AN ENTERPRISING PHOENIX: LEARNING THROUGH CHALLENGE AND EXCITEMENT IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on empirical data of accounts of change from interviews with employees of a local government organization. These employee accounts include ones of planned restructuring, of unplanned change in the shape of a critical event, and of the micro change of taking on temporary work (ie 'acting up'). Across each of these changes employee accounts featured notions of 'challenges', 'excitement' and 'learning'. As researchers interested in learning at work, these stories are prompting us to consider the various learning dimensions of organizational change, and in particular they are leading us to focus future research on a range of organisational practices (like 'acting up') that facilitate learning at work.

INTRODUCTION

Continual change has come to be the norm for organizations; indeed reference to change is now often explicitly built into organizations' public descriptions of themselves in order for them to appear dynamic and future-looking. Most change discussed in organizational and management literatures focuses on processes and practices deliberately introduced in workplaces to improve efficiency, competitiveness, quality and the like. However, sometimes major change occurs as a consequence of unplanned events, and the organization needs to develop ways of moving forward without the benefits of prior strategic planning. These macro organizational changes can affect individual employees at the local level. Moreover, individual employees can also be affected by micro level changes (for example, reorganization of workgroups or units). This paper is built around several kinds of change that occurred in one organization in Sydney, Australia: planned changes to promote efficiency, a critical event that produced unplanned changes, and finally, temporary internal change for individual employees. As educational researchers, our main interest, however, is not on an analysis of the changes themselves, rather we are concerned with the organizational stories constructed by employees around the changes. In particular, we focus on how employees construe the changes in affective terms, and we reflect on the possible learning and professional development involved.

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The paper draws on empirical data from interviews with workers in a local government organization in Sydney, Australia: Phoenix City Council (a pseudonym). Throughout the interviews, workers' accounts of planned restructuring in the organization repeatedly featured notions of 'challenges', 'excitement' and 'learning'. Interestingly, the same workers used similar notions to describe a significant unplanned organizational change. Finally, individual employees used remarkably similar terms to describe their experiences of temporarily working in someone else's job: that is, in an 'acting' position.

The paper is presented in three main parts. First, we provide background to the study including our research project and methodology. Second, we turn our attention to changes in an Australian organization. Not wanting to give the plot away too soon, let us just say that we have purposefully selected Phoenix City Council as our pseudonym for reasons that should become clear as 'our' story unfolds. With that said, this part of the paper recounts some organizational stories about change. These stories of Phoenix City Council (PCC), as told by its employees, provide a macro cultural context involving major organizational changes and which include ways of being, doing and feeling that are also embodied in the more micro accounts of employees' practices of 'acting up' in the organization. We show how narratives related by, and pertaining to, individual workers, resonate with the organizational stories. In the third and final part of the paper we offer our own account of these imbricated stories by constructing our own story. We suggest that the ways that the practice of temporarily filling vacant positions is constructed by acting-workers in this organization can be located within and related to broader narratives about the organization. In both the organizational stories and individual accounts of 'acting up' we found references to challenges and learning, and often to feelings of excitement. We see an organization meeting the challenges and rising as an enterprising phoenix, wherein workers position themselves as 'enterprising subjects' (du Gay 1996).

1. BACKGROUND: THE RESEARCH PROJECT, METHODS AND APPROACHES TO DATA ANALYSIS

Our interest in organizational change events and practices is related to our current research project. The project, "Beyond Training: Integrated development practices in organizations", focuses on work practices, in particular, on organizational practices that facilitate learning yet are independent of formal education and training programs. This three-year Australian Research Council project aims to provide in-depth analyses of the lived experiences of people in four organizations by developing and investigating detailed accounts of specific practices and their effects on individual workers and on the organizations.

More explicitly, we are interested in work practices that: (1) facilitate learning in a way that is embedded in work processes; (2) are independent of formal training programs and are not typically described in terms of training or education; and, (3) are managed or implemented by people whose primary job function is not training or learning. We are conceiving these practices as Integrated Development Practices (IDPs), and the practice of 'acting up' meets our criteria. First, it is independent of formal training programs and is not typically described in terms of training or education. Next, it is managed or implemented by people whose primary job function is not training or learning. Here we argue that it is also a practice that facilitates significant learning thus meeting our first criteria.

In our investigation of the Local Government organization that is the site focussed on in this paper, we found employees' accounts of macro organizational change included features that resonated in their accounts of the IDP 'acting up'. As our interviews unfolded and the data was analysed thematically, we noticed similarities emerging in the ways employees talked about their experiences of major change processes and practices, and more micro changes and practices. We became interested in exploring the experiential and affective relationships between different kinds of organizational changes, and how what we were finding might contribute to discussions around learning at work.

We take a narrative approach to this study and in using this approach we take as given that 'people tell stories to entertain, to teach and to learn, to ask for an interpretation and to give one' (Czarniawska 2004:10). Our concern here is not in the realms of epistemology, that is, (following Czarniawska), we are not interested in asking if these narratives are 'real' or not. Neither are we interested merely to show if, and if so then how, interviewees' narratives 'fit' into a larger narrative. Rather, we are interested in how the narratives of workers - both the macro and micro organizational narratives - illuminate the complexities and relationships of change practices, as well as how they provide insights into learning (at) work.

To date we have gathered data from two organizations (a community college and a local Council). While data collection methods include observations, document analysis and in-depth interviews, it is interviews that constitute our primary data source. Interview questions have been designed to elicit narrative accounts of people going about their work and about the organization itself. We have collected narrative accounts from fifty people across the two organizations, including thirty employees from PCC. It is the PCC stories that we draw on here to tell yet another story, in order 'to entertain', 'to teach' and 'to learn'.

2. THE PHOENIX CITY COUNCIL STORIES

Before entering the organizational stories constructed by the employees we briefly introduce the PCC research site through our own description drawn from general Council documents. PPC is a large local Council in the Sydney metropolitan area employing approximately 600 people and managing around $900 million worth of assets. Local Councils represent the third layer of government in Australia and they are responsible for service provision and governance at a local community level. The Council provides a vast number of services to its local community including the provision of library and community services, road maintenance, waste collection, building development assessments, parks and community centres as well as health and regulatory services. PCC's structure is hierarchical, with the General Manager overseeing all operations and four Group Managers responsible for the day to day running of three specific divisions of PCC's operations.

Moving from the overview of the Council told above, the stories of PCC, as told by its employees, provide more than an interesting backdrop for the organizational practice of 'acting up'. Rather, the stories construct the cultural context of the organization, featuring change as a key actor in the ongoing (re)construction of the Council. Further, the cultural context plays a relational role in the accounts of its workers' practices (O'Connor 1997). By this we mean that the employees' understandings of themselves and their work are mediated through the cultural context of the organization itself. Moreover, the context of the

organization is produced (and reproduced) by the employees' understandings. In the interviews we asked broad questions about the organization: its overall work practices, its development, changes affecting work and workers, and so on. Almost without exception, interviewees emphasised two main 'events' as critical moments for the Council. One was what has come to be known in the organization as 'the purchaser/provider split', and the other was 'the fire'.

2.1. Planned organizational changes: the purchaser/provider split

We enter the PCC story in the early 1990s although we acknowledge that the story began much earlier than this. The enactment of the 1993 Local Government Act, and the implementation of a National Competition Policy in the state of New South Wales in Australia, marked an important turning point for PCC. The Council was being positioned (and began positioning itself) within the discourses and practices of new public management. It began its own restructuring processes that focussed on simultaneously improving its customer focus and increasing the Council's competitiveness in providing its services in an open and contestable market (Jones and Gross 1997; Jones 1999, 2002).

At the core of the reform was a push towards efficiency in Council service delivery and the management of resources. Introducing principles and practices of business competition meant a major shift in the traditional approach to service delivery: a traditional approach that was described by one employee as resembling *'a sheltered workshop'*, a metaphor that conjures up images of protection and perhaps repetition and lack of change. One of the first changes at PCC was the instalment of a new general manager. The new general manager was deliberately headhunted from a large commercial company to bring about radical change within the Council. One employee describes the new manager as someone '*who thought everything was saleable and* [that we should] *go out there and create business and stuff like that'*. Another employee recounts the environment within the Council after the arrival of the new manager in the following terms:

> *So, if you can imagine the excitement of the restructure for a general manager that's on a buzz, and he lives on excitement because he can't just come into an organization and stay there, he's got to change it.*

And change it he did. Part of the new general managers '*need to change'* manifested itself in the disaggregation of the Council, that is, the breaking up of the organization into discrete business units (Palmer and Dunford 2002:215). In 1995 the Council was restructured into three groups: Strategy and Governance, Service Planning and Commission, and a Civic Services Group. The Council records show that there was a conscious renaming to create a distinction between the 'old' Council and the 'new' ways forward: a public repositioning of the organization. Of course, it was not a simple matter or re-naming and re-grouping. The new structure came to be known within the organization as *'the purchaser/provider split'*, with the Service Planning and Commission Group as 'the purchaser' of services: services delivered by the Civic Services Group (the provider). An employee described this as:

> *[a] sort of the corporate functions, well actually not even the corporate functions but there was the local government council and there were these business units ... they were supposed to be units of the council which would have a purely*

> *commercial focus and could exist outside of the corporation and could provide services to others in a contestable market.*

Unsurprisingly, not everyone within PCC was initially imbued with the 'new' business discourses, nor convinced that a shift to a commercial enterprise was entirely possible: '[I] *never really believed any of that for a whole lot of the council stuff*'. Despite his initial resistance, the same employee goes on to tell of a sense of pride in what has since been achieved:

> *We set up a planning and building consultancy business and we're the only council I still think today in Australia that has done that and we're quite successful at it.*

We asked many employees who were employed by PCC at the time of the restructure, about what it was like working for the Council during the 'split': *'it wasn't that hard, it was enjoyable'* one manager noted. Indeed, many spoke about enjoyment, the 'buzz' and 'excitement', as well as the uncertainty experienced. Even though the changes were planned ones, they nevertheless produced uncertainty, and the uncertainties caused stress and tension. Yet these accounts often also had a positive edge in terms of working together – and learning to meet the challenge of developing new ways of 'being':

> *It was like you were thrown in the deep end and go... that was a tough time. It was unbelievably stressful because we had to - we were all learning.*

This employee emphasises the collaborative 'we', and the following employee confirms no-one at the Council was untouched by the challenges posed by the restructure:

> *What we did was we – every person in the place, all 1250 were put into, basically, teams, work restructure, work - what was it called - work redesign teams. They were told that this was the way that the council was going to go, we were going to become more efficient, we were going to go and compete for work outside, they'd also have to compete for their own work in some cases, and that they needed to become more efficient to get that work outside and to fight off people competing for their own work. It didn't go down well to start with, but it was amazing*

As the mention of the restructure period being '*amazing*' demonstrates, despite the inevitable difficulties, many reconstruct the restructure story as difficult and challenging, but also productive and even suggesting excitement:

> *I mean I always saw local government as, and that's what I said when I was being interviewed, as sort of the pariah of the business world, you know, you wouldn't go to a party or a dinner party and say, I work for the council, and so with the way that the organisation then wanted to go, I felt, you know, this would be terrific*

We pause this story for a moment to foreground the challenge, excitement and learning involved in this organizational change. (We admit that there are different stories to tell not always illustrating these features, and sometimes even proffering more negative affect). Employees here construe the restructuring of PCC as a moment when the organization, while meeting significant challenge, reshaped itself as a successful 'new' public sector organization.

2.2. Unplanned organizational changes: the fire

Two years after the restructure a second event occurred: a fire. In 1997, as result of an electrical fault, the PCC Town Hall burned to the ground. Without exception, every employee we interviewed referred to the fire in his or her interview. Most, like the employee below, told of how despite the disaster the Council was operational within a remarkably short period of time:

> *Like the same day we burnt down, we had customer service staff on the ground, in the park, dealing with customers, because life went on. So, there was this real feeling of achievement that we'd actually gone through another major crisis like the restructure, and it was the biggest buzz. If you can imagine, we had to find houses, housing for everyone, we had to figure out people's jobs - so, there was a lot of absolutely urgent activity, as well as everything that was happening.*

What we found interesting was that accounts of the fire were not only told by workers who were actually there at the time, but they were also told by workers who had joined the organization since this critical event. The most recently employed worker we spoke with had been employed at PCC for three months, yet she also recounts a similar 'fire story':

> *So the fire is something that you hear – what I feel is the fire is something that's actually given [the Council] an identity [...] I mean in some ways it's a story that is just about us and it happened to us and the fantastic stories that came out of it – like all the pieces of the council were operating within short period of time – in all different places – those types of stories – people become – people talk about them with wide eyes and excitement*

In similar ways to the restructure, the fire and its aftermath represented an important organizational period for Phoenix City Council. Moreover, to sustain the importance of this event there were fire-related artefacts that could be brought out to illustrate the fire story. For example, during interviews we were (proudly) shown scorched and water stained documents, and we were taken to the general manager's office where a framed and charcoaled mayoral chain hung conspicuously on a wall. The fire, like the restructure, was a challenge that had been overcome. Despite the obvious losses, many saw the fire as a positive event that spurred people on to new ways of being and doing:

> *Can I tell you that the fire was actually a positive thing because all of, I mean there was a lot of residual angst - but back in 97 I mean it was still fresh, it was only 2 years after the change and the fire and what I noticed was that a lot of the staff who were - I call the cardigan brigade - who were apathetic about the change, and some of the management pulled their socks up, got in, it was an extraordinarily difficult time.*

And from another employee:

> *The day after the fire, everyone came in, the morning of the fire, and we told them that they could all - that they could all go home and we'd be ready for them on Monday. To the best of our knowledge nobody went home, we had people filling out*

> *DA's on the boot of their car, in the car park. By ten o'clock we had the phones on, we had temporary buildings down in that car park. By midday we were up and running, and this five story building was just smouldering in the background, but we know of nobody that went home.*

And yet another:

> *You can't just imagine what you do when you can't get into your building and you've gotta run a $110 million business; you know from demountables and mobile phones and borrowed furniture. But the staff actually picked up and I think the fire in many ways sort of aided the healing of the dislocation and disaffection of some staff from the structural change in 95.*

Over and over again, we heard how important the fire had been in reconstructing the organizational culture of PCC. Many thought the fire was advantageous for the Council *'because it drew people together'*. Meanwhile, others noted different yet still positive outcomes of the fire: '*sure in a fire we have lots of valuable things lost but if ever an organization needed a clean out'*. In this latter quote the fire completed the work of the earlier restructure, as another employee suggested:

> *Well, I mean,* [the fire's] *a perfect example of how we had gone from a, I guess, the them and us syndrome of local government*

Again we pause, this time to focus on the organizational challenges of this event. While it might be reasonable to understand the burning down of an organization as a disaster, for the most part employees retell it as a busy, positive yet challenging time that is imbued with excitement; a time that created conditions for, indeed forced, the organization to change.

To conclude these PCC stories of major planned and unplanned changes, we include a comment from a worker who notes that

> *at the end of that fire crisis, the buzz had gone back to the ordinariness ... so you can imagine all those subtle changes have now happened, and again, another great period of stability, almost of getting to boring.*

Ten years on and the purchaser/provider split is still in operation in the Council and the Town Hall has been rebuilt. Whereas this latter quote might suggest that there is more certainty within PCC and that it is no longer exciting or challenging (or offering opportunities for learning), this is not necessarily the case. For individual employees there are changes, and with these changes there are challenges: and learning to come from uncertainties. These challenges and this learning are discussed below in relation to the organizational practice commonly known as 'acting up'.

2.3. Temporary and local organizational change: 'acting up'

The practice of 'acting up' is a common one in Australian organizations. Basically 'acting up' is where a worker temporarily carries out duties or performs particular job tasks that are not the ones they are substantively employed to do. 'Acting up' is a practice that serves the organizational function of maintaining 'business as usual'. Having workers 'act up' is

important for organizations because it maintains the workflow of the job until a permanent incumbent is appointed or the original employee returns to the position.

Many PCC workers told us they were asked to 'act' in positions that were not their substantive ones. This could be because another person had resigned, taken another job, was on holidays, and so on. In this sense, 'acting' was a way of maintaining business operations as seamlessly as possible. The following comments exemplify this understanding of acting positions:

> [I was] *acting human resources manager for the council until [the senior manager] appointed somebody*

And:

> *Currently we have no manager, he resigned in December, and they are still going through the process of replacing him, I'm acting as such and sharing the role with* [name].

However, our investigations demonstrated that while acting positions maintain the flow of business, they do more than this. Accounts of acting at PCC also included many references to learning:

> *Currently I'm acting manager and team leader at the front counter, which I've just taken over the role at the front counter in the last two weeks, which I'm learning heaps as I go along.*

And:

> *I just had to sort of feel my way to actually manage the role of hiring and firing staff, dealing with staff issues, and there was no help of learning, it was just fly by the seat of your pants.*

The allocation of acting positions was not based on natural succession. In several units within Council the acting roles were spread amongst a number of employees. One manager told us that *'there's never a single person* [acting] *in the role'*. She adds that she was confident that when she is away her duties are carried out *'because any one of* [her] *managers can act in* [her] *role'*. Within this view is a confidence that regardless of staff movements the organization's operations are protected from significant disruption. Spreading acting roles around or sharing them between various employees could achieve this.

For acting-workers acting positions mean working in ways that are unfamiliar or unanticipated until they are called on to perform them. In other words, the context of acting is an uncertain one. Thus, performing in these uncertain and unanticipated ways presents a challenge to the acting-workers. Many accounts of acting in the organization express similar notions of challenge to the one expressed below:

I have been Acting Manager of the Strategy and Policy Unit and so that's very different to the work that I do on a day-to-day basis which I still have had to continue with. So that's been quite interesting, it's been a bit of a challenge.

Heightened by uncertainty, another employee account went further as she recounted that 'acting up' was *'a lot of hard work, it was petrifying that you'll do something wrong and the consequences of those decisions that you'll make'.*

Acting in the Council was not only about 'acting up'. Another way acting roles were evident at PCC was 'acting out'. Like 'acting up', acting out is a temporary arrangement that benefits not only the organization but also the individual doing the acting. The host unit or organization benefits from acting positions when the actors are seconded to acting positions because they bring with them skills and/or knowledges. Moreover, the actors may also facilitate the learning of the substantive workers in the host organization/unit. In this way, learning is organizational and serves an organizational development function.

However, acting also serves to develop those doing the acting. Some managers recognized acting as a career development opportunity. This was evident in the comments of one of the managers at PCC:

Yes I support that [employees going on secondment] *- I've had them go to* [suburb] *and* [suburb*) - and I've had them come and work here - mainly because I want my staff to see other locations with their eyes - to go and do it ... you need to give those opportunities so they're putting pressure on the career development side.*

Acting positions also meant welcomed increases in workload. In many cases the acting duties were in addition to those of the actors' substantive positions. While it might be reasonable for those acting to resent additional duties that came with their temporary roles, few described their experiences with resentment. On the contrary, while the experiences of acting were often described as challenging, they were also described as exciting:

It was scary, it was exciting, it was challenging. I love the rush it gives you, I think very rarely I would have times when I don't have a huge workload and I'll stop and I wouldn't know what to do with myself cos I'm so used to working a deadline and it's always, I dunno It's a lot of pressure, and everything has a deadline, and everything has to happen tomorrow. So I think it was a great challenge, it was exciting; it was petrifying at the same time.

And:

[It was] *was quite exciting at the time because I had no formal training in human resources, so the issue was well, how was this person going to manage the council's human resources, and a lot of it was just hands on experience with a bit of background by being on the consultative committee.*

What we see here are accounts of workers doing additional work, facing significant challenges, yet construing their experiences as not only exciting and challenging but also as ones where they were learning. In other words, while we suggest that 'acting up' is an organizationally generated practice that manages and maintains 'business', it is also a

practice that produces a 'significant stimulus for learning' (Hodkinson 2005:527). In all, these accounts of 'acting up' concur with Hodkinson's point that, 'people learn because their existing practices are challenged by crossing the boundary into a new situation' (2005: 527).

3. OUR PHOENIX CITY COUNCIL STORIES

These organizational stories above emphasised how major organizational changes in PCC can be read as more than restructuring or reforming; the interviewees construct the organizational changes as a kind of regeneration or even re-birthing of the organization with all the attendant excitements and challenges. One employee used the metaphor of the phoenix in his story of the Council fire (see below). This led us to explore the phoenix metaphor more closely.

The phoenix is a mythical bird that appears in literature as a symbol of resurrection and rebirth: renewed and ready for succession. It is known for its paradoxically melodious dirge and, when not engaged in fire starting, is said to be flying:

> [A]lways scanning the landscape and distant space. It represents our capacity for vision, for collecting sensory information about [the] environment and the events unfolding within it. The phoenix, with its great beauty, creates intense excitement and deathless inspiration (Kam-Chuen 1996:np).

This description of the phoenix resonates with the Council stories above. On scanning the landscape and then by investing in the hopes of new public management discourses, the Council undertook significant risks in its disaggregation processes. Disaggregation is one of several 'new' ways of organizing, although not a simple process of replacing old ways of operating with different ones (Palmer and Dunford 2002). The restructure required vision and innovation as it was planned and implemented, and as the employees' stories show, it 'create[d] intense excitement' amongst PCC employees.

The second major event recounted by employees was 'the fire', which is a further example of the reconstructing of the organization. Moreover, the reshaping was recounted in terms that also echo the myth of the phoenix. The phoenix is a:

> fabulous bird that periodically regenerates itself. According to legend ... when it reached the end of its life (500 years), it burned itself on a pyre of flames, and from the ashes a new phoenix arose (Phoenix3 2004).

While not necessarily setting itself alight, the Council literally burned and arose from the ashes anew. A worker recalls:

> *Out of the fire for me the so-called phoenix rising was an opportunity - because it coincided with* [Civic Services Group] - *we were going to conquer the world - to be honest we couldn't really give a stuff about the Town Hall.*

From the upheaval, disruption and challenge of the fire what was created was not a disaster to be lamented, but the opportunity for the Council to re-birth, to reinvent itself as a 'new'

organization. As in the myth, the Council, like the phoenix, did not die. Rather, again we see that the fire 'created intense excitement and deathless inspiration' which led to a new life.

We understand the Council as an organization that wants and needs to be an enterprising organization concerned with business efficiencies; while at the same time it needed to re-create itself following a critical event that involved everyone including even the material structures of the organization. Further, we postulate that workers position themselves as 'enterprising subjects' (du Gay 1996) in the midst of various kinds of change.

In the PCC workers' stories of the organizational changes - planned and unplanned change, macro and micro changes - they position themselves as particular kinds of 'enterprising subjects' (du Gay 1996), subjects who talk about themselves and co-workers as both challenged and excited about change, and who sometimes consciously understand the processes and practices of change in terms of individual and organizational learning. This leads us to explore what it is about challenges and excitement that create conditions for learning. How is the uncertainty of not fully knowing what to do in the face of change learning conducive?

In the data discussed in this paper, workers often talked about learning and/or themselves as learners, either explicitly or implicitly. This can be seen in the accounts where they positioned themselves as the protagonist in a narrative where they are met by, and are able to overcome, challenges through learning. In this way the workers constructed their identities as 'enterprising self/ves', and the story as a kind of 'bildungsroman' where they were they were thrown into a scene of confusion and excitement where their own confidence and capability were tested by new challenges, yet they were able to overcome them (Czarniawska 2004:138).

This may be because temporary work enables learning identities. Temporary work is among commonly used career management practices for developing leaders (Burgess and Connell 2006; King 2003). In temporary work there is always an expectation that the actor will not and cannot fully know how to carry out their roles. In other words, although not always explicit, there is expectation that learning is involved. Boud and Solomon (2003) have noted workers' resistance to naming and being named as learners, however here those in acting roles are pardoned from being fully-fledged workers, and as such appear freer to name their learning and themselves as learners. We anticipate that it would be useful for our overall research project to further explore how the practices of 'acting up' (and 'acting in') can contribute to organizational and individual learning.

5. CONCLUSION

In both the accounts of the organization (of restructure and of the fire), and in the accounts of acting, the contexts were ones of disorganization and uncertainty; they were also ones of learning. Uncertainty in the organization, as the result of crises, and uncertainty of workers' acting roles in the organization, created learning conducive conditions (Elkjaer 2005:534), uncertainty that is 'resolved when the situation is no longer experienced as uncertain' (Elkjaer 2005:535). Both the PCC workers and the organization itself learned when the

existing conditions and practices were disrupted. These disruptions were either planned, as with the Council reforms and when workers acted up, or unplanned, as with the fire.

The Council's restructure, the fire, and the practice of 'acting up' share a similar narrative. Each tells a story where the actors (the Council as a whole, or individual workers) are 'thrown into the deep end' - a crisis - and emerged as something/somebody new and perhaps better. The feelings of crises necessitated macro or micro changes that provided conditions for learning. Despite devastation, turmoil or uncertainty, the accounts are retold in a positive light - and changes are understood as opportunities. The stories of the organization present a laudable and resilient organization that met challenges proactively and dynamically, and with excitement. This was similar to accounts of 'acting' up where individuals met challenges of not fully knowing how to perform new roles, but through this uncertainty emerged from the experience as new and perhaps better workers.

As researchers interested in learning at work, these stories prompt us to consider the learning dimensions of organizational change. In regard to current research project the accounts of 'acting up' retold here are prompting our conceptual work around work practices.

Just as the organization was undergoing renewal and becoming an enterprising organization, so too the workers were constructing themselves as enterprising subjects. This positioning required workers to see themselves and the organization as active subjects who take up opportunities - a privileging of the 'enterprising self' (du Gay 1996). It is an enterprising organization and an enterprising self that understand uncertainty as opportunity for learning. Like the Phoenix, employees, and the organization reported on here, 'arise' from the crises and changes as new employees and organizations - enterprising indeed!

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