

The Real Affects of Change

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Artist's statement

The inspiration for these sculptures came while I was conducting research into organizational mergers. My research was in the tertiary education sector among institutions that deliver skills-based training in centres in Aotearoa New Zealand. Central government initiatives based on the need to offer relevant and cost-effective courses drove the mergers, but little attention was paid to the needs of local staff who were mandated to enact the structural changes. Programs were rationalised under the rubric that "bigger is better" and small organisations must therefore be inefficient and ineffective. Programs were under constant threat such that those associated with the program lived in a workplace of constant uncertainty and threat of closure. For many, the final result of a merger was their own job loss, the end of their teaching career or a personal toll that led to poor mental health.

There were 12 participants in my study, and each represented a unique and compelling narrative of the effects of organizational change on their personal lives. They were all deeply affected, and some weathered the emotional crisis better than others. Their stories of disruption, transition and loss affected me deeply too, and I wanted to render them beyond the narrative constructs which I used initially to articulate the research.

These 12 sculptures are reflections of the emotional effects of institutional mergers on each of the participants. They are pre-linguistic depictions of the profound personal impact that institutionally mandated change brings to individuals.

All the sculptures are mannequin heads with the same dimensions and features and made of polystyrene. Their uniformity provided a common ground from which each individual developed; achieving a veristic replication. The naturalism of each head is challenged by the surrealist attachments which elevate each beyond their common ancestry to represent a unique story.

The veristic surrealist constructs make "real" each individual experience and challenge the rationality of merger projects initiated by central government and implemented in organisations by managers without the specific change knowledge and leadership skills to lead the merging of organisations as communities of people.

Why sculpture?

Sculpture invites us into a three-dimensional space that allows us to perceive the work from multiple perspectives. Our gaze is prompted by the elements that are both present, and absent. Take, for instance, 2nd-century BCE sculpture, *Venus de Milo*. There are elements missing in the work, for sculpture is bereft of its arms, but it is this absence that invites the viewer to complete the entire image in his or her imagination. The 12 sculptured heads of this work require perceivers to bring each "person" to completion, by integrating their personal life story with the artefacts protruding from each head. The absence of the entire body, and the suggestion of a face, enhance the perceiver's aesthetic experience.



Sculpture 1 Brokenhearted

This sculpture depicts the overwhelming use of language associated with war and battle used to describe the merger situation. The toy soldiers represent employees as soldiers fighting together alongside good comrades in battle. As they come over the grassy knoll, they find that the heart of the organisation and the attributes of many employees in the organisation are blown apart and broken.





Sculpture 2 Massive churning machine of EFTS

The metallic and clunky approach to this sculpture reflects the described harshness and perceived brutality of the merger. Of managers arriving by the carload to takeover and impose new ways on the smaller organisation. The coins set within the metallic pieces symbolise the creation of a massive machine churning out a product that is bigger, better and financially more efficient rather than focusing on bringing together groups of people that care and support learners.

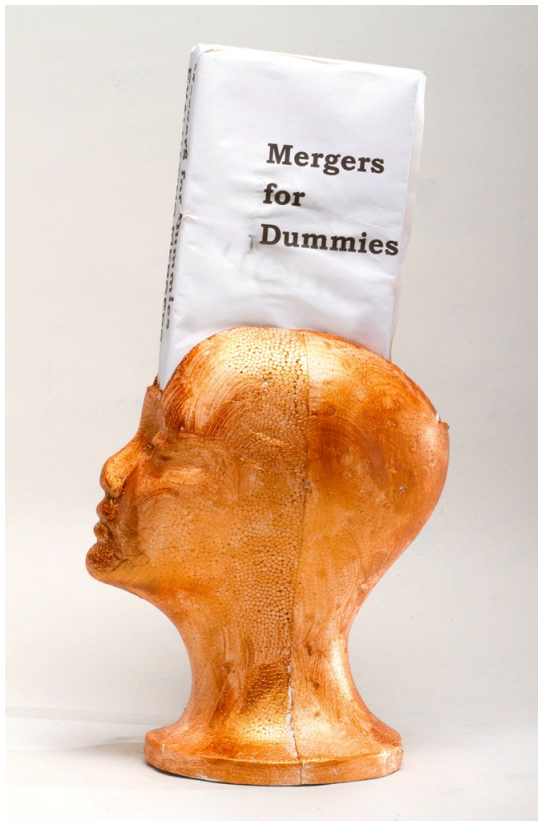




Sculpture 3 Just keep us informed

The headscarf of sculpture 3 outlines the minimalist and packaged communication that led to wounds both for the individuals working in the organisations but also in the communities affected by the mergers. The black writing signals the headline statements used to publicly present the merger while the red words signify the wounds and cost to the organisation and the people within it.





Sculpture 4 Learning

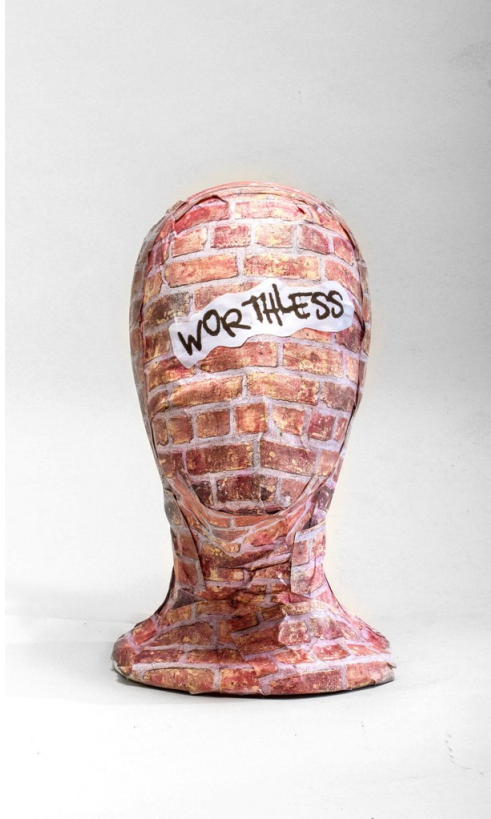
The bookshelf symbolises the opportunity to take learnings from the merger to feed forward into the future. The book title *Merger for Dummies* somewhat facetiously plays on the concept that mergers are something anyone can do successfully. While "Evaluating Mergers" poses the more serious concept that subsequent appraisals need to address the issue that mergers are not merely complete once two organisations are brought together. The desire to address that some good could come out of the pain experienced by individuals involved in the merger through learning.



Sculpture 5 Bunch of clowns

Reflects the belief that because the employee is from the smaller organisation then they must be a clown. The espoused view was that individuals felt stupid and incompetent because they came from a smaller organisation. The outcome was ultimately that the employee believed the messages from the larger organisation and personally took on these beliefs. The result was a broken individual shown in the cracks in the face of the clown. The quintessential "alley clown" is demeaning and shows the balls displaying "merger" being forced on the individual.





Sculpture 6 Worthless

Participants took on the organisation as self. This is depicted through the face of the individual forming the bricks and mortar of the organisation. The spray-painted graffiti of "worthless" across the face further symbolises how the labelling of the smaller organisation as worthless was taken on by the individual within the organisation. The employee repeatedly stated that "the organisation was worthless and so was I."





Sculpture 7 Breaking up the family

"The family was broken". A family portrait conceptually smashed over the head of the employee was used to represent feelings of no longer feeling a part of a whole. Similar to family tensions the merger created feelings of isolation and divided loyalties. The broken picture frame with sharp edges and shattered glass represented the lack of cohesion of the merger.





Sculpture 8 Isolated

Sitting alone in a field of green, employees recognised that although some managers attempted to support those moving to the larger organisation most did not know how to include new direct reports from the merged organisation into the new departments. Although it was recognised that there were opportunities in the new and larger organisation the feelings were still those of overwhelming isolation.





Sculpture 9 Saved

The face and head take on the form of water and waves of the ocean signifying feelings of being set afloat, in this case well before the merger occurred. The recognised red and white life ring or life buoy signals the feelings of being "saved" from being set adrift by an uncaring organisation.





Sculpture 10 Limbo

Limbo plays on the concept of sitting between heaven and hell; of being in limbo. The black characterises the darkness of no man's land and of not belonging in either space. The lonely figure embodies the feelings of choosing to jump or be pushed from positions of responsibilities previously held before the merger.





Sculpture 11 Organisation doesn't know who it is

An understanding that "knowing who one is" is a cerebral concept. The lights against the black background represent neurons and thus connections. The word "opportunity" is displayed in the brain reflecting together with the lights the brightness of new challenges generated by the merger. These feelings are tempered by the recognition that many in the organisation are feeling hurt and pain caused by the same merger. The letters that form the spine (merger) and represent the body (hurt) express that many of those individuals further down the organisation perceive less opportunities and experience feelings of pain associated with the merger.





Sculpture 12 Big fish eats little fish

A common conception of mergers is depicted reflecting a stereotypical message of a merger; that of big fish eats little fish. The sparkle and glamour of the big organisation is signalled with the gems and extravagant eyelashes of the "big fish". Only the tip of the tail of the smaller organisation can be seen expressing that the essence and body of that organisation is usurped through the merger process.



About the Authors

Vikki Roadley is the Director, Recovery Activities at Tai Poutini Polytechnic. Vikki has held senior management roles in Polytechnics undergoing significant change and this has spurred her interest in the human impact of organisational change. Vikki has recently completed a Master of Advanced Leadership Practice at Massey University in New Zealand.

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Ralph Bathurst is a lecturer in leadership and management at Massey University, Auckland New Zealand. Ralph's PhD from Victoria University Wellington is in organisational aesthetics and is an ethnographic study of a symphony orchestra. His background as a music educator and orchestral musician inform his research practice. Ralph lectures in leadership and management at Massey University and some of the journals he publishes in are *Leadership*, *Organization Management Journal*, and *Journal of Management Inquiry*.