

# Strategic Influence: promoting change through existing services, new services and advocacy

## Background

In April 1994 the B.S.L. held a forum to promote thinking about how the organisation might define disadvantage and how this focus might best be put into practice. This forum represented a beginning point in a larger discussion and some general areas of "agreement" started to emerge. Two of these were:

1. B.S.L. is not about providing huge numbers of services and is prepared to consider divesting. The B.S.L. needs to remain within the service business, ensuring that our services are at the cutting edge in innovation and leadership.
2. Services need to be based on some interpretation of need. They need to demonstrate and show a way forward. Service development and provision cannot be divorced from advocacy/social action impacts. B.S.L. services need to assist to redefine the debates.

These general areas of "agreement" emerged from what participants in the forum reported back. There was no opportunity to test either the extent of support for or the general understanding of these positions. As a consequence it was decided to develop a paper on innovation and leadership. This paper makes a start in that direction.

## Overview

When we started to discuss the topics of innovation and leadership it became apparent that neither word was easy to define. Different people place different emphasis on these words depending upon the context in which they are used. Part of the reason for these differences is that they describe qualities in how we do something. Neither is an end in itself. We neither need to be different for the sake of being different nor lead for the sake of leading. As the need for innovation and leadership varies according to what we want to achieve, the words take on different meanings in different contexts. If we do not define that context then there is a risk that the discussion will simply be about form without content.

This paper sets out to explore the context in which we work to promote change, as a prelude to later discussions about the means. It is not a detailed discussion of the means.

In terms of the broad context the work of the B.S.L. is perhaps best captured by the notion of seeking to have strategic influence. The organisation has a history of promoting changes which improve the circumstances of people with low incomes through its services and through advocacy. It has attempted to influence how others provide support both through the type and quality of its services and its social policy work. It has been strategic in the areas in which it has attempted to have influence.

To achieve its strategic influence, the organisation has used a variety of means, including promoting:

- changes to existing support systems, including improvements in standards;
- new arrangements for providing support, for example introducing a model of support used in one system into another;
- changes to the focus or philosophy through which services are provided;
- change to the range of services available by developing new designs; and
- change through advocacy and policy development.

Where it becomes confusing is that "innovation" is sometimes used to include all of the above four means of promoting changes through service developments. Arguably it should only refer to those areas where, because of a philosophical shift or different service design, something new emerges. However these considerations are secondary to achieving change and all the above means have a role in promoting a better situation for people with low incomes.

In order to continue to have strategic influence the B.S.L. needs to constantly reinvent its change agenda. The critical question then is how the organisation continues to identify and prioritize areas of change that it wants to work towards. Debating this means of change versus that form of change without a specific context is likely to be a diversion. Refining the means of promoting change once the context has been established is essential. What the following discussion does is take some tentative steps towards describing how the B.S.L. can continually reinvent its change agenda. The questions this discussion addresses is "how do we develop strategies for change?" and "how do we influence others?".

## Getting the direction right

Any discussion of the direction the B.S.L. takes in working for change must start with its mission statement, which follows.

*We of the Brotherhood of St Laurence work for the wellbeing of the poorest members of the Australian community to improve their economic, social and personal circumstances by:*

- *offering friendship, support and advocacy;*
- *sharing goods, services and resources;*
- *contributing to their empowerment and to the prevention of further poverty;*
- *improving the structures, institutions and distribution of resources to establish their security of income, shelter and employment; and*
- *working towards a sustainable Australian society within the global community.*

This mission is broad and identifies a number of levels through which the circumstances of people with low incomes can be improved, including on an individual basis, at a structural or institutional level or, even more ambitiously, at a societal level. What is challenging about the mission is this range of levels on which change is to be promoted. For example, it challenges staff in services to work for change beyond the boundaries of the individual service in which they work and to see their services as part of the range of structures and institutions which effect people with low incomes. Each service is one of the resources which contribute to their security of income, shelter and employment or their empowerment and the prevention of poverty, or some combination of these.

The mission challenges all B.S.L. services, including those grouped as support for older people, employment and training, income support and community, youth and family support, to use their work with individuals as a starting point for contributing to change in society's structures, institutions and the distribution of resources. Applying the same principle, the work undertaken by Social Policy and Research to change structures, institutions and the distribution of resources must benefit individuals. While these structures and institutions will vary according to how different services seek to support people with low incomes, for example, the government departments and community organisations which relate to older people are different to those which relate to the jobless, all parts of the organisation need to contribute to promoting changes at different levels.

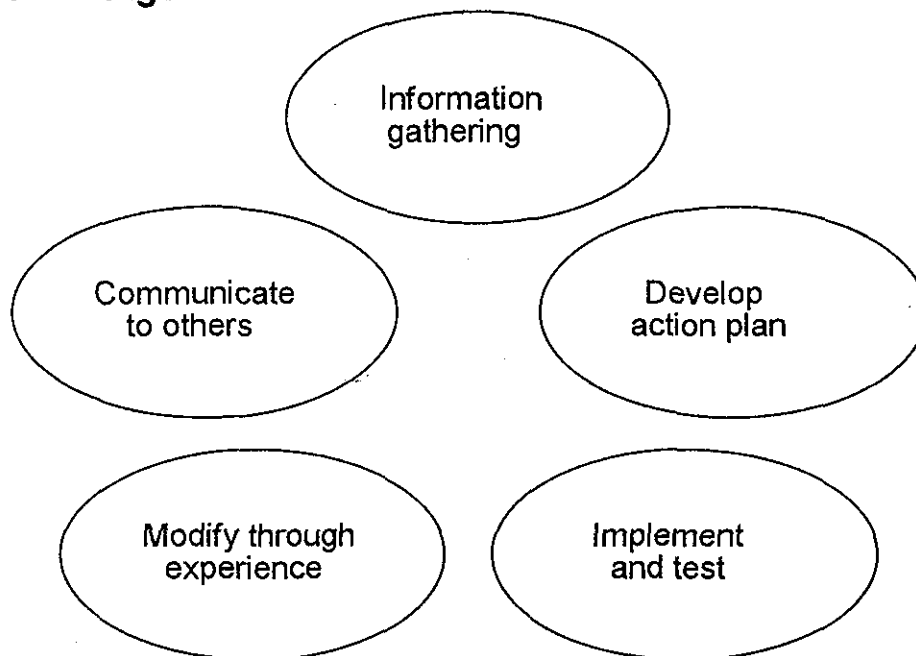
In order to achieve this at a practical level individual services need to define a change agenda which takes advantage of the expertise and resources available and their knowledge of the environment in which the change might occur.

## Developing strategies for change

How do we go about developing strategies for change? There is a reasonably simple process which most of us carry out all the time that leads to change. This starts with gathering the information that tells us something needs to change and what, if anything, anybody else has tried to do.

The next step is to work out what to do to develop an action plan which outlines what we want or what we want done differently. Once we have a plan we need to implement and test it to see if it actually does what we hoped it would. This may or may not involve convincing someone outside the organisation either to allow or to actually implement the plan. Usually things get modified through experience when we actually see how something is working. Then, if we wish to have influence beyond those who are immediately affected by the change, we need to communicate the value of change. This process is illustrated below.

## The cycle of change



As indicated earlier the change which arises from this process can be on a range of levels. Some variations include:

- changes to an existing support system, for example providing overnight care for older people suffering dementia;
- modifying the way in which elements in a support system are connected, for example using a Linkages model to support people with a disability;
- changing the focus or philosophy in a support system, for example in the way a family centre project introduced the concept of empowerment;
- increasing the range of what is available through establishing a new service, for example the first no-interest loans scheme;
- working to influence social policy, for example making a submission to the Federal Government's recent statement on unemployment; and
- working to change public opinion, for example through conducting a program like the Child Poverty Campaign.

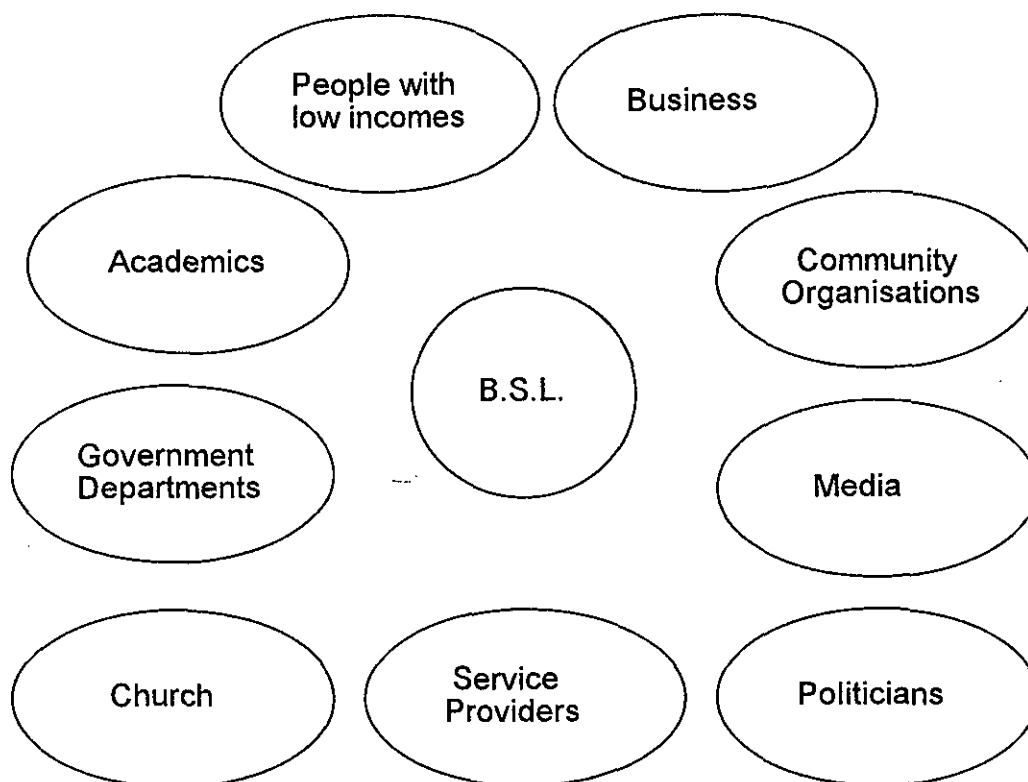
Some of these changes emerged from service practice, others from research.

In a service context we should engage in the cycle of change for good service development. We are expected to continually improve our service. What is challenging about the B.S.L.'s mission is the need to go beyond service development and look at promoting changes outside the individual service. To do this means developing an understanding both of different possibilities for change and who needs to be influenced to promote change in a broader way. Each of these steps involve being in dialogue with others.

### Who does the B.S.L. want to influence?

In order to achieve changes in people's economic, social and personal circumstances, the B.S.L. needs to influence diverse grouping within the community. Some of the groups that the B.S.L. may want to influence includes people with low incomes, community organisations, the media, politicians, government departments, academics, service providers, the Church and business. There are others who will also need to be involved in different change processes.

### Some groups the B.S.L. wants to influence

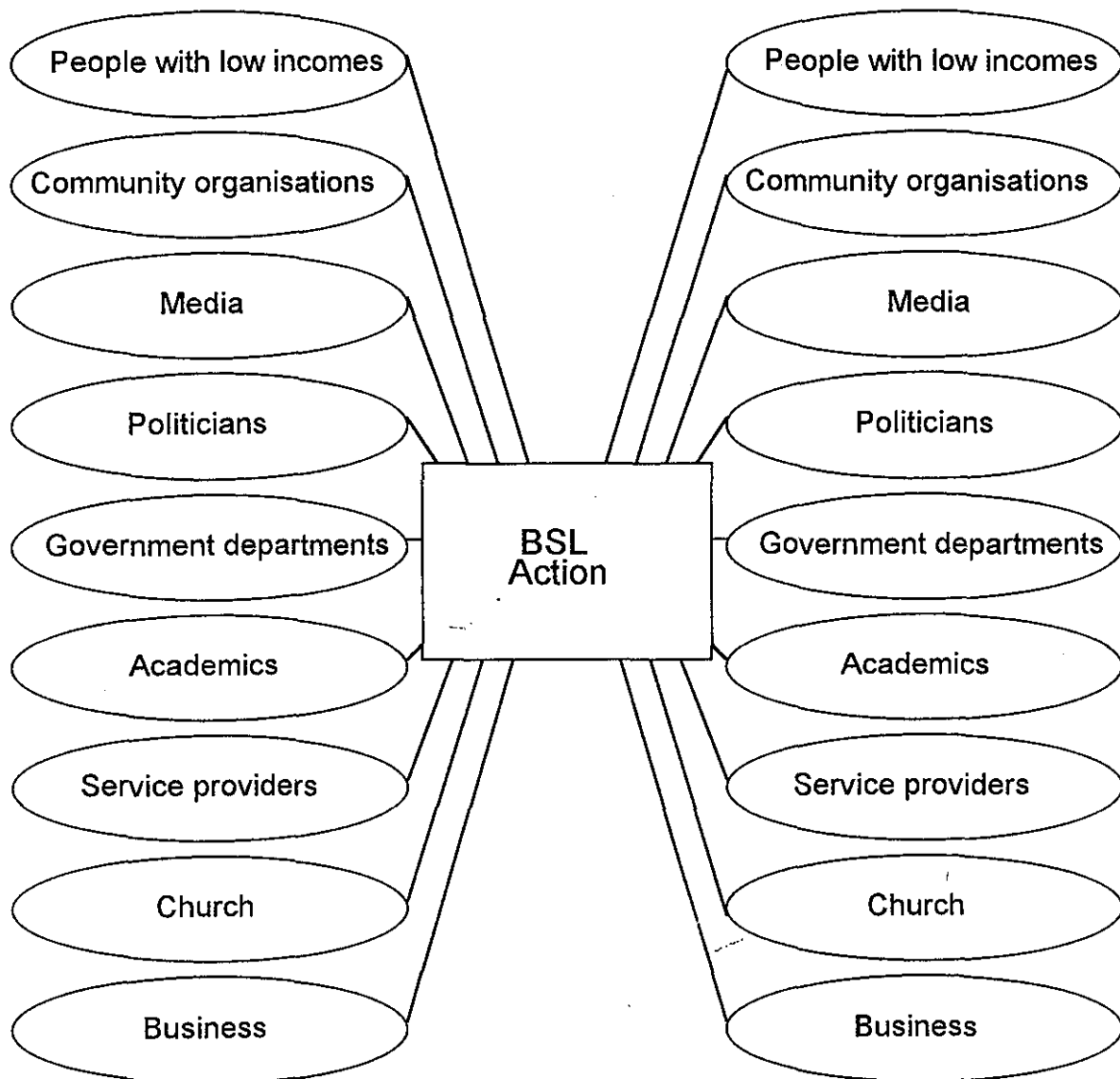


### Influencing others

While we can control, to some degree, change inside the organisation, it is more difficult to control change on the outside. Generally, we cannot ensure that a change will occur, so we need to influence others to help it happen. This means engaging people outside the organisation and convincing them of the benefits of the change. To do this involves entering into a dialogue, preferably in a way with which the other person is familiar. If someone is busy thinking about the issue of unemployment and you present them with a change that would benefit older people then they are unlikely to be influenced. So how do we work out who can be influenced to assist in introducing a change.

To be strategic this needs to be part of the information collection process. What do people with low incomes think? What about business or community organisations or the media? What work is being done in the political arena or by government departments? Are any academics working in this area? What about other service providers? Does the Church have a particular perspective? If we know what others think about an issue it is both informative, in terms of helping us understand the issue and it creates the opportunity for dialogue. The more levels of dialogue then the more *potential* there is for influence as the following diagram illustrates. Of course, we may discover no one else is interested in the change.

### Influence - an information flow



However, to use this approach for every change would probably be highly inefficient. Having gathered the information then it may be apparent that there are some who are a high priority to target to create change and others who are unlikely to be helpful, or not interested or too busy and so forth.

## Putting strategic influence into practice?

If we can combine the ideas outline above then the steps needed to develop a change agenda which allows services to have strategic influence emerges.

1. Identify what needs to change. Ideally this involves listening to people with low incomes and learning from them how the system needs to be changed to improve things for them.
2. Work out where the change fits in the scheme of things. At this point it is necessary to gather information from as many sources as possible about who thinks what and what the barriers to change are. Who are likely supporters? Who might be partners in working for change? Who already has good ideas?
3. Work out an action plan. The more others are involved in having input at this stage the more likely they are to support the process later down the track. It also involves thinking through what the means of communicating the outcomes will be.
4. Clarify what the B.S.L. can contribute that others may not be able to.
5. Implement the plan and see what parts work and what parts don't.
6. Modify the plan according to the experience.
7. Communicate the benefits or otherwise of the change introduced through the plan.

How one communicates is an interesting question. A written evaluation is often promoted as desirable, but this is likely to only be effective if it is written in a way and is part of an ongoing dialogue. Other ways of promoting a change include working to get service provider forums to promote the change, presenting the change at a conference, convincing government departments to modify guidelines to incorporate the change and so forth.

## Conclusion - some organisational issues

While this discussion only attempts to look at the first steps in developing a change agenda which matches the B.S.L.'s mission, these seemingly simple steps of identifying strategies for change and influencing others raise a range of complex organisational issues. The steps are explained in a practical way so that these issues related to implementation become apparent. In order to create a context in which the B.S.L. is to continue to have strategic influence, the following, amongst other things, needs to be addressed.

- **Opportunities to identify and nurture change plans**
  - How do we resource and support staff to focus on change as well as manage day to day concerns?
  - What skills need to be developed and refined for staff to effectively gather and interpret information from a range of sources?
  - What skills need to be developed and refined to assist staff know where to look for good ideas that will help them develop action plans which promote change on a range of levels?
- **Structures which promote the development of change plans and allow the organisation to prioritise action**
  - How do we create open pathways and forums through which a range of change plans can emerge?
  - How do we make the organisation's past work on an issue easily available?
  - How do we prioritize action in a way which doesn't blunt the energy of those whose plans are given a low priority?

- **Opportunities to record and communicate changes to others**
  - How do we resource and support staff to record the impact of implementing a change plan?
  - What skills need to be developed and refined to help staff communicate the value of a particular change?
  - How are the different areas of change being promoted, also co-ordinated so, where possible, they complement each other?
  
- **Organisational values which encourage and foster a commitment to work for change**
  - How do we ensure that the focus on change remains important?
  - How do we value those staff who have an ability to identify, develop and implement change plans?
  - Does the organisation have a commitment to marshalling resources to pursue changes it considers of a high priority?

Without the creation of adequate opportunities, structures and organisational values which promote change plans, then the capacity of the B.S.L. to continue to have strategic influence will be limited. Instead the organisation's agenda will be dominated by the day to day concerns of running existing services. If the mechanisms for constantly reinventing a broad change agenda which impacts on a range of levels are put in place, opportunities for promoting change through existing services, new services and advocacy will emerge. Importantly, the organisation will be most effective in improving the circumstances of people with low incomes.