



Driving sustainable change through unravelling the onion!

Why is it that the changes we both want and need to make often don't happen? Why is it that our intentions are often thwarted through unintended consequences? These two questions have increasingly bedevilled decision makers at all levels, in our modern society.

What this short paper suggests is that the nub of the problem lies in our misunderstanding of the onion; of acting on the outer layers of a project, change or issue without comprehending what lies beneath. It argues that effective and lasting change can only occur when conversation and action occurs in a way that aligns these layers of thinking and belief. To illustrate the ideas being discussed here how we think about and grow food is used as an example.

Litany

Most ideas and conversation start within what might be termed the 'litany' of conventional wisdom. This layer of thinking is reflected in media, casual conversation, industry journals, policies and plans. In the food sector, this is reflected in statements like: food processing is being undermined by cheap imports, environmental scientists are compromising our access to water, Australia can produce more than it requires, our farmers are among the most efficient in the world, people in cities don't understand rural folk and soon on. When we argue about change at a litany level, what is normally advocated is a solution at this level of understanding. Sometimes this is sufficient, sometimes not.

Structure

Beneath this litany layer lies a layer of system and structure. In the case of food this has some particular characteristics. Our food systems have been built on the idea of cheap oil; this drove the green revolution, the concept of trade liberalization and price driven efficiencies. As the price of oil and fertilizer has gone up, as trade barriers have remained stubbornly in place and as prices given to farmers have failed to reflect the price of inputs, the structure of our rural communities have been radically reshaped. Indeed one might argue that what we have seen is a shift from rural community to regional community. So perhaps some of the litany issues might be better addressed through a systems or structure lens rather than a litany lens. For instance, how could we designate system that lessened the costs of both inputs and logistics, so that the 'true efficiencies of production' provide the basis for sustainable food processing. In other words the focus might switch to a whole of value chain perspective rather than a production centric perspective. In a recent example the sale of high value live cattle for export will see 15 stages of handling occur between farm gate and the plane, with people in each stage taking a small percentage. Really!!!

Worldview

Wrapped inside the system level is a layer that might be termed a layer of culture and ethos, or a way of thinking level. It is this layer that helps us frame the systems and structures we use. Again with respect to food this ethos or way of thinking is very strong. Some components include; the environment exists for the exclusive benefit of humans, food production is primarily an economic (versus a cultural) activity and the best way to produce food is in large monocultures rather than diversities. There are now many food producers globally arguing that food can only be produced without compromising the environment, the way to compete against junk food is to encourage food consumption to be first and foremost a cultural act and that food production is more profitable, resilient and beneficial if it is produced in diversities. This latter approach is called agroecology and has been adopted by the UN as the basis for future food production.

Myths and Metaphors

In the centre of the onion lie our myths and stories. Stories are how we make sense of our past and our present. In the case of Australian food production these stories are very strong. 'We've golden soils and wealth for toil' lies at the heart of the lucky country and being the backbone of society. Recently the story is that we can become the food bowl of Asia. But if we tripled production that would only equate to about 3% of the regions demand - so hardly a big bowl!!!!

Inside Out or Outside In

So by creating a new story that has legs we can build new thinking. This in turn will create a different culture or ethos. In food, we saw this occur with a philosophy of no till in drought conditions. This new culture or ethos provides the basis for new systems which in turn changes what we want to achieve or measure in an issue or project, thus changing the conversation.....

Or by thinking through what we need to achieve at a litany level, we can start to see the system or structure that underpins it. This in turn helps us see more clearly how we might need to change the way we need to think which in turn provides fertile ground for stories and new meaning.

The use of this 'onion thinking' or to use its technical term 'causal layered analysis' helps us move beyond business as usual in a non-threatening way. It helps us see the inconsistencies that often exist between the layers. For it is these inconsistencies that stop desired change from working.

Finally a word of warning. Practitioners of onion thinking rapidly become aware of how silly or futile much of the current debate in many spheres often is. There is the temptation to try and right every situation. But as every onion lover knows it's a food that is best used sparingly and in balance.

Causal Layered Analysis

Unpicking the Onion – Making a difference

Today's Reality



Litany
How we see today (data)

Change the measures

The System
What is really happening

Structure changes behaviour

World view
Our culture

Change how we see the world

Myths and Metaphors
The stories we believe

Change the story

Imagined Reality