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Team Player Team Leader

This has been the key to Jon Olson's 42-year career.

By VICKI EARL

Jon Olson won't dispute the assertion that he belongs more truly to that past chapter in local government when, as he expresses it, "there was very little government interference and councils were just able to get on with their jobs."

His part in this began when he joined the Westland Catchment Board in 1956 as an engineering cadet. It finishes at the end of July when he retires as chief executive of the Westland District Council.

The 1950s and early 1960s were a golden period for New Zealand. Self confidence bolstered by a powerful economy saw both local and central government take key roles in bringing a host of new benefits to both urban and rural New Zealand.

When Olson moved from the catchment board to the Westland County Council in 1959 he remembers it "was an exciting place to work when I first started. I couldn't wait to get to work each day." In those early years of his career Olson recalls with pride an extraordinary time when Westland's infrastructure was virtually rebuilt. "One year we did 10 miles of new seal and built 10 new bridges," he says.

Looking back, four decades later, he pinpoints the ability to handle that huge volume of work as being, in part, achievable through outstanding teamwork. "We built up our own team of staff who were absolutely incredible. They could turn their hand to anything. We were a team right through the organisation from the Council to our field staff."

Olson spent 10 years as the engineer for Westland County Council before becoming county manager in 1984. And over the intervening years he never forgot what had forged the council's can-do spirit. It's an ethos which is still reflected in his management style. "I'm a team player," he says, "and I've been fortunate enough to attract a really good team around me and we've stuck right through."

They certainly have. Since 1989 he records there have been no



Jon Olson

'You can be too long in the top.'

changes in senior management on the Westland District Council.

The same certainly can't be said of local government's overall role. Olson has many positive things to say about local government's operational functions—past tense. It would be an understatement to say that he is less than impressed about the impact of the successive waves of local government reforms. "The reforms have made it a hell of a lot more difficult, and yet the powers of the councils haven't changed. We're still reactive—absolute creatures of legislation and statute. But that has to change now, otherwise local government is not going to have a future," he insists.

Olson is outspoken about the effects of the reforms. He candidly admits to being shocked at having to shunt staff off into LATEs. Olson saw this as ploughing a legislative bulldozer through almost 30 years of careful team building. "Up until then we'd had a wonderful team right through every position. Consequently, we did everything efficiently and well. Then, suddenly, it's gone."

He dismisses what he sees as the much vaunted cost-saving efficiencies which replaced the pre-reform way of doing things. "All absolute rubbish," he scoffs. "Look at the extra people who have to be put in place to control the contracts. They're not counted in the efficiencies, and so your costs remain the same if not worse."

He also takes a contemptuous tilt at the "knights" of the New Zealand Business Roundtable. "Doug Myers and the Roundtable only want to pick the eyes out of local government. And central government," he asserts "is determined to make local government as unpopular as it is. It does the big put-down on us at every opportunity."

Changing times, frustrating times. And Jon Olson sees the role of the chief executive enmeshed in this corporate culture shock. He believes that the stance of central government is now forcing the local government CEO to have an accounting background—and mentality. "Everyone seems to have forgotten that we had an accountant in charge of the country ▶

“ Central government is determined to make local government as unpopular as it is ”

not too long ago and look what that did.”

The consequences of this, he says, is that “there’s no manoeuvring room for innovation. There’s not even room to achieve things until you’ve been through a due process, by which time you’ve forgotten what it was you wanted to do.”

Not surprisingly, then, he envisages a need for a chief executive to continuously upskill, a necessity driven in part by the onrush of new technologies like the Internet. “The rate of change is horrendous,” he says only half jokingly. And, frustrated, he adds: “We have all this information we have to collect that only the audit department is interested in—no one else. I sometimes wonder who we work for now. Audit’s role in local government is now quite ridiculous as are its costs.”

But one source of keeping informed gets his thumbs up. He has only good things to say about the way SOLGM has regrouped itself for the challenges ahead. “I think it’s dramatically better than it was. It looks like it’s on the right track now, and is an excellent organisation for those of us way out on a limb.”

For Jon Olson, however, his personal path now leads to retirement. It’s not going to be a carpet-slippers-at-midday sort of lifestyle, though. His deadpan humour that has so delighted colleagues over the years, comes to the fore when asked if he dreaded retirement. “No,” he answers, though until a few weeks ago, he confesses he had been. Then he read an article in *Time* magazine which made him realise all was not lost. Viagra, he hopes, will prove his salvation.

Okay, okay—but seriously what will he be doing? Skydiving? Done that. And flown a microlight. Olson, it seems, has done a host of adrenalin-rush things and will continue to search out new personal challenges. “But it depends on how long those (Viagra) pills last,” he says straight faced.

Yet behind his drollness there is a thoughtful side that saw him ponder long and hard about retiring at the age of 60. He based his decision on the belief that “you can be too long in the top job. Once you get into your late fifties you do slow down.”

Job-wise perhaps, but not when it comes to his overall zest for life. Over the years he and his wife Rayleine have holidayed world wide. Last year this saw them touring Europe for three months.

On that occasion he retraced his paternal family roots visiting the home of his Swedish great grandfather who left the family farm on the island of Oland in the 1860s and, after many adventures ended up on the West Coast goldfields.

Then there are Olson’s three daughters to be visited. One is a doctor, another a pharmacist and the third a nurse. One daughter, living in Townsville will be the Olson’s first port of call when he and Rayleine head off for Europe and Sweden in August. And then there’s the penny farthing bike that has made Jon Olson—literally—a high profile figure around Hokitika.

Although local government will soon be in his past, he still displays a concern for its future. When asked his opinion of central government’s continuing pressure to have it further restructure and reform, Olson bluntly states that “it has to.”

But he is pessimistic about local government providing a career path. “Right now if a bright young person came into my office and wanted a career in local government, I’d tell them to ‘bugger off. I really would.”

“It (local government) used to be wonderful place and things used to happen, and that’s got to happen again or I dread to think what we’re going to end up with.”

Winning conference programme

SOLGM’s 1998 conference theme is “Winners” to be held in Dunedin from 30 August to 1 September it will feature an outstanding and richly varied line-up of speakers offering inspirational and thought-provoking viewpoints.

Keynote speaker, Dr David Suzuki, is one of the world’s foremost environmentalists and science popularisers. Bonnie St John will explain how to overcome adversity and so become a winner. Dr Lester Levy and Michael Hill, well-known names in their respective fields, will address on how to be successful in managing change and conveying your message. Atlantic conquering rowers Rob Hamill and Phil Stubbs will explain how winning teamwork can help reach your goals.

Workshop presenters Dr Carole Page and Sir Brian Elwood will talk about personal management style and official information.

The SOLGM Business School is offering two optional seminars prior to the official opening: urban design or tourism and leisure.

Throughout the conference Tech City will be operating: hands-on interactive displays and mini seminars on specific technological topics.

The conference opens with a spectacular Sunday night event celebrating the 150th anniversary of Southland and Otago followed, on the Monday night, by the Highland Fling Scottish dinner.

This is the conference you won’t want to miss.