



lessons

from a snake

Change is the space between the what was and the what will be. It is human nature that most individuals and collections of individuals – organisations – seek to avoid it, or avoid doing it too often.

The interval or space between the decay of the old and the establishment of the new constitutes, as John C. Calhoun wrote in 1850, 'a period of transition, which must always necessarily be one of uncertainty, confusion, error and wild and fierce fanaticism'.

So it is for individuals and organisations alike. And we're all achingly familiar with some or all those mindsets and behaviours in periods of change.

But perhaps in this Year of the Snake we might draw inspiration, even comfort, from a species that simply lives with the reality, and the risks, of life in the space between the decay of the old and the establishment of the new.

The snake sheds its entire skin on a regular basis, two, four or even eight times a year. The frequency of this 'shedding' depend on the snake's rapidity of growth, size, age, nutritional state, activity level and environmental factors. So too should each organisation understand itself, and

its circumstances, to know whether strategic change, or shedding of the old, should be done more or less frequently.

Pet shops warn buyers it might be quite alarming to see what looks to be a perfectly healthy snake suddenly acting or looking funny, but educate them to understand and accept that it's an integral part of the snake's natural cycle and rhythm of life. If staff or customers see an organisation as suddenly acting or looking funny while making changes then it might have some work to do to educate them that this is a necessary part of the natural cycle.

The first sign of shedding for snake owners is that their normally active snake is less evident, almost 'hiding', and the existing skin layer becomes opaque. In many organisations, strategy reviews are done behind closed doors, and there is opaqueness about future direction. This can make staff and stakeholders somewhat anxious.

In the shedding process, there is remarkable transformation of old skin cells and new skin cells, with some diffusion as well as some space between the two. For a period of up to two weeks the snake's vision is impaired, causing them to be

Right thinking

- Several times a year the snake's wellbeing and survival depends on a necessary part of its lifecycle: the successful shedding of its old skin and the development of a new one.
- Organisations might reflect on their 'shedding', understanding the necessity of always having a healthy strategic 'skin', and understanding the vulnerabilities and process in moving between the decay of the old and the establishment of the new.



somewhat aggressive and unpredictable, and vulnerable to attack. It is not unheard of for organisations' boards, executives or staff to exhibit similar behaviours.

Sometimes there is incomplete or improper shedding, which might be due to disease, malnutrition, trauma, incorrect temperature, incorrect handling. Incomplete or unsuccessful change efforts may have suffered similarly. And sometimes the incomplete shedding leaves an opaque cover over the snake's eye, restricting its vision.

It's also a fact that young snakes shed their skins more often, and sometimes in one entire piece, just as start-ups and smaller entrepreneurial organisations can rethink and recalibrate more willingly and readily compared to large organisations.

You may never wish to own a snake, but some of the advice given to snake owners if they see a shedding problem, might well serve as general organisational advice to those who see problems in their change or strategic review process:

- Analyse the environment; adjust heat, light if necessary. Ensure enough space and snake hasn't outgrown original enclosure.
- Analyse the diet i.e. adequate supply of proper type of nourishment.
- Check for signs of illness or stress, and ensure there is ample space for privacy away from prying eyes and the spotlight.
- For large snakes, help them along by soaking them in a tub of warm water and gently rub their skin.
- Always work in a head-to-tail direction.
- Pay close attention to the eye caps: if they won't come off, your snake's vision will be impaired and remain unpredictable and vulnerable.

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If you'd like any further information about Right Lane Consulting and how we help your organisation, please contact **Marc Levy** at marc@rightlane.com.au

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