

Our Bold Future: How Our Tiger Changed Its Stripes

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Queensland's Gold Coast is a city of 50,000 residents with a growth rate to match the "tiger economies" of Asia. One reason why it expects to see its population double in 50 years is that the city offers unusually rich biodiversity. Its landscapes range from the oceanside, with a multi-level array of built urban form for tourism and residents, through commercial and industrial centres to vast parklands nestled before a lush green hinterland. In 2007, the Gold Coast City Council began one of Australia's most exciting community visioning projects. Colin Russo summarizes here the factors that made it an award-winning model – and captured the hearts and minds of its citizens.

After only three years, the Gold Coast is transforming. From the traditional example of city management – Roads, Rates and Rubbish – it has become an outstanding model of successful shared leadership, demonstrating that it is possible for futures projects to cover an immense range of complex issues.

From the outset we worked with Professor Sohail Inayatullah, a renowned city futures expert, using his CLA methodology to deliver lasting change in the complex, living system that is Gold Coast City – and in the organization charged with managing it. Focused on the future of the city to 2037, the project is about creating a community that aspires to sustain and enhance its assets, with a living culture that embraces diverse interests from the coast to the hinterland.

The visioning initiative began with one of Australia's largest city-wide community engagement projects. That identified a suite of values extending from nine themes of land use; beaches; community, culture; economy; energy, environment; water and transport. Interviews with local experts and international city futurists presented solid grounding for Our Bold Future.

Dr Inayatullah explained that the challenges and expectations of a prosperous Gold Coast will never lessen. The best time to provide for a preferred future, in the face of continued global uncertainty, is right now. "When will there a better time to plan?" he asked.

How It Began

As a result of in depth preparation across Council, presentations by Dr Inayatullah and detailed preparations by elected representatives, a full meeting of Council resolved to:

- plan for future uncertainties through an awareness raising process
- bring the Gold Coast community together in planning for the future
- partner with the community to implement the plans
- create alignment in the city toward the Our Bold Future vision
- consider other actions that may lead to better plans, a better vision and better outcomes

The *Our Bold Future* initiative began in August 2007, when an Advisory Committee was formed to undertake urgent community engagement. Interactions included recorded interviews with expert industry practitioners, live presentations from Council experts and multimedia presentations and visualizations. All of them were aimed at focusing participants on 2037 as well as strategies needed in the immediate to mid term.

By May 2008, 11,000 community responses had been received through City Forums, surveys and focus groups. Questions focused on current and future preferences for the Gold Coast, and for the particular theme under examination. These included 'our environmental future', 'our economic future', beaches, land use, culture, community, transport, water and energy. We also used the "futures triangle" to explore the weight of the future (inertia) as well as the push of change and the pull of a vision. This helped us align survey questions, which focused on current preferences, future priorities and constraints - as well as ways to overcome constraints - and were designed to allow comparisons between all responses received from the forums and surveys. That in turn made it easier for citizens to check that their own responses were included – and it helped them to relate their choices to other priorities and constraints.

The surveys were online, and were also used in 25 city and staff forums with business and residential communities, for State Government managers and staff and for students at two universities and one college. Input from young people was included in presentations to local schools and through the Gold Coast City Council Junior Youth Council. A local City Scope youth exhibition also captured local youth views.

The Bold Future initiative distanced Gold Coast City from any notion of 'no-frills' community engagement, with its risk of being seen to be following only the letter of the law. Those were the 'old days'. Instead it demonstrated Council's capacity to lead and transform to a new level of community engagement practice.

In terms of litany (the key lists and unordered data that help us form an understanding of a topic) it is possible to say that "'meaningfulness' in community engagement is about enhancing measured performance around meaningful acts leading up to, during and after the engagement process". Less formally, meaningfulness is also about accessibility, or good communication about the program. Communication, after all, is defined as the sharing of understanding, so 'meaningful engagement' is about more than the exchange of information, in one forum for a minority. On the contrary, it is about engaging the majority, or at least offering access to the majority to participate in a meaningful way. Shared understanding is also required for the results of community engagement – the changes to be brought about must not only occur, but must be communicated, to sustain the 'meaning' of what engagement is all about.

What Made It Work?

Five critical success factors from the Gold Coast Bold Future Initiative were:

1. A great use of modern media and website techniques
2. A wide use of systems from Universities, TAFE, State Government, Schools, and engagement of local businesses and industry representatives
3. Successful use of themed survey questions, used throughout forums to confirm veracity, credibility, representation and demographic stratification
4. Wide range of themes addressed
5. Integration of findings into outcomes and sustained use of the Bold Future vision to implement City projects.

What Will Sustain the Initiative?

1. Refreshment and continuing engagement across wide demographics
2. Capacity to work with and develop maturing interest groups across the city
3. Capacity to implement outcomes
4. Communication of the implementation of outcomes
5. Positive feedback capture through official monitoring and evaluation, and refreshment of aims and actions through future/ongoing rounds of community engagement.

Only through rigorous performance measurement can real change be identified and communicated. The current Gold Coast context is broadly about integrating a litany of continuing projects through the Bold Future vision. At the systems level partnerships, consultation and other ways of engagement are being researched. The vision is being sustained as both aspirational and practical. At the world view level, the Bold Future Initiative has begun to bring the Gold Coast and the community of futurists together in very early steps. And perhaps the most powerful result is the way it has worked at the myth/metaphor level, helping the city to transform its narratives (see Figure 1).

Council has pursued a pragmatic approach to the futures project throughout, using the program as an effective methodology to integrate community engagement, governance and planning discipline requirements.

CLA level	Power	Politics	Leadership
Litany	<i>From</i> focus on internal authority, internal funding and internal decision making <i>to</i> a comprehensive, integrated, internal and external context	<i>From</i> retention of control at all costs, role playing and positioning, strategy, popularity <i>to</i> control through holding a long term view integrated with current professional practices and needs	Coalescence of different leadership styles, actions and outcomes that now consider futures studies skills as fundamental
Systems	New approvals/decision making processes that encompass futures considerations	<i>From</i> electoral systems, where contact with community is only through campaigning and formal Council meetings, <i>to</i> constant engagement and permeability	Leadership systems have considered integrating futures corporate methodology
Worldview	Invested interests at different levels of the decision making process are now more transparent and accountable	Self sustainability vs. Group sustainability. Democracy vs. Autocracy is now better balanced	Realism and goal orientation is a prerequisite for successful ongoing leadership
Myth Metaphor	<i>From</i> “the Government has the power”, “Fair go, mate” <i>to</i> “power with the people” and “we are all on the same boat”.	<i>From</i> “I am best for the role – I will save you”, “Big Brother/paternalism” <i>to</i> “we couldn’t do this without you”	<i>From</i> “The city is ours for our taking / only we built this city, in isolation” <i>to</i> “Together we built this city to make a difference”

Figure 1. How "our bold future" changed our city.

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