



The State Revenue Office and the Ballarat relocation project (Epilogue)

Upon assuming his role as SRO commissioner in April 2002, Paul Broderick realised that there was much work to be done. He set out his five strategic pillars for the organisation:

- effective and efficient revenue collection;
- compliance;
- tax technical excellence – which had been devalued previously;
- internal and external relationships – with staff, unions, etc;
- upholding and improving standards.

During the first year of his tenure, he made relationships a major priority in order to revitalise the organisation and bring both the Melbourne and Ballarat offices together. He also had to deal with staff either unable or unwilling to secure work elsewhere and now facing redundancy. Colleague Robyn White believed his personal, consultative style would help in dealing with the union and affected employees. Broderick described his approach:

“Our strategy during the whole period was to be honest with people and upfront. Even if [they] didn’t want to hear it at least they knew that we weren’t telling any lies. We needed to rebuild integrity and trust in management and we knew we weren’t going to do that by

This case epilogue was written by Marinella Padula, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, for Professor John Alford. It is a teaching resource to accompany the case 2006-33.1, and as such is available only to authorised persons. The support and assistance of the State Revenue Office of Victoria is gratefully acknowledged. The assistance and support of the State Revenue Office is gratefully acknowledged. Responsibility for any errors, omissions or judgments in this case rests with ANZSOG.

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just telling people what they wanted to hear if that just wasn't true. I met with staff on a regular basis, implemented a very good newsletter, met regularly with people face to face and spent a lot of time wandering around the organisation just talking to people. I also spent time with the people in that pool facing redundancy and met a number of times with the union delegates one-on-one and in groups. The idea of that wasn't to convince them of my point of view, the idea was just to say: 'Look, this is the reason we're doing it, we're being honest with you about what's happening and in the end [redundancy] is probably going to be the result. I know you don't want to hear it, but we're genuinely trying to place these people. However if we can't place them, then there's no alternative, we need to draw a line across it and the organisation needs to move on.'"

The SRO also took a proactive approach, organising staff meetings ahead of union meetings to ensure that staff were clear about the SRO's position in advance. But, even after personal intervention by Broderick to place as many people as possible, approximately 20 SRO staff still faced losing their jobs and a decision had to be made. Said Broderick:

"Consequently, we stuck to our guns and went through with [the redundancies]. It was very difficult, but in terms of change management it was the best possible thing to do, because the organisation needed to move forward and leave that part of its history behind."

Nonetheless, Broderick felt that the process had been conducted as positively as possible:

"We did respect the union's position, we respected they had rights in this process and we respected their integrity, particularly that of the union leader. Although I didn't necessarily agree with his views, I did believe that he was behaving honourably...we did try and behave with high integrity on both sides and I think that really helped. After all this died down we still ended up with a respectful relationship despite having gone through this traumatic time."

Broderick also had to devise a way of bringing two very different offices together. In addition to creating social clubs and activities to facilitate staff interaction, he ensured management were concerned with seeing both locations succeed. As he explained:

"We tried to have a common culture between Ballarat and Melbourne. Not the same culture because people in the country have a different approach but common underlying values.

"One of the ways we did that was [to] assign each executive director some responsibilities in Melbourne and some in Ballarat. So you couldn't get this culture of saying: 'Well OK the people in Ballarat behave like that.' Or 'It's the fault of the people in Melbourne, let's blame them' because each person had responsibilities in each camp and couldn't be disloyal to either one.

"That worked brilliantly... It was in people's self-interest to develop both sites."

He saw that his next task was ensuring that the Ballarat office didn't lose momentum:

"We were very conscious that we needed to do things in Ballarat to make sure that people saw that they had a career there and it wasn't going to be a processing factory. Because

when people first started to work there most of the jobs were routine processing-type jobs and those jobs lent themselves to be transferred there because they were lower-skilled. So what we did was develop a strategy of creating higher-level, more complex jobs over time, with another focus of becoming more productive.”

Once productivity targets were met, Broderick was careful to ensure the SRO’s promises were fulfilled. This has, over time, seen the number of entry-level positions fall while the number of higher-level investigation and technical advice jobs has risen. For Broderick, it reinforced the importance of following words with action and emphasising the connection between them:

“Just keep repeating the message: ‘This is what we said we’d do; now you can see we’ve done it.’ I think in management you’ve just got to keep repeating it. Even though to me it sounds repetitive, I’ve got to remember that the staff are only hearing it once a quarter but I’m giving the messages all the time while talking to different people.”

Nonetheless, Brendan Harrison, the Branch Manager of Land Tax, who had relocated to Ballarat, observed that managing staff in the next phase wasn’t always straightforward. While new staff all began at the same level, some progressed more quickly through the ranks than others. Also, unlike most workplaces, the vast majority of staff had commenced at the same time, meaning that reality was more likely to hit en masse.

Because circumstances were difficult initially, the SRO invested much time and effort in keeping staff interested and happy, which Harrison found created a hard act to follow:

“Our job as managers is to get the work done. If you can keep people happy and get the work done that’s good, but it’s ultimately about getting the work done... You have to manage people’s expectations more realistically instead of coming in with bells and whistles to keep everyone entertained.”

Stephen Dalli, another who had moved from Melbourne, also watched new staff come to grips with life at the SRO:

“Once the honeymoon was over, people started to realise what the organisation was really about... If you want a job at Movie World, the SRO is not the place to be. Whilst you’re learning tasks and duties you don’t really get that overall understanding of the organisation and its needs. But by the end of 2002, people had a good idea of what the SRO does, what was required of them, about the potential for promotion and skills development. A lot of them hadn’t worked in government before, so that was new too.”

Overall, however, the SRO managed to avoid a significant slump in morale and productivity, according to Broderick, through providing better career paths. Broderick noted that over the following three years productivity improved at the Ballarat office by 14.5 percent per annum.

The Ballarat office also received full ISO certification seven months after opening. And according to SRO figures, as of February 2005, the Ballarat office had retained 87

percent of its original staff.¹ Improvements were also made at the Melbourne office to the point where survey results indicated very little difference in the attitudes of Ballarat and Melbourne-based staff.

Buoyed by the Ballarat project, the Bracks Government relocated the Rural Finance Corporation to Bendigo in 2004 and an Office of Housing call centre to Moe. In November 2005, the government announced a feasibility study into the possibility of moving the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) to new headquarters in Geelong. This would involve the relocation of some 600 positions, expected to generate a \$50 million per year in economic benefit to the town and surrounding community.²

For Broderick, the Ballarat project has been more than worthwhile:

“The government policy of decentralisation could be viewed cynically, but it has turned out to be really good for Ballarat. People have come off the dole and found decent jobs, while others have found fulfilling careers. The Ballarat office has created opportunities for many people and this has been the upside to all the difficulty and trauma.”

¹ State Revenue Office Victoria ‘State Revenue Office Victoria: A stake in the ground for regional development’ February, 2005 p. 28

² Office of the Premier ‘Media Release: Boost for Geelong with possible TAC relocation 17/11/2005