

What Landholder is that? Tailoring Your Engagement Approach

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Key Points

- Social sciences are as important in successful river management as technical science.
- There are a number of frameworks and other tools to articulate the practical application of social science methodologies one of which is de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats'.
- Landholders are all different despite often being grouped together as 'farmers'. 'Six Thinking Hats' can be applied when engaging individual private landholders in river management to help guide NRM practitioners to develop their skills in this area by tailoring their approach.
- The practical application of this can be demonstrated through use of landholder personas.

Abstract

Using Dr Edward de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats' as a framework, different landholder profiles are explored in relation to the successful delivery of on-farm river restoration projects. All landholders are different, but they fit into broad groups in terms of their approach and motivation. White hats need all the facts and science to make decisions; yellow hats are very positive and have lots of ideas which may or may not be feasible; black hats are the devil's advocate and look for errors and issues, but once satisfied will tend to do a good job; red hats base decisions on feelings with little understanding of the facts; green hats tend to be very creative with lots of ideas, but may lack practical ability; and finally blue hats represent the extension officers, bringing together many different approaches and ideas to tailor on-ground action for long term environmental improvement. Using a light-hearted, story-telling style approach, these six thinking hats will be explored in relation to real-life experience in the context of landholders achieving on ground riparian restoration projects.

Keywords

Landholders, river projects, profiling, frameworks, social science, motivation, experiences

Introduction

Traditionally in Australia, riparian management and implementation models have focused on the technical aspects of undertaking actions within and along waterways to improve condition. In recent times however, the social sciences are becoming more prominent in river management and focus is given to the participants or 'players' involved in undertaking various on-ground actions (Lund 2015). In Australia, where 48% of the total land area is managed by private landholders (ABS 2017) including most of Australia's arable land, local communities therefore become responsible for caring for water catchments to deliver clean water and other ecosystem services for the greater good. Protection and / or improvement to a waterway often comes down to the willingness of individuals and their families, who may or may not have an active environmental community to support them, or a network such as Landcare, government agencies and / or Non-Government Organisation's (NGO's) to provide knowledge and incentives. There has also been a tendency towards short term funding cycles, and this lack of funding continuity presents major challenges at all levels of Natural Resource Management work. This is because the issues being managed often require sustained effort over the long-term, retaining skilled staff is extremely difficult with no security of funding, and the short and interrupted funding cycles waste funds due to the rapid scaling up and down required (DoEE 2017). Funding goes up and down with each election cycle, and continuity often relies on the tenacity of those that undertake these important roles. Similarly, funding for landholder incentives also goes up and down, and the key to getting these funds

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effectively and efficiently “delivered” on ground frequently relies on the skills of extension officers and other community champions.

It is for these reasons that programs like Rivers of Carbon (an on-ground incentives program run by the Australian River Restoration Centre), have turned to investing in people, to increase the likelihood of good outcomes for long term river management. Rivers of Carbon supports landholders and communities to undertake on-ground activities in a framework that invests in a long-term shared journey. This includes ensuring people feel as though they are part of something ‘bigger’, providing access to science in a way that is easily understood (and interpreted where necessary), ongoing knowledge exchange with those that have had similar experiences, and fostering existing and new relationships to arm people with the confidence to act in a sustainable way.

Delivering projects in this ‘social based’ framework requires an understanding of the people that are being engaged. We learn what motivates them, what ignites their passion and commitment, and what sparks their willingness to gain and share knowledge. We respect and seek from our landholders the understanding and experience they already have, as any on-ground actions we recommend must be placed within the context of their daily life and decision making. Finding a win-win solution to any issue can be difficult, but when you start by understanding the people involved, rather than leaping straight to what needs to be done, you lay the foundation for a relationship that empowers them to act.

Another part of our approach is to allow the time and space to enable people to understand ideas that may be very new to them, or to consider information that contrasts with past action. For example, willows were planted to stabilise riverbanks as recently as the 1970’s, and now people are being asked to remove them as a weed of national significance, often involving great expense, time and, sometimes risk. Similarly, for the ‘old timers’ who remember the drive to clear land, it can be a struggle to grasp why we are asking them and their families to replant and protect remnant vegetation. By understanding a person’s context, as well as appreciating different personalities, levels of comprehension and decision-making processes, long term outcomes of riparian management can be significantly enhanced.

Using the ‘Six Thinking Hats’:

One way of understanding differences between style and approach, is to use Dr. Edward de Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats” (which are colour-coded for ease of understanding). This system has been designed to help make work places more collaborative and less combative, more productive, and more confident in their creativity (de Bono 2018). It requires people to switch hats to explore all viewpoints.

In the context of river management, it is a tool that can help practitioners to adapt their own approach when working with landholders by understanding the different ‘hats’ (or ways of thinking) that a landholder appears to wear. It is not a foolproof or prescriptive approach, but rather serves as a guide to increase understanding and awareness. It is important to note that most people wear several ‘hats, although a person’s style can often be dominated by one or two particular ways of thinking, or in this case ‘hats’.

De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats are as follows:



The White Hat calls for information known or needed. These are people who can only deal with rock solid facts and just the facts.



The Red Hat signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. These are people who work purely on intuition and emotion.

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The Black Hat is judgment -- the devil's advocate or why something may not work. These people focus on the negative – what could go wrong, why it wont work and are risk averse.



The Yellow Hat symbolizes brightness and optimism. These people will lean towards the positives and downplay negatives.



The Green Hat focuses on creativity: the possibilities, alternatives and new ideas. These people have a tendency to look outside the square.



The Blue Hat is used to manage the thinking process and ensure the six hats guidelines are turned into practical actions, and to maintain a broader perspective. This is the role of the coordinator.

The Six Thinking Hats and Landholder Profiles

To gain an insight into how you might use the Six Thinking Hats it is useful to delve past the theoretical and into the practical. We will do this by exploring how the six hats theory might apply in the real world for the benefit of NRM practitioners.

Meet Tom. Tom is a yellow hat. Tom is a hard-working older man who has been on the land all his life. He is a fourth-generation sheep and cattle farmer, with a large family and expansive holdings. He is less involved in the farm business as he is getting older, and through succession planning (i.e. handing more things over to his children) he has time to think about projects to improve the farm after seeing the resource base decline over the years. Tom has seen many policies come and go that have affected his farming business in different ways, including his ability to manage his waterways (some good, some bad). He has made progress towards fencing and revegetating some of his smaller creeks, which he can see the benefits of doing, but is constrained by his experience of the boom and bust cycles on his land, so is cautious about taking on too much at his age because he does all the work himself. Tom could be described as a yellow hat – optimistic about undertaking future projects but requires a significant amount of logic to be applied to go ahead. He will do things in bite sized chunks but will not go ‘all out’. The more Tom does, the more willing he is to take on more, providing he has incentives and support, as well as trust in the people he is working with.

As a project officer, you will need to know what you are talking about in a practical sense, be supportive and prepared for a long-term relationship. Tom needs to know he can call you about his projects at any time as someone who is there to help when he needs it (or at least is on his side and willing to try to help). Tom will do a fantastic job and will become a community champion (without meaning to) which he will eventually embrace. You may as well throw out the landholder agreement, as Tom works on a gentleman’s handshake (but he will sign it anyway). Tom involves lots of cups of tea and a relationship with many family members which is a pleasant way to spend a morning. You will also find yourself calling Tom whenever you need a host or speaker for a field day. He will reluctantly and nervously agree to do this with a smile.

Meet Anthony. Anthony is a white hat. Anthony is a young professional who has relatively small land holdings – just enough land to run a small commercial business in Alpaca wool and some Lavender which his wife particularly likes. Anthony can never quite get the farm to make a profit, but mostly breaks even. He is constantly annoyed about the Serrated tussock which is a money vacuum and is frequently heard cursing the neighbours lack of Serrated Tussock control. He relies on his and his wife’s off farm income, and as t the farm is a lifestyle choice, if it pays for itself then he is happy. He is not keen to sink a lot of money into it unless all the facts are sound and balanced. He and his wife will go to field days, look up information, talk to a range of professionals, talk to other landholders, and continually struggle with the idea that there is no one simple answer to anything in river management! Anthony will spend considerable time trying to get all the answers.

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The best way to work with Anthony is to understand his need for facts and figures and provide them as much as possible. It is also important to guide Anthony into the brave new world of river management so that he understands broader concepts rather than individual facts (Anthony is extremely good at math's because it is absolute). He also doesn't like mess. So, for Anthony it is best to promote an understanding of basic ecosystem function rather than the results of the latest CSIRO study on how many species of beetles are in his riparian zone and what they all do, or "the finer points of biofilm" which, as interesting as this is, will not help Anthony to feel confident to act. Once he feels confident, Anthony will just get on with the job and you are unlikely to hear from him unless he has a problem. He will also have all the other computer programmers from his work out planting trees on his farm after employing a contractor to build the fence (for a strongly negotiated price of course).

Meet Margaret. Margaret is a black hat. Margaret is a middle-aged woman who lives with her partner on a medium sized farm which they bought to get away from the fast paced and stressful life of the city. Her partner runs her own online sales business and travels a lot, and Margaret manages the farm which is primarily boutique cattle and some horse agistment. Margaret is inherently skeptical about anything to do with the government, and while she is interested in fixing the erosion along her creek, she is reluctant to enter into any kind of agreement or contract. She uses logic to decide why something won't work in a way that seems logical to her.

To engage Margaret, you will require extremely good communication skills, and will need to find something that Margaret is positive, for example, a shared passion that is usually completely unrelated to the topic at hand e.g. dog training, growing strawberries, travel or crosswords. A good place to start is to ask about her cattle, and you will learn that she is developing a new line for the Japanese market (with high marbling). Be interested! She will become animated and will appreciate your interest. From here, the conversation can gently turn to shelter for stock and water quality, and some practical ways for these to be protected by fixing the erosion within her overall farm management plan. At this point you can share your own knowledge and experience in addressing the sorts of issues she has on her farm by being honest about what may go wrong, but also about what is likely to go right. The key here is the experience of the practitioner – if you don't know, promise to find out. Never bullshit to Margaret. You will lose her forever! Once satisfied, Margaret's skepticism will lessen (although will never completely go away). The ongoing relationship can sometimes feel strained because Margaret likes to speak her mind. Stay strong and positive.

Meet Max. Max is a red hat. Max inherited a relatively large mixed sheep / wheat farm from his parents (along with a manager and other workers who run the farm business). He has been off the farm for many years after leaving for the big smoke to pursue a career in electronics, which although successful, left him feeling he needed a change and resulted in a move back to the farm when his parents died. Max is passionate about protecting the environment and was the motivator for workplace 'giving back to nature' days, Clean Up Australia, Earth Hour, as well as living a sustainable environmentally friendly lifestyle. He felt the farm was his opportunity to make a difference to future generations by looking after the land through sustainable yet profitable farming. His parents did not share his views about 'tree planting', and Max found it hard to sway them during the short stays he had with them when he visited. He did manage to install a couple of small treelines over the years which his parents were fine with. His first activity was to call around looking for projects to help with financing his ideas.

During the first visit with you he produces a map with every creek and fenceline earmarked for revegetation in green highlighter and an infectious enthusiasm. Max is easy to get along with because he shares your views on this matter. However, you have a task ahead to bring Max back to reality in terms of funding availability (from grants and Max's landholder contributions), time and managing risk by not doing everything all at once. You help Max to come up with a sensible implementation plan and start by doing some significant, but achievable activities in areas likely to have the most impact (e.g. connecting remnant vegetation, providing shelter, promoting soil retention and so on). It is also important to provide basic information so that Max understands the reasons behind the actions being suggested. Have a chat to the manager of the property to get her views on what is proposed as she has worked there for more than 20 years and has a great deal of contextual knowledge

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about the land and the business. She can make it work. Max will change his mind several times before settling on a plan but, once implemented, will eventually result in a good project (with the farm managers help).

Meet Linda. Linda is a green hat. Linda is on a relatively small block in an estate with several other relatively small blocks, runs some coloured sheep, and designs living spaces in houses as a very successful interior designer. Linda's main skill is thinking outside the box. and she will want to use any available grant funding to do something completely left field. You will be left thinking that it seems like a good idea, but how in the hell are you going to get it to fit within the project guidelines. She is often in the audience at field days, and you have been to see her several times but can never quite get anywhere.

On this occasion you are out there because she wants to put a waterfall on the creek to power the outdoor sauna (which she has recently built but is struggling with power supply). You explain that the funds are to improve biodiversity and water quality, and she commits to doing whatever it takes as long as she gets her waterfall. She agrees to fence and revegetate her entire creek to a width of 50m each side and install alternative water for stock if you could just swing her some rock and an excavator. You find that the outcomes for the project are too good to refuse (because her project links to two other neighbours) and, after assessing the impacts to the river which are relatively small, you decide to give her the benefit of the doubt (reminding her that she needs to get the appropriate approvals). She is so ecstatic that someone believes in her project idea (because local power generation is good for the environment in her view) that she doesn't listen to your conditions. A strongly worded and clear agreement is important with Linda.

Meet yourself: You as the NRM practitioner are the blue hat. Look at the job you are doing and reflect on what has worked and what hasn't. Don't cringe at the mistakes you've made, or the people who have irked you, but rather embrace the wins. Take the time to look at what you have achieved. You are the link between science, government policy and practical action, and without you little would be achieved in the space of riparian zone and catchment management. Make sure you have a good understanding of the bigger picture and try to put the pieces of the puzzle together so that outcomes are maximized on-ground. The model of delivery of many riparian projects don't differ significantly, but it is the application of the tools in the toolbox that make all the difference in the face of significant variability.

Conclusion

Working with landholders requires a variety of skills that mix technical knowledge, experience, intuition, emotion and passion. It is not a role to be taken lightly, as it is highly personal and often involves those you are working with to think about things differently and change their behaviour. The conversations you have with landholders are vitally important in laying the foundations for an ongoing long-term relationship. Many of us working in this role are faced with the reality of short-term funding cycles, a problem that works against being able to develop relationships (DoEE 2017). This can be managed if we get to know our landholders so that we can tailor our approach to working with them. The 'Six Thinking Hats' is a useful tool, as it enables consideration to be given to what the landholder needs to support their decision making, as well as providing you, the project officer, with some guidance about how best to interact with different personalities. Humans are as messy and complex as the natural environments we are trying to protect and restore – this diversity is a strength and one that makes our work life interesting, frustrating but ultimately rewarding. Using frameworks such as the 'Six Thinking Hats' provides an example of how social science has a practical application to river management by shifting the focus onto the human and social elements behind action.

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