



# Collaborative change in the Melbourne Print Centre

**A case study of  
News Corp Australia  
and the AMWU Printing Division**

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This is a case study of transformed workplace relations at News Corp Australia. Adversarialism, which has long typified the relationship between management and their major union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), is giving way to a collaborative approach.

This transformation began at the company's Melbourne Print Centre (MPC) in 2015, when both parties acknowledged that there had to be a better way to deal with the many challenges confronting the company and the broader newsprint industry. This case study describes the subsequent process by which the parties worked with the Fair Work Commission (the Commission) to achieve greater collaboration at the Melbourne site and reports some of the positive outcomes achieved so far. It also anticipates future efforts to consolidate the new approach at this site and expand it to other sites around Australia.

## THE ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR HISTORY TOGETHER

News Corp Australia is a publicly-listed subsidiary of the international media company, News Corp. It is the country's largest media company, publishing and printing newspapers, along with producing digital media on a range of platforms (IBISWorld 2016; News Corp Homepage). News Corp Australia has grown over the years through acquisition and comprises a number of entities with quite different structures and cultures. Its governance structure is complex and relatively fluid (Aston 2015). Ultimately, the company is overseen by the Board of Directors of the parent company based in New York, which approves major strategic and investment decisions in Australia.

This case study concentrates on the newspaper printing segment of the business, which produces seven of the top ten newspapers sold in Australia, selling 10.4 million newspapers each week (News Corp website 2017). The main focus is the Herald and Weekly Times Pty Limited, which operates one of the larger production

sites within News Corp Australia. It is based at the MPC. Newspapers have been in production here since the 1990s, when News Corp Australia invested around \$500 million in four new print centres (in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane). It was purpose built to accommodate a number of large printing presses.

The MPC is extensively unionised, as is the case across most of News Corp Australia's print sites. The predominant union at the site is the Printing Division of the AMWU. The site unionisation rate is approximately 95 per cent with the majority of the members in the AMWU Printing Division (90 per cent) and the remainder in the AMWU Metals Division. The other notable union is the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) Division of the Communications, Electrical, Electronic, Energy, Information, Postal, Plumbing and Allied Services Union of Australia, which covers electrical maintenance, although its membership is much smaller than the AMWU. Members of the Printing Division work in operations, or the

production side of the newspapers, while members of the Metals division (as well as ETU members) work on the maintenance of equipment used in production. Consistent with the long traditions of print unions, there is strong workplace organisation, with active union delegates regularly coordinating their activities.

Wages and conditions at the MPC are regulated through enterprise agreements. Members of the Printing Division of the AMWU are covered by a national agreement (News Corp Australia – AMWU Metropolitan Printing Agreement 2014). Traditionally, the mechanical maintenance workers represented by the Metals Division of the AMWU and the electricians represented by the ETU had separate agreements, but they came together in a single Victoria-specific enterprise agreement in 2011, which was revised in 2014 (Herald and Weekly Times Pty Limited – Maintenance Agreement 2014).

### **Acknowledgements**

Research for this case study comprised interviews with six key informants from News Corp Australia management, the AMWU and the Commission as well as extensive analysis of documents. Interviewees are not identified in order to meet the requirements of ethics approvals.

## Technological change and the workforce

Until 2014, the MPC site operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Reduced volumes of printing due to drops in circulation and the smaller size of newspapers due to digitalisation has meant that the printing can be completed in a shorter window of time. The short-to-medium-term forecast is for continued decline in circulation with an estimated reduction in annualised revenue of 3.3 per cent between 2016 and 2021 (Tarrant 2016).

The workforce skills required to operate the printing presses have changed over the years, with an end to most of the old manual labour and the traditional occupation of compositor. Many printing staff have upgraded their skills. Likewise, computerised production has shortened the production process and also led to reduced labour requirements, with numbers significantly down from the approximately 500 staff required in the initial stages of operation at the MPC (Interview with management; Tarrant 2016, p.26). Staff numbers were also reduced when approximately 50 employees became redundant following management outsourcing seven titles published at the MPC (Interview with management).

The MPC presses are rapidly becoming out-dated, inefficient and unreliable. On-going maintenance is required and sourcing parts is problematic. The company has identified the need for newer presses, which are much smaller, more efficient and require fewer staff. In this context, managers see the MPC as too large and a new, smaller site as more practical.

### Adversarial relations at the MPC

Relationships between management and unions at the MPC had been poor. One manager, for example, said:

*'The Melbourne print centre... was the print centre where we had most of the industrial disputes... for a variety of reasons: a lot of it to do with union structures; maybe carrying on of traditions; bumping up against the new technology in the new place; maybe a little bit of managers, who were less sophisticated than they might have been. Whatever the reason, the MPC is a problem child.'*

Another manager characterised relationships as 'toxic' – an assessment that union officials largely agreed with:

*'Prior to the recent couple of years, the relationship was very adversarial... I would describe it as being "non-productive" because if the employer suggested something that may well be productive and it wasn't going to be a major issue, our members would say "no", just because management suggested it. So, [workers would be thinking] "it can't be good for you if management's suggesting it". There was all this speculation that there's got to be something evil in it; it's leading to an ultimate goal of attacking us somehow;... these people don't do things genuinely, they want to attack us all the time... So, it's best to just say "no". You just say no to everything, and that way management go and do what they do and we run the presses. That's how it works... I honestly don't know how they managed to put a paper out.'*

These poor relationships were illustrated by the difficult process by which enterprise agreements were negotiated in earlier years. In both the 2011 and 2014 rounds of enterprise bargaining unions sought from the Commission ballots for protected industrial action, which they won. There were stoppages in 2011 by the maintenance unions, although not in 2014. Even without actual stoppages, however, there was much frustration on all sides.

When disputes did go to the Commission, tribunal involvement was characterised by the traditional focus on resolution of notified disputes. Moreover, in the years leading up to 2015, management identified a lack of continuity, in that a number of different Commission Members became involved in these disputes.

Even more typical of the poor relationships, however, were the many small disputes at MPC between bargaining rounds that did not get to the Commission:

*'... aside from the wages negotiations..., they were never big disputes. There were a lot of little disputes, about a lot of little things, that you could almost put a band aid on soon after they occurred.'*

The same manager saw these disputes as reflecting a 'culture' in which management communicated poorly and an approach by workers/unions in which *'... whenever something changed, whenever something is done, the first instinct was "let's go off and have a chat about this and then come back with a whole list of demands"'*.

The many disputes and the underlying adversarial relationships meant that the implementation of workplace change was extremely slow and difficult. With the industry under pressure and technology changing rapidly, this situation represented a serious challenge to the viability of the site.

After a company restructure and change in senior management in 2011, national News Corp Australia managers and national AMWU Printing Division officials had gradually been developing better working relationships, although this developed slowly and did not extend to all the company's printing sites.

## A CHANGE IN DIRECTION

By early 2015, seven titles previously printed at the MPC were cancelled and the printing of another 20 had been outsourced, resulting in the loss of 70 jobs and the need for significant changes to rosters. However, despite declining circulation figures (and accompanying advertising revenues) and the need for dramatic efficiency improvements, management was still committed to a future for newspaper printing. Management consequently sought more redundancies in the short term at the MPC, but they also announced to union officials their ambition in the longer-term to open a new print centre with new technology. This would require a new location, a reduced workforce and significant multi-skilling of jobs.

By mid-2015, rumours were rife amongst the workforce of the move to a greenfield site and management informed the workforce as a whole of its plan, although it had not yet been approved by the company's international board. Union officials recognised the gravity of the situation:

*'This was a really big issue. We had a very large group of people that were on a team negotiating or consulting over these redundancies. Probably 60 per cent to 70 per cent of them were up for either a voluntary or a forced redundancy, so there was a conflict there. Very emotional.'*

Given the extent and pace of change that was needed and the adversarial relationships at the site, management knew implementation would be difficult. The senior manager recalled:

*'... we wanted to get the change from Melbourne, and I think me trying to drive it by myself we would have got there, but it would have been a long and hard and bloody road... Time was*

*against us in this change and we had to get it all done at once. It just would have been heavy work, heavy lifting and in Fair Work a number of times, having the dispute resolution... clause put up in front of us.'*

As one of the union officials recalled, 'relationships everywhere were toxic' and 'both sides were gearing up for a big dispute'. In this context, they recognised that things had to change:

*'Our view was, well, what are you going to do? What's the alternative? Keep doing what we're doing? It doesn't work.'*

The union officials approached the senior managers to see if they would consider a more collaborative approach. These union leaders – along with Deputy President Anna Booth (Deputy President Booth) and Commissioner Julius Roe (Commissioner Roe) – had previously been involved in the remarkable turn-around in relationships and performance outcomes at Orora Fibre Packaging (see Macneil & Bray 2015). They were, in their own words, 'convinced of the collaborative approach' when the circumstances were right. Management had some trust in these union officials and they responded quickly and positively, although the senior manager acknowledged that this was something of a 'leap of faith'. Another manager with 20 years' experience at News Corp had reservations at the beginning, although he took comfort from Commissioner Roe's reputation:

*'I was a bit cynical about it, having had the baggage of the history... How's this going to work?... But [I was also] optimistic, because someone like Commissioner Roe is very experienced and I was absolutely confident that it could not do us any harm.'*

After some investigation into the Orora case, which included personal discussions with managers at Orora, they agreed to jointly approach the Commission. In August 2015, News Corp Australia national managers, MPC managers and AMWU Printing Division officials had several 'positive and helpful' meetings with the Commission with the aim of identifying common goals between the parties. Particularly important here, especially for management, was a common vision:

*'I want sustainability in print. I want to make sure that we can print newspapers well into the future, and if I can achieve that goal then they get longevity in [union] membership. So, [union leaders] buy into my goal because they want their people employed for a long period of time, and they understand for me to achieve my goal I need to make structural changes...'*

From these initial meetings, it was jointly decided that the new collaborative approach would be piloted at the MPC News Corp site, where circumstances resulted in the most urgent need for redundancies.



# THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

The transformation process began in September 2015 at the MPC with a joint training session conducted by Commissioner Roe. This set the scene for subsequent actions, which involved the establishment of appropriate joint decision-making structures and detailed negotiations over a range of workplace changes.

## Collaboration Team training

The first training session, run by the Commission in September 2015, was held at the MPC and was well-attended by representatives from both sides, including AMWU/ETU delegates and full-time officials, on the union side; and the General Manager Operations and other senior managers from Operations and Production on the management side.

The aim of this training session was to introduce the participants to the principles of collaboration. The workshop opened with a presentation about the importance of trust and respect in workplace relations and how they can help with conflict resolution. The workshop proceedings were underpinned by the interest-based bargaining philosophy.

The training session also involved activities where management and the unions were encouraged to identify the key issues in the business from the other side's point of view. The need to build a new collaborative model was stressed and practiced through exercises designed to identify common concerns. In particular, discussion focused on how to maximise the shared interests and work together to achieve mutually-agreeable outcomes.

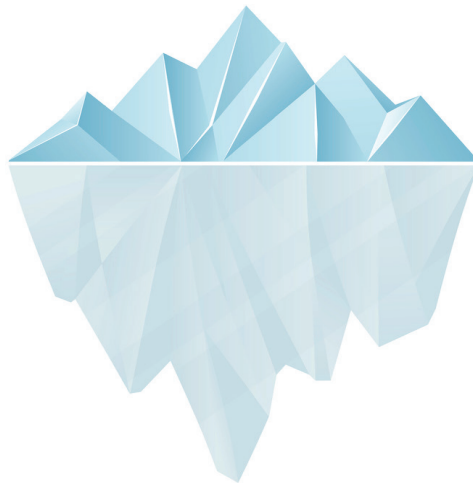
Both management and unions indicated that this collaboration team training was a great success, with positive feedback received from the attendees. One union official explained that delegates in particular embraced the model:

*'I have found, through my experience, that when we've introduced this interest-based bargaining model, our delegates soak up this information and want to engage in it because, for them, they see it's a way to be heard, when they feel like they haven't been heard for so long.'*

## Visible Positions

### Underlying Interests

- Needs/Concerns
- Hopes/Fears
- Risks/Opportunities



### Why focus on interests?

- Just focusing on 'positions' will not effectively address all of the issues
- More options can be generated for potential resolution, that:
  - meet the shared interests
  - meet the interests which are in common but not in conflict
  - resolve or best meet the interests which are in conflict

The same official observed the conversion of the delegates during the workshop:

*'... body language, what I've observed is the delegates start off with their arms crossed, but by the end of the session, they're engaged. They want to know more... In a sense, if we stick with the training that Commissioner Roe has done so far, it's providing the delegates in particular with a new way of doing things that they would not have had exposure to before.'*

One manager acknowledged that the collaborative approach was 'very new to me' and that he had some trepidation. He saw the training workshop as highly successful, which he attributed to Commissioner Roe's knowledge and wide experience, his membership of the Commission and his personal style:

*'He gave us some insights in to the sorts of things that he'd done at other businesses and how he would approach it. And that absolutely gave us a whole new context... So that was*

*quite promising, particularly his style. [H]e's very, very good at just talking to people in plain English... no jargon, he's a very honest, sincere type. And he comes with that whole trust and respect of the tribunal. For me, this was... the most important thing, because... as much as we get on very well with [the union officials] and with a lot of the reps individually, that history of disputes and [poor relations]... with the local management, there was a lot of... distrust or a lot of, 'the company's really only doing things to suit itself.'*

Soon after the training session, a two-page 'outcome' document was jointly produced by the parties summarising the discussions and laying the foundation for establishing the collaborative approach, including: agreed common interests; barriers; what will help; and the next steps to be taken.

The section on the 'next steps' guided events over coming months, including getting endorsement from the workforce to participate in the process; establishing the working teams to address key issues; determining the governance structure and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU); identifying and developing objectives and timelines.

The training session was repeated in February 2017 due to redundancies from the original 'MPC collaboration team'. Interest among the delegates was high and the union had no difficulty in filling vacant roles. According to union officials:

*'In Herald and Weekly Times, there were so many delegates and so many different departments, we got them to elect someone from their department to be a delegate. Ironically enough, after the first round of redundancies, we had to redo the whole collaboration team again.'*

The focus of the second session was essentially the same as the first, training the participants on the importance of establishing trust and respect in the

workplace and how this can assist in conflict resolution. Again, the feedback was positive.

### The Protocol on Collaboration

Following the successful first training session, the unions and management worked together to produce a statement of agreed objectives and shared principles. This four-page document, entitled 'Protocol on Collaboration', was completed in October 2015. It opened with a sentence stating what this approach is **not** about:

*'The most important information to communicate to everyone is that this is not a process to undermine wages and conditions of employment, it is about transparency, communication and consultation moving forward.'*

An introductory section then laid bare the precarious state of the newspaper industry and stressed the inevitable need for change. The two alternatives for change – resist or cooperate – and the repercussions associated with each strategy were discussed.

The document identified five 'objectives' of the collaboration, which were to:

- improve the quality of decision making regarding change;
- strengthen buy-in by managers and co-workers;
- make the change process fairer for all concerned;

- facilitate speedy and ultimately sustainable change; and
- strengthen workplace relations for the long term, beyond the current change program.

The final section of the Protocol focused on the 'agreed features' of the model, including:

- information sharing;
- the central role for the Collaboration Team;
- general principles;
- approaches to consultation;
- genuine and efficient consultation;
- supporting collaboration and dealing with disagreements; and
- communication.

The 'agreed features' was particularly important because it set out the jointly-determined parameters that both parties saw as necessary for successful collaboration; in other words, aimed to ensure that everyone was playing by the same rules.

### The 'Structure for Collaboration and Resolving Disputes'

Still under the guidance of the Commission, the next step was for the parties to formalise the structure and processes of the collaborative approach. This was contained in a document entitled 'Structure for Collaboration and Resolving Disputes', which outlined a three-level hierarchy of joint management-union committees.



## The Operation of the New Collaborative Processes

In accordance with the agreed procedures, the Collaboration Team met and drew up a spreadsheet, which listed some key issues, the interests of the parties on these issues, and a final column presenting possible alternative ways forward. Out of this process, a series of concerns were identified: the number of redundancies required at the MPC and the processes by which they would be implemented; changes to shift operating hours and new rosters; the use of casual staff; and several more specific issues associated with penalty payments.

These were not simple issues. Redundancies, for example, were always contentious, especially if management favoured compulsory – rather than voluntary – redundancies. The question of new rosters was also difficult because, as one of the union officials said, they are important to everyone:

*'The roster was horrific, and nobody likes touching rosters, one, because it's complex,... and two, because it causes controversy on the floor. So through collaboration and discussion we decided, well, let's try and tackle it, and we did!'*

Over the following months, the members of the Collaboration Team formed working groups that met fortnightly to discuss the issues. They used interest-based processes, focusing on jointly resolving problems rather than each side defending fixed positions. Several issues were successfully resolved, including the use of casual staff, changes to shift operating hours and some aspects of the rosters. The Collaboration Team could not, however, resolve some of the issues.

Following the agreed procedure, the unresolved matters were escalated to the Steering Committee – without resolution – and then to the Senior Steering Committee, again without resolution. Finally, both parties agreed to approach the Commission on three issues: penalty payments for Christmas Day and the Grand Final public holidays; redundancies; and rosters. After a series of meetings, all three were successfully resolved through a combination of negotiation and conciliation by the Commission (on the penalty payments issue, see FWC 2016a). The solutions to the redundancy and roster issues were especially novel in the context of employment relations at News Corp Australia.

The approach to the redundancy issue was unusual because, to quote one of the managers, it involved 'consulting when contemplating a decision, not after the decision was made'. The negotiations went through several stages. Initial conciliated discussions led to agreement on the principles to be used in selecting candidates for redundancy. The application of these principles led to the vast bulk being voluntary, but six had to be decided on a compulsory basis. Appeals by the six employees chosen by management for compulsory redundancy also went to the Commission for conciliation, although these were dealt with by Commissioner Anna Lee Cribb (Commissioner Cribb) in Commissioner Roe's absence. All were confirmed, except one highly unusual case that will be discussed below. Overall, the process by which this round of redundancies was handled was, according to managers, much better than previously because employees were better informed:

*'Yes, ... it was a challenge, but... the fact that we were talking... regularly and they were reporting back regularly, all of a sudden there's context... It's an ongoing conversation... People are hearing first hand that a lot's going on and it's quite difficult to navigate. And so it's going to mean job losses and they understand why they're suddenly printing something, or not printing something. I think all of that helps... It's bad news, but it helps them deal with the facts.'*

The solution to the problem of rosters – formalised in January 2016 (see FWC 2016b) – was innovative and, as explained by Commissioner Roe, reflected the new cooperative spirit between the parties:

*'... with the rosters... the unions came up with their proposed roster, and management came up with theirs and the resolution in the end was not either introducing one roster or introducing the other or even some sort of compromise, which is what might have traditionally happened. Instead, what happened was there was an agreement to implement the union roster for a period of time, and then implement the management-proposed roster... That was an example of a different sort of approach to resolution and the only reason why that happened, I'd say, was because of commitment to trying to maintain and build the collaborative approach. Both parties would have preferred or selected a different resolution if it wasn't for that.'*

## THE OUTCOMES

The new collaborative approach at News Corp Australia is still in its early days. However, the outcomes so far have been positive. All interviewees, for example, report that the tense relationships associated with the history of adversarialism at the MPC have eased, with improved morale, better communications, more trustful relationships and a greater positivity towards the new direction.

Productivity levels are up and employees have become more flexible towards their job boundaries. According to one of the union officials, for example:

*'They [ie. employees] are doing things now on the floor that they would have never done previously, basically because of collaboration, and having a say at the table and having a view. It's not as far along as probably the company would like it, but I think the company will acknowledge that they're doing things now that they would have never done previously.'*

Two outcomes of special value to union members, according to Commissioner Roe, gave hope for the future:

*'One was the prospect of achieving investment in new equipment. That gives some future to printing newspapers, rather than adopting the Fairfax approach of... going online. And the second is achieving some certainty... the sharing of information leads to greater certainty...'*

These outcomes flowed from the confidence management showed in its employees:

*The sharing of information has been a key aspect of the collaboration principles and the company's been very good about that... including market*

*sensitive information as part of the process. And that's been respected by the workforce.'*

In a similar vein, one of the union officials argued that the collaborative process allowed serious and worrisome issues to be resolved in ways that benefitted employees and the union:

*'... for our members and for the AMWU, we've got through some extremely difficult issues... in a much more positive way and productive way, and in terms of resources point of view for the company. [And we've been able to avoid] emotionally dragging our members through a long dreadful process... because of the commitment on both sides to the collaboration.'*

The most telling result of more cooperative attitudes and behaviours, however, is the way that important workplace changes (which included significant workforce redundancies, changes to shift and roster arrangements, and better management of annual and long service leave) have been introduced, to the benefit of both sides. These benefits were not quantified but they were real. At the most basic level, the changes were negotiated without stoppages of work and with fewer appearances before the Commission.

Commissioner Roe observed:

*'The redundancies proceeded without disputation... In the past, every time there's been redundancies – and... there's been a whole series of redundancies over the last 30 years, at all of the sites – it's always involved disruption. Whereas this time, it didn't. So, in that sense they were able to work it out differently.'*

A union leader agreed:

*'I know it's worked because there's no disputes coming out of Melbourne and we used to deal with [them] on a weekly basis.'*

Likewise, a senior manager said:

*'I truly believe that, if we hadn't gone down the collaboration process, we would have been in the Commission on a dispute resolution four or five times through the [redundancy] process.'*

The change process was also quicker and less costly than on previous occasions. One manager, for example, argued that they avoided delays of 4–5 months in the implementation of redundancies:

*'It would have dragged. We would not have achieved the September conclusion, it would have dragged closer to Christmas, and we wouldn't do this at Christmas, so it would have dragged into the New Year... But we achieved the timeline we needed...'*

Relatedly, cost savings for management came from legal fees they avoided. If the collaboration had not happened, one manager explained:

*'... we would have lawyered up. Our experience in Melbourne is we used [a law firm] and we spent a lot of money [on them]. And we would have had them in Fair Work... and so it would have been a lot of time for Fair Work to close the dispute... We weren't doing anything outside the enterprise agreement, so we would have got the outcome we wanted. But we would have had to get numerous interpretations from Fair Work...'*



The same manager concluded:

*'So, we would have had delays, we would have had legal bills and then would have a really [unhappy] workforce at the end of it that weren't happy with where the company was at.'*

Workplace change under the collaborative model also produced unexpected outcomes that were more innovative than those contemplated by managers at the beginning. Three examples were provided. The first involved unexpected proposals by employees for work reorganisation:

*'We [ie. managers] initially started off by saying, "...there's a group of plate makers, we don't see them being impacted". But through the collaboration process, the guys came back and said "what if, rather than having publishers, plate makers and production assistants, we form this large department called Production and we ask people who wants to go?" And then we ended up with more people voluntarily leaving. I mean, multi-skilling across those three areas! Perfect... We still ended up with the same outcome, in terms of the products were bring printed when we wanted them to be printed, the number of people producing was the same, except the design of the organisation wasn't as we anticipated it would be.'*

A second example came through efforts to reduce the accumulation of annual and long service leave, which one manager quipped had built up to such an extent that 'you could probably buy a small European country'. News Corp Australia traditionally did not have a Christmas shutdown – indeed, the editorial and production areas cannot shutdown – but management raised the issue nonetheless:

*'And so we weren't expecting anything..., but as a result of those discussions they [ie. workplace delegates] came back with, "we'd love to have Christmas off. We haven't had a Christmas in five years".'*

Moreover, delegates proposed that employees could swap between day and night shifts – a practice that rarely happens – in order to facilitate those who wanted to take leave over Christmas and to give day shift workers a chance to earn extra penalty payments flowing from night shift, if they wanted. Managers were delighted and attributed this (unexpected) flexibility to the new collaborative approach:

*'This is their suggestion, not ours! Let them cover some guys on nights. The guys will take the time off, the night guys. Thank you, yes... people are taking leave! So, again that was an initiative that really came out of suddenly people talking and listening and recording mutual interests...'*

The third example involved the reinstatement of an employee who was made compulsorily redundant. This was a very unusual decision at News Corp Australia, which management was reluctant to take, but they made it and it worked out well for both sides: the employee, who wanted to stay, was still at work 12 months later and, according to management, fulfilling his role very well. Credit for this outcome, according to the manager, goes to the collaborative process:

*'And he's still there. So..., it ended up working out, and the collaboration process provided the avenue for him to stay in the business... To me that was remarkable... because to have a manager stand up... in Melbourne and say, "Hey, we've changed our mind", or, maybe, "We've made a mistake, we're going to look at this", is unheard of. That was big learning for everyone.'*

## THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSION

Both management and unions acknowledge that the Commission played an important role in reducing adversarialism and promoting collaboration at the MPC. The senior union official, for example, stated:

*'It's absolutely necessary to have Fair Work involved... Every way you set this up, that's got to be a part of the structure.'*

The senior manager illustrated the value of the Commission by reference to the reassurance it gave to participants about the collaborative process:

*'... it was quite safe, because it was Fair Work at the top of it, and Fair Work are independent, so even if you were sceptical and thought, "Oh, here's the union and the company doing some side deals, and we're all going to get done over," they were all comfortable that Fair Work was going to be the backstop for them.'*

The Commission's contribution was only possible because of the legitimacy it enjoyed in the eyes of the parties. As one of the union officials said, *'... there's huge respect on both sides for the Fair Work Commission'*. This respect came from the stature of the tribunal as an institution, but also from the behaviours and actions of Commission Members during the process. As has already been observed, the training sessions were particularly well-received, while Commissioner Roe also guided the parties as they constructed the various collaborative structures. As one manager put it, *'Fair Work, promised that they'd be there as that umbrella over the top, to... act as umpire, if need be, and provide advice. And Commissioner Roe did that.'*

Commissioner Roe also won considerable respect and trust from rank and file workers through his preparedness to engage. As one of the union officials observed:

*'He actually walked the site... and our members were quite impressed because they hear about this person, but 99 per cent of the members don't get to go in the Commission when there's a dispute, they just hear the result. They've heard this person and then, "Oh my God, he actually came through and saw how we work at our factory, saw what we do here." So they've got high respect for Fair Work because of that. They think and believe [the Commissioner] understands what they do, which makes a difference. So, they will respect the Commission's decisions a lot easier knowing that.'*

Commissioner Roe was, however, not the only Member of the Commission involved at News Corp Australia, and both management and the union reported constructive experiences with other Commission Members. In the first instance, Deputy President Booth helped to educate the parties, particularly management, about the features and merits of the New Approaches program. Likewise, positive experiences were reported with Commissioner Cribb, who stepped in when Commissioner Roe was on leave. She demonstrated a commitment to the process, which built respect, when she became involved in some difficult issues surrounding redundancies:

*'We met with her a couple of times along with management... We spent many, many hours in there, until late at night. We worked tirelessly. That's one thing that you have to give credit to the Commission: that they will sit*

*there until 11 o'clock at night, if they have to, to get something resolved. Because they see the importance of dealing with it and not holding it over for another day or a week or whatever it may be.'*

The parties' satisfaction with the Commission in this project was also linked to its accessibility and the 'process' role that it played. In other words, Commission Members were available – at short notice – to informally facilitate when issues could not be resolved without in any way dictating outcomes. As one union official put it:

*'You don't want Fair Work coming in telling everyone what to do, but you do want that involvement when you've had a block in the road, before you end up in an adversarial position to attempt to try and resolve it on the basis we can all walk out of here with something in our pocket, and for the betterment of everybody.'*

One manager reinforced the value of having a Commission Member – as occurred in this case – who understands the issues and who is readily available, someone with:

*'... familiarity, awareness... When you've got a regular [Member], the fact that we have that accessibility is critical.'*

## CONCLUSIONS AND THE NEW WAY AHEAD

It is still early days in the transformation process at News Corp Australia. But already tangible benefits are being realised at the MPC. Due to the commitment by the parties to find a better way, and their hard work, the 'toxic' and 'unproductive' workplace relationships of the past have begun to be replaced with more cooperative and constructive arrangements.

Together, the parties have established joint decision-making structures and developed skills to better resolve problems, reduce conflict and prevent disputes. Indeed, many issues – including difficult changes like redundancies and new rosters - have been jointly resolved without the resistance and industrial disputation of the past, leading to reduced costs and more efficient work practices. In this way, management have been able to respond more effectively to the difficult external environment in which they are operating.

Employees have also benefited. While the changes that have been introduced are undesirable to some, the greater participation of employees and their union representatives in designing and implementing the changes has not only resulted in better outcomes but has also enhanced their sense of security – they have more information about the context in which they work and avenues to contribute to how the company will respond to that context.

The Commission has been integral to this transformation. From the initial consultation, to training the parties and facilitating the collaborative process to providing timely and independent advice when the collaboration process stalled, the Commission has provided valuable support throughout the process.

The future of collaboration at News Corp Australia will unfold on two fronts. At the MPC, decisions must still be made about investment in new technologies. Certainly, key managers are committed to retaining newsprint in Australia and union officials are hopeful that the new collaboration will encourage management to invest in the future:

*'And I think with working together, the change in attitude of the members down there ... and things moving in the positive direction, is all helping with the company wanting to reinvest in that site.'*

Beyond the MPC, the next step is to continue to extend the new collaboration to other print sites around Australia. This process is under way. In November 2016, Commissioner Roe conducted a much larger training session, as part of the annual News Corp Australia conference, attended by delegates and management from all over the country. In May 2017, Commissioner Roe also delivered a training session at News Corp Australia's Chullora site in Sydney.

The News Corp Australia experience so far has led their senior manager to reflect on the future of workplace relations in Australian manufacturing industries:

*'... manufacturing in Australia has significant challenges. We've got a number of competitors, whether it's offshore, or whether it's disruptive technologies, in my case. We can't go back to doing it the way things have always done, so we've got to look at new ways of doing it. We have to change and we have to be nimble. We need a method that's more flexible for us to be able to change effectively and efficiently. Sticking with the enterprise agreements, dispute resolutions and getting Fair Work to resolve disputes is 1970 stuff, 1980 stuff. We're not in a manufacturing environment where that works anymore. If we're not prepared to change the way we work, be a lot more nimble, then we will end up in a situation where manufacturing is not tenable in Australia. And that's not the outcome many of us want.'*

In this context, he sees the value of the Commission's New Approaches program:

*'To me, Fair Work in their oversight of the collaboration process is providing a tool for industry to be more effective and... more competitive.'*

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