Department of Sustainability and Environment

Developing a fire learning network:

a case study of the first year

Fire and adaptive management

report no. 78

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By Claire Campbell, Simone Blair and Andrew A. G. Wilson

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Summary

DSE started to pilot a learning network expecting that DSE and the wider community would gain, share and develop fire knowledge, and thus build a foundation for achieving better fire outcomes. The experiences of the first year (of five), seen in terms of the adaptive management themes of thinking, action and learning, were reviewed in terms of each of relationships, team, cultural context, how to talk about the network, and systems (holistic) perspective. The experiences both confirmed expectations and resulted in new knowledge.

The network developed widespread relationships between interested parties (individuals, communities, groups and organisations). The process involved facilitating ongoing conversations between diverse individuals who were interested to learn more about fire. The conversations supported the development of trust and understanding between the participants. By the end of the first year, one 'conversation' had developed to an advanced stage, while others were just starting. Distinct and constructive changes in attitudes and understandings about the issues emerged.

Building a network development team was vital. Core team members actively worked to cultivate relationships and follow up invitations for conversations. The extended team included locally based community members who were crucial to connecting to people and initiating conversations.

Recognising, respecting and adjusting to cultural differences both within DSE and in the wider community was essential. Prevailing culture profoundly affects how people interact, make choices and relate to initiatives such as a learning network. The important notion that 'everyone is part of community' proved surprisingly foreign to a culture more accustomed to seeing government and the wider community as 'them and us'. Creating a learning network in this context would require a paradigm shift within both the DSE, and the wider community. They would need to engage in a partnership that both would find largely unfamiliar and uncomfortable. DSE would need to better-understand and accede to community capability and knowledge, and relax its unconscious assumption that knowledge is somehow absolute.

Adapting the language used in talking about the network was crucial. Terms such as adaptive management, response and even learning network, were unhelpful. It was important to talk about the network as a group of linked, locally-based conversations.

Directly impacting on fire management decisions is not the networks role. Rather, it creates an environment for sharing, learning and understanding, leading to wider views and acceptance and respect for the views of others.

The biggest challenges were in shifting ways of thinking from linear effects to patterns, from details and parts to the whole, from the quantifiable to the unquantifiable, and from outcomes to process. The emphasis had to shift to 'systems (holistic) thinking' about the social, economic and environmental factors that interact in complex ways. The conversations may start anywhere and can't be confined, but they must mesh with existing interests and thinking.

The present report documents learning identified at the first review point, after 12 months of experience. One of the conclusions is that the characteristics of a large organisation can, unintentionally, inhibit learning.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank many people for supporting and helping us to prepare this report. First we would like to express our appreciation to all the community members who are part of the strategic conversation process. It has been an exciting journey of mutual learning. In addition we would like to express our thanks to all of the regional DSE, Parks Victoria and CFA staff that have been part of the evolving process.

In particular we would like to thank the learning and knowledge team members: Francis Hines, Edith Huber, Matt Campbell, and Shannon Treloar for their ongoing support and openness to an ongoing conversation of ideas. Also we would like to thank the DSE Community Engagement team with whom there has been many stimulating conversations. Thanks are also extended to Liam Fogarty for his ongoing support. Our thanks are also extended to the reviewers of this document; Maryanne Martin, Peter West, Frankie Maclennan, Geoff Parcell and Ian Campbell.

We look forward to continued conversations with all of you.

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Australian Government
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About the Authors

Claire Campbell

Claire is a clinical psychologist who has worked in the community development field over the past ten years. She has systematically worked and developed processes, tools, approaches and mechanisms designed to empower communities to respond to the issues they are facing including HIV/AIDS (Africa, Asia Pacific), and the issues of loss and grief encountered after the natural disaster of the tsunami in 2004 and the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005.

Claire spent a number of years working across cultures as the lead researcher in a participatory action research project evaluating the impact of HIV/AIDS prevention approaches implemented by the international Salvation Army. This research occurred in eight countries (Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda, PNG, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka) and involved sharing what was learned with other organizations.

Claire believes that all people have the capacity to respond to the issues facing them in their own context. By systematically applying core concepts related to building relationships through ongoing conversations, dynamic change is possible, irrespective of culture or issue - whether this be HIV/AIDS or fire.

Simone Blair

Simone is an anthropologist and before joining DSE Land and Fire management she taught, and undertook research, in this discipline at the University of Melbourne. She has worked with Victorian commercial fishing communities to describe how they learn about, understand, use and pass on knowledge about the marine environment and how their values and social relationships affect these processes of learning and inter-generational knowledge transfer.

The common thread that runs through her work with commercial fishing communities and her work in land and fire management is her interest in how groups of people come to know, value, care about and use the natural environment. She believes that different life ways, cultures and ways of knowing can offer all people insights as to how we can better live in, and adapt to, our world.

Andrew Wilson

Andrew is a forester by training and has worked for DSE (and the departments that it succeeds) since 1987. He has worked in the functional areas of fire management, whole-of-department information management, geological survey and corporate IT. Before joining DSE, he worked with CSIRO's National Bushfire Research Unit in Canberra, and the Rural Fire Research Centre in Melbourne. His masters degree researched the survival of people and houses at Mount Macedon following the devastating Ash Wednesday fires of 1983. That research is the basis of the "so-called" 'Wilson house survival meter'.

Common threads that run through Andrew's work include making practical sense of complexity, and linking disparate people and concepts together to release the benefits of them working as a whole.

Foreword

In the months after I took on the Chief Officer role in late 2005, Liam Fogarty, Andrew Wilson and others in the Learning and Knowledge Team of Land and Fire Management initiated a project called 'learning by doing'. It was an important innovation in working smarter and looking for ways to reduce the chances of repeating the huge bushfires that had burned over 1 million hectares of bush in 2003. Part of working smarter is looking for new ways to work alongside the community, to improve the ways that we share our land management knowledge with people and to improve the way we incorporate local knowledge into our own operations.

Significant change takes time, and without respite further large and devastating bushfires have occurred, not least those near the Grampians (2006), the Great Divide (2006-07) and on and around Black Saturday of February 2007. Though the community recognised that DSE had improved greatly with 'community engagement' during that 2003 fire, much more was still needed. Thus a crucial part of the learning by doing project was to focus on how to better bring together the strengths of community and the strengths of DSE.

The community aspect of the initiative took shape as a 'learning network' of ongoing 'strategic conversations'. The aim was to bring people together, often with different views, to share their experiences and learn from each other. Strong facilitation would be essential. Staff from DSE and Parks Victoria, though they may participate, would have no special standing. The learning network started carefully, for there could be no jumping ahead, no matter how urgent the need.

Not surprisingly, the questions to be discussed and understood were the big ones around alternative options for managing fire in the landscape. How, for example, can the often-competing needs for protecting life, property water catchments, amenity and fauna, be addressed simultaneously, everywhere at all times? Amidst such complexity trust, relationships, and the knowledge and interests of the participants, were of upmost concern for the learning network facilitators – for how can we learn from one another if we lack trust in or respect for each others' knowledge.

This document describes the process of developing a learning network approach in a Victorian fire agency. It tells the story of the benefits and work involved.

All of us in DSE - and perhaps also the community - need to be open to doing things differently, to take measured risks, and to critically examine the effects of both old and new ways of working. The present report exemplifies this approach, and I commend it for showing discipline and insight in evaluating the lessons thus far. The learning networks approach, fitting as it does alongside our existing community engagement practices, shows early promise. It is timely that we continue to test it, and talk about it, for the need is great.

Ewan Waller
Chief Officer, Fire and Emergency Management
Department of Sustainability and Environment

Introduction

Bushfires are a dynamic, critical and integral part of life. For example, they affect water, biodiversity, energy supplies, the economy, carbon balances, livelihoods, property, community relationships and life itself. Paradoxically, some of their effects, especially those on biodiversity, are necessary and desirable. Not surprisingly, knowledge about fire and its effects is incomplete, and ways of managing fire in the landscape are debated vigorously.

One important approach to managing the environment, including fire, is 'adaptive management'. It requires managers to openly engage in a cycle of acquiring knowledge from a wide variety of sources, applying that knowledge and systematically learning from that action to improve subsequent actions.

Campbell, Blair & Wilson (2010) and Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell (2010) suggest that adaptive management requires opening up the flow of knowledge through conversation. The people who hold the necessary and available knowledge are numerous and are dispersed throughout the broader community, as well as management organisations (such as DSE). Each person holds some of the knowledge, and no person or organisation holds it all. If actions are to harness the best available knowledge, then participation in conversations must be diverse and effective.

Campbell, Blair & Wilson (2010) further advocate that an effective approach to adaptively managing fire in Victoria should involve 'learning networks'. These networks rely on conversations to bring people together for sharing and learning. Such conversations support more understanding; faster and more cumulative learning; and better decisions, actions and resulting impacts.

In January 2008, DSE initiated a fire learning network as a Victoria-wide pilot. To couple that action with learning, DSE undertook to test and refine the rationale for learning through conversation over several years (for discussion of rationale see Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010 and Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell (2010).

Just one year later saw a dramatic change in circumstances with Australia's worst natural disaster – the Victorian bushfires of February 2009. Community interest in fire surged and recovery became an important need.

The principles and concepts that were laid as foundations during the first year of developing the learning network could be applied as part of the long-term recovery process for communities directly and indirectly affected. However, the fire, its effects and the implications of the network are matters for subsequent reporting and are not included here.

The purpose of this report is to describe the overall practical experiences of the first year of the fire learning network. This report complements a report by Blair, Campbell & Campbell (2010) that describes the detailed progress of a specific conversation in a specific locality.

The present report aims to examine key inner-workings of adaptive management in practice, by showing how thinking and action inform each other and result in continual strategic adaptation. It starts by outlining the initiative's origins. It then reviews five themes – relationships, team, cultural context, how to talk about a network and systems (holistic) thinking. It addresses each theme in terms of thinking, action and learning.

Origins

The idea of DSE developing a fire learning network began with thoughts around community.

Tenuous relationship

The relationship between DSE and the community around the issue of fire is tenuous. Traditionally, DSE has been perceived as being the 'expert', the one who makes the decisions on behalf of the 'community' and enacts the decisions, resulting in a division between 'us and them'. Over recent decades, decisions and actions by DSE's fire employees have tended to trigger conversations with interest groups. In general, the broader Victorian community has been uninterested in discussions about fire management as currently presented by DSE.

Where interest does arise, the community often questions the assumption of 'expertise' and the reasoning behind decisions. For example, many people question whether the long-term impacts of planned burning on the environment are really understood. They distrust DSE's assurances that burns are needed to protect assets, and that fire actually benefits the environment. They argue that DSE does not seem to understand the issues and that it makes decisions without really consulting people and respecting their knowledge of the local situation.

As Campbell, Blair & Wilson (2010) and Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell (2010) explain, the questioning of expertise reflects deeper issues of trust – in the decisions made and in the underlying knowledge. Knowledge exists in many forms, reflecting the multitude of ways in which it forms and evolves. Decisions, to be informed and strategic, must tap into many knowledge sources, both experiential and theoretical.

New paradigm

The expected benefits were clear – sharing and learning within and between organisations and the community. Achieving the benefits, however, would require a paradigm shift. For example, DSE would need a perspective, attitude and way of working that sees:

- The community as being contributors and partners in the process rather than recipients.
- The community as having equally valid knowledge and experience to share – that can support more informed and strategic decisions being made about fire in the landscape.
- Knowledge acquisition as a dynamic process with no end point.

In practice, paradigm shifts happen slowly. They happen as people learn by engaging in activities that apply the different ways of thinking and working. This suggests that DSE staff would need to adapt over time through learning by doing, preferably by first participating in a pilot initiative.

Opportunity to try new things

In 2006, two DSE staff, each with over 20 years' experience in fire issues, secured funding from the Commonwealth government. The funding was used to create an opportunity for exploring and testing various new approaches to fire management through a 'fire knowledge and learning team'.

The team worked under the umbrella concept of 'adaptive management' and worked towards finding new ways to plan action and learn from taking that action. It sought sustainable methods and better ways of working that, in the future, would result in more informed decision-making about fire. Initially the team addressed acute needs, such as flora monitoring protocols, information systems and fuel hazard guides. It also considered the need to focus on connecting and including community. Unless community could participate in the process of planning, doing and learning, DSE would miss valuable input and the 'better approach' to learning would still result in common lack of community acceptance. The question of including community was one of 'how'.

How?

A starting point was to consider establishing a fire learning network similar to the one The Nature Conservancy had established in the USA. That network, as Campbell, Blair & Wilson (2010) subsequently reviewed, connected people around specific conservation projects for the purpose of sharing and building knowledge about fire. Through structured workshops and interactions the network facilitated sharing, learning and participatory planning for action. The team thought that something similar may work in Victoria, but was concerned that the prescriptive character of the approach may limit its effectiveness. The team needed new expertise and thinking, specifically about community.

Who?

The team identified the type of person ideally suited to developing a learning network:

- Already thought within the new paradigm. Experience working in community development, in particular in a role of helping a community to empower itself to be effective, seemed beneficial.
- Had no previous knowledge of DSE and fire to cause their internal agendas and past ways of working to unduly affect exploration of the new ideas. The person may have little knowledge of either and would thereby have knowledge that is characteristic of the vast majority of Victoria's population.
- Looked at the world in terms of 'systems thinking', and especially systems that are socio-ecological-economic. The person would understand that everything is connected with and affects everything else.

'People' influences on network development

Each individual experiences events, situations and even moments differently. Each person brings with them his or her own values, motivations and experiences, which directly impact how they perceive, interpret and respond. The people brought on board to develop the network (initially the network developer and knowledge developer) would be no different.

Their own experiences, context and values influenced how lessons of the network's development were perceived, interpreted and acted on. Other people would have acted differently and interpreted the lessons differently, resulting in a different story of development.

The remainder of this report describes the story and lessons of the team brought on to develop the network, in terms of each of the five themes.

Expectations

Based on theory, precedents and experience, (Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010) predicts the characteristics a network displays after one, three and five years of development. Some of the expected development milestones are reproduced in Table 1. This report considers the actual progress observed after one year of pilot implementation, in the context of five themes.

Table 1. The expected effects of implementing a pilot learning network

After one year	Growing awareness and acceptance of the ideas and ways of working through a learning network is beginning to be seen within and outside the organisation.
	Widespread new relationships exist between interested parties (individuals, communities, groups and organisations).
	Some people are not interested in participating, for the evident reason that a learning network is not a forum in which they can push their agenda.
	In some areas conversations have become established as a recognisable entity or functioning network.
	The development stage of one or more conversations is advanced.
	The individual or local conversations remain separate from each other.
	In advanced conversations some potential facilitators have begun to emerge.
	In advanced conversations some measurable changes in attitudes and understanding about the issue have emerged.
	For advanced conversations local people have taken ownership.
	One or two incidental, serendipitous and local fire and natural resource benefits have emerged.
	Commonly, but with exceptions, people in hierarchical organisations will welcome the initiative but remain caught up in systems that reinforce existing behaviours and practices.

Table 1. The expected effects of implementing a pilot learning network continued

After three years	Consistent conversations are taking place involving those inside and outside the organisation and conversations are beginning to be linked.
	The number of conversations has increased exponentially since the first year.
	Participants own and decide the direction of the conversations.
	Some significantly better fire and natural resource effects are evident e.g. increased understanding of the issues, less conflict and more working together have emerged, both at local and broader level.
	Some conversations have ceased as people have lost interest, moved away for other reasons or felt that all the issues that had interested them have been discussed. For the moment they've learned all they can or want to learn.
	Relationships developed in conversations are being maintained outside of the conversation setting.
	Though widely supported in general, the network initiative has experienced some difficult patches, expressed not least from within government, through having been misunderstood or having changed senses of identity or balances of power.
	Connections exist and sharing and learning is occurring between several of the advanced and established conversations.
	The network development team continues to support network development by connecting conversations and building relationships with people interested in forming new conversations and linking into the network.
	Facilitators have emerged from within the conversations and are facilitating conversations independently of the network development team.
After five years	Ongoing conversations linked as a network are considered a natural part of how people within and outside organisations interact. People take their own initiative and action and adapt the learning network's philosophy in their own ways as circumstances evolve.
	Extensive improved fire and natural resource effects that address complexity and entail systems thinking have emerged, both at a local and broader level. They are characterised by increased understanding of the issues, less conflict and more working together.
	Participants control the network – they decide on its directions and the types of connections made.
	The people involved in many individual conversations actively work to establish other conversations in nearby areas and connect them with the network and other networks.
	Established conversations identify and develop new facilitators, independently of the formal facilitation team.
	The network development team supports the conversations and the establishment of new conversations from the background.

Theme 1: Relationships

In developing the network the critical factor is relationships. The network developer was clear from the outset that if the network was to be successful and sustainable then network development would need to be 'from the ground up'. Her background knowledge and experience in cross-cultural and community psychology and community development had made her acutely aware that relationships are essential to any process.

Pre-existing thinking

Relationships refer to the inter-connections between people. Whether the contact between people is direct (face-to-face) or indirect, and either verbal (e.g. telephone) or non-verbal (e.g. online), relationships develop from every interaction. For example, stopping to ask a stranger for directions requires engaging with the person, reading the person's body language and exchanging "thankyous". Though brief, the encounter forms a relationship that reflects a degree of trust and interpersonal connection.

With multiple interactions, the type and nature of a relationship changes. Repeated points of connection build understanding of the other person and solidify opinions and feelings about them. These experiences help each person decide how much and often they wish to interact.

Relationship development is connected with community resilience. Resilience refers to the ability of an individual or community to prepare for, respond to and recover from a significant event. Being connected with those around you, whether they be family, friends, neighbours or others, has been shown to significantly increase resilience.

The role of conversation

A key component of relationship development is conversation. Conversation helps to develop understanding of the other person – their hopes, dreams, fears, family context and history. Through conversation the people involved develop trust, which supports ongoing deepening and potential longevity of the relationship.

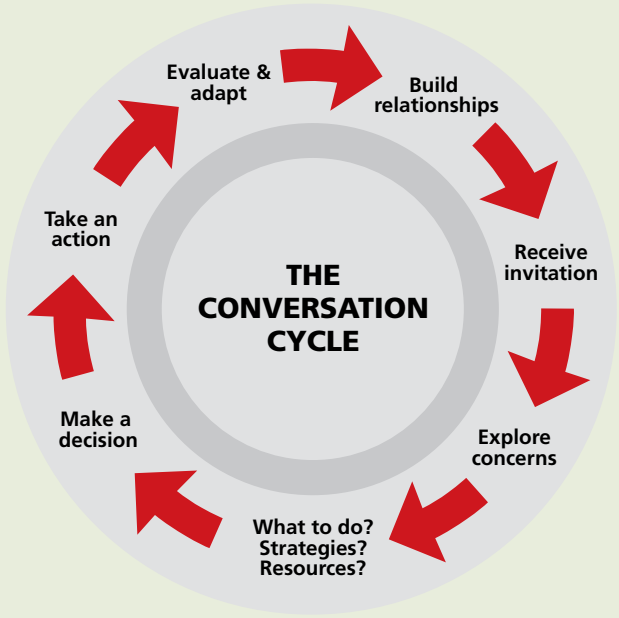
Conversations that reflect a relationship of trust provide an effective environment for exploring contentious issues. They allow people to express different views and reach understanding. In turn, such conversations further support the strengthening of trust and mutual respect.

Conversations that over time build connection between people, support change. That change can be internal, such as change in knowledge about a topic or change in feelings about the other person. It can also be external, such as when making joint decisions to take action or change behaviour.

The conversation cycle

The network developer had used the process of conversation as a strategic tool in previous work. Conversation had functioned as a tool to support people in coming together and developing their relationships; supporting them in exploring issues of concern; exploring options for action; making decisions together for action; taking the action and then evaluating the action to determine future action. Figure 1 illustrates a framework for a continuous conversation cycle (Campbell 2000).

Figure 1



Applying the conversation cycle framework results in several benefits, for example:

- Helps build relationships – relationships are essential to ensuring that the conversation begins and continues to develop.
- Provides a framework – the cycle helps facilitation of a conversation by being a framework for how a conversation can develop and progress.
- Helps the facilitator keep track – the facilitator's role is to keep track of where the conversation is at within the cycle and ask strategic questions that keep it moving.
- Reminds that more than a single conversation is required for relationships to develop and for the conversations to reflect depth of content. Completing the cycle needs more than one conversation at a given time and may take several months or longer.
- Reminds of the dynamic nature of conversation – several cycles may occur simultaneously.
- Supports in-depth discussion – back tracking to an earlier point in the conversation to explore it in greater depth is often required.

The role of facilitation

Facilitation is a process that helps conversations to develop and progress over time. One or more people can facilitate a conversation. Their role is to support creation of an environment where issues can be identified and discussed in a neutral and safe manner. Facilitators do not impose their own perspective or agenda during the facilitation process. Instead, they help the participants to explore issues by asking questions and challenging people to think more carefully. The process of facilitation can often be empowering for all involved (see Campbell, Campbell & Blair forthcoming, for further discussion of how to facilitate conversations).

The importance of invitation

A critical aspect of the ongoing process of conversation is invitation. **Invitation refers to the welcoming of ongoing relationship and conversation.** It directly reflects on people's motivations and reasons for being part of the conversation and whether they will continue to be involved over time. Generally, invitation and relationship are strongly correlated – the stronger the relationship the more likely that people will invite the conversation to continue and develop.

The role of key people

A vital aspect of working successfully in a community is finding key people within the community and developing relationships with them. People who have relationships with many others and are respected are often the people who can make things happen quickly. They have an ability to mobilise people and local resources. Such people can be referred to as local 'champions'. People in traditional leadership roles often fill this role, but not always. Sometimes, the person who has the most influence over a group is often one who sits quietly at the back. Forming relationships with such people makes any work in a community much easier.

Action taken

This approach to relationships was applied at every stage while developing the network. The network developer had only one pre-existing relationship connected with fire management and this lack was an advantage. Relationships, therefore, had to be formed from scratch without past agendas or assumptions about how things should be done. All relationship avenues were followed up with an open mind.

Tapping existing networks

The first relationships formed were within the knowledge and learning team within DSE. The team's relationship networks were then tapped. One important part of the team's network was Parks Victoria's Fire Environmental Planning Officers (FEPOs). Contact with and visits to the FEPOs led to conversations that focused on motivations for being involved with the environment, and how a learning network may work in their locality. Each FEPO was also asked to suggest people with whom to explore the issues further. An example of this scaling-out of these relationships is shown in Appendix 1. Another important network were the Community Engagement Fire Facilitators (CEFFs) within DSE.

Finding the champion

Sometimes the referrals from the FEPOs connected the network team directly to the key person or champion in a community. In most cases, however, conversations with several people within a community were necessary to identify the local champion. Once this person was found the network conversations evolved quite rapidly. The champion was often in a position to invite people from diverse backgrounds and orientations to come together to begin talking. Often those people had never sat down to talk about the issue about which they were passionate in a neutral environment. Many were surprised to find points of commonality and connection despite their opposing stances on fire in the environment (e.g. Strategic Conversation case study, Blair, Campbell & Campbell 2010, Appendix 1).

Linking to other organisations

Relationships were also developed with people from other organisations, many of which had programs and processes that applied some of the principles inherent to the learning network. Connecting with these organisations to learn from them and explore if linkages could be made seemed sensible. The thinking was that making use of existing structures and resources would be of mutual benefit and more efficient than creating a whole new system.

The other organisations included Melbourne Water, Landcare Victoria and the CFA[1]. One of the strongest partnership relationships to emerge was with the CFA (see Example 1).

Example 1: Building a relationship with the CFA

The network developer held several conversations with the community development team within CFA. DSE's fire community engagement team believed that the learning networks were an interesting approach that connected well within an existing partnership initiative between Victoria's three fire agencies – DSE, CFA and the MFB (Metropolitan Fire Brigade) – 'Fire Ready Victoria'. The DSE team, which is well connected with the CFA team, helped set up a conversation to talk about the network and possible points of connection. The members of the CFA team felt there were strong strategic points of connection with their initiative called 'Community Fireguard'. They provided contact details for the Community Education Connectors (CECs) in each CFA region. They also wanted to work together to develop a set of guidelines for how the relationship could work.

Continues next page

Notes

1 Melbourne Water is a government agency responsible for extensive forested catchments that provide Melbourne's water supply. Landcare is a community run organisation that is supported by DSE in overall coordination and funding. The CFA (Country Fire Authority) is the lead fire-response agency for private land in outer metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria.

Example 1: Building a relationship with the CFA *Continued*

Community Fireguard

The CFA implemented Community Fireguard to support communities in coming together to build awareness of their own fire risk and capacity to respond to that risk.

The Fireguard groups form via invitation. Street meetings advertise the initiative, and those who are interested invite a Fireguard facilitator to help them establish a group. The person who takes the lead gathers people from his or her street to meet in one of their homes.

The facilitator joins the group for a series of four set sessions. In these sessions, the group discusses issues of risk and explores how individuals can protect their homes and themselves. By the end of the four sessions, all participants develop their own fire protection plan.

After the four sessions, continuation of the group depends on the group members. Each group decides when and how often to meet and what to discuss. It can call on the facilitator for support.

The CFA recognised the benefits of letting groups know about strategic conversations as a way of further developing the fire knowledge of these groups, and of maintaining their fire interest. The CFA decided that they would let the groups know about the conversations and people who were interested could join an existing conversation, or come together to initiate a new conversation.

Several groups in the Geelong and Mornington Peninsula areas quickly expressed interest in being part of the strategic conversations.

Key learning as a result of action

The action solidified and confirmed thinking on several points:

- Relationships are central to any process, regardless of the issue.
- Conversations help build relationships and are therefore critical to a learning network.
- By focusing on relationships, the foundations for a more sustained response are laid e.g. others became independent advocates for the learning network initiative.
- Change happens as a result of the relationships.
- Conversations build community resilience for many types of responses, including response to fire.

The action resulted in new learning:

- Resisting outcome-based thinking is important – specifically defined outcomes are less important than the process. Too often the focus is on input, action and output – the 'project' approach. A person's greatest learning and knowledge development occurs in the *process* of thinking through the issues, making decisions and acting on them and as a result forming deeper relationships with those around them. These things are traditionally not measured. The philosophy behind participatory action research summarises this well – the process is as important as the outcome. Indeed, in many cases the process is the main outcome. The stages of the process are: being involved together, thinking about the issues together, exploring solutions together, choosing actions to take together, evaluating the impact of those actions and integrating the learning into future action. Each stage is transformative and supports strengthening relationships and resilience.
- Recognising existing groundwork in developing relationships with other organisations and people is important for example, developing the relationship with the CFA community development team was much easier due to previous work that focused on building greater partnership and integration between DSE and CFA, through the 'Partnership Guidelines' and 'Living with Fire' framework.

Theme 2: Team

The concept of team can have various meanings. For the pilot initiative the meaning was firmly influenced by the network developer's previous ways of working.

Pre-existing thinking

Team refers to two or more people working together with a shared vision. It implies that the members share a vision about where things are heading, and that shared ways of working to achieve that vision exist. They also share a strong intention to work together effectively, which requires a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

Team includes core members and extended members. The core team comprises of the people who work together on a daily basis to talk about strategy in developing the network, explore ideas and concepts and identify key learnings for adapting future actions.

The extended team includes people who share a vision and want to work collaboratively to see it realised. Extended team-mates can operate as a team in several ways – as community champions who bring people together in their particular locality or actively engage in conversation about future strategy and conceptual ideas. Team can grow rapidly.

Effectiveness depends on a cohesive team. A cohesive team is more likely to be able to recognise what it can and cannot do/achieve in a given situation and respond appropriately. In a team environment members feel supported and connected. Team is people who can be relied on and who ensure that other team members do not feel alone in holding and pursuing the vision.

Action taken

The approach to team influenced how the network developed. When joining DSE, the network developer had only one existing relationship in DSE and therefore almost no sense of team.

The first step in building a team was to get to know the people in the knowledge and learning team and understand how their work was interconnected. It was hoped that this would lead to opportunities for identifying points of connection where a shared vision could emerge.

Building the team

The other members of the knowledge and learning team were focused on specific issues, such as flora, fauna, fuels and fire behaviour. Initially, the team was less focused on the social science dimensions of community development. The managers were very interested but their attention was thinly spread. This limited the scope and depth of the conversations that were possible in the immediate organisational environment.

Extended team

The network developer focused on developing the extended team and was keen to identify champions among the evolving relationship network. Two key people emerged who played a significant role in maintaining the momentum of developing the learning network. They were a community member (see Example Box 2) and a Parks Victoria ranger (see Example Box 3).

Example 2: Community as extended team

The community member in one township was a 'tree changer' who had moved to the area from Melbourne after retirement. The DSE Community Engagement Facilitator for Fire in that area suggested contacting her. Apparently, Kay[2] was interested in fire and connected widely with others.

Kay met face-to-face with the network developer in Kay's home. Kay was initially cautious. The network developer talked about broader issues rather than fire. The purpose was to help build rapport and a relationship with Kay by demonstrating a greater and genuine interest in Kay as a person, and her whole context, and where Kay and her context may fit with fire. This approach proved successful as Kay entered into a dynamic and energetic conversation that covered themes that ranged from her previous work in aboriginal communities, to why she had chosen to move to the area.

More importantly, the conversation explored the concepts inherent to community development and their relationship with developing the learning network. Kay expressed great excitement at the prospect of the network's development and how it could work. The conversation became one where ideas were exchanged and explored. Kay expressed strong interest in providing continuing support, particularly in exploring the thinking and ideas as they developed.

Kay emerged as a strong team member with whom to share ideas and explore thinking. Finding this team member was extremely encouraging to the network developer as it reduced the sense of 'aloneness' in thinking about the conceptual and wider context.

Notes

2 The names given in example 2 and 3 are fictitious.

Example 3: Parks Victoria ranger as extended team

Another member of the extended team emerged soon afterwards in the form of a Parks Victoria ranger named Ted. A FEPO from that area had given the network developer Ted's contact details. Ted enthusiastically wanted to meet.

The location of the initial meeting was the local Parks Victoria office. The conversation explored the idea of the network and what it could look like. At that time the focus was still on how the network could be the basis for monitoring the effects of fire on flora and fauna. The conversation also explored, however, how the concept of adaptive management concerned wider issues than just monitoring. Ted invited the network developer to join him for a day in the field to talk further and to meet several people whom he felt may wish to be part of the network.

The developer joined Ted on a Saturday driving around the forest area. The conversation flowed freely and continually, addressing themes such as the diverse impacts of fire and the conceptual ideas behind developing a community based network.

Ted had previously experienced community networks where the goal was local ownership and direction. He could see the potential for the fire learning network and the strategies that would be required. For example, he could see the need for developing smaller, locally-based conversations before inter-connecting them to form an overall network.

During the day Ted introduced the network developer to several key members of the local 'friends of' groups. The members of each group were highly passionate about their area and how fire was being used there. They thought a learning network would interest them.

Ted and the network developer were keen to pilot the idea soon. Ted was happy to take on the role of bringing people together and finding a venue for the first meeting. He emerged a local champion and team mate.

Several months later, the first pilot strategic conversation took place, with some 20 people attending. Many of the people were affiliated with Parks Victoria, CFA, friends groups, the local Scout Association group, while some others were simply members of the local community whom others had invited. For a more detailed description of the pilot conversation group see the case study report by Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell (2010).

The knowledge and learning group as extended team

Ongoing conversations with the knowledge and learning team resulted in mutual learning and understanding. As a result, the conversations were more relevant and meaningful to all involved and strengthened the sense of an extended team.

The core team

An opportunity to extend the core team came in April 2008 when a social scientist was appointed to the role of 'fire knowledge developer'. The role was intended to capture the knowledge emerging from the conversations within the learning network, and produce knowledge products to help DSE staff and the community to understand some fundamental fire issues. This role was integral to the process of developing the learning network and the conversations. Knowledge products alone would be of little use unless they were part of the organic growth of the network itself.

The knowledge developer and the network developer shared a common vision and belief about the capacity of people and their ways of working. They quickly established a rapport and a foundation for exchanging and exploring ideas. They talked continually, especially about the content of the network conversations and the key learnings.

Expanding the core network team increased momentum for building the network. The members of the core team worked together to expand their thinking and make strategic plans for future action. Taking action was now easier. In each conversation the team could work together to ensure that all angles were covered and key issue discussed.

Key learning as a result of action

The action solidified and confirmed that:

- Having different types of team-mates is important – those who are part of the core team and those who are extended team members. This helps share the ownership and responsibility of the process.
- Extended team champions can sustain the ongoing process even when there is no core team.
- Team-mates fulfil the roles of conversation facilitator, catalyst and supporter.

The action resulted in new learning:

- In the context of DSE, building both the core team and external team from scratch was necessary. The network developer had not faced this issue before, having always worked within an environment where one or the other type of team already existed. Exploring new relationship networks and evolving the team was an interesting – though in the early stages sometimes quite difficult – learning experience.
- In DSE, the extended team includes 'project firefighters' that are employed seasonally for firefighting and undertaking planned burning. Project firefighters come from all walks of life – in other seasons they are, for example, nurses, mill workers, university students, teachers and farmers. They highlight that DSE is itself part of the community, with staff who have incredible knowledge and interesting perspectives. DSE would benefit from tapping into this diversity more.
- Without a sense of team the work of developing a learning network is very isolating. It constricts the broader-scale thinking that is required to help move the network forward. Team conversations bring greater creativity and depth of thought, allow ideas to be explored and provide more opportunity for reflection of learning. This demonstrates what is hoped to be achieved in the wider strategic conversations.
- The processes of gathering and capturing knowledge and the conversations of the learning network are inseparable. Conversations are the forum for exploring participants' knowledge and potentially building new knowledge. Each automatically informs the other. It was critical that the learning networks developer and knowledge developer worked together, supporting and informing each other.

Theme 3: Cultural context

Before joining DSE the network developer had worked across numerous countries and cultures, and was acutely aware that understanding cultural context was critical to working effectively. The knowledge developer also came from a background where understanding cultural context was essential. The team's combined experiences of cultural influence strongly affected how it moved the network forward.

Pre-existing thinking

Culture refers to the social norms, customs, prevailing values, language forms, perception of knowledge, relationship style and structures that dominate any and every sociological context. Culture can be viewed on a broad scale, such as the prevailing culture of a country, or on a more detailed scale, such as along a street or within a particular group or club. At the more detailed scale, people may move between several different cultural contexts each day.

Adapting style

A prevailing culture influences how people interact with each other. That applies within the culture, between that culture and other cultures and outside or around that culture. Dominant cultural norms and values determine whether people accept or dismiss others, based on how relevant they perceive those people to be to their cultural context. For example, a group who skateboard together may not readily interact with members of a library group.

Recognising and respecting cultural differences is a key part of working effectively. Working is much easier if, when a person enters a context, he or she takes the time to listen for and observe who talks, what they talk about, how they talk and more generally how interactions occur. Learning the culture enables the person who enters to adapt his or her own style of interaction and way of talking about things, so that people in that context perceive those things as being more relevant. It also increases the chances that the people within the context will respect and listen to the person who enters.

Adapting the way of working

As well as adapting the way of approaching people, adapting the way of working and the tools the person brings into a cultural context is also important. For example, a facilitator may receive a request to help reduce obesity in a community. The facilitator may have experience working with that issue in several contexts and have a number of processes and tools that the community could use. The facilitator must be aware, however, that the particular cultural ways of doing things, relating and talking about the issue, will differ. The processes and tools must be flexible enough to allow for the people from the particular context to achieve the vision in ways that are most relevant to them.

Ownership

When a person who enters a cultural context is aware of that context, he or she also demonstrates an understanding that for change to be owned and sustained, people must understand and make choices for themselves. Theory and practical experience shows that it is the individual who must decide to change their attitude or behaviour. People can temporarily change for others who may be in a position of leadership, power or respect. However, unless the relevance of the decision to themselves and their lives is identified and the potential benefits recognised, lasting change is unlikely. Relating any initiative or process to the prevailing cultural context increases the chances that the benefits will be locally owned and therefore sustained.

Action taken

Thinking about culture influenced the network development. The network developer approached the role as an opportunity to learn about different cultures. The cultures included those within DSE and those of the other organisations, communities, groups and individuals who were connected with the issue of fire. It was reasoned that, by understanding the culture, working with people and adapting working processes and approaches relating to connecting people for sharing and learning, the work would be easier. It was also hoped that this approach would increase the chances of DSE finding the initiative to be relevant and therefore continue to support it.

Multiple cultural contexts operated internally and externally to DSE's staff that worked with land and fire. Within DSE, the culture that prevailed varied geographically across the state and more generally between head office and the field. Some key differences related to perceptions of priorities, how the staff viewed community and how to interact with it, the hierarchy of relationships within the field, organisational structure and the scope given to staff for taking initiative.

For the people outside DSE, cultural context influenced attitudes towards fire. Conversations across Victoria showed that interest in fire and the environment varied a lot. For example, in areas such as the Grampians and the Dandenongs[3] – both had recently experienced large fires – fire was a priority. In urban areas of Melbourne and the countryside where fire had been less prevalent, interest was extremely low.

Cultural understanding of knowledge was highlighted following the knowledge developer joining the network team. The knowledge developer had been asked to create knowledge products to support the network conversations. It was clear to the team, however, that knowledge was a dynamic, ever-changing entity that reflected each person's cultural context (i.e. their values, cultural norms, beliefs etc). The team began exploring how knowledge flowing in and out of the conversations could be viewed and harnessed. It began framing knowledge in the context of 'mental models' – the ways in which culture influences how a person constructs what they perceive as knowledge and how they grow this knowledge. The role of strategic conversations in supporting this was identified as critical Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell (2010).

The framework used to support conversations was flexible, in order to cater for the different cultural contexts. A way of working and guidelines (Campbell, Campbell & Blair forthcoming) to support the network gave a broad vision and outline for how to develop and sustain the conversations without being prescriptive. Those tools were general enough to apply to any context while still being relevant. For example, a conversation in the Dandenongs could be highly focused on fire, while conversation in an urban setting could at first be more generic and then in some form eventually link to fire.

Key learning as a result of action

The action solidified and confirmed that:

- Culture varies from community to community; adapting accordingly is necessary. A network team needs to comprise people who recognise and address this theme.
- When working in different cultural contexts, network developers need a framework that is flexible and not prescriptive.
- Criticism should be addressed with an understanding of the cultural context. If there is a criticism, an effort should be made to understand why the person is making the criticism. The criticism should then be judged within the cultural context of the situation – is it valid for the context, or a reflection of the individual. Based on this judgment, it can be determined whether the approach needs to be changed so that it best suits the context.
- Understanding people's motivation and values is critical. Interest in engaging with a theme may come from various conceptual, social, action and other perspectives.

Notes

3 The Grampians and Dandenongs are fire-prone localities in Victoria.

The action resulted in new learnings:

- Everyone is part of community. Even though people work for different organisations, such as DSE, the organisation is not who they are. The connections of a person with an organisation may be weaker than the person's connection with people or place. As community members, everyone has something to contribute to the conversation. The individuals bring their diverse backgrounds and experiences to the conversation and thereby increase the conversation's vitality and the opportunities for learning.
- Sharing the vision of everyone being from 'community' was surprisingly difficult. It seemed as though people in organisations viewed themselves as separate from 'community'. The process of finding ways of sharing and working with people to see beyond this perception is ongoing.
- People have been 'trained' to expect a particular way of doing things. DSE, for example, has trained its staff and sometimes the community to expect particular approaches to learning. This training, or conditioning, is self-reinforcing and often unintended and invisible. The strategic conversation approach is not DSE's usual (cultural norm) way of doing things. It is therefore less clearly understood. Initiatives, like 'Community Fireguard', suggest that parts of some fire agencies are becoming more comfortable with this way of working. If DSE's culture is to change, the ways of introducing and talking about alternative ways of working with community need to be relevant and understood.

Theme 4: How to talk about the network

The members of the network team had extensive experience adapting to situations where the way in which things were talked about had a significant impact on what people would understand. The team members were accustomed to adapting their own language and phraseology for people to more clearly understand the concepts and ideas. This experience directly impacted on how the network developed.

Pre-existing thinking

Even when people speak the same language (e.g. English), the meaning and intentions can differ significantly. This effect reflects the cultural context and educational and experiential background of the people involved. Learning the meaning, intention and 'language' of the context being entered into is important. When the language is understood, building mutual understanding around issues becomes easier.

When entering a context, a willingness and ability to adapt the way of talking about the issues will increase the chances of mutual understanding. It is presumptuous to assume that the other people in the conversation will take the responsibility to learn your language, and such an approach is likely to be ineffective, even counter-productive (see Example 4).

Example 4: Language use

The network developer came from a background of psychology and community development. She found that the language that she used to describe key concepts within her way of working did not translate into DSE's existing language. For example, the meaning of the phrase 'response' differed widely between contexts. In community development, response refers to the capacity of the community to take ownership and choose what they do. In DSE, it is strongly associated with the action of putting out a fire.

Action taken

Thinking about how to talk about the network influenced how the network developed. Initially the learning network was framed within the context of adaptive management. Adaptive management referred to the process of developing a model, taking action, learning from the action and adapting future actions based on the learning.

Over the first year of development, the way in which the learning network was talked about changed. It transpired that talking about a learning network in the context of adaptive management was ineffective. Most people had heard of adaptive management but few understood what it was, which created confusion. Consequently, the members of the network team adapted their approach and successfully started talking about the principles of adaptive management, in relation to the network, without using the jargon. They stopped explaining the adaptive management model and the role of conversations within it. Instead, they talked about conversations as a way of hearing different points of view and building understanding to perhaps change future actions.

The focus became one of creating an environment for sharing, learning and building understanding. The network would not be about changing attitudes or opinions, but rather would be an environment for understanding where others were coming from.

Back to basics

The team members also adapted the language they used when talking about the learning network itself. Often people were interested not in the concepts but instead in the reality of what a network would look like and be to them. The team members decided to ask themselves the basic question: just what is a learning network?

They decided that a network comprises a group of locally based conversations. To build a network they would first have to build the component conversations. Such conversations would have to have facilitation guidelines to protect them from becoming forums for people to promote particular agendas. The conversations were, therefore, expressly not to be directly about changing policy or the world. Instead, they were to offer a chance for people with different views to come together and learn more about the broader concepts associated with fire. Through conversation the people could discuss differences in order to understand them. In understanding difference, personal knowledge would be increased and perhaps new knowledge created. Coming together would also strengthen relationships and create more opportunity for building community resilience. In due course, positive changes would follow of their own accord.

People more broadly understood and welcomed the network team talking about the network in terms of 'linked conversations'. The revised approach was feasible and productive, so the team started calling the overall process 'strategic conversations'.

Changed focus

The network was originally conceived as a way for people with different experiences and expertise to come together for sharing and learning that could impact on land and fire management decisions. However, that way of talking about the network quickly showed itself to be 'risky'. That terminology suggested that the network would be a forum for policy change and direct influence. This opened up the network for abuse by those who held a particular agenda. It meant that people would see the network not as a neutral environment for sharing and learning from different perspectives, but rather as a forum for seeing who could 'talk the loudest' (see example 5).

Example 5: Misinterpreting the network's purpose

A particular area in Victoria has a long history of contention between land managers and the community about land and fire management approaches. This contention is ongoing. When the network team met with some of the people involved with the issue, the network team strongly emphasised that the learning network would not be a forum for getting an agenda to policy makers or government. The group persisted but soon realised that there would be no direct avenues for their agenda. As a result, they decided that they did not want to be part of the learning network. The network developers respected this decision.

The network team quickly changed the way it talked about the network. **The focus became one of creating an environment for sharing, learning and building understanding. The network would not be about changing attitudes or opinions, but rather would be an environment for understanding where others were coming from.** With people understanding others better, the team expected that several things would happen (Table 1, p10 lists a number of other expectations the team predicted could eventuate). Participants would:

- Gain a better understanding of the broader issues associated with fire, which could have the impact of influencing their individual thinking and choices.
- Recognise that their view was one among many, which could influence their perspective on the micro versus macro view of the landscape.
- Gain a greater respect for different views even if they still disagreed with them. Greater respect and understanding of others could result in less conflict around contentious issues.

Additional influences

The content and nature of each conversation varied widely depending on the interests, motivations, values and context of the participants. As highlighted in the examples of champions, some people already identified with the way of thinking. For them, moving to talk about the broader concepts and issues from the initial conversation was natural. For others, who were less familiar with community development ideas, the team first discussed the basics and introduced the more conceptual side of things as understanding and interest grew.

Key learning as a result of action

The action solidified and confirmed that:

- Conversations should reflect what will resonate with people, and what they can grab and move forward with.
- The tone and style of conversation, and the perceived level of interest, should guide judgment about how much detail to go into.
- Conversations and language are dynamic. Principles may guide them but manuals should not prescribe them.
- When the topic/issue is really understood it is easier to talk about it in very simple terms. Often people hide behind jargon and apparent complexity when they do not fully understand all the dimensions of the topic.
- Theoretical knowledge is enriched by experience and visa versa.
- Changing the way things are talked about is often necessary and helpful. Playing with the name of the conversation in different contexts helped identify what term worked best. For example, "group forum" or "strategic conversation".

The action resulted in new learnings:

- The network developers found that by intentionally minimising their identification with DSE (while still acknowledging that connection), their perspective remained more 'external'. For example, they never referred to 'we' when talking about the organisation and their relationship with it. Each person engaged in conversation received the same level of engagement and recognition that each perspective is valid and based on context.
- Conversations occur in every aspect of life. They drive all aspects of work within an organisation. For example, conversations help propel thinking and progress in areas of work, such as planned burning and fire behaviour. Such conversations involve sharing views, experiences and research. Linking the conversations from within an organisation to conversations outside the organisation helps share this information and build on its depth.

Theme 5: Systems (holistic) perspective

The members of the network development team were accustomed to working and thinking about individual issues as part of a whole. The background of one was psychology, and the other, anthropology. The interplay of contextual variables, whether environmental, social or economic was inherent to their way of thinking. They applied this experience to the network development process.

Example 6: Interconnections in a system – an example

If you trip on a pavement, many factors may have contributed to the cause. These may include sociological factors, such as the reason you were walking there; what you were thinking or doing when you tripped; what people were present nearby and what they were doing. Economic factors could include the quality of the paving material; when it was last checked for safety; how, when and by whom the pavement was laid. Ecological factors could include past usage of the pavement, weather and the slope of the ground.

In turn, many other factors affected each of those factors – and so on. A very complex picture can quickly develop even around a very simple event.

Pre-existing thinking

A system in this context refers to sociological, economic and ecological factors that continually interact. Events, effects and issues rarely occur in isolation. They are part of a dynamically interacting system. Sociological factors include motivation, values, personal context and background and cultural context. Economic factors include finances and resources. Ecological factors include the impact of human urbanisation, the role of fire on flora and fauna and food chains. Example 6 provides a simple description of this idea.

Building understanding and knowledge requires recognition of how the whole system interacts. Sometimes achieving this is difficult. Most of us are trained to think in terms of linear causes and effects – that X occurred because of Y. In addition, the task to think in terms of systems is not easy, as it requires a person to think beyond their immediate concerns and interests. Most people are concerned with what is immediately around them and are not interested in, or necessarily aware of, the dynamic interplay of factors or the different ways that others can perceive these.

When focusing on fire, a wide and diverse range of perceptions and values affect whether people want to talk about it. For some, fire is an issue of extremely high priority and relevance. They see its impact in their daily lives or on their surrounding environment, and as such are highly motivated to know about it. For others, however, fire is unimportant and they are unmotivated to talk about it.

A systems view is aware of the wider influencing issues and increases the relevance of the fire conversation to more people. It allows the initial theme of conversation to be any aspect of the system, aspects that may seem irrelevant to land and fire management. Through the natural process of conversation the links with fire can be drawn, often from a different angle than a direct approach may have tried.

Projects exist within a system

A systems view also affects how people perceive individual projects within the context of the whole. **When people view a project – which has a start and end – through a systems lens, the project loses its perceived isolation and becomes part of an ongoing process.** In this way, a project enters a system that had existed for a long time and the project exists within the system for a time. After the project finishes, the system continues. The project may affect some of the dynamics within the system, but never become the system itself.

Unfortunately, proponents of a project often over-emphasise the role of the project itself. When the project becomes everything, it usually does not achieve what it sets out to as it no longer operates as part of the bigger picture and becomes incompatible with sustained change. When the design of a project helps the project to support and strengthen constructive and powerful aspects of the system, for example, by applying the principles of cultural understanding and language use, sustained and systemic changes are more likely.

Action taken

A systems view played an important part in how the network developed. The knowledge and learning team already thought in terms of systems, and saw the need for better and more open learning. Initially, the network developer focused on conversations around monitoring of flora and fauna. Monitoring was an entry point and a basis for adaptive management. This entry point also meshed with the existing interests and scientific orientation of the organisation. In addition, by focusing on monitoring, the connections between the conversations and other aspects of the team's work in adaptive management were emphasised.

Focusing the conversation solely on monitoring, however, alienated many people. Few people, unless they had a passion for flora and fauna in their local environment, were interested in talking about monitoring. Indeed, the network developer found the topic uninteresting and suggested diversifying the focus to appeal to a broader group of participants.

The network developer tried to find points of relevance to the fire issue in her own life context and experiences. Using herself as an example, she highlighted how, for the majority of the community, fire is not a priority. Finding where fire fits with people's life issues that are of higher priority, and adapting the conversation accordingly, is necessary.

The core and extended team explored different ways of talking about and understanding the whole system. This allowed discussion of systems from different understandings and backgrounds (Example 7).

Example 7: Developing a systems view

A systems approach was cemented when the team connected with a community member who was an active permaculturist. (Permaculture focuses on a holistic approach to environmental management that considers all the sociological, economical and ecological factors simultaneously).

Bill had come into contact with DSE after raising concerns about several land-management decisions near his property. He had engaged in a dynamic email exchange with the local FEPO over DSE's ecological burning policy. The FEPO contacted the DSE's fire planning and knowledge team for support. This lead to an open-ended face-to-face meeting.

Bill thought in a highly systemic manner and felt it was important to consider the broad range of influencing factors when making environmental-management decisions. Those involved in the conversation agreed with him. Bill agreed to meet the network team again for a more focused discussion around systems and the factors involved. The team identified that Bill could give good insight into how to view the issues systemically and find alternative ways and language.

Key learning as a result of action

The action solidified and confirmed that:

- The topic that starts the conversation doesn't matter as eventually the conversation can be connected with fire. This means that everyone's life is touched by fire and its effects in some way – whether they are conscious of it or not. Trusting the process – that a systems approach views any issue within the system as an opportunity for conversation – is important. Many people would readily engage in a seemingly unrelated conversation that would lead to fire, despite them initially not realising the connection.
- Attempts to confine the conversation to any single specific theme are likely to be futile and counterproductive. To most people, a theme such as monitoring is too narrow and not relevant. Beginning the conversation by looking at the larger picture, and finding points of commonality and the ways different perspectives fit together, leads to a conversation that is much deeper.
- Developing the network in ways that complement the existing processes of the organisation, rather then creating a whole new set of systems, is important.
- Over time, distinct indirect outcomes result from the people being involved in the conversations. For example, DSE's fire-training team began to see links between ecological thinking and their training about planned burns.

The action resulted in new learning:

- DSE – perhaps in common with many organisations – tends to focus on detailed information and lose sight of the big picture. Continually finding ways to help an organisation recognise the Gestalt principle – that the whole is greater then the sum of its parts– is vital. Being aware of the details is important, but no less so than being able to pull away and see the whole and the place of the details within it.
- DSE – perhaps in common with many scientific organisations – tends to focus on cause and effect relationships and things it can quantify. This is consistent with traditional Western science, which has focused on matter and on what can be quantified and measured. DSE is less familiar with how social factors that lead to different interpretations of science play a huge role in community decision-making. Continually finding ways to help an organisation see the world in terms of sociological, ecological or economic relationship patterns is vital. A learning network demands a systems view that tries to understand relationship patterns and interconnections and work with this broader and more complex picture.
- Pigeonholing people into roles, is contrary to a systems-thinking view. It limits the conversation and potential learning to people designated to particular roles, so that only a few can talk about certain topics. Typically, DSE staff have much more to offer than the confines of their formal roles suggest or permit. Everything is part of the whole and has relationships between issues/ roles that are interconnected and related. An approach that focuses on capacity recognises that every person can explore, understand and contribute.
- Though the facilitator of the conversation must be neutral, she or he also needs some key knowledge of the subject area. Even the best facilitators will be ineffective unless they have an idea about the end goal and can ask questions that help the conversation develop around the whole picture. The level of knowledge needed is modest and a newcomer can readily learn it. In general, having a running knowledge of potential conversation themes – those that fit with the systems thinking approach – is important.
- Even when an organisation, such as DSE, initiates the development of a learning network, meshing the conversation and approach with the organisation itself is critical. An organisation comprises numerous people with different understandings, few who would initially understand the network approach, and many who would want to pursue outcomes directly. The conversation must always start with the people, both of the wider community and inside an organisation.

Conclusion

The first year of developing a fire learning network yielded new lessons and confirmed that our expectations, based on theory, precedent and experience, are relevant to the theme of fire in a Western culture. The process highlights both the value of the network approach and the need for patience in developing the necessary relationships and trust.

One confirmed expectation is that the characteristic hierarchical structures of a large organisation tend to inhibit learning and relationships with the wider community. For part of the year DSE is an emergency response organisation that depends on working in a chain of command structure, which makes switching between hierarchical and network approaches even more difficult. The more an organisation can develop its capacity to think and act as part of a socio-ecological system, rather than just linear cause and effect relationships; consider the whole rather than the parts and process rather than just the outcomes, the more effective it will be. For an organisation to move towards the less familiar and therefore more uncomfortable takes time, groundwork and acts of faith from all those involved.

Applying the discipline of adaptive management to develop a learning network as a pilot was appropriate and effective. Continued development of the network will result in further learnings and tangible benefits, particularly in light of the bushfires of February 2009. Consistent with Campbell, Blair & Wilson (2010) and Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell (2010), further reflection and review should occur in two years. In the meantime, the documented experiences of the first year may encourage others to apply the approaches and principles to their own situations.

A taste of the second year

While this report has been in production, strategic conversations have been developing. The story of this development will form the next report. Table 2 offers a glimpse.

Table 2: Network activity summary

Item	Number
Nodes[4] in network	9
Formal conversations held	31
SALT[5] visits	60
Local champions[6] identified	8
Local facilitators being mentored	1
Instances of transfer[7]	2
Fire Areas involved	4
Agencies involved	7
Initiation of community driven processes[8]	8

Notes

4 Individual conversation groups

5 Relationship building visits where Support, Appreciation, Learning and Transfer takes place between team and others.

6 A local person who has been instrumental in bringing about the conversation locally

7 Where a person who has attended a conversation, has been inspired to share the idea with others and begins a new conversation.

8 A conversation inspires the commencement of, for example – a Community Fireguard group, a network of people willing to help others manage fuel on their block, volunteering to join CFA.

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p 12. Photo courtesy of Matt Campbell.

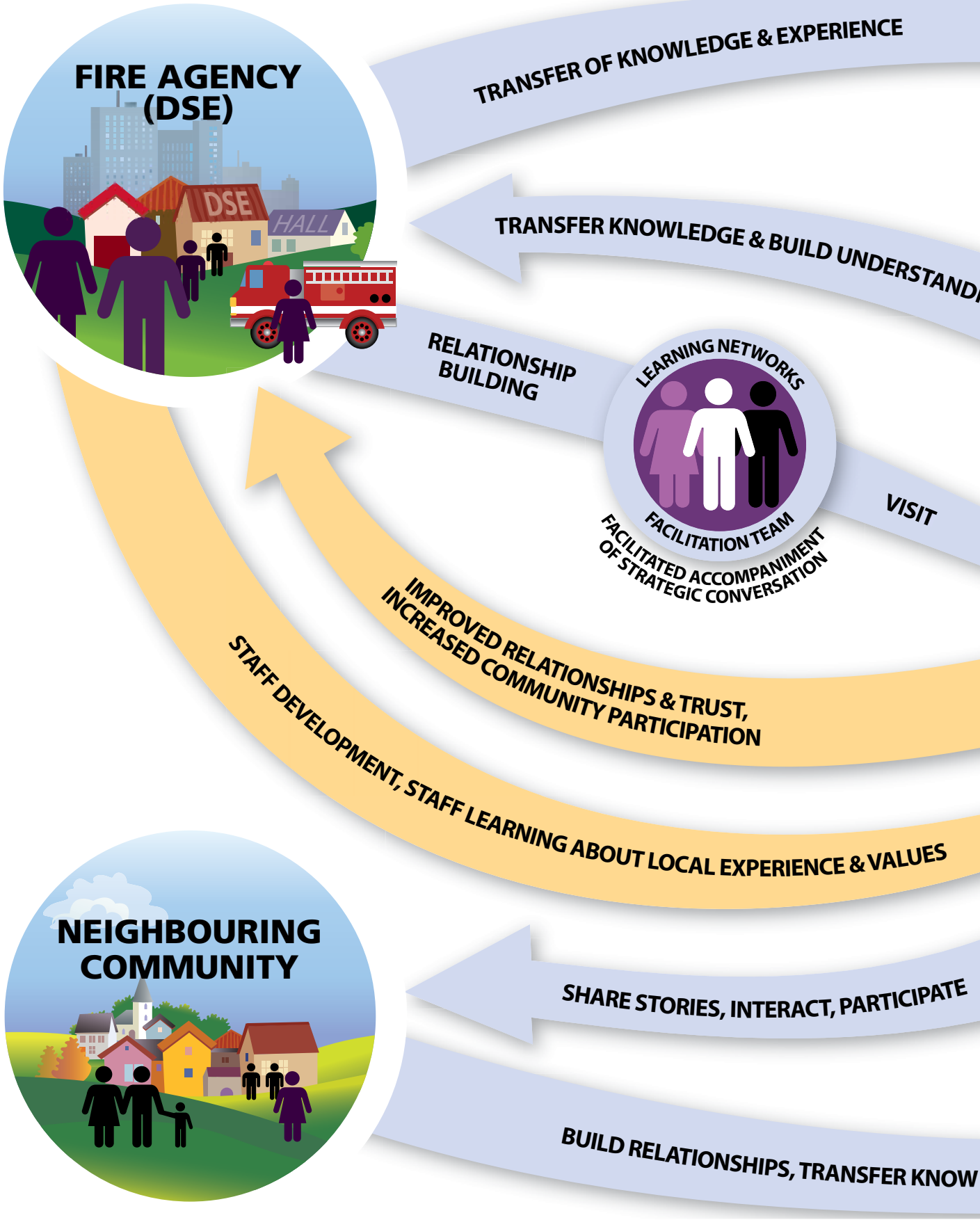
p 13. Photo courtesy of A. Klink – Facilitating a conversation.

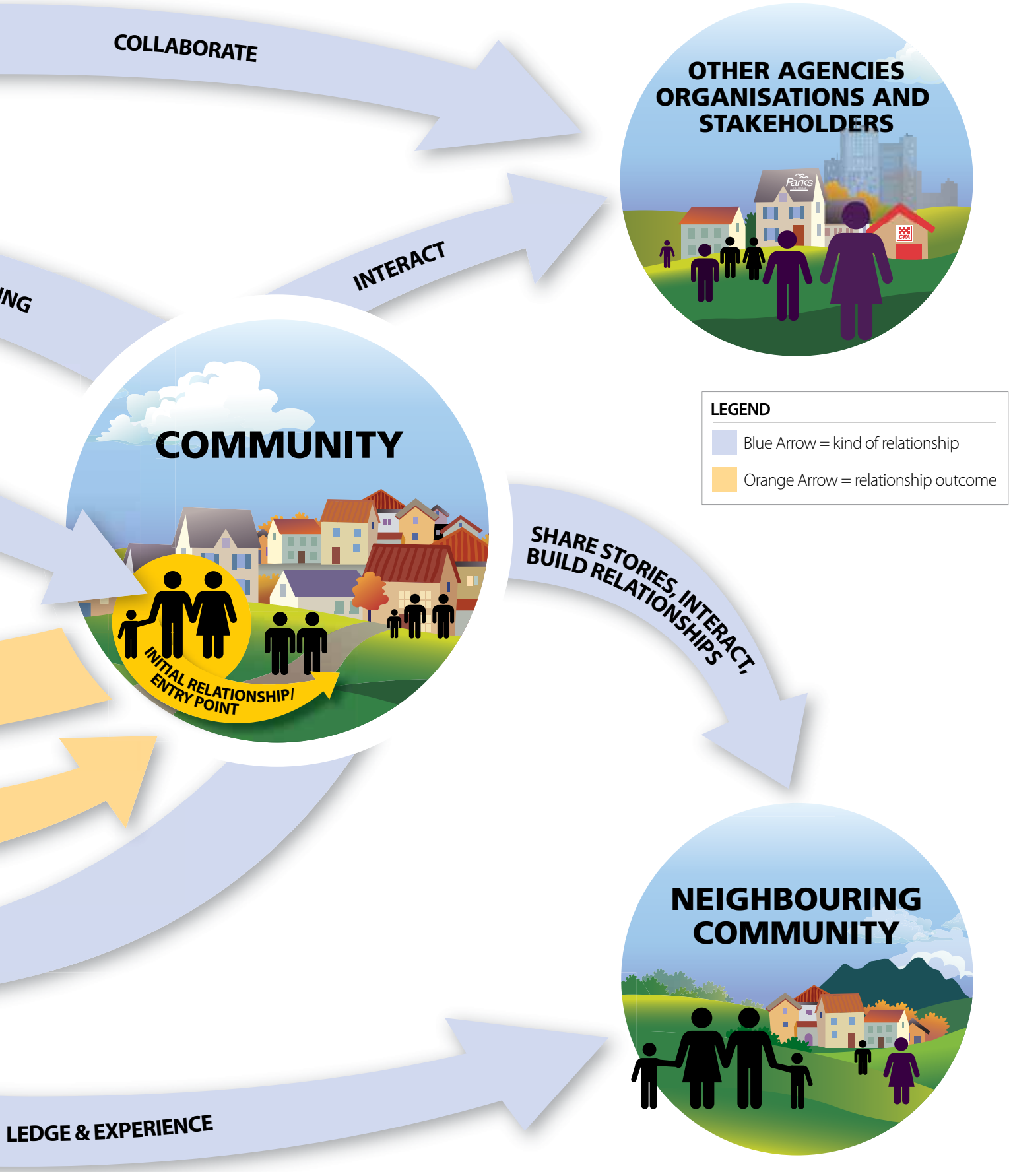
p 19. Photo courtesy of Claire Campbell - community conversation in Pakistan.

p 22. photo courtesy of Matt Campbell

p 25. photo courtesy of Parks Victoria – vegetation recovering after fire.

Appendix 1: Illustration of conversations 'scaling out'




COLLABORATE
OTHER AGENCIES ORGANISATIONS AND STAKEHOLDERS
INTERACT
COMMUNITY
INITIAL RELATIONSHIP/ ENTRY POINT
SHARE STORIES, INTERACT, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS
NEIGHBOURING COMMUNITY
LEDGE & EXPERIENCE
LEGEND
Blue Arrow = kind of relationship
Orange Arrow = relationship outcome

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Supplementary report

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