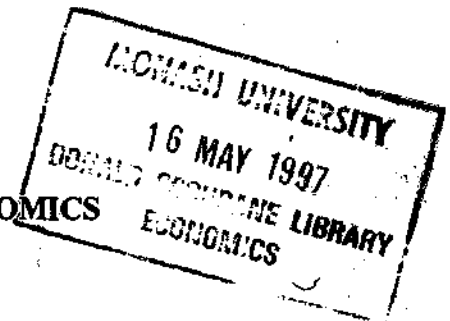



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**METAPHORICAL POWER IN A PICTURE -  
CLARIFYING ORGANISATIONAL  
EXPECTATIONS**

13 MAY 1997 

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*Working Paper 29/97  
April 1997*

**Abstract**

Communication is a major element in successful change programs yet, apart from asserting its importance, the literature has been almost devoid of innovations to facilitate employee understanding and behaviour change. The use of one of the earliest forms of communication - hieroglyphics - when combined with the power of the metaphor and computer technology, is presented as an innovative technique to assist organisational change efforts.

## **Introduction**

Communication is a major element in successful change programs. Exterbille expressed this aptly in her article entitled "TQM can be DOA without a proper communication plan" in which she described the result of change efforts as "being condemned to a quick and inglorious death" unless appropriate communication occurs (1996, p.32). Furthermore, that most managers under-communicate or inadvertently send inconsistent messages, and typical employee-directed documents on change processes often result in employee confusion or alienation (Kotter, 1996). However, although the importance of communication in the production of change is not new (Ford and Ford, 1995; Want, 1995), the literature over recent years has not provided many innovations which will help make this process more effective.

The process described in this paper, known as Graphic Planning™, provides, on one hand, an innovative technique, yet on the other hand, reinvents an ancient approach to communication. Positive feedback has been received from those organisations using this technique in major change programs.

## **Purpose of communication in change programs**

What is communication designed to achieve in organisational change? It is seen as a way of announcing, explaining and preparing people for change (Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder, 1993; Jick, 1993); increasing commitment to change (Beckhard and Pritchard, 1992); inspiring change through the operation of cognitive dissonance mechanisms and as a way of sustaining change (Kirkpatrick, 1985). Cornett-DeVitto and Friedman (1995) found that, in the case of mergers, clear direction and timely, accurate, realistic and informative communication were related to success.

Without reviewing the strategic management, cultural change and organisational change literature in any detail, there appear to be a number of fundamentals that must result from the change process: there needs to be remembered intentions (Mintzberg, 1988), the organisational schema must be changed (Maznevski, Rush and White, 1993), the organisational vision, systems and people must be aligned (Ramsay, 1996), and, according to some, employees should understand the change (Reger, Mullane, Gustafson and DeMarie, 1994) in a holistic manner (Hellgren and Melin, 1993).

The aim of the communication is to achieve new behaviours right down to the lowest level of the organisation where success or failure may well be dictated by the behaviour of the so-called minor players or front-line workers (Brewer, 1995). Employees must understand the vision and mission of the organisation, and must be committed to act differently and effectively on behalf of the employer (Want, 1995).

The paradox of communication is that the more technology has extended the breadth and reach of communications, the less we are actually communicating with one another" (Price Waterhouse, 1996, p.13).

## **Role of management in the communication process**

Bennis (1984), in a study on successful leaders, found that one of the four things they had in common was the ability to manage meaning, and to give concrete meaning to new ideas, and, in so doing, use metaphors to make their vision clear to others. Similarly, Isabella (1990) and Vaughn

(1995) have indicated that managers often serve the function of interpreting events and framing meaning for others in the organisation.

Thus the role of the manager in the change process has been described as "the creation and maintenance of systems of shared meaning that facilitate action" (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985, p.724). The manager needs to manage "how employees think and feel about their colleagues, work activities, the marketplace, and all other elements of organisational life" (Hannagan, 1995, p.246). This often means changing the cognitive set, common framework, culture, and consensual reality of those inhabiting the organisation.

According to Reger et al (1994, p.33), a significant feature of major change is that "successful implementation requires a new mindset that questions members' most basic assumptions about the nature of the organization", but these mental models are not easily altered. This is particularly evident when communication of a new vision only typically receives 0.58 per cent of the total communication directed to employees (Kotter, 1996).

Also, given that research on verbal communication shows that people remember only about 25 per cent of a message (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith and Kleiner, 1994), up to 85 per cent of information we accept is through the eyes (Buzan and Israel, 1995), and "the average mind is deluged with words" (Ries, 1996, p.97), a different form of communication is called for.

Graphic Planning™ draws on the earliest forms of communication - cave drawings (Buzan and Israel, 1995) and hieroglyphics - which were in pictorial form. It appeals to both sides of the brain - the right side through images, colour, emotion; and the left side through language, detail, number and sequence (Pont, 1996). Colour and images are used as they reportedly enhance memory and stimulate the right cortical process (Buzan, 1989). The use of sensory words both within the plan and in the accompanying documentary material also help the employee to see, hear and grasp the meaning portrayed (O'Connor and Seymour, 1994).

Furthermore, the use of metaphor makes the message highly memorable, because, in themselves, even without the graphical representation, they are succinct (Krefting and Frost, 1985).

In an attempt to draw together some of the key requirements for effective change (eg focus, vision, mission, results orientation) and to communicate these in a way which is not only acceptable to employees but memorable and challenging, this communication technique, Graphic Planning™, emphasises the importance of the "whole picture" being conveyed to staff. It incorporates principles of parsimony, focus, memorability, relevance both emotionally and rationally, and uses metaphor to enhance the impact of the message.

### **Use of symbols and metaphors**

To reduce uncertainty for both the manager and the employee alike, managers label things (tell subordinates what is what), use metaphors (tell them what things are like or what they could be like) and use platitudes (tell them what is normal and acceptable) (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990). Bolman and Deal (1991, p.11) use the term 'frame' to cover schemata, maps, images and metaphors; they describe frames as "both windows on the world and lenses that bring the world into focus", as well as being tools for action. However, employees are "not tabula rasa to be freely written upon"; managers need to convince their subordinates of the merit of their "meaning" possibly by persuasion with the aid of linguistic artifacts or material aids (Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges, 1990, p.349).

**Symbols.** Due to the complexity of behaviour in organizational systems, members, in seeking meaning in their lives, vest meaning in events, behaviour and objects, develop an organisational history and a common point of view, much of which is processed through symbolic means. "A symbol is a sign which denotes something much greater than itself, and which calls for the association of certain conscious or unconscious ideas, in order for it to be endowed with its full meaning and significance" (Morgan, Frost and Pondy, 1983, pp.4-5).

The term 'symbol' has also been described as that which "forms a bridge between different possible meanings which we can cross and recross before we finally commit ourselves to a single meaning" but its inherent ambiguity comes with the advantages of economy of expression, "the power to invoke those sentiments and emotions which impel people to action, while at the same time the precise rationalities behind the appeal may be opaque" (Turner, 1989, p.4).

**Metaphors.** Metaphors are a form of symbolic expression. They have been described in various ways. It has been argued that the metaphor simply represents a fanciful literary device (Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982), yet others argue that they provide simple ways of seeing and thinking about organisations which simplify the complex and aid understanding (Oswick and Grant, 1996). Sackmann (1989, pp.463-464) described metaphors as "the mental pictures which are used to conceptualise, understand, and explain vague or unfamiliar phenomena" and attributed them with quite powerful instrumentality eg "metaphors can refocus the familiar and show it in a new light", "provoke a vivid image which make future actions more tangible", and "connote meanings on a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural level in a holistic way" which "influence one's construction of reality and may lead to activities and outcomes which are experienced differently than the ones associated with a different metaphor".

Similarly, Marshak (1993, p.44) says that "some psychologists assert that metaphors serve as the essential bridge between the literal and the symbolic, between cognition and affect, between the conscious and the unconscious". As such he argues that metaphors provide the medium of choice when trying to present ideas which are not easily accessible to analytical reasoning and discourse.

Kotter (1996) advocates the use of metaphor as part of the communication process in creating major change, especially when trying to get across complicated ideas. He provided the following comparison to illustrate the power and simplicity of the metaphor when communicating with employees:

Version #1: We need to retain the advantages of economies of great scale and yet become much less bureaucratic and slow in decision making in order to help ourselves retain and win customers in a very competitive and tough business environment (*thirty nine words*).

Version #2: We need to become less like an elephant and more like a customer-friendly *Tyrannosaurus rex* (*sixteen words*).

(Kotter, 1996, p.92)

Graphic Planning™ utilises this concept but takes it further by actually providing colourful pictures of the metaphorical message.

In the organisational change process metaphors have been described as having four possible functions: transformative, facilitative, as a steering function for action, and to invite experimentation (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990). They can create cognitive dissonance, contrasting what is with what can be. Two of the three major applications for metaphor in organisations argued

by Brink (1993) are particularly pertinent to graphic planning: first, he argues that they are more easily heard than rational explanations and as such encourage listening, and secondly that they encourage employees into communication because the symbolism seems creative, and stimulates reflection and action. They promote engagement, and through engagement, change (Broussine and Vince, 1996).

Promotion of communication and conversation is thought to be a major factor in change (Duck, 1993). In fact, Ford and Ford (1995) go so far as to argue that communication is not just a tool used within the change process but that change is a phenomenon that occurs within communication. They argue that:

"change is a recursive process of social construction in which new realities are created, sustained and modified (and that) Producing intentional change..is a matter a deliberately bringing into existence, through communication, a new reality or set of social structures" (Ford and Ford, 1995, p.542).

Five categories of communication tools have been described as useful for change agents in bringing about change: "assertives" or claim making, "directives" or requests, "commissives" or promises, "expressives" or the expression of feelings or emotions, and "declarations" or the announcement of a new operational reality (Ford and Ford, 1995). Thus conversations include symbols, artifacts, theatrics and whatever else is used in conjunction with what is spoken. Breakdowns in the change process are seen as a breakdown in one of the four conversations of change. Although Graphic Planning does not rely on conversation, it certainly promotes it, and this concept of the four conversations of change can be applied to the graphic reality provided to employees.

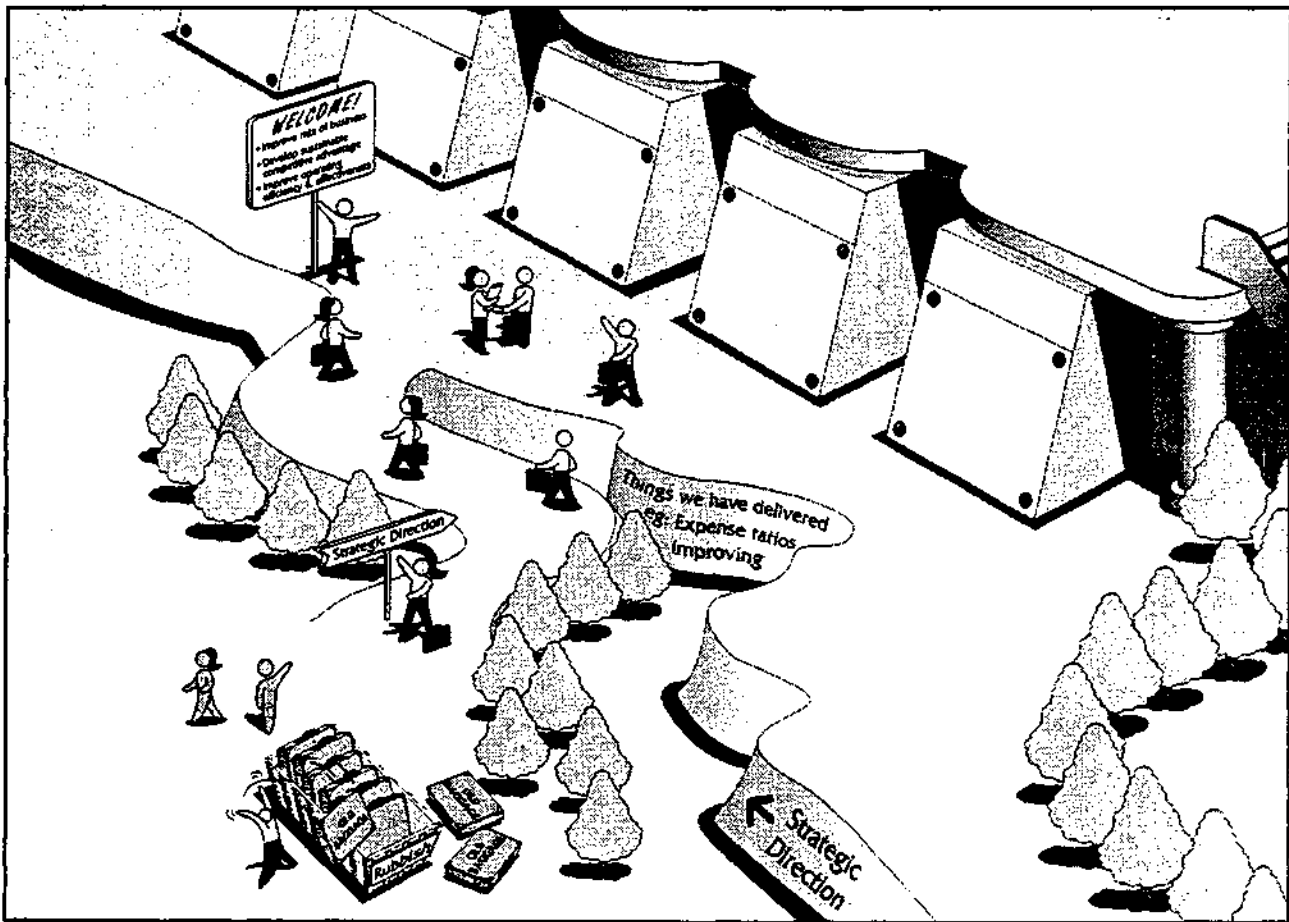
### **Case Illustration of Graphic Planning™: the story of MMI**

The case which we will use to illustrate Graphic Planning™ is MMI, one of Australia's leading business insurers. It has approximately 1700 staff in Australia, about 55 in New Zealand, and upwards of 250 intermediaries and brokers (who are part of the extended organisation). Staff are in over 30 locations. MMI is 40 per cent owned by a French organisation, Allianz.

The aim of MMI's Graphic Plan (GP) was to bring together numerous change projects which were occurring in the organisation in order to give people an integrated or holistic picture. Thus the GP consists of a series of messages which take the employee on a journey through varying landscapes from "desperate deserts", where there was a fight for survival, to the "lush tropics", where the company grew voraciously in a favourable economic climate.

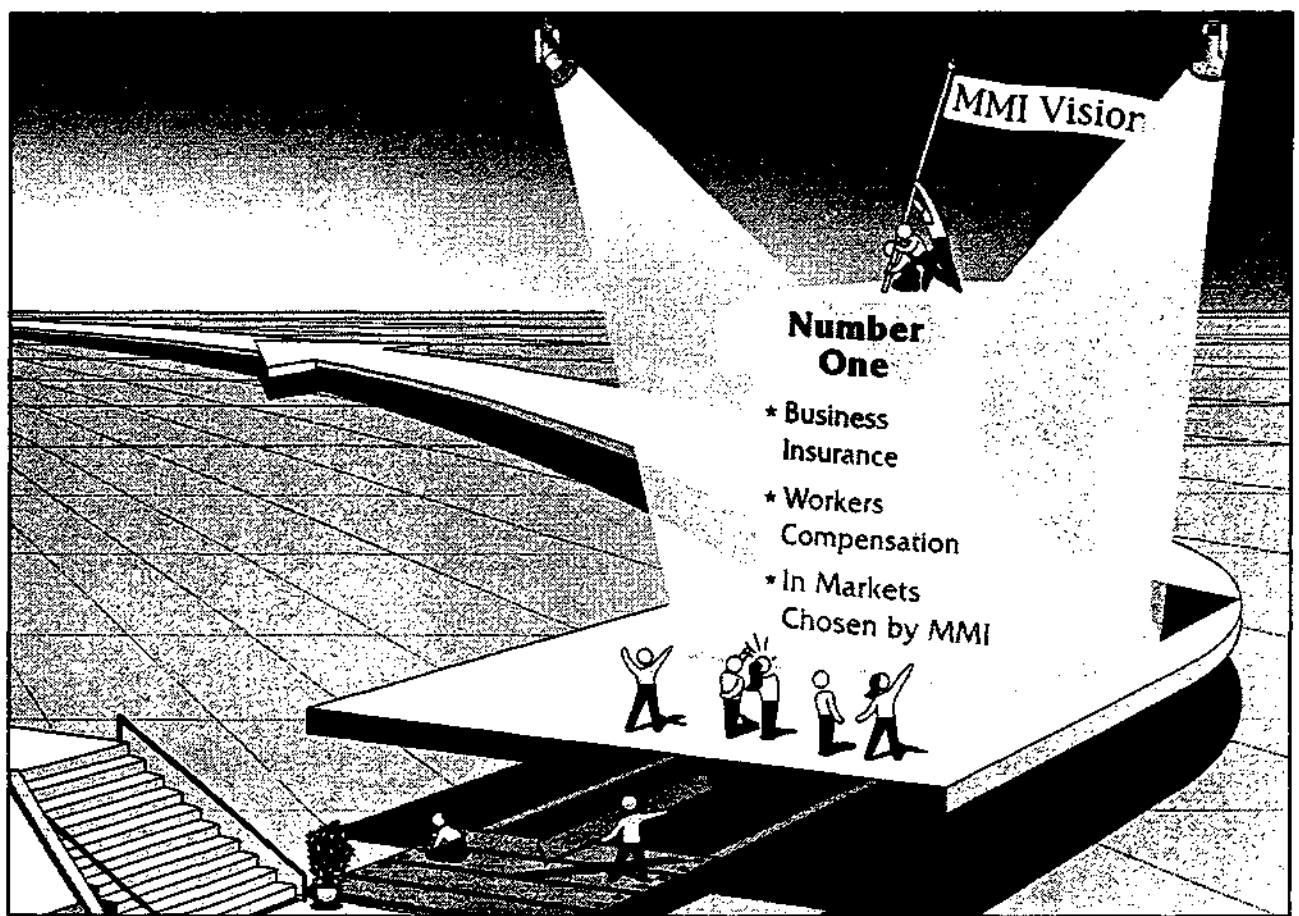
On this journey some excess baggage was collected, and the organisation found that it was weighed down and unable to respond to the changing market quickly enough. Therefore, as we will see in the overall GP, the baggage had to be unloaded (see Figure 1 for the metaphorical picture of "unloading the baggage"). The GP takes the staff from the past to the vision for the future, and shows a metaphorical bridge being constructed to this future (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Pathway from the past - getting rid of excess baggage



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Figure 2: MMI's Vision - building a bridge to the future



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When these messages are presented to staff initially they are given a verbal presentation using "build-ups" of the final GP such that they are given interpretations of the meaning of each section. (Colour, a very important part of GP, is used in all plans, but cannot be incorporated here.)

There are numerous messages in the GP which essentially take staff along a number of paths (see Figure 3). For example, if they unload their baggage they are welcomed to the strategic direction of the company. The required values are spelt out. Staff are given employee support so that they choose to remain in the organisation and develop a new way of doing business or they might choose to leave and return to the marketplace. MMI informs their staff through this method that every one of them has a responsibility to adopt change and a collective responsibility to assist others in making the change. Training and learning will be provided to employees which will stand them in good stead both inside and outside the organisation. The focus of MMI is on meeting customer needs. The change will mean changes in terms of job roles, mobility and career paths.

Thus the GP spells out what is happening, what is being worked on, and what is being aimed for. Staff can be under no illusion about the expectations of them, the changes required or the values underpinning the desired behaviours. Their choices are also clear. Links can be made with both Ford and Ford's (1995) categories of communication tools, as well as with Barrett and Cooperrider's (1990) functions of metaphors.

The GP is quite new to MMI but, to date, the feedback indicates that it has been well received.

## Discussion

The process of Graphic Planning™ accepts Vince and Broussine's (1996) assumptions that change depends as much on comprehending and managing emotional relatedness as it does on employing rationality or logic, that individuals frames of meaning are important and that change needs to be seen as a psychological and learning process as well as a structural/political phenomenon.

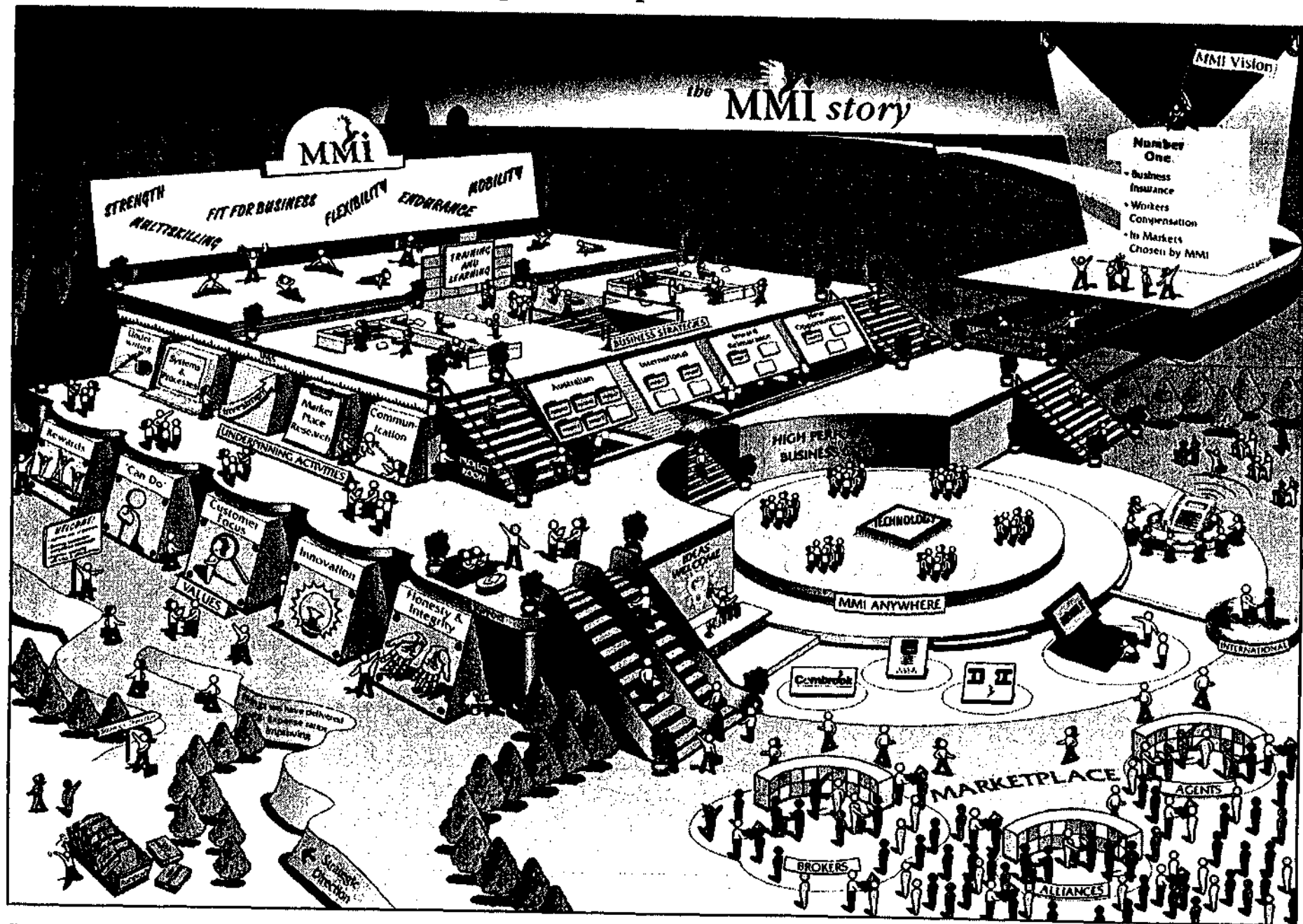
Having managers and employees draw pictures of their feelings during change and having them represent their organisational metaphors has been reported (eg Barry, 1994; Broussine and Vince, 1996; Meyer, 1991; Vince and Broussine, 1996), but the provision of pictures/graphics and metaphors to facilitate the alignment and motivation of employees during the change process has not been reported in the literature to our knowledge.

When carefully constructed it is argued that the GP can influence employees' thinking, feeling, construction of work reality and work behaviour in ways which will facilitate major organisational change. The use of Graphic Planning™ is more likely to result in consistent messages being provided to employees which is seen to be essential (Brody, 1987).

Graphic Planning™ draws on ancient techniques of communication, cave drawings and hieroglyphics, rejuvenated with computer technology and the written word. It provides a powerful communication technique, incorporating principles of parsimony, focus, memorability, relevance to both emotion and logic (right and left brain), and uses metaphor to enhance the strength of the message.



Figure 3: The MMI Story - a complete Graphic Plan™



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Graphic Planning™ is not proposed as the only means of communication in organisational change nor as a replacement for so-called rich forms of communication (Daft and Lengel, 1984). However, it is argued that Graphic Planning makes a contribution to those involved in organisational change and that it can have a very powerful impact through the use of metaphor, actions, colour, words and by providing a holistic picture. By its emotive and colourful content, it is likely to generate more positive conversation amongst employees, thus increasing its impact. Although reports from organisations which have used Graphic Planning™ have been positive, formal research is yet to be completed on reactions by staff to this type of communication.

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