The steel leadership program: telling the stories

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Abstract

Introduction

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- The OD Team at Port Kembla intends using these stories to help build a new culture.

An analysis and representation of participants’ stories of their experiences arising out of the BHP Steel Leadership Program (SLP) does not lend itself readily to executive summary and bullet points. However, we have been able to discern a number of key themes from the process of gathering these stories and, of course, from the stories themselves.

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THE STEEL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM:
TELLING THE STORIES

A Report to the OD Team, BHP Port Kembla on Stories Related by Participants in the Steel Leadership Program from the Springhill Works, BHP Steel

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December 2000
Summary

Introduction

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- The OD Team at Port Kembla intends using these stories to help build a new culture.

An analysis and representation of participants' stories of their experiences arising out of the BHP Steel Leadership Program (SLP) does not lend itself readily to executive summary and bullet points. However, we have been able to discern a number of key themes from the process of gathering these stories and, of course, from the stories themselves.

The Key Themes are:

Summing Up The Major Learnings—Self-Knowledge and Interpersonal Understanding

- When people summed up the effects of the SLP on their lives at home and at work, they often spoke about personal gains in self-knowledge.
- They often spoke about how improved self-knowledge can lead to more effective management of emotions and relationships.

The Steel Leadership Program (SLP)—Memories of and Reactions to the Course

- Personal change often involves struggle and tension. Aspects of the course were experienced as physically and/or emotionally stressful by many participants. Stresses were sometimes short-term, sometimes long-term. They were experienced in relationships within the course, later in the workplace, and even beyond in people’s personal lives. However, most accepted struggle as a necessary component of their learning experiences.
- Many of the participants mentioned SLP’s reputation as a potentially difficult course. Some detected an aura of secrecy surrounding it, particularly in the earlier years of its operation. However, most also counteracted that reputation with stories of their own positive experiences.
- All participants in this study reported positive learning experiences, despite SLP’s reputation for being challenging. Some tried to inform themselves as much as possible before going, while others decided to focus on how the course could meet their particular needs. Others discovered how the course met their needs afterwards. Another way of dealing with perceived negative aspects was to suggest possible improvements to the course (eg, in its structure, composition, personnel, and choice of participants).
Coming Back—Trying to Apply the Lessons

• For most of the people interviewed, coming back to work required a period of readjustment and reintegration.
• The extent to which SLP participants felt disoriented after returning to work depended partly on how many other people in their immediate workplace had also completed similar courses. Most of the more recent SLP participants were able to draw support by sharing their stories with others who knew what the experience was like.
• Most participants said that the SLP had not significantly changed their attitudes to the company. However, most did say that they had detected changes in beliefs and behaviours in themselves and in other people at BHP.
• Many of the participants identified the MBTI as a significant factor in changing their understanding and management of themselves.
  ➢ For example, they described how it:
    * gave them a new and more positive view of themselves;
    * was a tool for self-understanding and self-management that continued to be used after the course.
• Not everyone found the MBTI useful. Some saw it as an instrument for ‘pigeonholing’ people, or even providing an excuse for undesirable behaviour.
• Whether the effect was slow or fast, most participants reported that they returned from the SLP to enjoy improvements in their understanding and management of interpersonal relationships. For example:
  ➢ A sense of a better comprehension of one’s self often led to better interpersonal relationships.
  ➢ There were a number of stories about how people used their knowledge of others’ MBTI types to modify their perceptions of another’s personality and behaviour.
  ➢ Most of the people interviewed spoke in general terms about paying more attention to building, maintaining and improving their interpersonal relationships. For example:
    * Expanded knowledge of personality differences allowed people to reframe their understanding of difficult relationships at work.
    * Some learned new methods of dealing with stress which led to improved working relationships.
    * Some learned to use new ways of communication in order to manage interpersonal relations.
    * Some become more aware of people’s complexity, and that people change over time.
Most respondents were able to specify incidents in which work was done differently, by themselves and/or by others, because of SLP initiatives at BHP. Some stories of change were about using particular tools and techniques from the SLP to create new understandings of people’s values, abilities and behaviours in order to bring about cultural and structural change. Sometimes, however, the forces driving change were difficult to specify. SLP initiatives merged with other change programs at BHP, such as WLOC. Some examples of new work practices follow:

- Teaching materials for training sessions were improved, as people had learned from the SLP that there are individual differences in the way that people absorb information.
- Often, the end-results of people’s actions at work fail to measure up to the outcomes that were initially desired. Aspects of the SLP helped people to understand why this occurs.
- SLP encouraged people to pay more attention to establishing and maintaining good relationships with people at work.
- Some people had observed a greater sensitivity to personal and interpersonal issues in the way BHP organised social interaction among its employees, especially across different cultures.
- There have also been changes on the shop floor. For example, a project involving the upgrade of the entry end of the galvanising lines at Springhill earned favourable mentions from several interview subjects. Instead of handing the job over to technical staff, operators were involved from the beginning. Their involvement provided an opportunity to put the SLP principles into practice.

**Summing up the Changes in BHP**

- The SLP and WLOC initiatives have directly contributed to cultural change beyond the individual level. They have given people a “framework” within which to discuss interpersonal issues.
- Some detected a greater level of honesty in the organisation, although there was still some distance to go.
- Overall, there was a range of stories about changes in BHP due to the SLP. Most respondents were able to describe some changes that had happened, as well as other changes that were still required. Stories about change that had happened included the following:
  - Personal change at an individual level had had effects at the organisational level. However, changes had been uneven within BHP, according to different workplace cultures and rates of change.
  - Improvements were noted in the following areas: - ways of thinking and communicating about issues, group or team work, safety culture, acceptance of diversity, standards of acceptable behaviour, and leadership.
Overcoming Barriers to Change

- Many participants suggested that more follow-up was needed after the SLP course. A range of options were mentioned, including more courses, further use of HR resources, and continuing contact with fellow participants.

- Suggestions for overcoming perceived barriers to change included the following:
  - Greater participation in the SLP by people at all levels of management.
  - Greater access to courses similar to the SLP for all members of the workplace (e.g., courses designed for whole work teams).
  - Greater attention to the needs of minority groups (e.g., being more inclusive of personality and gender differences), both within the SLP itself and more widely within BHP.
  - It should be noted that gender issues were raised only by the women who were interviewed.
  - Greater consistency between learnings from the SLP and the workplace culture of BHP, especially with respect to the words and actions of upper management.
1. Introduction

Stories are important to an organisation’s culture. Through stories, people express their values, create personal and organisational identities, and define and illustrate desirable and undesirable behaviours. When an organisation changes, its stories change. The influence can also run in the opposite direction. Through powerful stories, people’s assumptions and even their actions can be changed.

The BHP Steel Leadership Program (SLP) seeks to change culture through personal transformation. Many people have been affected, some profoundly. Everyone who has been on an SLP course has a story to tell, as do those who live and work with them. Often, these stories remain untold, or are shared by only a few people.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, stories quickly began to circulate about the Steel Leadership Program (SLP) that gave it a reputation for being personally challenging for the participants. Such stories have continued, although their deterrent effect appeared to be abating by the late 1990s. This report describes the complexity of meanings about the program that have been built up from those stories. All participants who were interviewed generated new stories about the SLP as necessary hardship in order to achieve personal progress and cultural change within the organisation (although many also described possible modifications to the SLP to remove unnecessary difficulties). This construction of attendance at the course as a personally rewarding rite of passage within the workplace culture may have contributed to the tempering of myths about the course in recent years (other contributing factors, such as changes in the design and conduct of the course during this time, were unable to be considered in this report).

Late in 1999, the University of Wollongong’s BHP Steel Management Research Program received funding for a three year research project, to be carried out in collaboration with the OD Team located in Port Kembla. One of the major aims of this project is to collect and record people’s related experiences—their stories—of the SLP. This report covers the first phase of the project. Between October 1999 and June 2000 fifteen interviews were conducted with Springhill employees who had attended the SLP course. The interviews were transcribed and returned to the individuals for checking. At the time of writing, nine had been checked and returned to the researchers. One participant asked that his transcript be kept private. The other eight participants allowed all or part of their transcripts to be circulated in BHP. The OD Team’s intention is that their stories will help to build the new culture.

The following report is also part of the cultural change effort. Our aim is to draw out, illustrate and summarise the major themes that emerged in the interviews. Although our account is based on all the interviews, we have used illustrative quotes only from sections of transcripts that have been approved for circulation. We have given pseudonyms to the people who generously allowed us to quote their words in this way.

We begin the report with a summary of the major learnings that were derived by participants who attended courses in the SLP over the past five years. We then focus more closely on people’s experiences of the SLP course itself, and on their accounts of what happened when they returned to work and tried to apply the principles they had learned at the course. We conclude with some observations that participants made about barriers to change at BHP and, finally, consider possible avenues for fruitful future story gathering and dissemination.
This section introduces the rationale for gathering stories from participants in the SLP. It also introduces the University of Wollongong BHP Steel Management Research Program. Section 2 describes positive reports about major learnings after participating in the course, in terms of individual progress in self-knowledge and interpersonal understanding, not only in the workplace but also (and for some, more importantly) outside the organisation. Section 3 traces the changing corporate meanings of the SLP. It concludes, however, by describing how these positive stories also included accounts of physical and emotional stress that were sometimes extreme, and that reveal a complex layering of new organisational myths about the SLP.

The complexity of those myths has been further added to by stories about efforts to apply lessons learned from the course. Section 4 describes that complexity by providing examples of the immediate and longer-term effects of the course. Here, it describes new myths about personal and organisational change. Most participants reported no significant change in their attitude to the organisation, although they did report change in behaviours. Change was most significant for them in their stories about better self-understanding and self-management, and better interpersonal relationships. Many described the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) as a useful tool for greater understanding of the psychology of themselves and others. This and other learnings from the course contributed to positive stories about personal change and examples are given, concluding with specific examples (Section 4.5).

Section 5 provides stories about how the SLP has brought about broader organisational change, and examples are given. However, stories also included those about more change being needed and for it to be more consistently applied throughout BHP. Section 6 provides two major groups of stories in which participants identified possible barriers to change and how to overcome them. One was about the need for improved follow-up after the course, and a number of suggested solutions are described. The other group of stories all concerned the perceived need to break down barriers between various groups within the workplace culture. Whilst it was acknowledged that such barriers are found in all organisations to a greater or lesser degree, there were many hopeful stories about the possibility of change over time within the workplace culture of BHP, and the section concludes with a number of examples. The report concludes with a discussion of possible avenues for fruitful future story gathering and dissemination.
2. Summing Up the Major Learnings—Self-Knowledge and Interpersonal Understanding

When people summed up the effects of the SLP on their lives at home and at work, they often spoke about personal gains in self-knowledge. Steve was typical in this respect when he said, "I got more out of the course in terms of personal development than through development of working. [...] It's changed my understanding of myself, forever". Similarly, Sebastian ranked the SLP as 'perhaps one of the best training courses or personal development courses' that he had done during his long employment in BHP. Like others, this was particularly because he felt he had gained self-knowledge and interpersonal understanding:

For me personally it was very much a personal learning as opposed to, say, a group or a team learning and I know that the majority of people in our group spoke about what they personally had got out of the course. To me the course was very much about me and what I learnt about myself and how I interact with other people and how, by what I do or by what I don't do, I could possibly have some type of effect on what they might feel or think.

Simon provided another example, when he said that he had found his expectations about gaining self-knowledge had been fulfilled:

What I suppose I wanted out of the course was some idea of some aspect of myself that I hadn't previously thought about. To find out a bit more why I'm the way I am. I think I got that out of it—which was good. I learned that it was all right to be who I am. I don't have to be anyone else.

A sense of greater self-knowledge can lead to more effective management of one's emotions and one's relationships with others. The following quote from Sue shows how she believed that gaining self-knowledge had enabled her to manage her feelings more effectively:

I used to slam my office door all the time. I'd just walk in and I'd be so angry—a conversation or a phone call or something. I would just slam the office door or I'd yell at someone, or carry on. And I worked out that I really needed some time to myself and that was how I unconsciously achieved it. So instead of saying "I just need some quiet time"—because that was a sign of weakness, I'd just slam the door instead. So I was aggressive—Now I get to the space calmly. I don't get aggressive. I go "Stop, hang on. This is just because I need 10 minutes to be by myself—be in a room by myself or whatever". [...] It takes it out where it's supposed to be, which is just—a bit of a stress overload, or just that I need some space to myself. And that's probably been the biggest single thing because you don't alienate people left, right and centre any more.

Sue articulated her experience in personal terms, relating the experience of learning about herself at the SLP course to her own activities in the workplace. Steve, who already enjoyed good interpersonal relationships at work, noted however that the SLP had improved them:

I've always enjoyed coming to work. I've got a really good job. I like the people around here. They're really good. But having said that, it's probably...
even better because of going to Leadership because it sort of teaches you how to avoid conflict. And you avoid conflict by understanding how other people behave. So you can avoid it that way. I never have experienced much conflict here, but it has made it a lot better. Just because you understand what makes other people tick, it’s easier to push their buttons.

Later, we will take up the themes of improved personal and interpersonal understanding in and out of work, when we focus more closely on techniques that people have used in their work and at home, and on concrete changes that people have experienced in their workplaces. Next, we consider how this greater personal understanding was achieved. What was the SLP course like for the participants? How did they experience it?
3. The Steel Leadership Program (SLP)—Memories of and Reactions to the Course

3.1 Change and Struggle—the Earlier Courses and SLP’s “Reputation”

Personal change often involves struggle and stress. Aspects of the SLP were experienced as stressful by many participants. We interviewed people who had attended the course at various stages of its evolution. Those who attended the earlier courses were more likely to speak of the experience in terms that highlighted its challenging nature. Sue, who attended in 1996, described it as a rewarding and stressful process:

After you've been to Steel Leadership, there's very little that can confront you and be more disturbing.

Q: What was disturbing about Leadership?

The fact that they can read your mind. That's disturbing. And the fact that they push when they find something scary. They don't let you retreat from it. They push and they make you confront things and that's scary. And yeah, you see things about yourself that other people see that you didn't see, and that you don't like. So that's scary too.

Both Sue and Stan (who attended in 1995) reported that it was stressful for others. Sue stated that “a lot of people were very scared of it and wouldn't go.” Stan reported that it had been more stressful for other participants than for himself:

One thing I guess I wasn't really prepared for was that psychologically—I think some of the people were pulled apart. I felt that they didn't put them back together prior to returning to work. I guess I had an expectation that the facilitators would do a lot of that putting people back together again. But maybe one of the learnings is that there's a responsibility on all of us to do that.

Q: To help put people back together?

To help people. Particularly when they'd gone through fairly traumatic experiences. There were some fairly traumatic experiences that were shared during the ten days.

Responses and impressions such as these contributed to the SLP acquiring a reputation as “the weird course where people have nervous breakdowns and quit and all the rest” (Sue). Aspects of this reputation had lingered and continued to resurface quite strongly sometimes. For example, according to Sebastian (who attended in early 1998):

[Y]ou started to hear some of the stories of people who may have had some not-so-good experiences and that sort of thing. That seemed to dominate some of the discussion around Leadership. It almost made some people fearful of what this thing was, and what were they doing with us if we were to go down there.
Simon (who attended in 1999) reported:

I'd heard many stories prior to going about how it had affected people's marriages. It affected how they related with people. Some people realised how work had overtaken their lives and it was a major event in their life that that occurred.

However, some recent participants noted how the reputation of the SLP was changing. An example is evident in this exchange between Sean (who also attended in 1999) and the interviewer:

I still struggle with why some people—and I don’t think the group I was with was excessive in this, at all, anywhere near excessive—but I still find it interesting that people struggle and feel they’ve got to dump massive things on the group after a day or so. I still find that

Q: You mean emotional stuff?

Yeah, emotional, and I wonder whether that’s because it’s built up. Something you feel, it’s been built up to be an emotional experience, and it gets locked in.

Q: Is that the reputation it has around the place?

Oh well, I think it’s getting less and less like that. But it certainly had it earlier on.

Hence, by 1995 (the earliest date that the respondents participated in the course) the SLP had gained a reputation for causing stress in participants. That negative reputation continued to circulate in stories within the workplace for participants in later courses (up to April 1999) but appeared to be abating.

3.2 Challenging and Trying to Change the Reputation

Many of the participants mentioned SLP’s reputation as a potentially difficult experience. However, most also challenged that reputation through stories of their own positive experiences.

Sue (who attended in 1996) interpreted the SLP in terms of her individual needs at that time. Despite the disturbing nature of some aspects of the SLP (“not sleeping” stood out in her memory when she looked back on it), Sue found it a rewarding and appropriate experience: “In an odd way I had fun; it was very hard but exciting. It just came along at the right time for me”. Similarly, Sally (who attended in early 1997) reinterpreted it as something more positive than what she had been led to believe:

You just heard it was more about what they call a love-in—trying to get everybody to eventually reveal their insecurities to the point that they all cry, rather than saying “OK, the aim is to see how complex everybody is”, and that even though you may think that you are the perfect person or whatever, that everybody is different and they’ve all got their different aspects and values.
However, I found the course taught me how to understand and work with all the different personalities to get the best out of them. That's how I saw it.

Sebastian (who attended in early 1998) told of hearing both positive and negative stories about the SLP, and that there was almost an element of secrecy surrounding what participants had done. However, like Sue and Sally, he resisted stories about bad experiences, and appeared determined to make up his own mind.

We heard the negative stories, but we'd also heard far more about the people who had come back and experienced good things as a result of it as well. [.....] Well, I guess those thoughts went through my mind as well, but at the same time it was something that I wanted to do. I know some people were offered the course and they declined the offer and that's OK, but certainly I was looking forward to—if it helped me in any way and helped me to understand others. I was certainly very grateful for the opportunity, and so that wasn't an issue. At the same time I guess everybody's curiosity is aroused around "What is this thing called leadership and what does it mean for me?"

Similarly, Steve (who attended early in 1999) said:

I had a few different opinions of the course. I found out a bit about it before we went and everybody said it was a pretty challenging week, but I didn't really form an opinion before I went.

It seems as though the facilitators tried to play a part in challenging that aspect of the reputation of the SLP as being stressful for participants by encouraging them to not use the course to resolve deep personal difficulties, although they were still sometimes unsuccessful. For example, Simon stated:

The thing I found interesting—and they went to great lengths to point this out at the start and through the course—was that we’re not here to discuss your innermost private feelings, but some people felt compelled to just let it all out. Maybe it was a catalyst for that.

Some resisted the negative reputation by suggesting possible changes to the SLP course to improve its impact. Sebastian wanted more “fun” activities to balance the “classroom” learning situations:

A lot of the activities were either class-room orientated or small break out rooms and that sort of thing. I think what might be a very useful thing for the future would be to actually play some more games like - go outside, and not play say sporting games, but play games which teach people some more about how we interact.

Simon suggested the possibility of breaking up the SLP course into shorter component parts (eg, two parts of four days each). However, he acknowledged that "you'd possibly lose that dynamic if you start splitting the course up.”

Sally suggested changes in the composition of the course leaders and participants to overcome barriers based on gender difference within the course itself. For example, she suggested:
It wouldn’t hurt for them to have a different course, maybe run by the other people, where there’s, you know, have a few more women than guys and have men of a higher position, where they can make a change in the organisation. Let’s not just put men at the same level as us, or lower, but men of a higher level, where they learn about the difficulties that the women have and to understand us a bit better, and how they could perhaps feel comfortable or make people comfortable in working with us and acknowledge our efforts.

Others (eg, Sebastian, Steve, Simon), however, reported no need for major changes in the course.

All participants reported positive learning experiences. Most resisted the negative reputation of the SLP. Some simply tried to inform themselves as much as possible (eg, Steve), whilst some decided beforehand to focus, instead, on how the course could meet their needs (eg, Sebastian, Simon), and others (eg, Sue) discovered this afterwards. All reported positive learning experiences. Another strategy of resistance was to suggest possible improvements to the SLP (eg, in its structure, composition, personnel, and choice of participants).

3.3 *Reputation Aside—The Emotional and Personal Impact of the SLP*

If we set the SLP’s reputation aside, there are still plenty of comments from participants to indicate that many of them did find it to be a very personal, emotional and sometimes stressful experience. Indeed, Sue reported that the reputation of the SLP was less of a concern than the impact of managing interpersonal relationships amongst participants at the SLP course:

> My concern wasn’t stories I had heard, or course content so much, it was being with people for eight days and finding out that I was the only girl, which although this is normal in my work situation is more of a challenge on courses such as this.

Part of the stress was due to the sheer physical strain. Simon stated that the course was “worthwhile” despite it comprising twelve-hour days, with one extending to sixteen hours. Steve and Sally pointed out:

> It was hard. It was emotionally hard. Physically, it was pretty stressful and strenuous because of just the long days, because you had to think for so long, and it was a very emotional time as well. In that respect it was a pretty tough week (Steve).

> It did get to quite a few of us, to the point that most of us cried or were upset, which I think is more due to sheer exhaustion because we were doing fourteen hour days. I think by the fifth or sixth day I was just about exhausted so, of course, on the fifth day I had a cry. Also, you’re probably trying to challenge certain things that you normally place protective barriers around, since our characters are formed by what’s happened to us in the past, and it’s continually changing because of our experiences (Sally).

Steve also added a description of the extent of the emotional effects of the SLP course:
When your walk-talk partner cracks then you're expected to be there for him, I believe.

Q: Did that happen on the one you were on?

Yeah, a pretty bad crack, a really bad crack. Everyone cracked at some stage.

Some reported delayed reactions to the SLP course. Whilst Sue described a positive response overall to the course in that "(y)ou feel good, because you feel empowered," nevertheless she reported "it's hard. It's a lot harder to come back from that one than, say, GLP2."

As a result, she described long-term emotional difficulties because of the SLP:

I had to go overseas three months later for a course, and I said to my boss "I don't want to go". So three months later I was still—brain spinning a little bit, and trying to sort out what to do and what was going on and all that sort of stuff.

Sebastian, on the other hand, reported a slow but positive longer-term impact:

And I'm finding more and more people are asking for advice or asking for help and I think I'm also reciprocating that. I also feel quite comfortable now in ringing them up and saying, "Well, what do you think about this?" or "How would you approach that?" or "Why do you think this person might be doing what they're doing here?" or whatever. And I think there's a lot more openness now.

He also described the benefits from a practice that had been established within his management team of its members offering support to another member during their attendance at the course (they faxed a cartoon with comments on it from all the team members to the individual mid-way through the course). Sebastian described how "it makes you feel really good [.....] that somebody's thinking of you down there and wondering how you're going."

He noted that this practice did not appear to be widespread amongst other management teams.

Among the people we interviewed, there was an acceptance of some emotional discomfort, in the interests of personal growth. Simon expressed this well:

The exercise was also to probe people on what they're really thinking, and I think Phill did a good job of that and he had the support of the others. Some people, including myself, I think, found that uncomfortable, but I think that's part of the experience, and without that it may have been less effective. [.....] I think you need that degree of upheaval to actually make the change.

There were many stories about the emotional and personal impact of the SLP on relationships outside work, especially in the individual’s family life. For Stan, the course reassured him and reinforced his practice of separating his work and personal life:

At the course they talked about when you go home, you take off your BHP work clothes. You leave them. As soon as you get in the door you change into civilian clothes. I've actually always done that, but hadn't realised what I was doing. I had a learning that that was a good thing to do. You leave work
behind and you become a home person by that sort of symbolism. I guess it reinforced to me the importance of that, and now I always do it. It helps with the transition from work to home.

The separation of work and personal life as a component of the organisational culture was reinforced by Sally, who remarked that "(p)eople don’t tend to talk about their private lives around here." Therefore, many may have experienced a significant impact of the SLP on family relations because it would have been unexpected.

Steve told of how his wife had been “very worried at first because she thought I’d come back a changed person and she didn’t want me to change” and because when he attended the course “I was ringing up at 10 o’clock at night like a blubbering idiot a couple of times, home sick and emotional.” Simon, who had “heard many stories prior to going about how it [the course] had affected people’s marriages,” described how his wife had rung him on the first night of the course, in tears because she had been left to deal with unfinished home renovations. On his return from the course, when his wife drove him home he was “emotional” because it was:

the longest time I’d been away since we’ve had our baby and her language development within a week astounded me. I couldn’t talk all the way home, I was quite emotional and my wife thought, "Oh God, what’s going on here. Is there something wrong?" There was nothing wrong. It was just that I’d missed them, I suppose.

Simon stated that the course had helped him to be “more considerate of people’s feelings” in his relations with family and friends, and recounted how another participant at the course had resolved “a lot of personal problems at home.” He also described in a positive way how he had learned to separate his work and personal life:

what it’s enabled me to do is to get more balance as well, in my life, in terms of knowing the relationship between work and home life and how to deal with it.

Sean described how he had good communication skills at home and in the workforce before participating in the SLP:

I don’t feel that I bottle things up at all. I normally talk about it [.....] I share my thoughts with people around here, rather than do something and then they find out about it afterwards. And at home, we’re constantly sharing our thoughts. So maybe that’s just the way we are and it makes things a lot easier and we don’t quite understand how other people could get bottled up.

However, he believed that the course had taught him ways to improve his relations generally, and:

reinforced what I wanted to be. I certainly view my family life as the most important thing to me, and getting out and having fun. And work as important to enjoy, but not to live for, I guess. So it’s just reinforced all of those things, I think, and continues to reinforce that I try to encourage the people around me to have a life outside of work too.
Most of the people interviewed were asked the question “What stands out most in your mind when you look back at the experience?” The answers give an interesting cross-section of the major themes that have emerged. For Sue, it was insomnia, “the possibility of change” and “the power of communication” (“The fact that Phill Boas could totally bamboozle someone asking exactly the same question two different ways”). For Sebastian, it was learning “just how different people truly are, and that in the past, I didn’t have a good appreciation of that”. For Steve, it was “the personal development side of things” and “just how close as a group we all got”. Simon emphasised gaining self-knowledge: “I learned that it was all right to be who I am. I don’t have to be anyone else”. This, in turn, made it easier to relate to others: “I feel—being who I am—under pressure, certainly in a meeting type environment, to say things when I really don’t feel there is anything to say. I learned that it’s all right to be like that”.

Overall, stories about the impact of the SLP on its participants described physical and emotional stress, both short-term and long-term, and sometimes of great intensity. Some (eg, Sebastian) were grateful for the efforts made by others back at their workplace to maintain communication and emotional support during the course. Many described how that stress had been experienced widely, in all their relationships within the course, later in the workplace, and even beyond in their personal lives. However, most accepted much of the stress as a necessary component of their learning experiences. Whilst their stories told how the course had strengthened boundaries between their work and private lives, they described how they had experienced significant personal change through improved self-knowledge and personal relations across those boundaries.

Most memories and reactions were reported positively. Despite circulating stories about the SLP’s negative reputation (that may have decreased more recently), all participants interviewed for this project resisted by reporting positive learning experiences. Other strategies were to gain as much information as possible before attending, to focus on using the experience to meet one’s needs (either before or after attending), and to suggest possible improvement to the course.
4. Coming Back—Trying to Apply the Lessons

4.1 Coming Back—Isolation and Support

For most of the people interviewed, coming back to work required a period of readjustment and reintegration. Some referred to the lack of a “critical mass.” Sean expressed this well using the metaphor of reading a book:

I guess one of the things that strikes me is that you come back—and I’m a manager of a group of people and none of them had been on the program [.....]

So one of the difficulties is that you’ve shared with a group of people for a week and then you come back to a group that you’ve shared a lot with in the past, but you haven’t shared that so, it’s sort of like—it’s not like going into a new chapter, it’s like closing that book and going back to an old book that you’ve been reading. And somehow you’ve got to mesh the two together a little bit.

People who attended the earlier courses sometimes felt disoriented when they came back to work, as there were few people around them who had understood what they had been through. Stan, who went in 1995, said:

There weren’t a lot of people around in my immediate group that had been to Leadership. So you didn’t have a big network for support. You needed a period of debriefing to talk about the impacts. It’s good to have some people around who can take time to sit down with them afterwards to make sure that you are OK—see how they’re travelling essentially. So it was a little odd at the time.

Sue (who went in 1996 and was the first person in her group to attend the course) had mixed feelings, including some bewilderment:

I didn’t come straight back. I had a couple of days off. I don’t even remember it that much. You feel good, because you feel empowered. But then, it’s hard. It’s a lot harder to come back from that one, than say, GLP2. I don’t remember a lot. I know I had to go overseas three months later for a course, and I said to my boss, “I don’t want to go”. So three months later I was still—brain spinning a little bit, and trying to sort out what to do and what was going on, and all that sort of stuff.

Sue also noted that, in the early days, there was simply no “framework” for pursuing the lessons learned from the SLP. There was no common language, or common sets of concepts. That would only come later, after more people had participated.

Most of the more recent SLP participants had been able to draw support by sharing their stories with others who knew what the experience was like. Simon, who attended in 1999, also needed time to think and sort out his responses. However, by this stage, quite a number of people had been, and Simon did not feel isolated:

Coming back here to work—very quiet the first few days. I think I was more reflective of what I’d been doing. I’m lucky in the sense that most of the people in this area have done the course, so they understand the experience that
you've just had, and that was good. Everyone was offering to talk to you about it—if there was anything you had to say, or if there was anything you wanted to talk about. I didn't really feel that that was the case.

Sebastian, who attended in 1998, had a similar experience:

I found it [coming back] pretty good because the group of people that I work through—I don't think there was anyone who hadn't been exposed to the leadership program, and I guess I was probably one of the last to actually go. So, when I came back, everybody who was down there, everyone who had already been could understand, because they'd actually experienced it. It's very difficult to try and describe to somebody who perhaps hasn't been, exactly what it's like, because they haven't necessarily had the experience. They didn't experience the emotion or the feeling or they weren't involved in the conversation, or what that meant at that particular time. But certainly the group that I work for were very supportive.

On the other hand, Sean, who also had attended the SLP course more recently (later than Sebastian, and at the same time as Simon in 1999), reported being isolated on returning to work (see above). Unusually, none of the people in the group that he managed had previously attended such a course.

It is evident, then, that people felt different when they came back to work after attending the SLP course. The extent to which they needed to readjust to their feelings of personal change after returning to work depended partly on how many others in the workplace had also completed similar courses (experiences of isolation or support also depended on follow-up with members of the particular course in which they had participated—see Section 6.1) The next section examines how they felt different after the SLP course. Had they changed their attitudes towards the company?

4.2 Attitudes to the Company

Most of the people interviewed were asked whether the SLP had changed the way they feel about their workplace. Most said that it hadn't. In fact, participants' answers to this question just served to reinforce the degree to which the SLP experience was a personal one. For example, Sue told how her changed feelings were expressed in new beliefs and behaviours:

Not so much about the company. It increased my understanding of myself so that I haven’t exploded since then, which I used to do on a regular basis—slamming the doors or throwing things. It helped me to understand that a lot of the conflict I had experienced was related to personalities and not all the gender thing.

Sally stated definitely that the course had not changed her feelings about BHP but, instead, change had occurred at a personal level of beliefs and behaviour:
It sort of showed me how to make people feel more comfortable with me because I’m a fairly driven person. I have set goals and I am always ambitious. Probably not as ambitious, now.

Sebastian was unsure about whether the course had changed his feelings about BHP:

I don't know. Probably not a whole lot. I don't really feel I approach my work a whole lot differently, to what I did before Leadership. I think others would probably be a better judge of that than what I am. But I don't feel Leadership really changed how I feel about the work place, not a whole lot.

Simon also believed that the SLP had not “fundamentally changed my view of the company”. However, he did comment that there was now “a lot more transparency than possibly we've had in the past, which is good I think.” The SLP had brought him personal change in that, although he had been “ready to leave” at the time of doing the course, he then decided:

I can make as big a change here as I can outside. So I thought I'd give myself another twelve months to see what I can do—to see if I can change things.

Sean believed that the SLP had “not significantly” changed his attitude to BHP, but that it had “reinforced” a process he had already been undergoing towards preferring a more balanced lifestyle.

Despite their denial of significant change in their own attitude to the company, most respondents said that they had detected changes in beliefs and behaviours of their own and of other people at BHP. We will take up this theme later (see Section 4.5).

4.3 Changing Thoughts And Practices (I)—Understanding And Managing The Self

We will now attempt to capture the ways in which people have, or have not, experienced change due to the SLP. In the next three sections we will examine three dimensions—changes in self, changes in interpersonal relationships, and more specific changes in the ways in which work is carried out in the workplace.

We have already highlighted the degree to which some participants experienced the SLP as a journey towards self-discovery. In this section we aim to be more specific. What aspects of the experience were useful for expanding self-knowledge, and in what specific ways were people’s self-perceptions altered? How did these altered self-perceptions affect people’s lives at home and at work?

As mentioned before (in Section 3.3), Stan described how the SLP taught him to relax by reinforcing his separation of work and personal life, but it also taught him to relax more with his work colleagues:

I try to take some time out, whether it's personal time—whether you go for a dinner or a drink with some of the guys on the team. I'm more conscious of those things.

Sue described a major effect of the SLP on herself in terms of a better understanding of herself and a greater ability to manage her behaviour in new ways:
[.....] my own sense of calmness, perhaps, and developing an ability to change my behaviour. Having a model for changing your behaviour—that repetitive behaviour that you do all the time, and you don't understand why. You just wish you could stop. That was probably the single biggest thing—that you can actually have a conversation in your brain that changes that behaviour.

Sally described how the SLP had helped her to conform more to expected behaviour whilst retaining her ambition, but that this may have prevented her from gaining promotions that she deserved:

And when you have that bit of drive, with every element of drive there is a bit of aggression. Because of this I probably came over to some people as very aggressive. It's OK to be aggressive if you are a guy, but it ain't OK if you're a woman, and you pay severely for it for a lot of years, and I mean a lot of years. They are going to remember you as being aggressive, or awkward, or they will try to tell you, you know, you're domineering. They use all those harsh words. And so I have learnt from the course to sort of, to still have that sort of drive in me, but to portray myself in the image more of what they wanted of a woman. [.....] It's sort of a little more effective. It's probably not as much heartache for me, but if it was really effective I wouldn't still be doing the work I am doing, would I?

Sally believed also that any beneficial effects of the SLP could not be sustained without adequate follow-up to reinforce new behaviours:

I found the course sort of interesting, but I think the usefulness of the course has gone over time as there's no follow up. You just don't go on the course and find suddenly you can use the techniques automatically. You learn a bit about yourself, and you've been given a few little techniques on how to modify your behaviour so that it doesn't affect your outcomes, that you're trying to do in your job. I'd have to honestly say a lot of people have probably gone back to the way they were before. There have been a few people that have changed.

On the other hand, whilst Sally had learned from the SLP to modify her behaviour so that her assertiveness would be less likely to be misconstrued as aggression, Sebastian had learned how to be more assertive, so that he had been able to change his behavioural response to his particular emotional states:

I know that I'm a lot more confident in talking to people. I guess one thing for me was that I'd always had a bit of a fear of getting up in front of a large group of people. Not a problem if it was a smaller group, and an informal group and that sort of thing, but in the larger group I guess I've always had a bit of a fear of that sort of thing. And I think aspects of the leadership course have helped me overcome a lot of that to a degree. And I still get nervous [.....] and all those things before I'm due to tackle that kind of thing.

Steve found that the SLP reinforced his existing behaviours, which he believed conformed to the desired outcomes of the course:
I would like to think that I’ve sort of behaved at work the way the leadership program teaches you to behave—to be open and honest, do a lot of talking and get out and about a lot. I’m not secretive or anything so in terms of coming back to the work environment, I didn’t really struggle at all.

Like Steve, Simon believed that the SLP had reinforced his existing behaviours. However, it had also changed some of his behaviours, such as

I think I’m more considerate of people’s feelings than I was. Certainly in my home life—I was thinking about some friendships that I have and what part I have in maintaining those friendships. Also, about how I interpret actions, other people’s actions towards me.

Similarly, Sean believed that, despite his criticisms of some aspects of the SLP, his self-understanding and self-management did not broadly conflict with the course expectations of behaviour outcomes, and that this conformity was increasing with repeated exposure to similar courses:

I don’t agree with or don’t believe completely in a lot of what is talked about during the program but in going through similar activities, I feel more aligned with it each time. Whether that means I’ve been converted or the chip’s been programmed or whatever, I don’t know. And I’d say that people that work with me would probably say that I display some of the things that the organisation seems to be looking for out of the program anyway.

The Myers-Briggs typology (MBTI) was a learning from the SLP that had a significant impact on several people. For Steve, encountering the MBTI was “freaky” and “amazing”. It gave him a new and more positive view of himself:

I found it was really good. It’s just more learning about myself and why I behave like I do. Before I went on the course, I used to think, “What is wrong with me?”, but now you can read about it every day. And when I can read about my type everyday and it’s normal. So I know why I think like I do and why I behave like I do. It’s good.

Steve has continued to regularly use the MBTI as a tool for self-understanding:

(I)f things start to bug me or worry me, I’ll dive in and have a read and just see if there is anything in there that can explain why I’m doing what I’m doing. So yeah, I read Myers-Briggs stuff once a week, probably.

Simon also found knowledge about his MBTI type to be self-affirming:

One thing that I found quite interesting was about my personality type—I’m an INTP. At the course there were probably another four in the same personality type. We got together at one stage and spoke about how we reacted to certain factors and without fail you could determine what the other person was thinking, in a very general sense. You knew exactly how they were reacting to whatever stimulus it was at the time—which I thought was
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amazing. The fact that we were so similar in our responses. It was almost like a sixth sense.

Q: Is that the main thing that stands out when you look back at it?

For me it was. For me—being an introvert—it was good to know—I knew I was an introvert anyway, but when I saw some other introverts I didn’t feel as introverted as I perhaps thought I was. I think that was the biggest thing for me. I’m probably listening more to people. I feel—being who I am—under pressure, certainly in a meeting type environment, to say things when I really don’t feel there is anything to say. I learned that it’s all right to be like that. I’m more a “step back and think about it” person and then maybe contribute. I find a lot of people, particularly in this industry, natter a lot and you don’t seem to get anywhere. So that was good to know.

Sally found that the MBTI helped her feel better about herself and her contribution to BHP because she felt she understood more how her own personality type related to the broader distribution of types throughout the organisation. It also helped to explain her feelings of being undervalued:

There were about thirty of us and they split us up into four categories. Anyway, there were two guys and myself in one group and then there were the other groups. Most were in the IJ category. I was in the EP group. I remember them saying that this category of three people—the EPs—are the doers and the other people were systems and procedural people. They then said we need more people in the organisation like these three. If you had more people in this category as leaders then BHP would be a very dynamic workforce, because you need doers in Leadership. Unfortunately they tend to use us doers as doers all the time, so you don’t get into a leadership position because they rely and depend so much on you going out and doing things. That’s fine, but I’m sure that we doers can certainly make effective in leadership too. You need the two to complement, right? I mean you do need the person that’s judgemental, or the procedural things, and you need to have another person’s who’s perceptional, combining together to help lead the workforce. But it was really an eye-opener on that side of things. So yeah I probably gained a lot from the course on that. But I don’t think the procedural and systems people have really taken that out of the lesson.

Sue, on the other hand, was not pleased about finding out her personality type. Initially, it reinforced her feelings of being an oddity within the company. Later, however, she came to accept it.

The guy I first worked for when I started as a trainee was a raging ISTJ and wouldn’t let me go home at the end of the day without all the filing done. So for years that’s the way I thought you worked, and I was seventeen when I started. So it took me probably six months to accept that it’s OK to be an INFP. They’re nice human beings, and you’re actually allowed to be one, and it doesn’t mean that you’re weird or you’re soft or you’re strange. That took a long time to come to terms with. That’s who I am and that’s actually OK. It’s as valuable as being anything else. It sounds like I was in a pretty shitty place...
at the time, doesn’t it? I was a girl and I was an INFP. So, that’s probably the thing that took the longest time to come to terms with.

Sue had used the MBTI quite extensively to improve her understanding of herself and her relationships with other people at work. At the time when she had attended the SLP course four years previously, she felt “fed up” and thought:

I’m sick of this. I want to know how much of this is me, how much is the boy/girl thing. How much is it BHP’s got a bizarre culture?

The SLP, particularly the MBTI and models of behaviour change, had helped her to sort her problems out:

So it helped to understand myself a lot better, and the impact I had on people. That’s not to say that I changed it all the time. I just understood it better.

Q: So the major effect it had was on your relationships with other people around you?

Yeah, and in my own sense of calmness, perhaps, and developing an ability to change my behaviour. [...] Also looking more closely at interpersonal relationships and understanding why people are weird through my eyes.

Sue’s exploration and use of the MBTI had continued. She now believed that she was more like an ISFP than an INFP.

Not everyone found the MBTI illuminating. Sean, for instance, was not impressed by “some people around the organisation who seem to have memorised great chunks of it and do pigeon-hole people very quickly”. In his view, types were related to circumstances:

I’ve done the Myers-Briggs test three or four times now and the first time—the type has changed three times, and quite significantly in a couple of the indicators. I’ve probably got some things in my mind that help explain that to me. When I first did it, and for a long time after that, I basically didn’t feel you could categorise people like that, and that circumstance or environment would influence it very heavily. Rather than say “the individual is that type”, say the example would be “the individual is that type in those circumstances”. But change the circumstances and they would be a different type.

Nevertheless, as we have noted for others elsewhere in the report, Sean had discovered a greater tolerance of diversity in the organisation. He attributed at least some of that tolerance to the use of the MBTI. Likewise, Sue stated “(t)he key learning was that it is OK to be different.” She used the MBTI to gain a personal sense of greater understanding of her differences from others in the departments where she worked:

not so much for understanding other people, I don’t set out to analyse other people – mainly it’s a general understanding of how fundamentally different we can be. Consequently I don’t react to other people’s behaviour so quickly. I do use it for understanding my own behaviour and how other people view that.

Sue learned to accept her differences from other people by:
understanding different styles in the way people work, and that it’s so fundamental that people are different. It’s not just a little bit different. Some are inherently different.

As a result, the SLP helped her to improve the way she dealt with stress:

It increased my understanding of myself so that I haven’t exploded since then, which I used to do on a regular basis—slamming the doors or throwing things.

It is interesting to note that Sue was only one of three of the people interviewed who said that they used their knowledge of the MBTI to manage their stress.

Many of the participants identified the MBTI as a significant factor in changing their understanding and management of themselves. Two women who were interviewed also related these changes to their workplace context. One participant was critical of particular uses of the MBTI when it was not contextualised to a particular workplace. Some also described how the SLP had helped them to gain a better understanding of the self through learning about and accepting differences between themselves and others in the workplace, and this is discussed further in the next section with respect to interpersonal relationships.

4.4 Changing Thoughts and Practices (2)—Understanding and Managing Interpersonal Relationships

A sense of a better comprehension of one’s self often led to better interpersonal relationships. As a result of learning greater tolerance of diversity, Sally believed that she learned “how to understand and work with all the different personalities to get the best out of them.” She found this sort of understanding helpful in changing her impact on others:

I’ve probably learnt how to assess people and I’ll adapt my character to make that person feel more comfortable with me.

Q: What kind of things do you use to do that?

I suppose, if a person seems to feel more comfortable with someone that’s quietly spoken, then you’ll be more quietly spoken, or whatever.

Sebastian also reported that an important learning from the SLP for him was:

[.....] just how different people truly are, and that in the past, I might have—well I didn't have a good appreciation of that, and sometimes I couldn't understand why people would do things in the manner in which they did them. I couldn't understand why some people sometimes might think about things in the manner in which they did. But the Leadership program certainly helped me understand people a lot better and made me appreciate that we are all very different and we take in information differently and we interpret it differently and from that we do things differently. It certainly gave me a good appreciation of that. But then, for myself it was also a case of understanding what I do and how that impacts on others.
Sebastian remembered, in particular, how an exercise in Neurolinguistic Programming taught him new understandings of differences in the way people process information:

Then we were broken up into smaller groups. We went out and we had to talk within our own groups and actually talk...try and be conscious of giving people a description of something from a visual point of view, and then changing that on to some other type. I think there were three. I found that was something new - that I had never been exposed to before. I had never had any sort of appreciation of it prior to that,

In a related vein, there were a number of stories about how people used their knowledge of others’ MBTI types to modify their perceptions of another’s personality and behaviour. One, by Steve, described how it had helped his interpersonal relationships at work:

It’s amazing, you know, when you talk to people back here, you just compare the different types. The first question you’re asked when you get back, is “What’s your Myers-Briggs Personality Type?” and you can understand then why people behave like they do. And I suppose that has been a pretty significant development at work. Once upon a time you would say “That bloke’s just a dick head. He doesn’t know what’s going on” — arrogant, rude, blah blah blah. But now you can almost have a guess at his Myers-Briggs type and you can understand it. He’s not really rude and arrogant. It’s just the way he operates and that’s fine, that’s good. You just need to be aware of that when you talk to different people.

Sue used her expanded knowledge of personality differences to reframe her understanding of some difficult relationships at work:

It helped me to understand that a lot of the conflict I had experienced was related to personalities and not all the gender thing. [...] I can reasonably clearly distinguish now between whether someone I’m dealing with has a problem with me because I am a woman, or me being an ISFP, and them being an ESTJ. So, in my brain it’s relatively clear now and it doesn’t stress me. That’s not to say that you still don’t get treated a certain way because you’re a woman, but it’s a lot easier to manage — And more often than not now I attribute it to personality differences, than to it being someone not comfortable around women.

She explained how the way she had learned from the SLP to change some of her behaviours, in order to deal differently with stress, had markedly improved her work relationships:

So I was aggressive — Now I get the space calmly. I don’t get aggressive. [...] And that’s probably been the biggest single thing because you don’t alienate people left, right and centre any more. You don’t send the e-mail straight away. You stop and think. You don’t return the phone call straight away. You stop and think. OK, sometimes you still send the e-mail straight away. But it’s taking that time out to — “Why did I react like that? Why has my brain just exploded? Hang on a minute”. It calms you down. That makes a huge difference to your interpersonal relationships, when you’re not aggressive with everyone all the time.
Similarly, Sean described how the SLP had helped some people to use new ways of communication in order to manage interpersonal relations:

I think there are quite a number of people now who would actually go out—when they don’t get a reaction the way they wanted it to happen—will go out and instead of just keeping on hitting the wall with a sledgehammer, they’ll actually think of other ways of knocking it down, rather than just trying to blast through they would have preferred to blast through. And that’s why I say it’s really useful for conversations and thinking about reactions, whether it’s right or wrong—it doesn’t matter. It’s broadened people’s ability to communicate.

Most of the people interviewed spoke in general terms about paying more attention to building, maintaining and improving their interpersonal relationships. Sally spoke of being more aware of people’s complexity, and the fact that all people change over time:

I suppose one thing I do is that I first assess the people that are within the team with me, and I make sure that—I can either sense or be aware of how they are today or what their general personality is and to work out how best I can bring out that person to contribute in the best way possible. We are into this term at the moment “change management”, and that’s fine, that means that we’ve got to change the way we do things and change processes in the way we think, and problem-solve and so forth. But what we’ve got to constantly do is change our opinions and views of people and that’s what that’s brought on me—from that course. Because people are complex and we don’t know what’s happened to that person in the past to make them the way they are. Also, people change.

Sally linked an acceptance of change with flexibility, and identified this as an important component of good working relationships:

How I was ten years ago or even fifteen years ago or whatever is totally different from what I am today. And no doubt in ten or fifteen years’ time I’ll be a totally different person to what I am today. People are always constantly changing, from their experiences and that’s why you get change in society. [.....] Yet in our views of people, we still haven’t learnt that we do change, so we penalise people or hold very firm opinions of people from what we’ve known or seen of them a long time ago. Hence, people who saw me or remember me, when I was a lot younger, still hold that opinion and they won’t be flexible or allow you to sort of develop a new relationship with them.

Steve also said that he used what he learned from the SLP to understand people better and avoid conflict:

we sit in meetings and, you know, you sit with some managers and you really sometimes question their behaviour and you question how they operate. And that puts a big bias in your mind, as to what their role is and how well they do their role. So—since the course, that doesn’t raise any questions any more. You just accept that’s the way they operate and get on with it. So it’s made it a lot easier in that respect. It certainly helps you understand where people are coming from.
According to Steve, he would need about another two years of working in the organisation before he would be able to act on his new understanding in order to challenge such behaviour and change the way he managed such interpersonal relationships.

For others, improving interpersonal relationships was a gradual and multi-faceted process. Stan, Sebastian, and Simon all found this to be the case. Stan described the gradual change in increased awareness of the work involved in maintaining relationships:

Q: Did the course have an impact on your relationships with other people that you work with?

I'm sure it did, but I can't think of a dramatic change. I think it was just the consciousness of the relationships that you must have if you're going to... It was just a whole series of things that worked on the relationships. It wasn't as if I went through a dramatic change.

Q: What kinds of things are doing now that you didn't do before?

I try to take some time out, whether it's personal time—whether you go for a dinner or a drink with some of the guys on the team. I'm more conscious of those things (Stan).

He also noted:

I try and keep reasonably good networks. I still maintain those networks. I guess that was another learning throughout the BHP training. I'd make a discipline of ringing someone once a week to find out how they are, and what they have been doing. I think it's good, but you have to work at it.

For Sebastian, change almost crept up without his noticing:

I wouldn't say it changed immediately, but I'd definitely say, looking back now—about twelve to eighteen months down the track—I'd say that I probably have a better understanding of some people that I have a lot of interaction with every day. Sometimes I really couldn't understand exactly what they meant, or where they were coming from, or why they might be doing what they were doing. After going through the course and understanding some of those subtleties around what actually makes us so different to other people, whether it be our values, or how we take in information or whatever else. It's been about eighteen months. I can now—some people who I really couldn't understand, now we're a lot closer than perhaps we've ever been.

Simon was initially unsure whether change had occurred at all, but then said that he thought he had become a bit more “open”:

Q: Did it change your relationships with the people you work with?

No. Maybe I'm more open with some of the things that are going on in my personal life. I realise that there's a certain amount of information that is probably worth—divulging is a strong word, but—talking about, that gives them some understanding of why I'm doing what I'm doing, or why I'm the
way I am at a particular point in time. We all, I think, have a fairly—in business terms—open relationship in that respect. We talk about things that are going on outside, things that are affecting our lives, and that’s been really good.

Q: So you wouldn’t have done that so much before hand?

I think I did, but I’m probably even a little more open than I was in the past, which I think is a good thing. I think what it’s enabled me to do is to get more balance as well, in my life, in terms of knowing the relationship between work and home life and how to deal with it. We talk quite informally a lot of the time here as well about those aspects. I think it’s good.

Simon also said that he now felt he was more considerate of people’s feelings, and more aware of the part he plays in maintaining friendships.

Overall, whether the effect was slow or fast, most participants reported that they returned from the SLP to enjoy improvements in their understanding and management of interpersonal relationships. The next section examines how this effected changes in the way they their work was done.

4.5 Changing Thoughts and Practices (3)—How Work Is Done

How did this improvement in understanding and management of interpersonal relationships translate into changed work practices on a broader scale? We were able to find a number of examples in which respondents were able to specify incidents in which work was done differently because of SLP initiatives at BHP.

One lesson that was taught in the SLP was that there were individual differences in the way that people absorbed information. Both Sue and Sebastian spoke about how they had used this lesson to improve the way in which they prepared material for training programs. For Sue:

There are tools in it that stay forever—just little things. We were talking about a training program recently—I’d just finished organising a conference and someone sent the presentation they were going to do. It was monstrous. It was text, pages and pages of text. The whole conference was organised the way it was because I cannot take in three days worth of lectures. I’m not an auditory person—even my, forget it. Even visual, you know. I’m kinaesthetic. So they’re useful frameworks to explain to people. You can just say “Well, you just can’t do that. You need pictures and samples”. But they’re useful frameworks: “And some people take in pictures, and some people…..” It gives frameworks you pull out over time.

Similarly, Sebastian described practices before the SLP:

Before, I think we used to just dump a lot of information on people, and it either wasn’t relevant, or it had no meaning, or some people just couldn’t understand it because of the way in which they took in information.

Now, however:
We’ll tackle it in four or five different ways depending on what we’re trying to get through to try and cater for a number of different people. And some of it will be visual, and some of it will be text, and some of it will be stories, and some of it will be cartoons. We use a lot more of those sort of things to try and reach the masses now, than what we would once have done. I think the Leadership program has definitely played a significant role in that side of things, just helping us to understand.

Sebastian described also how he had learned to assess outcomes, by reflecting on “why I hadn’t necessarily achieved the outcome that I had set out to achieve, or the outcome that I desired from the start.”

Stan described his most memorable specific learnings from the SLP as being able to use methods for improving relationships in the workplace:

Some of the techniques and toolbox type things, in terms of being able to read people’s behaviours. Are they being open and honest or are they not? They were valuable tools. There are cultural things that really stand out—building the teams before you get into some of the activities, building relationships with the people, and the dynamics of people. I spend a lot more time on that sort of activity now, up front.

He described a detailed example and the effects as follows:

I probably have to give more recent examples, because when I was on the course I was in a staff role. So, you didn’t have the teams of people around you, quite to the same extent that you do in an operating role. Within [name of workplace], we’ve taken people off-site to do some of the relationship-type things. Instead of just trying to have a half day business meeting, we’ll have longer sessions, where we have business activities, but also spend time on people activities as well. What are the real issues? I’ve found that extremely beneficial. We’re setting up a new operating team at the moment and we’ve used a concept of taking layers out of the organisation. It’s non-hierarchical, non-structured. We’ve got a team and we all support each other. Even in terms of the way the organisation structures go—instead of boxes, there are overlapping circles. What that’s demonstrating is that we all have to share and help each other. That’s been a conscious decision, whereas five years ago I probably wouldn’t have done that. It all comes from establishing relationships and working off and feeding off that.

Q: How many people work at [name of workplace]?

About eighty people work at [name of workplace]. On the paint line, it’s only a team of twelve. It’s consciously been set up that way so that we do actually have to get the layers out the organisation. It’s a little bit of an experiment. We’re relying on the people to be involved, and for the role to be engaging. We’re all in the same room sharing the information. It’s a living example of trying to take away the barriers within the organisation.

Q: How long has that been going on?
It’s still in its early stages. We only started it at Christmas time and I guess we’ll find out how it goes in about two months time when we start the operation up. It’s a golden opportunity to try a different approach. The other thing that we’re now doing is setting up the values, the taboos, the sorts of behaviours that we’re looking for and not looking for within the team. That’s something we wouldn’t have done five years ago. It’s important to have those things written down and talked about. We discuss them, have them visible and we check ourselves against them.

Simon also had seen a greater sensitivity to personal and interpersonal issues in the way BHP organised social interaction among its employees, especially across different cultures:

A big conference was organised a month or two ago, for all the technologists to get together to talk about technical stuff. But the people that organised that conference were more interested in creating the networks and the relationships than they actually were in the technical aspects of the conference. So while there was a technical theme, they concentrated a lot of their time on getting people together to talk, to learn who other people are, within and outside their fields of expertise. They were very culturally aware. We had people from all over Asia here and New Zealand, America. They were culturally aware and we went out of our way to be mindful of the things, say, a Muslim culture needs in terms of their food requirements etc. and, you know, they don’t like going into bars and all that sort of stuff. They were very mindful of that. I don’t think that would have occurred before. I think we were very ethnocentric in terms of how we operate. I think the change is a result of Leadership. I think that is a symptom of things changing. I notice John Cleary has a big conference on next week and they’re trying to make events more interesting and taking away the stodginess, the formality of how we would do things in the past. I don’t know if anyone, and I could be wrong, but in the last two years he’s pulled people from all over the world in, like one hundred to one hundred and fifty people at a time, to talk to each other. Now that, to me, has got to be representative of some change in the focus and a recognition that there’s something in the business for it. So I thought they were two good examples of—if not a direct, then certainly an indirect—influence of Leadership. Perhaps things are changing a bit.

He spoke about how he used SLP principles to try to make some changes in his own sphere of influence:

I’m in a role here at the moment in which I think I can have some minor influence on trying to make these behavioural changes. I deal with strategy. I’m trying to implement in our people’s minds a more internal locus of control about their future. We tend to rely on externalities, market dynamics, etcetera to go forward, whereas I’m saying we have to look within, towards our people, to go forward. From that respect I think I have a role to play in at least chipping away at the stone, to try to get ideas into our senior management’s heads to do things. I have these discussions with our local people. I’m in a purely analytical type role and an advisory role. I have managed people in the past, but I’m more of an adviser to people now. My role—and I suppose it fits into who I am—is to try to step outside. They talk about going into third position and looking in on various aspects of what we do, to look for ways to
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do things, which I enjoy. I’m trying to make—not waves, but—ripples, to get in these guy’s minds that there are other things that we should be thinking about. That, I suppose, is what I see my contribution is in terms of changing our culture.

Things had also been changing on the shop floor. A project involving the upgrade of the entry end of the galvanising lines at Springhill earned favourable mentions from several interview subjects. In the past, the job would have been handed over to a group of engineers, and the operators would have been only minimally involved. This time, however, the people running the project saw an opportunity for putting the principles learned in the SLP into practice. According to Scott, who helped lead the process:

We tried to bring maintenance and engineering and operations together from day one. The discussions and issues didn’t revolve around equipment, they revolved around—as a group of people—what we could do a little bit differently. It was a good way to work, so we maintained that process. At those meetings we talked about things like, well, how do we want to work? What’s good and bad about the current system? How are we going to take responsibility for making this a success? People were going to be displaced based on this, so we decided: “Well, how can we do that and still keep it an accepted process?” We developed some simple principles—to look after those people that wanted to stay, and look after those who wanted to go—because some people actually wanted to go—and not push anybody out of their department. That was a strongly held value by people. They didn’t want to be involved in anything that hurt someone else in the department. Could we actually invest the five million dollars and get on with life? It’s been twelve months now and that’s actually happened.

Although running things this way—with open meetings every Wednesday—was, according to Scott, “a little bit demanding in terms of the energy required”, the improvement in workplace relationships, and the financial returns involved in producing a better product, made it well worth the effort. Representatives from the project were invited to Melbourne to make a presentation to the BHP Global Maintenance group. According to Scott, the executives wanted “to try and understand a little bit about what went on and how we did it.”

Whilst the course had helped to demarcate boundaries between work and home life, Sebastian described a number of small, but important, examples of how the work culture had benefited from incorporating a more personal touch that replicated family life. The manager of his work group ensured that everyone knew of and celebrated people’s birthdays. All members of the team contributed to a “cake fund” and once a month they met to “have a cup or tea or coffee and have a bit of cake and share a bit of cake and just talk about other things other than work.” And another manager contributed some basketball tickets as a reward for individuals who had performed well at work. Simon also described how he disclosed more about his home life to his colleagues at work and how this had improved his working relations:

Maybe I’m more open with some of the things that are going on in my personal life. I realise that there’s a certain amount of information that is probably worth—divulging is a strong word, but talking about—that gives them some understanding of why I’m doing what I’m doing, or why I’m the way I am at a particular point in time. We all, I think, have a fairly—in business terms—open relationship in that respect. We talk about things that
are going on outside, things that are affecting our lives, and that's been really good.

Possible reasons for the apparent contradiction between Simon's statement above and Sally's ("(p)eople don't tend to talk about their private lives around here") discussed earlier (Section 3.3) are that the SLP taught people to discuss their private lives more in the workplace and/or men, more than women, noticed a change in this behaviour because it may have been more unfamiliar to them.

Overall, stories of specific changes in the workplace after participation in the SLP were about gaining particular tools and techniques for a new understanding of people's values, abilities and behaviours in order to better bring about cultural and structural change.

After examining stories about individual and interpersonal change, we will now turn to how participants in the SLP reported change at the organisational level.
5. Summing Up the Changes in BHP

This section provides stories from SLP participants (in chronological order according to their date of attendance) about their understanding of the ways in which the SLP had effected change at the broader organisational level.

Stan was generally satisfied with the organisational culture (where culture may be understood in terms of values, symbols, belief systems, shared practices and codes of behaviour) and did not see the need for any significant changes in BHP:

(O)ne of the things I've always felt is that BHP does have a fairly high set of values in the way it does try and treat people. This experience further reinforced the organisation's commitment to change.

Q: Has it always had those values do you think?

Maybe not as clear as saying "had those values", but I think—we're in a difficult industry. In other organisations, you're basically here today and you could be gone tomorrow. BHP takes care of the transition, and training. BHP has worked pretty hard on those things. We can be critical, but there are a lots of things we do extremely well.

Describing how change “doesn't happen overnight,” he gave the example of how BHP was flexible enough to be able to support changes in improved work relations:

Talking about group maintenance and doing check-ins—we wouldn’t have done that five years ago. I think we're a better team because of it. It forces us to think differently—how we operate, discussing things with the boss even though we don’t agree with it.

Others also had positive stories about change, although most also told stories about the need for further cultural change at BHP.

Sue gave an example of how the organisational culture was changing “to variable degrees”:

It depends which part of the culture you mean. Safety culture for instance is changing really slowly. Acceptance of diversity is probably changing a little, I suppose. The whole of the business environment is changing and in a way that’s forcing people to look at things a bit differently. It’s pretty slow, but my perception is I wouldn’t have even come here to work five or ten years ago. There is just no way I would have walked onto this site to work. So it has changed.
She also gave examples of how she believed some changes had been beneficial:

Here where I am working there’s a huge amount of work going on about changing the apathy, the lack of standards in both personal and inter-personal relationships, and actually running the plant. There’s a huge amount of work going on there. You take two steps forward and one step back. But the two guys leading it, I give them full credit. The industrial blackmail and all this other crap that goes on is just amazing. And they are really putting a lot of effort in, and it’s rubbing off. Things are starting to change.

Q: Which two guys?

The line manager and the operations coordinator. They’re setting standards again. A lot of that is why the culture is so bad. It’s because there were no minimum standards of behaviour. You could get away with murder here. Now they’re going back to: “No, you’re paid for twelve hours, you work twelve hours”. And trying to break away from what seems to have happened in the last ten to fifteen years here, which is anything goes as long as we don’t have a strike. There were just no standards of behaviour. It was just crazy. You actually need to get everyone back on a civilised footing and you try and get them to respect each other. That makes the culture better for everyone. It’s not easy, but it’s only been two and a half years, or two years, that the manager’s been here. And I think the toll on him is enormous. But it’s gradually changing. It’s got a long way to go, but it was just at such a low level. There are still times when you shake your head and you just go “I can’t believe people are like that” and individually they’re not. But this place has got to a point where those things happen. You know, sitting down reading newspapers now instead of watching what’s going on—that’s not accepted any more and that’s not done any more. Certainly on day shift. It used to be done on day shift for heavens sakes, imagine what the back shifts were like.

For Sue, the SLP and WLOC initiatives have directly contributed to cultural change beyond the individual level:

It’s given people a framework within which to talk about things, so you’re not talking about people, you’re talking about people in the context of this thing over here. So it’s had an impact from that point of view. It’s taken it out of the interpersonal almost and said “Let’s talk about this problem over here”, which might be absenteeism or something like that. And it’s just given people different ways of talking about it. So you might be talking to a bunch of people who have never done Leadership—so you don’t necessarily use the terms—but there’s actually a framework to talk about things—understanding why people are different. When you’re counselling two people who are at each other’s throats, well, it helps if you understand that they’re so intrinsically different. It helps you to be able to explain those things to people.

Sally believed that BHP as an organisation was still “trying to struggle” with the SLP but that “it realises that it’s got to take some of the notions from the course and that it’s got to create more of a team environment, and to be considering people’s emotions.” As a result, she believed that BHP was “understanding the effect they can have on someone.” For Sally, this understanding was being achieved through individual change:
So someone that’s wanting to go up the top—years ago, like I said before—wouldn’t care who they hurt along the process, whereas now they probably realise that they still want to go to the top, but they have to be more aware and concerned about the people. And I think some of them are realising that it’s the people that are the foundations for them to be at the top, like a pyramid. And that if you don’t have that foundation, then the rest is just going to fall down in time anyway. So I think it’s taught them that. [.....] it’s probably hard work for some of them because they’re used to doing something a certain way for a lot of years, and it probably doesn’t come naturally to them. But there are some managers that are taking it that way and they’re quite good.

Sebastian believed that the SLP had played a role in changes within BHP. The extent of its role was, however, limited in that the SLP played “a big part of it but not the whole part.” The changes in BHP that he spoke positively about involved new improved ways of “working within a fairly supportive group,” whose members were more able to express their vulnerability in terms of communicating a lack of knowledge and willingness to learn from each other (see Section 3.3).

Steve was ambivalent about whether there had been significant cultural change in BHP as an organisation: “I’m not really sure whether the culture of the place has changed that much.” Interestingly, he described his overall satisfaction with the organisational culture in terms of a past culture with similarities to home life:

"It was all one big family company. People were pretty friendly. Back in time it wasn’t the BHP hierarchy imposing themselves on the organisation. It did do that, and it has done that—a pretty stupid thing to do—but it hasn’t done that forever.

However, a change he was able to identify as due to the SLP was: “(t)here are a lot more leaders now than there were. I mean, there are still a lot of managers, but there are certainly lots more leaders.” Steve also was certain about the ability of the LOC programs to effect some change on the “shop floor”, whereby: “there's this pretty strong bond that forms with the guys. It's how to translate that across crews and that's the challenge.”

Simon believed that “hopefully, the company will get something out of it,” and that “with these types of courses you've got to take some sort of long term view of their effectiveness.”

He looked to the future for significant changes in BHP, when “a critical mass of people” who had done the course would have changed their behaviour and, in turn, “start to change the BHP culture.” Nevertheless, as discussed earlier (see Section 4.2) Simon noted that the SLP had contributed to greater “transparency” within the company, and this is discussed further in Section 6.

Sean described how he believed there had been “pretty substantial” changes in communication from the old culture of “people saying what the bosses wanted to hear,” although there was still “a reasonable amount” of the old communication culture in existence. He also described an example of change in the function of a work group. Where previously members of that group had “got together maybe once a year to talk about issues in the functional area,” now:
they’re getting a bigger group together, having those behavioural sessions and some functional sessions which are more focused on improvement opportunities rather than the actual content activity and an expectation that the teams that get formed. At the moment they’ve got a couple of teams spread around Australia who have phone hook ups once a month to discuss their functional issues. So, instead of it being a once a year thing, it’s a once a month thing, and they have developed a better relationship and talked about it amongst themselves and shared it amongst themselves.

He stated that the SLP contributed to such changes because it:

[.....] has exposed a number of people to that sort of concept and it’s also given us linkages into the group of facilitators that can, probably at the moment, give us the best value in that behavioural facilitation.

Overall, however, Sean believed that change was needed more consistently over the whole organisation, as it presently:

[.....] would have got value but maybe not maximum value. I think plenty of pockets would be getting better value probably out of those targeted groups, rather than drawing people from all over the place. [.....] It is still maybe not adequately addressed. It’s certainly not structurally addressed. The concept has certainly given value and the flow-ons have given value. Maybe there’s more value to add to some other activities that we are not doing, I don’t know. There’s still a lot of problems within the organisation, not—probably in the behavioural area, but I’m too close to the coal face to say, really.

Overall, there was a range of stories about changes in BHP due to the SLP. Most respondents were able to describe some changes that had happened (summarised below) and other changes that were still required (discussed further in Section 6). Stories about change that had happened included the following:

- Changes had been uneven within BHP, according to different workplace cultures and rates of change (Sue, Sean).
- Personal change at an individual level had had effects at the organisational level (Stan, Sue, Sally, Simon).
- Examples of improvements that were noted included: ways of thinking and communicating about issues (Stan, Sue, Simon, Sean, Scott), group or team work (Stan, Sebastian, Steve, Sean, Scott, safety culture (Sue), acceptance of diversity (Sue), standards of acceptable behaviour (Sue), and leadership (Steve).
6. Overcoming Barriers to Change

Sean described the SLP as "really more some form of change program." However, he and other participants in the course identified some difficulties in implementing change, both before and after attending the SLP. For example, Stan stated emphatically that "(t)here has to be a better ways to do things. There's no question about that." And, at the time that he did the course, Simon "was ready to leave" because "at several levels [.....] I saw our management culture as not moving forward. It was quite frustrating. I was looking around for other work outside." What were some of those barriers and how did the SLP overcome some of them?

6.1 Follow-up after the SLP course

Many participants in the SLP told stories about the need to follow the course up with further opportunities to learn and practice new behaviours. For example, general stories about the difficulties in maintaining the momentum of change included the following:

I found the course sort of interesting, but I think the usefulness of the course has gone over time as there’s no follow up. You just don’t go on the course and find suddenly you can use the techniques automatically. You learn a bit about yourself, and you’ve been given a few little techniques on how to modify your behaviour so that it doesn’t affect your outcomes, that you’re trying to do in your job. I’d have to honestly say a lot of people have probably gone back to the way they were before. There have been a few people that have changed (Sally).

It would be a good idea if you got the group together again, eighteen months, two years down the track, just for a couple of days, just to review what they’ve done and where they’re at and how things have changed. Just take them back in time and—like a little refresher course—to keep the momentum going. (Steve)

If you do it once you only pick up a little bit of it, and if you don’t revisit it, it drifts away. And if you want to actually get the behaviour changes being really reinforced then you’ve probably got to go back in some way or other every—it might be even every six months, and it might be for a fairly long time, but you should keep going back. (Sean)

Stan mentioned some specific HR resources as useful for the continuing process of seeking help to reach particular goals of change:

I think collectively we’ve realised it’s a really important thing and it’s a journey. We know what we’re looking for but we still have to ask for some help. We’re using one of the internal HR resources, someone like Jelena Kralic, or someone like that who’s well down on that journey to help us with that process. There’s a site transition team being used around the organisation.

Sebastian told how he had maintained contact with his “walk/talk” partner from the SLP course held two years previously, where the partnership involved sharing any type of experiences that either one may have been undergoing.
Many participants therefore suggested more follow-up was needed after the SLP course, and a range of options were mentioned (more courses, further use of HR resources, and continuing contact with members of the course).

6.2 Barriers between Work Groups

Sean was concerned with achieving greater teamwork by breaking down barriers between groups in the workplace, and he believed that the SLP strengthened, rather than broke down, those barriers:

[.....] one of the other things I’ve been trying to chip away at is—quite a number of people have tasks which you can put a fence around and say ‘that’s their job’—and I think definitely more so now than in the past—I’ve tried to encourage people to cooperate as a team rather than saying ‘that’s their job’, and sharing and getting coverage. Some people have told me that for the last ten or fifteen years, in one team, they haven’t taken time off until the last twelve months. We’ve been trying to avoid that and have the jobs covered so that they can take a decent holiday and someone can cover them. They’re just going through a process of doing that again with a new group. So I think some of that has certainly not been driven out of the program. It’s reinforced by the program.

He described how some work groups had overcome this barrier by having most of its members from different functional areas participate in a course (e.g., in Finance and Coated Steel). He was also concerned that a general lack of a sense of urgency increased such barriers to change within BHP.

Similarly, Stan wanted all members of a work team (in both leadership and operations activities) to learn skills similar to those gained from the SLP. This would engender “more trust” and overcome the “us’ and ‘them’” mentality, allowing access to courses to be spread more evenly throughout all sections of BHP. Unlike Sean, Stan was more accepting that such a broad organisational change would take time: “(w)e’ve worked very hard on it, but you can’t change years of history overnight.”

Stan described how his attendance at the SLP had contributed to a change in the team structure, to one that was “non-hierarchical, non-structured” where “we all support each other.” This was “a living example of trying to take away the barriers within the organisation.” He noted that attending the SLP course:

[.....] with my peers has probably been a more powerful part of the process for me. Attending the Leadership course with a whole lot of people that you don’t have any interaction with compared to going to it with my immediate business team has been a much more powerful thing for me as an individual.

Nevertheless, like Sean, he also noted that the most effective change to this new team structure had occurred:

[.....] when the organisation has sent whole work teams. They made the commitment to go—not just the leadership team of that organisation [.....]
We've done it in small pockets, but not all the way through. At CRM we've had small pockets go away, where we've been doing work place change.

One way to judge the extent to which people have changed is in how they treat minorities. Simon's story about the SLP reducing ethnocentrism within BHP (see Section 4.5) needs to be contrasted with stories by women, such as Sally, who told of their pain from continually feeling excluded, despite some superficial changes. This occurred even in exercises carried out within the SLP course:

But what was interesting was none of the men who wanted to network to help their career path volunteered to be my partner as they saw me as no benefit to assist their career. Hence, it highlighted that in their minds we're still not inclusive. OK, they've changed a bit over the years, they're a lot better than what they were in the past, but I think it's more hidden discrimination today. I don't know whether it's just a cultural thing or they don't realise they're doing it. But it still hurts.

Sally referred to the "hidden discrimination" she continued to experience in BHP as an example of gender barriers to more open communication in BHP generally:

[.....] some of them are very good at the team words, and things like that, at the right places, but the actions are not showing. Words are very cheap. [.....] They're not doing the straight out blatant horrible discrimination like what happened years ago when I was here. But you don't get supported, and you're not given the opportunity to be put in a position to promote yourself. They "do" nice words and say you're a valued team member, and they utilise your skills, but when it comes to actually presenting or being made to put input into a decision, you're either not listened to, or you're not even invited to a venue to promote yourself. So it is very unfair.

She described the limited career paths for women, who mostly gain promotion to the upper hierarchy in "non-threatening decision-making areas—HR, marketing, occasionally accounts" rather than in "production areas."

In addition to gender difference, she also suggested that differences based on the MBTI could be more equally balanced within the organisation:

(F)or BHP as a whole, for it to be really dynamic and progressive, it needs to take that fundamental lesson in that we need more EP people—doers—in with them as leaders, it then would move at great knots. For us to have an effective change we've got to be willing to be a little uncomfortable, to take risks and we haven't gotten to that stage yet. Because the IJ people are very good in putting feel-good words in documentation that it makes them look like they're going well. They come up with like "The Face of the Future" or the change management things, but gee whiz, you know, now that you have got these words, you have got to get the right personality to have the drive to make the words into actions and I don't know that BHP has really had a look at that. Maybe they'll take this seriously, who knows?

It should be noted that gender issues were raised only by the three women who were interviewed.
Simon described how BHP was like other organisations politically in that “there was unequal treatment of people within the organisation.” He described the potential for change at a personal level, in terms of his continuing role in BHP, where “I can make as big a change here as I can outside.” At an organisational level there were also “some positive things at times,” but he qualified this with the comment that:

I also see that more often than not we don’t follow through. Other factors come into play which overtake what you were working on and I find it annoying that we don’t have a constancy of purpose. But I don’t think it’s any different to anywhere else.

Several felt that more change needed to happen in the upper echelons of the organisation. Some described an old culture at BHP that was resistant to a new leadership culture:

Yes, it's too old at the top and too staid. If you look at very progressive companies around the world, particularly in America, they're not people who are so old and set in their ways. The majority of managers and directors in BHP are people who developed their careers in the fifties to the mid-seventies, which were the times that people were still inflexible or very hard in their ideas, and the Leadership techniques back then were whoever was the person with the biggest shout and didn't care about who they were going to hurt or make fall around them were the ones that got promoted and are still at the top today. Also, the majority have only had their careers in BHP and have not learnt how to adapt or be able to generate new ideas and techniques (Sally)

One of the good examples was that on the last day, they wheel in a couple of heavies and they sit down and talk to you. And that’s a bit daunting at first, because you're really being reintroduced back into the real world. You can see that some people are just not passionate about it. You almost think that they’re forced to be there. Senior managers—yeah, they bring a couple in and sit down and talk. There’s half that genuinely want to come along, and listen and talk, and preach and be a part of the group. And then there's others that you think, God, their heart’s not really in this. (Steve)

There were also stories about inconsistencies between the words and actions of members of the upper hierarchy. One concern was the expressed goal of change towards more open communication:

There’s a certain degree of expediency that they want. They’re very short term orientated as well. That’s my impression. [.....] Recently we’ve had to fill in a survey on what we think of the company and it was fairly open and candid about what we could say. I thought that was good. So at least they’re trying to find out. They want to attract and retain good people. So they’re starting to work on those aspects as well. Still, they’re only operating on a very superficial level, I think. I don’t think they’re working on behavioural aspects of people. They expect things like—we’ve got this charter—which I don’t know if you’re aware of it—that’s supposed to drive all behaviour and that’s just bullshit. It’s like Pavlov’s dogs. You see this thing, you salivate, and then you’ll do what it says. That worries me a bit—that they could be so superficial
about it. [...] But I suppose I have to give them the benefit of some doubt and hope that in the long run we’ll see some changes for the better. (Simon)

Despite some irritation with the charter, Simon did some positive change in the way in which BHP dealt with difficult issues:

One thing I found interesting—which was good and maybe he had license to do it—was this Ok Tedi issue we have at the moment. BHP’s in a real bind with what they’ve done with Ok Tedi. But I see [...] is at least raising the issue of what ethical standard are we going to take, and he’s getting the debate into the arena about what our position from here on really is. I think it’s good that we’ve recognised that. I would have thought under the old structure we’d bury it.

Even Sean, the most recent participant in the SLP, was concerned about the credibility gap with respect to behaviour outcomes of the course, such as the aim to change communication behaviours and, more generally, to the behaviour of upper management within the organisation:

I think the organisation historically has had a very hierarchical view of leadership, and that the further up the organisation, the more right you were. It didn’t matter whether you’re genuinely right or not. I think that’s, in part, changing. I still think I can see fairly significant snippets of exactly that happening in a different way today than it was happening a couple of years ago. [...] I think we’ve still got massive disbelief right throughout the organisation.

The first example he discussed was of his view that most participants in the course he attended believed the Head of HR had not done, or learned from, a similar course because, when he spoke to them at the course, he “just wanted to share some of the good things he saw the organisation doing in HR.”

Sean’s second example was from the workplace, where members of upper management were perceived generally as not following through on their statements, such as that salaries and performance would become more closely linked:

So you keep hearing this at a high level, and keep not seeing it at a much lower level. If actions don’t follow words, you don’t believe them. And hearing it for I don’t know how many years now, quite a number of years in a row, and it not being followed through with even after that length of time. We’ve not improved or not changed at all really. The disbelief just continues to increase.

Similarly, Simon (who attended the SLP course at the same time as Sean) gave an example of the credibility gap continuing to be suffered by members of the upper hierarchy at BHP, both locally and in Head Office. He referred to the CEO of Steel who had spoken with participants at the course, “but his actions aren’t following through on what he’s saying.” He added that people in Head Office appeared to be “profit driven,” “externally focussed” and “short term oriented.”
The barrier to changing the culture amongst those in the upper hierarchy was widely viewed as being one of not having yet reached a “critical mass” of people —within the upper hierarchy and overall—who had participated in the SLP. For example:

And I think as the organisation progresses from here and we start to get some of the younger guys moving through who realise the benefits of the course, and behave the way they should—and there’s plenty of them around—then it will filter through even further. But I reckon it’s a great idea putting people—they obviously put the senior people through pretty quickly, but the senior people are the people who’ve been here the longest, and they’re probably the people in whom the culture’s entrenched the most. So they’re actually going to be the most difficult people to change. But putting the younger people through, and the people that haven’t worked their way through the organisation yet—as they progress from here, and they really see the ways we could do things better, they should be able to get more change throughout the place. (Steve)

I know a lot of people at my level have had the experience but there is still, I feel, a lack of change in behaviour in our upper management to reflect that. And that was blatantly obvious on one of the days we were at the course. At one of the sessions people from very senior management within BHP are invited to come and talk to the group. One of the guys there was the head HR person [...]. He was right into the measurement of people, right into defining people’s roles in a very metric way, I suppose. For an HR guy he seemed more like an accountant. Certainly he came across as lacking any people-type, not skills, but compassion I suppose—which I thought was interesting. We had a few other senior people there. We had [...] I couldn’t help but feel that he’d done this many a time. He’d been to the Leadership course many times to do this type of talk—and apparently he was one of the instigators of the Leadership program—but he’d never done the full course to my understanding. I couldn’t help but feel that here’s a guy that—Maybe something within him feels there’s a need for it, and he’s saying the right things but his actions aren’t following through on what he’s saying. That’s the impression I got. I might be totally wrong. (Simon)

Barriers to change within BHP were therefore acknowledged to exist in many organisations. One comment about how personal individual change played an important role in overcoming organisational barriers echoed other comments about how the SLP was an effective agent (see Section 3). As stated earlier in this report, many participants reported great benefits from the SLP in terms of changing thoughts and practices, both personally and in interpersonal relationships within and outside the workplace. Suggestions for overcoming perceived barriers to change that were reported in this section included the following:

- greater participation in the SLP by people at all levels of management.
- greater access to courses similar to the SLP for all members of the workplace (eg, courses designed for whole work teams).
- greater attention to the needs of minority groups (eg, being more inclusive of personality and gender differences), both within the SLP itself and more widely within BHP.
- greater consistency between learnings from the SLP and the workplace culture of BHP, especially with respect to the words and actions of upper management.
7. Conclusion

This document summarises the major themes that have emerged from fifteen interviews conducted with managers at Port Kembla's Springhill plant who have attended BHP's Steel Leadership Course. Their stories highlight the personal impact of the SLP -- an impact which has manifested itself most strongly in improved self-understanding. Associated with this is an enhanced appreciation of individual differences among people. Both these learnings have facilitated improvements in relationships, both at work and at home.

As well as improvements in their understandings of themselves and others, our interview subjects also spoke about changes in BHP work practices and culture. Here, however, stories of change were intermingled with stories of the continued existence of old patterns of behaviour, and of the uneven nature of change. Change is indeed a long and difficult process, and the metaphor of the journey used by some of our respondents is entirely appropriate. In keeping with the aim of this report, which is to privilege the voices of those who have experienced change in BHP, we end our report with a comment from Scott, who summed up the effect of the SLP as follows:

In summary, what it's done so far is that there are a lot of people out there who've listened and taken enough away that they have a good set of softer skills to allow them to actually do more work with all the Leadership principles. I think there's a platform there we can work from. And I think that's starting to slowly happen. It's given some people in BHP enough courage and skill to actually start to question the way the business really runs. You're starting to see that out there every day across the place. There are little things happening everywhere that are good. I'd love to say that there are less games played, and I think there are. It's definitely creating a different approach to things. People are more aware of what's going on around them. Some people are starting to take more responsibility for themselves, which is pretty good. A lot of people are starting to realise that they have been trapped in the system, and they are starting to think how they can improve things with the wages guys. The wages guys are quite willing to work that way.