case of Centrelink, one could identify two basic uncertainties — the uncertainty of the relationship between the client and the researcher/clinician, and the uncertainty of neither comprehending the nature of their organisational communication dilemmas nor how to resolve them.)

Scholars generally assert the need for interviewers to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the various forms of interviews and interviewing techniques so they may focus on the relevant organisational issues (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Neher, 1996; Neuman, 2000; Sekaran, 2000; Schein, 1987; Van der Heijden, 2001). Clearly, the interviewer needs to have superb listening skills and be adept at personal interaction, question framing and wise probing, for the elaboration and loosening of deep-seated issues (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Neher, 1996; Van der Heijden, 2001). This researcher considered the implications of each of the interview styles - structured and unstructured, face-to-face, telephone or on-line before deciding on the most appropriate approach. This researcher primarily employed unstructured interviews which sought to explore and probe into a number of factors affecting communication within the organisation. The researcher was careful to establish a basis of trust and rapport with interviewees in order to reduce the introduction of bias (Sekaran, 2000). Establishing senior management support for the intervention, and having that fact communicated to interviewees helped to reduce a self-reporting and monitoring bias; interviewees felt free to respond openly to interview questions. Neuman (2000) and Van der Heijden (2001) emphasise that the interviewer must be conscious of their own propensity to bias through poor interview techniques or influencing the interviewee in various ways to get pre-determined answers.

Neuman (2000) elucidates how field research interviews are proscribed by the field setting and the members within that setting. Ethnographic interviewing is considered the most appropriate style for the Hypothetical research because its three basic types of questions elicit "the cognitive structures guiding participants' worldviews" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 112). The ethnographic interviewer aims to "engage in a conversation with the client without directing what the client says" (Van der Heijden, 2001, p. 147), "allowing topics to come up in any order and following various trains of conversation without any particular plan" (Neher, 1996, p. 330). The value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on the organisational

culture through the interviewee's perspective and through a first hand encounter. Marshall & Rossman (1999) say this is particularly useful for getting — from the interviewee — the meanings of events and behaviours.

This researcher was conscious that the in-depth interview is much more like a conversation than a formalised event (Neher, 1996; Neuman, 2000; Schein, 1987; Van der Heijden, 2001), and that the interviewer must respect how the interviewee frames and structures his responses: "The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108). The researcher started the interview process by having each of the interviewees consider several broad questions on paper and e-mailing those answers to the researcher. Different questions were asked, depending on which sampling frame the interviewee came from. Essentially, ASO interviewees were asked for their experiences of issues, blockages or problems that they had identified in their dealings with the CSC network. CSC interviewees were conversely asked about the barriers that prevented them from using the ASO as a support in their role as a manager or team leader (see Appendix 2).

Using these initial, e-mailed responses and from responses to the questionnaire, it was hoped to unlock some of the key problems from both sides. Over the following 5-6 weeks, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews (45–60 minutes duration), on a one-to-one basis, either at each interviewee's office or on the telephone. The researcher took extensive hard copy notes and sought out additional information with one or more supplementary interviews by e-mail. The researcher used the interviewees' initial e-mail responses, combined with the key *good* and *bad* experiences reported by questionnaire respondents, as the basis for the in-depth interviews/conversations.

As a general approach, the researcher first attempted to gain the interviewee's confidence by working through their profile within the workplace. If they were receptive and open, then pointed questions could be asked, particularly if there were what Neher (1996) calls "discrepancies in perception" (p. 331) between the questionnaire findings and the particular respondent's perceptions. In particular, this researcher sought out personal communication problems and who or what the respondent felt was responsible for causing them. This

approach is consistent with the aims of the interpretive researcher, who wants to learn what is meaningful or relevant (Neuman, 2000; Sekaran, 2000). The intention was to uncover patterns of work behaviour and information flow and to find, in those patterns, instances of both good and bad communication. Neuman (2000) calls this "meaningful social action" (p. 71), where the researcher is not simply studying observable behaviour, but is seeking out those actions to which interviewees attach subjective meaning. The interviews were also used to assess each interviewee as a potential panelist (Schein, 1987), that is, were these particular organisational members confident, articulate, opinionated and knowledgeable. As noted in Chapter 4, the pre-intervention interviews were most valuable for penetrating the symbolic expressions of the culture and the perceptions of organisational life.

3.5.4 Hypothetical panel

There were demographic considerations in the selection of the core group to be interviewed and then selected for the panel: job status, years of experience with Centrelink, achieving gender balance, and a range of geographical work locations. Diagram IV indicates the range of experience on the panel, and Table 1 reveals how the findings of key variables from the questionnaire were matched as close as possible to the selection of interviewees and the final choice of panelists.

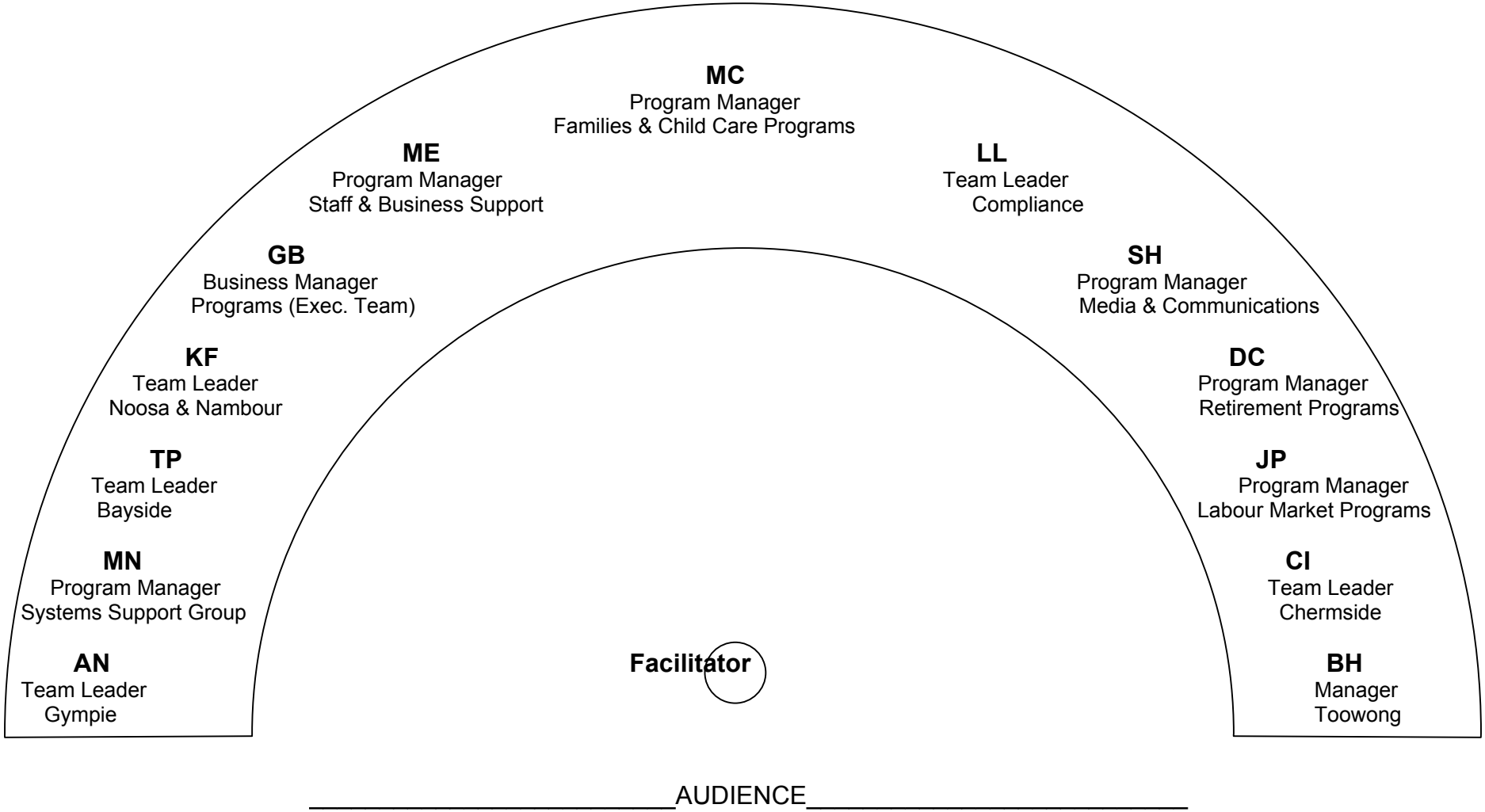

Diagram IV: Centrelink Hypothetical panel members

Table 2: Key variables for selection of Hypothetical panelists

	Consideration for panel		*Preferred number on panel*	*Match with survey and final number*
	YES	NO		
AGE:		✔	12	**13**
MALE:	✔		4	**5**
FEMALE:	✔		8	**8**
CENTRELINK EXPERIENCE:				
Less than 1 year		✔		
2-5 years	✔		1	**1**
6-10 years	✔		2	**4**
11-20 years	✔		5	**6**
21+ years	✔		4	**2**
EMPLOYMENT LOCATION:				
Brisbane city	✔		4	**8**
Brisbane suburbs	✔		5	**3**
Sunshine Coast	✔		2	**1**
Gt. N. Region	✔		1	**1**
JOB STATUS:				
ASO manager	✔		3	**7**
CSC manager	✔		3	**1**
Team leader	✔		6	**5**

Given the focus on communication issues, it was decided the Program Manager, Media and Communications, would be a valuable resource, and this person was added to the panel. While age was not considered a significant variable, three relatively young team leaders were selected for the panel. Also, at least one representative from each of the Centrelink 'years of experience' categories was selected. Employees with less than one year of employment with Centrelink were not considered a significant variable to influence the make-up of the panel.

The final panel had a balance of males and females representing Centrelink employment generally but not representing the balance from the questionnaire (which was 50:50). In terms of assembling a balanced group of panel members, it was resolved, after discussion with the

management group, the panel should attempt to reflect the overall gender balance of Centrelink employment: approximately 8 females and 4 males (that is, 2.1 females to males). Given the specific communication issues of the Hypothetical, it was felt that other variables of employee diversity (for example, indigenous, disability, ethnicity and language) were not significant enough to warrant further weighting the panel in any way.

The physical work location of employees was seen as important in that research interviews revealed several criticisms of the ASO for its *head office* culture. Initial interviews indicated that ASO staff do not get out into the suburban offices often enough, and rarely make it to regional offices. Consequently, it was thought essential to get a mix of employees from Brisbane city and suburbs, the Sunshine Coast and Great Northern Region clusters in order to pick up these different perceptions. Another important variable was employees' competence with computer systems. The pre-Hypothetical questionnaire established a relatively high confidence with handling computer software programs amongst the majority of employees. Given the significance of computerised communications within Centrelink, it was assumed that each of the managers and team leaders on the panel would not only be confident in the use of Centrelink systems, but would be opinionated and articulate about their shortcomings.

3.5.5 The Hypothetical

After several discussions with the guiding management team, it was resolved that the Hypothetical performance should concentrate on the key avenues of internal communication between the ASO program managers and the managers and team leaders within the Customer Service Centres.

The Hypothetical panel size varies from between eight and 15 people, and an audience of the panelists' peers may watch the intervention presentation. While it was important to cover key operational areas throughout Area Brisbane in selecting the panel, not all managers were available to take part on the day chosen to present the Hypothetical. However, the 13 who were finally invited to be on the panel accepted the invitation. Program managers covered the key portfolios of:

- Systems Support.
- Staff and Business Support.
- Labour Market Programs.
- Families and Child Care Programs.
- Media and Communications.
- Retirement Programs.
- Compliance.

Team leaders came from the Customer Service Centres of Gympie, Noosa, Chermside, Cleveland, and Toowong, which serve many Area Brisbane metropolitan and demographic zones. An open invitation to be in the audience on the day of the Hypothetical presentation was sent by e-mail from the ASO to all CSC managers and team leaders throughout Area Brisbane. Approximately 40 participated, representing 20% of the total number of this sample population in Area Brisbane.

The Hypothetical was presented in a small conference room away from Centrelink Head Office. The panelists' tables were set out in a crescent shape and the panelists were placed in no particular order around the table (Diagram IV). The audience was seated facing the panel and the entire two-hour presentation was audio recorded. Centrelink management expressed a strong wish for panelists to maintain anonymous. Consequently, the audiotape is not available for incorporation into this study, and while a full transcript was utilised in the study by the researcher, and is submitted as an appendix, all names have been deleted (Appendix 3). The facilitator put various scenarios to the panelists, questioning and testing their views, inviting their opinions and asking them to question and to comment upon each other's views. Occasionally, the facilitator turned to the audience to seek their comments on what the panelists were saying about their organisation and their workplace. Having worked through a

number of pre-determined issues, the facilitator brought the Hypothetical to a close after approximately two hours.

3.5.6 Post-Hypothetical de-briefing session

After a short refreshment break, the facilitator called on both panel and audience to articulate the key issues they thought had emerged from the Hypothetical. These issues were recorded on a white board and taken into a more focused de-briefing session involving ASO managers in the afternoon.

3.5.7 Post-Hypothetical "elite" interviews

As already noted, Schein (1987) documents the uneasy relationship between the clinician/researcher and the organisation; between the reality of the organisation and what management may want to hear. Putnam (1983) asserts that researchers/clinicians exist in a "dangerous dialogue" with the client (p. 37). If the relationship with management is tense, then it is probably because of the distorting effects of managers' controls, particularly when the clinician is trying to win them over to make potentially beneficial changes to the organisation (Frost, 1987; Weick, 1983). Frost (1987) and Neher (1996) describe how management agendas may often be well hidden, and change is resisted for a range of political motives and self-interested behaviours.

The point being made here is the need for the researcher to be aware of management power and control in setting the parameters for the Hypothetical, and in making use of its outcomes. Putnam (1983) asserts that the interpretivist adopts a pluralistic view of organisation, treating it as a collection of factionalised groups with different views, purposes and goals: "Even though dominant coalitions of powerful members make decisions that have consequences for all participants, lower level coalitions can be politically potent and exert direct influence on managerial actions" (p. 37). Putnam (1983) suggests that researchers and managers should work closely together to define the research parameters. Indeed, for the Centrelink case, it was resolved with senior management that because communication problems at specific management and team levels were the motivation for employing the Hypothetical intervention, the research would be restricted to those levels — ASO managers, CSC

managers and ASO team leaders. However, a pre-Hypothetical questionnaire distributed to the entire Area Brisbane population, and an open invitation to that population to be part of the Hypothetical audience, were counter-balancing efforts to eradicate elements of bias in the study. The research would also integrate subordinate and superior perspectives within the sample frame, so as to explore how their working relationship may be reconstituted and improved (Jablin, 1979; Putnam, 1983).

Before conducting the Hypothetical, it had been the researcher's intention to distribute a second questionnaire to gauge the effectiveness of the Hypothetical and to probe respondents' views about the various management and communication issues raised in the Hypothetical. However, due to constraints of time and access, and in discussion with the management group, it was decided to conduct several key "elite" interviews. Elite interviews achieve a richness in data, particularly, in the Centrelink case, where the researcher focused on senior managers who have what Jablin (1979) describes as better communication and articulation skills, have a deeper and broader understanding of the bigger organisational picture and are sensitive to the feelings and ego defence needs of their subordinates (p. 294). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), valuable information can be gained from elite interviewing, particularly if the interviewees have key roles in the organisation. "Elite" individuals have an overall view of the organisation, particularly its management, legal and business policies. They also have input into future plans, training functions and, hopefully, an appreciation of the needs of the learning organisation.

The researcher was given access to the ASO management group and selected five managers for elite interviews, four of whom had participated as panelists. The fifth manager was in the audience and had also been a panelist in the first — 'boy's club' — Hypothetical. The researcher carefully prepared questions that attempted to explore their reactions and perceptions of the Hypothetical in which they had taken part. Consequently, the funnelling technique was used; open-ended questions were posed to begin the manager interviews, before progressing towards more specific lines of enquiry (Appendix 4). Interviews with the five managers covered the areas of:

- staff and business support;

- media and communications;
- business management;
- corporate, customer and community; and
- systems support and IT services.

The researcher arranged one-on-one in-depth interviews with each of the five managers at Centrelink's Queensland's head office. The audiotape-recorded interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes, and included a number of open-ended and closed questions. By this stage of the case study, and following the Hypothetical, all of the interviewees had an easy familiarity with the researcher. They appeared to clearly understand and respect the aims of his research, and his acknowledgement of the need for confidentiality. Consequently, they provided good opportunities for acquiring the in-depth information and insight required. Questions asked during these interviews were focused on perceptions of the Hypothetical as a tool for probing organisational issues, and how such issues were being followed up within Centrelink (Appendix 4).

3.5.8 Post-Hypothetical documentation

Following the Hypothetical performance, the researcher was interested in exploring any documents which referred to the impact of the intervention and how such impacts and responses related to the research questions and conceptual framework of the case study. Apart from noting specific actions taken by Centrelink, such documentation provided the opportunity for content analysis, as follows:

- In what terms did Centrelink describe the Hypothetical intervention?
- How significant did Centrelink view the outcomes as being?
- In what ways were the outcomes to be dealt with by the organisation?

Those documents included e-mails, meeting minutes, an internal survey, internal publicity, and a detailed follow-up paper — "Strategies identified for Quick Wins (QW) and Big Impact (BI)" (see Appendix 5).

3.6 Ethical considerations and limitations on the study

The researcher sought permission from Centrelink Queensland management to use the material from the proposed Hypothetical for this research thesis. This request presented a possible conflict with Centrelink's privacy provisions, as the thesis would eventually become public property. Also, the research includes, at times, intrusive, personal interviews with staff at senior levels within the organisation. However, the researcher/consultant is known to Centrelink, having conducted an earlier Hypothetical as well as media training sessions. Consequently, he had an awareness of the need for confidentiality during all internal contacts with the organisation, and of the ethical considerations covering social research of this kind:

> The law and codes of ethics recognise some clear prohibitions: never cause unnecessary or irreversible harm to subjects; secure prior voluntary consent when possible; and never unnecessarily humiliate, degrade, or release harmful information about specific individuals that was collected for research purposes. (Neuman, 2000, p. 92)

Centrelink gave permission to undertake the research on the condition that, while information and views expressed in the Hypothetical were not to be edited or proscribed in any way, all Centrelink staff involved in the Hypothetical were to be guaranteed anonymity, primarily to ensure that personal responses were not linked to specific individuals. Consequently, the names of all those in the case study have been replaced in the thesis with two randomly assigned initials. The research project also had to comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. QUT's Human Research Ethics Committee gave approval for the project and a Statement of Consent form was produced by the researcher, under the aegis of the Ethics Committee, and was signed by each Centrelink staff member taking part in the project.

The researcher had restricted access to Area Brisbane staff, who were informed by the Area Manager that the research project had been approved by Centrelink. Although research

interviews, before and after the Hypothetical, were conducted in formal workplace environments, interviewees generally responded in a positive and helpful way. Despite the nervousness of some panel members, the Hypothetical panelists also responded openly and with enthusiasm to the opportunity to critically analyse the performance of their organisation, particularly in the pre-Hypothetical research interview stage.

As mentioned, the researcher could have made greater use of participant observation in order to get closer to the organisation. There are advantages and disadvantages of participant observation that the researcher believes are relevant to the Centrelink case study. Table 3 illustrates the key strengths set against the perceived weaknesses (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 134-5). The researcher believes a greater level of participant observation within Centrelink would have improved the depth and breadth of collected data.

Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages of participant observation

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Data collected in natural setting	Can lead the researcher to 'miss the forest while observing the trees'
Elicits data on unconscious thoughts and actions	
Provides context information	
Allows wide range of types of data and participants	Highly dependent on the ability of the researcher to be resourceful, sympathetic and honest
Good for documenting major events, crises, social events	Fraught with ethical dilemmas
Provides immediate follow-up for clarification	
Useful for uncovering participants' perspectives	Difficult to replicate
Aids discovery of nuances in culture	
Supports cooperation	Can cause discomfort or even danger to researcher
Good for obtaining data on non-verbal behaviour and communication	Overly artistic or literary style can obscure the research

Source: Strengths and Weaknesses of Data Collection Methods, tables 4.1, 4.2, Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 134-135.

It is believed that, in future applications of the Hypothetical in special case studies like Centrelink, it is important to expand the period of participant observation in order to penetrate the culture under research more effectively. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that "Immersion in the setting allows the researcher to hear, see, and begin to experience reality as the participants do" (p. 106). Immersion is the role of the ethnographer, and Schein (1987) claims that the organisational researcher must be able to function in both the clinical and ethnographic roles. While the ethnographic role of immersion offers the researcher the opportunity to learn directly from his own experience of the setting, the role must not dominate that of the researcher/clinician who is essentially inside the organisation not only to observe, but to provide help by offering viable solutions for change.

Additional data could have been usefully collected about the perceived functions and outcomes of the Hypothetical tool, through the application of a post-Hypothetical questionnaire to audience members and panelists. For example, this study would have benefited from having some gauge of the perceived gap between the audience and panelist expectations of the Hypothetical, and what they saw as the outcomes of the intervention. Given the perceived reputation of the Hypothetical from its recent origins in the electronic media, as outlined in Chapter 1 and 2, the nature of this gap could guide future presentations of the intervention.

3.7 Conclusion

The triangulation of methods in this study is considered a valuable approach. The methods were used sequentially, that is: the data from the questionnaire provided important perspectives on the outcomes of the Hypothetical. The Hypothetical in turn addressed organisational issues within Centrelink, while the elite interviews provided data that focused on the perceived outcomes and conduct of the Hypothetical intervention tool and the nature of communication problems within Centrelink. All research methods contributed to a deeper understanding of the broader Hypothetical intervention process.

The researcher was concerned to establish whether or not the data collection methods being used were the most appropriate for dealing with the research questions, particularly in view of the fact that the Hypothetical does not appear as a recognised intervention tool in organisational communication literature. The researcher was guided by the detailed analysis of appropriate data collection methods provided by Marshall and Rossman (1990), Neuman (2000), and Sekaran (2000), as well as Schein's (1987) in-field clinical perspective and Neher's (1996) assessment of interpretivist methods for communication assessment in organisations.

Future applications of the Hypothetical intervention process could profitably incorporate different research methods to those used in this study, depending on the desired outcomes of the intervention. For example, a focus on action research methods, such as greater participant observation, is likely to reveal repeat episodes of poor communication by members, thereby prompting the researcher towards storylines that raise organisational awareness of such negative episodes. Another important action research aim is recognising political action and empowerment in the workplace. Direct observation of those within the organisation who have power — and how they exercise it — could be utilised in storylines that highlight the negative and positive uses of power in decision-making as well as how they help formulate organisational culture.

The findings of the study, outlined in Chapter 4, will discuss further ways in which research methods may be configured to deliver specific outcomes from the Hypothetical intervention process in workplace settings.

Chapter Four: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the findings of the data collection methods described in the previous chapter. The research problem for this study has been defined as:

To identify the functions and features of the Hypothetical as an intervention for organisational communication and change, using a Centrelink case as the basis for exploration.

It has been noted that the problem poses two aspects for exploration — the relevance of the Hypothetical as a generic intervention tool for organisational communication, and the impact of the Hypothetical on the specific case study. This dual nature of the study is clarified in the four research questions (p. 2). Consequently, the data in this chapter is being evaluated on two interrelated levels. It is being evaluated in the context of the performance of the Centrelink Hypothetical, applied as an intervention in an organisational communication setting for a client. The data is also being evaluated in terms of how the Hypothetical has been identified, defined and revealed as a potential intervention tool, drawing on frameworks of the relevant literatures consulted for this study. This chapter will first identify the Centrelink culture in which the findings are being discussed, and how this analysis is informed by the literature considered applicable to the organisational setting. The findings of each research method will then be detailed and discussed in terms of the dual tasks of the study.

As already reported, the research methods used for this study were applied in a flexible, sequential and cumulative manner; each method was seen to inform what came before, and provided an information resource for what was to come after. Similarly, the findings from this methodology are also reported sequentially, followed by appropriate discussion and the evaluation of themes. Diagram V presents the

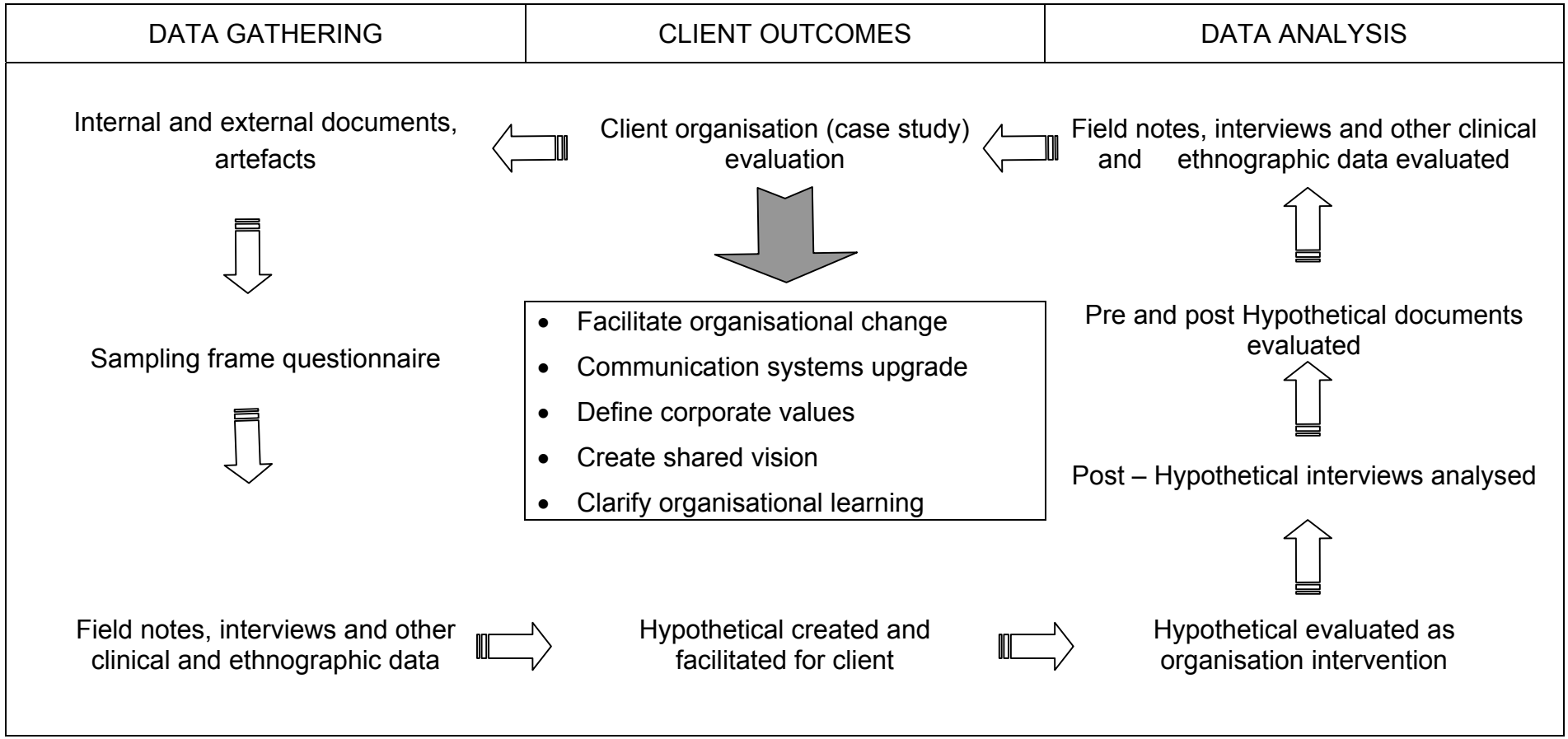

Diagram V: Case Study — Data collection and analysis and Hypothetical evaluation

sequential flow of data collection and analysis from the Hypothetical process and how client outcomes for facilitating change are derived from each specific intervention.

The use of the Hypothetical reflects a traditional action — or applied — research model, in that those within the client organisation who want research outcomes participate in the research process, with the ultimate aim of improving the organisational lives of those involved (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Freedman, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Marquardt, 1999; Neuman, 2000; Schein, 1987; Sekaran, 2000; Senge, 1992). Action research is focused on the interactive processes and experiences of the organisation as they are happening, and the interpretivist researcher is concerned with the members' accounts of these experiences and whether or not shared meanings emerge from their organisational life (Putnam, 1983).

4.2 The Centrelink culture

In order to embark on a meaningful analysis of the research data as it applies to Centrelink management communication strategies and policies, it is important to have some understanding of the organisation's culture and the management goals within which Centrelink claim to operate. Lewis (2000) asserts that no-one has been able to satisfactorily define organisational culture, and she accepts the colloquial, "way we do things around here" (p. 122) definition of culture. Indeed, Centrelink uses this same colloquialism — "Our Culture — The way we do things" (*Centrelink Strategic Directions 2001-2006*, p. 4) — to ground their own meaning of organisational culture:

> Centrelink is made up of people who want to help others — who want to make a difference in people's lives, in the community and in society as a whole. Centrelink employs people who are strongly committed to, and take pride in, quality customer service delivery. (*ibid*)

From an interpretivist perspective of culture, it is clear that an organisation's culture is revealed both by its shared meanings as well as its directly observable behaviours. As was noted in Chapter 2, the organisation utilises stories, myths, language, rites, rituals and ceremonies to either illustrate the underlying culture, or to show how they define the culture itself. Centrelink's culture statement can be seen as embracing the wish for shared meanings:

"people who want to help each other; … who want to make a difference in people's lives", as well as articulating the need for shared behaviours: "Centrelink employs people who are strongly committed to, and take pride in, quality customer service delivery" (*Centrelink Strategic Directions 2001-2006*, p. 4). Centrelink asserts that shared behaviours set standards of interaction and service that help to build the organisation's reputation. Kotter (2002) also asserts that the core challenge for organisations is people's behaviour, and the need to bring about key shifts in what they do (p. 2). Desirable Centrelink behaviours are spelt out in a number of ways for its employees through the Australian Public Service values code, a Centrelink code of conduct and an internal customer charter. Centrelink shared behaviours are stated formally as:

- Listening to customers and the community
- Mutual respect for our customers and for each other
- Exploring and putting in place innovative and cost effective ways to provide the right outcome
- Solving problems and developing opportunities
- Behaving with integrity and in an ethical manner. (*Centrelink Strategic Directions 2001-2006*, p. 5)

These behaviours are clearly intended to inculcate a culture of 'service' in all employees through a shared understanding of meanings, and feelings of mutual interdependence. However, as Lewis (2000) asserts, many of these behaviours ('listening', 'mutual respect', 'behaving ethically and with integrity'), are imprecisely defined, because they have come from the language of psychology, and it is only in recent years that organisational psychology has started to recognise the importance of behaviours and emotions, and to establish solid empirical bases for research findings (De Dreu *et al*., 2001). It was also noted earlier in the study that, although it is problematic to define organisational culture and the behaviours that in turn define that culture, it was useful for the Centrelink researcher to observe behaviour through the way organisational members interact and respond to each other.

Centrelink is a large public service bureaucracy whose organisational hierarchy attempts to focus and motivate its workforce through its Strategic Directions framework. This framework focuses on one, prime, government-directed outcome: "effective delivery of Commonwealth services to eligible customers" (*Centrelink Strategic Directions 2001-2006*, p. 3). Centrelink's national 'Balanced Scorecard' is the primary organisational tool for communicating and measuring the organisation's performance. In summary, the scorecard:

- Assists in corporate governance
- Focuses performance against organisational goals by linking them to explicit objectives and measures
- Identifies key performance attributes that must be attained in order to reach organisational goals
- Allows monitoring of ongoing performance through a range of key measures, against which organisational achievements can be recognised and weaknesses identified, to give opportunities to improve performance
- Communicates organisational performance to support ongoing planning. (*Centrelink Strategic Framework 1998-2003*, pp. 32-37)

In terms of Centrelink employees then, the Balanced Scorecard is a framework against which people can give their best, and demonstrate effective leadership within a learning environment (*Centrelink Strategic Directions 2001-2006*). This framework also corresponds to the earlier organisational proposal that employees should be linked together by the work they do. Key performance indicators (KPIs) for employees are also focused on the Balanced Scorecard (*Centrelink Annual Report 2000-2001*):

- Create an environment where people can give their best
- Promote a culture of high-performing people
- Promote effective leadership as integral to the Centrelink culture

- Create a learning environment with Centrelink. (p. 128)

Centrelink employs broad and highly sophisticated training and skills programs focused on these KPIs, and it is within the context of the organisation's learning environment that the Hypothetical was commissioned.

The documents suggest that Centrelink places importance on performance assessment for its people, with the emphasis on 'learning' rather than training; this approach is aligned with the notion of 'the learning organisation' in the literature presented in this study: ongoing learning, re-evaluation, new orientations or restructuring (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Goh, 1998; Seo, 2003; Ringland, 1998; Senge, 1990, 1992; Therin, 2003; Van der Heijden, 2001). Centrelink documentation, both internal and external, uses language that accentuates this notion of learning: 'National Learning Strategy', 'Learning Executive Group', 'People Management Learning Team', 'Team Learning, Strategic Learning', 'a learning environment' (*Centrelink Annual Report 2000-01*).

Centrelink documentation further reveals an organisation that, as conceptualized by Goh (1998), aims at being skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (p. 194). However, it is outside the scope of this study to determine whether or not this learning environment functions through a top-down perspective or is a non-hierarchical, inclusive, participative environment of management and employees at all levels.

The literature examined for this study reveals that the participative workplace environment leads to common experiences and the development of shared mental models about problems and issues in the organisation (Goh, 1998; Senge, 1990; 1992). Centrelink's emphasis on "Team and Individual Learning" (*Annual Report 2000-01*, p. 147) suggests that the organisation is developing a common experience framework, or a common theory of action for the team to follow (Goh, 1998). Goh (1998) asserts that learning organisations invest in training experiences that develop this common experience framework. In the case of Centrelink, specialist teams are assembled with aligned skills to focus on specific business directions such as transition to work, jobsearch training, and disabilities services programs.

Programs such as these are overlaid with Centrelink's broad action theory of helping Australians to move forward in practical ways that are meaningful to their lives.

4.3 Document analysis

4.3.1 Internal documents

As part of the exploration of the Centrelink organisational culture for this study, a review was undertaken of a number of internal and external organisation documents. These complement the primary research methods and assisted with revealing the "values and beliefs of participants in the setting" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 116). This section further examines how the language and content of Centrelink documents suggests an organisational culture that is founded on aligning employees' shared behaviours to achieve its desired standards of interaction with and service to customers.

At the start of the case study with Centrelink, the researcher wrote to the primary contact in senior management to pose several initial questions about the proposed Hypothetical, and to request printed documentation about Centrelink that they thought was relevant to the project and would assist the researcher to develop an understanding of both the setting and of the group involved in the intervention. The researcher received a number of printed publications for internal and external use by management and employees. These publications were useful as insights into organisational culture, systems thinking and the emotional capability of members.

"Getting the Support from Area Support Office"

The researcher received a four-page brief from the Centrelink management group headed 'Getting the support from Area Support Office — A Hypothetical'. There were plan drawings of the individual offices occupied by Area Support Office staff in Brisbane Head Office (Appendix 1). The floor layouts of the Area Support Office reveal a closed office space for each manager, with their support teams grouped around the perimeter of each floor in similar, closed office accommodation or tightly partitioned sections.

This brief also addressed the content of the Hypothetical audience: "specifically Team Leaders, but anyone in a leadership role or 'earmarked' for a leadership role would be appropriate". Also "audience involvement will be encouraged e.g. Michael might turn to the audience and say, 'who has had a similar experience?'". The panel was defined as 12 to 14 people who were program managers and relevant business managers (from ASO); 4 to 5 team leaders from customer service centres, who are articulate and 'switched on' to the issues.

Centrelink wanted to explore the role of the Area Support Office, so the researcher first asked the management group how Centrelink, in the best of all possible worlds, would like to see the ASO utilised. Their written brief detailed the following priorities as:

- *Open, two-way* communication.
- *Responsive to*: feedback, requests.
- Focused on *Area outlines* and *CSC outcomes*.
- If Team Leader in Network has an issue, knows where to go for *support* and feels OK to do it *(receives a welcoming response)*.
- *Understand* ASO boundaries and limitations.
- Policy advice; utilizing helpdesks for *problem solving*.

The (*italicised*) words used in this brief reveal a management group that is conscious of effective team working, both in terms of desired outcomes: *Area outlines*, *CSC outcomes*, *utilizing helpdesks*, and in the way that employees are expected to relate to one another: *open*, *two way*, *responsive to, support*, *receives a welcoming response*, *understand*, *problem-solving*. While content analysis in itself does not confirm that effective team working is taking place, there is evidence here of what Foy (1999) regards as the encouragement of members to be open with each other; the first step towards team building (p. 160). The main feature of effective team working is that it is "in some sense strategic" (Procter & Mueller,

2000, p. 3), and Centrelink management is here reinforcing positive group norms and shared meanings in order to consolidate the organisation's own 'strategic directions' (*open, two-way communication, Area outlines, CSC outcomes*). This reference to group norms is in line with what Procter and Mueller (2000) call "support congruence" (p. 14), where the organisation's goals and values, and the very language it uses to communicate them, reinforce the behaviours it wants from employees.

In this four-page brief, Centrelink also provided a list of names for the panel, and of other personnel to be followed up if those selected were unavailable. In the event, all 13 suggested panelists accepted the invitation. Centrelink had also been asked to list the goals of the Hypothetical; specifically to name those issues which should be addressed and those that should be avoided. They wrote two headings in answer to this question: "Issues to be addressed", "Issues to be avoided". Beside the second heading, they simply placed a number of question marks. Pressed later on this, the researcher was told that there would be no point in pursuing two issues in the Hypothetical — Centrelink's Career Information Centre and the role of Business Manager within the professional structure. There was no attempt to sidestep key issues, but it was felt that these two specific matters should continue through the then current management review. Under the heading "Issues to be addressed" in the Hypothetical they listed:

- Improved understanding of services and support offered by ASO
- Making visible the invisible work done by ASO
- Identify areas where ASO can improve service to the Network
- Areas where partnerships can be formed or improved (between Network and ASO)

Discussion

This brief was important to the researcher as it gave valuable contextual insights into the organisational culture of Centrelink. For example, the floor layouts of the Area Support Office in central Brisbane reveal a traditional compartmentalization of staff rather than the

more interactive use of open-planning. In their study of contemporary organisational leadership, Clancy and Webber (1995) suggest that the one office/one manager assignment of work space is symptomatic of an old 'chain of command and control' approach to organisational hierarchies. This physical isolationism of ASO management may be a cause of the disconnect and misunderstanding between ASO and CSC staff. Senge (1992) speaks of the need for physical 'connectedness' of an organisation's individuals, and most surveys of workplace satisfaction call for managers to physically interact with each other and with their staff, in order that vital connections are made and remade (Clancy & Webber, 1995, p. 28).

The list of "Issues to be addressed" once again reveals an organisation that is seeking group effectiveness through consistency in behaviour (Mintzberg, 1987). Words such as *understanding*, *making visible*, *identify*, and *improved* convey a pattern of actions required from employees that will continue the focus on the organisation's strong service orientation. This is also evidence of what systems thinkers call the capacity to see 'wholes', or the need to focus on the key interrelationships and align thinking so as to influence behaviour (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Freedman, 1992; Senge, 1992). By serving up these issues for the Hypothetical, management is posing a communications challenge. Kotter (1990) describes such a challenge as "trying to get people to comprehend a vision of an alternative future" (p. 75). In this case, however, the Hypothetical is not so much being asked to help launch a new vision but, in asking for *improved understanding* and aiming to *make visible the invisible*, the organisation is seeking help to re-focus on their existing vision and goals.

The last two issues to be addressed by the Hypothetical — improving partnerships and service — suggest that group effectiveness needs to be tested. In this context, the Hypothetical is expected to explore how well Centrelink group members interact, how strongly they believe they can achieve what is being asked of them, and whether or not they are producing outcomes that are shared by all group members, as well as meeting broad organisational goals.

Another recognisable feature of Centrelink's approach to management is in the way the organisation perceives leadership. The four-page brief from Centrelink senior management, given to this researcher, repeats the need for qualities of leadership when justifying the

selection of members of the Hypothetical panel and audience — "anyone in a leadership role or earmarked for leadership role would be appropriate" (Appendix 1). It was observed in Chapter 2 how a recognisably strong organisational culture is inseparable from enlightened leadership (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992; Senge, 1992; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Schein, 1992; Van der Heijden, 2001), and, while it is difficult to define good judgment in a leader, Centrelink appears to be suggesting, in line with Mant (1997), that as long as those earmarked for leadership are intelligent, then they will be adept at pursuing the organisation's goals.

"Area Brisbane Profile"

Another significant internal document received by the researcher was "Area Brisbane Profile" (Appendix 6). Created by senior management, it throws some light on the organisational culture and indicates the importance of the emotional capability of its managers. The Profile is a detailed outline structure of Area Brisbane and its customer service centres. This confidential document provides brief details of managers and the numbers of employees in each ASO office and their responsibilities, key issues, problem areas, and resources (both human and otherwise). Most of the summaries are written in a 'matter of fact' business English, and rarely make any critical assessment of their resources or comment on other key issues. However, there was clearly opportunity to do so, and whenever such commentary occurs, it focuses on system failures, for example, "Systems based problems persist which affect the team's capacity to meet these targets, regardless of staffing". This again challenges the Hypothetical to re-focus on the organisation as a whole and to explore where key interrelationships may be breaking down and creating the systems problems.

A separate section of this document (also confidential) outlines the Customer Service Centre network within Area Brisbane. The profiles of each urban region are to the point and relate to the roles and issues experienced by each office. Just as the ASO office functions are detailed, often without commentary, the CSC office profiles are presented in a similar way. However, CSC managers have frequently taken the opportunity to reflect more broadly on their working environment. For example, in the Bundaberg region it is claimed: "most of the area is in a depressed economic state. It has been so for many years and has one of the lowest

average household incomes in the country". For staff in the Fortitude Valley office, the challenge is different: "A significant proportion of our 'regular' customer population have problems associated with drug and alcohol dependence, homelessness, psychiatric disorders etc, all of which generate a comparatively high workload and pose service problems at our counter". Occasionally, CSC managers communicate succinctly the pressure of dealing regularly with serious social problems across the Centrelink area. For example, the Kippa-Ring office manager states that such explosive issues "sometimes lead to hostile and aggressive situations when such assistance can't be made available and all welfare agencies are affected by this". At Caboolture "a high proportion of families in the area are dealing with unemployment, low income, frequent changes of custody, domestic violence etc.". Other problems relate to facilities and staffing, for example, "Sufficient accommodation space at Noosa is an eternal battle" (Nambour/Noosa offices), and "The loss of trained staff is resulting in an increase in workloads for experienced staff whilst new staff are being trained" (Gympie).

Discussion

These examples from Centrelink employees provide information about how conscious they are of the broad social and economic ramifications of the working environment in which they operate. They also illustrate the stress they are under with face-to-face emotional encounters, and they confirm Hackman's (2002) assertion that effective organisational members need emotional maturity and a measure of personal courage (p. 222). However, Goleman *et al*. (2002b) make the point that emotions are contagious and group members take their emotional cues from each other. So, it may be asked whether management, in publishing its organisational problems in the "Area Brisbane Profile" document, are helping to spread the 'contagion' of organisational criticism by its members. However, the non-critical and descriptive style of presentation of these problems suggests that, collectively, the managers of CSCs possess what Goleman *et al*. (2002b) call 'collective emotional intelligence'. In other words, the managers demonstrate an ability to manage such problems by possessing the emotional capabilities of "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management" (p. 177). It is significant that senior managers are prepared to publish and to share organisational stories, and suggests there is a process of 'thinking together' under way (Senge, 1992; Bordow & More, 1991).

"Internet Home Pages"

The researcher was also provided with hard copy print-outs of each of the ten ASO home pages on Area Brisbane's Intranet (examples: Appendix 7). Each of the home pages is laid out in a different way — different type faces, headings, use of graphics, writing style and depth of reporting. The only constant on each of the pages is the "Centrenet Home" and "Area Brisbane Home" logos at the top of the page. Two or three homepages have a sophistication and presentation which meets high standards of web page design — simple navigation cues, easy to follow tabs and search icons, graphics, photos and brief items of information. Other pages simply offer slabs of text, paying little or no regard to IT and graphics packages. There is an "Area Brisbane Executive" page, which lists the names of the various business managers, but there is no overall home page for Area Brisbane and its component parts. Also, there are no homepages for the Retirements and Finance Management Support departments.

Discussion

The researcher had no access to Centrelink's Intranet system. However, hard copy print-outs of each of the ten ASO home pages revealed a confusing mix of presentation styles, depth and breadth of information provided and unclear 'readability'. This apparent lack of management coordination of the Centrelink Intranet home pages was in conflict with the enormous amount of 'traffic' through the system. There was a pronounced disconnect between the sophistication and detail of program policy and the vehicle by which it is conveyed around the organisation. This disconnect was explored in the Hypothetical. The failure of the ASO to provide leadership in producing a set of consistent home pages is particularly clear evidence of one team-working strategy that had failed. Whether or not this led to a breakdown in 'team interdependence' (Kotter, 2000; Proctor & Mueller, 2000) is an issue that was pursued in the Hypothetical.

"Centrelink Staff Poll"

The researcher also received controlled access to the results of a confidential staff poll that was conducted in May 2001 to assist further exploration of organisational culture and employee perceptions (*Centrelink Annual Report 2000-2001*, p. 139-140). This poll is one of

a series conducted on a regular basis amongst all Centrelink staff by the Roy Morgan polling organisation. The researcher was able to make notes from these results but not to photocopy any part of it. The opinion poll is voluntary, and seeks employee views about their workplace and their organisation. This particular poll summary for Area Brisbane compared positive and negative responses to specific questions with responses to the same questions from the poll six months earlier; it also provided the May 2001 national results as a further comparison. Out of a total Area Brisbane staff population of 1941, there were 753 responses to the poll. The poll reveals that employees generally express positive feelings about their workplace and their organisation. For example, to the question "*Your work gives you a sense of satisfaction*", 73.6% gave positive answers and 12.3% gave negative answers. To the questions, "*You know what is expected of you at work*" and "*You understand Centrelink's purposes and how they apply to your work*", more than 85% of employees gave positive responses. There were low positive scores for:

- "*You feel Centrelink is committed to you*" (33.7% positive, 36.1% negative),
- "You *receive regular feedback about your work*" (45.3% positive, 36.1% negative),
- "*You feel valued working in Centrelink/ Centrelink values you*" (44.5% positive, 32.8% negative)
- "*You receive recognition and praise for good work*" (48.9% positive, 27.4% negative)

In all cases, the number of positive responses to all 14 questions from Area Brisbane employees had risen, often substantially, from the previous poll in December 2000.

Discussion

The frequency and breadth of the Morgan internal poll suggests that Centrelink has what Dixon (1996) describes as a consultative style, and perhaps even a participative organisational style. The results of this confidential staff poll appear to substantiate this suggestion, with a very high percentage of staff (85%) stating they have an understanding of Centrelink's purposes and how they apply to their own work situation. The high scores from

the poll, over time, for questions relating to how respondents feel about Centrelink, and how well they understand the organisation's purposes, confirm the Jehn & Mannix (2002) observation of a strong consensus of high work values among members. Centrelink poll responses also reflect the Jehn and Mannix contention (p. 241) that members with similar work values usually agree on norms regarding their work, and this agreement promotes workplace harmony. Research into group conflict has also shown that organisational members who have similar work values and feelings about their organisation are more likely to trust and respect one another and feel they are working towards a cooperative, rather than competitive goals (Jehn & Shah, 1997). The Morgan internal poll appears to confirm that Centrelink staff are working in a cooperative manner. Importantly, this also partly explains the measure of openness from the organisation in allowing the written expression of criticisms of Centrelink and personal pressures of the workplace, observed through such documents as "Area Brisbane Profile". As a qualitative measure of the workplace culture, the poll provided an indication that there was an open and revealing atmosphere for the Hypothetical to explore organisational issues.

4.3.2 External/public documents

Introduction

The researcher requested a range of relevant Centrelink publications that could provide background information considered useful in research for the proposed Hypothetical. Analysis of this material demonstrated that the core vision of Centrelink is not being communicated consistently. Therefore, it can be assumed it will be difficult for members to comprehend a shared organisational vision and for management to get staff aligned, and moving in the same direction. A few examples demonstrate this inconsistency.

Centrelink delivers about 140 'products' and services on behalf of around 20 Commonwealth and state client agencies to approximately 6.3 million customers. This huge social service 'business' utilises all key communication channels — electronic, telephonic, face-to-face, and print, in order to keep in regular contact with its employees and its customers. For the new employee joining Centrelink, the printed and electronic sources of information, that describe the organisation and its role in Australian cultural life, are vast and comprehensive.

Since its inception five years ago, Centrelink has presented itself as a 'business' which attempts to deliver high quality, and cost-effective products and services. Centrelink publications, both internal and external use the jargon and business language of commercial enterprise, as the following excerpt shows:

> Centrelink has always sought to find innovative ways of improving its customer service, and has taken another step towards achieving its vision of a one-stop shop for all government services by continuing a partnership with Service Tasmania. (*Centrelink Annual Report, 2000-2001*, p. 5)

Centrelink's complex social support delivery role is communicated in business and manufacturing language and begs the question: do customers and employees understand the meaning of such language when it is applied to such intangible 'products' as Employment Services or Training Credits. For example, *Our business Our future — Centrelink Strategic Framework*, is a 70 page public booklet which describes the purposes of Centrelink and the means by which they can be accomplished. Its vision is described as "making a difference to the Australian community through responsive, high quality government services and opportunities, and giving value for money" (p. 5). The concept of 'giving value for money' may be seen, like much of the business jargon, as difficult to correlate with Centrelink's core roles which are "to link services, personalize solutions and broker information on behalf of the community and other agencies…" (p. 4).

The questionnaire data reveals a high percentage of Centrelink staff who have more than ten years tenure with Centrelink. Many of these Centrelink employees are familiar with previous bureaucratic values of social service under the old Department of Social Security, and they have had to learn a new language, often the language of the commercial market place. This discrepancy suggests that there is a possible disconnect between those who are attempting to have Centrelink function under a 'business' model, and staff who still see their working lives within the framework of social service. For example, the internal *Our business Our future* publication asks employees to come to terms with such concepts as 'customer values', 'strategic positioning', 'business strategy', 'business outcomes', and 'performance measures', in a working environment that previously hinged on interpersonal relationships between

themselves and individual members of the public. These findings suggest that not everyone in the organisation might share the same understanding of the business model; if there is a disconnect between the business model and some employees, it will have an impact on the achievement of organisational goals (Dixon, 1996; Senge, 1992).

There are other publications that seek to promote a more pragmatic and customer-based image to their readers. For example, "Australians Working Together" is a folder of material published in May 2001 to outline a $2 billion program of improvements to Australia's social support system. This folder contains media releases from each of the Commonwealth social service departments, fact sheets explaining each of the new spending and policy initiatives, a list of key terms used, and a small, (24-page) brochure that summarises, in point form, the entire program. Apart from the ministerial media releases, this material is written in plain English and avoids social service or business jargon and public relations 'spin'. It is material that reflects the consultative nature of the organisation. It is explanatory and intelligible, with numerous examples or case studies to illustrate the various service implications.

4.3.3 Summary

A close textual analysis of Centrelink literature provides a useful insight into the positive and negative aspects of Centrelink communication, and how such analysis can assist with Research Questions 3 and 4. The external publications utilise economic and philosophical concepts and language of the business world which are at odds with the previous social service culture and corresponding motivations of many of its employees. The various publications also indicate differences in the way the organisation presents itself to its employees and to its customers. Given that employees have access to both internal and external literature, there is likely to be some confusion over these different presentations. All publications sighted by the researcher provided a valuable insight into the way the organisational leadership seeks group effectiveness through influencing joint behaviour patterns and the alignment of 'shared mindsets'. The organisation demonstrates, particularly through its internal publications, that it has an awareness of the qualities of transformational leadership. Its leaders also indicate they endorse consultative and participative models. However, they may be failing their employees through a lack of clear messaging. The

statement of organisational problems or issues to be confronted in the Hypothetical includes the questioning of leadership, and points also to a need to refocus on the organisation's joint vision and organisational goals.

4.4 Background experience of Centrelink — 'The boys' club'

In order to give a fuller account of the research environment and current organisational culture of Centrelink, the findings from a Hypothetical intervention that the researcher conducted with Centrelink in 1999 are provided. These findings suggest that the learning culture identified in the documents of the organisation is not wholly embraced by organisational members. This earlier Hypothetical intervention sought to discover why a significant number of Customer Service Centre managers were resisting a significant change in the administration of Area Brisbane. Head Office proposed the clustering of suburban offices for reasons of efficiency and the economic savings in material resources and staff. However, Head Office was being resisted by key managers, who argued for retaining their office management independence. The Hypothetical intervention, conducted in 1999, placed several of these managers onto a panel that explored their management attitudes and views on shared resources.

This researcher, acting then as a consultant, revealed a 'boys' club' operating at senior levels, which was regarded by some senior Centrelink managers as a negative aspect of embedded organisational culture. Comments made by some interviewees in the current case study were occasionally influenced by their experience of the previous Hypothetical and the controversial nature of the 'boys' club'. Also, the raising of this issue, in the previous Hypothetical, had a significant impact on the closeness of the relationship between the researcher and the client. Despite perceptions of openness and cooperation, it became evident, through highlighting the boys' club issue in this first Hypothetical, that there are proscribed boundaries around this organisation, and perhaps all organisations, past which the researcher, as clinician, is discouraged from exploring.

Schein (1992) and Putnam (1983) analyse the difficulties of the role of consultant as researcher, particularly where the researcher digs too deep and, either intentionally or

unintentionally, becomes a direct interventionist inside the system. There is then the danger that he or she may alienate members of the system and risk having the contractual arrangement terminated or not renewed. In Chapter 3, it was noted how the organisational researcher may chance upon sensitive, or 'no go' areas which may become unproductive if incorporated into a Hypothetical scenario.

Putnam (1983) highlights the likelihood of management bias if research focuses entirely on managers. Responding to Putnam's (1983) view, this researcher worked to achieve a deliberate balance of interaction between team leaders and managers in the second Centrelink Hypothetical. However, during the presentation of the first (1999) Hypothetical with Centrelink, the researcher, as consultant, experienced not only management bias, but management domination. The consultant had been asked to devise a Hypothetical which explored what was then a new Centrelink concept: 'cluster' management. In 1999, Centrelink was still adjusting to a commercial model for the provision of social services to Australians. It had recently become the new service provider for government departments that set policy and determine scales of payments. It was the role of Centrelink to work within pre-determined budgets to satisfy its clients, not only in terms of service delivery, but also in the management of those budgets.

The concept of cluster management is unique to Area Brisbane. It was developed by the then Area Brisbane manager who was seeking efficiencies of scale within an economic environment where 'downsizing' was the order of the day. Apart from efficiencies of scale, the Area Manager wanted Area Brisbane to be outcome-focused rather than resource-focused. Cluster management was chosen over other co-operative management models because Area Brisbane was considered too large for the traditional board of managers, which is a common feature of these models. Clusters of 3-5 offices were seen as more manageable, and managers were to share common interests within their clusters. A practical illustration is in the use of psychologists in Centrelink offices. It is financially impractical to employ a psychologist in every office so, under the cluster scheme, a psychologist has a 'home' office and provides a visiting service to other offices in the cluster. Cluster management is essentially a 'teams' model, where a group of Customer Service Centres are linked geographically, and function as an integrated team in terms of human resources, financing and customer outcomes.

In 1997, the Centrelink Executive for Area Brisbane set a two-year time frame, with 1 July 1999 being the deadline for the full implementation of a self-managed team model of cluster management to be in place. The aim was to achieve equity of outcomes, in that all Centrelink offices would be expected to deliver the same products and levels of service. Starting with the view that Centrelink is judged by its clientele on the *worst* performing office, it was necessary to shift from an individual to a collective responsibility for office performance. Hence, if one office was behind in a specific area of performance, then effort and resources should be shifted into that office from others in the cluster, until that office's performance was equivalent to others in the cluster.

The vision of the Centrelink executive for the satisfactory introduction of cluster management required a conceptual shift — from ownership of resources to a collective view on resources targeting and their use.

It was clear before the end of the financial year 1999 that there was still considerable resistance from many of Area Brisbane's 24 Customer Service Centre managers to the introduction of cluster management. It was also clear that, without the managers' active support, cluster management could not be introduced into Customer Service Centres in Queensland.

Centrelink senior management identified a number of cultural and managerial barriers that were blocking the proposed introduction of a more co-operative arrangement between offices. These barriers included a lack of commitment by managers to the cluster management approach, threats to territory, scepticism, competitive motivation between offices, fear of work overload, perceived differences in staff performances between offices, and lack of performance indicators. It was clear to the executive that CSC managers had caucused on the issues and shared strong misgivings about cluster management. On a personal level, managers feared more meetings, increased travelling times between offices and resultant costs, increased workload and greater administrative complexity, and concern about how the individual performance of managers would be judged.

At that time, a small group within the Area Brisbane Executive was convened to examine the major barriers to cluster management and to find ways of minimising them and establishing a new time frame for the successful implementation of the cluster management concept. One of the interventionist strategies chosen to help meet these aims was the Hypothetical. The consultant was briefed by members of the specially-convened Area Brisbane group as well as by the Area Brisbane manager. It was at this point that the consultant took on the role of researcher and was allowed open access to all staff within Area Brisbane. During the research period, a number of issues emerged which were written into the final Hypothetical scenario: "Cluster's Last Stand". The key issues were:

- territoriality or protection of the manager's particular 'patch';
- competitive motivation unlikely to be sacrificed for cooperative approach;
- confusion over personal goals versus corporate goals;
- cluster management challenges the comfort zone;
- performance indicators: how do we know if and when we've succeeded;
- the danger of incurring more work, more meetings, more responsibility;
- why work with an inappropriate funding model;
- how will budgets be applied and accessed by managers; and
- *presence of a strong 'boys club' in some clusters — i.e., an informal collegiate approach by managers to dealing with regional problems*.

The last issue on this list — the 'boys' club' — generated considerable discussion and concern amongst the managers following the presentation of the Hypothetical. It was listed in the de-briefing paper used for discussion with the client following the Hypothetical presentation (Appendix 8). The 'boys' club' had been included as an issue within the scenario

because two women staff members, interviewed during the course of the research phase, had made it clear that they believed a boys' club existed. They said this cabal of managers not only had an impact on the progress of women through the organisation, but also had an impact on how new workplace procedures like cluster management were likely to be received. Indeed, in an early confidential briefing paper to this researcher from the executive, it was made clear that one of the key barriers to cluster management put up by CSC managers was the way they caucused to create a unified opposition to specific policy initiatives:

> This change would mean a loss off power. Managers would need to know how the Area Manager would judge their performance … Managers tend to bristle … they say that credit is earned by good management and why should they share it.

Consequently, the consultant/researcher wrote a Hypothetical scenario in which certain managers demonstrated a 'blokey' mateship. This was fictionalised as the close socialising of managers amongst their peers, and having them talking informally about management problems. Female panelists were asked if they agreed with this notion that middle-aged, male managers were competitive and unwilling to change: "Is that how some cluster managers appear … just a mob of big boys playing touch footy?".

Discussion

The identification of a 'boys' club' within Area Brisbane is evidence of what Feldman (1984) calls a group norm, or an informal rule that groups adopt to regulate group members' behaviour. More significantly, for the Centrelink boys' club, group norms tend to be enforced when the group feels threatened (p. 48). So, not only had a number of CSC managers developed a norm to protect themselves from embracing cluster management, but the reactions of some Hypothetical panelists after the presentation attempted to reinforce that norm. The sudden raising of the 'boys' club' during the Hypothetical was seen as both provocative and threatening by some male panelists. It was reported informally by a senior manager in conversation with this researcher some six months after the presentation, that at least two male members of the Hypothetical panel believed they had been singled out as examples of the boys' club phenomenon, and that the issue was exaggerated and had been made unnecessarily divisive. They also criticised the Hypothetical for being unproductive and

claimed it was of little value to management as a culture-building tool. This reaction was recalled by a one of the elite interviewees for the current study, who was also a panel participant in the first Hypothetical.

Senge *et al*. (1994) offer an explanation for certain difficulties that may emerge from action learning tools like the Hypothetical. They suggest that those who are willing to tackle organisational norms and mental models, and accept different points of view intellectually, may not cope all that well with the emotions stimulated through the playing out of scenarios (p. 241). Argyris (1990) also suggests that such organisational defensiveness (as observed in this first Centrelink Hypothetical), is due to a wish to avoid embarrassment and criticism. More recently, Seo (2003) has argued that "various organisational defensive routines that distort and bypass valid information can be understood as political processes through which individuals in coalitions try to enhance their survival and personal well-being within organisations" (p. 11). He wonders how managers can commit themselves to practices that require a high degree of openness, when logically they're being pressured to remain in tight control in their organisation (p. 13). There is no doubt, claims Kotter (2002), that the most fundamental problem for organisations is getting people to change their behaviour. Consequently, whether through emotional blockage, or political resistance, the Centrelink managers' response to the ' boys' club' issue is seen as "threatening to the political ground of other groups, making them unwilling to participate in transformational dialogue" (Seo, 2003, p. 12).

The significance of the 'boys' club' phenomenon, in the previous Centrelink Hypothetical was again highlighted during the elite interviews conducted for the current study. Three of the managers chosen for the elite interviews in the current case study referred to the previous Hypothetical, in which they were involved, and what had been the organisation's response to the 'boys' club' issue. Their comments have a general bearing on their perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the Hypothetical as an intervention, and the role of the facilitator as consultant:

> Also, it has to be understood that if you have a Hypothetical where things are going to come out of it that people aren't going to like, then we need to plan beforehand to deal with that.

> I suspect when you get a little bit close to the bone, it may be truthful … it is more understanding the climate at the time.

> The previous Hypothetical you did made significant changes for the organisation, because it confronted the unstated.

and again,

> I know a number of people, not myself, but a number of business managers and other people who said, 'why would we be here today when it caused so much angst last time?' I said that is exactly why we do it again because it is good for the people.

These comments illustrate that organisations have sensitive or 'no go' issues which a consultant may uncover in research, but should be wary of probing without first flagging the potential sensitivity with those organisational members responsible for the Hypothetical intervention.

4.4.1 Summary

The managers' response to the suggestion of a 'boys' club' was explosive and indicated that a significant shift of a mental model within Centrelink was needed. It also suggests that the Hypothetical needs to build in protocols for balancing advocacy and inquiry, allowing panelists time to reflect and to reassert their sense of comfort with the format. These findings from the first Centrelink Hypothetical led this researcher to the conclusion that those experiencing a Hypothetical should be aware they will likely experience complex emotional and cognitive responses. Also, the construction and writing of the Hypothetical scenario requires more care in providing opportunities for inquiry and careful de-construction of such sensitive issues as male dominance in the workplace (Senge *et al*., pp. 241-259).

4.5 Pre-Hypothetical interviews

The panelists for the Hypothetical were selected in consultation with the contact group of managers on the basis that the panelists should represent the two employment areas on which

the case study is focused — the Area Support Office and the Customer Service Centres. The researcher interviewed each of the panelists prior to the Hypothetical, primarily by telephone (no more than twice, with each interview lasting up to 45 minutes). The questions for the interviews/conversations were based essentially on the documentary materials provided to the researcher, as well as answers that each of the thirteen panelists had written in response to an initial, broad question put to them via e-mail from the researcher:

> *In your job as Team Leader (or Manager), what are the things you have experienced that have been issues/blockages/problems to your understanding of what Area Support Office does and how it can support you and your own office?*

Responses to this question from each of the panelists varied in length and depth. However, most answers recounted specific issues connected with individual work environments. Language used was businesslike and to the point, and only occasionally was a personal feeling or a criticism expressed in writing. These criticisms converged into three areas:

- Apparent systemic failures in communication — "*E-mails are not always directed to the appropriate staff; not passed on*"; "*Their diminished resources (ASO) have resulted in reduced direct access, with the use of answer machines common*". "*The volume of written information that is sent our way can be very daunting*".

- Frustration over what is seen as inadequate management — "*When CSOs book an interpreter — why doesn't the interpreter turn up sometimes*?"; "*Some ASO staff have never worked in a CSC, or haven't for a long time. They don't appreciate the hectic/chaotic time pressured environment it is in CSCs*".

- Anxiety over the individual's ability to cope with the system in which they work — "*The risk of feeling inadequate in my job*"; "*I don't want to sound like a whinger, so I won't say anything*"; "*I am concerned about my own ability to be consistent…*"

It is important to determine, through the Hypothetical process, whether these three concerns are unrelated or whether they are, in fact, connected and contingent. For example, does it

follow that an individual's concern over their ability to cope is the result of an unresponsive and inconsistent working environment? Is frustration over poor management the result of inadequate communication processes?

Prospective panelists were interviewed by telephone over a period of four weeks. It was often difficult for panelists to devote 45 minutes to these interviews, given their managerial responsibilities and constant demands on their time. Panelists were prepared for the interviews and understood that the questions being asked would be used as background material for their role as panelists in the Hypothetical. Also, senior management had given clearance for interviewees to speak openly about their working environment. The early part of the interview was spent getting each panelist to profile their job and work patterns. The researcher then asked them to identify problems in their immediate work areas, and in the organisation generally.

The researcher approached the analysis of data by identifying common issues or themes. The aim was to form concepts from the data that would provide answers to the Research Questions 3 and 4. The pre-Hypothetical interviews revealed three basic themes about the Centrelink workplace:

1. **Disagreements or misunderstandings** — with other work areas about responsibilities.

2. **Lack of resources** — including lack of training, leading to failure to deliver on targets, etc.

3. **Lack of effective internal communication**.

It emerged from the interview data that all three themes presented aspects of organisational conflict; that there are differences of opinion over resource allocation, the meaning of organisational messaging, and the functions of other work groups. As noted in Chapter 2, Jehn and Mannix (2001) define three types of organisational conflict — relationship, task, and process conflict. The interview data suggested that there is little or no evidence of relationship conflict, that is, dislike among members and interpersonal incompatibilities. This

has a positive aspect for Centrelink, as Jehn and Mannix (2001) hypothesise that high-performing groups have lower levels of relationship conflict throughout all phases of group interaction than low-performing groups (p. 240).

4.5.1 Disagreements or misunderstandings

The interviews with panelists revealed disagreements and misunderstandings that had both a task and process context. Task conflict was demonstrated through differences in viewpoints and opinions relating to organisational tasks and who should be doing them:

> Government policy isn't as definitive as it used to be; not as black and white. So there is more opportunity for discretion. (JP-Pre-Hypothetical)

> I am not aware of a common purpose or vision across the ASO. (BH — Pre-Hypothetical)

Task conflict, as defined by Jehn and Mannix (2001, pp. 238-9), also specifically relates to differences of opinion about the roles and tasks of Centrelink's National Support Office in Canberra and the Area Support Office:

> Policy interpretation (from Canberra) is gibberish, duplicated and conflicting. There's a lack of clarity. They don't research as they used to. (JP — Pre-Hypothetical)

> There are lots of grey areas between legislation and policy, which are constantly changing, making discretionary decisions for particular customers difficult. (AN — Pre-Hypothetical)

There is clearly process conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001, pp. 239-40) amongst members and, specifically, differences over who should do what and how much responsibility different people should get:

> We (Systems Support) don't deal with mainframe programs. (MN — Pre-Hypothetical)

> Staff are irritated by Communications and Marketing staff wasting their time chasing good news stories when they are busy. (SH — Pre-Hypothetical)

> We have six business managers and their lines of delineation aren't clear; we can do better. For example, align performance to a specific program. (GB — Pre-Hypothetical)

4.5.2 Common complaints about resources

Disagreements over resources are primarily process conflicts:

> We (Systems Support) are not resourced for training. (MN — Pre-Hypothetical)

> We have only four people to look after Area Brisbane which leads to stress leave. (MN — Pre-Hypothetical)

> CSCs often don't meet key performance indicators because Systems Support don't meet their turnaround times. (MN — Pre-Hypothetical)

> Pressures in the office mean quick fixes. What's a priority to us isn't to ASO. (TP — Pre-Hypothetical)

However, where there is disagreement over the application of particular resources, task conflicts may result:

> There is a real need for a stronger focus on structured technical training … a fair bit is now delivered on-line … but there is no substitute for the real thing. (JP — Pre-Hypothetical)

> ASO teams often recycle data rather than adding value or processing it. (BH — Pre-Hypothetical)

> There is too much research and not enough is focused on what is actually needed. (BH — Pre-Hypothetical)

4.5.3 Common problems with communication

A difference of opinion over communication is primarily a task conflict. However, organisational members do not only complain about specific breakdowns in communication processes, they also question the way communication is used within the organisation. Task

conflict over communication tends to consist of complaints about its precise function and performance:

> The volume of written information that is sent our way can be very daunting and you feel the need to try and read all of it because you may miss something vital. (KF — Pre-Hypothetical)

> Information does not come in a 'need to know' format highlighting what we should concentrate on … things come from 5 different people sometimes. (KF — Pre-Hypothetical)

> There is no Retirements homepage and no Finance Management Support homepage … and when you search 'Topic Guides' there is no reference to Interpreters. (KF — Pre-Hypothetical)

> We need more regular visits from ASO. They need to talk to staff more often … we need the human face. If you can put a face to a voice on the phone, it's easier. (CI — Pre-Hypothetical)

> Reports on performance from ASO are helpful but they are not proactive; they are not helping to solve anything at any given time. (TP — Pre-Hypothetical)

Differences of opinion over communication that are defined as process conflict tend to focus on the broad application of communication policy and how it can improve organisational performance:

> Sometimes we don't target the message to the right person, but then there's the perennial question of whether all information should go through the manager. (ME — Pre-Hypothetical)

> Sometimes the network assumes that we should just know what is happening for them, but we do need to have that communicated to us. (ME — Pre-Hypothetical)

> We need more visits from ASO staff so they can get to know the CSC. We also need more information from program managers because we don't know the full range of available services. (BH — Pre-Hypothetical)

> There's an almost hostile, adversarial approach by some ASO staff when network staff ring them with a problem. ASO needs to support all CSCs, not just the 'squeaky' wheels or those with influential managers. (BH — Pre-Hypothetical)

Apart from the three themes which help to make sense of the Centrelink workplace, a broad overview of the interviews of potential panelists reveals clear evidence that, seen through a symbolic convergence lens, organisational members create their own stories and myths of how the organisation functions. In some cases, these are expressed as shared myths which are helping them make sense of their environment (Bormann, 1989; Kaye, 1996):

- … sometimes we hear on the grapevine…
- Internal communication is very bad.
- Information does not come in a need-to-know format.
- Interpretation of policy is often through Chinese Whispers.

There are also numerous instances of interpretive stories and myths, which refer to the specific communication disconnect between the CSCs and the ASO:

- I am not aware of a common vision or purpose across the ASO.
- … adversarial approach by some ASO staff.
- …ASO is somewhat removed from CSCs.
- Policy interpretation from Canberra is gibberish, duplicated and conflicting.
- A few ASO personnel may have lost a feel for the actual day-to-day business of the CSCs.

4.5.4 Summary

It can be observed from the three distinct critical themes evaluated from the panelist interviews that a strong pattern of task and process conflict exists amongst the Centrelink population. Research by Jehn and Mannix (2001) concludes that such a pattern is consistent with high performing groups (like Centrelink), where task and process conflict can be beneficial, depending on how such conflict occurs in the life of the organisation. The fact that no relationship conflicts were revealed in the interview data tends to reflect the Jehn and Mannix (2001) research finding that high performing groups, like Centrelink, operate under low levels of relationship conflict. This contributes to better information sharing, improved conflict resolution and better task performance (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). This conflict pattern is a valuable resource for determining the broad communication problems in the ASO and CSCs and how to resolve them (Research Questions 3 and 4).

What is apparent from the data of panelist interviews is an openness about the problems being articulated, and a willingness to work towards solutions. These qualities are not only characteristic of high performing groups but are essential ingredients for starting a strategic conversation and a generative learning process, particularly by those people who have the power to institute such processes within the organisation (Senge, 1992; Schwartz, 1996; Van der Heijden, 2001).

4.6 Pre-Hypothetical questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix 2) was directed specifically at the sampling frame for the Centrelink case study: the Area Support Office managers and the managers and team leaders in Area Brisbane's 24 Customer Service Centres. The majority of respondents (76) stated they had been employed for more than 11 years with Centrelink (which included their years with the previous Department of Social Security). Thirty-two of that group have 21 or more years with the organisation. Forty-nine respondents are team leaders in Customer Service Centres, 21 are managers and 26 are specialist officers, including psychologist, interpreter, and so forth. Ninety-one respondents are full time employees and five are part-time. Only four respondents reported competence in a language other than English: Turkish, Spanish, German, Croatian. Twenty-nine respondents said they work in Brisbane, 34 in Brisbane

suburbs, 19 in the Sunshine Coast cluster and 14 in the Great Northern Region cluster. In general demographic terms (see Table 4), the sample was representative of the population and relevant to the definition and resolution of the organisational problems (Research Questions 3 and 4).

Table 4: Centrelink employee demographics

Number of respondents				Total
Years with Centrelink				
2-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-20 yrs	21yrs +	
7	13	44	32	**96**
Job status				
Manager	Team Leader	Consultant/Specialist officer		
21	49	20		**96**
Full-time	Part-time			
91	5			**96**
Job Location				
Brisbane City	Brisbane Suburbs	Sunshine Coast Cluster	Gt. North Region Cluster	
29	34	19	14	**96**
Written / spoken competence in language other than English				
Turkish	Spanish	German	Croatian	
1	1	1	1	**4**

Centrelink is clearly a heavily computerised workplace. When asked about specific channels of communication and the importance of computerisation to their workplace, questionnaire respondents rate highly their skills with computers and software programs. Further, by far the majority of staff receives regular information from the Area Support Office by e-mail, and it is their preferred mode of receiving information. The use of the telephone was a secondary preference for receiving information, with face-to-face managerial contact of less importance. An indication of the effectiveness of technical communication methods is that whenever

network staff have a query requiring information from the Area Support Office, most say they can usually contact someone who can help them by e-mail or telephone.

While there is widespread acceptance of the use and efficiency of technical communication methods, respondents were not so clear about the efficacy of messaging between the ASO and network staff. As previously observed, this relates to a high task and process conflict. ASO and CSC staff were asked separately if they were satisfied that ASO staff understand and take account of the broad range of pressures and demands made upon the ASO. Positive and negative responses to this question were equally distributed, revealing a lack of clarity in the role and performance of the ASO.

The survey suggests that the majority of CSC staff are more likely to feel they have ample opportunity to discuss with their peers what they think are important Centrelink issues affecting internal communication than do most ASO staff. Given the top-down nature of internal communication processes, this may help explain why network (CSC) staff are unclear about what is coming from more senior (ASO) staff members.

Most respondents felt that there is a positive climate within Centrelink for voicing suggestions for improvements in internal communication. This may seem to be at odds with how CSC and ASO perceive each other. However, interestingly, most respondents (62) said they go informally to a colleague or an immediate supervisor to discuss changes to Centrelink procedures, suggesting that employees rate their work colleagues as responsive and encouraging when it comes to discussing workplace changes. The second highest group of respondents (22) rated their immediate supervisor as responsive and encouraging. The majority of staff clearly value one-on-one workplace relationships. Only four out of the sample preferred a formal peer group meeting for discussing potential workplace changes. These findings accord with the observation that despite strong feelings of task and process conflict, there is little relationship conflict in the organisation. Close working relationships and strong interpersonal bonds contribute to beneficial information sharing and improved conflict resolution (Jehn & Mannix, 2001, p. 240). This is one positive performance outcome which was used to develop the storyline for the Hypothetical intervention.

The final two questions (13 and 14) were open-ended and gave respondents the opportunity to express, in their own words, their good and bad experiences of Centrelink. The answers to these questions provided a large amount of rich textual material which related to the three broad conflict themes already defined: **disagreements or misunderstandings**, **lack of resources**, and **lack of effective communication,** as well as highlighting new ones.

The researcher examined each of the responses to these questions, looking for patterns of the same or similar words being used to describe common experiences (Appendix 9). The aim was to correlate the answers so as to reveal repeat episodes or stories by respondents, which may point to commonly held beliefs, shared meanings or mindsets that staff may have regarding the way their organisation is run (Bordow & More, 1991; Pacanowsky & Trujillo 1992; Dixon 1996). The researcher then grouped the responses using key descriptor words from their answers, and identified meanings shared by respondents. The researcher then wrote a summary statement for each group with the number of responses in brackets:

- *Staff feel there is support and encouragement from ASO in having them understand policy and resolve their problems* **(40**)

- *Staff believe there are problems with the communication of social service policy issues* **(24)**

- *Staff believe that communication is ineffective in the workplace* **(23)**

- *Staff believe that ASO is responsive to their needs* **(16)**

- *Staff believe there is effective communication within their workplace* **(11)**

- *Staff believe that they get the training assistance they need* **(11)**

- *Staff believe that ASO staff attitudes are unhelpful* **(6)**

- *Staff believe that they don't get the training assistance they need* **(2)**

The data from the questionnaire points to key communication episodes that help define the organisational culture of Centrelink (Schein, 1992; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992). For example, in terms of whether or not communication is effective in the workplace, there are common themes and repeated episodes such as: conflicting policy information received from ASO; not getting timely responses to enquiries; and not knowing who to contact at ASO. The more frequently expressed episodes provided the basis for the story-telling within the Hypothetical and opportunities to encourage participants to scrutinize the effectiveness of their Centrelink culture.

4.7 The Hypothetical

4.7.1 Scenario issues

Before writing the two hour Hypothetical scenario, the researcher categorised the key themes and key problem areas that had emerged from the questionnaire, the interviews, and from Centrelink documents, as outlined in previous sections of this chapter. These themes and problems were collated into a representative list of issues as the basis for discussion with the Centrelink management reference group. Four themes emerged:

- Communication.
- Workload.
- Staffing.
- Perception.

Issues that were collated under each of these themes had either a generic or a specific context. While the generic issues are significant for an overview of the setting, the specific issues provide the creative information for the story-telling framework of the Hypothetical (Table 5). Generic issues included:

Communication Theme: '*what is the ASO*?', and '*information overload — it needs to be filtered*'.

Workload Theme: '*it is a balancing act — juggling the demands of the National Support Office and the needs of the CSCs*', and '*high workload demands need for prioritisation*'.

Staffing Theme: '*it is difficult to recruit and keep good staff*', and '*who supports the team leader and manager?*'.

Perceptions Theme: '*Why is the FOI team so unresponsive to the needs of the network*?', and '*Who are Compliance? What do they do? Their role is not clear*'.

Broad, system-based issues, like the examples quoted above, provided the backdrop against which fictional stories were told, based on the specific issues within the four themes. For example, specific Communication issues included:

- '*Answer the phone! They ring out too often*'
- '*There's no voice-mail or phone transfer*'
- '*There is no Area Brisbane home page that acts as a traffic manager*'.

Specific Workload issues included:

- '*ASO staff have lost a feel for the day-to-day business of the CSCs*'
- '*Policy User Support cannot provide visits or technical training due to overload*'

Specific Staffing issues included:

- '*Good technical staff constantly take career progress in the National Support Office*'
- '*Relief staff in Policy User Support lack necessary experience*'

There were also specific issues in the Perceptions theme, but because they were perceptions, it was considered important to further research these issues to ensure they were representative perceptions, and could be satisfactorily corroborated. These issues included:

- '*There are bad feelings towards the multicultural unit*'

- '*There's a high complement of baby boomers which probably means a dramatic loss of talented staff in the next few years*'

The theming approach was a significant way of ensuring that a balanced evaluation of the data was made. No attempt was made to grade these themes (or the issues under them) by importance. The management reference group made no requests for the inclusion or the dropping of particular issues, but rather, guided the researcher as to the relative importance of issues identified. Table 4 indicates there are broad generic issues in *communication* and *workload*, while staff can identify specific issues that need attention within the themes of *communication*, *staffing* and *perceptions*. The communication theme created the most responses, suggesting that perceived problems in this area may have some impact on the problems identified in the other themes.

Table 5: Hypothetical scenario issues

THEMES	GENERIC	SPECIFIC
Communication	• Who and what is ASO • Information overload; it needs filtering • Shortage of IT technology • Managers not passing on information • Constant policy interpretation by ASO • ASO as support group misunderstood • Confusion over ASO / NSO relations • ASO 's expectations of CSCs unclear	• We need a 'map' to find the right person • Answer the phone! There's no voice-mail • Too much use of answer machines • E-mail overload despite its convenience • Network staff not using homepages • ASO should respond to bad publicity • Too much 'good news' chasing • Communication & marketing hard to find
Workload	• High workload, no prioritization • ASO juggling NSO & CSC demands • Area Brisbane too big for SSG outreach • ASO out of touch with customers • Reduced direct access to Policy U.G. • High demand on Systems User Support	• SSG not resourced for systems training • No visits or training from Policy User Group
Staffing		• It's difficult to recruit & keep good staff • Good tech. staff seek NSO career move • High ASO staff turnover = retraining necessary • SSG staff need exposure to network • Policy User relief staff lack experience • Indigenous staff report no ASO support • No HR grievance support for team leaders
Perceptions	• Compliance role is unclear to CSCs	• Why extra support for ethnic minorities? • Interpreters are difficult to access • FOI team unresponsive to CSC needs • Customer's side always taken by CRU • C&M services unrelated to payments

In order to create the Hypothetical storylines, the researcher retained the four themes, with between 10 and 15 issues under each theme. These issues were supported by the thick interview data, outlined earlier in this chapter, and referenced to other research material, such as Centrelink documents, and specific questionnaire responses. The preparation of themes and issues can be seen to directly address the perceived organisational problems of the ASO and CSCs: that is, Research Question 3. This material also begins to address Research Question 2 — how the Hypothetical functions as an intervention process — by indicating a broad 'generic theme and specific issue' approach, which the Hypothetical storyline attempts to embrace. Previous experience using the Hypothetical in other organisations has shown that it engages its panelists intellectually, emotionally and entertainingly throughout the two hour encounter. Consequently, it can neither totally address broad conceptual problems in Centrelink (purely an intellectual exercise), nor can it simply tackle emotional issues without acknowledging the broader systemic problems.

The Hypothetical story

As already indicated in Chapter 1 of this study, organisational issues are written and woven into a Hypothetical scenario through the use of a semi-fictional narrative based around real happenings within the cultural life of the organisation. The scenario is easier to follow and is more entertaining for those involved if they feel those stories have some strong basis in reality for how their organisation functions (Robertson, 1986, p. ix). The broad narrative may include contemporary national events, for example, the Sydney Olympics, the Bicentennial celebrations, or visits by international VIPs. For the Centrelink Hypothetical, this researcher used the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting at Coolum as the background to the scenario, primarily because it was contemporary and it was an international event being held in Area Brisbane at the time. The final draft of the scenario script has the various issues written as facilitator's narrative and questions to each of the panelists (Appendix 3). For example, the facilitator wanted to explore the issue of early retirement as found in the Perceptions theme, and therefore posed a number of questions to different panelists in order to tease out their reactions:

> Facilitator (F): … This is the first year of the big bonanza for baby boomers… JP, it's pay-out time isn't it? What starts to happen this year?

(pause for answer from JP)

F: Is early retirement attractive to you?

(pause for answer from JP)

F: And you GB … are you planning early retirement?

(pause for answer from GB)

F: ME … do you think you'll be going through to 60?

(pause for answer from ME)

F: It's a concern though isn't it ME … the number of skilled and experienced baby boomers in Centrelink who're eyeing off early retirement?... How many in Area Brisbane would you say?

(pause for answer from ME)

F: DC …retirements are your speciality aren't they? … are we losing the wisdom of the elders do you think?

(pause for answer from DC)

F: What do you think … AN?

The significance of follow-up questions in a Hypothetical scenario depends upon the responses from the panelists and the quick wittedness of the facilitator. Comparisons between the facilitator's prepared script and the transcript of the actual presentation (Appendix 3), reveals a number of such supplementary or follow-up questions. The facilitator's script was written in such a way as to cover those key issues from the four themes that could be satisfactorily covered in the two-hour time limit. The range of issues were written into the Hypothetical storyline in no particular order but came down to the following:

- Introduction/Early Retirement — *loss of the wisdom of the elders*.
- Families/Payments — *relationship between the ASO and the network*.
- Child Support Agency — *workload priorities, human resources*.
- Interpreters — *not accessible through home pages*.
- Area Brisbane and National Support Office priorities — *lack of clear definition of ASO role, policy guidelines unclear leading to mistakes*.
- Area Support Office Staff Newsletter — *why don't we have one*?
- Home Pages — *incompatible layouts, ineffective content and design*.
- Training — *technical and systems; in-office training has failed*.
- Computers/MAPSTAT.
- Perceptions of ASO — *ASO is not well defined, nor are its responsibilities to the network clear*.
- CHOGM.
- Communication/E-mail/Phone/Face-to-face/Video conferencing.
- Customer Satisfaction Survey — *how do staff interpret it?*
- CHOGM 2 — *includes Centrelink's interface with the public and media*.
- Finale.

Clearly, without the fictitious storyline to bind them, this remains merely a list of organisational issues. This complex matrix of issues must be addressed by the panelists but, of course, given some narrative interest by the facilitator. Each of these issues has emerged

from the four themes and they were selected for their relevance to the generic and specific organisational problems, and for their relevance to the panelists. The Hypothetical dynamic is based on having a storyline that engages each panelist from their own personal intellectual and emotional perspective. In this context, the careful weaving of the Hypothetical storyline with each of the panelists is a significant feature and performance aspect of the intervention (Research Question 1), elements that are conceptualized within the relevant theatrical framework of symbolic interactionism. This weaving of issues and panel also helps explain how the Hypothetical is to function as an intervention (Research Question 2).

4.7.2 Conceptualising the issues identified by the Hypothetical performance

After the Hypothetical performance, the researcher analysed the transcript of the Centrelink Hypothetical with the aim of identifying common themes or concepts that related to the research questions. The transcript of the presentation reveals a panel that is open and willing to discuss all difficulties and challenges within their working environment. The language used is businesslike and professional and there is no evidence of anyone evading questions or qualifying their answers. There appear to be no examples of deference up or down the management structure to inhibit the free flow of the discussion. On the contrary, panelists were openly critical of organisational structures and of the allocation of resources. This aligned with the data from the pre-Hypothetical questionnaire and panelist interviews. Criticism was generally delivered in a positive way, with panelists seeking ways to resolve issues rather than simply attack the organisation. The audience, on the other hand, was not as responsive. They did not readily answer questions asked by the facilitator, and at no point did they seek to interrupt the flow of the panelists' discussion with their own views and opinions.

The researcher coded forty different issues from the Hypothetical transcript (Appendix 10). These issues, whether discussed in negative or positive terms by participants, were then grouped under three key organisational themes. The first two themes (below) correspond to those from the pre-Hypothetical research analysis:

1. **Resources** — technical and human.

2. **Communication** — internal; with customers; with media.

3. **Organisational Structure** — Centrelink culture; policy inconsistencies; relationship between CSCs, ASO and NSO.

Technical and human resource issues

Discussion about technical resource issues produced some strong opinions about organisational tasks and processes. Training was one of the most frequently mentioned issues, and staff feel that there are insufficient resources given to training and re-training in systems software:

> … if we can't provide people with the training to do that job, then we need to look at other solutions to that problem. (Appendix 3, p. 33)

As a general process issue, training impacts on the tasks issues of accuracy and consistency of advice given to customers, as well as on the ability of staff to navigate the system and to work efficiently:

> I don't believe it [training] works, and the feedback to us is that a number of users out there, the CSOs, don't get that training … you've just got to know where to look for it, while in a lot of cases it is not out there. (Appendix 3, p. 32)

General human resource issues focused on their allocation to the network and whether such resource allocation was seen as fair and rational by the staff. There was also the minor revelation that the ASO, while supposedly there to serve the network, is also devoting a considerable amount of time and resources to the National Support Office in Canberra:

> … even from our particular group which deals regularly with national support office, we don't fully understand how they operate. They change their structure very regularly and a lot of times when we question how they actually operate, they can't even explain it either. (Appendix 3, p. 17)

A number of ASO program managers indicated they were under-resourced (the Systems Support Group, for example), and this led to the conclusion that the lack of clarity in the network about the ASO, and its role, was due to the failure of ASO program staff to visit CSCs on a regular basis:

> Yes, we are stretched from a resource point of view, but so is everyone here. Even without the network, from a resource point of view for Area Brisbane, if you looked at it from a pro rata basis, we probably have less than four people to look after all our systems. (Appendix 3, p. 33)

It was speculated that the projected loss of experienced staff through early retirement in the coming years will further reduce the ability of the ASO to pass on its knowledge and experience:

> …so if we don't do something then we are going to lose a lot of expertise as well. So we need to make sure that the people we are bringing on are skilled up to replace that expertise. (Appendix 3, p. 2)

While there is ample performance data passing through the network, it was stated that there have been few attempts by the Area Support Office or the National Support Office in Canberra to explain its relevance to those on the ground, the Customer Service Centres:

> F: Cedric, how does this policy fuzziness, when it happens, translate out into the network?
>
> A: Inconsistency of decision-making, that's the main one.
>
> F: By the CSC?
>
> A: Inconsistency between the CSC and CSC. One office does it one way, another does it another. (Appendix 3, p. 19)

Another example of the policy 'fuzziness' coming from the ASO is the confusion over how key performance indicators are established for each CSC:

> We don't to this day know what our KPIs are or how they are measured. Despite the fact we have business partnership agreements, we are being held accountable for results and we still cannot determine exactly how they have been measured and what they mean. (Appendix 3, p. 48)

Communication issues

The Hypothetical presentation revealed that there was broad concern over the inadequacy of the different methods of communication being used within Area Brisbane. The concern is expressed from the perspective of practical or material support for staff, as well as how the organisation communicates regard for its staff and, in turn, how they express their regard for the organisation.

The most common material problem cited in the Hypothetical — by both panelists and audience members — is the Centrelink Intranet, which was criticised for being poorly designed and poorly maintained for staff:

> Some people, even after training, didn't have the motivation, didn't think they had the responsibility or the expertise. They didn't update it [relevant home page] on a regular basis, so therefore they lost that training very quickly and … [despite] good intentions it became a mishmash of information. (Appendix 3, p. 24)

> We don't know what half the icons are there for. We never use them and a lot of our PCs are very slow. (Appendix 3, p. 27)

The Area Brisbane home page, in particular, was viewed as ineffective, with almost all of the ASO program home pages considered poorly designed, inconsistent and uncoordinated with each other. The inadequacies of the Intranet were seen to have flow-on effects to CSOs, who frequently find it difficult to locate relevant people within specific program areas. For example, they cannot track down interpreters; they find Intranet navigation complicated when updating policy information; and, as already mentioned, staff say they need training refreshers to navigate the system more efficiently:

> F: SH. You can't just type in 'interpreter' can you, on the Centrenet search?

> A: No you can't. You would have to go into your reference page and go to M for multicultural and that would bring up a multicultural job aid person who would help you work through that process. (Appendix 3, p. 11)

While e-mail is the major form of communication between the ASO and CSCs, (according to the pre-Hypothetical survey), and it is the preferred way of communicating, network staff on the Hypothetical panel claimed the quantity of un-prioritised material makes it is impossible to cope with the daily flow of e-mail. So, while CSCs want the ASO to let them know what's going on, they complain of information overload through the e-mail system, or inaccessible information through ASO home pages:

> … we try to send out area support office news on e-mail but when you talk to staff about whether they have seen it, the answer is no, we haven't seen it. Using e-mail obviously doesn't work. (Appendix 3, p. 21)

> … you really want targeted messages coming to you about what's the main issues and what you need to look out for; what you might need to be mindful of, major issues. But we don't seem to get that anymore. We just get holus bolus, everything that is coming out of MSR. It is a huge task for us to read it and comprehend it and then to find what it is that we need to target in the volume of information that is coming our way. (Appendix 3, p. 39)

Like e-mail, the telephone is also highly popular because it is quick, direct, and the staff member has a voice to connect to:

> A large part of it has to do with people wanting to move onto another task, so let's settle this task now. The phone is the quickest medium to do that, so you get someone directly that they can communicate the problem across to the area support office person and they are able to verbalise the discussion… (Appendix 3, p. 40)

However, too many ASO staff phones ring out unanswered, or they are connected to answering machines:

> Usually you have got options and can leave a message on the system's voice-mail. But a lot of the time if I spent five minutes on hold, I get annoyed at having to then leave a message. (Appendix 3, p. 41)

While there is an acknowledgement that electronic communication is the main means for reaching colleagues, there is a strong desire in some staff for more face-to-face communication, and this relates to the CSCs' request for more visits by ASO staff:

> I am a firm believer in talking to people face-to-face and that would be one of my primary aims. We are a big area and it takes some time to get across to people in a face-to-face environment. (Appendix 3, p. 14)

Apart from being critical of the way material is communicated to them by the organisation, panelists from the network spoke of the inconsistency and duplication of policy interpretation by ASO officers at head office:

> … the waste of time and also, the staff just start losing trust in getting policy decisions. They're told to do it one way and a week later they are told no, that was wrong. (Appendix 3, p. 19)

Another important and worrying inconsistency, highlighted by panelists, is the difference between what the media constantly wants from Centrelink (the details and 'stories' about specific customers), and the generalised, or generic service issues, that the CSCs are only permitted to talk about by law:

> If Centrelink were to make a practice of speaking out about individuals, we would have to do it in every case. And we are a lot more powerful than they are. She [Centrelink CEO] is not prepared to challenge, for moral reasons, the legal guidelines … David Margan from *A Current Affair* [Channel 9] is a real opponent of ours in this regard, and he has often said that … he sees us hiding behind the legislation. (Appendix 3, p. 51)

However, further questioning, by the facilitator, of those ASO panelists who are authorised to deal with the media, revealed their preparedness to operate *in between the lines* of the

legislation that is meant to protect the identity of Centrelink customers. Where obvious cases of fraud have been detected, the media may be given off-the-record information:

> We can't go on TV or radio or any other way and speak specifically about a customer. But if someone is lying, we would say hypothetically, a person in such and such a situation did such and such. In other words, we are giving a bit of background, off-the-record information to a journalist to help them decide whether they think this is really a story. (Appendix 3, p. 51)

This latter issue has implications for the second area of communication concern — how the organisation expresses its support for its members and how members express their concern for the organisation. It was revealed in the presentation, for example, that staff members can be disappointed if they think that the Area Manager is not supporting his or her staff through the media:

> A lot of people are dismissive of it and will say the area manager does support you. They understand what is going on, but they are limited in what they can say … but initially people can be quite hurt when they see that there hasn't been support. (Appendix 3, p. 52)

When staff define the kind of support they expect, they are clearly looking for more than simply a commitment of resources to their workplace:

> … if they are **our** support [Area Support Office], then I would like to think they are for us a bit more than a third of their time … it should be the majority, more than 50%. (Appendix 3, p. 5)

There was evidence from senior management on the panel that they are conscious of the need to consider the emotional lives of their staff, given the sensitivity of their working relationships with socially disadvantaged clients. A number of Hypothetical 'stories' were based on the impact of scarce human resources and how this may impact on workplace relationships. The following examples highlight this awareness of the need to consider the emotional content of employees work and how they might need to develop appropriate competencies to deal with it:

> I think you would want to make sure it [suburban office] was well supported by both information expertise and certainly emotional and professional support for those who need to be there. (Appendix 3, p. 6)

> I would be concerned that we would be taking on work that is volatile, with a lot of confrontation in it. But then, if our goal is linking Australian Government services and making a difference to the Australian community, then it could be good for us to do this work. (Appendix 3, p. 7)

It has already been noted in the literature that emotional capabilities are more readily measurable in face-to-face relationships. Both managers and employees on the Hypothetical panel demonstrate a preference for face-to-face communication for conveying clarity of message and the breaking down of personal barriers:

> … it is a much better two-way process. The visits they give are very well received. Also, it breaks down the barriers between someone on the phone who you may think is being unhelpful, or at least you can talk through those issues in a face-to-face environment. (Appendix 3, p. 42)

Managers demonstrate their recognition that, through face-to-face interaction, they can sense the development needs of others and cultivate opportunities through different kinds of people. The need to read a group's emotional currents and power relationships is also recognised by managers on the panel:

> We would first be talking to the manager and his team about their perceptions of why that sort of a result came through. And from previous experience, the managers can be very ingenious in coming up with reasons as to why those views are held by customers. Then we would leave it to the management team within that office to address the issues and do some analysis and come up with a plan to try to rectify whatever the problem is. (Appendix 3, p. 46)

> I would bring it up first with all my team leaders to see if there might be something we can do as a leadership team about that. And, as a team leader I would bring it up with the staff and say this is what our customers are saying. What can we do about this? Why do you

> think this might happen, and try and workshop some ideas of how to improve that for next time. (Appendix 3, p. 47)

For example, when asked to specifically define the qualities of a chairperson for a new committee, one senior manager stated:

> We would be looking for someone who could very quickly gain an understanding of what's important to the network staff and listen to their concerns and come up with a strategy to address those concerns. So, they would have to have very good analytical skills and also have well-developed communicative skills so they could talk to staff in large numbers but also one-on-one and have the capacity to deal and negotiate with the CPSU union to make sure they were cooperative in the process. (Appendix 3, p. 8)

This excerpt demonstrates a manager who is not only aware of the need for cognitive skills of analysis and communication in staff members, but also of the need for a broad range of emotional competencies. Here, he is expressing a need for self-confidence, self-regulation, self-control, adaptability, initiative, conflict management, team capabilities, leadership and, above all, empathy, particularly with a service orientation. There is also evidence that managers are well aware of the need for specific emotional competencies in themselves, for dealing with staff:

> I am concerned about factoring in my consistency, when giving advice. We were talking earlier about getting phone calls from the same site from three different people about the same issue. I don't know if I can maintain consistency in that situation, because the Chinese whispers effect comes in. The way you describe something to me maybe different to the way A describes it to me, and I may interpret, and therefore respond differently. (Appendix 3, p. 35)

> … I suppose first of all we would need to work out how we could get input from people and the process that would involve them to be able to tell us what their concerns are. (Appendix 3, p. 9)

Similarly, senior managers demonstrate in the presentation that they are aware of what happens to emotional commitment in staff when the organisation is seen not to support their material needs:

> … the staff start losing trust in getting policy decisions. They're told to do it one way and a week later they are told no, that was wrong"
>
> F: Losing trust. That's quite serious isn't it ME? Loss of trust?
>
> A: Yes, it is serious, and it affects people's morale and whether they feel like they are being supported by the organisation. (Appendix 3, p. 19)

It is one thing to recognise the problem of losing staff commitment, and another to adequately resolve it. The presentation revealed that managers only offered the reallocation of resources to the areas of most need, as a solution to this loss of trust:

… what ME just described is a fairly sensible approach. By doing some analysis of the problem, in identifying where in the organisation, the problems are and try to have some impact and influence on them. (Appendix 3, p. 20)

Organisational structure issues

Panelists from the network were generally critical of the lack of definition of the ASO and its managers' roles. CSCs want a clearer understanding of the relationship between themselves and the ASO:

> I have never seen a document of who does what role in area office or who you contact for a certain issue if need be. I have never seen a job description. (Appendix 3, p. 16)

ASO panelists acknowledged there was a lack of clarity of roles of head office personnel and that they had not been made clear to the network:

> Yes, I think the area support office does need a very clear vision about what it is there to achieve, so that all those who work in area support office are very clear about why they are there and what they are meant to do. (Appendix 3, p. 16)

Further questioning produced acknowledgement that this problem was a failure of those at the top of the organisation, that is, themselves:

> F: ME, how long have we had area support office?
>
> A: We've been there for nearly four years. It has taken us a while hasn't it?
>
> F: GB, is this a problem, not having a clear roadmap to explain area support office, given its central role and given the turnover in staff that we are obviously seeing?
>
> A: It certainly is a problem and I must admit I was surprised some weeks ago to find out that the area homepage wasn't operational for all staff and didn't describe accurately and in detail, all of the area support functions. (Appendix 3, p. 16)

Several panelists and audience members emphasised the importance of a 'caring culture' in Centrelink, which they say often gets overlooked through the constant juggling of resources. For example, when challenged with taking on a new child support function, one ASO panelist responded:

> I would be concerned that we would be taking on work that is volatile with a lot of confrontation in it. But then, if our goal is linking Australian Government services and making a difference to the Australian community, then it could be good for us to do this work. (Appendix 3, p. 7)

Another panelist, when faced with the same challenge, was concerned about the potential impact of providing a new child support service within the existing organisational culture:

> We'd really need to examine the child support network in terms of what sort of a culture they have been working in, in the past. What sort of culture has Centrelink got … then we

> would need to look at what sort of a culture this new organisation would have, or that we would like it to have. (Appendix 3, p. 5)

The inconsistency of policy interpretation, which is an issue in the *communication* theme, reappeared as a *structural* issue because inconsistencies in the application of policy lead the CSCs to make mistakes. However, there was evidence that senior management in the ASO is conscious of the need to tap into the organisation at different levels in order to identify future errors:

> We continually need to be reminding ourselves what those needs and priorities are, because they can shift and they can change over time. Recently we had a vertical slice, where we had a cross section of staff sit down with the area manager and business manager and myself and we talked about what the issues were for them within the network. And those things all feed in and come back to area support office and we consider how we can provide support. (Appendix 3, pp. 21-21)

4.7.3 Discussion

Two key findings of the Hypothetical presentation merit discussion in light of Research Question 2 and how the Hypothetical functions as an intervention for facilitating change. Schwartz (1996) asserts that a strategic conversation is:

> a carefully thought-out but loosely facilitated series of in-depth conversations for the key decision-makers throughout an organisation … they are effective ways of framing the planning efforts that already take place, to further illuminate the decisions that are already being made. (p. 221)

In this context, the Hypothetical can be seen to have been part of that 'conversational' process for Centrelink. As already suggested, the organisation literature indicates that Centrelink has management practices that encourage self-criticism and input from those who feel they have something constructive to say. While critical issues highlighted by this case study indicate Centrelink may not be a totally well-functioning organisation, its decision to employ intervention tools, like the Hypothetical, demonstrates the organisation is willing to explore, develop and refine its future direction and methodology (Dixon, 1996). The data also

suggests that Centrelink senior managers and team leaders are constantly trying to conceptualise an organisational culture that is meaningful beyond the completion of daily tasks:

> Yes. I think the area support office does need a very clear vision about what it is there to achieve, so that all those who work in area support office are very clear about why they are there and what they are meant to do, at a level higher than the individual function and tasks they do. (Appendix 3, p. 16)

> I am concerned about my own factoring in of consistency; into giving advice. …The way you describe something to me may be different to the way A describes it to me. And I may interpret and therefore respond differently. So, I am very concerned about that. (Appendix 3, p. 35)

> It seems to me that when we are talking about help desks and problem management and throwing resources at them, is that the way to go? Is that actually treating the symptom or should we be fundamentally going back to training people properly to do their job in the first place — when we do have new initiatives, training people properly and therefore reducing possibly the requirement for support through problem management processes. (Appendix 3, p. 36)

What is emerging from these and other comments from the Hypothetical transcript is that this group of people is trying to reach beyond the surface issues of Centrelink, and articulate shared basic assumptions of the dominant cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behaviours that define their cultural environment.

The Hypothetical scenario exposed a number of organisation issues which had emerged from initial research. It was not always possible to obtain a consensus of individual views expressed, as the presentation developed as an unfolding story rather than as a formal debate with opinions sought, for and against. However, examples of issues cited in this chapter were generally accepted by all panelists. Differences of opinion tended to emerge, not about the organisational problems themselves, but about the causes and ways of resolving them. This usually came down to differing opinions about the allocation of resources.

There is a richness of data that illustrates not only that there are shared pictures of a Centrelink future — such as a more user-friendly Intranet and a greater focus on a 'caring culture' — but also clear demonstrations from panelists of intelligent leadership. The scenario provided panelists with the opportunity to display leadership through their knowledge of organisational goals and to communicate that knowledge effectively (Mant, 1997; Bolman & Deal, 1991). The management group clearly understood the symbolic nature of the Hypothetical scenario. The ease with which they interacted and were able to examine their own organisational culture through the various fictitious storylines (and to acknowledge its deficiencies as well as their own), demonstrates the value of a symbolic frame as a tool for analysing organisational culture — for this researcher, for the panelists themselves and for the performance aspects of the Hypothetical (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

It was evident, however, that these framing values were not as beneficial to the audience. While panelists had been well briefed over the performance aspects of the Hypothetical and their role as unrehearsed and interactive players, the audience had not been sufficiently well briefed as to their special role. The facilitator only came into contact with audience members on the day of the presentation, so that numbers and composition of this group was unknown. The facilitator gave a short briefing before the Hypothetical, but this proved insufficient for making clear the audience's role as active critics in the scenarios that were to unfold. The audience should also have been advised, probably by senior management, that they were no restrictions — should they wish to be inquisitive and/or critical throughout the unfolding scenario, when invited by the facilitator. It is clear from the transcript of the presentation that they rarely entered into the role playing of the intervention. As will be seen by evidence from the post-Hypothetical de-briefing session, the audience were much more comfortable providing input into a traditional debate than they are in the fictitious role play of a Hypothetical.

The second key finding of the presentation is that, while there was no attempt to grade or prioritise issues in the storyline, the Hypothetical transcript reveals how panelists make their own cognitive and emotional sense of their workplace and prioritise workplace issues in the context of available human resources. For example, in demonstrating their concerns, panelists spoke of a loss of Centrelink's 'caring culture', and of staff work overload, lack of training

support, frustration and lack of trust over inconsistencies in policies and information overload. The presence of emotional competencies in helping members to prioritise organisational problems is considered an important finding from the presentation of the Hypothetical. The observation of the use of emotion-based knowledge within the Hypothetical presentation is a significant performance aspect (Research Question 1) and helps to explain how the intervention may facilitate change in different settings (Research Questions 2). This aspect will be discussed in the context of recommendations for the future use of the Hypothetical in Chapter 5.

The experience of the previous Centrelink Hypothetical — in which the sensitive issue of the 'boys' club' was revealed — suggests there needs to be a strategy for teasing out those issues that are deeply-rooted mindsets or a failure of specific emotional competencies, either within the Hypothetical tool, or through post-Hypothetical follow-up. The following comments about the previously identified 'boys' club' are taken from the elite interviews for this study, and alert the researcher/consultant to the need for a longer period of ethnographic research within the organisation in order to more clearly unearth such sensitive issues and allow for more structured diagnostic treatment (Schein, 1987, p. 221).

> Those people who did see it (boys club) as an issue and would like to have seen it broken up, were angry because it wasn't. It drew attention to the lack of openness in our communication, which meant that we didn't have a way of dealing with something like that. It had to be watered down afterwards so that it didn't exist, rather than try and deal with something that was too hard.

> It was a fairly sensitive issue at the time due to quite a bit of reaction. I don't see that there is much change in that dynamic, but it is talked about more openly.

> M [Area Manager] didn't want to do anything with it [the boys' club issue] … by you raising it, and him saying it wasn't there…you can't pretend that it is not there … I think that that opportunity was missed for the organisation.

> The whole raising of that issue about boys club was a genuine issue and a lot of people in the room recognised it as a genuine issue, but we didn't have a process for dealing with it…

> it never was sorted out satisfactorily… the fact that it was raised and resolved offended some people.

Schein's (1987) analysis of the 'psychological contract' mirrors the sensitivity needed for this researcher/clinician, and the complex relationship between clinician and client and ethnographer and organisational members. It is clear from the 'boys' club' data that the researcher and the facilitator must be careful to balance the content of the intervention, so that it is a meaningful experience for those who believe there is need and opportunity for organisational change. The following comments from the elite interviews of the current study illustrate that the Hypothetical should neither alienate those involved through heavy-handedness, nor be ineffectual through avoidance of serious matters that need organisational attention:

> I don't think it was as stressful as people were prepared for, and I think they were disappointed. They had expected something a bit more controversial and fiery.

> Others said you had got it wrong and my comment has always been that the strength of the reaction tells me how right you actually got it.

> The people on the panel didn't know, and we hadn't briefed them enough about what their job was on the panel, so they weren't sure whether they were supposed to give the company line or whether they were really trying to work out a problem. As a result of that they were giving the company line and were checking the boss to see whether that was right or not. And we got a bit more restraint.

Earlier in this chapter it was noted that the failure to adequately brief the audience of their role in the intervention led to a restraint in their responses. The latter quotation (above), by one of the panelists and elite interviewees, suggests that a similar failure to adequately brief the panelists led to a similar restraint. However, the Hypothetical transcript reveals different levels of involvement and openness by panelists, and suggests that an individual's restraint is a personal attribute and that individuals interpret an invitation to speak freely in different ways. Ways of providing a more 'restraint-free' environment will be canvassed in Chapter 5.

Humour in the Hypothetical

Finally, in terms of presentation features of the intervention and the significance of emotional intelligence to the performance, a number of humorous incidents or tension releasers for both audience and panelists are revealed in the performance transcript:

> F: BH, you would like to see some sort of filtering process wouldn't you, for e-mails? How would that work?
>
> A: Did I say that …? (Appendix 3, p. 38)

> F: But S., can you cross that privacy line and not be seen as breaking the rules?
>
> A: We have in some instances.
>
> F: Would you like to share them with us?
>
> A: As long as you don't tell S [Centrelink CEO].
>
> F: We promise. (Appendix 3, p. 51)

These instances reveal that the workplace tension that panelists are meant to feel is clearly not 'real' and simulations of this kind can be seen as low risk settings, comparable, for example, to simulator training for airline pilots. Consequently, it is important to try and regulate the humour and entertainment elements so that they do not overpower the new learning aspects of the intervention. For example, in the Centrelink Hypothetical, the facilitator noticed that it occasionally took time for panelists to settle after particularly amusing incidents had caused laughter. This break in the flow of the presentation, and in a particular line of argument, made it difficult for everyone in the presentation to refocus on more serious matters and to pick up their train of thought.

Providing the stories remain credible and truly confronting, there are opportunities for the intervention to produce deep insights and to rise above pure entertainment. The Centrelink Hypothetical revealed humour springing naturally from the stories and dramatic tension. It is concluded that the more the facilitator attempts to manufacture humour through contrived episodes and jokes, the more the entertainment value will increase at the expense of deeper educational or learning benefits.

4.8 Post-Hypothetical debriefing

Immediately following the conclusion of the Hypothetical, both audience and panelists were invited to discuss the outcomes of the presentation. The aim of this 45 minute 'debriefing' discussion was to identify the issues they thought assumed the most importance in the Hypothetical, and to identify any issues which had been missed or were under-emphasised in the presentation. The management group intended to take the outcome of this debrief to further discussion in a closed session (Appendix 3, pp. 55-62).

Both audience and panelists were much more relaxed and there was a spirited, free- flow of information between the two groups. This discussion was important for two reasons:

1. It revealed that the key organisational problems, which had first emerged in the pre-Hypothetical research, and were later woven into the Hypothetical presentation, were now substantiated and further refined.

For example, although the need for training emerged as an issue in the Hypothetical, it was clear in the de-briefing that staff were often at cross purposes over what is 'mainframe' and what is 'application' training; that is, there was a need to know what kind of training is really needed:

> That was a very smart element that came out of today. That sense of, we actually know what we were talking about when we talked about training. There were a whole raft of issues and the fact that we can actually sit down and T. could actually be talking cross purposes with the matter of priority and definition. (Appendix 3, p. 54)

2. It underscored, again, how organisation members will make emotional sense of their workplace.

In the de-briefing session, participants often expressed frustration and confusion with a system that was malfunctioning for them. However, solutions to inadequate resourcing, for example, were offered in terms of making it easier for the employee:

> I think the job for the CSO is getting bigger and bigger and we are saying to them more and more, you don't need to retain this knowledge in your head. Just rely on the tools. But if they don't how to use the tools and what to put into the tools, then there is no way they are going to get anything right. (Appendix 3, p. 55)

A number of people in the audience spoke out on the issues that they felt really mattered most to them and to the organisation. It was further clarified that taking staff out of work to 'train' them is not factored into staffing levels, leading to a shortage of staff and difficulties down the line in meeting Centrelink targets. Also, there was general agreement in the Hypothetical that the Centrelink Intranet was poorly designed. However, the de-briefing further clarified that Team Leaders must know how to use the 'tools' and must continually update their skills for accessing material through the Intranet.

These examples, drawn out during the de-briefing stage, indicate the capacity of the Hypothetical process to achieve a closer refinement and definition of the organisation's problems both from cognitive and emotional perspectives.. Although there was a perceived communication breakdown between the Area Support Office and the Customer Service Centres, it became clear during the Hypothetical performance, and later in the de-briefing session, that it was not simply a matter of one group failing to understand their responsibilities to each other on a micro level, but of not understanding their core responsibilities on a macro level. Staff in the Customer Service Centres believed that the Area Support Office primarily existed to support their activities and they were constantly being let down or 'short-changed'. But what was revealed in the Hypothetical is that the ASO must also devote a substantial amount of their time and resources to supporting National Support Office projects. But even this relationship is ill defined.

> F: MN. The role of the National Support Office can be a grey area, too, can't it? Do you think the network is clear about what the NSO does and the ASO does?
>
> MN: Certainly not. Even from our particular group [Systems Support], which deals regularly with National Support Office, we don't fully understand how they operate. They change their structure very regularly and a lot of the times when we question how they actually operate, they can't even explain it either. So, I believe the network would have great difficulty in trying to keep up with the current structure. (Appendix 3, p. 17)

4.8.1 Discussion

In contrast to their involvement in the Hypothetical, the audience was far more interactive in the de-briefing session that followed. While most of the issues raised in the Hypothetical were reiterated, the audience stimulated further debate and clarified specific concerns, for example, misunderstandings over what constituted training in Centrelink, and the problem of interpreting policy from the ASO. There was also some concern expressed over the further need to define the roles of the ASO and how that role is different from that of the National Support Office (NSO). The de-briefing session revealed the potential value of incorporating the audience more often into the Hypothetical process. As primarily observers of the scenarios being played out, their views and opinions come from a different perspective of the intervention. This is further evidence of the need to fully brief the Hypothetical audience, to engage them, and to integrate them more closely into the scenario.

4.9 Elite interviews

4.9.1 Introduction

The researcher wished to identify further perspectives on the outcomes of the Hypothetical, not only for the benefit of Centrelink, but also to determine the features and functions of the intervention for completion of the study (Research Questions 1 and 2). Scholars acknowledge that elite interviews are valuable in providing an overall view of an organisation — its policies, past history and future plans. However, they also claim (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Neuman, 2000) that elite interviews are difficult to achieve because of the elusiveness of senior executives and their penchant for privacy.

The researcher conducting the Hypothetical case study had no difficulty in accessing the five selected senior Centrelink managers, although it took a period of three months to complete all five interviews due to the managers' busy schedules. Having conducted the case study over a number of months, and having been in contact with all the managers on several occasions, there was a level of acceptance, cooperation and 'comfort' which made the interviews uninhibited and data rich.

Schein (1987) asserts that the clinician who is asked to help resolve organisational issues should have ideas on how to improve the situation. Through creation of the Hypothetical, the researcher has made use of Schein's (1987) method of asking diagnostic and provocative questions in order to interpret, suggest and recommend solutions for the client's consideration. The elite interviews were partly conducted to gauge the effectiveness of this action research model.

All five, audio-taped interviews were conducted in the private offices of the managers, in what Neuman (2000) calls 'frontstage' settings. The researcher was aware that such settings were unlikely to produce unguarded comments or confidential insights. In these circumstances, Neuman (2000) asserts that "an elite member, experienced in dealing with others, may smile and give a researcher the official, public relations version of events" (p. 153). However, as the researcher had enjoyed a relatively long period of professional contact with the interviewees, the unstructured interviews appeared to be frank and open.

4.9.2 Elite interviews

The aim of the interviews with the elite group of managers was four-fold:

- to elicit their views on the impact of the Hypothetical in addressing internal issues of communication within Centrelink;

- to reveal whether the Hypothetical highlighted the key communication concerns, and whether interviewees felt the intervention had a part in changing perceptions of those issues;

- whether those perceptions led, or were likely to lead, to long term beneficial changes in the organisation; and

- whether the interviews provided further information for resolving Research Questions 1 and 2 of the study, that is, what were the interviewees' perceptions of the performance aspects of the Hypothetical and its ability as in intervention to facilitate change within Centrelink concerning the specific issues raised.

Each of the senior managers acknowledged the Hypothetical as an effective intervention for bringing about necessary change. In an attempt to analyse the implications of these interviews, the researcher found it useful to consider the impact of emotional competence on decision making (Arnold *et al*., 2001; Foy, 1999; Goleman, 1998; Gowing, 2001; Janis, 1971; Salovey *et al*., 2001). Salovey *et al*. (2001) assert that the way people manage their emotions has a strong influence over how they marshall their intellectual abilities (p. 189). The 'elite' interviewees primarily reported impressions, feelings, and emotional responses to the Hypothetical experience, and Salovey *et al*. (2001) argue that emotional intelligence can be utilised to plan, create and motivate action. Analysis of the interview transcripts distinguishes two aspects of the Hypothetical experience for the interviewees that they claim will lead them to future action.

Aspect 1: Interviewees' recognise the value of the Hypothetical in raising important organisational issues, and the need for them to institute change

Interview data collated under this aspect demonstrates an awareness of members' concern, annoyance and frustration with issues, but, more importantly, that managers knew they must do something about it. So, comments such as:

> … we are prepared to work a bit more creatively in terms of how we do it.

> … so now we are accountable to do something.

and:

> We have certainly looked at how we are doing our training.

indicate an awareness of the need to sense others' feelings and perspectives, to send convincing messages, resolve disagreements and guide others towards positive outcomes if they are to meet organisational goals (Salovey *et al*., 2001).

Given that the aim of this study is to explore the Hypothetical as an intervention tool for organisational change, these interviews were important in understanding the capacity of the Hypothetical as a catalyst for making the organisation aware of the need for such change:

> Quite often we need a catalyst and you talked about getting it right … and the Hypothetical was a catalyst. You certainly highlighted some things that should have been obvious to us.

> The Hypothetical has got that bit of life … you can get onto more contentious issues and areas of discontent; like you can actually raise them.

> The thing that helps through this particular Hypothetical is that it breaks down some of the barriers. The staff felt much more relaxed, and were able to say things they may not say to you during a normal office visit.

> We have facilitators here who are very good at what they do, but they have never focused on that type of intervention or inquisition. In some ways it makes the executives sit up and take notice and puts us on the spot a little bit and I don't think that hurts us at all.

Aspect 2: The perceived weaknesses of the Hypothetical

Apart from seeing a positive role for the Hypothetical in raising previously unacknowledged issues, and perceiving the intervention as a catalyst for change, there were those who felt the catalyst didn't go far enough, or had failed to meet expectations:

- There was a failure to 'ignite' the audience through insufficient briefing.

> I think we could have given them [the audience] a bit of a rev up beforehand so that we could have had a more interesting and less bland process — if we had said clearly to the audience, they were invited for audience participation, rather than audience entertainment.

- There were insufficient challenges or confrontation to the system through the Hypothetical performance; less entertainment and more revelation required.

> I think it was entertaining and I don't think it was as stressful as people were prepared for, and I think they were disappointed.

> This one was enjoyable, enlightening without being confronting … I don't think they had a lightbulb experience.

> … maybe next time you do it, we might be a little bit more confronting … Watching the other panel members, you stretched people a little bit but I didn't think any were out of their depth.

- The panel was considered too large to accommodate reasonable interaction within the time frame.

> Perhaps the panel may have been a bit large … my personal preference would be to focus in a bit and really drill down into some of the issues.

- Employees felt restricted in their responses due to the presence of their superiors.

> I know you tried to draw them out many times and it wasn't always successful and I thought they were just too quiet ... maybe their bosses were sitting there and *that* may have been an issue.

- The impact of the Hypothetical has not percolated beyond those directly involved, into the rest of the organisation.

> There has certainly been discussion amongst people who were there; that level of awareness. But I don't think it spread much past the people who were there.

4.9.3 Discussion

The elite interviews indicate that this management group is willing to listen and to change, despite the uncertainties inherent in such a process:

> It demonstrates we have to be open in terms of communicating with the network, and it would seem that we are prepared to work a bit more creatively in terms of how you do it.

Wack (1985b) describes this process as: "leading to strategic insights beyond the mind's previous reach" (p. 140), and Senge *et al*., (1994, p. 375) asserts it is "the willingness to touch the dangerous". However, there is no indication that the management group engages in the learning loop process which "seeks to uncover the social traditions and norms where the

individual governing values are nested and to actively link them with individual awareness and action" (Seo, 2003, pp. 7-8). In other words, while the Hypothetical provided some opportunity to 'touch the dangerous' and unearth insights, the Hypothetical or similar interventions are not an ongoing part of Area Brisbane's management strategy.

Research Question 1 of this study seeks to identify features and patterns of the Hypothetical in order to help explain its value as an intervention. For example, it is important to know if what came out of the Hypothetical was truly revelatory to those involved or was simply highlighting organisational dilemmas more obvious to the outside consultant. For example, in the words of one panelist "You certainly highlighted some things that should have been obvious to us". In this context, Centrelink managers observed the catalytic nature of the Hypothetical, or the way it confronts issues to stimulate the players to find creative solutions. However, a number of managers observed the process as less confronting, or less stressful than expected. As reported above, one manager said: "I don't think they had a lightbulb experience". Clearly, the Hypothetical experience can be confronting for some — for example, panelists in the previous intervention who identified as being in the boys club, — while not so for others: "I like conflict as a resolution. I think a bit more of that would be good". Exploring the unknown is a feature of the learning organisation process. However, if there is too much discomfort in the unknown for too many people, then the learning process may be inhibited. Also, inherent in action science interventions, like the Hypothetical, is the dilemma of learning loop practices possibly undermining those who have the political power in organisations:

> … valid information created as a result of double-loop learning can sometimes be threatening to the political ground of other groups, making them unwilling to participate in transformational dialogue. For these groups of people, a pure conversational approach may be ineffective in generating double-loop learning. (Seo, 2003, p. 12)

This dilemma was observed in the earlier 'boys' club' scenario. Indeed, the transcripts of two of the elite interviews for the current Hypothetical reveal that the 'boys' club' issue had not been confronted and not resolved by Centrelink two years later.

> I know a number of people, not myself, but a number of business managers and other people who said, 'why would we be here today when it caused so much angst last time? I said that is exactly why we do it again, because it is good for the people.

As already noted in this chapter, a greater use of time spent in ethnographic research would more clearly delineate the significance of negative mindsets and how the facilitator might tackle them in future Hypothetical interventions. Clearly, a measure of sensitivity is required where senior management is concerned and where there are high expectations of the Hypothetical. Seo (2003) acknowledges that managers are unwilling to commit themselves to practices that require a high degree of openness, while the pressures of the workplace require them to keep a tight control. Similarly, Argyris (1996) has experience of executives who feel threatened by double-loop learning because they fear it will release tensions and pressures over which they have no control. Hopefully, participants will express uninhibited feelings and opinions in a Hypothetical, but depending on the cultural life of the organisation, intellectual and emotional containment may occur, with participants who are passive and do not engage beyond the superficial organisational issues. This is an aspect of the Hypothetical that needs some attention, and solutions will be canvassed in Chapter 5.

4.10 Post-Hypothetical documentation

Approximately two months after the Hypothetical presentation, the researcher asked the leader of the management group for evidence of follow-up of outcomes through the organisation's internal systems. The response was that issues raised by the Hypothetical had been progressed in a number of ways, and relevant documentation was provided to the researcher.

4.10.1 Area Support Office Leadership Team (ASOLT)

The ASOLT group of senior managers provides strategic direction for the Brisbane Area Support Office. They deal with cross program issues and resource management. One of the Hypothetical panelists is on the ASOLT team and was the senior manager who liaised directly with the researcher. Following the Hypothetical, and in concert with colleagues, she drew up an action plan which was tabled at the monthly ASOLT team meeting. Six main

areas for improvement were identified, and ASOLT assigned 'natural owners' or those nominated to follow up each of the areas which were:

- Training (*where to from here*; *what's the issue*; *common understanding and consistency*; *managing the training*; *technical/applications*).

- What is the role of ASO and the roles within it (*clarity*; *communication*; *be an advocate*)?

- How do we make the best use of our expertise (*develop more*; *use what we have*; *succession planning*)?

- How do we add value to the data distributed (*including better provision of performance information*)?

- How can we better manage the provision of policy advice (*including better utilization of specialist staff*)?

- How can we improve communication (*face-to-face*; *e-mail*; *home pages*)?

Each of the six areas of concern had a list of possible strategies and was coded by each ASOLT manager as to whether they were considered 'Quick Wins' (QW) or 'Big Impact' (BI). Under each proposed strategy was a series of action plans with nominated resources, the person responsible and a proposed completion date. The identified areas nominated for follow up appeared on the ASOLT meeting agendas for two months, after which the researcher received no more internal documentation.

In his examination of what brings about meaningful change in organisations, Kotter (2002) stresses the need to show organisational members an unassailable truth that will influence their feelings. His main point is the importance of changing behaviour, and Centrelink management are indicating in this document a need to respond quickly to the outcomes of the Hypothetical and to capitalize on its key findings: "those who are most successful at

significant change begin their work by creating a sense of urgency among relevant people" (*ibid*, p. 3). Interestingly, Centrelink management views reflect Kotter's belief in short-term wins which provide "credibility, resources and momentum to the overall effort" (p. 5). Similarly, Frost (1987), in his examination of power, politics and influence, asserts that small wins "create meanings that carry with them a degree of power that in turn influences subsequent actions and outcomes" (p. 536). As one reflection of Kotter's (2002) rationale, the Centrelink ASOLT team document indicates an empowered group who are focusing quite deliberately on what is achievable within a short time frame.

> They focus first on tasks where they can quickly achieve unambiguous, visible and meaningful achievements. These short-term wins are essential, serving four important purposes:
>
> Wins provide feedback to change leaders about the validity of their visions and strategies.
>
> Wins give those working hard to achieve a vision a pat on the back, an emotional uplift.
>
> Wins build faith in the effort, attracting those who are not yet actively helping.
>
> Wins take power away from cynics. (Kotter, 2002, p. 127)

The actions they are seeking to change are primarily improvements to communication processes which they believe will lead to changes in behaviour: "establish protocol for answering phone messages; commit full time resource to set up home page; review e-mail lists and who gets what; identify what learning support is available" (Appendix 5).

4.10.2 Learning Directions Committee

One of the nominated areas for attention — 'training' — was also referred to the Learning Directions Committee which sets priorities and strategic directions for Area Brisbane. The committee also provides expertise and advice on quality and learning for the Executive and the Area Leadership Team. A "Hypothetical Action Plan" was presented to the Learning Directions Committee (LDC) for training. It contained three strategies:

- Better market what is already available.
- Clarify "technical".
- Learning Directions Committee — raise issues with relevant area.

The remainder of this Plan set out a number of actions, including:

- identify what learning support is available;
- update Homepage including navigation;
- standardise definitions of training types;
- market/publish definitions; and
- develop action plans.

In the following month's LDC minutes, details of the Homepage update were provided. It is not spelt out in these minutes, but clearly, the organisational response to the Hypothetical has been to regard it as an intervention that has highlighted problems requiring internal actions and strategies to arrive at solutions. Consequently, the Hypothetical appears to have communicated its chief role and function to the organisation — as a catalyst for change and more effective communication.

4.10.3 Systems Support Group (SSG) Survey

Following the Hypothetical, the panelist responsible for Area Brisbane systems support decided to conduct a survey of SSG internal customers to gather information about customer satisfaction with SSG service levels. While not flagging the outcomes of the Hypothetical to survey recipients, the survey preamble stated: "This need for continual improvement was emphasized at the recent 'Hypothetical' exercise". The survey was in the form of an e-mail

sent at random through all SSG helpdesk teams. It had a web file attachment containing the survey.

Seventy-five out of 100 responded to the survey, which asked for views on hours that SSG staff are available to answer phone queries, preferred method of contacting SSG staff, the usefulness of the SSG web page, and the quality of SSG service. Data from the survey led to a number of recommendations for action:

- Consider trialing a half hour extension of phone availability from 4.30 to 5.00 p.m.

- Marketing of SSG service standards to include information designed to stream non-urgent queries through e-mail rather than phone.

- Web page redesign to be undertaken as a priority. Current issues to be sorted by keyword not by date. Active promotion of re-designed web page. Updates to web page to be made once a week by a nominated team member.

- SSG Leadership team to examine service improvement areas. Channel feedback to teams and individuals about network appreciation of the service they provide.

As with the outcomes of the previously mentioned Learning Directions Committee, the Systems Support Group leadership team has translated the outcomes of the Hypothetical into strategies for change and improved communication. Interestingly, the Hypothetical storylines had depicted the various means of communication often as deficient or even counter-productive to effective communication within Centrelink. These deficiencies clearly motivated SSG to dig deeper into the organisation with its survey, to confirm the problems and to find solutions.

4.10.4 Summary

Post-Hypothetical documentation clearly reflects a wish within management to involve a wider employee base in Area Brisbane to tackle the problems raised in the intervention. This confirms the notion that effective leadership is about empowerment and having managers

stimulate motivation in their employees. It is also bound up with effective communication (Mant, 1997; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992; Senge, 1992; Schein, 1992). The follow up to the Hypothetical by Centrelink management demonstrates examples of such communication occurring primarily through a consultative style (Dixon, 1996). The various communication processes (ASOLT action plan, Learning Directions training program) indicate a management that has 'ownership' of the perceived outcomes of the Hypothetical and is seeking input and action, whilst retaining control of the potential outcomes. By translating the issues and dilemmas from the Hypothetical into the language and structures with which they are familiar, management exercise that power and control, for example, "Quick Wins" "Big Impact". However, there is evidence of a more participative approach through the ASOLT action plan where management is seeking shared meaning, a 'common understanding', and the views of subordinates on how to move forward. Management is empowering subordinates by invitation, to find the solutions to the dilemmas posed in the Hypothetical, thus demonstrating that effective leadership is in play (Mant, 1997). There is evidence, too, through these internal documents, that outcomes from the Hypothetical have been translated into Centrelink's own organisational language, symbols and structures. Also, some of the dilemmas posed by the Hypothetical have prompted the gathering of more data (SSG survey), all of which points to a management that has used the Hypothetical to promote learning and to help promote an ongoing examination of its organisational culture (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992). A significant asset of the learning organisation is its ability to integrate new knowledge, or to mix existing knowledge in different ways, often through the use of new methods of learning (Therin, 2003).

4.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings from the data reveal the twin aspects of this research study. It identifies the features and performance aspects of the Hypothetical intervention tool, and it reveals the Hypothetical's effectiveness in exposing the organisational problems within Centrelink, and how the organisation responded by seeking ways some of those problems might be resolved.

The chapter also further clarifies the distinction between the Hypothetical as a one-off change management tool, and the broader use of the Hypothetical with other research and intervention tools as a change process. The latter function necessarily includes clinical and ethnographic research within the organisation, quite separate from the Hypothetical presentation. All of the data, when viewed with the outcomes of the Hypothetical presentation, provides further perspectives on Centrelink's organisational problems.

Chapter 4 also reveals that this Hypothetical process uncovered not only communication problems — such as the inadequate use of electronic messaging or poor communication between head office and network centres — but broader organisational problems that also need attention, including inadequate training, lack of clarity of group roles, and negative group norms.

This chapter has described the research findings from a triangulation of methods approach. Both qualitative and quantitative methods (interviews, questionnaire, Hypothetical, documentation) provide a breadth and depth of data. A sequential approach to the application of methods and data analysis was chosen as each method informed what came after and added to the richness of the data (Neuman, 2000, p. 125). This approach was also chosen because Research Questions 3 and 4 dictate that pre-Hypothetical data findings will determine the shape and content of the Hypothetical storyline. Similarly, post-Hypothetical data findings led sequentially to the resolution of Research Questions 1 and 2. Conclusions about the application of the Hypothetical in the Centrelink setting are drawn in Chapter 5, and recommendations for its use in future settings is based on the informing literature from Chapter 2 and the findings from the Centrelink case study.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will draw conclusions from the research findings about the use of the Hypothetical tool and, utilising the guiding literature, it offers a number of recommendations for how the Hypothetical tool and overall process may be applied in future settings.

Consequently, this chapter first identifies the broad features and functions of the Hypothetical from the findings data. Conclusions are drawn about the benefits and limitations of the Hypothetical intervention tool, derived from the Centrelink case (Research Questions 1 and 2), and the informing literature. Special features of the intervention are described as observations from this exploratory study.

Throughout this chapter, recommendations are also made as to how the Hypothetical tool, and the overall process, can be utilised and modified to deliver clear outcomes for organisation clients in terms of their organisation communication and change management strategies (Research Questions 3 and 4).

5.2 How the Hypothetical intervenes — Its features and functions

This study has revealed that the Hypothetical exhibits a number of features and functions that mark it out as an intervention tool for a range of management settings. It is an intervention tool that:

- employs the symbolism of stories, simulated performances, role play, dramatic interactions and confrontations to explore and test organisational culture;

- utilises selected organisational members to represent and articulate the problems of their culture and to address solutions;

- tests team-working efficacy and leadership skills and aligns, or re-aligns, group thinking; and

- identifies the Hypothetical tool within an intervention process which incorporates pre-Hypothetical clinical and ethnographic research aspects, a Hypothetical performance and post-Hypothetical de-briefing and analysis.

5.3 Finding solutions in communicative moments

The data from the Hypothetical process indicates the relevance of symbolic convergence theory for the exploration and explanation of organisational problems and their resolution. Organisation literature emphasises that among the main drivers of symbolic convergence theory are the conversations about actions in the workplace and the achievement of shared meanings by members. The Hypothetical reveals a number of these conversations, or what Bormann (1989) calls "communicative moments" (p.103), when panelists express an empathy and agreement over organisational problems. While panelists were often unclear in the Centrelink Hypothetical performance about common solutions to such problems as e-mail overload or fuzzy definitions of government social policy, the post-Hypothetical follow-up discussions and elite interviews reveal data on likely solutions.

5.3.1 Recommendation

It is recommended that the Hypothetical process is further refined so that data collection (e.g., surveys) and other intervention methods (e.g., interviews) are more tightly focused on specific organisational problems, how they might be presented as Hypothetical stories, and how the data from the performance might be channelled into post-Hypothetical problem-solving processes.

Data from the Hypothetical tool and the literature on symbolic convergence also illuminate Bormann's definition of 'groupness'. Groupness occurs where stories are jointly held by an identifiable group or team within the organisation. The Centrelink ASO managers and CSC team leaders clearly articulate their individual group territories in order to make sense of their

particular predicaments; for example, team leaders accuse head office managers of being out of touch with the realities of service delivery, and ASO managers contend that if the CSCs understood how much work they have to do for the National Support Office, they might not be so critical of their lack of commitment to them. This demonstration of 'groupness' is maintained through a range of fantasy type stories. One of the clearest examples in the Hypothetical performance is the description of how Centrelink's client privacy policy is presented to the media. The issue of privacy and client confidentiality is a 'script' (in symbolic convergence terms), constantly presented to the media by Head Office, but it can often hide or mask deliberate misrepresentations and dishonesty by clients. Centrelink staff have difficulty working within a process that may hide the 'true' situation from the public. Hence, the group fantasy of an organisation that is constantly being misrepresented through the media is retained, particularly by customer service staff. On a more positive side, it is clear from the Hypothetical performance data that a Centrelink caring culture is shared via 'fantasy chaining' amongst organisation members.

5.3.2 Conclusions

Symbolic convergence theory reveals the group stories, fantasies, fantasy chains and sagas of organisational life. The Centrelink intervention reveals specific shared stories and mindsets, particularly of the two key organisational groups — the Area Support Office managers and the team leaders in the Customer Service Centres. Consequently, symbolic convergence demonstrates it is a useful template for exploring Centrelink organisational life. The various stories and rhetorical visions of the Hypothetical tool in this study (for example, Centrelink as a caring culture) are highlighted and examined in the interests of clinical evaluation. It can be seen from Chapter 4, for example, that the formalised Centrelink data — its internal and external documents and the way it deals with the print and electronic media — do not accurately or fully describe the life of the organisation, or the behaviours of its members. However, the Hypothetical intervention demonstrates that it can tease out the stories that groups maintain, as their particular organisational reality, but do not always reveal in day-to-day life. This is confirmed by elite interviewees who comment on the uniqueness of the Hypothetical tool for raising issues that had not previously surfaced.

It can be observed through the Centrelink case that the Hypothetical intervention tool helpfully identifies both the negative and positive aspects of organisational practice and culture. Individual and group performance is observed as panelists are encouraged to relate to each other, so as to open up strategic conversations for aligning corporate objectives.

A significant performance aspect of the Hypothetical tool revealed in the study is its ability to examine not only the robustness of organisational culture, but also the effectiveness of the group processes that form and maintain that culture. The Hypothetical stories help resolve the creative tension between what the organisation is in reality, and what its members would like the organisation to be. For example, the Centrelink facilitator proposed the image of a secretive organisation that was unwilling to communicate with the media. Panel discussion revealed an organisation that is limited in its media relations capacity, but that organisation members prefer a more pragmatic approach to the constant negative stereotyping of an unresponsive Centrelink.

Other Hypothetical stories tested how well beliefs and behaviours are developed and managed. For example, panelists were specifically asked how well the organisation was handling succession planning in light of Centrelink's high cluster of 'baby boomers'. On a broader level, they were asked how well they trusted the system to get things done. It is clear from panelists' answers to the succession planning dilemma, for example, that there is not an articulated policy to resolve it. This appeared to surprise them as a group, as if someone else should be looking after the issue. Succession planning caused some post-Hypothetical discussion and the issue was given higher priority on management's agenda. Consequently, it is possible to observe the Hypothetical being able to tease out issues that are part of the rhetorical vision, but which have not been critically evaluated and articulated by the responsible group.

The credibility of the Hypothetical stories, which are meant to be metaphors for workplace reality, is paramount to the achievement of dramatic tension. The elite interviews revealed mixed views about the success or otherwise of this aspect of the intervention. One way of assessing its impact and effectiveness was in ascertaining how confrontational it was in presenting issues:

> I would have preferred to see a more pushing approach to tackle some of the outdated observations. That is why I think the previous Hypothetical you did made significant change for the organisation because it confronted the unstated. This one was enjoyable, enlightening without being confronting.
>
> The Hypothetical has got that bit of life in terms of the issues that you could raise … you can get into more contentious issues, and areas of discontent; like you can actually raise them.
>
> The environment you set up for them was much more conducive to a free and open discussion than it would be if any of the execs. walked into a customer service centre and said, 'what are your problems'.
>
> Maybe the next time you do it we might be a little bit more confronting. But it is giving people comfort, first of all in the process, and then as you move along within the boundaries.

What adds to the tension in the Hypothetical, particularly from the audience point of view, are the discrepancies they detect between what panelists say and what they have actually seen them do in the workplace. Norton and Brenders (1996) make the point that because metaphor can create tension, it can also motivate (p. 206), and there is evidence in the Centrelink Hypothetical of panelists working through problems, trying to find answers amongst the competing resolutions. This motivating tension is most valuable when it reveals deep insights into the systemic norms that are causing the organisational problems. It can mean the difference between a disruptive intervention (for instance, the boys' club Hypothetical), and one that has less of an impact on the organisational structure. Consequently, it is important that clinical research penetrates the embedded mindsets of the organisation, where such systemic problems often begin. The researcher therefore needs the confidence and the experience to know where to look, and organisational leaders need to have confidence that such penetration will ultimately benefit the organisation.

Chapter 4 revealed that Centrelink not only exhibits strong motivating tensions to resolve problems but also demonstrates features of a 'learning organisation'. Indeed, the decision to

bring in an outside consultant to apply a new intervention tool is indicative of an organisation that is prepared to try new ways of acquiring knowledge and to modify its behaviour during such a process. It has also been noted that a number of key scholars of learning organisation literature agree on the need for core strategic building blocks for such organisations.

5.3.3 Recommendation

Where organisations demonstrate or proclaim a generative learning culture, it may be possible to test this culture by interweaving tests of the building blocks — for example, leadership, experimentation, transfer of knowledge and teamwork — into the Hypothetical scenario. Consequently, it would be possible to test whether or not organisational members demonstrate effective leadership and teamwork and whether a culture of experimentation is encouraged. Research methods prior to a Hypothetical presentation could diagnose the learning capability of the organisation using core strategic building blocks as fixed measures. Data that, for example, reflected the organisation's weaknesses, could then be used to strengthen the building blocks through the stories built into the Hypothetical tool.

5.4 How the Hypothetical aligns and challenges the dominant culture

The findings suggest that the Hypothetical tool is an instrument for aligning staff — their views and perceptions of the organisation, as well as their motivations for, and acceptance of, a shared vision. It has also been noted how panelists are selected to represent, as closely as possible, the group or the culture that the intervention is meant to address. Consequently, when the Hypothetical is seen to probe the relationship between Centrelink head office (ASO) and the network, it is exploring the degree of task-driven interaction between group members (task interdependence). Setting symbolic tasks for panelists tests their outcome interdependence; challenging their group norms tests the 'potency' (Shea & Guzzo, 1987, p. 26), or collective belief of group members. Depending on the reactions of group members, the Hypothetical stories reveal the level of task and outcome interdependence within the group and the organisation. The stories may be written so that the panelists articulate the group's goals and, together, demonstrate their collective belief that they can achieve what is needed. For example, the stories in the Centrelink intervention focused on such issues as

training, technical communication methods, and resources, so as to highlight problems with performance and potency, which in turn were seen to affect the group's task and outcome interdependence.

Consequently, the Centrelink case illustrates how the Hypothetical panel is selected, not so much for its homogeneity (that they all think the same way), but for the broad focus they could bring to addressing the organisation's problems. In the case of Centrelink, organisation members can be seen to have 'taken their eyes off the ball' on a number of communication and management issues. So, the conversations initiated by the facilitator challenged the panelists, singly and as a group, to weigh up the importance of the problems, and to articulate how they might be resolved.

The facilitator exercises control over the use and course of the intervention tool by determining the composition of the panel and by creating the storylines and the shape of the drama; all without their consultation. Leadership literature reveals that this is an alignment technique in which the facilitator is ceded control for the duration of the Hypothetical, and has the power to set the aligning agenda. Having in one sense seized the organisation's agenda, the facilitator may adopt the role of transformational leader, replicating, to some degree, the re-aligning of members views back towards shared goals. This is both the performance aspect and function of the Hypothetical as an intervention tool. Even when Centrelink panel members were aware of a broad problem in advance of the Hypothetical presentation, it was remarked by three of the elite interviewees that having a problem posed as an organisational dilemma in the presentation had prompted them to see it from new perspectives.

The overriding problem that prompted the commissioning of the Centrelink Hypothetical was the perceived disconnect between the Area Support Office and the network offices of Area Brisbane. An important feature of what has been described in Chapter 2 as the malfunctioning organisation, is the disconnect that occurs, not necessarily within sections or departments, but between or across them. Kotter (1990) notes that some people in organisations are well connected, usually the senior management groups, but that most members are not. The fictionalised Centrelink stories illuminate this disconnect by providing

performance opportunities between panelists from different areas of the organisation, and highlighting such problems as the inefficient Intranet and the failure of head office to articulate to the network who they are, and what it is they do. Importantly then, as an intervention outcome, the Hypothetical facilitator leads panelists to appreciate the relative importance of such problems, and how they are adversely affecting the communication practices and outcomes of the organisation.

This is a significant function of the Hypothetical — to demonstrate and align rather than instruct organisational members. It is at the core of the notion of the learning organisation (Senge, 1992), which, as has been outlined, drives much contemporary management theory. The Hypothetical tool can thus be seen as an integral part of a learning culture rather than of a training culture; it is part of a culture that has an ongoing impulse to be generative and expand capabilities, rather than one that instructs and teaches. The Hypothetical tool employs stories that challenge members' capabilities, and shows them new ways of looking at their organisation. For example, in the Centrelink performance, panelists realised they needed to go back to the beginning with their Intranet problems and design a system that was much more user-friendly:

> I suppose some of that goes back to a decision made 18 months ago to give the responsibility of home pages back to the individual units. Therefore let's train up those people within those individual units in developing their homepage. (Appendix 3, p. 24)

Similarly, there was some articulation of the need to construct an e-mail regime that truly meets the personal needs of each user:

> Part of it is, we need to know what the e-mail message is about. Do I need to see this? Is a response expected? Is there some action required on my part? So that's important. But also, ensuring that the information needs to come to me or should it go to someone more directly. (Appendix 3, p. 39)

What is observed in these examples is an organisation that can work through issues through the Hypothetical, in ways that they may not do in the normal course of organisational life. All

elite interviewees acknowledged this special performance role of the Hypothetical intervention — to trigger potential change mechanisms in organisational members:

> I suspect at times internally that we don't see the wood for the trees. Even at the discussions before [the Hypothetical presentation], it was embarrassing and painfully obvious. We have had some attempts to do it and I think when you attempt to do something and you fail, each subsequent attempt becomes a little bit harder. And we all felt we have got to fix it. And it was someone coming in from the outside that highlighted it.
>
> Immediately after there was a buzz around the place, that it had gone well; that it was good experience and demonstrating that we are open in terms of communicating with the network. And it would seem that we are prepared to work a bit more creatively in terms of how we do it, rather than having a workshop or sending out an e-mail.
>
> As an agent of change we sat down and said basically these were the issues brought up in the Hypothetical and we need to do something about it. We promoted that [the Hypothetical] to the network so we are accountable to do something. From the point of view of a change agent, it was important.

These attitudes, when considered in light of the processual approach to managing change, demonstrate organisational members who appreciate the links between action, perception and thinking; that is, continual learning. Consequently, those Centrelink senior managers involved in the Hypothetical intervention acknowledge (albeit implicitly), the value of double-loop learning or the need to challenge the values of the organisation so that institutional learning can follow.

The interviews (excerpted above) also suggest that the Hypothetical's catalytic function as a change agent may have a role within the learning loop model. As was noted in Chapter 2, the learning loop rationale provides a continuous organisational learning paradigm, or what Van der Heijden (2001) calls an ongoing "tolerance for ambiguity" by organisational members (p. 183).

Elite interviewees also point to a continuing use for the Hypothetical in a Centrelink that embraces institutional learning:

> I think it is a very creative and powerful tool that we should use more.

> I think in 12-18 months time we could certainly look at it [the Hypothetical] again, and it would be a different scenario with different issues confronting us in 18 months time. It would be a benefit for someone from outside coming in and sitting down with a panel and doing that without the rigours of a formal meeting process.

The Hypothetical stories have another important function within a continual learning environment. They offer panelists alternate views of an organisation that can be run better. Stories in the Hypothetical intervention tool are focused on key people and critical events in the organisation. They convey the values, behaviours and group norms which may be desirable, as well as highlighting those that may not be; the 'the boys' club', for example. As has been noted earlier in this study, the exchange of information is one of a number of generic building blocks that underscore a healthy learning culture; the others are mission and vision, leadership, experimentation, teamwork, and cooperation. (Deetz & Kirtsten, 1983; Goh, 1998; Senge, 1992). It is the use of these building blocks that can help to dislodge negatively patterned group behaviours, and focus on those which are more conducive to the desired organisational culture. The Centrelink case reveals how the Hypothetical scenario may fruitfully incorporate such building blocks to address the ongoing learning needs of the organisation and its members.

Centrelink panelists not only demonstrate their organisational culture, or parts of it, but also show qualities of transformational leadership. As noted in the literature, an important aspect of team efficacy is transformational leadership. In fact, it was a prerequisite of developing a Hypothetical in early commissioning documents that Centrelink management requested that panelists be selected for their leadership qualities, or in order to 'flush out' those with potential leadership skills. The Centrelink panel provides evidence of leadership, frequently expressing strong feelings of commitment and shared belief in the organisation, and confirms how transformational leaders have a positive effect on team efficacy. There is a difference of opinion in the literature as to whether a culture of transformational leadership within the team, or the encouragement of strong values and norms, is the best way to engender trust, commitment and team efficacy. The Hypothetical tool, as utilised in this study, is a once-only

experience for its members, and is limited by time constraints as to how it may clarify this difference of opinion.

5.4.1 Recommendations

It is suggested that the clinical research for future Hypothetical case studies incorporates data that provides profiles of team and leadership roles and the skills needed by organisational team members. For example, if a particular Hypothetical tool was commissioned to specifically explore leadership, the organisation may opt for a panel containing a balanced mix of team builders, ideas people, implementers, innovators, shapers, and so forth. Such team role inventories have been devised by a number of theorists, including Belbin (1993), Mintzberg (1987), Salovey *et al*. (2001), and Goleman (1998), and provide ways of determining the most appropriate skills and behaviours required for any given team.

Similarly, the search for leadership skills should be factored into Hypothetical story-telling, whenever organisations are seeking to define effective work groups and identify future leaders. For example, in the Centrelink scenario, a junior female team leader was 'promoted' to manager and was presented with a number of important decisions. Her strong performance in the new role was remarked on by at least two senior managers in the post-Hypothetical 'elite' interviews. Leadership skills may be defined in future Hypotheticals according to the needs of the particular organisation, so that a Hypothetical scenario may include stories to test such skills as envisioning, invention, negotiation, decision-making, teaching, interpersonal implementation, and so on.

5.5 Playing roles and working the team

Apart from testing leadership and group effectiveness through its storylines, the Centrelink Hypothetical intervention tool revealed it is also a team-working exercise. The Hypothetical tool, like other effective team working exercises, brings people together, and includes a number of different roles to achieve maximum performance. Each member of the Hypothetical panel has a specific role to play, and together they are a microcosm of the organisation, or parts of it. Like any effective team, the Centrelink panel confronted the

human and technical resources they believed the organisation needed to meet its vision and purposes. Sometimes there was a genuine discovery of new team talent:

> The surprises for me were that some of the people on the panel I didn't know, handling themselves as well as they did. I think T. was just terrific. She is a real find for a 23 year-old. You said to her, 'you are now the manager of Wynnum and what are your issues'. She says, 'give me a moment to think'. Then, ' my issues are…' I think that was terrific.

Associated with the identification of effective team working and leadership skills is the importance of emotional competence in decision-making processes. Centrelink elite interview managers remarked of the Hypothetical, for example, that it was often a depth of feeling that triggered important discussions:

> I was surprised about how strongly people felt.
>
> I don't think any of the issues were total surprises. It was the depth of the feeling that some people had about not knowing their way around the Area Office.
>
> I can remember the emotion and the quality of that. I think it would have given them a bit of a rev up beforehand.

Elite interviewees are here acknowledging the emotional content of the performance which faced Hypothetical panelists. The developing stories are unknown to them, so they must respond with a broad range of responses — intuitively, instinctively, creatively, and convincingly — to dilemmas which are meant to replicate the need for quick and wise decision-making in workplace settings. On another level of emotion, there is evidence in the Hypothetical presentation that when organisation managers detect a malfunction in the system they reveal their concern for its impact on staff:

> The way *you* describe something to me may be different to the way A. describes it to me and I may interpret, and therefore respond differently. So, I am very concerned about that. I am concerned that we keep shunting information out to you guys — the network by e-mail, by phone calls — and I know you don't have time to read it. (Appendix 3, p. 35)

> … a waste of time, and also the staff start losing trust in getting policy decisions. They're told to do it one way and a week later they are told no, that was wrong. (Appendix 3, p. 19)

What is identified here is a willingness to critically evaluate the system because the problems, cited above, call for emotional judgements or judgements significantly informed by emotion. As noted in Chapter 2, these examples also demonstrate the supporting theory of symbolic convergence. The notion of people coming together to share symbolic ground is what Bormann (1989) calls the sharing of "a common sentiment or emotional involvement and commitment to symbols" (p. 102). Bormann (1989) makes it clear that "Symbolic convergence creates, maintains and allows people to achieve empathic communion as well as a meeting of the minds" (p. 102). In other words, the symbolic convergence framework helps to identify emotional intelligence at play within the 'communicative moments' of the Centrelink Hypothetical intervention, a key conclusion of the Hypothetical tool revealed in this study.

5.5.1 Recommendations

This study has noted that emotional competencies are learned capabilities for organisational members based on emotional intelligence. Consequently, competencies can be measured and the results utilised to achieve improved performance in the workplace. It is therefore recommended that suitable emotional competence frameworks are explored for their relevance in the creation of Hypothetical scenarios and for data analysis of the Hypothetical intervention tool. Goleman believes it is difficult to teach people emotional intelligence (EI) (Shinn, 2003, p. 21), but it is possible to measure emotional intelligence via a range of EI tools. What is new in the measurement of EI is the creation of tools similar to those that measure cognitive intelligence and from within the field of psychology (Gowing, 2001). This study has not attempted to delve into management psychology literature; however, tools such as Goleman's Emotional Competence Inventory and Emotional Competence Framework (Gowing, 2001) and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass, 1996) may be useful for assessing leadership competencies, including conflict management, when Hypothetical panelists are being selected, and when Hypothetical scenario transcripts are being analysed.

The result of assembling the Centrelink panel was an emotionally intelligent team who demonstrated their social skills and empathy in solving the Hypothetical dilemmas. Indeed, the transcript of the Hypothetical presentation also reveals organisational members with a strong empathic team spirit. Consequently, it is recommended that suitable emotional frameworks may be profitably utilised during pre- and post-Hypothetical research in order that conclusions may be drawn about desirable panelist behaviours and performance strategies. For example, if negotiation skills have a high priority in the organisation, and a desired outcome of the Hypothetical process is to find out how well such skills operate, then prior research can focus in this direction, and create simulated negotiation situations between panelists in Hypothetical stories. Post-Hypothetical analysis can then identify, for example, where management may need to bring about changes in members' skills.

In this study, the post-Hypothetical interviews suggest panelists felt comfortable with role play, and its safe and non-threatening outcomes. However, it is difficult to detect from the written transcript of the presentation and the audio tape, sensitivities such as discomfort, conflict, tension, body language and other emotional responses, which could assist in determining effective team-working.

While it was noted in Chapter 3 that the two-hour performance was audiotaped (primarily for analysis in this study), only short sequences were recorded on videotape by Centrelink for internal publicity. It has been concluded in this study that the exploration of emotional competencies may be a role that is developed for the Hypothetical tool. In this context, where cost is not prohibitive, a comprehensive, multi-camera audiovisual recording of the performance would be valuable for the analysis of emotional competencies. Not only would electronic recording assist data analysis, it would also provide useful feedback for participants to see and hear how they interact and how their behaviours impact on others.

5.6 The Hypothetical as a wider intervention process

The reporting of the Centrelink case demonstrates the features and functions of the Hypothetical as an intervention tool, but the results of the wider study demonstrate how the tool is part of a larger research and intervention process. The Hypothetical presentation is in

itself a research method, but it is also informed by other research methods in this study — survey, interviews, de-briefing sessions, internal and external marketing documents. Finally, it is the sum of the entire Hypothetical process which provides data for drawing further conclusions about the significance of the Hypothetical as an intervention tool, and about the particular organisational problems and their solutions.

Inherent in the word 'intervention' are implications of disruption, interference and intrusion, and, as already noted in this chapter, elite interviewees had reservations about the level of disruption and intrusion achieved by this particular Hypothetical intervention. The literature also revealed the difficulties that the clinician has in getting to the bottom of organisational problems (Schein, 1987; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1992), and the Centrelink case confirmed the difficulty of getting 'under the skin' of the organisation in the time allocated.

5.6.1 Recommendation

It is suggested that a period of participant observation would be beneficial to the Hypothetical research process. This should be carried out separately to the clinical role of the researcher/facilitator, so that organisational members are clear about who is there simply to observe, and who is there to find solutions to problems. As Frost (1987) asserts, it is important to "penetrate politically motivated disguises" (p. 537), and this takes some considerable time and a large measure of trust from the organisation. While the Centrelink researcher believed he had members' trust, there was insufficient time to closely observe organisational problems and employee behaviours.

5.7 Highlighting problems and offering solutions

The research problem for this study was expressed in the context of organisational communication. However, the literature revealed an interconnection between communication issues and other issues of management. As Dixon (1996) states, organisations are "communication phenomena that create problems for people in their attempts to interact successfully" (p. 56). The analysis of the Centrelink Hypothetical process indicates that

organisational communication problems rarely exist in isolation. For example, one major problem strand can be identified as:

1. a lack of human resources leading to

2. an inability by the organisation to provide adequate systems training which

3. leaves CSC staff with inadequate skills to interpret Centrelink policies.

The first two problems are resource problems leading to problem number three, which is a communication issue.

The Centrelink Hypothetical process (Chapter 4) highlighted many such cause-and-effect breakdowns between organisational communication, as well as issues of management, resources and organisational culture, and this is a significant use of the Hypothetical process.

However, not all organisational issues were seen in a negative light. For example, the questionnaire responses and post-Hypothetical interviews conveyed the sense of a consultative and participative workplace, where effective team-working could take place and positive group norms are supported. The pre-Hypothetical interviews revealed task and process conflict in the organisation, but the Hypothetical presentation uncovered no relationship conflict. Instead, it revealed a high performing group that could communicate effectively to resolve differences.

Many of the organisational problems articulated through the pre-Hypothetical research were confirmed during the presentation and then reaffirmed in post-Hypothetical interviews and documents. Although the aim of the Hypothetical intervention in the Centrelink case was to articulate organisational problems, it was just as important, in a clinical context, to point to solutions. The pre-Hypothetical research located and defined the problems in order to provide material for the storylines in the presentation. The Hypothetical presentation was able to give symbolic form to these problems, and, by highlighting the implications of such problems, help panelists to focus on specific solutions in post-Hypothetical activities.

It can be concluded from the selection of research methods and the findings from the Centrelink case, that while Hypothetical panelists spoke often of the need to find solutions, it was the post-Hypothetical follow-up activities that actually identified those solutions, or triggered organisational procedures to find solutions. This is not to report a failure with the Hypothetical intervention tool, but to note that within the time constraints and performance limitations of the presentation, it may not always be possible to articulate fully-formed solutions to dilemmas. On the contrary, this confirms the earlier observation that the Hypothetical tool is an effective spark or catalyst that promotes new learning.

Post-Hypothetical documentation reveals a management group wanting to involve a broad employee base in tackling the specific communication problems raised in the Hypothetical presentation. What is observed therefore, linking the pre-Hypothetical research and post-Hypothetical analysis, are continuous issue threads which can be fully explored by the triangulated research methods applied in the overall Hypothetical process. Some of these methods may already be used by the organisation, particularly in the context of regular communication auditing.

5.7.1 Recommendations

The Hypothetical process might be usefully incorporated into an organisation's communication audit. For example, a content analysis of pre- and post-Hypothetical Centrelink documents, pre-Hypothetical questionnaire, and of the elite interviews are all potential components of a conventional communication audit. Indeed, these and other audit methods, such as focus groups, technology analysis, team interaction analysis and communication logs, could be added to a particular Hypothetical process mix when specifically needed.

Given the potential for the Hypothetical to reveal organisational strengths and weaknesses, it could be profitably included as an intervention within a broader suite of communication audit tools. Neher (1996) asserts that the focus of a communication audit "is on evaluating the processes or systems of communication, not on evaluating individuals" (p. 328). However, as

the Hypothetical partially focuses on evaluating individuals for collecting data, it may provide an extra dimension to the traditional communication audit.

It is also important to articulate a protocol of 'freedom of speech' for Hypothetical participants with future clients. It is recommended that group consultations by the researcher/consultant to prospective participants would ensure that key messages about such 'freedoms' would be jointly shared and understood by participant employees and their supervisors/managers.

5.8 The Hypothetical as a scenario planning exercise

This study has revealed a close similarity in purpose and operational style between the Hypothetical process and the performance processes of scenario planning. Both activities utilise specific management decisions as the focus and starting point for their intervention, and both use the power of logic and imagination to create 'pictures' of the future. Both processes also have the potential to stimulate organisational members to 'shake their world-view', and identify implications for future decision-making. As highlighted by the literature review, this places the Hypothetical firmly in the scenario planning area of change management practice.

However, one may question, (for example) why scenario planners would work towards defining a number of credible futures, if those who must then choose between these futures, and make important changes may be inhibited in their decision-making by unproductive behavioural traits. An example of this phenomenon was revealed on a small scale in the Centrelink Hypothetical. A broad range of communication problems was revealed, some of them caused by a totally ineffective Intranet. Curiously, while Centrelink management was aware of this failing, no-one had ownership for fixing it, and so the problem got progressively worse. When the Hypothetical presentation dramatically accentuated and linked the Intranet issue to other systemic communication problems, the organisation appreciated the dangerous 'ricocheting' effect of their poor Intranet system. In this example, the Hypothetical scenario did not present a cogent and logical argument for change as the scenario planner might, but instead created 'pictures' of a malfunctioning communication system to stimulate a shift in

perception of the problem. While this reaffirms the need for both feeling and thinking amongst members, it is not to assert that the cognitive processes of scenario planning alone would not have arrived at a similar level of awareness and need for change.

5.8.1 Recommendations

It is suggested that the use of the Hypothetical could broaden the scope and add value to scenario planning outcomes, particularly as there is little or no attention paid to the importance of emotional capabilities in the scenario planning literature. The force behind scenario planning is 'the business idea', or the organisation's mental model and what drives it. Scenario planners make cognitive and logical sense of the workplace, but there is no formal recognition of the emotional competencies of those who must make macro decisions about the organisation, or who have to prioritise workplace issues in the context of available human and material resources. On the other hand, while the Centrelink case reveals the Hypothetical providing operational input into structural workplace issues (training, IT resources, Intranet), the intervention is often more illuminating when found observing how organisational decision-makers apply personal capabilities, behaviours and motivations to resolve workplace dilemmas.

For example, the Hypothetical tool may be applied towards the end of the scenario planning process, and may utilise the data from the futures or scenario plans that have emerged. Once a number of potential futures have been revealed to the organisation, a Hypothetical intervention could be created that focuses on aspects of these futures from the perspective of those who will have to implement them. The Hypothetical tool would be written to draw out how and why organisational members say and do what they do. As noted earlier in this chapter, the Hypothetical tool in this study demonstrates that it is a catalyst for change; it points towards solutions for decision-making that are developed and formulated into organisational strategy through post-Hypothetical activities. The Hypothetical may effectively discover why it is that when members are faced with a number of competing futures from a scenario planning exercise, they decide on one future in preference to another.

5.9 Conclusion

This study has sought to understand the Hypothetical as an intervention for facilitating and managing change, primarily through organisational communication. A range of qualitative research methods and the relevant literature have helped to define it as an intervention tool that fits within the scope and practice of scenario planning. Symbolic convergence theory highlights its performance attributes, particularly where the Hypothetical performance utilises simulations and role play based on a real organisational setting. Data from the Centrelink case study has more specifically revealed the qualities and functions of the Hypothetical as a research and intervention process from an interpretivist view of organisational life.

Finally, data from this study has confirmed that the Hypothetical is an exploratory tool for revealing emotional competencies and how they affect decision-making, problem solving and change management strategies. The scenario planning literature consulted for this study reveals that little or no attention is paid to the impact of emotional competencies of those involved in scenario planning. Consequently, future research into the Hypothetical and scenario planning could profitably explore how members' emotional and cognitive frameworks affect the management of communication and change in the well-functioning organisation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Brief — Getting support from Area Support Office — A Hypothetical

Brief
Getting the support from Area Support Office - A Hypothetical.

Date: Wednesday, 28 November 2001

Venue: To be advised

Time: 9.00am - 12 noon
- 2 hours for the hypothetical
- 1 hour for analysis e.g. areas we need to focus on, where do we go from here
- question and answer time included in this

Cost: $1500

The audience
Specifically Team Leaders but anyone in a leadership role or 'earmarked' for a leadership role would be appropriate. *(Audience involvement will be encouraged e.g. Michael might turn to the audience and say 'who has had a similar experience')*

The Panel (12-14 people)
- All Program Managers and relevant Business Managers.
- 4/5 Team leaders who are articulate and 'switched on' to the issues
- see point 3 for possible membership

Further Information:

Addressing your points individually:

1. ***Printed information on the role and activities of ASO***
   - as attached and more to come.

2. ***How Centrelink would like to see the ASO utilised (in the best of all possible worlds)***
   - open two way communication
   - responsive to: feedback, requests.
   - focussed on Area outlines and CSC outcomes.
   - if Team Leader in Network has an issue, know where to go for support and feels okay to do it (receives a welcoming response)
   - understand ASO boundaries and limitations
   - policy advice; helpdesks for problem solving utlised

3. ***Suggested panel members***

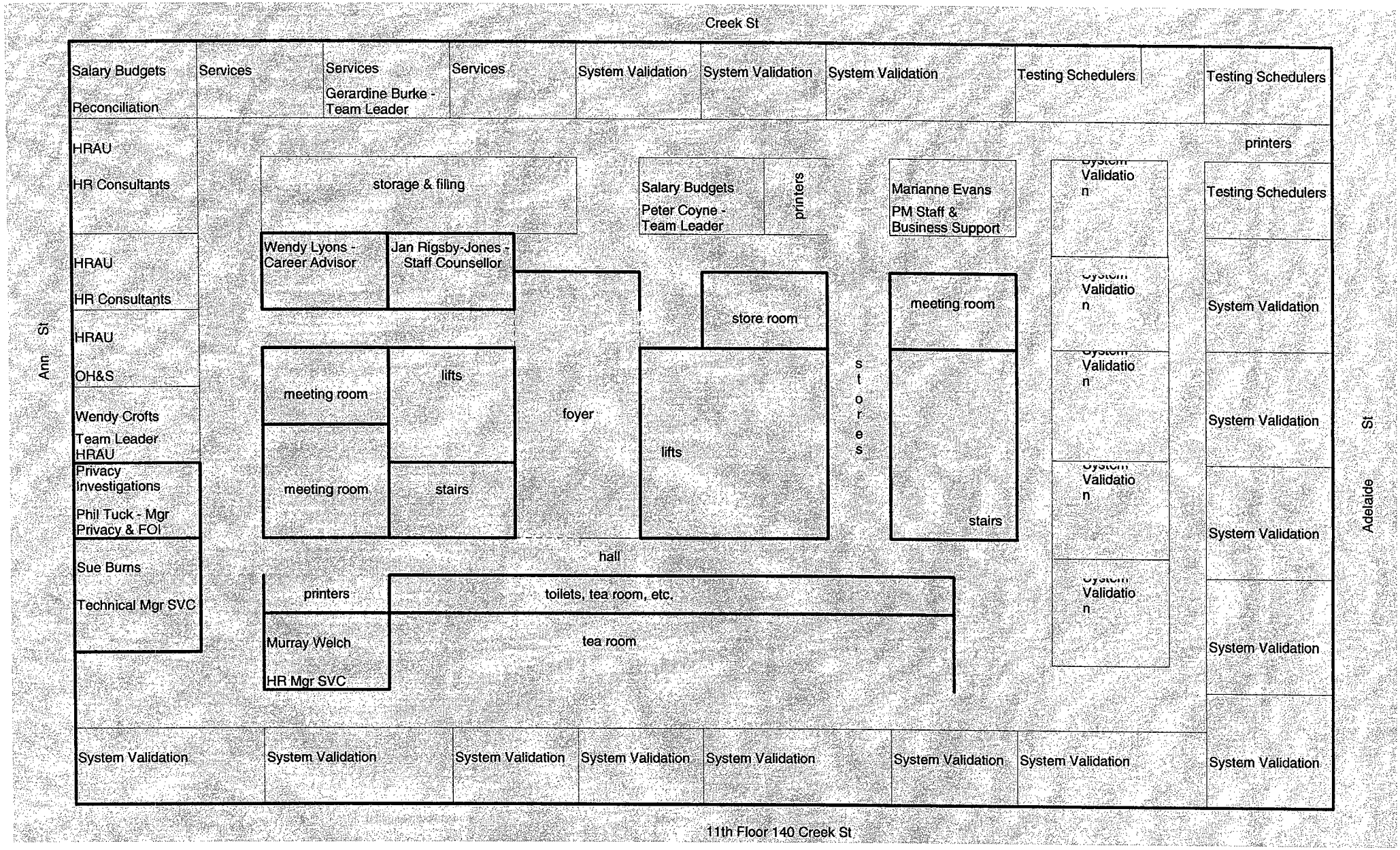
Paul Goodwin (Area Manager, Area Brisbane)
Melissa Fox (Australians Working Together)
Marianne Evans (Staff and Business Support)
Mike Neumann (Systems Support)
Sandra Hogan (Customer and Community Relations)
Frank Judd (Policy)
Business Manager ??(.....)
Desley Hargeaves?????
Suzan Anthony (Manager Social Work)????
Lisa Gordon (State Psychologist)
Team Leader x 3
FISO???
MSO???
Indigenous???
Colette Kinsella (Career Info Centre)

4. ***Goals of the hypothetical (issues that need to be addressed and those to be avoided)***

Issues to be addressed

- improved understanding of services and support offered by ASO
- making visible the invisible work done by ASO
- identify areas where ASO can improve service to the Network
- areas where partnerships can be formed or improved (between Network and ASO)

Issues to be avoided??????


Creek St
Salary Budgets
Reconciliation
Services
Services
Gerardine Burke - Team Leader
Services
System Validation
System Validation
System Validation
Testing Schedulers
Testing Schedulers
HRAU
HR Consultants
storage & filing
Salary Budgets
Peter Coyne - Team Leader
printers
Marianne Evans
PM Staff & Business Support
printers
Testing Schedulers
HRAU
HR Consultants
Wendy Lyons - Career Advisor
Jan Rigsby-Jones - Staff Counsellor
store room
meeting room
System Validation
HRAU
OH&S
meeting room
lifts
foyer
lifts
stores
System Validation
Wendy Crofts
Team Leader HRAU
Privacy Investigations
Phil Tuck - Mgr Privacy & FOI
meeting room
stairs
stairs
System Validation
System Validation
Sue Burns
Technical Mgr SVC
hall
printers
toilets, tea room, etc.
Murray Welch
HR Mgr SVC
tea room
System Validation
System Validation
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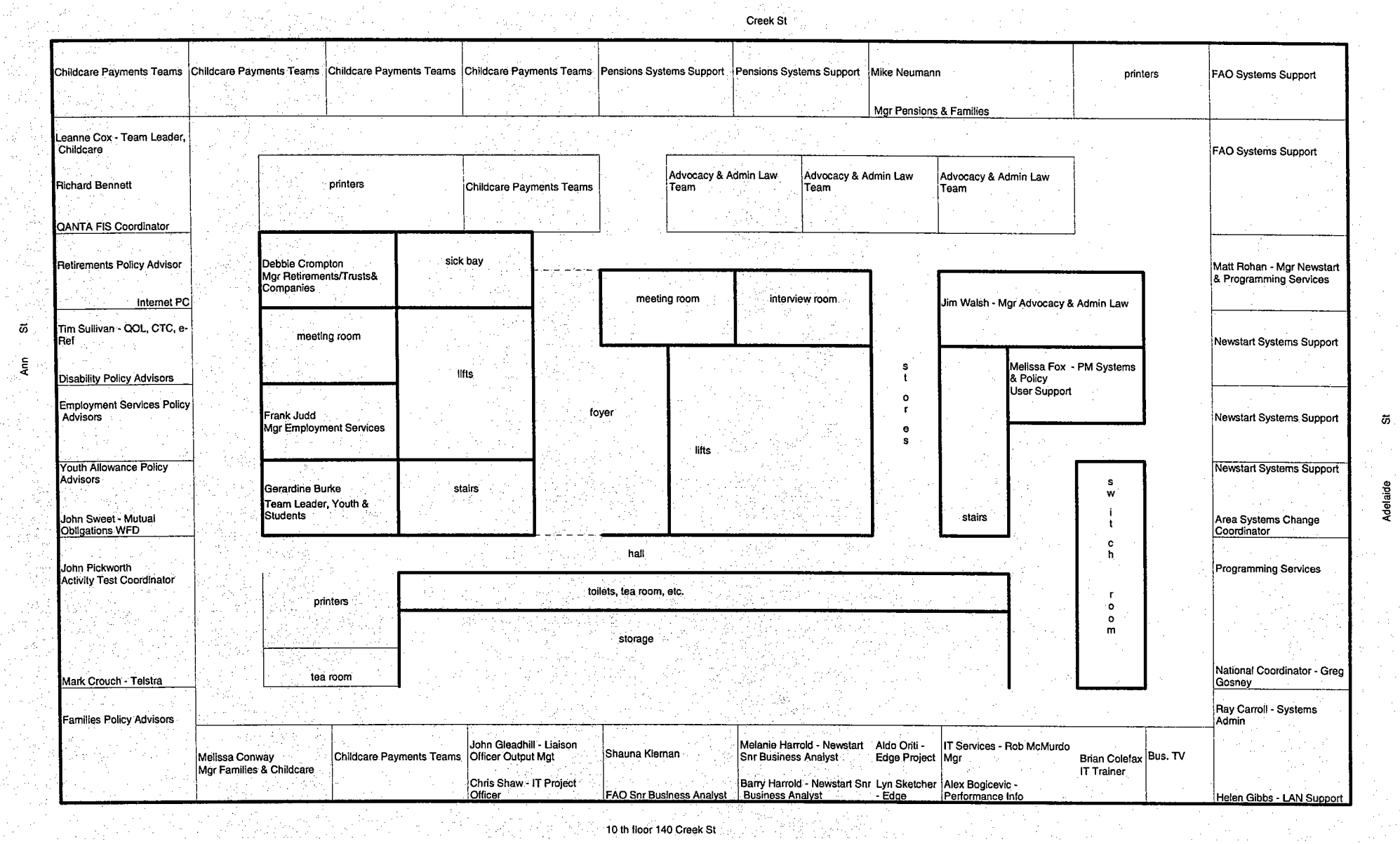
System Validation
Ann St
Adelaide St
11th Floor 140 Creek St


Creek St
Ann St
Adelaide St
Childcare Payments Teams
Childcare Payments Teams
Childcare Payments Teams
Childcare Payments Teams
Pensions Systems Support
Pensions Systems Support
Mike Neumann
Mgr Pensions & Families
printers
FAO Systems Support
Leanne Cox - Team Leader, Childcare
Richard Bennett
QANTA FIS Coordinator
printers
Childcare Payments Teams
Advocacy & Admin Law Team
Advocacy & Admin Law Team
Advocacy & Admin Law Team
FAO Systems Support
Retirements Policy Advisor
Internet PC
Debbie Crompton
Mgr Retirements/Trusts& Companies
sick bay
meeting room
interview room
Jim Walsh - Mgr Advocacy & Admin Law
Matt Rohan - Mgr Newstart & Programming Services
Tim Sullivan - QOL, CTC, e-Ref
Disability Policy Advisors
meeting room
lifts
Melissa Fox - PM Systems & Policy
User Support
Newstart Systems Support
Employment Services Policy Advisors
Frank Judd
Mgr Employment Services
foyer
lifts
stores
stairs
Newstart Systems Support
Youth Allowance Policy Advisors
John Sweet - Mutual Obligations WFD
Gerardine Burke
Team Leader, Youth & Students
stairs
switch room
Newstart Systems Support
Area Systems Change Coordinator
hall
John Pickworth
Activity Test Coordinator
printers
toilets, tea room, etc.
storage
Programming Services
Mark Crouch - Telstra
tea room
National Coordinator - Greg Gosney
Families Policy Advisors
Ray Carroll - Systems Admin
Melissa Conway
Mgr Families & Childcare
Childcare Payments Teams
John Gleadhill - Liaison Officer Output Mgt
Chris Shaw - IT Project Officer
Shauna Kiernan
FAO Snr Business Analyst
Melanie Harrold - Newstart Snr Business Analyst
Aldo Oriti - Edge Project
Barry Harrold - Newstart Snr Business Analyst
Lyn Sketcher - Edge
IT Services - Rob McMurdo Mgr
Alex Bogicevic - Performance Info
Brian Colefax IT Trainer
Bus. TV
Helen Gibbs - LAN Support
10 th floor 140 Creek St

Appendix 2: Centrelink questionnaire

CENTRELINK SURVEY

"Improving Communication in the Workplace"

Centrelink is constantly on the lookout for ways of improving communication between ourselves and with our clients.

This survey will contribute to that process. It will provide information to be used in conjunction with a 'hypothetical' to be conducted with middle management on December 13, 2001.

A second survey will be conducted some weeks after the 'hypothetical', which is being designed to stimulate participants to consider real workplace issues and problems. In particular we are exploring the impact of the Area Support Office on the wider CSC network. The whole project should prove most helpful for our future planning and communication strategies.

This is an exercise that is being conducted by communications consultant Michael Berry. Apart from commissioning Michael to conduct this project, Area Brisbane has also given him permission to use the data from the two surveys and the 'hypothetical' for his business masters degree at QUT.

The content and confidentiality of these surveys and the 'hypothetical' is being overseen by Area Brisbane ASO and supervised by QUT Graduate School of Business.

Thank you for agreeing to complete the following questions. Please return the completed questionnaire to me (11th floor, 140 Creek Street, Brisbane) before the hypothetical on December 13.

Section One: About Yourself
(Figures beside questions represent quantitative responses to the questionnaire)

Please circle the numbers which represent the most appropriate responses for you, in respect of the following:

1. Your Gender *(circle one)*

1. Male 46
2. Female 50

2. Number of years with Centrelink *(circle one)*

1. Less than 1 year
2. 2-5 7
3. 6-10 13

3. Job Status *(circle one)*

1. Manager 21
2. Team leader 49
3. Consultant/Specialist officer 26

4. 11-20 44
5. 21 + 32

4. I am employed: *(circle one)*
1. Full time 91 2. Part time 5

5. Are you competent in languages other than English?
state which languages and whether written and/or spoken competency:
3 only
written/spoken Turkish, Spanish, German, Croatian

2. *About your workplace*

1. My daily place of work is: *(tick one)*

Brisbane city ☐ 29

Brisbane suburbs ☐ 34

Sunshine Coast Cluster ☐ 19

Great Northern Region Cluster ☐ 14

2. How do you rate your confidence with handling computer software programs: *(tick one)*

VERY HIGH	HIGH	MODERATE	LOW	VERY LOW
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11	40	38	7	

3. I broadly understand the roles of the Area Support Office *(tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4	2	11	55	24

4. The most frequent way I receive information from the Area Support Office is via: *(tick one)*

e-mail 88 ☐

internal mail ☐

phone calls 2 ☐

Intranet home pages ☐

other employees in my office 1 ☐

my manager 5 ☐

other *(state)* ……...

……

5. What would be the most preferred way you would like to receive information from Area Support Office?

E-mail: 82 internal mail: 1 My manager: 9 Phone calls: 11 Meetings: 4 training/workshops: 2

6. Whenever I have a query that requires information from the Area Support Office, I can usually contact someone who can help me. *(tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3	2	9	61	24

FOR CSC STAFF:

7. I am satisfied that ASO staff understand and take account of the broad range of pressures and demands made upon the ASO. *(tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	13	22	34	4

8. I have ample opportunity to discuss with my peers what I think are important Centrelink issues affecting internal communication. *(Tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11	20	31	4	

FOR ASO STAFF:

9. I am satisfied that CSC staff understand and take account of the broad range of pressures and demands upon ASO staff. *(tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9	12	5	1	

10. I have ample opportunity to discuss with my peers what I think are important Centrelink issues affecting internal communication. *(Tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	4	9	15	3

11. There is a positive climate in Centrelink for voicing suggestions for improvements in internal communication. *(tick one)*

STRONGLY DISAGREE ☐	DISAGREE ☐	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE ☐	AGREE ☐	STRONGLY DISAGREE ☐
8	33	45	3	

12. Whenever I have a suggestion for change in Centrelink I usually discuss it first with: *(tick one)*

a colleague informally	62	☐	my immediate supervisor	22	☐
in a formal peer group meeting	4	☐	a relevant senior manager	6	☐

Other (specify) ……

13. Briefly relate one good experience you have had with Area Support Office in which you were involved.

An ASO manager saw the value of a training package I was working on and encouraged me to complete my work, and she did much promotion of the package.

I had great assistance from both WC and SS in HR regarding a potential poor performance problem I had with a staff member. They assisted me with developing a duty statement and a set of performance measures which was a great help.

Resolving problems for client with disability. Caring team-ASO always good support.

Employment services — youth and students. Team leaders meetings.

Dealing with HR issues HRAU very supportive and provide any reasonable service. In particular, clarification of PA issues.

Working with another team on a project and getting a lot of support from that team.
Liaison with PAU to organise some very much needed training — provided quickly — very helpful.

Participated in new Area Managers "vertical slice" meeting. Good to see new AIM interested in staff (from all over the area) opinions.

Had an issue with lost/misplaced files. Approached local IT support person who immediately came to my work station, located files and moved them back to original location. Also explained how they were lost. Top support.

Needed PR products urgently. Also staff went out of their way to seek supply of literature.

Satisfactory outcome to a "Deny Access" case which was not providing sufficient protection.

Working with policy staff on a request for compensation by a customer because of possible office error. ASO staff member helpful, positive and customer payment approved.

Full support for a difficult inquiry. Office went beyond the call of duty to ensure I had correct info and ensured I fully understood.
Generally speaking, response times are very good when policy/systems issues arise.
Have had constant dealing with policy, and they have all been good.

Everyone helpful.

The timely, knowledgeable and complete understanding of communication prior to and during the implementation of FAO. A staff confidence builder.

FOI unit was helpful when I needed to talk to them.

FJ's information and availability over Ansett customers — especially on week ends.

I was selected to form a Focus group on coaching which was excellent. It was reassuring to know that ASO was getting input from the network before implementing a strategy.

Co-ord and program TRG for CSC — co-operation provided successful outcome.

Employment services help from Elaine Gibson was wonderful when I needed help for a Job network member, to exit clients from intensive assistance for customers who were not activity-tested.

Seeking information for a project I was involved and I did not know the range of data that was available on system. I was given timely and friendly support in dealing with areas that I was not competent in.

Frank Judd and his EMS staff provide a fantastic service - it is always a good experience dealing with them.

Was part of a coaching group (which was much needed) organised by ME and RG.

Support from ASO to achieve results with Trainees Cert3 & Cert4.A major initiative such as the recent FAO reconciliation have been well communicated and staff have felt informed and knowledgeable over the latest developments.

Mostly customer issues — BO for a particularly difficult one EP's also via CRU.

Booking cars is always a positive experience. J & co. do all the work. I tell them what I need and they arrange it. This must often involve a lot of juggling and negotiating, but it all happens with a minimum of fuss.

The Forging Ahead course was extremely useful and well presented.

Negotiating with business improvements to decentralised training. They always seem willing to run additional causes in the GNC to save costs for CSC.

Needed advice about a cluster budget and JW from resources unit came to our meeting and gave us advice about improvements to our salary planning process.

Sought assistance for CSC staff from HRU excellent response.

Needed help to understand system processing SSG response was very quick, problem had to be escalated to NSO but was informed all the time of progress and eventual resolution.

Risk assessment VCW when doing business plan for Bayside.

The recent Planning for your retirement seminar was excellent.
Issues raised with ASO have been passed on to NSO and suitable resolutions found/worked on.

Great support/advice from HR unit. Timely and accurate.

Numerous good experiences with the business and policy teams. Business improvement for their support and guidance with staff teams, policy for their endless fountain of knowledge and their "nothing is too much trouble" attitude.

Confirming third part contract for KPC workers.

As I'm in ASO I'm not sure how to answer this — but I find program managers of policy areas very responsive and co-operative regarding distribution of budget funding.

I deal daily with one or all of the following teams: CRU, FOI & privacy, HRA. I have only ever had good experiences with these teams.

All contacts are usually positive - can't recall anything exceptional — staff are usually helpful and willing to do whatever they can to help. HR staff are particularly helpful, excellent support staff with problems whether personal or work related.

FOI and Privacy are always helpful.

AWT presentations by JE. HRAU advice and intervention. Practical support — posters, flyers, photography from communications unit. Business improvements workshops. Programs e.g., Forging ahead.

I wanted to place a Centrelink WFD column in a local medical newsletter. I received a very timely approval from area BRN.

E-mailed request to policy advisor and received response within 24 hours.

Forging ahead training.

At Nundah, the business improvement team ran a "RCW" for a partnership arrangement with local school guidance officers and community groups. This established an excellent basis for a community partnerships.

I was required to organise a training course in ASO. I was unfamiliar with what was required and where resources were to be found. I received excellent assistance and guidance from several people.

Recent AWT risk management workshop was well planned and conducted.

Very close partnership between MSU-MSO's and policy.

Area support office has been very helpful in listening to our difficulties with the old JSA listing is for outstanding secondary assessments and as a result the new style listings are not wasting so much of our precious time.

Technical policy support and program manager take interest in actual customer situations and workflow.

Usually anything to do with business improvement.

I found systems support very helpful in finding a solution to a system error.

Support from HRA unit

JE AWT sessions last week were informative. Pitched at CSO level and contained current detail about AWT initiatives. J and I co-facilitated and it gave me an opportunity to push several messages.

Employment Services meetings. ABST (ALT) meetings.

Finance & services provided great support when took over admin functions.

Information received from Policy and the way it was received by PW.

Don't have much to do with ASO.

Support for staff within office with difficult work situation. Staff counsellor.

Support in establishing a new process.

Getting changes made to the system (mainframe).

Being thought of and asked to participate in a NSO working group on CEN — that is, valuing the expertise out in the network and providing opportunities.

Always have good response from policy units and program managers that I deal with.

The opportunity to participate in the Vertical Slice meeting in October.

Training provided by policy unit when registered.

Staff counsellor is always very supportive when I contact regarding health of a CSO and is very quick to follow up with CSO concerned.

Prompt handling of many queries with quick, if not immediate responses. Finance and services always extremely helpful.

I have had excellent response times from some areas of ASO previously, both in the CSC and in ASO. IT services are always brilliant with their assistance and knowledge.

When there are guest speakers in training they are on time and helpful and communicate prior to the meetings e.g., HRAU.

Asking for assistance from policy and having an immediate positive response.

25 year service awards presentation.

I have had dealings with the work environment unit with relation to poor performance, and each time I had a question relating to the process, or having the commonwealth medical officer involved, the area support office were very helpful, and promptly got back to me to advise the process.

Involved with Ansett seminars — the interaction and teamwork in a very fluid situation policy-wise was eye-opening.

An application to spend money on technology that would improve service.

Positive feedback from area manager over my performance.

HR unit are very supportive for intervention when staff issues are enmeshed that require independent resolution.

A great easy to understand presentation, BPR & AWT presentation re: New business processes.

BPR & AWT presentations — I presented and the interest level was surprisingly high.
ES visits program — 1 day at each office.

14. Briefly relate one difficult experience you have had with Area Support Office in which you were involved

On a day when I was dealing with a customer with complex and urgent needs, all of the relevant policy staff were away from the ASO — I had to contact NSO customer segment people for assistance.

I've received incorrect information from PAU on various occasions which makes it extremely difficult for decision making.

Problems occur using IES system

Trying to get some direction in relation to accountable forms EBT: No clear person to speak to. Eventually found information in Intranet.

There seems to be a lack of communication with information some meetings. I get my minutes to some meetings via the network and I stay on the mailing list for this reason.

CCDA case which took over 8 weeks. Staff member I spoke to was neither co-operative or helpful — in fact, was rude.

Getting same info from different sources in ASO.

Still trying to get a policy representative up to Gympie to workshop self employment areas.

Difficulty in satisfying target, benchmark requirements where the CSC has a number of priorities where ASO person may have one area only and expects theirs to be met.

Decision was made by manager who had delegation. However this decision was questioned by ASO officer, they did not appear to be listening to me.

Several times I have received different answers from policy people relating to the same query.

The complete lack of effective communication and training during the devolvement of the pensioner education supplement. A staff confidence destroyer.

System issue: Was advised they could not help me, however didn't try and work out other ways to help.

Share resources of staff being swallowed up in the area, but staff not being informed or consulted.

Attended a workshop on HR issues which I felt was a total waste of time as it did not cover specifically the issues that were in my office. I felt it would have been more appropriate for HR to come to my office and discuss with T/C of my office the current issues.

It took over 4 hours to establish the one correct form needed by a customer to apply for 24 hr child care. Family payments team had stated the customer needed to sign a form so daycare provider needed help in establishing which one. Was initially told the wrong one and daycare provider queried it - was then told it was another one etc. etc.

Trying to get information on who to contact not what as the Intranet page does not reflect all TEAs.

Every time I phone a particular unit a staff member answers without identifying himself or where he works. I always have to ask — who is this? to make sure I've phoned the correct place & he always sounds annoyed.

Compensation claim for customer. Time taken with policy.

Most problems stem from NSO communication, which in turn stem from political issues with partnerships.

A touch of arrogance with some ASO staff and "we know best" attitude (which can be misplaced by people who have not worked in CSC and in cases would be afraid to. Believe most ASO staff do understand that they are to provide support and do so to the best of their ability.

Sometimes not getting a timely response from a voice message I have left can present a problem.

Nothing major. Sometimes the time frames for responses are unreasonable.

Difficulty tracking down correct person to speak to in relation to CEN query (equipment question). Similar re OH&S and equipment issue about phones and head-sets. Very helpful and easily resolved, but frustrating finding 'right' person.

Dealing with (some) managers who don't really 'get' Centrelink, or truly believe in it.

No problems with area Brisbane. Old office in NSW another story!

Rolling profile continuous discussions.

Sometimes find some individual staff intractable.

Contacted one of the policy teams for info - had to leave a message to contact me on their voice mail but was never called back — had to f/up a couple of days later — this was a customer asking for a review and had

received incorrect and inconsistent info from Centrelink several times previously — this does not enhance our image to public when there is added delays in these complex cases.

I tried to get some IT information from someone who wasn't very helpful and was quite abrupt.

Policy suggestion: where there was (is) a clear significant problem with existing policy. Lack of support & advocacy to NSO by ASO. Merely passed on the issue to NSO without any active role. Passed on NSO 'advice' back to CSC with no questioning.

Overall good. Some time ago I wanted to find out if some stats results were accurate. I found area BRN and referral to Canberra could not give the required details. Was continually referred to someone else.

E-mailed request for assistance to same policy advisor more than once (on more than one occasion) with no response.

Sometimes ASO is the meat in the sandwich when we are chasing something - policy or advice, procedures etc from NSO.

When I first moved to ASO I was in an information void. I was not on any e-mail lists and was unsure what information I needed and where to get it and who to get it from.

Some time ago, both myself and a CSO in the call centre both rang policy and were given different information about the same situation (YAL policy).

The only difficulty I have encountered with Area support office has been a problem meeting short time frames for responses/feedback and this has been because NSO have given area office limited time.

Trying to get PES training.

A defective administration case took ages to be finalised by policy.

Insufficient time given to action a request.

Frustration over unwillingness to adopt a consistent approach to check the checking — should be centralised to reduce variations across the area if we want to GIR.

Review support not fully understanding of pressures and demands across CSC.

Very difficult to get through to systems, especially when there is urgency on a case.

Differing information about subject.

An unrealistic expectation and time frame being set.

No response to my e-mail from policy unit.

There have been one or two occasions whilst working in the CSC where I contacted ASO for clarification and found that the answers I received were conflicting or the 'experts' knew less than I did.

Keeping home page up to date.

Getting (within the team) two different opinions from area policy almost simultaneously.

Trying to get agreement for rewards and recognition funding.

Request support from a team in specialist area, but it was not provided.

Trying to get out of the building late one evening and getting someone to help.

Some ASOLT meetings are difficult — issues of power of different personalities.

Appendix 3: Centrelink Hypothetical — audio transcript

Centrelink Hypothetical — audio transcript

The Centenary of Federation Carnival is well and truly over. No more firework displays, no more flower shows, no more historical enactments. But at Centrelink in 2002 the carnival is only just beginning for some Centrelink employees. This is the first year of the big bonanza for baby-boomers. JP, it's payout time isn't it? What starts to happen this year?

Baby-boomers? What are you talking about Michael? I start to retire, maybe not this year, but maybe the next year, very shortly perhaps.

So is early retirement attractive to you J?

It is, Michael, and I guess to a lot of people about my age group, because of some peculiarity in our superannuation system, a lot of people might think we talk about numbers. An e-mail message the other day said about 12% of our staffing in our area office are 54 or over. So there is a fair bit of incentive for people of that age to retire early.

And you GB, are you planning early retirement?

I have been planning early retirement for many years, Michael. For similar reasons to what John just described, there is certainly an incentive there to think about it and that is probably as far as I have taken it at this stage.

Okay, ME, do you think you will be going through to 60?

I have still got a long way to go to get to 60. But no I don't think I will be here until I am 60.

It is a concern though ME, the number of skilled and experienced baby-boomers in Centrelink who are eyeing off early retirement.

It is a concern for us because we do have a large number of staff within area Brisbane.

How many would you say?

Over 50 we have got about 265 working in the area, so if we have got to do something we are going to lose a lot of expertise as well, so we need to make sure that the people we are bringing are skilling up to replace that expertise.

DC, retirements are your speciality aren't they? Are we losing the wisdom of the elders, do you think?

Oh, definitely, not only in Centrelink but in the community as a whole.

What do you think, A? What do you think about this loss of talent?

I don't know how we can replace it.

You don't know how we can replace it?

Yes.

Well out there in the network offices in January 2002, there is more than summer heat beating at your doors. TP, you have got a high families component out there at Bayside, haven't you?

Yes.

One of the highest in area Brisbane, wouldn't you say?

Yes.

Well it certainly shows this morning, because there is an agitated queue out there. They're waiving their overpayment letters from Centrelink. Some dispute your calculations, others just want to abuse you. You're going to need some help this morning, T. Who are you going to call?

Well in that situation, really it is up to the staff in the office to deal with that because that's what is in our face that morning and we are the only ones that can deal with it and usually it will be my staff calling on me to deal with that.

Would you expect some help say from MC, Program Manager Families?

If there were some complex cases where we couldn't see how an overpayment has been calculated or there was a question in relation to the policy behind that, then yes.

Well, sadly T you can't get her on the phone of course because she is taking a similar call from AN at Gympie. CI and KF are also on hold. You would both like some help from M wouldn't you, C?

In that situation I generally deal with job seekers or students, so if there was an overpayment to do with that side of things, then yes I would need to get through. If it was more complex than what we could handle in the office.

K, would you like some help from M?

My expectation would be more of that I would want her to be aware of what was going on rather than requiring assistance from her because we would have to deal with that ourselves, but it would be important for her to be aware of the impact that was happening so she could pass that on within her network.

You are all very considerate of M. This problem though M, of overpayments has been anticipated hasn't it? After all it was before Christmas 2001 that the Minister announced that letters would go out?

Yes, that's right. The Minister made an announcement early in December that the letters were going to be sent out and those are for debts that have been on the system out there since July 2001, so they have been building up.

How many people are affected in area Brisbane?

Last time I looked it was certainly over 20,000 people.

20,000 families?

Yes.

What can you do to ease that work offices through this initial angry period of public response?

I think that K's point was probably spot-on that we need to know what the response is so we can feed it back to national support office. In a situation where the workload becomes over the top, then there are probably ways we can look at trying to alleviate that maybe through some help from the core centres or between offices. But also, someone else said that we may be called on for the more complex cases if there are some cases that we really can't explain well to the customer, then it might be one of the specialist officers in the team with me who could help sort that out.

In fact, M, although you are part of area support office, your unit actually spends most of its time on other matters. Can you explain the breakdown of your portfolio?

We've got a couple of different things happening, probably not all our time spent on other matters, but because we have got some national projects we are working on, there are a couple of people who are working almost exclusively on those. The two permanent families policy officers are devoted to issues that are within the area, and that's the sort of help this functions, casework and other things. We have got a couple of people at the moment who are on secondment on a national project on the parenting training material and learning needs analysis and one person working on job redesign trials for parenting payment. So for me, that would mean probably about one third of my time would go towards those sort of network issues, a third toward the national projects and about a third to the child care payment team.

Out in the network, is that how you see various support in FAO and your involvement? About a third of the time given to you. Is that how you see it? Is anybody surprised at that

amount of allocation of time? No you are not surprised, excellent. T, does that gel with how you see FAO operating?

I would have thought it would have been more.

More to the network?

Yes, if they are our support, then I would like to think they are for us a bit more than a third of the time.

Do you agree with that? Just nods will do, no names. Yes I am seeing a few nods out here. How much time T would you say, percentage wise?

It should be the majority, more than 50%.

OK. GB, 2002 starts off very well for you. At the end of last year you put in a pretty impressive bid for a pilot study that would see Centrelink take over the child support agency business. One of the first e-mails that you open up this morning, January 2002, is from Canberra and it is to tell you the good news Gary, you won the bid. If area Brisbane gets this right G, this could mean an accelerated career move for you, couldn't it?

My word yes. I am not sure in what direction though.

Well G, you haven't done it yet. You've got three months for the pilot and $200,000. What are your priorities and will you involve all the area network or just two or three offices?

I guess priority one would be to sit down and identify primarily who the stakeholders are in this process. That would be step one in the development of a plan to make all that work. In looking at the issues that we need to cover, and having had some experience in this type of thing before we'd really need to examine the child support network in terms of what sort of a culture have they been working in, in the past, what sort of a culture has Centrelink has got and if we are forming a new organization rather than bringing the child support people on board then we would need to look at what sort of a culture this new organization would have,

or that we would like it to have. Then develop something from there in terms of a whole range of other processes, we would have to identify exactly how we are going to do it in terms of the people issues.

G, you have got three months, not three years.

Yes. We work very quickly in the area office. We could do that reasonably quickly by talking to the stakeholders in both organizations and then develop some of the plans to take it forward. A major part of it would be to involve the whole area, I don't think we could do it, even though we are talking about a pilot, we would still need everyone to know about it.

So the whole network would need to know about it. You wouldn't involve the whole network?

If you are only doing it in one or two sites then our primary focus would be in the sites we are doing the pilot. But we would make sure the communication strategy let everyone in the area know.

Okay. BH, it is the same January morning for you in your Toowong office. As you log onto Centrenet, you look uneasily out of the office window at the queue of customers on the footpath. They all seem to be clenching a Centrelink letter in their hands. Last year you helped out G with that child support bid. There is an e-mail from G this morning telling you we have won the bid. Actually B, G wants you on a special steering committee to work on staffing issues. It will mean a meeting in Brisbane once a week for the next 3 months. Have you got time to do that?

Once a week for the next 3 months. Yes.

You have got time for that, okay. Toowong has a high proportion of FAO customers, your office will be one of six in G's pilot. As the manager at Toowong, what would you want for your office in terms of resources?

All of them. I think you would want to make sure it was well supported by both information expertise and certainly emotional and professional support for those who need to be there. You have to be very careful with a pilot, this is what happens. When they are rolled out to everyone without that level of support we find it doesn't work. Want significant resources given it is a big change in the way we do stuff.

Could you put a figure on an extra staff member – two, three?

No, I couldn't.

Are you concerned that a new child support function will mean a return to a more policing role for Centrelink?

I would be concerned that we would be taking on work that is volatile with a lot of confrontation in it, but then if our goal is linking Australian Government services and making a difference to the Australian community, then it could be good for us to do this work. We have to be very careful how we did it.

You are concerned though aren't you that this perception of Centrelink as a policing agent?

Yes, yes.

This would add to it wouldn't it really, given that the agency's current operation.

We would have an enforcement role which we have now in a range to some things, but yes it would increase a proportion of our enforcement role.

MC, this steering committee that G's organizing sounds like it is up your street too. Yes?

Yes.

What would you bring in terms of this concern about resources and the way that Centrelink is perceived.

Probably from the contact that I have with the child support agency I am in the position to understand from their perspective what their customers are like. Some of the meetings that I attend involve agencies that work with parents who are separated and who have liabilities or otherwise receiving child support, so I will be able to bring that perspective along and also an understanding of policy perspective of how the child support legislation works and how it interacts with our family assistance legislation.

Good. G, two good people on your committee. But you do know that you are going to get some resistance from the network over resources for your pilot study. You have heard it all before, robbing Peter to pay Paul. You are going to need a seasoned performer to chair this steering committee if you are going to get network support. Don't you agree?

Yes, I do.

What kind of chairperson are you looking for? What sort of personality do you want?

We would be looking for someone who could very quickly gain an understanding of what's important to the network staff and listen to their concerns and come up with a strategy to address those concerns so they would have to have very good analytical skills and also have well developed communicative skills so they could talk to staff in large numbers but also one-on-one and have the capacity to deal and negotiate with the CPSU union to make sure they were co-operative in the process.

Sounds like a diplomat to me G. Yes?

We have people in our organization that have done this sort of work before and they are still here and they would be hiding for sure, but I am sure we can find them.

Okay, a diplomat. It sounds like you ME. Do you consider yourself a diplomat?

Sometimes, not always.

Sometimes you have to be confrontational.

Sometimes I think you need to be.

Are you willing to help G out to facilitate this new child support program.

Yes, I think I am willing to help him out. Just this once.

You will need to take the network along with you as G says, won't you?

Certainly will.

You can hear it now, can't you M, no not more work. How can you pitch this to them, in fact you have got some network staff here now. Ask for their help?

Well I suppose first of all we would need to work out how we could get input from people and the process that would involve them to be able to tell us what their concerns are.

You talk to them M.

What are your concerns? What are your problems or issues with us taking on child support agency work?

Would it apply to the country as well as the city?

I think we would have to wouldn't we, because we would need to be able to look at how it worked in a rural setting as well as a metropolitan setting. I think one of our 6 would have to be from a rural area.

Like Bundaberg. So you are actually volunteering are you P? So you're keen to get your staff on board? What do you think your staff's concerns are?

We would be taking on board customer base…

So do you think your staff would be willing to communicate that to some other staff throughout the area as well so that they could talk about their experiences?

Yes.

KF, you are in this child support study.

That would surprise my manager.

Well K, you have got lots of hippy children on the Sunshine Coast haven't you. What are you going to need to handle this new workload?

Well definitely staff would be an issue. We would need a lot of support and knowledge. Liaison with other sites who have already got CSA because we have no involvement with that at all at the moment. Definitely I would want to know up front what sort of impact they're envisaging. What sort of timeframe we are looking at and what sort of outcomes, who's going to be looking into this matter, who's going to be assessing how it is going, what sort of monitoring is going to be happening, how much time involved in the monitoring, reporting etc. So how much of my time is going to be involved as well.

Okay. A you are in this pilot as well. What do you think you need?

If you have got experienced people going into the pilot how to backfill behind them, given it is only a short period of time, it doesn't give us much time with temps and the same things. What are the outcomes, what do we have to achieve?

Do you consider yourself a rural office?

Yes, we do.

A fully fledged rural office. You are outside the influence of Brisbane?

Yes, definitely.

Sounds like you are lucky A. T. you're another one in this pilot study, what do you think you need?

Definitely the resources, the staff, training, to be able to backfill if we are getting experienced people, but everyone is going to get questions about it, you can't just limit those people to be the ones to deal with the CSA enquiries.

GB, is $200,000 enough to do this pilot?

That would depend on who you talked to. Given my experience in talking to the network managers, I think I know the answer would be no. But I think when we sat down and discussed the processes that we need time to undertake, particularly looking at the feasibility and proof of concept study we would have done earlier on, we could make do with that amount of money and if necessary and we found it wasn't enough further down the track, we could borrow some from the hickey bank.

Okay. CI, your January Monday morning at Chermside hasn't started all that well. Your manager's called in sick so you are in charge. You have got 23 e-mails to get through and already there seems to be an unusually long queue of customers outside waving pieces of paper. One of the Friday's e-mails is from the office at Stones Corner. They have been processing Iraqi refugees and they are sending you a young couple today who claim to have family living in Chermside. They will be here in a couple of hours, you are going to need an interpreter. Does Chermside have a multi-cultural services officer?

The northern cluster of five offices does have one and she is available and we all have her number if she is not in our office on that day. Monday morning she would be, yes.

Normally she would be C, but this morning she won't be. She's got the same bug that your manager has got, so she can't make it. Now you don't have an interpreter on the CSC directory that you can get to, in fact there is no directory of MSOs, there is no multi-cultural homepage for area Brisbane either. What are you going to do, who are you going to call?

J.

You are going to call JP?

The employment services part of area office to see if there is anyone there who can advise me where a multi-cultural officer is that we could use. If that didn't come to fruition or not being anything within the organization, I would have to look without.

You try to call J, but his phone is engaged. SH, you can't just type in an interpreter can you, on the Centrenet search?

No you can't. You would have to go into your reference page and go to 'M' for multi-cultural and that would bring you up to a multi-cultural job aid that would help you work through that process.

Well C, it is not something you are familiar with obviously, you are staring at the Centrenet screen and you decide that you will click on mutant cows. Why not, it is as logical as anything else. It starts with 'M'. You would click common topics, then you would click assisting customers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. You get a contact, you're lucky, you actually do get hold of JP in employment services. By the way, did you know that is where you get hold of interpreters? That is where they come from.

No, it is not. I am glad you would have rung J, it would have been a good start, he would have know where to go but in fact the person to ring if you want an interpreter is Lyn Cox and she works in my programme with Brigid who is in the multi-cultural unit. It is available for all programs, not just for employment.

Is the network, S, familiar with that if there is that need?

Yes.

There is also a telephone interpreter service, something we could utilize.

GB, there is another good news e-mail for you this morning. It is the area manager, PG. Centrelink has asked him to go to Canberra to head up the Guiding Coalition. He wants you

to take over as area manager and Canberra's come back very quickly and confirmed a two year appointment. Something you would look forward to?

With some reservation. The question was asked, why and that would be one of the questions I would ask too.

Why you were appointed?

Why I am being offered, because with that comes a certain expectation that at some point in time I might be asked to live in Canberra or some other State which at this point in time I am probably not going to agree to. There would be some further discussion to be had I think.

You are staying here in Brisbane as area manager, there is no problem about that. What are your priorities in this new job, steady as she goes or some key changes?

Initially there wouldn't be any major changes, we have our set of priorities at the moment and all of our network managers and our business managers are aware of those. From time to time they change marginally and emphasis changes from one issue to another and it would be just a matter of making sure that all of our leadership team is kept abreast of all of those issues.

TP, you have got a concern about the priorities of the ASO and those of the network. Would you like to tell us what those problems are and would you like to put them to G in his new role. He's looking for input.

It seems a lot of the time that what is coming from area, is the big picture push about Centrelink's strategic direction and where we are going, but in the network we still seem to be struggling to get it right. I don't see that it lines up, we are getting the big picture and I know that getting right is part of the big picture sort of stuff, but what we are getting from the area is more about, well this is what Centrelink is about, not about this is how you can do your job.

I guess it's important from an area perspective and from the executive perspective that we do paint the big picture from time to time so that people in the network know exactly where we are going. I take on board your feedback if you require more detailed information, direction, support, assistance then we in the area office will have to look at how we do that. That is our role.

T, you had a good example of something that didn't work for you involving the family actual means test, didn't you. That went over a couple of years. Can you explain again, this was a priority thing where you didn't seem to get what it was you wanted out of the resources?

When we took over Youth Allowance in 98 we took on obviously the assessing of the youth allowance payments which involved the family actual means test which was quite complex and difficult and as a CSO at the time I was assessing something that I really had no idea of what I was doing and we were getting feedback through audits, 'you are not doing this right', but it wasn't until a couple of months ago anything from area saying this is actually how you do it, so there was no specific technical training on that aspect of what we were expected to do for at least 2 years.

Out in the network, G's in the job, he wants to know what priorities there should be. Any broad bullet points from the network? Please G we must do this, this is a priority? You can e-mail him, because his phone's engaged. No priorities? Everybody's very happy G, I think you are going to focus on lack of technical training.

Even the area's definition of technical training seems to be different from what the network's is.

We will come to technical training. That is a good one. Any more in terms of resources, priorities? This is a very impressive gallery, you are going to have a really breeze of a time as acting area manager. How do you actually see this balance of priorities between the area office and the network.

I guess I have to listen to the messages and if the message is new initiative training and technical training isn't addressing the needs then we need to have a look at what the requirement is and how we might better address that. Having said that, some years ago we traded off a lot of centralized technical training and put those resources into the network, so we would be also talking in this process to the managers about where they really want those resources and if the push is for more centralized technical training then they may have to be a shift in resources and that would be an interesting discussion.

Now that you are area manager, how will you let the network know about your views and the proposed changes perhaps that you intend to make in area Brisbane? What's the form of communication you are going to have with your network?

It probably wouldn't be one form, there would be probably be a hybrid version of communications that would go out. I am a firm believer in talking to people face to face and that would be one of my primary aims. We are a big area and it takes some time to get across to people in a face to face environment. So we may have to use the electronic medium whether it be video, electronic mail. I think it would be combination of things, but certainly face to face.

T, GB is quite impressed with your analytical mind. Bayside needs a new manager at the moment and he has decided it should be you. Are you excited about that?

No. Not at all.

Do you have a choice about this?

Do I?

You always have choices and they come at a cost.

There's choices and choices.

Well this is a choice you can't refuse. You have got a new team leader in Cleveland. He is from interstate and he is not quite sure what kind of support systems he has around him to help him out. What can you give him to read T? He is left-brain sort of guy, so he likes to see cascade diagrams with boxes and arrows and job descriptions. Do we have a publication that sets out the area support executives, business managers, program managers with their programs and photographs etc.?

Not that I am aware of.

Not that you are aware of. SH, do we have a publication that sets all this out for us?

No I am sorry T, we will just have to walk you through that verbally.

So we don't have a publication that explains area support office.

As of last week we do now have an on-line publication. It hasn't been publicized out to network as yet and it was primarily just linked a week ago. It does go through the area leadership team, it goes through the executive and some of the roles the executives are playing, especially with the core business managers, which may not be fully understood within the network. It also moves into the area of support office and it shows a structure there across the different program managers we have. It also has the responsibilities under each of those program managers. Unfortunately, T with the person who is coming in as a team leader role, may not be able to get the full information of what those portfolio holders are, because we haven't actually got that information in there yet. That is something we are working on.

So, T can't get access to that, and either can you C because you would like to know this breakdown wouldn't you? Do you see a lack of clear definition here of area support office?

Yes, I have never seen a document of who does what role in area office or who you contact for a certain issue if need be. I have never seen a job description.

ME, how long have we had area support office?

Been there for nearly 4 years. It has taken us a while hasn't it.

GB, is this a problem, not having a clear roadmap to explain area support office? Given its central role and given the turnover in staff that we are obviously seeing?

It certainly is a problem and I must admit I was surprised some weeks ago to find out that the area homepage wasn't operational for all staff and didn't describe accurately and in detail all of the area support functions. So it has been recognized as a problem.

So is this a priority then for your new management?

Well it is and we have spoken about it recently with the area office people responsible for this and we have a plan to fix it.

It is a bit of a misnomer isn't it, area support office, it has much more to support than area Brisbane, is that right?

More than Area Brisbane, that is correct.

BH, is this a case of needing perhaps a more clearly defined role for the ASO? Is it a matter of having a totally separate vision for the area support office?

Yes, I think the area support office does need a very clear vision about what it is there to achieve, so that all those who work in area support office are very clear about why they are there and what they are meant to do. At a level higher than the individual function and task they do. I think the actual term area support office indicates what it is meant to be, is probably a good starting point.

MN, the role of the national support office can be a grey area too can't it? Do you think out network is clear about what the NSO does and the ASO does?

Certainly not, even from our particular group which deals regularly with national support office, we don't fully understand how they operate, they change their structure very regularly

and a lot of the times when we questioned how they actually operate, they can't even explain it either. So I believe the network would have great difficulty in trying to keep up with the current structure, even to remain like that for the next 5 years, which it won't.

GB, the CSO of Centrelink says in this year's annual report that the NSO has a design policies in the past without understanding their impact on the network. Do you agree with that?

You have to be very careful about what you said about that. I think in the confines of this room I would agree with that and we certainly given that information back to national support office in a considered way in the past.

JP, do you think that the policy coming out of the client departments is as clear and definitive as it should be.

No, by no means and it appears to have changed over recent years where possibly in previous years it was easier to get a definitive policy advice on something and I think all the other program managers will agree that is not so easy now. We are a step removed now, we are not social security anymore, we are Centrelink, so the policy does not come from Centrelink NSR, it comes from client departments and that makes it one step harder.

Can you give a couple of examples of say the complexity and lack of clarity that you are seeing in policy?

I guess we talked about Frampton area, it has always been difficult and complex and it is hard to get straight answers. Self employment is one we wrestle with quite a lot and I think people in the network will agree with that, it is very difficult to attack that. People who are self employed, what actions to take with them. There is a range of things that are probably difficult on a policy angle.

What happens J if a policy interpretation is unclear, what do you do in employment services?

We are lucky enough to have people that have been on deck for a long period of time, people like Peter Ward that you would be well aware of. From time to time I have to say that the policy people in NSO come to people like Peter Ward to get policy advice which is really frightening when you think about it. Clarification and interpretations, so we are lucky we have those sorts of people that can make a pragmatic and common sense and reasonable interpretation of policy advice and broadcast that out.

When you say, people like Peter Ward, are there many like him?

Indeed no.

If Peter Ward is on leave for 4 weeks, what happens then?

That's when we strike trouble and we talked about numbers to some degree later. 1250 people out in the network is something like the numbers out there now and when you talk about retirement's policy, there is one policy officer. When you talk about disability there are two, one of those is on long service leave for 3 months, so that is the end of that. We find it obviously very difficult to get replacements in; a) people with that knowledge are few and far between, and b) it is a reluctant to release people from the network into area office and you can understand that.

M, do you agree with this? We are seeing a difficulty with policy?

That actually explains where I was coming from with a third of the time that there are two family policy officers and they are our permanent staff and if we didn't take on national projects, we would have those 2 people and that would be 100%. But what we find is that by taking on those projects I can build up a bigger base of staff, it is not huge, but it is more staff so that we have got more continuity and we are able to cover those essential policy jobs more evenly.

D, the same with you?

Very much so, as P pointed out, there is one full-time retirement person to man the help desk for all 24 sites in area Brisbane. She recently had to take some emergency leave and I couldn't fill the job for love nor money.

Another priority, Gary?

Well it is, and as all these things, is never easy to fix. We accept that the network does want more support from the area office particularly in the help desk arrangements but we also need to be aware that several years ago when we did have a very large area office and there were staffing cuts, corporately we all agreed within the leadership team that we would reduce the size of the area office and that is where the large amounts of cuts were attributed. If we want to go back and provide more support now, then we need to talk to you and the managers about where we get those resources from.

C, how did this policy fuzziness when it happens, translates out into the network?

Inconsistency of decision-making, that's the main one.

By the CSC?

Inconsistency between CSC and CSC, one office does it one way another does it another.

Mistakes?

Depends on which way the policy ends up being. One of them has to be a mistake, yes.

Waste of time?

Waste of time and also the staff just start losing trust in getting policy decisions. Told to do it one way and a week later they are told no, that was wrong.

Losing trust, that's quite serious isn't it ME. Loss of trust?

Yes, it is serious and it affects people's morale and whether they feel like they are being supported by the organization.

So what can area support do to provide a better clarity perhaps to fill these resource gaps?

It is a difficult one in terms of trying to improve clarity we continue to advocate with national support office whether it be on individual cases or the way the policy is presented. We also try to train people up so that they know what the tools are and can access the tools for them. But it is difficult for us, we always like to put more support in there and I think it is the same as when you are balancing your resources within your CSC, we have the same issues within area support office trying to identify where the priorities are and how much resource we put in.

Good thinking GB?

It is, with all these issues they are complex and there is never any one solution to these problems that I have been able to find over the years and what M just described is a fairly sensible approach by doing some analysis of the problem in identifying where, in the organization, the problems are and try to have some impact and influence on them. At the end of the day there is only a certain amount of influence we can have, and as an executive if we determine to put more resources in there well, I guess we can. It's a balancing act.

ME, G really likes to reward strategic thinkers. He would like you to take on the vacant business manager position. Are you happy to do that? You have to keep up with your own existing work, of course, supporting customers and staff.

Yes, I would do that.

He wants to get ideas from the network, the sorts of things he has been talking about on how to improve its understanding of ACO and its resources and of course to get clarity with the roles of NSO. How will you do that?

There is no one way you can do that and a lot of that happens through face to face communication and we have already got some existing forums, we have team leader forums, team leader days, so we could start to integrate those sorts of discussions where we sit down and talk about what the issues are for the network and area support office and how we try to meet better the needs of the network. We continually need to be reminding ourselves what those needs and priorities are because they can shift and they change over time. There is also recently we have had vertical slice where we had a cross section of staff sat down with the area manager and business manager and myself and talked about what the issues were for them within the network and those things all feed in and come back to area support office and we consider how we provide support.

Out in the network, do you have any suggestions for M, you have heard the kind of problems that C and other team leaders are having with policy, loss of time, lack of consistency, mistakes and so on. Can you add to those, can you supply some more information to M on those kinds of problems that you are getting?

There are long term people who have been around and who probably don't contact area office as much and there maybe an in-bound program at the area level.

Sound good M?

Sounds very good. I particularly like the in-bound program because that is something we had been thinking about as the next step from the hypothetical so yes I think that would be interesting.

Anyone else?

So you are saying to involve CSOs as well?

So, we don't hold it at the team leader level, we percolate lower down as well. Okay.

ME, one of your business improvement staff comes to you, she feels the same way about this vision thing, too many people are asking who are the ASO and what do they do. She says,

“Look M we spend thousands of dollars on publications, colour publications like this one. We tell our customers who we are and what we are doing, why can’t we tell ourselves what we are doing?” How about a regular area support newsletter M, we could call it ‘Supporting Briefs’. Circulate it to all our CSCs every month, black and white, photos of staff members, we could produce it internally, just a few hundred dollars a month, what do you think?

I actually like the idea because we try to send out area support office news on e-mail but when you talk to staff about whether they have seen it, the answer is no, we haven’t seen it. Using e-mail obviously doesn’t work. Maybe we need to go back to some of the more tried and true.

Let’s see what our network thinks about this. What do you think, a good old fashioned printed newsletter on your desk once a month?

Depending on how the information is disseminated. I recently came from network to area support and didn’t even know there was an area support newsletter until I got into area support so it depends on how it is disseminated.

Well, we have got this printed newsletter on your desk first of the month, you don’t have to log on to look at it, you don’t have to switch your answer machine on to hear it, it is sitting there in front of you. A good idea? BH what do you think? A good step towards a greater clarity perhaps?

No, I think a hard copy is a good idea and I think the area support office is doing a fair bit and they are now producing a regular newsletter electronically. It is an issue with e-mail communications as managers get hundreds of e-mails every few days and it is what they send on or what they don’t. I think a hard copy is good, with a half dozen sitting in the tearoom would be good, so that everyone can go and have access to it rather than something.

What about the network? One tearoom for the network? 24 offices?

Do we distribute this printed publication, once a month to all the network? They seem to want it. I am seeing a few nodded heads here.

A you are out in the country rural office, do you think this would make a difference to have this printed publication, say once a month?

Yes I think so, but we still need to know why we are getting it and is there anything relevant in there for us.

Well we will assume the editorially it is spot-on every month. Looks as though the printed communication may be back in fashion M, so we need to look at that.

C, out at Chermside, you finally got the interpreter you needed, you have managed to reunite your Iraqi family with their local relatives in Chermside, but now there is another problem with the interpreter. JP, what happens when you send an Arabic speaker to translate for an Iraqi Kurds?

We have to be very careful about those aspects, but yes, Lyn who looks after the division for interpreter services is well aware of those issues and I think she looks very carefully at the information she's got and she matches the interpreter to the need. We certainly have a problem with the numbers of interpreters. The TPP we have had through lately, a couple of the dialects are very hard to get interpreters for them. There are plenty of Arabic speakers around.

But they won't speak to Iraqi Kurds will they?

No they won't.

Any advice for C then?

You really need to talk to multi-cultural services. They are the people who talk to the interpreter providers and they have got the specialist knowledge required.

C you are not somebody who gives up easily, phones are still engaged on the interpreter services, but who is that nice lady in Marketing/Communications, S someone. She'd know.

SH, can C type S***** into the computer and find you? He doesn't know your surname and he doesn't know your title.

No he can't do that.

Yes, he can. In the area Brisbane directory.

*But if I don't have a last name, I am sure there is more than one S*****.*

There might be a couple of others.

I know C how we will get through this. You have typed interpreter and got 1300 responses. The same with S*****, there are a lot of them in area Brisbane for some reason. Let's try the area support office homepage. But there isn't one is there GB? Does that mean it isn't a priority or we simply don't need one?

No there is one, it's probably not as comprehensive as we would like it to be. I am not sure the particular area that C is looking for is up there or not and I am willing to have some help on that one.

No it is not up yet, but it is just about to go up.

DC, you have doubts about the effectiveness of homepages anyway don't you?

Yes. I don't think CSOs in the network use the homepages as a first or second choice because of time constraints. I don't think it is easy for them if they have a customer sitting with them and say, I will just flick around the Internet and see if I can find a phone number.

MN, why are homepages for support office units formatted so differently? Some units and retirements and finance management, don't even have one. It is a bit of a mishmash isn't it?

I would agree with you. I suppose some of that goes back to a decision made 18 months ago to give the responsibility of homepages back to the individual units and therefore let's train

up those people within those individual units in developing their homepage. Some of those people even after training, didn't have the motivation, didn't think they had the responsibility or the expertise. Didn't update it on a regular basis so therefore they lost that training very quickly and what came into that, was good intentions became a mishmash of information on a homepage to a point where you could look at it in one stage, where it consists of a number of units, what about finance and some of the other units.

Out there in the network, what do you think about these homepages? Are they working for you or do you use them?

Compliances group? Human Resources is stunning, it has a photograph of staff on it. What about some of the others, are they all as effective as one another. I am getting the feeling they aren't.

Your comments about compliance are very good.

Yes M?

There is a set standard for development of homepages. We haven't always adhered to that, but recently that is the direction we are getting now is we must adhere to that and that is Rob McMurdoch who updates the Brisbane homepage. That's one of his priorities to get this consistency across all Brisbane homepages and hopefully that will be some of sites you see at the moment. They will be different, we can't have all the glossy photos and content and information is a priority and set out in a set standard so each page will look very much the same and how you manoeuvre through the different pages.

People who have tried to use it before and been disappointed about it are not going to go back.

There is a big credibility problem there, I totally agree. We have also have a wide range of staff, some people are computer literature and only use for their work and know nothing else about computers. So using something like e-mail or homepages to get information, is totally alien to them. They need it in other forms as well.

The credibility a problem in the network? Yes a few nods here. A bit of work to do on our homepages. C, you are not having a good time with your computer I'm afraid. Not that computers are wholly bad of course, it is just that most of us are on the edge of ignorance when it comes to computer use. But C there is a Centrelink computer program that you quite admire. You are impressed with Mapstat. Why is that?

If Mapstat is used correctly then it can be quite helpful for a singular office to get any of its own idiosyncrasies to say, the call centre network, so if you have a particular way of doing things which may not be the standard way of doing things, then hopefully it will make it a smoother transition for the customers into our office.

ME you know a bit about maps don't you? You used to be on the customer service delivery advisory committee, which has a commitment to communication protocols. Who sets up and runs Mapstat?

Mapstat, each individual site is responsible for maintaining their own site and the CSTAC actually did quite a bit of work in encouraging CSCs to make sure they had it up to date and they had accurate information and even did a bit of work in trying to help people to use a common format reflecting some work that Nundah had particularly done so it was easier for the call centre to be able to find the information.

So the network are the ones that are making this work well and someone else is uniformly making it present in such a way. Interesting. Why then doesn't the area support system have a similar professional look about it, if we have got a perfect example on the network?

As M said, it certainly something we have been looking at is the formatting of the pages and you mentioned before the roadmap is very important and makes it easier for people to navigate through. I think from today we have got some ideas and the important part for us is what we now go and do with that in the next step.

M are you referring to why doesn't Area Support have information on Mapstat?

No, why don't we have the networkers handling their own system very well, feeding in well. It's a good reference, its logical and clear. You guys aren't getting it right. Perhaps you should hand it over to these guys, let them handle it.

MN you are in your office this same Monday morning reassured by the hum of your hard drive. On your desk beside your Mickey Mouse mat, leans a metal frame and in it are the words 'to ere is human, but to really stuff things up, you need a computer'. We all blame computers don't we MN. Just how good are they? How state of the art is the Centrelink computer system?

If you look at the number of users throughout Centrelink, when you are looking across the whole nation, you are looking at somewhere between 25,000 to 27,000 users of the system. For what we actually have sitting on our hard drives, which is very minimal compared to what you can buy, I think the system operates fairly well for the number of users. We are up there with the top 3 in Australia with the number of PC users. But if you look from an operational point of how we actually get the best out of our system when we get into some of the new tools that are being produced such as e-reference, getting into Centrenet, the bandwidth just isn't there. That is a problem and a lot of people think, well this system does allow me to look at some of the screens and onto the homepage.

Are we talking of slowness? Is that how you see it, SH, slow, unwieldy, difficult to navigate?

Complicated, yes.

KF, do you see it that way? Too many icons.

We don't know what half the icons are there for, we never use them and a lot of our PCs are very slow.

Slow PCs, JP?

Yes Michael, obviously there is a tremendous range of information and a range of different programs, probably not a lot of information on there that isn't useful to somebody and there

are a few little tricks, someone told me the other day if you keep your CDI shut down, it makes it run more quickly and it does. It is probably marginal but it helps.

Have the CDI running and utilise its notes, it's the combination Lotus Notes and that confuses people no-end.

How is the network, slow? Any other things that haven't been mentioned that you are finding with the computer system? Because you are not using it a lot in the sense that a lot of people are saying it is too slow.

System downtime, yes. But it affects the workload. Slowing ourselves down by progressing.

I think it needs to be stated and a lot of you have seen those black Dells that sit out in the network, to make a comparison about running some of the programs, outside Centrenet, you will see they actually run and operate much quicker and some of the log-on times for some of these systems is quite enormous. Some people are logging into the system in 10 seconds, compared to 5 mins. in some cases. There is a new batch, and it is open up to tender and there is a new batch of Dells which will be quite larger from a speed point of view than the ones you have got out there at the moment. These will hopefully be quicker than those again and these will be available in the first 3 months of 2002.

The reason you have those extra Dell PCs, I'm not talking about the implement PCs, I am talking about the PCs that were put into offices to assist someone in employment services processing. You say that they were being used for Sprite, but one of the justifications for those PCs was not because of Sprite, it was because they did a test in WA and they did speed test and was looked at in a normal size office, that they could actually make time savings by using these black Dells. Sprite was not one of the tools but it would seem that that could be beneficial on top, but it was in regard to doing continuation forms, as you know continuation and doing interviews and there were savings there. We had them look at when we actually distributed those PCs. There were only 1500 distributed and basically Brisbane got 10% and work that on new claim stats, populations and figures like that. So that was the justification.

Why did it take so long to start replacing some of the old PCs and a major part of the reason for that is with the potential outsourcing of INT which was a Government policy, it was expected that would go ahead and whoever won the contract would then undertake a network replacement project. We all now know that outsourcing is not going ahead and we are now ramping that up again to replace the network.

In the Financial Review this week there is an indication from Jane Treadwell, who is the CEO for Centrelink indicated a new dynamic approach to Centrelink and involved in that is the use of the Internet management and I believe there is a push to have that pushed out into the various levels.

We have to collect our staff to be able to help the people to use the Internet and all those centres.

One of the reasons Centrelink has not gone down the Internet servicing road is that we are very cautious of managing the impact and there is a range of other impacts and it is certainly something that we have raised continually with that former area manager who wouldn't take any notice.

MN, if the computer fairy could grant you three wishes, what are the first three system problems you would want to solve in area Brisbane?

I am not going to talk about actual system problems, but on a more universal level, the first is the use of the homepage and as we are talking about systems here, the SSG has homepage on the area Brisbane homepage. So if you go to the first page of the area Brisbane homepage, click into the unit you will see that system support group, click on that and it will open up our homepage and involved in there is a number of more individual homepages going across pensions, FAYO and also NSS and also program services which no doubt some of you would use for interrogation of data. If I said from a point of view of staff telling me that information we put up onto our homepage now that is going to have to be redeveloped, and needs to be remarket it also. But there is a lot of information up there that users and calls come through to us that is contained within those homepages. If your staff look in the current issue section

of each of those homepages you will see on a regular basis, issues go up there that the network is calling us about, so that would be probably the first one.

The second one, if we are looking at solutions here, would be and we have attempted in the past, a system contact officers. Some people know that as expert users in each of the offices. Some offices have very good network setup for system contact officers or expert users with each of their teams but others don't. It is something we would like to push in a roundabout way, and if you want us to provide a better service in systems support group, this is a solution, is the use of system contact officers in each of your site. We get calls on the help desk about a particular problem, they will hang up and we will get a call from the same office again, different person about the same problem. We have actually got the person three calls in a row from the same office about the same problem. We have actually put out to offices, but I don't know if it filters down to the staff, because that it where our communication needs to be and I suppose anything there, if the staff have a problem, don't just ring the system support group or the policy section, ask to speak to the subject matter expert within your office, or a peer or a friend who may have experienced the same problem. Maybe we have got to look at a different way of marketing that, it is also saying what can the users do before they actually contact us and again it's a matter of getting people to read that and listen.

The third wish, as we mentioned first up, it's system training. A lot people at the network will hold us responsible for systems training. We look after 6 areas, we have 23 staff.

Is that technical training or systems training?

If I say from a systems training point of view, we have an IT training unit, really only consists of one person.

But SSG is not resource technical training, so who is?

That could be a good question. Maybe NSO is resourced in a roundabout way and it is hidden in some of the papers are developed in an early stage, but its lost.

They've gone out to the network. The resources are out in the network and have been out there for a long time and maybe they have been absorbed or changed but what we knew of as technical trainers was actually been broken up and sent out.

There is one point, the development of material on a national level, we are not expected to develop our own material but I think people would probably express their experience that the national material is not always kept up to date so they have to keep updating it themselves.

So are we saying, M perhaps in office training, is that not working?

I don't believe it works and the feedback to us is that a number of users out there, the CSOs, don't get that training. Some of the major initiatives and S has actually indicated there is all this technical training out there, you just got to know where to look for it, while in a lot of cases it is not out there.

It is not out there, G you had a comment? So the system side of training is not being followed through? There is no system training?

M will tell me if she agrees with this, the FAYO reconciliation, which is a major process and a lot of the network staff receive 2 days training, the feedback we got from even our staff who attended that, was minimal. Some people saying 30 minutes exposure to the systems technical.

Nothing like, you rarely get where there is live system training involved. People walk away and have no idea. When I come in on Monday, what am I going to look at on my computer. They have no idea.

T, you are the new manager at Bayside, is this one of the issues you want to put to G as a priority? System or technical training? It does concern you doesn't it?

Yes, it does and to me I see that the area support offices definition of technical training is different to the network. It was highlighted recently when we were talking about the induction package for trainee and we went to a workshop day where we were talking about technical

training and at the end of the day we realized we were talking about two different things. Technical training in what we were talking about from the area support office point of view was actually policy, where we were talking about getting in and keying in the screens on the system.

So a basic clarification of what we mean by training - system or technical or policy training ? it does sound as though there is a bit of fuzziness there, is that how you see it G?

It is, but people need to know all that to do their job. As we said earlier in the day, and it has been repeated a couple of time, the training for the technical training is out in the network and that was a decision we made and if we need to review that then we should.

To the network technical training was policy and the whole issue of technology wasn't really part of the equation.

So we need to review that?

We also need to look at what out expectations of people is out in the network in terms of the job has got a lot bigger, a lot more difficult and more complicated and if we can't provide people with the training to do that job, then we need to look at other solutions to that problem. It may well be redesigning the job so there is more specialization perhaps. I don't have the answer.

Who trains the trainers?

Could I just say, there is an NSO responsibility with this, if they use FAYO reconciliation as an example, I spoke to the national IT manager of FAYO and he totally agreed that there is no training going out to the network from a systems point of view. He said it wasn't his responsibility and I said, it must be someone's responsibility. He said it is the business owner's responsibility. You may have got the same answer M.

Yes.

So there is not a full appreciation of the network?

If you look at that same example, the material was being written in about April because that was the schedule we had in order to get the training delivered on time for a July implementation you had to have the training material written about April/May.

There are courses offered through compliance, but is it the case that some compliance staff may have to do that training in their own time?

Not in area office, no.

In the network?

I can't answer for the network, I'm sorry. That's an individual decision we have to take.

Where then? Do staff have to do training in their own time?

No. That's an individual site's decision, it has nothing to do with area office. Area office staff have two competencies, one of which they need to do that are essential to their jobs, some compliance staff in the network will also need to do one of those as part of their job, but it is an individual site decision as to whether or not they do it on the job or in their own time.

In the network, do you find that you are having to train in your own time occasionally?

Yes you have some expectations that some of your own time would be needed.

GB, what does that say then about the priority of training in the network, if that is having to happen?

It is a complicated problem and I accept that we have at an area basis and on a national basis, underdone the training. It really needs to be reviewed.

Underdone the training?

Yes.

MN, A has been on the phone this morning. She has also left a couple of e-mails on Friday that you have not been able to get to them yet, is this a problem A, making contact with ASO units, like systems support?

Definitely, I see them as the last resort anyway, so if I need to contact them, I want an answer.

Why is that MN? Are you stretched pretty thinly? What are you responsible for?

I would like to think that last resort is a good thing. As long as people use their own analysis skills and their own knowledge and communication skills in the office, a last resort is a good thing. Yes, we are stretched from a resource point of view but so is everyone here, even without the network. Resource point of view, probably for area Brisbane if you looked at a pro rata basis, probably less than 4 people to look after systems.

You look after what, 11 call centres?

We look at 155 sites, which include 11 call centres and the major call centres up the east coast. That's about 40% of the nation's CSOs that deal with us.

Like FAO, you are not just there for area Brisbane, are you?

No we are not. We like to think we are, but we are not unfortunately. We do get some people actually believing that the policy and systems are about the same size. We probably should be doing more but like G said, some concessions have to be made.

C, you have got a niggling problem again with a particular pensioner's payment. It seems he has more assets than are apparent. Okay you have asked all the right questions, but it is the Rolex watch and the hand-made Italian shoes that have got you concerned. You suspect a web of family assets overseas. Phone KF and ask her for advice, because she is experienced. Just ask her how you would deal with this, where you go next.

I have got a customer K that seems to have more assets than what is being disclosed, what are the appropriate ways that I would go about discovering these assets.

Just had a similar case myself and found out there are some people in area support office who can actually help with searching for titles, property etc.

Actually C, what K is saying you probably really do need compliance to help follow through this case, do the investigating and tell you how to handle it. Is that what you would like?

Well yes, it gives me direction.

Well compliance is not actually set up to investigate and resolve compliance breaches for CSCs anymore is it? Why not?

Most of our work is project work, we have some units that are there specifically as an area function, but most of our compliance staff are on specific project work funded generally from NSO, so no we can't do the work for you. However, we are prepared to share our expertise and offer assistance and point you in the right direction.

So another example of an area support unit that really is doing work that is not concerning the network or not able to involve the network directly. A fair assessment? BH are you concerned about this lack of definition perhaps even ignorance, in the network about what area support unit like compliance are able to deliver on an area level?

Yes, it is more a lack of understanding. The fact that we have got units in our area support offices do work which is not really about area support as such, once you understand it, you understand the rationale for that and you don't have a problem with it. That needs to be understood. The assets etc. at least you know where you can go to get some advice and how do I do this. There needs to be greater clarity on what they do.

This area of clarity, DC, you are concerned about your own awareness factor, out in the network. Why is that?

I am concerned about my own factoring into consistency, into giving advice. We were talking earlier about getting phone calls from the same site from three different people about the same issue, I don't know if I can maintain consistency in that situation, because the Chinese whispers effect comes in. The way you describe something to me may be different to the way A describes it to me and I may interpret and therefore respond differently so I am very concerned about that. I am concerned we keep shunting information out to you guys to the network by e-mail, by phone calls and I know you don't have time to read it.

Do you think the network knows you are there D?

I think some people in the network know that I'm there or area support office is there. I do get a lot of phone calls from people and the first sentence is "I don't know if you are the right person but .. I know you will tell who is". My role in getting it right is to tell them who the right person is. That's a part of getting it right. Most of the cases I get, I am the right person.

Does the network know that is D's role, to be responsible for the getting it right?

Talking on behalf of everyone here from area support office, I would rather get 50 phone calls that I am not the right person, but I can tell them who is, than no phone call at all. I don't care how many times people ring me.

It would be nice to get to the right person first, than have to make 50 phone calls to get to the right person.

Mare we talking here of simply a resource issue? Because the ASO is not what it used to be a few years ago. What happened to its resources?

When we joined area south, we had just under 300,000 and we are now 120,000.

Over the years, we generally we have to make some savings, but then there have been conscious decisions at times that area support office has worn more cuts than the network because we were better able to and wanted to leave as much resource in the network as we could and some of what we have tried to do is we have actually considered when we've taken

on national support office work or work from other areas because that allows us to bring more money in and help us to keep area support office at a reasonable size so that we can maintain our efficiencies and have enough staff. So M can actually build up some skill within family, so it is not just two people, and that helps us as an area, even though at times you might look at us and think gee, there are six people there, but I am only getting two people's worth of service. It does help us to maintain ourselves at a viable size, otherwise we could end up getting too small which some areas have done and they have difficulty maintaining any level of expertise.

GB, are we seeing a pattern here? FAYO, compliance, systems support — are you concerned about a discrepancy between what the CSCs see the area support office is here for, and what you are contractually here to do?

I share the concern and it is not a surprise because I have been part of the process that has seen the resources diminish. I guess it is a question as much as anything else. It seems to me that when we are talking about help desks and problem management and throwing resources at that, is that the way to go, is that actually treating the symptom or should we be fundamentally going back to training people properly to do their job in the first place when we do have new initiatives, training people properly in that and therefore reducing possibly the requirement for support through problem management processes and that's a question for you guys.

Well it's March 2002, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting has arrived on the Sunshine Coast. Queen Elizabeth has opened the conference and the Hyatt Coolum is filled with much colour and movement. Australia it seems has turned a blind eye to the land appropriation policies of Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe is a welcome guest beside the Hyatt Coolum swimming pool. Robert Magee is fascinated by Centrelink. He wants to visit a customer service centre to see for himself the many ways that people can get money from the Australian government. KF, you are the new manager up there at Noosa and Nambour, Centrelink CEO is coming up from Canberra today and she is going to show President Magee one of your offices, which one do you suggest he visits? Noosa or Nambour?

Nambour.

That's good, because the President is also interested in sugar milling as well. In fact K, according to the latest customer service satisfaction survey, Nambour may not be the best choice. Customers have given staff speed and efficiency a low score and customers also think that staff at Nambour are not easy to deal with. Is that a fair judgement to make of Nambour office?

No, they actually did get a really good report last time around. They got a Roy Morgan one and Noosa has actually had three, but Nambour is a combined site so if they wanted to get in one impression a look at employment services, families and disabilities and retirements, Nambour is a good site to see that. In Noosa we have two sites, so you would have security issues, shunting them back and forth between two different sites and it wouldn't give the overall picture of what Centrelink would do.

President Magee also happens to be a closet surfer. So I think perhaps Noosa might be a safer choice. Will you show him around Noosa K?

Happily.

You would happily show him around Noosa. AN, you are down from Gympie this morning. You have been called to the Stones Corner office. You see last Friday was really hectic, the manager of Stones Corner, Helen Bernaise was rushed off to hospital with a burst appendix, so A you are acting manager for at least two weeks. Stones Corner is very different to Gympie, SH what are the differences between those two offices?

Well, you will find that as a bigger office, there are probably 20 more staff than you are used to in Gympie and considerably more retirement and youth customers. It is a city office in a reasonably tough part of town, industrial and all the community agencies are close by and they will lobby you in the area. A lot of itinerants, big refugee issues which came up before and it is well organized with a great reputation in terms of managing that refugee issue.

There is the RMU and you will be managing, I gather that takes up a fair amount of Helen's time managing that huge site out that way.

A I am sorry there is just not going to be very much of a gentle induction for you down at Stones Corners, do you think you will pick things up quickly on your own?

No, I have to find out where it is first.

ME, is there a way that area support can help staff acclimatize to a new office or are all offices a bit like a new sock, one size fits all?

I don't think it is one size fits all. You can actually look at Mapstat to find it. There is quite a bit that area support office can do by talking to program and unit managers, we actually have quite a bit of knowledge about different sites that we can relay to people. Each site does have its own way of doing things and its own culture and issues because of their different customer and staffing profiles and all of the program and unit managers would be happy any time to talk to a new person going to an office about our perceptions as to how things work in that office. That is not always the way to do it, but it is to get a variety of perceptions. Also in terms of tasks, there are a lot of experts in area support office who could help you in things like resourcing, finance matters, HR matters.

Well A, there are 29 e-mail messages this morning, poor Helen couldn't get to them on Friday. Would you try to read them first thing, or dip in and out of them during the day or perhaps read them after work?

Wouldn't be first thing, I would be lucky to get to them that first day.

Even though there may have been two or three high priorities?

I would glance at the headings, but being there for a short period of time you would be talking to people to find out what is happening and what needs to be done.

ME, e-mails are a concern for staff isn't it?

Certainly the amount staff get. They find it difficult to squeeze in reading that with everything else they have got to do.

BH, you would like to see some sort of filtering process wouldn't you, for e-mails. How would that work?

Did I say that? I just think it needs to be clear and work on some communication protocols and G's being doing some sterling work heading up that group. Part of it is, we need to know what the e-mail message is about, do I need to see this, is a response expected, is there some action required on my part, so that's important. But also ensuring that the information needs to come to me or should it go to someone more directly.

MN, does Centrelink have guidelines for e-mail users, the use of bulletin boards and discussion groups for specific topics and limited to a defined group of people?

They do have standards for e-mail usage etc. We don't utilize bulletin boards much at all. E-mails certainly there is, the size of the e-mail, content, the representation, the message you are trying to put across etc.

To our panel, do we find that e-mails are being answered or responded to before or after work?

I do a fair amount of e-mail work after hours and I get responses after work.

D the same thing?

Definitely. Even recently had responses from personal phone boxes. We are sending e-mails to our home e-mail address, reading and responding from there.

It is actually not even staying back, you are sending them into your home environment and doing the work there. KF, you have got a problem with e-mails don't you? The duplication from NSO to ASO and then to the network.

Especially at the team leader level where a lot of us are wearing a number of hats across, well I have got three, retirement, disabilities and FAYO, and there has been a lot happening in all those areas over the last 12 months and to keep across those, you really want a targeted message coming to you about what's the main issues and what you need to look out for, what you might need to be mindful of, major issues. But we don't seem to get that anymore, we just get holus bolus, everything that is coming out of MSR when I think it is a huge task for us to read it and comprehend it and then to find what it is that we need to target in the volume of information that is coming our way.

And out in the network are you finding that duplication? Are you getting through it or do you dismiss a lot of it and delete it? Yes, I see a nod.

It is dangerous to delete it. It really is because there will be things in there that have to be done but they are buried in 20 pages of stuff in a bulletin, what is it they really need to go to here.

So there are levels of trash?

Finding the nuggets amongst it. Some people that are on a number of my mailing lists that tell me they get duplicate messages but they prefer it that way. They tell me they would rather get the whole lot and they can trash what they don't want fairly quickly just to make sure they are getting all the information and a good coverage.

So, it is educating yourself in terms of that priority and when you access it and when you use it?

There have been issues that have come out of employment services that have affected retirements and DIS teams that haven't come via the retirements and DIS teams and so you really have to run your eye over everything.

When you get in in the morning whether you think you have got time or not, you really on most days have to look at what's there to make sure there is no vipers among it.

MN you have recently conducted a survey and despite the ease and speed of e-mail, staff prefer the telephone. Why do you think that is?

A large part of it has to do with people wanting to move onto another task, so lets settle this task now. The phone is the quickest medium to do that, so you get someone directly that they can communicate the problem across to the area support office person and they are able to verbalise the discussion as opposed to communication starting to develop by e-mail which may mean they don't send enough information in, there is a response back to them saying we need more about this, they send that back and it can go backwards and forwards from a long period of time.

But the phone systems isn't perfect is it?

No because there is no-one on the other end.

No-one on the other end, C?

Quite often no-one is there and able to pick up the phone.

T?

Usually you have got options and can leave a message on the systems voice-mail, but a lot of the time if I spent 5 minutes on hold I get annoyed at having to then leave a message.

I use the e-mails at the same time as the phone.

K?

Yes, I do that and quite often you get voice-mail and then think I will try somebody else and you get their voice-mail and you think I don't know whether I want to try for the third voice-mail here and then you ring somebody you know and hopefully they can help you or actually go and speak to a person.

The same in the network? Frustration again, engaged phones perhaps?

In some cases it may be an answer that has to be given to the customer on the spot. A claim able to be finalized without an answer there and then and in most cases that is where the phone is the best way to go because you can get a finalized done otherwise we are not doing proper customer service.

T, nothing really beats face to face interaction does it? Do you think it is the best way to get across a lot of this technical information?

Yes.

JP you have had a positive experience recently using face to face communications. Having you visited all 24 CSCs?

We did a round of employment services visits in the last few months and visited every site and probably spent a day at every site talking to a range of people from a range of perspectives and I thought that was very valuable and we got very good feedback from the network on that. It is very resource intensive which is hard for us to do that and hard for us to organize but I think it paid off.

Has that got something to do with employment services being the area support only and therefore that's where your attention is focused?

I guess so, we have got less of that national project involvement that other programs might have. Having said that it is good to have that involvement, it puts us at the leading edge of changes, we get to drive it to some degree, we get resources from it that on some occasions we can use for our own purposes. It is a valuable thing to do to have that national involvement as well.

BH, what do you think of the benefits of face to face communications over less interactive methods like Centrelink's educational network?

Well, it is a much better two way process. The visits they give are very well received also it breaks down the barriers between someone on the phone who you may think is being unhelpful or at least you can talk through those issues face to face environment.

D, this perhaps would solve your sense of awareness factor in the network perhaps. Would you like to get out there more often?

I would much prefer to be out there all the time.

Well perhaps we could find you an office somewhere. Mind you it is not possible MN for all team members to afford the luxury of visiting network offices. Certainly not in SSG, why is that?

I think G and M said before about some of the decisions made a number of years ago, our staff numbers at the moment are equal to what they were three years ago when we looked after three areas, through Northern Territory and all of Qld. We have the same number of staff now looking after NSW also. It is also a demographic but also coverage and maybe it is part of our objective to be out in the CSC at least once a year.

Well greater personal contact with the network is a proposal the area support leadership team wants to put to our new area manager, GB. As they walk into your office this morning, is this your first test of strength do you think G?

No it wouldn't be the first but it certainly would be a challenge.

ME, you've been nominated to put this issue to G. Here's your chance, try and convince him now that there is nothing like face to face meetings for getting the message across.

G, we've had a hypothetical and we've got a lot of feedback from the staff about that they would like to see greater face to face interaction with area support office, particularly from SSG and the policy areas to facilitate better technical and systems understanding. We've had a look at this and usually when we've done this we try to juggle within our own resources because we are quite aware we've only got a limited size cake and if we want a bigger cut of

the cake that has to come from the network and we've been looking at how we might be able to do this and we feel that area support office, we can juggle things and we can most likely fund half a position. I was wanting to know whether the area or you could help us find the other half a position to be able to do this?

G let me add a couple of thoughts that have come from the network as well. We have value creation workshops, we have service delivery and community partnership workshops, Centrepay and preparing for work agreement interviews, the national multicultural reference group forums, community outreach, in other words we use programs for a customer's face to face, surely what's good for our customers is good for our staff?

As we said before, it is not a simple problem and there is no solution to this. I mean the area office could probably agree to a request for another half a position, but before we did that I would like to examine a few other options and one of them might be looking at how we are handling things within the area office now whether we can reprioritise some other functions and possibly looking at restructuring some jobs.

Restructuring jobs, that sounds ominous G?

Restructuring in our terminology probably means redesigning the jobs so that they can provide a more comprehensive service. I also think it is time we looked at the problem a bit differently because it has been here for a long time and we haven't been able to fix it using the conventional methods and I think probably what I would be doing is looking to go back to national support offices as part of the solution and using my new network down there to talk to some of the community segment leaders and some of the INT people about the requirement for support that their programs are now imposing on the area office and ask them if they would like to consider a contribution.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul again perhaps?

I know they have plenty of money down there.

Okay, well actually the Deputy CEO of Centrelink, PH is concerned about this very issue of face to face communication. He is backing the latest move by the national contracts management unit who've just received tenders for a range of desktop PC-based video conferencing equipment. Do you know about this G?

I am learning about it yes.

It is probably on an e-mail somewhere. The aim is to have desktop PCs with video cameras so that you can talk and see each other one to one or in a conference with several people. Do you think it is a practical idea?

It is probably a practical idea, but whether it is good value for money in the current environment is the question I would ask. Those sorts of facilities are very expensive and is that in our top ten priorities? I would remain to be convinced that it is.

Well PH certainly thinks it is and it has become policy and the national contracts management people have in fact done just that this month. So videoconferencing is on the way. Would that help you KF get a bit closer to area support?

Even though Nambour is only an hour away, quite often it can be a 2 hour trip each way to get to Brisbane, we don't get invited to be involved in working parties very much because we are out of that metro loop to a certain extent.

So videoconferencing would work very well. A, out in the country, certainly, because this is where the videoconferencing so far has been used in Centrelink, very limited but you would see benefits, wouldn't you?

For the same reasons.

G, the annual results of the Morgan Customer Satisfaction Survey are out and you need to discuss some individual hot spots in the network with your assault team that have come in this morning. You are about to open your Roy Morgan survey folder as all of you are, when

your direct line rings. Caller alert shows it is the CEO in Canberra. Are you going to take it or are you going to leave her the recorded message.

My response to that would vary from time to time and in the current environment I think I would take the CEO's call.

Well G, she wants you to help her out of a jam this morning. You see she has been grounded in Canberra by autumn fog and can't get to the Sunshine Coast. She says, G look will you please show President Mugabe around the Centrelink office. Will you do that?

I certainly give it some serious consideration and I think. The answer to that would be yes. I am not sure we would be taking the President to Nambour though. We have had some bad experiences there in the past.

It will mean putting off your important meetings and your working lunch.

I would certainly discuss it with the CEO and if she saw that as a number one priority well I could reallocate some of my other functions to my very capable deputies whose I have developed very well over the years.

So you'll drive up to the Sunshine Coast.

S, the Roy Morgan Customer Satisfaction Survey is out and you are the first one to see the results. Is this an important measure of performance in Centrelink?

It is important. It is one that is looked at every level of the organization in Canberra and in the area and network.

When you get the results, what do you do with them?

It is about to change but until now, the way I have got them is three ways. First of all I get an e-mail with the top level results for the area and then I e-mail out to each manager what that

office got for their overall result, which is like a percentage. So that's their top level result and that is the one that people hang out for.

And that's why President Mugabe is keen.

BH, you get the figures for Toowong. How do they look to you, are they clear when they come in?

Yes, it is clear what they mean.

How do you interpret the bar chart in this latest survey that suggests that Toowong customers don't like the way staff treat them, staff aren't easy to deal with, customers don't think we are a caring organization and we don't understand their needs?

Well they could be wrong, the bar charts.

One instance where the customer is not always right.

It would be clear what it means, but I would need to ask why is this so.

GB how can you convey this kind of information to get a positive outcome from staff?

We would first of all be talking to the manager and his team about their perceptions of why that sort of a result came through and from previous experience the managers can be very ingenious in coming up with reasons as to why those views are held by customers. Then we would leave it to the management team within that office to address the issues and do some analysis and come up with a plan to try to rectify whatever the problem is.

T, Cleveland has scored very well in this latest survey. You are actually above the area average in all the service attributes apart from communication listening. Why do you think that is?

I have no idea, I would have to ask.

You haven't seen this last survey in November? Regardless, 'communication listening'. What does that say to you in terms of the customer's perception of your office?

Well obviously they are perceiving that the staff aren't listening to their issues and aren't communicating effectively with how to overcome some of those.

How would you address it as manager of Bayside?

I would bring it up first of all with my team leaders to see if there might be something we can do as a leadership team about that and as a team leader I would bring it up with the staff and say this is what our customers are saying, what can we do about this, why do you think this might and try and workshop some ideas and how to improve that for next time.

SH if a CSC has a problem with interpreting these figures or even agreeing with them, where can they go for help.

I am a good place to start or the customer relations unit, Linda Barnes and Evie are quite happy to come out to offices and work through those results. What we found and some offices do use that Kippa Ring just recently been working with us on some results still from their last poll, because what we find is that sometimes it is obvious why a customer said that and you can see it, but other times you really don't know why and it just poses more questions. So what you might need to do is another focus group with customers locally or sometimes you can work back and track what was happening in the office at the time.

C, are you aware of the customer relations unit and if you need clarification? The network, are you all aware of that? TP not all performance data comes to you in a way that is helpful is it?

There is so much performance data out there and so much that we have to keep an eye on and in so many different places to find it, especially on the Internet, and I often struggle with tying the performance data I am looking for with where to actually find it. I might go through several sites before I think, there it is.

BH, you have a problem with some national data that comes your way. What is it?

We don't to this day know what our KPIs are or how they are measured. Despite the fact we have business partnership agreements we are being held accountable for results and we still cannot determine exactly how they have been measured and what they mean.

So that is analysis of data you are talking about?

Yes, what does that data mean because it is actually driving and our understanding what it means is driving practice in the offices in terms of what we do in rejecting claims, not rejecting claims etc. We can't get clarity as to whether we are doing the right thing and whether it makes any difference.

So what you are saying is there is probably plenty of raw data there but is not being analysed for you so you can make sense of it.

It is being analysed but not sufficiently and we can't make sense of some of it.

G, what do you think? Is it possible that we actually have too much research data?

I think there is too much of it. From talking to the managers we'd like to see a lot of it consolidated into a much more user-friendly component of our business and we need to start talking to various people in the areas responsible, national support office for producing that sort of information. We have done that in the past but it is not easy to get fixes.

SH puts out a media release about the Roy Morgan Customer Survey. She announces yet again how well Maroochydore has done. Is that the purpose of Centrelink publicity SH, to let customers know how well they are looked after by the network?

It is one of the purposes. We've got a couple of purposes, one of them is about critical information that people need and we use the media as one way of achieving that. The other is about using media consciously as a way of demonstrating to staff that the organization know

that they are doing a good job and we want to tell the community about it. Yes, that would be the purpose of a Roy Morgan media release.

G, on the Sunshine Coast, you have arrived safely and you are showing President Mugabe around the Noosa office. All the TV and radio news crews are there, fortunately Noosa is one of the open plan offices, spacious, carpeted, air-conditioned, so there is plenty of room for everyone. Mr. Mugabe is most impressed but as a convinced Marxist, he can't understand why you simply don't take money from the rich and give it to the disadvantaged. He says to you G, "Tell me Mr. B, why do you have this targeted welfare system? Surely it would be simpler and cheaper to manage if you simply gave everyone a fixed amount of money?"

I would have to explain to him about the democracy that we live in might be slightly different to him.

As you start to answer G, the electronic media's push their microphones a little closer. What do you tell President Mugabe and of course the 6 o'clock news nationally tonight?

We would have to explain that this is the system that the Australian people and government have endorsed to make sure that the most disadvantaged in our society are catered for and because we do have limited resources that targeted social welfare system is the fairest one for this country. However he is entitled to do whatever he wants to.

As you balance this statement about Centrelink against your future career prospects, there is an awful ruckus off to your right. It is one of your angry parents, KF, he is waving his overpayment letter and shouting loudly at one of your staff, he is speaking a foreign language and he is not clearly getting the message across. Is this a problem with open plan offices KF? Nothing is private anymore.

Some things are definitely private and in those instances you would try and encourage that person to come and talk to you privately in a room away from the general public area.

Your non-English speaking parent is now incensed, Mr. Mugabe is fascinated by this display of democracy at work and he moves over a little closer to listen. The poor parent has now

reached breaking point, he flings his Centrelink letter at the staff member, leaps to his feet, knocks over the floor console with its 'Welcome to Centrelink' sign and scatters the 'do you disagree with the decision about your payment brochures' across the floor. The Channel 7 cameraman jumps back to avoid the console, his camera connects with a firm whack on the side of the Zimbabwean President's head, the lion of Africa goes down for the count. Suddenly, there's pandemonium. GB is knocked over on top of the President and as if on cue the Zimbabwean delegation throws itself to the floor. Centrelink Noosa fills instantly with State and Federal Police SWAT teams. The angry and bewildered parent is frog-marched off for a very long interview and the media dart away to file for the evening news. You switch on the evening news, GB with some nervousness, sure enough Centrelink is the lead story, even on SBS World News. SH, the electronic news media often gets it wrong when it comes to Centrelink, doesn't it? Why is that?

Well one of the reasons they might get it wrong is that they get stories about individuals perhaps like that parent in that case who might go to them with their side of the story and we are not at liberty to tell the other side of the story.

But S out here in the network, we reckon Centrelink doesn't stand up for us enough. Take that poor non-English speaking migrant, and his overpayment problem in Noosa yesterday, you can't discuss that man's personal story in the media can you?

No I can't.

Why not?

Because we are bound by privacy guidelines which make it impossible for us to do that.

When there is a clear case of a customer say cheating on Centrelink, aren't we justified in telling the media? Isn't it important how we are seen by our customers?

Within the organization and to the point I have spoken to SV about this on a couple of cases where people were really lying and S said to me, this is like David and Goliath. If Centrelink makes a practice of speaking out about individuals we have to do it in every case and we're

are a lot more powerful than they are and she is not prepared to challenge, for moral reasons, the legal guidelines.

But S, can you cross that privacy line and not be seen as breaking the rules?

We have some instances.

Would you like to share it with us?

As long as you don't tell S.

We promise.

We can't go on TV or radio or any other way and speak specifically about a customer but if someone is lying we would say hypothetically a person in such and such a situation did such and such. In other words we are giving a bit of background off the record information to a journalist to help them decide whether they think this is really a story.

S, isn't it any wonder we have such bad press when we can't put our point of view? Or are we just using it to evade a difficult debate?

Well that is what journalists often say, David Margan from Current Affairs is a real opponent of ours in this regard and he has often said that to me, he sees us as hiding behind the legislation and that is why I had the conversation with the CEO. I think it was to our disadvantage as you suggested much more often than to our advantage. So it is not a case of hiding behind but it is the case of doing what is correct for our customers.

Anyone in the network have a view about Centrelink in the media? No? Anyone on the panel? Have you had any contact with the media in the sense that you had a frustration about dealing with them? A? No. C? No.

From time to time in interviewing our area managers and you can sit there and clearly see that they have patched that interview to suit themselves but other people don't necessarily

look at it that closely and get quite upset when they think that an area manager hasn't supported them. A lot of people are dismissive of it and will say, the area manager does support you, they understand what is going on and they are limited in what they can say. You can clearly see they have cut that interview and patched in questions to his responses. Initially people can be quite hurt when they see that there hasn't been support.

Better to be safe than sorry.

I remember one morning spending half of the day reassuring people and that that interview was not necessarily a reflection of the conversation. It had to be done, because people were quite upset about it.

Was that interview with MR? Yes, then I was actually with M when he did that interview and they talked to him for just over ¾ of an hour and they asked him about the same three questions over and over again. It was David Margan and of that whole ¾ hour they picked out and he was at the end of his tether. So sometimes as a general principal we would put people up, we would speak and be as open as we could with media, it is sometimes like putting someone in the front of a runaway truck. It is not of use to us.

The barrier that stops staff from saying they are proud to work for Centrelink, because everywhere you go if there was something on Current Affair last night, your friends are going to talk to you about it and you get so frustrated with the fact that you know that it was hogwash.

Well ladies and gentlemen, the SBS World News Bulletin literally tells its own story. In Noosa today, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe was attacked. Allegedly by a disgruntled farmer angry at the President's land-grab policies. President Mugabe was on the Sunshine Coast for the CHOGM meeting. He was visiting the Centrelink office at Noosa when the attack occurred. Mr. Mugabe was struck on the head with a piece of furniture but was saved from further attack by a senior Centrelink manager who leapt upon the fallen President shielding his body from further blows. President Mugabe praised the courage of the manager, Mr. GB. He said to show his appreciation, he has invited Mr. B and his entire

Brisbane network to Zimbabwe to set up a Centrelink in his own country. Mr. B said he and his 1500 colleagues were seriously considering the President's generous offer. Thank you very much.

ENDS.

Transcript: Post-Hypothetical de-briefing discussion

Let's go through some issues, the first one is early retirement. Do you consider it a priority, are we going to have to worry about this seriously in the next couple of years, do you think it is worth putting on the board?

I think it is a real issue because we do have an older group of staff and we have a very flat structures so we don't have a lot of people who are experienced at management level and that is skill and experience is very important in that. That whole succession planning is an issue for us.

I think this is a good opportunity to bring the young Turks again.

Any other priorities or are there just too many of them?

Is that the sort of issues, do we put the money into our systems training?

That was a very smart element that came out of today that sense of, we actually know what we were talking about when we talked about training. There were a whole raft of issues and the fact that we can actually sit down and Tania, could actually be talking at cross purposes. With the matter of priority and definition.

Even when we understand what the issue is. Not necessarily with the mainframe, but the application side of it and that is where we still are today.

We are still at that point in the training. They come away and expect they can sit down at their computer and operate the mainframe and that hasn't happened and that has been some of the feedback that has gone back. Part of that program too, you don't think to identify that as an issue in its own right that needs a lot of serious attention.

That then brings us to the other issue of quality time on the Internet and other products.

We have got procedural training, we have got policy training, assistance training, training in using the system.

My point is not that that is the priority training, but it is the fact we acknowledge that this must happen but we didn't do anything about it.

I am not sure about that Tony. We have had Brian Colfax working on that training solidly. I suppose have we put in enough would be more the question rather than have we done anything.

Some sites have actually taken Brian more so than other clusters.

You have been up to the Sunshine Coast where we have done a lot of training up there. A lot of work has to be done in reinforcing and encouraging staff to actually use what they learn and use it regularly because that is part of the issue. They get so focused on particular actions, they lose site of those other tools.

They lose the competence in those tools. They simply don't have the time to keep up with to it.

It also doesn't take long to get frustrated with it. When we talk about now having standards for the layout of the homepage, I went into a homepage today that I use at least twice a week every week and they have now reverted to the Centrelink style, and I hate it. It took me four minutes to find something that I could find in two clicks. I was getting frustrated and in comparison to a CSO I have all the time in the world. So it doesn't take long to lose it.

Which one was that, the same one as employment services?

Yes.

We want consistency.

I think the job for the CSO is getting bigger and bigger and we are saying to them more and more you don't need to retain this knowledge in your head, just rely on the tools, but if they don't know how to use the tools and what to put into the tools then there is no way they are going to get anything right.

I suppose it comes back to which bit. We can say technical training for the network but then we get down to the question of what's technical training and which bits are systems, which bit is about more understanding the Lotus products. There are all bits to it.

You don't know what you don't know.

Part of the issue of training is what comes out of national support. I don't think we can walk away from that either, but they obviously have got a lot of staffing, resources and time and they develop the products. But we on the main, would you agree S, we have to spend a lot of time redoing and that's not good enough either.

Right across the nation, whoever has to deliver that has to spend many hours in how will I present this and what do I do. A made a comment at the break that maybe there should be more 'train the trainer' courses whereas L had a different perspective when she said, when we were sure there was consistency. Even in our own group we are trying to balance the budget and costings. It does come back to, it's about managing training and I think we have lost that as well. Area office has downsized significantly so has every CSO and the actual role of an IOT, I would doubt there would be too many sites in area Brisbane or anywhere across Australia who has a designated IOT anymore.

No-one has got anymore IOTs as such.

No. Some individuals in their own right.

But S has got to be part of this equation as well and what do we as an area can we do with S and how can we use it and how can that help us with our resourcing in things like information systems. Maybe they could utilize that technology as well.

In each office we are staffed to the bare bones to do the work on hand. Now we talk about taking people out for 4-6 days to get competent training done but that is not factored into the staffing so we lose staff and we struggle to keep up with the actual work we have got to do because people are being trained. People have to be trained to do the actual work. Should actual absences to train be factored into staffing?

Just on bringing the new staff in we have been piloting the new national induction program and that does now have the level of technical training in it, as a result of feedback we have got yesterday, a lot of that will be switched around the order and things like that. A part of what we are doing with the pilot is looking at the cost of doing that as well and that will go back to guiding coalition about the need for us to be able to invest up front at the beginning to get these staff properly trained.

The training never stops.

It never stops, but to be able to at least bring people in in a structured way so that they do get properly trained. They now have to do things the right way.

People being asked to do too much too early.

We never assess the long term cost, we only look at the dollars initially.

That's right. Whether it is better to invest upfront so that we can do it properly.

That's has certainly been shown out in the audit reports that there is a cost and that's part of the getting it right stuff now.

If you go back four or five years, some of the employment services only had the Newstart system to actually comprehend with. Now a new starter comes in and they have to work the NSS system, there is AYS, there is IES and they get involved in the job network and its vastly improved and from even a systems support perspective. I don't know how a lot of CSOs deal with that.

Another issue is policy of sites. John I know you have something to say about this.

Yes, you know we can go to two different people and get two different policy interpretations. Now I know that some of you are probably reacting to that by just making your own decisions on your own judgement and experience. There is a danger in some of that I guess. I

don't know how you feel about that where we can't give you a realistic or definitive policy answer, what do you do, do you go your own way?

I think in the northern cluster we have a good process where we have team leaders. Groups like employment services etc and what we do in employment services a lot, we have made a good network out of team leaders and we will contact each other and try to get a consistency across those officers.

I reckon they probably deliver it and not giving us that precise policy advice as they used to deliberately because they expect us to look at the customers entire circumstances and look at all the situations and all the issues, use our judgement and look at the spirit of the legislation and make a informed decision that way. I don't think we are going to get away from this fact of fuzzy policy.

Cedric even though that sounds like a good process to go through, it could just mean your five officers in your cluster are actually doing the wrong thing.

Our experience in the families help desk is that the expectation is that we provide individual details of the case rather than asking about a global or hypothetical situation that we have to provide a specific case so that the advice is on that one case. It is not meant to extend necessarily.

At the same time to tell the media that we don't make any individual exceptions.

That's the big public perception isn't, my neighbour got it and I didn't. Remember the pension bonus.

There needs to be more aggression on some of the policy stuff, and there are some clear cases where we do not get policy, and we should be definitive. It was a long time after the youth allowance came in that we got definitive policy on that. I think in those cases we should say to NSO in writing, unless you advise us to the contrary, this is how we are going to apply it, because we wait for months and months for policy advice from NSO. They therefore can write the network is going to do this unless you tell us the contrary and this forces the hand

and because we sit out there and worry about it, we don't know about it and have got staff confused and they don't know what the interpretation is. There is some classes of policy decision that fall into that category where we should just force the hand where we don't get advice. There is other stuff which is appropriately discretionary and that's fair enough.

If you look at how they actually intend to force policy to a more consistent line. You put the information in, it will make a decision for you. It removes some of that discretion.

There must be a good way to prioritise that, does it come down to that?

Anthea you might want to mention the call centre process?

We have actually managed through our call support area to reduce this through our staff. All technical e-mails or anything that affects the CSO's job with customers, system problems that are going on, go through to our national informational officers. So we have actually trained all staff to click on one button and it takes you to the officers. Talking about multiple attachments, they go through the attachments and take key points from it. We also have technical support officers in our areas. Anything they get directly, they actually post it up there. That's one way the call centre actually reduces the amount of e-mails and that develops the staff from that.

Therefore the whole course of the network goes through those one or two people in the office.

Does this fall in with the homepages?

There is a national responsibility there. Call support is an area in itself.

You mentioned at the start as you got into that last topic, you mentioned videoconferencing. When it comes to system technical mainframe training, it needs to be self-paced and that's when you start going more than one on one, it starts to lose.

There is certainly a problem with videoconferencing if you are not used to it. It isn't all it is cracked up to be. In the area of multi cultural services often you can understand and you can see their face and there is something about that rather than talking on the phone. That's what I have been hearing, this sense of not being connected. It is something you are going to have to work out because it is new, the technology is not quite as good as it should be yet but it is may be good.

The other part of that issue is that there are offices with very experienced staff who are very stable and have a lot of knowledge and we're not utilizing them, because they are not sitting here in Brisbane and there is some potential in that area, so that people can be involved in without having that burden of having to travel and being away for extended periods of time.

Who says that they have to sit in their own offices. If they are within the cluster, but that is another option we should fix for. If they are in a cluster they don't have to physically sit in their own office, it might mean that if you go to that place 20 minutes down the road where you are not quite so well known or relied on, and you can work on these other projects. I wouldn't like to see us close our eyes to half the staff in this area not being utilized.

That's my point.

Indication that needs to talk about clarity between the NSO and MSO and what those units actually do and why it is in some cases most of their time is taken up.

I think it needs to be marketed and communicated. For example the comments made today on 300 here in area office some time ago, and there is now 120 and out of all the program segment units there is only one that is perhaps giving the majority of their time to the network.

You have heard that one is perhaps isn't. I don't know whether you have heard that from my program or from M's or S's programs.

But there are projects being funded by national support.

I think it is more the stuff that Gerry was talking about where there was no clarity and we're making assumptions and interpreting stuff in our own fashion and we don't know what is going on.

That's is what I am trying to say, if there were 300 and then 120 and also part of that 120 is not available to you, because it is being funded by national support and I think it also put a face to people here in Brisbane. I think by communicating that no you haven't got those 120 regional. SB said if you are not servicing your customers, you better be servicing somebody else. At CSC the perception is there is 120 people in area Brisbane and I might have contact with 5 of them, what are the rest of them doing. It is about marketing and communicating. Maybe out of that 120 there are 20 working on national projects and that would build some credibility for you people as well and also put it in perspective that we got some projects as well.

I suppose something for us to talk about this afternoon is how is the best way to communicate that view.

Do we need to have another look at what is actually being said with a more logical and compact distribution of it.

What we are looking for is something we can actually work with. We look at it today and think Oh God, there is a downward trend and look at it tomorrow it is still doing that, and the next day we can't wait, we have got to do something and it is only 3 days, not 3 weeks that has past.

I think Michael that is part of what SH said, not serving the customer, you are serving someone who is. I think that comes down to that ASO vision. What is the vision and the role of those units that are there to support the network and therefore underlying that is the issues, what is it the network wants and is that analysis of data and don't just tell me, give me 10,000 bits of information and help me to understand what that information means and if there is a good best practice being done achieving the benchmark all the time, no-one else is, what is that? How can the ASO add value to that raw data.

Who does it come to? Does it come directly to the manager and that is an issue that came up as well. Who actually needs it. We didn't have to go along with the way it was set up philosophically you have to respect the issue of privacy and therefore go along with this conflict between ourselves.

The difference between what is happening to the individual and what the government policy is, see that Centrelink is responsible.

I don't know that clarification is enough. I don't know that we have enough out there balance the balance sheet if you like. There's stories that are coming out there on the media that aren't that great for us but have we put enough out there on ourselves on the positive side of the balance sheet. People in the community say, I don't know whether that is really what Centrelink would do. Good news stories. I don't mean frivolous things but we're talking about things that we would do on a positive side of things and there would be a lot community stuff that happens out there and we just don't see it. I understand S has difficulty getting that published.

The biggest difficulty isn't getting it published, it is getting the stories in to the communications. The local media are actually quite willing to run our good news stories very often. The problem is because staff have got all these other pressures we have been talking about today, whose going to take time off to think up good news stories to tell S and her team in Brisbane and they don't want to. That's our biggest problem. We do nag you a lot, is that useful?

Again you have got that problem, of talking about good news stories. I understand that a good news story is about an individual, about their personal story. There is still a problem whether it is good or bad news, we can't initiate it.

Not if it is a customer's details.

Those kind of stories are very good and you do see them, but you can't be asked to initiate them.

That is why it is time consuming, we can do a bit of work with an external agency and community groups and MPs and asking them to ask people if they will etc. That is why it is time consuming.

That is why clarification of policy is very important that is I suspect the nemesis of this and the media is very much more aware of that in terms of authority. They would be very clear about it in a media sense what they are talking about and hopefully they will get it right. So it is one of those jobs that S can have from the inside.

That is about what we interact with the media about but I think as an organization we have got to look at, there is a message we give to the media but there can also be a different message that we give to staff internally. It doesn't have to be the same message and we may be restricted in what we can say to the media, but we can still say things to our staff and I think that is sometimes where we miss out.

Every time it happens with one of those stories, we tell managers as it is happening.

Thanks again very much and I personally once again really enjoyed this process, I love working with Centrelink, I think there is another hypothetical in the training area. Good luck and thank you very much.

On behalf of Centrelink, it has been a very long morning and it doesn't seem like that and it is due to your professionalism and also your educating and professional journalism.

Appendix 4: Centrelink “Elite” interviews — post-Hypothetical

Centrelink “elite” interviews — post-Hypothetical

The Hypothetical was employed to explore perceived communication difficulties between the Area Support Office and the Customer Service Centre network.

Before you turned up to the Hypothetical can you recall any perceptions you had about significant communications difficulties between the ASO and the CSCs.

Did the Hypothetical change any of these perceptions?

What do you think if anything, the Hypothetical achieved on the day?

Has the Hypothetical heightened the discussion amongst staff of certain issues since the event?

Have you observed any ways that you and the group talk about the Hypothetical experience … either in meetings or say, at the coffee machine?

Any stories … personal anecdotes … any words or adjectives that you can recall that describe the Hypothetical experience?

Is there anything that’s been written … say memos … e-mails … reports … about the Hypothetical?

Do you think there are downsides to this kind of scenario and role play?

Did the Hypothetical highlight issues that were a surprise to you? … how do you think the Hypothetical achieved this?

Was it the issues themselves that were a surprise or the way the Hypothetical presented those issues?

Did the Hypothetical highlight issues that were unlikely to emerge from using other means of management education and training?

What were they?

Why do you think those particular issues wouldn't be raised through more traditional management training forums?

Do you think there are unspoken 'no go' areas when it comes to examining improvements in areas like communication and workplace efficiencies? E.g.:

- the individual's motivation in the workplace
- willingness to make the best of available resources
- personal attitudes to change

What is it about the Hypothetical do you think that is different to other interventionist tools you have seen used in management education and training?

What role do you think the Hypothetical has … or could have … in management training?

The key issues raised as needing attention in the ASO's closed session in the afternoon were:

- Training
- The role of the ASO
- Making the best use of our expertise
- Adding value to data distributed
- Better management of the provision of policy advice
- Improving communication

Which of these issues have been followed up … How and why?

The issues that are being dealt with, are they the most demanding?

Are these issues being dealt with because time and resources make it possible, or are there other reasons?

Those issues that are forced to wait. Is it because they are difficult, need more resources and development? E.g.:

- succession planning
- managing expertise level

From your experience, what kinds of intervention tend to bring about desired changes in the workplace, e.g., management directives, focused training programs, appeals at a personal level.

So how would you sum up your assessment of the Hypothetical?

Appendix 5: Issues raised at the Hypothetical workshop

Issues raised at the Hypothetical Workshop

Analysis from hypothetical revealed 6 main areas for improvement

1. Training
   - where to from here
   - what's the issue
   - common understanding (consistency)
   - managing the training
   - technical/applications.

2. What is the role of ASO and the roles within it
   - clarity
   - communication
   - be an advocate

3. How do we make the best use of our expertise
   - develop more
   - use what we have
   - succession planning

4. How can we add value to the data distributed

5. How can we better manage the provision of policy advice

6. How can we improve communication
   - face to face
   - email
   - home pages

1. Training (where to from here, what's the issue, common understanding consistency, managing the training, technical/applications.)

(Group: Shaun, Linda, Brian, Marianne, Brad, Cedric)

Strategies identified for Quick Wins (QW) and Big Impact (BI)

Code	Possible Strategy	Issues
BI/QW	LDC	• Resources • Recruitment • Training relief • Support tools available in a timely manner
BI/QW	Clarify 'technical"	
BI/QW	Better market what is already available	
QW	Who has what training going on	
BI	Centralise some training	
BI	Tailored learning	
BI	Build better linkages	
BI	How to....	
BI	Facilitated E reference training	
BI	Identify key priorities	
BI	Standardised mainframe training program	
BI	Accountability and responsibility - clarify/implement	
BI	Adequate lead time for new recruits	
BI	Improve succession planning (informal)	
BI	Review Training Facilities	

Other strategies NOT coded as QW/BIs

Code	Possible Strategy
	Make better use of CEN (CVC) cos it's not going to go away
	Cert IV, balancing time available to do it with high workloads - sharing good practice
	Facilitated schedule for learning
	BPR will facilitate a stepping stone approach
	Remedial training
	Reinforcement process
	Improve training database
	Learning styles - tailored learning
	PC Tools
	Area Strategy on Learning priorities
	Task training list as per Area Vic
	Re-identify the resource (business case)
	Train the trainer - effective trainers (Possible Cert IV in WPTA more appropriate)

2. What is the role of ASO and the roles within it (clarity, communication, be an advocate

Group: Unknown

Strategies identified for Quick Wins (QW) and Big Impact (BI)

Code	Possible Strategy
QW/BI	Homepage - clear fully defined information about each team, easily navigated - information from each unit - separate out NSO staff (projects)
QW	Information about ASO into the network - provide (or tell Managers to put in tea room) paper and electronic versions of not only ASO News but Area Brisbane News)
BI	ASO visit the network and vice versa and better targeted
BI	Include ASO info in induction program via a number of forums i.e. Video, discussions at training
QW	ASO 'roadmap' on homepage and hard copy (date it)
BI	Inbound Programs
QW/BI	Improve access to ASO - update messages on answering machine e.g. "On lunch till 2 - Call-back by appointment - timliness standards so CSOs can keep customers informed e.g. "I'll be able to answer you this afternoon
BI	Placements, projects opportunities - share around more
BI/QW	Establish clear vision statement - role of ASO apparently exists so get it out

Other strategies NOT coded as QW/BIs

Code	Possible Strategy
	Staff movements in ASO - electronically
	Importance of communication to CSOs
	Better targeted Network visits
	Marketing the role once it is defined
	Review/change the name of ASO - more than support to the network is being done
	Use mobile phone text messages
	Differentiating up from whether it is an ASO/NSO issue

3. How do we make the best use of our expertise (develop more, use what we have, succession planning

Group: Mike Neumann, Philip Scott, Mel Locker, Anne Gore, Lesley Boulton, Gael O'Donnell

Strategies identified for Quick Wins and Big Impact

Code	Possible Strategy	Issues
BI/QW	Team Leaders and CSOs cluster program meetings	• Incentives to volunteer for projects etc • Release of staff for other duties
QW	Outposting project work to CSCs	
QW	Relief Pool for Temps for absences	
QW	Promotion of Cluster opportunities	
BI	Sharing proven practice and developing a medium to do so	
BI	Copy call support homepage idea	
BI	System contact officer (Gun operators)	

Other Strategies NOT coded as QW/BI

Code	Possible Strategy	Issues
	Area Based order of merit (management and specialist)	How to identify 'inbound participants
	Improve coach/mentor practices	
	Inbound/outbound program e.g. Projects, short placements	
	Use people with degrees (let them use their degree)	
	Recognise, develop and utilise talent/skills	
	Extract info about skills from new staff	
	Maintain a register of skills, knowledge and talent	
	Match skills when implementing BPR	
	Greater use of ASO/CSC/NSO (task forces, focus groups e.g. FAO demand data	
	Make sure everyone is talking about the same thing	
	Projects to include Rural site staff	
	Note infolink with skills data (do a stock take e.g. Project availability data base in NSO)	
	Mentoring program	
	Subject matter experts	
	Matching skills to jobs	
	Clear development program - identify leaders early linked to a mentoring program	

4. How can we add value to the data distributed

Group: Danny, Peter, Loretta, Greg K, Greg Caldwell

Sategies identified as Quick Wins and Big Impact

Code	Possible Strategy
BI	Re: mgt reports distributed (i) add 'how these better offices are achieving these results'
BI/QW	Provide some explanations as to (i) how to use the product (ii) where you got the data from (iii) time frames/period of measurements (iv) trends ....up...down...how come
BI	Some sort of forecasting facility in the use of stats...so we can act ahead of time on something building up e.g. Like old PRISM Point in time reports - identify trends, issues
QW	Link up staffing resources with Demand Schedules e.g. (all centres match roster to anticipate peaks) - review Powerplay (train in Powerplay) - what report do we want - ask us
BI	Relevance (Relevant comparisons)
BI	Clarify what are KPIs and how measured
QW/BI	Place in all one place
QW	Ask the network what they want (identify what is really required)
QW	Concise in portrait
QW	Time taken to extract data
QW	Test magnitude of data to enable quick display (CSC slower PC)
QW	Alex's management info report is good but where does data come from? Refer point 2.
BI	Onus could be on higher performing sites to share their success methods
BI	A single search engine/index for all data available e.g. Key in topic and get list of sites and what data on that site
Comment	Too much time spent looking back

5. How can we better manage the provision of policy advice

Group: Wendy Crofts, John Pickworth, Debbie Crompton, Marnie Sonnenburg, Jason Orchard, Trevor Jessen, Tony Perrera

Srategies identified as Quick Wins and Big Impact

Code	Possible Strategy
QW/BI	Summarise info that comes out Distribute via email to each site and consider homepage in the future with links on the email
BI??	Ensure best practices are known e.g. Nominated subject expert in each site for each payment/program to summarise and disseminate
QW/BI	ASO to 'pick out' salient points
BI	If we are going to distribute via electronic means, we need Dell PCs
QW/BI	Raise profiles of specialists e.g. ARO,CAO,FIS
BI/QW	If policy inform from NSO is unclear, ASO to advise NSO of Areas approach while waiting for clarification - advise network of this process when it occurs
BI	Technical training - systems and policy combined - whole picture
QW	Promote use of e-reference
QW??	Cluster Approach

Other strategies not QW/BIs

Code	Possible Strategy
	Video conferencing
	Check information and presentation of information with SMEs (customers)
	Quarterly technical session - appropriate attendance
	Bring technical experts to TL meetings/program meeting
	Go to NSO - feedback re their output
	Assertive approach as 'interpretative' policy issues - why is the advice vague? - then address area advice, feedback on vagueness
	Generic Policy issue
	One Stop Shop website (like 'communication')
	Regular TV Broadcast on current issues
	Face to face service when there is a major change in policy (ASO-Network)

6. How can we improve communication (face to face, email, home pages)

Group: Unknown

Srategies identified as Quick Wins and Big Impact

Code	Possible Strategy
BI/QW	Linking email to home page; develop homepages or improve - link to policy
BI/QW	Knowing who is who and what they do. Updating essential/assign responsibility
BI/QW	Topical expertise SME to summarise and distribute - One Stop Shop for information Very clear titles
BI/QW	Input response officers name against email - positional Mail Boxes
QW/BI	Watch out for acronyms
BI/QW	Prioritise messages e.g. '5 star' messages
BI	Technical support office (as per C.C._ national info homepage, Lead area
BI	More face to face roadshows, broadcast messages, Bus TV
QW/BI	Review e mail lists Team rooms on line (issue) Using/training needed BI/QW Cluster ideas shared Don't duplicate Centrethink Protocols - titles e.g. Info, response, action etc - urgency?
QW	Protocols - sending points e.g. Disability...CDO....RM
BI	Standardise homepages
BI	L & D time - access

Other strategies not QW/BIs

Code	Possible Strategy
	Alter some aspects of our 'culture' eg. NIMBY, 'reinvent the wheel', solutions in our backyard sometimes..but we don't know it
	Active listening not 'I don't want to hear more about it..it'll never work in our office
	More links on websites
	Improve quality and quantity of email
	Align Area info
	Ensure all have same understanding before start communicating about a topic

Appendix 6: Area Brisbane profile

Customer Service Centre Manager

Assistant Manager (in few offices only)

Reception Team for whole office
(In some offices only. Others have reception point for each team or combinations of teams, eg Employment, Youth & Students)

Employment Services Team

*Newstart Allowance
*Partner Allowance
*Newstart Mature Age
*Widow Allowance
*Job Seekers

Youth and Students Team

*Youth Allowance
*Austudy
*Abstudy?
*Student Financial Supplement Scheme

Retirements/ Disabilities Team

*Aged Pension
*Disability Support Pension
*Carers Pension
*Concession Cards
*Seniors Health Care Card

Family Assistance Office

*Parenting Payments
*Child Care Benefits
*Family Tax Benefit
*Health Care Cards

SPECIALIST OFFICERS - All offices have access to these services if not the person on site fulltime.

JET: (Jobs, Education Training) Case management of single parents back into study or workforce

FISO: (Financial Information Services Officer)

Social Worker

Psychologist: Assess (some) Job Seekers

Multicultural Service Officer

Indigenous Service Officer

In Office Trainers - Some offices have as full time position. Varies greatly. NthMetro Cluster has a unit of Full Time trainers

Office Support Unit - a separate unit in some offices - takes care of internal admin and technical support

Area Brisbane

Area Brisbane comprises Area Executive, Area Support Office and CSC Network Clusters, Compliance, some outposted NSO Units and NSO project staff.

There are also two Call Centres located within the Area, Brisbane and the Rural Call Centre at Maryborough.

Snapshot

Area	24,000 sq km - from Brisbane to Bundaberg and west to Kingaroy
Population	1.6 million
Customers	700,000
Customer Service Centres	24
Staff	1,539 *Area Brisbane* 313 *Brisbane Call Centre* 89 *Maryborough Call Centre*

Governance

Area Brisbane's Governance arrangements are detailed on the Area's Home Page. In summary, governance arrangements are:

Area Brisbane Strategic Team (ABST) Now called Area Leadership Team

Overseen by the Area Executive. Provides overall leadership, sets strategic directions and fosters integrated management approaches.

Area Support Leadership Team (ASOLT)

(Provides strategic direction for the Area Support Office. Cross program issues & resource management.)

Strategic Support Teams (SST)

(Progress, modify, enhance, review business goals, integrated approach)

- Customer Service
- Information Technology
- People Management
- Community Partnerships

Governance arrangements under review

Cluster Groups

(Optimise outcomes for staff and customers based on geographic locations)

- Wide Bay
- Sunshine Coast
- North Metro
- South Metro

Consultative Arrangements

Area Strategic Consultative Committee

Chaired by Area Manager. Forum for CPSU to represent members' views on Area Strategic issues.

Resources Committee

A joint committee which makes recommendations to the Executive about resource issues of strategic significance.

Learning Directions Committee

Sets priorities and strategic directions, provides expertise and advice on quality and learning for the Executive and ~~ABST~~ A.L.T.

Appendix 7: Centrenet home pages

This Appendix is not available online.
Please consult the hardcopy thesis
available at the QUT Library.

Appendix 8: Centrelink Hypothetical consultant's debriefing notes

Broad Oak
PRODUCTIONS

Centrelink Hypothetical
"Cluster's Last Stand"

ANALYSIS

AIM :
The aim of this hypothetical was to examine the management culture at office manager level within Centrelink / Area Brisbane. The main consideration was the aim by senior management to put in place a "cluster management" model within Area Brisbane.

The framework of any hypothetical seeks to place participants in familiar territory, albeit in a future time. It sets out to test the personal, ethical, moral and philosophical attitudes as well as approaches to personal and management relationships. It asks participants to think out loud and question how and why they do things.

The hypothetical assumes that much of modern management is conducted 'on the run' - decisions and actions are often taken quickly, intuitively and with little thought to what may be the 'big picture'.

Consequently, the hypothetical seeks to expose the consequences of our actions and to constantly question the rationale of our decisions.

Review:

"Cluster's Last Stand" was a hypothetical that telescoped some of the key issues that could be considered as barriers to cluster management. The following sets out these key issues and our analysis of the group's responses encountered during the hypothetical.

Finally, without being too prescriptive, we have suggested issues that managers need to focus on in the future.

ISSUE:
Territoriality or protection of your particular geographic patch.

COMMENTS:
This was an issue that had been raised in cluster management meetings and was also raised during the research phase. It was not strongly expressed by managers on the panel even when several panelists were questioned over a possible loss of power if the cluster as a whole were funded and not individual offices.

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ISSUE:
Would managers change from being individually competitive to a more cooperative approach under a cluster management model?

COMMENTS:
This was an issue raised as a possible cultural barrier to Cluster Management. The element of competition between managers was also raised during research but was expressed by those below office manager level.

During the Hypothetical this issue did not feature strongly. In fact, managers exhibited a genuine willingness to cooperate throughout the scenarios. There is a discrepancy here. Our conclusion would be that there needs to be more open discussion not only between managers but also seeking views from below manager level.

This issue also highlighted what may be a gap between the way managers perceive management effectiveness and the way it is perceived by those who they manage. "Sharing Feedback" or giving and receiving of information up and down the management ladder is seen as essential practice.

ISSUE:
Cluster management will mean more work... more ..meetings and more responsibility.

COMMENTS:
This is related to the previous issue. During the Hypothetical there was almost a passive acceptance that more work could be taken on board. There was an attitude of, "we can get by ", from several panelists.

There is some discrepancy here between managers and those below them. We wonder if panelists were being really honest and were preferring to "play safe" with their peers. While this can be seen as laudatory and supporting a cooperative spirit, it may be an attitude that does not accord with what is achievable by staff at ground level.

ISSUE:
Is there confusion over personal goals versus corporate goals ?

COMMENTS:
The corporate goals and outcomes for customers were clear and well articulated during the course of the Hypothetical. There were genuine feelings of goodwill towards the organisation and its objectives.

Surprisingly, at times personal goals (ambition, career advancement, pay increases etc.) were almost dismissed as immaterial e.g " we don't really expect advancement these days", " we are all reasonably well paid".

ISSUE:
Is there a lack of clarity about vision and end goals for cluster management?

COMMENTS:
This was seen as a major issue, both in research and during the Hypothetical where it was expressed as "the map and the mountain". In fact, it was expressed that it may not be necessary to have a mountain i.e. no fixed and final goal in sight.

It may be appropriate in terms of cluster management that the management journey is more relevant than any final destination. However, managers were seen to be struggling with such a concept. How far we go and how fast, was unclear to most panelists.

We recommend training initiatives that focus on the definition and communication of vision / purpose / meaning. This could include a communication strategy for staff throughout the Area about the direction / purpose / progress of cluster management.

ISSUE:
What would happen to personal feedback on the individual manager's performance ?

COMMENTS:
During the research phase there appeared to be a discrepancy between the outcomes of individual performance appraisals and the way the performance of a cluster was to be assessed.

It appears that while performance appraisals are conducted at all levels within Centrelink, they may not be fully effective at management level. Several participants were a little vague on the benefits or aims of performance appraisals and it was left unclear as to how the performance criteria of the cluster were to be established.

This issue is related to vision / mission / goal setting and emphasises the need for effective communication tools.

ISSUE:
Performance indicators ...how do we know if and when we've succeeded?

COMMENTS:
This is related to the previous issue and, despite prompting, was a question that went unanswered during the Hypothetical. No-one had a clear picture of how the success or failure of the cluster was going to be measured.

It seemed that until there is a complete transition from the present geographic funding model to a cluster or portfolio funding model, this lack of clarity is likely to prevail.

ISSUE:
Cluster management challenges the comfort zone.. we've always done it this way...why change.

COMMENTS:
While this view has been raised as a cultural barrier at cluster management meetings, it was certainly not articulated in this way during the Hypothetical. In fact, there was a remarkable acceptance of change within the management group. Scenarios that covered cuts to individual budgets, office downsizing, even possible office closure and redundancy were taken with a certain resignation and preparedness to adjust.

This was not the view expressed during research, below manager level. This probably means a need for sharing feedback up and down the management ladder.

ISSUE:
There is confidence in the use of teams.

COMMENTS:
The development of teams is viewed as part of the progress towards effective cluster management. There is a strong sense of teamwork within the managers and its benefits were well articulated - better responsiveness to needs of customers; team members are closer to the problems and to one another; quicker, better decision-making; achieve common goals; reduces unproductive competition.

We believe Centrelink should consider training initiatives for team leadership that build on this strong cultural ethic within the organisation. We could assist with appropriate training modules.

ISSUE:
There is a strong 'boys club' in some clusters... an often informal collegiate approach to solving individual office problems.

COMMENTS:
This was an issue that was denied by several panelists within the Hypothetical. However, this was not always the view expressed to us during the research phase both at manager level and below. We believe this is an issue that should be further explored. Mike Russell's suggestion of 360 degree performance appraisals would more than likely reveal the incidence of this.

There are several positive outcomes of a 'boys club' culture such as peer support and the sharing of ideas. However it is an inadequate substitute for a truly cooperative culture as it tends to entrench resistance to change, covers up inadequate performance or inappropriate behaviour, and shuts out new people and new ideas.

ISSUE:
Equity of outcomes is seen as desirable, but what does it mean and how can it be achieved.

COMMENTS:
This issue relates to the broader issue of knowing when we have arrived at an effective cluster model. A fully functioning cluster will presumably deliver an equity of outcomes across the group.

It wasn't clear how this equity could be achieved between the dowdy, run-down office with its unhappy and aggressive customers and the bright, new open-plan office with its bright, intelligent customers.

There were some hesitation over the suggestion that some offices would have to give up some of their resources to help out the less well-off offices.

ISSUE:
Managers may not be clear what their services cost and how client departments set their costs.

COMMENTS:
This was agreed to on the panel. Clearly, in terms of producing a well functioning cluster model, managers will need more information about the costs of running their cluster. We believe the provision of such financial modeling is vital to the way cluster managers embrace a new approach to management.

THEMES ...things you may have to pay attention to

Clarity of vision and acceptance of a shared vision

- does it describe a compelling future that people wish to share?

Performance reviews and pay

- issue of individual review and cluster performance
- accountability and development - are these compatible goals for a system of performance review?

Teams / clusters - what is the goal or the end point?

- how will we know when we get there? How do we get it right?
- is it a journey or a destination?

Customer service

- did Beth Price's comments as a disgruntled customer reflect the current Centrelink state of play?
- is this reflected in your vision?

How we work together

- making decisions - consensus, after consultation, by role?
- "Boys Club" is there one?
- Trust - is this an issue?
- how do we build and maintain relationships?
- resourcing and equity of outcomes
- role of managers - member of a Board of Management versus site manager

Sustaining ongoing cultural change

- the mountain and the map
- do we need to revisit whether or not we want to go to "Nirvana" ?
- can we afford to, "let it evolve"?

Hypothetical de-brief

The hypothetical model seeks to place you in familiar territory but test your personal, ethical, moral and philosophical attitudes and your relationships... it asks you to think out loud about how and why you do things...it seeks to expose the consequences of your actions... and to help you constantly question the rationale of your decisions.

It does this by placing you in the culture in which you operate and then twisting and warping that culture... hopefully maintaining a sense of reality...

The brief was to look at the management culture ... at office level... keeping in mind the desire to introduce a cluster management approach at regional level...

The hypothetical telescoped some of the key issues that could be viewed as barriers to cluster management... these included:

- **territoriality or protection of your particular geographic patch**

NOT SEEN AS A MAJOR ISSUE ON THE DAY

- **competitive motivation unlikely to be sacrificed for cooperative approach**

NOT THE CASE ON THE DAY... GENUINE WILLINGNESS TO COOPERATE

- **possible confusion over personal goals versus the corporate goals**

NOT SO MARKED... THE CORPORATE OUTCOMES SEEMED QUITE CLEAR AND ARTICULATED.

- **what would happen to feedback on individual performance**

NOT A MAJOR ISSUE ON THE DAY...

- **cluster management would challenge the comfort zone... we've always done it this way... why change**

CERTAINLY NOT ARTICULATED IN THIS WAY ON THE DAY. IN FACT THERE IS A REMARKABLE ACCEPTANCE OF CHANGE...CUTS TO YOUR

BUDGET... DOWNSIZING... WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE CENTRELINK CULTURE...??

- **performance indicators... how do we know if, and when we've succeeded**

THIS WAS CERTAINLY THE CASE ...NO-ONE HAD A CLEAR IDEA

- **the danger of incurring more work... more meetings, more responsibility**

THERE WAS ALMOST A PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE THAT MORE WORK COULD BE TAKEN ON BOARD...YOU WOULD GET BY.. AGAIN I WONDER WHAT THOSE BELOW YOU WOULD SAY.

- **we would be trying to work with an inappropriate funding model**

Along the way I also discovered some other issues:

Those I talked to articulated a lack of clarity about a vision and end goals of cluster management... no mountain and a very sketchy map ... so in particular... how <u>far</u> we go and how <u>fast</u> was unclear...

THIS WAS CONFIRMED ON THE DAY

A strong sense of cooperation ...

THIS WAS STRONGLY CONFIRMED ON THE DAY

A confidence in teamwork

VERY STRONGLY STATED AND ASSUMED DURING THE SCENARIOS

A certain resignation about change

THIS WAS CONFIRMED ON THE DAY

How budgets are applied and how managers have access to those budgets is crucial to the success of clustering

NOT STRONGLY ARTICULATED ON THE DAY

There's a strong boys club in some clusters... an often informal collegiate approach to solving regional problems.

THIS WAS DENIED ON THE DAY ... EVEN BY A FEMALE MANAGER .. IS THIS THE OBSERVATION OF STAFF UNDER YOU?

An understanding of the meaning of EQUITY OF OUTCOMES but a lack of clarity on how they could be achieved.

ON THE DAY ... THERE WAS A STRONG BELIEF IN THE COOPERATIVE APPROACH TO GET YOU BY.

A real concern that managers do not know more precisely what each of their services cost and how client departments establish their costs.

THIS WAS AGREED TO ... GREG KERSHAW ... AND NO-ONE DISAGREED.

IN THE END, DID YOU HEAR WHAT YOU EXPECTED TO HEAR ...?

Appendix 9: Summary of responses to survey questions 13 and 14

Centrelink Survey Questionnaire:
"Improving Communication in the Workplace"

Question 13: Good experiences of the Area Support Office by Customer Service Centre staff

Responses by category:

a. Assistance, support or encouragement received in understanding policy or resolving problems

Respondent No:
1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,14,15,16,18,19,20,22,27,28,29,31,33,36,37,38,45,46, 49,50,53,56,57,58,59,63,64,65,70,73

Key words: assistance, assisted, resolving, good support, supportive, clarification, very helpful, top support, full support, support to achieve results, staff went out of their way, satisfactory outcome, helpful, positive, beyond the call of duty, information, reassuring, cooperation, friendly support, fantastic service, good experience, gave us advice, excellent response, response was very quick, great support/advice, numerous good experiences, support and guidance, endless fountain of knowledge, only ever had good experiences, usually positive, helpful and willing, particularly helpful, excellent support staff, always helpful, practical support, very close partnership, very helpful in listening to our difficulties, take interest in actual customer situations and workflow, great support, support for staff within office, support in establishing a new process, getting changes made to the system, being thought of asked to participate, valuing the expertise, staff counsellor is always very supportive, extremely helpful, brilliant with their assistance and knowledge, interaction and teamwork was eye-opening, very supportive for intervention,

b. Effective communication

Respondent No: 3,5,11,13,22,29,66,69,72,74,75

Key words: team leaders meetings, interested in staff opinions, ensured I fully understood, complete understanding of communication, well communicated, staff have felt informed and knowledgeable, was informed all the time, communicate prior to meetings, promptly got back to me to advise the process, positive feedback from area manager over my performance, easy to understand presentation, interest level was surprisingly high

c. Responsiveness

Respondent No: 11,13,15,19,24,32,33,35,40,41,60,63,64,65,67,69

Key words: response times are very good, timely, availability, timely and friendly support, a positive experience, it all happens with a minimum of fuss,

timely and accurate, nothing is too much trouble attitude, very responsive and cooperative, very timely approval, received response within 24 hours, always have good response, very quick to follow up, prompt handling of many queries, quick of not immediate responses, excellent response times, having an immediate positive response, promptly got back to me to advise the process

d. Training assistance

Respondent No: 6,16,21,25,26,39,42,43,44,51,66

Key words: organise some very much needed training, provided quickly-very helpful, focus group on coaching which was excellent, coaching group, extremely useful and well presented, they always seem willing to run additional courses, business improvement workshops, forging ahead training, I received excellent assistance and guidance, well planned and conducted, AWT sessions were informative, guest speakers in training are on time, and helpful

Question 14: Difficult experiences that officers have had with Area Support Office in which they have been involved.

Responses by category:

a. Communication

Respondent No: 1,2,4,5,7,10,11,12,14,17,18,20,22,23,29,32,33,35,43,44, 46,48,49

Key words: staff were away from ASO, I've received incorrect information from PAU, no clear person to speak to, lack of communication with information at some meetings, getting same information from different sources in ASO, CSC decision questioned by ASO officer, they did not appear to be listening to me, several times I have received different answers from policy people relating to the same query, complete lack of effective communication and training during the devolvement of the pensioner education supplement. A staff confidence destroyer, shared resources of staff being swallowed up in the area, but staff not being informed or consulted, trying to get information on who to contact not what, as intranet page does not reflect all TEAs, staff members answer phone with identifying himself or where he works, most problems stem from NSO communication, which in turn stem from political issues with partnerships, not getting a timely response from a voice message, sometimes the time frames for responses are unreasonable, had to leave a message to contact me on their voice mail but was never called back, was continually referred to someone else, emailed requests to same policy adviser with no response, when I first moved to ASO I was in an information void, very difficult to get through to systems, especially when there is urgency on a case,

differing information about a subject, no response to my email from policy unit, keeping the home page up to date, getting (within the team) two different opinions from area policy almost simultaneously

b. Problems with internal systems

Respondent No:
3,4,8,9,13,16,17,19,20,24,27,31,34,36,37,39,40,41,42,45,47,49,50,51

Key words: problems occur using IES system, , trying to get some direction in relation to accountable forms EBT, still trying to get a policy rep up to Gympie to workshop self employment areas, difficulty in satisfying target, benchmark requirements, advised they could not help me, however didn't try and work out other ways to help, took over 4 hours to establish the one correct form needed by a customer, trying to get information on who to contact, not what, as intranet does not reflect all TEAs, compensation claim for customer - time taken with policy, most problems stem from NSO communication, which in turn stem from political issues with partnerships, frustrating trying to find the "right" person, rolling profile continuous discussions, lack of support and advocacy to NSO by ASO, sometimes ASO is the meat in the sandwich when we are chasing something - policy or advice, myself and a CSO both rang policy and were given different information about the same situation, meeting short time frames for responses / feedback because NSO has given area office limited time, a defective administration case took ages to be finalised by policy, insufficient time given to action a request, frustration over unwillingness to a adopt a consistent approach to check the checking, review support not fully understanding of pressures and demands across CSC, an unrealistic expectation and time frame being set, answers I received were conflicting or the "experts" knew less than I did, getting (within the team) two different opinions from area policy almost simultaneously, trying to get agreement for rewards and recognition funding, request support from a team in specialist area, but it was not provided,

c. Staff Attitudes

Respondent No: 6,21,25,28,30,53

Key words: staff member I spoke to was neither cooperative nor helpful, in fact was rude, a touch of arrogance with some ASO staff and "we know best" attitude, dealing with some managers who don't really "get" Centrelink, or truly believe in it, sometimes find some individual staff intractable, I tried to get some IT information from someone who wasn't very helpful and was quite abrupt, some ASOLT meetings are difficult - issues of power of different personalities,

d. Training programs

Respondent No: 15,38

Key words: workshop on HR issues I felt was a total waste of time, trying to get PES training,

Appendix 10: Coded issues

KEY ISSUES - Centrelink Hypothetical

COMMUNICATION

Who and what is ASO... there's a lack of definition or profile of the office out there in the network.

Finding the right person - linked to the first issue. We need a 'map' and an 'index' to locate the appropriate expertise.

Information overload - it's not filtered and it's not always directed at the right person.

Answer the phone! Sometimes they ring out and there's no voicemail or alternative pick up.

Use of answer machines is too common.

There's email overload ... but it's the quickest way to disseminate information

Technology restrictions - does this impact on the level of sophistication in disseminating information?

Managers and CSOs are not passing on information provided by ASO

Network staff are not using the homepages for information

We are constanting interpreting and re-interpreting policy to network staff and managers.

The relationship between ASO and network as a support group is not always understood.

Is the communication relationship between NSO and ASO effective and transparent?

Network sees bad publicity and asks why is no-one standing up for them, because they can't make a personal response.

There's a perceived conflict in the network that C&M chase good news stories in preference to fending off difficult journalists.

Network staff often don't know how to access C&M services ...in fact they may not even know they exist

We are not always clear about our expectations when we make requests and ask for follow up.

WORKLOAD

The workload means everything is regarded as Priority No 1. We need prioritisation

It's a balancing act - juggling the demands of NSO with the needs of the CSCs

Software Systems Group not resourced of staffed for systems training needs of the network.

The geographical coverage is too broad for SSG to effectively conduct regular outreach

ASO staff may have lost a feel for the day to day business of CSCs. They often relay 'cold' information with no awareness of the customer.

Diminished resources in Policy User Support means reduced direct access

Policy User Support cannot provide visits or technical training

Systems User Support access is high at times due to strong demand on services

STAFFING

It's difficult to recruit and keep good staff.

Good technical staff soon take career progress in NSO so the recruitment / training cycle starts again.

ASO staff turnover is high as well as movement between offices and across teams... it means continual recruitment and training.

SSG staff need exposure to demands of the network as major workflows change.

Relief staff in Policy User Support seem to lack experience needed.

Indigenous staff say there's discrimination against them and there's no ASO support.

- staff members are supported by HR with a grievance; who supports the team leader?

PERCEPTIONS

- Bad feeling towards the multicultural unit. Who are they, what do they do? Why do we provide special support for ethnic minorities at the expense of others?

- Why is it so difficult to get an interpreter once they're booked?

- Why is FOI team so unresponsive to the needs of the network?

- Why do CRU and C&M staff seem to take the customer's side against staff when he or she has behaved badly to staff?

  Why does C&M have so many different services when our core business is payments?

- Who are "Compliance" and what do they do - the role is not clear and this leads to frustrations, misunderstandings and anger