

Occasional Address: University of South Australia

Graduation Ceremony 10 August 2010

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Pro Chancellor Mr Terry Evans, Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Hoj, members of the University, distinguished guests, graduands, ladies and gentleman I am very honoured and humbled by such a distinguished award as Honorary Doctorate, I thank the University and Council for their decision to confer this award. I thank Pro Vice Chancellor Professor Andrew Parfitt for the very kind citation and to Pro Vice Chancellor Professor Ahluwalia for his contribution to the citation. I offer my congratulations to emeritus professors Stephen Hamnett and Philip Howlett on their recognition today.

Graduands I add my congratulations to those already given, as you well know it takes a lot of hard work and sacrifice to get this far, personally and by those that support you, so this is your day to recognise and celebrate your achievement.

Apart from immediate thoughts of partying your minds have likely focussed on commencing and advancing your professional career, with no doubt aspirations of achieving much. So thoughts on strategies that might help achieve these aspirations framed in a way you may not have considered seems an appropriate topic for this Occasional Address.

Your working lives will be characterised by change. Most of the time change will appear rapid but evolutionary. Overlaid on this there will be unanticipated extreme change that occurs when our increasingly interdependent world adjusts to some triggering event. The recent global financial crisis and the 9/11 attacks are examples.

From the science of complex adaptive systems we can draw some useful ideas to apply to your future working world. Within this construct the concept of adaptation across multiple scales is important. The scales in your working world will certainly encompass individuals, teams of people, multiple levels within organisations, governments and nations where at all levels there is continual and

mutually influenced adaptation. At one scale people are great adaptors just consider how rapidly you adapt in workplace salary negotiations. At a different scale, organisations adapt using different processes and time scales as do governments and so on.

In summary evolutionary change punctuated by unanticipated extreme change will characterise your working world. You may find the concept of adaptation across multiple scales a useful way of viewing your working environment. I will now consider what this means in practice.

First on a personal scale you need to find a career that motivates you and aim to develop deep expertise in an aspect of the profession you wish to follow. Early in your career you will likely change employers, possibly a number of times, but keep a strong focus on consolidating your skill base rather than make the mistake of broadening too early. Poor early decisions tend to be amplified long term. I have seen many careers plateau because of a veneer of expertise but no depth.

Further having expertise allows you to better bound problems or tasks, to make them tractable by knowing what you don't need to consider. In a US factory a production engineer said to me "It's time to shoot the scientist and ship the goods". The real world will often impose 80% solutions, knowing the implications of what is not being addressed are very important.

As you become more experienced you should increasingly think in several scales, as a start, try and see the issues like your boss or the next level up –what issues concern them and how can you more effectively contribute to achieving the organisation's objectives? Jobs tend to be defined at a particular scale, that is perform duties bounded by defined roles and responsibilities. Clearly you should aim to do a good job but your thinking doesn't have to be bounded by those boundaries, you are likely to do a better job by starting to think like the next level up.

As you think at the scale of the organisation ask how well positioned is it to function in our increasingly interdependent world? Has the organisation optimised its operations assuming an essentially static environment and hence

potentially at risk to unanticipated change? Is it attempting to sense and carefully adapt to its changing environment or is it purely reactive? Is the culture locked in the past or amenable to change? As Jack Welch the famed former CEO of General Electric stated: *“When the rate of change outside your organisation exceeds that within your organisation, the end is near”*.

As you become more experienced you will discover that some problems cannot be solved within one scale, indeed the difficulties at one scale could be symptoms of dysfunction at other scales. Drivers, symptoms, authorities and degrees of freedom differ at different scales. I have found a sub-element of an organisation struggling to solve a problem within their own resources (that is on the same scale) without comprehending that the real cause of their problem arose at higher scales within the organisation and a solution had to be concurrently addressed by processes and authorities only available at those higher scales.

Once you established your skill base and begin to assume greater responsibilities you should systematically increase your range of skills – through broadened workplace experience and education possibly an MBA or other specialist courses. For more senior appointments some like to talk in terms of Tee shaped people – those with demonstrated depth of expertise but also well developed breadth - the top stroke of a capital T.

I would suggest that the ideal shape is like several capital Ts joined together so while continuing to develop breadth the down strokes reflect deeper expertise developed in other areas. At a personal level you will be better positioned to adapt to changing environments if you become a multi-T shaped person.

Let’s not forget the basics such as good quality work, reliable performance, treating people fairly, adhering to your organisation’s code of ethics, behaving with integrity and contributing to societal good, they are fundamental to your future development.

So in this world of change you’re on notice to have great careers, to make a positive difference to the world, so best wishes and good luck.