

It is good to be here tonight

I am not too sure what to say to you all between courses and restroom breaks

In these situations I think it is best to keep it short and reasonably to the point

Tonight is probably not the occasion for the stock/standard speech on all things group training as I am preaching to the converted and I guess you have heard it all before

If I were to make such a speech (but I am not) I would of course talk about the extraordinary success story that is group training

And about the fact that without it, training opportunities for indigenous Australians and those with a disability would be seriously restricted

As well, I would of course mention the fact that without group training, the survival of the traditional trades in some areas would be under question

and I would also take the opportunity to mention that without group training...

the Commonwealth's New Apprenticeship Access Program, which aims to assist the most disadvantaged of school leavers, and give them a second chance, and is without doubt one of the more difficult programs to manage...

would have been struggling long ago...

And of course, no such speech would be complete if mention was not made of the fact that, despite the success of group training...

many companies' survival may well be under threat if proposed new funding arrangements come into force next year...

But No....

Tonight is not the night for such a speech.....

Instead, I shall focus on a more general subject – but one that has been concentrating our minds of late

And that is the vexed issue of... "government /stakeholder relationships"

And I will attempt to straddle both sides of the fence with my personal observations

But before I do that, it is probably only fair that I make a few confessions so to give you some idea as to where I am coming from on this important issue

My first confession is that for 14 years, I had a fatal attraction to all things political

I was your regular political junkie – the highs were very high but the lows were very low

So in June last year, I decided to go cold turkey

And like all ex-junkies, I must admit I still suffer from the odd withdrawal symptom (my antidote is to listen to Senate Estimates over the Internet)

My personal involvement working for the Federal Liberal Party (but never as a member of the party) began during the "Joh for PM" campaign in 1987 and ended six months before the third successive "John for PM" campaign of November 2001.

Whilst the beginning and end points are quite stark and stand out in the memory...

I must say much of the rest of the time in between resembled one long repetitive play same basic story line...the same actors, though the male lead would sometimes change...the odd overnight sensation or shooting star...the occasional unforgettable scene...and the many forgettable ones

Yet despite the sameness and the cynicism, politics does allow you to meet and work with some very individual people who in their own unique ways, make a difference

And who all, along the way, teach you a lesson or two about stakeholder management – good and bad

Where else would you get the opportunity to work for someone like Dr John Hewson on a four year national crusade called “Fightback” only to see it all crash and burn in the last few weeks of an election campaign?

...when stakeholders got scared

Where else would you get the opportunity to personally sack a liberal party candidate called Pauline Hanson for “conduct unbecoming”?...

and see the whole country unravel as a result?

...when stakeholders were angry

Where else would you get the opportunity to run a State election campaign...

based on the premise that the only way to win was to repeatedly state that you would lose?

...when stakeholders were confused

And of course where else would you get the opportunity of working with someone like Dr David Kemp...

a man of amazing intellect, commitment, personal belief and drive

...but stakeholders were very definitely divided

So, amongst all the blur of 14 years...

there have been some tangible moments of clarity (of sorts)...

But equally a feeling that, when push came to shove, successfully reading and **managing** stakeholders, whatever their agenda, remained elusive and just out of reach.

In all my time in politics and government, I must say the most difficult thing to do it seemed was to build productive, meaningful and lasting relationships with many “stakeholders”.

To really understand where they were coming from and for them to understand where I, and those I worked with and for, were coming from as well

Questions would abound...

Who do I talk to?

How do I talk to them?

Who are they?

Who can I afford to ignore?

Whose spin do I believe?

What bureaucrat to trust?

What “real person” to latch on to? and

Can I get away with talking to nobody - keep my own counsel and press on regardless?

These are terrible confessions to make, I know...

but maybe it is simply the nature of the political beast...

and underpins the sentiment often expressed about people needing to “get out of Canberra” and to broaden their horizons a bit

Building genuine relationships with stakeholders in politics and government **should** be a very natural thing to do

and of course some do it very well...

whilst many struggle

Those who do it well, I think, on the political and government side, accept and understand the need for genuine two-way feedback and consultation on a regular basis

They see the benefits of sensitising and humanising what is often either a highly charged and chaotic political environment or a very technical, dry and bureaucratic one

They accept the fact that all wisdom and knowledge does not reside in a Minister's office, a senior bureaucrat's in-tray, a political party's internal focus group research or with one peak body

Those who don't do it so well however, seem driven either by a large ego which always seems to know best anyway...

or by an over-riding devotion to process and managing contracts as opposed to managing people

The “my way” mentality over-rides the two way approach

I suspect some of you here tonight have been on the receiving end of such stakeholder treatment on the odd occasion in the past

The other key issue with managing stakeholders, from a government and political perspective, is of course how they are graded in the hierarchy of influence...

Who's on the A-Team and who's on the B, C and D Teams

Depending on who you are at that time, and of course, who does the grading...

you can have a cosy...lukewarm...or frosty relationship with those who make the decisions and hold the purse strings

This can lead, I believe, to some stakeholders becoming far too close to the decision-making process whilst, for others,

they may as well be invisible...

In negotiations and consultations, decision makers, policy managers and political operatives pick and choose who they like to include and exclude

that is their right and privilege ...and it may indeed lead to efficient lines of communication...

But I think it can also lead to a blinkered and predictable view of the world at times

These personal observations on stakeholder management, from one side of the fence so to speak, are not meant to be a criticism of anybody or anything in particular...

(the only person I would dare point the finger at is myself....)

they simply reflect, to me anyway, what seems to have happened as a result of the way things get done

And maybe, during times of constant economic and social reform, the management of stakeholder relationships by government is all the more fraught and difficult as everybody is loudly demanding a place at the table and pleading their own special case

Maybe...

but, whatever the reasons behind what may or may not have occurred in the past...

I have no doubt that the **management** of stakeholder relationships in the future needs a tune up and in some cases, an overhaul

This is no great revelation to you all, I know...

Yet it has been magnified even more so in my mind since I removed myself from the system and started to hear the thoughts and views of those “on the outside looking in”

Now, the obvious response from some on the other side would be “well Jim, you would say that wouldn’t you, now that you have jumped the fence”

But I think that would be missing the point

I **do** understand the workings of government...I **do** appreciate the “mechanics” of politics...and I **do** have the utmost respect and admiration for those in public service

The only point I am making is that, from my own observations,

The **art** of properly managing stakeholder relationships has been lost in many respects...

Often there seemed little time for opposing views or different ideas or even constructive criticism.

“Read the rules, stick to the guidelines and if you don’t like it – tough “

for **some**, this has been the preferred approach for managing stakeholders

Whilst such approaches have been oddly equated with toughness and strong management style and can even lead to promotion within some circles, they are totally inappropriate and simply not sustainable and everyone here knows that.

There just has to be better and more effective ways to ensure that genuine two-way feedback and consultation is made part of the business of government and politics

And for that to happen in a meaningful way, we stakeholders have to play our part and lift our game where needs be.

We must be prepared to put our own performance under the microscope as much as those on the other side

And I think the words and sentiments of Dr Peter Shergold on this very issue of stakeholders - in speeches he has made since taking on his new role - are very welcome and very significant

It is obvious that Dr Shergold believes there **is** a need to rebuild and renew relationships with his particular stakeholders – group training being one of them

To make his own people more accountable for the quality and effectiveness of the relationships they build

It is good government, good politics and simple common sense...

And I hope it reaps enormous rewards – but for that to happen, we stakeholders have to lift our game as well

Group Training has been a major stakeholder in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Australians for the past few decades.

During that time, it has had to build and manage relationships with the community and with all levels of government.

To many in the network, it seems somewhat of a paradox then that whilst the community relationships remain very strong, vibrant and productive, it is often the relationships with government that have become frayed at the edges...

There clearly has been fault on both sides...

not enough listening

too much talking at

and too little talking to

rigidity and inflexibility

misunderstandings

paranoia

and conspiracy

So...

in this hopeful new era of listening and inclusiveness, where both sides seem to be accepting that things just have to change for the better

I welcome the opportunity for less fraying at the edges and less heartburn...

and look forward, now as a stakeholder on the other side...

to being a part of building **genuine** partnerships and to breaking down some of the barriers between "us" and "them"

I may have had to wait 14 years to find out how it is done properly

...but I hope the wait will be worth it