

2005 PVS Workshop

Transcript of Recorded Session, 10th October 2005 Tape One: Side A

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Thanks very much for the invite to come speak, Jim actually rang and asked if I could come and talk about the FISH philosophy.

Can I just ask, how many of you have heard of, or read the book called FISH? Are you familiar with it at all? Good.

The reason I have become sold on it is, and I have to admit at first I wasn't, it somehow took me by surprise I think.

As Tracy was saying I've been involved with change management for the last 30 years or so, in various ways, and one of the things about change is that its really, really difficult sometimes to try to get companies to look at change.

I'm especially involved in management and leadership, and change is one of the key things that managers are often looking at. Usually they are wanting "change" to change their people rather than themselves, and that becomes an interesting challenge in itself as often the problem is not the issues of the staff, it's the managers who like to cause problems within the organisation, rather than the staff who are actually doing the work, so I've discovered.

When a customer is talking about change, it becomes a really interesting thing because most change these days is really more theoretical than practical. And one of the biggest problems I have ever had when it comes to the whole change thing is: how do you actually get people to change? What is it that really makes change happen in an organisation? Because the reality is that, if we're being honest about it, you usually can't change an organisation. It would be great if you could, but the reality is, you can't. Even if you've got the person at the top that decides that change is going to happen, you think everyone underneath can either resist it or decide to go with it.

So there's a whole lot of stuff involved in change, and my biggest problem in teaching change is when I talk to people; what are the different steps of change that people go through? And so I can identify those. These are the set of transition stages, or whatever, but actually getting people to change, that becomes a real issue or a problem.

This book was actually written by Stephen Lundin, who we've imported across a couple of times to run some seminars on this whole FISH thing. The good news about this by the way, is that it's really easy to read, that's different and its thick pages, for those of you who don't like reading.

Let me tell you about why I got into this particular book and then I'll talk to you about some of the stuff in your notes.

This is a particular book that I didn't want to read. When I was at AIM, I heard some people who were on a course talking about this book, that FISH principles are great etcetera, etcetera. I had seen it, we had it on our bookshop shelf and I thought do I really want to read it?

Now there was another book around, and I'm not going to tell you the name of the book, but there was another book around which I thought was written by the same person. And I had started reading this other book and hated it, just thought this is just such a waste of time, and so I ended up not finishing the whole book. So when I saw this one I thought 'not another one, the guys written another one' and so I put off reading it.

And as I said, I'd heard a couple of people talking about it, so I thought that's interesting, some people talking about it. Then about a week later I heard some more clients, some other people coming through courses talking about it, and a week after that some more people talking about it.

I thought darn it, if we've got clients talking about it I'm going to have to look at it, because obviously at some stage people are going to ask what I think of it.

So I did what I do when I don't want to read something. Often there's lots of books on management and you've got to go through them, you've got to look at them because people inevitably say 'recommend a book for me; tell me something that would be really great to read that will help me'. And so you've got to look at the books.

If you go into a bookstore in town and you ask for management, they'll show you where the management section is. It's this huge shelf which has got hundreds of books on it. How on earth do you know which is a good one to choose? So that's where I had to sort of look at some of these things. And what I normally do is if there's a book that I don't really want to read, as I'm going out of the door on Friday night I grab it and take it with me. Then I usually wait til late at night, when I'm just about to go to bed, and think 'gee, I must have a look at that book'. I take a quick see through, and think yeah, okay, you know, put it down and that's when I don't read a book and that starts the weekend.

And that's what I did with this one. I thought 'enough people have talked about it, I'm going to take the thing home Friday night and I'll have a read of it'. So, I did that. I grabbed it Friday night and at about ten o'clock I thought 'I'll have a quick look at this book'. So I sat down, started reading it, and the next moment I looked up at the clock and realised it was about two o'clock in the morning. And I had gotten so engrossed in the wretched thing that I had forgotten about time, it just absolutely grabbed me.

It's like when you have those sort of 'aha' type of moments, that's exactly what happened for me. And I suddenly realised that this held the key to whole thing I've been looking at, over the last x amount of years, about change and how change happens in an organisation. How you actually can get change to happen even with people who don't want change. I felt like I had discovered this huge key. Now I didn't tell anyone about it, because I wanted to think about it a bit more. At the end of that week, I still hadn't said anything to anyone, but one of the admin girls said to me 'Gene, before you go home today I want to have a talk to you'. I said 'yeah, okay, not a problem' thinking there may be something she needs to catch up with me about. She said that she had been watching me over this last week and that something was different, and she wanted to find out what it was. Without my even realising it, the act of reading this book and identifying with it, totally changed my perspective, but it actually changed a key thing in me which I had picked up and realised, and that is this key thing: how to change someone's attitude.

I know that in this kind of an organisation you wouldn't work with people who have got bad attitudes [laughter] and one of the things for me is how do you change someone who's got an attitude that they don't want to change? I hadn't realised the impact that the philosophy actually had on me. So, really for me, it changed the way I began to look at my day changed, the way that I was actually organising my work, it changed a whole lot of things for me.

I'll give you a couple of illustrations and then we'll look at the DVD. It's not professionally done, it's done by someone who wasn't even a professional in fact. It's been put together so what you see is the raw stuff, it's not fancied up or whatever for screen. It's based on this place in Seattle, Pike Markets Fish Place, which has become world famous. It starts with four principles which it outlines, and I've written them down here as well. And those four principles are the key to this whole thing.

It's an amazing story, people go down there in lunch hour just to watch these guys sell fish. Think of your old Fremantle markets, it's almost that kind of a setting. It's not a fancy place, it's an old place, it's a dumpy looking place, from that point of view, so it's not as though they've set up this fantastic program. What they've looked at is, said 'we're stuck with this workplace, what can we do to change it, what can we alter it?'

Now the interesting thing about it is that in the same market place there's another fishmonger as well, and he's struggling selling fish. So they actually tried to do a couple of things that these people do, and it didn't work, and I'll tell you afterwards why. Because it's not something you can copy.

I'll give you some examples of how it works over here in Perth, a couple of companies that I work with personally have just been transformed and some others are in the process of transforming. So rather than say too much more about it, I'll throw the DVD and get you to have a look at it.

[DVD plays]

A friend of mine who's the HR manager for one of the food stores actually rang me and said that he had sent some of his staff to the seminar and that just had to ring me to let me know one of their young guys got in trouble when he went back and decided he'd throw some things as he actually worked in the seafood area. The manager who hadn't been at the seminar didn't actually appreciate the fact that he was throwing prawns around. And that to me is where you've got to contextualise.

Can I, in a training environment, actually make this work? I belong to a particular group of people who actually believe that training should be fun, that learning should be fun. And it's based on the fact that the more you enjoy yourself the more you actually remember. If you think back to when you were sitting an exam you were tense, and sometimes what happens is you just get a sudden blank mind. Afterwards you come out and someone says 'how did you go with such and such?' and they mention it and you think 'oh, that's exactly what it was' and you can suddenly remember it again.

But why is it that our minds go blank at that kind of thing? It's because of the pressure, the stress, the hassle, we're so uptight about learning or whatever it is that all of a sudden our minds go blank. The reality is that the more we relax, the more we take in. That's one of the key things that I've really discovered in the whole training game.

When I first came into AIM I came in as a consultant to take a particular course. We were doing a series of courses, which was about twelve days and they said 'we want you to actually change that course'. In actual fact it was originally twenty-three days. They wanted me to change it, to transform it, to you make it different from anything they've ever offered before, different to what their competitors were offering. That was my challenge when I first came aboard at AIM, five years ago. When I first developed it, and I wrote down twenty-three days down to twelve days for a start and instead of making it over a period of over twelve months, I made it a twelve week course, where it was one day per week for twelve weeks. People said 'people aren't going to come; how can people in industry today commit themselves to one day per week for twelve weeks?'

If you'd come to some of the courses that we've run earlier on you would also have found the notes were sometimes up to 180 pages of notes for a course. But let's be honest about it here, no one really reads about it afterwards. You get on the course, go through it, and afterwards the notes sit on the shelf. So one of the things I did was to cut down the pages and the content from about 180 pages to twenty-six pages. The trainers were horrified and said that it will never work. I responded that it would because we were not going to depend on content, we were going to depend on people actually learning while they're on the course. So I developed this course based around experiential learning and created some activities so that people could actually get into an experience.

I invented some games that no one had ever played before including one where I split the groups into two groups of three. Each group of three had a bowl of M&M's which they had to trade off with each other. But without knowing it, they both had slightly different instructions to each other. One had to collect a certain number of colours, with each colour worth something but the others had to get a certain number and swap a certain number. I'd send all the group A's out, have group B's in here and then I'd brief them, saying that I was going to give them some time to work out their strategy as to how there were going to achieve their goal. For group B this was to get as many brown ones as possible because the brown ones are worth more, but the green ones are worth nothing.

And the other group had instructions of 'for every two M&M's that you trade, you have to include one green one'. Remember for the group over here, the green ones aren't worth anything. But this group has to trade one green M&M with every two M&M's that they trade. And their goal was they had to swap at least seventy five percent of their M&M's in total to win.

So, I'd leave them for a few minutes and then I'd go out to group A and say 'how you going guys, you ready?' 'Yep, yep, we're all ready'. 'Okay, I'll just go check the other group'. So I come into the other group 'how you going?' 'Yep, going really well' and say 'look, the other group just need a bit more time to prepare their strategy'. So they're thinking 'well, what strategy?' Then I go out to the other group, close the door behind me, go out to the other group and say 'look guys, I'm sorry but the other group just need a bit more time to prepare' and neither of them need time to prepare.

But I'm purposely doing is setting them up, because they're now thinking 'what strategy have they got in place? We're ready to go'. Then I go back in about three or four times and do that to them. By this time about fifteen minutes have gone and each group's thinking 'what does the other group know that we don't?' That's the first thing. Then just before they get together I go to the first group and say 'okay guys, I'm going to go and tell them we're going to start, this is ridiculous, we've got to start. The only thing is, although I can't tell you anything about their strategy, I wouldn't necessarily trust exactly what they say'. Then I go back into the other group and say exactly the same thing.

So now you've got these two groups sitting there, not trusting each other. And the other thing that I say to them is that 'if at anytime you want to talk about something as a group, call time out and go out and discuss what you want to do'. So you've got these groups coming in and out, you know, and all this sort of stuff, so setting the groups up. It's virtually like setting them up like management and staffing in a sense [laughter].

And then partway through, as I watch the negotiations, I will pick out the dominant one in a group. I'll wait until they're in full flight, and really pushing things, and then I just sort of go over to say 'sorry group, sorry to interrupt. This person has been transferred to another department' and pull them out by swapping them into another group.

Now that can take all morning for the groups to try and work through, because I'm chopping and changing them. Sometimes adding different instructions. You're probably thinking 'what in the world has that got to do with the course?' Its got everything to do with it because its got everything to do with negotiating, its got everything to do with deciding whether we induct people properly when someone new comes into the group because they've been working somewhere else.

There's a whole lot of learning that suddenly starts to happen and instead of just telling them about induction or telling them how people work, all of a sudden they can look back and they can say 'okay, this person came into your group. Did you stop and tell them what was going on?' You get the new person saying that they feel absolutely lost and that although they were going great over there, they have no idea what this group over here is doing. So you get all these sorts of dynamics happening.

The first time we ran it the AIM managers were saying that it sounds really dicey. I learnt to say 'trust me, trust me'. The first time we had it publicised no one signed on for it. And I'm thinking 'uh oh' you know, sweat. And the managers were all saying 'ah ha, okay, we've got a ripe one here'. The second course didn't run. By that time I'm thinking 'I'm in trouble'. Fortunately, when I signed on at AIM we signed an eighteen-month contract [laughter], which was wisdom from my point at that time which I didn't realise. The third one ran with eight people.

Those eight people came from different companies and they got so excited about it they went back and sold it to their companies. The next session we ran had eighteen people. Normally we top our register at about fifteen. From that point on, companies began to book people on those particular courses so that we had to run multiple courses and in fact they were booked up four courses in

advance with people coming on it. And we had to decide to cap this course at twenty-eight, because it was just getting too big for each course. That particular course which I developed, based on some of these principles, now brings approximately three million dollars every year into the institute. So, yes, they're fairly happy there with what we achieved; from nothing to three million dollars.

How does the FISH principle work in another setting? One of the groups I had to work with was Royal Perth Hospital and one of the ladies at one of the sessions asked me how she could put FISH into practice. I asked which section she worked in and she told me that worked in the area where people only go there because they're dying. She said 'how do I apply the FISH principles in this situation, where people are coming to us? They're not going to get better, they're actually going to die, so their relatives are coming in to visit them knowing that they're going to be dying'.

But she went back and thought about it and around January I got this really excited email from her. She went back and she thought 'I know that I can do anything which uses these principles' and so she thought about them. She thought 'I may not be able to do something for the patients, but I can do something for the staff' because a lot of the staff just dread coming in to work because you don't want to get emotionally attached to the people because you know they're going to die. So she went out and she would have spent ten or fifteen dollars and she bought this big bottle filled with jelly beans and stuck it on the counter. And then she bought all these tiny little father Christmases. All small ones, all different types of father Christmases and she hid them all over the ward. She had a sign on the table which said 'guess how many father Christmases there are and get the bottle of jelly beans'. So that's what she decided to do for the staff.

She said the staff thought it was great and it gave them something to do in that sense but she also noticed that as people were coming into the ward and they got closer, they'd read the sign and some of the people's faces would start to actually light up a little bit. She said after a couple of times some of the relatives came to her and asked whether they could join in and she agreed. So she had these relatives going around looking and counting all of the father Christmases around the ward. And the people who were dying would ask what's going on, and the relatives were telling them, so the patients started getting involved as well.

She said that although several of the people did die over the Christmas period, she got three letters from their relatives thanking her for making their time there more positive, and that it really meant so much to them.

My challenge at the moment by the way, is that I've just been approached by the funeral directors to ask how they can put it into practice [laughter]. Now I haven't quite worked that out yet [laughter] as to what you can do with a funeral directors. So if any of you have any ideas, let me know [laughter].

So remember I was saying to you that you've got to contextualise what you're doing, you've got to contextualise the stuff. Its not about throwing FISH, it's about: can we have fun at work? It's not about going overboard and it's not about annoying other people.

One of the things I've discovered is that it's like throwing a rock into a pond. Where the rock hits, that's the centre of the pond and you see these ripples go out. And I suddenly realised that for me, I can change my attitude, because the reality is I can't change anyone else's attitude. I can't necessarily change my work conditions, I can't necessarily change my environment, there are certain things I just can't do. But I can look at my attitude and say: what can I do about me that helps me enjoy my work better? And what I've discovered is that as my attitude changes it actually influences the attitudes of the people around me. And they actually begin to change without them realising it. That's the great thing about understanding how you can actually change people without them realising it. And if they don't want to change, it actually doesn't matter, that's their choice. But I choose, like I said, I choose to be happy. And that's what is really comes down to is this whole choice thing.

Now, how do you contextualise it? One of the things I did was to paint the back wall of my office bright red. I decided I would do something to grab people's attention, let them know something different is happening, especially when I took over the role as manager of a particular area. I also had a huge post-it note made up which said 'product development and assessment' but it was only partly painted to look like it wasn't quite finished. And on the drawing were these elves. I had an elf on a ladder and another elf down reading some plans and a couple of elves hanging down painting the sign of 'product development and assessment'.

The reason I did that is because I wanted to get a message across to people that there's something magical happening here, something unexpected, something different. It's not complete yet that's why the sign's not finished.

The number of people who came through my office to have a look was amazing, and then other people began to get involved. I never ask anyone to get involved.

I was sitting at my desk one day and a couple of the girls came by and asked whether I like my sign. I replied that I did like my sign and they asked whether I liked the elves. I said that yes, I did like the elves and it wasn't until after about ten minutes that the penny dropped and I turned around and looked at the sign. The admin girls had gotten together, and taken a photo of each other wearing a Santa Claus hat which they blew up and stuck over the faces of the elves. So I suddenly had these admin people on my wall [laughter].

We've got about forty six people in the office and I'd say over the next day or so, all forty six people came to have a look, and see what was going on, and not one of them left without a smile. Now all it meant was that people started to enjoy themselves and have a little bit of fun. Was it over the top? No, it wasn't over the top. It fitted within the context of my office. And that's why I'm saying to you, it's not about throwing things or stuff like that. It's working out what is the context that I've got that I can actually do something with. That to me is the whole philosophy of the FISH thing.

The other day the CEO came to me and asked whether we can do anything about the premises and I responded that I think we can. I was just speaking with the guy this morning to work out how to add some colour and life into the training room wall. Now, it just started off very small, and from that it's gradually grown.

The principles are great. Now why do I believe them? If you have a look at those notes, there's some really frightening American statistics, but I've checked up on them in Australia and they're pretty much the same. They're only about one or two percent out so keep that in mind as we look at it.

Just down the bottom on page two, second to last paragraph, it says less than thirty percent of American workers consider themselves to be fully engaged at work. According to data collected in 2001, some fifty five percent are not engaged in the workplace, while another nineteen percent are actively disengaged, meaning not just that they're unhappy at work but they regularly share those feelings with their colleagues [laughter]. The longer employees stay with organisations the less engaged they become. After six months on the job, forty eight percent of employees remain engaged. After three years the figure dropped to twenty two percent.

My question is what happened to the other seventy eight percent? What it means is that after three years seventy eight percent of staff are disengaged from their job, in the sense that they go because they've got to earn money to live, but they are not actively engaged in the sense of enjoying what they are doing and wanting to be productive. So when they first start off really enthusiastic the amazing thing is it only takes one month for fifteen percent of them to become totally disengaged.

Now, that worries me because most of us spend more time at work than we probably do at home. So if we're going to spend that much time at work, we need to be enjoying ourselves. We need to be at least feeling that we are being productive and actually getting something out of it in return. And I have to say that since I started taking on this FISH philosophy, I have never enjoyed work as much as I do.

I really enjoy it, it is great fun and I do have fun at work. Just because I think 'why not? Why shouldn't I?' to me it's a matter of how can I have fun at work, how can I engage people?

On page five are your four principles of FISH:

- Choose your attitude
- Play
- Make their day
- Be there

Can I suggest that 'choose your attitude' be your key one?

When I was training, I used to talk about the ASK principle: A for attitude, S for skills, K for knowledge. And when I ask people if they had to hire someone who had good skills and a good working knowledge but they had a shocking attitude would they want to work with them? Most people say no. Say to people 'if someone didn't have the skills and didn't have the knowledge but they had a really good attitude would you hire them?' Ninety eight percent of the time people say yes. That's because if someone's got a good attitude you can give him/her the skills and knowledge.

In any organisation that's going to change, or bring about change, attitude becomes the key thing. I know the government is a little different in this way, but can attitude release funds to us? Yes, in one sense it can. I've worked with welfare for the government so I know it works in that and I've defined those principles and I've seen the same thing happen.

It comes back to attitude and also determination. I am going to get you to think about some of these things and how you can put them in to practise yourself. But before I do, are there any questions that you want to throw about, about the philosophy and stuff?

[Question from audience - cannot be heard]

Yep, absolutely. It doesn't matter that they haven't got the same attitude that I've got because what I believe is that in time I'll be able to change them [laughter]. We have one particular person who regularly comes to work looking like they've sucked on a lemon [laughter] and their attitude is like that, it's just terrible. If I allow that other person to affect me, it will destroy what I'm trying to do with the positive stuff. It can become poisonous that's why with a positive attitude we have to make our positive stay in and their negative stay out.

Let me tell you how I ended up winning them over. It doesn't mean that they are never negative anymore because they still are, but now and again I get these little lights of positive stuff happening. This person was one of the admin staff and they don't always get recognition because they're not in the forefront. Most admin people work jolly hard and do a lot of stuff which they don't get credit for. So one day I just simply went out and bought a cake from the shops, with my own money, and took it in for morning tea. The first thing people said is 'why, what's it for?' [laughter]. I said 'it's just for you guys, you do a great job, and I couldn't do what I'm doing without the help of you guys', so we had morning tea.

About three or four weeks later I bought another cake for morning tea. And still got the same reaction; 'what's it for?' It took about three times to begin to break that attitude, whereas now the great thing is that all the admin people started to get involved. And now I gradually see it affecting their attitude.

I have to make sure I don't react to someone's negative things; instead I say 'I'm not going to let that worry me if that person is going to be like that. I don't have to be like that, I'm still going to be nice'. And what happens eventually is the ripple effect. You don't see the effect of those ripples straight away, but eventually they will wear the edges. That's exactly what happens to the negative person, it gradually wears those edges away. It may take time but don't forget how long it's taken them to get like that.

End of side A

Side B

[Continued mid-sentence]...So there's a whole lot of stuff in there. I could go on for hours, but I'm not going to because my role is just to give you an insight and freshen you up.

Can I just get you to spend about five minutes thinking about those four principles, you've got them there on page five. Could I get you to identify which one would be an appropriate one for you to have a go at putting into practise where you are right now, in your area or department? Which one do you think would be appropriate?

[Breakout to group discussion]

Let me just get all of that feedback from you. Some of you may have actually come up with one or two suggestions as to things that maybe you could do. Is anyone prepared to share theirs? What did you come up with?

[Audience member explains an idea of different coloured cakes at morning tea sharing the cryptic crossword]

Absolutely. Any other ideas?

[Audience: how do you deal with inappropriate gifts?] [Laughter]

The only suggestion I would give would be appropriate.

The other thing that can be hard is what if you work by yourself? It's when we come in contact with people - that's the key. You'll notice at the back section that there are two excuses for poems in there. I don't always come into contact with all forty-six people at AIM, but one of the problems we have had is people leaving the kitchen clean. And we occasionally get a note from someone saying 'clean up the kitchen, it's messy again'. And so after a while I thought it would be good to approach it in a slightly different way and see what response we get.

So the first poem I wrote about was about the sandwich maker, which people just didn't clean. You'd go to use it and there'd be crumbs and stuff all over it. So I wrote a poem call 'ode to a roach'. It talks about this cockroach that's walking through the kitchen trying to find something to use to scratch because he's got an itchy back. And he finds this plate with crumbs on it and rub itself around and scratch its back and have something to eat as well, which it turns out was the toaster. The amazing thing is that since then the toaster has been really clean. The other thing is the staff fridge. People would just leave things in there until they had developed a culture. So I just wrote about the fridge. And it's amazing because people walked out laughing. It's a nicer kind of an attitude than the usual 'clean up the kitchen, its messy'. It's looking at particular ways to communicate some of these things. And the reason I put those there wasn't because of the great poetry but because sometimes it's good to look at a different way of how to do things.

[Audience member relates a story]

There's some great stuff we can do with the FISH principle, they really do work, and I have to admit that I really enjoy doing what I'm doing. I really enjoy work, the office, and it's great. A lot of it's just through doing stuff like this, just applying it. Not telling everyone else what they need to do, but simply going in myself and saying 'wow this is good stuff, I'm going to start living it'. And it really does have this ripple effect - it affects other people.

Firstly can I thank you for inviting me to share with you this afternoon and hopefully it'll make you think that maybe there's something we can do with the sour people and with some of the other people around us who just sometimes don't want to change.

If people don't want to change it doesn't matter. The key is if I want to change, that's fine, it's like the ripples. It will eventually have some effect on those people. Other people may say 'wow that's great' and join in with you.

Can I just thank you for having me this afternoon; it's been fun, thanks very much.