Adapting to change: radical innovation in the union movement

Dr Melissa Slee
NTEU Branch President
RMIT University
"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

— Charles Darwin
Adapting to change

1. Developing an accurate understanding of the external environment: threats and opportunities
2. Adapt your union strategy to best fit this new context
3. Implementing the strategy
Yes, but how?
Knowledge Management
Activity theory: what is knowledge?

“knowing” or “know how” over knowledge:

- Situated: context driven
- Provisional: constantly being revised and adapted as the context changes
- Pragmatic: focused on the task at hand

(Blackler 1995)
Activity theory: how is “know-how” shared?

“communities of practice”
“becoming” a member not “learning” a set of practices:

- Learning the language
- Developing relationships necessary to gain access to the repository of “know how” available
- Storytelling: flexibility to convey instincts, hunches, metaphors and meaning – shared “world view” “speaking the same language”
two limitations to communities of practice

1. Inherently exclusive and resistant to change
2. Prone to “group think”
   (Swan et al 2002; Leonard and Sensiper 1998)
Radical innovation

Radical innovation occurs at the interstices across groups:

- requires “breaking the frame”: reframing the problem not just solving it the usual way
- “creative abrasion”

(Leonard and Sensiper 1998)
New information

Boundary spanners:

Individuals who link the outside world to internal world of organisation

1. Obtaining information from external environment
2. Successfully transmitting this information within an organisation

Tushman and Scanlon 1981
1996: what happened?
NTEU’s strategy in crisis
what happened next?
(Arguably) National Council saves the day!
Some conclusions...