

CHAPTER 12

CONFLICT, GROWTH AND INNOVATION

Our work is here. We speak of power and of rank and authority, yet, beneath each issue, between the floating words and dissonance of opinion, there sits a fundamental opportunity for choice. Part loss, part gain. Our work is one of orchestrating dissonance, the ripples of which will alter the fabric of society, one conversation at a time. Some are soft, some are hard. All are necessary.

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It's all good?

It is easy to get excited about the idea of innovation. We hear about the need for it in our organisations and communities from political and organisational leaders alike. Most CEOs know that there are lots of great ideas in their organisations which could help their systems adapt and prosper. They also know that these ideas tend not to come to light or are quashed before they can

get any traction. In a corporate organisation we worked with, the CEO lamented that a product improvement that would give them a leading edge over their competitor took more than six months to get any visibility at all in the organisation. What he found was that the system worked very hard to slow it down or kill it off before it got too far—often with the best intentions. It did this while promoting an organisational narrative of supporting creativity and risk-taking.

Innovation is a hope, slogan and call to action that often doesn't get very far. That's because innovation calls us to commit ourselves emotionally and psychologically. Hopefully, and necessarily, we do that with others who are making the same kind of commitment. If that can happen it inevitably means conflict with other ideas and interests—in fact, the resulting conflict is vital for the innovation. And this is where the hopes for innovation usually die.

We can't make a new year's resolution to eat and drink less, exercise more or quit smoking and not come into conflict with our current way of life, comforts and existing behaviours. Similarly, we can't find a way through some of Australia's adaptive challenges without similar conflict. Creating innovative organisations, responding to climate change, finding better ways to manage land and water, and tackling increasing obesity won't come without a clash of values, beliefs and assumptions between different interests in communities and organisations. Indeed these clashes exist within ourselves as individuals. Nobody *really* wants to get out of their comfort zone.

The clash or incompatibility between opinions, ideologies, beliefs or interests is what defines conflict. When it arises it is often a marker of where an individual or a system's growth is. It's a bit like a road sign: 'Warning—Growth Ahead'. While it

represents an emerging potential, we need to be prepared and skilled if we don't want to end up in the ditch or just turning around and going home.

Conflict is a tough sell in the Australian context—even the more positive interpretation offered here as a signal of growth. Not that it is necessarily easy anywhere else in the world or dealt with much better. We need only check out the international news to see how poorly differences between us as humans are dealt with. Yet there is something unique about conflict in Australia, both in how we deal with it and our understanding of its legitimacy in a peaceful nation.

While disagreements, differing points of view, tension and mistrust between groups and individuals are part of human existence, it is rare to see them openly surfaced in Australian workplaces or communities. Their suppression means that when and if they do arise they carry a lot more firepower than we were intending or they come out in a place where they cannot be understood and progressed. But before trying to understand why Australians struggle with productive conflict, it is worth understanding what it offers. Why would we want to disrupt the apparent peace? Because, as we like to say in Australia, 'It's all good,' isn't it?

Well, mostly. The space and distance from the world's troubles have been some of Australia's greatest assets. What was initially a curse for many early settlers has become one of our greatest opportunities. Beyond the material advantage, our space gives us the ability to relax and block out the world's problems. There's more than enough space for things to be out of sight and mind.

But as the world becomes both smaller and more diverse, it brings inevitable conflict. Australians are increasingly faced with a need to understand and negotiate across values, beliefs and

interests. This is what we have earlier in this title called 'leading across difference'.

As Australians we can approach this with dread and anxiety or we can try to see its potential. The potential is the opportunity, indeed the necessity, to innovate. The ability to compete locally and globally is dependent on this. More importantly, communities and social systems are calling for innovation. Transport, child welfare, housing and an ageing population, to name just a few examples, are all calling for significant innovation.

Australia's prosperity provides a unique opportunity to be of benefit locally and globally. Are we willing to do something with this prosperity, knowing that this will inevitably involve some kind of conflict among us? This brings us to the Australian challenge—and opportunity—with conflict.

Australia and conflict

The paradoxes of leadership discussed in Part 2 paint a picture of what is unique in leading in Australia. A number of these paradoxes can inform some of the challenges with conflict and in turn innovation and growth: in particular Australian's relationship with authority, the preference for strong personal relationships (over task and role), and our egalitarian values.

Dependent on authority

Despite our irreverence, Australians show a high dependence on authority. When the status quo is challenged or called into question, this means we usually look to authority with an expectation that the role will fix or calm things. Often unwittingly those in authority will respond to this expectation by trying to move things on (away from the conflict), shut it down, 'put it in the

parking lot' for later, blame the source of the conflict or resort to a technical fix. Easing the tension also helps maintain or restore authority, at least in the short term, because the expectations on the role of authority to keep the calm have been fulfilled.

At a round-table discussion on social innovation in Sydney hosted by a touring American academic, Geoff witnessed how easy it was for the innovation agenda to be pushed back to authority. As the conversation proceeded, the visiting academic repeatedly tried to explain how social innovation can only be owned by non-government players. Yet the Australians couldn't help seeing government as the central player and patron of any social innovation. The academic had missed the cultural difference between the two countries.

Anti-authority

The other side of the authority paradox is the anti-authority narrative or what might be more commonly called the 'larrikin spirit'. When we face difficulties and conflict, we not only look to authority figures to fix things—we can easily blame them. Authority can swiftly become the lightning rod for the problem. Instead of having the argument among us, we have it against authority. People in authority can be burdened with the problem, particularly if they do not alleviate the tension fast enough.

A police commissioner confided how difficult Mondays were in the police force following a weekend with a number of road deaths. The media and public seemed to see these deaths as the fault of police, a convenient home for it! This places the role of authority in a difficult spot. In times of change, authority's role is to alert systems to impending threats and challenges. In other words, they need to bring conflict to a system in order for it to respond differently and adapt (innovate), for which they may be blamed.

Australians display a preference for working with and maintaining strong personal relationships. In other words, 'being liked' is important (see box 'How to get ahead at work'). This makes it difficult to tolerate conflict because of a fear of being disliked and excluded. As a result, the more difficult conversations tend to happen outside of our formal meetings and usually with those that are 'on our side'. When the inevitable, and healthy, disagreement eventually gets some air, it is usually in the more comfortable informal context: in the corridors, down at the pub or at the coffee shop. It is a credit to our skills in working politically that we are able to deal with the undiscussables in this way. The downside is that it kills productive conflict that could help the system. It also reinforces the idea that difficult conversations are not sanctioned and need to be 'handled' somewhere else.

Many of us have experienced coming to a meeting where there was clearly a previous meeting to which we weren't invited, one where the majority got shored up and the decision was guaranteed without the danger of any messy disagreement or conflict.

Our personable, social approach, one of our greatest traits, becomes problematic when we *can't* just be mates, when something else is called for.

How to get ahead at work

Australians think the way to get ahead at work is to be popular with colleagues, while Brits favour the sucking-up-to-the-boss method. Germans think it's most important to dress the part and Singaporeans emphasise being seen in all the right places. That is, according to research commissioned by LinkedIn and conducted by IPSOS Mori

and Catalyst Research. The survey covered 3200 working professionals globally, including more than 400 in Australia. Three out of four (75 per cent) Australians rate being liked by colleagues as the most important factor in career development, the study suggests. This compares with fewer than two out of five (38 per cent) of the British respondents.¹

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Egalitarian values

At least on the surface Australians hope for equality and sameness. Yet change often means that there are not going to be equal outcomes for everyone involved. In the face of this, it is easier to paper over the fact that some will benefit more and some may lose more, at least temporarily. Indeed any kind of real change will involve some kind of loss for everyone involved

It is usually those who will gain more who try to do the papering over, as it can be uncomfortable to admit to and recognise another's loss. The risk is that we only hear the 'yes' voices that will benefit more from the change and not allow space for the 'no' voice that may lose more. We end up rewarding and creating an 'in group' and wonder why we cannot innovate. Papering things over in the hope of equality can make the conflict bigger and send it underground where it can't be used productively, any more.

It feels strange to argue for more arguing, kind of like spoiling the party. But we often get stuck between two polarities. It seems that it's either 'all good' and 'no worries' or it's the high stakes, winner-takes-all scenes that we can see in parliament. These two scenarios are actually not that different. In one, conflict is buried, and in the other it is open but extreme. But they have the same outcome. Neither is able to really hear alternate voices or

innovate. But why are these alternate voices, or the 'no', important in innovation?

The cult of 'yes' and the loss of 'no'—Why conflict is important for innovation

Looking to authority to fix or blame and fearing that conflict will jeopardise personal relationships means groups end up seeking a false and un-useful surface consensus. One senior public servant probably said it best to us in our research: 'We end up creating and maintaining cults of "yes" in our systems.'

Expressing 'no' then has little legitimacy or safety and gets pushed underground. As Leigh Weiss reflects:

If I go to a meeting but don't have the chance to test my views against contrary opinions, I may leave the room saying 'yes' to initiatives without feeling any personal commitment to them.²

Where does this leave us if we are interested in innovating, change and growth? It leaves us sticking to the 'yes' and losing the wisdom of the 'no'.³

Sticking to 'yes'

The most obvious response to potential conflict is resorting to technical solutions (see Chapter 2). In an effort to avoid conflict, it is easy to revert to the known: restructuring, calling in consultants, setting up a working committee, running a consultation process, centralising, decentralising, or whatever the system is best at doing to turn down the heat. Technical solutions are also an implicit means of supporting authority. After all, technical work is the domain in which authority has the most expertise and is responsible for on a daily basis.

Authority is inevitably predisposed to look after the status quo and the interests of the majority or mainstream. Yet innovation and growth rarely come from the centre of systems. They come from the edges: structurally, geographically, culturally or ideologically.

These are the people at the coal-face hearing about customer or client experiences, those sitting in the regional offices or those who are treated or experience our systems very differently. These 'edges' have a different experience of systems to how the mainstream experiences it. They may be marginalised by the mainstream, alienated or completely overlooked. These edges often have unique perspectives and experiences of the systems we operate in, which often are the clues to a system's growth. But it is hard for authority and the mainstream to see and hear these alternate voices.

This often means that the 'no' voice ends up losing or alienated. This is not to say that loss should be avoided. It is very rare to have everyone completely 'onboard' and almost impossible for everyone to benefit equally in change, at least in the short term. The loss could be tangible (financial, control or security) or even just to our pride.

The dangers of losing the 'no'

Not allowing the conflict between parts of the system to surface and be understood, acknowledged and worked with has a number of dangers:

1. *We lose the wisdom* of those who are not agreeing with how things are or what's being proposed. The 'no' voices in systems are not objecting just for the sake of it or purely out of self-interest. They often represent a view which is useful to hear. The cult of 'yes' can mean losing this wisdom. For example, an organisation we worked with was seeking to innovate in its service delivery to its clients. The 'no' voice raised the issue

of how its managers treated its own people as a problem in this innovation—in effect it could not offer better services if it was harassing its own people. This was met higher up with disbelief or dismissal. Though difficult to hear, this wisdom was key to the innovation.

2. *Dealing with loss* is important and often underestimated. Those who are not benefiting equally or are losing from either the status quo or the proposed changes must deal with what it means to lose. The fear of admitting to or creating loss can mean that instead we do nothing and ignore it. In effect we don't know how to move on well.
3. *Creating 'terrorists'* is the other impact of not dealing with loss well. Ignoring the losses and just moving on is a great way to inflame people. It is no wonder then that change so often fails. Terrorists in mild forms appear in community and organisational life all the time. They can be identified by barbed jokes about the latest changes all the way to strikes and departures. Perhaps because there are so few opportunities for dissent to be voiced, we create mouthpieces for us to vent our frustration in the only way we know how. This might be why shock-jocks resonate so well with the disaffected. Perhaps our inability to hear alternate voices and deal with them well means we need to find other ways to be heard.

Conflict and the 'no' are valuable to making progress and growth. If we can't tolerate it, we end up creating terrorists in our systems. Terrorism can either be angry, loud and seeking to stop progress aggressively (which we usually leave to others to do for us) or the more passive and familiar resistance. In effect, conflict ends up polarising rather than helping innovation.

Thankfully Australians bring something to bear to this challenge.

Showing up—how to innovate

People left by keeping their real feelings and thoughts . . . to themselves preferring to support the friendly group atmosphere of camaraderie while gossiping privately about their views. In a sense they hadn't showed up yet.⁴

Innovation and change happen when people 'show up'. This means bringing all of ourselves into the challenges we face and allowing others to do the same. And when we show up we will inevitably meet some kind of conflict.

Australians bring significant gifts to the challenge of conflict: an awareness and sensitivity to the excessive use of power and an irreverence to authority. This 'naughtiness' is a good antidote to the cult of 'yes'. What's missing perhaps is the skill to do something with this naughtiness that allows progress to be made so it doesn't just turn into complaining.

Without these skills it is easy to get knocked out in the heat and confusion of conflict. The preceding chapters on purpose, role and power form the base of these skills. The following three sections outline what more is needed to use conflict productively from the perspective of purpose, power and role.

Purpose: productive conflict

Not all conflict is useful. Productive conflict, which is what this chapter is promoting, has a purpose of facilitating innovation. It does this by allowing a diversity of thinking to emerge. It has a fundamental premise that to reap the benefits people need to *stay in* relationship. Unproductive conflict, perhaps what we are most scared of, moves us out of relationships. It is highly emotive and divisive and drives people and interests apart. How do we

make sure we are promoting and holding people in productive and functional relationships?

From positions of authority, we need to be ready to tolerate, contain and create productive conflict so that systems can innovate. This requires being able to develop, communicate and hold a clear and compelling purpose: one that is collective, positive, achievable, aspirational and galvanising. This may take some time to work out collectively. The questions about why we are doing what we are doing are usually not asked and groups can be months into collaborative work without being clear on why they are working together. Asking the questions about purpose and having to commit to a tangible outcome is challenging, but is authority's purpose. This compelling purpose can sustain a group through the heat of conflict.

Power to create a holding environment

Productive conflict requires the creation of spaces where conflict can safely arise. This is what is often called a 'holding environment', characterised by:

The cohesive properties of a relationship or social system that serve to keep people engaged with one another in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work.⁵

Holding environments enable groups to develop their identity while containing the conflict, chaos and confusion that is often produced when they struggle with complex problematic realities. This is like a pressure cooker to contain and regulate the heat. A pressure cooker, unlike a wok, holds in the heat, pressure and ingredients without a large flame. Similarly, in conflict it is easy to depart from a loose holding environment (a wok) because there

are no barriers to exit or little incentive to stay, or because it is seen as too unsafe or too hot.

The majority of the work in innovation is the creation and maintenance of a strong and safe holding environment to keep stakeholders involved long enough to create something new and make progress. Unfortunately, what often happens in attempts at innovation is that, beyond the initial fanfare and sponsorship, there is little thought given to holding people in the work when it starts to get hard. So stakeholders stop 'showing up'.

A strong holding environment can create a space where a level of trust can be established to make it safe to bring forward difference. The harder the adaptive issue is and the innovation required, the stronger the holding environment needs to be.

The National Economic Summit held by the Hawke government in 1983 is a good example of the creation of a successful holding environment at a large system level. Coming to power months before, Bob Hawke created a strong container for the work his government was attempting. Using the mandate from the recent election, Hawke and his deputy, Paul Keating, assembled key stakeholders from unions and the business sector in a highly visible way, set a clear purpose and used the physical environment purposefully. The summit was held in the House of Representatives chamber with dinners at the Governor-General's residence and at the Lodge. 'For business chiefs the event was heavy with the smell of power and the weight of responsibility.'⁶ The result was a commitment to wage restraint and support for the government's economic approach for the ensuing years: two feats that had eluded previous governments.

Good holding environments are critical in all types of difficult change and innovation, not just in systemic political change. It could be in a performance management process, product

development initiative, inter-agency stakeholder meeting, or a team meeting. All of these instances, whether they are at the national level or one-on-one, rely on the judicious use of power to create a strong holding environment for the work to take place. Similar to the sides of a pressure cooker, power and rank can be used to create a holding environment where stakeholders feel safe enough to stay in the heat and not retreat.

But personal power is only one element of a holding environment. There are other tools, including the following.

Clear authority and sufficient structure

All collaborative efforts require someone to hold the authority role. This is the person or entity that can provide sufficient direction, protection and order for progress to happen. This is probably the most important element of a holding environment, yet it is tempting to shy away from the responsibility given Australians' wariness in owning power. Under pressure people will look to authority and seek safety from that role. People are watching so we need to be clear of our purpose and send out strong messages that 'we can contain this', which is different from just shutting conflict down. Using power well keeps people working and creating. Using power poorly means they will flee physically or mentally. There is nothing like a poor use of power to kill other people's intelligence.

Physical environment

Seating, location and room set-up can all help create a positive holding environment. If we are hoping for a different result from the same group of people, it might be difficult if they are meeting in the same place where they do their day-to-day work every

week. We need to create new learning spaces if we want a new conversation where we can learn and turn up the heat.

Reputation and relationships

The expertise, practice and reputation of the stakeholders are important parts of a holding environment. These relationships develop with time spent together and the trust that has been built. If stakeholders perceive their collaborators and those in roles of authority can be trusted and are known to be effective in getting things done, it provides a strong holding environment to begin a collaborative and creative effort.

Existing culture

Bonds of affiliation between group members, norms and common values, traditions, language and rituals all can play a part in a holding environment. While the existing culture can impede change, it can also be used judiciously to support it.

Facilitation

Sometimes it is important to use external parties who may be more objective or neutral to free up stakeholders to work in the holding environment, particularly those in the roles of authority.

Time as a tool

In our work in innovation with groups and systems, it is no coincidence that the 'sticky' moments—where the group is able to have more difficult conversations—happen close to the time a session is finishing. Using time boundaries keeps the group focused on their intention and progress. Of course this needs to be balanced with creating enough time for real work to happen.

Changing the way systems work takes time. Not expecting quick fixes and having realistic expectations are important.

Who's at the table

The more successful collaborations are often the more diverse and have the right level of mix and power in the room. The tendency is often to collaborate with people who are known and on the same page. That's fine with technical challenges, but for many of the adaptive systemic challenges in Australia, we don't get to pick the people we want to work with. Having people with a mix of skills, diversity of experience and world views is important when no one person has the answer or the authority to make change by themselves.

Experiences and familiarity with adaptive work and trust of authority

These are two important experiences that will determine how fast the group can move. If members of the group have no trust in authority and are not used to working more creatively, things will take longer. It doesn't mean these people should be excluded, it's just that the holding environment will take longer to build. As they are probably outside the mainstream, their voice is valuable: it will just require more thinking and awareness on the part of authority to make it safe for the group to learn and work.

Urgency

Create urgency in the environment or use what already exists to contextualise the work. Similar to Håwke's mandate, what's happening in the broader environment can play an important role in holding people. Is there a crisis happening or pending? Do people feel personal urgency from themselves or their sub-systems?

A new role: facilitating the 'no'

Innovation is one type of adaptation in a system. It requires authority to shift from its usual role. As discussed in Chapter 2 the role of authority is responsible for:

- Disclosing external threats—rather than just trying to fix them
- Disorientating people from set roles—rather than trying to keep people where they are
- Exposing conflict—rather than just shutting or cooling it down
- Challenging norms—rather than just maintaining them and supporting them.

On the one hand, authority needs to hold its role lightly enough to allow new developments to emerge, which will include conflict. And on the other hand, authority needs to ensure there is a strong enough holding environment to keep the heat up while making people feel safe (enough).

This requires more fluidity and lightness in the role of authority than is usual. It is a much more facilitative role: a 'broker of difference'. And this role can be taken up in both formal and informal roles of authority. It is required wherever there is conflict and can support a creative process that allows new ideas and ways of working to surface. How is that done?

- Through the skill of bringing forward alternate views (the 'no')
- By protecting the 'no' to understand the wisdom within it
- Holding steady during conflict
- Finding a way to not get stuck in the 'no'.

Bringing forward the 'no'

Authority is conditioned and supported to find 'yes': the mainstream view. This is the view that minimises and avoids conflict. Facilitating innovation and conflict requires a shift in how the purpose of the role of authority is perceived. It requires what deep democracy practitioner Myrna Lewis calls getting 'inside the no' to help understand the wisdom of the alternate views.⁷ Understanding the 'no' can also help to make decisions that stick; otherwise the 'no' will come back later in another form, usually to derail implementation.

'Deep democracy', originally developed by Arnie Mindell, is a process that focuses on the awareness of voices that are both mainstream and marginal. This chapter is based on some of its themes. It is an approach that can be useful to allow a more facilitative role of authority to emerge.

Firstly, it's important to make it safe to hear all the views and for disagreement to surface in the group or team. This unfortunately rarely happens. From the role of authority we might be the last person in the room to see how much we quell, disallow or ignore conflict and differing views. Often only the easiest view or the one that is favoured by the mainstream is heard. Usually the mainstream feels safe enough to advocate strongly for its view as if it's the only possible view rather than just another option. Unwittingly, the role of authority can cut off multiple and alternate views by how it asks questions. For example:

- Does anyone have a problem with this idea? (Translation: You might be the problem)
- Everyone agree? (Translation: I am not interested in who disagrees.)

Making it safe means inviting alternate views and modelling that it's okay for them to be surfaced. It can take time for groups to get used to this idea. They may not believe that it is actually okay to surface other views. We need to be prepared for silence, minimal contributions or an echoing of mainstream thinking, at least to begin with.

Another way of thinking of this is like a hunting exercise. Like hunting it requires silence and patience. If the clues to innovation in our systems were easily uncovered, they would have been found already. Alternate views often need time and coaxing to come forward. Authority's role is to keep waiting and asking:

- What other thoughts do we have?
- I am not sure we have everything here—what are we missing?
- What would an outsider say?
- What would one of our critics say?

Protecting the 'no'

The mainstream and authority have to work hard to hear the 'no' even when it does surface. We often hear from people in authority that they are interested in the alternate voices but are distressed that 'they' can't communicate in a civil or logical way, that the emotion needs to be taken out of the issue, or that normal channels and processes should be used. Or there is frustration, that the 'no' voice won't communicate at all. Assuming that alternate voices are going to sound like we would like them to sound, or make any sound at all, demonstrates a lack of understanding of how hard it is for these voices to emerge. For example, the reason the 'no' voice might sound so angry is that it may be the only way it can get heard. Systems are often not ready for

alternate views and these people may have been burned before when they've voiced the 'no'.

The task is to protect the alternate voices for long enough to understand them and hear what wisdom they contain. This requires depersonalising views and ideas and ensuring that they all get protection. So, instead of asking 'Who else thinks this or feels like this?' (Translation: Do you dare to support this alternate view?), we could say, 'I think there's something in this (alternate view)—let's try to understand it more'.

And if no alternate view arises, it can be useful for authority to model it. For example, 'If we were to imagine someone who was against this proposal, what would that person say?'

Working in this way requires us to develop the skill of depersonalising ideas, hearing all the views and sitting with the conflict. Bringing forward alternate views is an interactive and intuitive art. It requires looking for the clues of dissent and then helping the group use them to form a range of interpretations about what might be going on and what is possible.

Holding the conflict

Roles of authority are always signalling what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable. Systems are particularly sensitive to cues on conflict and disagreement. If authority consistently adopts the mainstream view without open debate and cannot hold and protect alternate views, others below are likely to follow that lead. On the other hand, if there is an open commitment to debate and an explicit understanding that debate moves the organisation to better decisions, then employees are more likely to bring their ideas into the arena.⁸

To work with conflict productively means taking on two critical assumptions about collaborating or 'working across

difference'—that there is wisdom in the group and an acceptance that the work can't be done alone. It's easy for us to say we agree to this, but often when the conflict and disagreement arise we can quickly lose our appetite. The question is, how to not only surface the alternate views but stay with the 'heat' that then follows? There are a number of parts to this.

Firstly, this requires having a good awareness of what we represent in our role by our values, beliefs and ideologies. In other words, what faction might we represent in the system and in the world. If we are trying to resist taking sides or shutting down the alternate view, it's important to find a way to work as neutrally as possible, knowing that we can never completely abandon our views—nor is that useful. We can hold the conflict when we can show some distance at least temporarily from what and who we normally represent.

Secondly, that when the conflict arises it can be held. What helps here is to not frame what is being brought forward as personal. It is tempting to allow just one person or a predictable group to own the conflict and alternate views. This is convenient for everyone else. If it can be spread and shared among the group that's trying to work together, everyone can take a part in it. This will give relief and protection to the person raising the 'no', make it safe for other alternate views to surface, and loosen up the group to explore different roles and power patterns. Innovation cannot happen unless existing patterns of power change. It can be as simple as asking, 'Who else feels like this—even just a little bit?' At first, no-one may be willing to join the alternate view because bad things often happen to that view. In this case the role of authority may need to help it: 'Well, there's a little bit of me that feels like that . . . Let's explore it a bit more and see what we can learn from it.'

This will create a process that allows the wisdom that might be in the conflict to arise. For example, one group we worked with always started arguing about a particular business area when they were seeking to do something different. This stopped innovation and new conversations emerging. The person with authority found it hard to hold this conflict and as a result the conversations never seemed to go anywhere. When he was able to go deeper into the argument instead of seeing it as a diversion and an attack on him, the group was able to find some wisdom that allowed them to make progress. They found that their purpose was too unclear to do anything new and their ambitions were beyond their current competence. Until this conflict was held well by the authority role, the group wasted time cycling through the same arguments and the issues got personalised.

As this example implies, authority is often seen as the problem when the heat goes up. This is the last part of holding the 'no'. The role of authority can become a lightning rod for the frustrations and arguments that inevitably surface in any collaborative process for a range of reasons—they are seen to represent the status quo, are not quelling disagreement, are quelling disagreement too much, they might be getting things wrong, or people have had poor personal and systemic experiences with authority, to name just a few. When authority becomes the lightning rod, it is an indicator that the system has been disrupted and is having to start to learn new ways of working together. The expectations for people in authority to return everything back to normal are high; and when they don't deliver, it is inevitable that at one point or another that authority will get attacked. This usually has very little to do with what authority is doing or the person holding the role. But it can be difficult to bear and to hold from that role.

The task is to walk the fine line between getting completely deauthorised by the attack ('getting rolled') or snapping back at the attack and shutting down the alternate views. Holding steady in this middle place is one of the toughest challenges of the role of authority.

Not getting stuck in the 'no'

A holding environment needs to be 'tight at the edges and loose inside'. The loose part means that there's enough space for creativity, conflict and alternate voices to emerge and be worked with. The tight part is making sure the process of innovation can keep moving forward without getting too caught in the 'no'. This is the value of the holding environment. It helps groups to not get lost in the alternate views and derailed. The holding environment and purpose keep groups moving forward but with the wisdom that comes from the 'no' included.

However, consensus is not always possible. While there is wisdom in alternate views, it doesn't mean that all views can or will be implemented. In the desire to accommodate everyone or in the fear of disappointing, it is easy to become immobilised. After we have given room for all of the views to arise, we need a way to move forward. A decision needs to be made to implement something, leave something behind or take a specific route.

This is the point at which the role of authority needs to put forward a proposal and hear what is required for everyone to 'come along'. This isn't about whether the proposal should go ahead or not; it's about what people need if they're going to support it. This step is equally as important as giving space for the diversity of views to surface. Now that all the wisdom is available, the group needs to move forward with a workable solution that will inevitably not please everyone.

so what do people need to come along?

Interesting things happen at this juncture and with this question. Firstly, we are giving a clear signal that the group needs to move to another phase and that not everyone or every idea will be accommodated. Secondly, that those in authority show their interest in hearing what is required for people to support the proposal. This is different from trying to continue to lobby for an alternate proposal. The lobbying is over. Thirdly, requirements emerge that usually can be easy to accommodate and also give data on what some of the issues in implementing the proposal will be. And finally, it demonstrates that conflict is tolerable and still allow forward movement.

This is an important step in promoting innovation. In our work with groups we have found the experience of being able to hold conflict and bring the minority voice along to be very powerful. In one group of community leaders, the participants found it remarkable that they were able to go into the conflict, hear the 'no' voice, take onboard the requirements and still be able to continue working together. Their experience had been that groups often splintered at the point of conflict and therefore were unable to harness the wisdom of the 'no'.

Sometimes this question—What do people need to come along?—will generate responses that are impossible to accommodate: that there is nothing that can be done to get people to come along, no matter how much work went into creating the most open space for all the views to be heard. This happens particularly on deeply entrenched issues or with parties who have been in repeated dispute. When this occurs it signals there is much deeper conflict among the parties that often has little to do with the proposal in question. If this is the

case, it is uncertain whether the innovation can be successfully implemented. That kind of conflict is beyond the bounds of the topic of innovation in this chapter. Nonetheless, if this stage is reached and not everyone will come along, we have still acquired very good information about what we may face in trying to implement our proposal—we will know who's in and who's out.

What's at stake

Conflict is easier to sell than do. It may not be for everyone—even in the form and purpose put forward here. It's important to recognise the potential losses here before talking about the hopes. It is hard to deal with the reality of breaking up the party. We may not be liked for a while or at least have to create situations where people are uncomfortable. If we carry a narrative of being liked and avoiding blame—that's going to be tough.

Hopefully this chapter has provided some skills and awareness on how to work with conflict to advance organisations and communities and why it is necessary. Because it is vital—even if we are scared of it and might not get it right—for our adaptation in Australia.

What are some of the things we may hope to innovate in Australia? Peace and prosperity for future generations? A sustainable way of living and population? Perhaps reconciliation between black and white Australia? A larger role in a changing world? These are big aspirations but they are not that different from the hopes we have for our more immediate environments—peaceful communities, resilient organisations, sustainable and prosperous lives, healing and harmony among us.

To achieve these hopes Australians need to foster innovation and model a new way of dealing with conflict. How we argue, not just how much we like each other, becomes critical.

These arguments we have are a mark of our liberty. We can never forget that as we speak people in distant nations are risking their lives right now just for a chance to argue about the issues that matter.

President Obama, Victory Speech, 2012