  

Ethical consulting for the global age

A presentation by Joseph A. Camilleri

at the launch of Alexandria Agenda

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It is my great privilege this evening to introduce you to Alexandria Agenda, its vision and its approach. Let me first thank all of you who have come to share this evening with us, the many more who have conveyed their apologies and their interest in learning more about this venture, and the other members of the Alexandria Agenda team who have invested so much thought and energy into its creation.

Ours is a globalising world in which the scale, intensity and speed of change is impacting on organisations, large and small, public and private. Alexandria Agenda’s purpose is to help organisations get a better handle on their complex and rapidly changing environment

Whether it’s a government department or agency working in such areas as education, multicultural affairs or the environment, or a national government engaging with another government or seeking to stake out a position on the world, or a large or medium sized business in banking, transport or the manufacturing sector, or an international organisation, be it the World Bank or the World Health Organisation, a university, or a civil society organisation, be it Oxfam or the Catholic Church, the basic challenges are the same.

* How to engage multiple stakeholders
* How to balance competing priorities
* How to reconcile diverse interests and perspectives

This is precisely Alexandria Agenda’s role: to bring a distinctive approach to the business at hand – helping organisations get a better handle on their complex and rapidly changing environment.

A word about the name Alexandria Agenda. In the search for a suitable name, we soon discovered to our chagrin that our first two or three preferences were already listed either on the ASIC or domain registers. As a way out of this frustrating exercise, my colleague Mendo Kundevski, suggested we consider the name of a city as the basis for a name – a city that stood for something grand akin to Alexandria Agenda’s vision.

Having dispensed with a number of possibilities either because they were far too common or not distinguished enough, we stumbled upon the city of Alexandria. What did it have to commend it? It was the site of the celebrated Lighthouse of Alexandria, the first lighthouse in history, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and the last to remain standing. It was also the site of the Library of Alexandria, perhaps the most significant library of the ancient world, dedicated to the muses, the nine goddesses of the arts and learning – its collections regarded as treasures of incalculable value. Centuries after its destruction the Egyptian Government inaugurated in 2002 a new library, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, near the site of the ancient institution – built at a cost of $250 million and housing one of the most digitalised and prized collections in the world.

But what most distinguishes Alexandria is it cosmopolitan history. Founded by Alexander the Great (of Macedon), the city also known as the pearl of the Mediterranean, has been rightly described as one of the greatest crucibles of civilization, a melting pot of the cultures of Europe, Asia and Africa.

This seemed an appropriate enough icon for our venture. It was only as an afterthought that it dawned on us that I was born in Alexandria and that Mendo is of Macedonian origin.

Though Alexandria Agenda may be able in theory to range across a great many areas of human activity, in practice we have chosen to focus on three key areas:

sustainability 🙜 diversity 🙜 education

These three areas neatly dovetail with Alexandria’s three claims to greatness: its durability [sustainability], its cosmopolitanism [diversity] and its contribution to learning [education].

Of course other considerations have shaped our choice of the three areas: these are the areas where our team has an established record of involvement and expertise. These too are areas where stakeholder relationships are particularly complex and diverse, and where the issues are delicate, sometimes highly sensitive, but in each case crucial to the success of many organisations and to future prosperity and well being.

This brings me to the four services Alexandria Agenda is offering:

advice 🙜 dialogue 🙜 training 🙜 evaluation

We aim to provide organisations in both the public, corporate and not-for-profit sectors with a firmer grasp of the key stakeholder relationships on which their success depends, a sharper sense of the issues that need to be addressed and of the most productive ways of building productive and sustainable relationships. The advice we offer is based on sound analysis, a rigorous mapping out of the landscape, with a view to ensuring that the organisation’s products, services or projects are of the highest quality and deliverable at a lower cost than would be otherwise be the case.

Stakeholder relationships are often diverse and complex, and the way an organisation is governed and its objectives and strategies are framed must take account of competing, at times conflicting perspectives and priorities. Hence the need for dialogue, for effective communication not just within organisations, but between the organisation and its many stakeholders. Dialogue does not just happen. It has to be carefully nurtured; mindsets and skills have to be painstakingly cultivated. In dialogue the emphasis is as much on listening as it is on speaking. Alexandria Agenda has a wealth of experience in the facilitation, management and conduct of sustained dialogue.

Sound analysis and sound advice, and a framework for dialogue do not automatically translate into effective performance on the ground. For this higher skill and competence levels are needed. For middle management Alexandria Agenda offers the kind of training and professional development that makes for improved analytical, organisational and communication skills (writing, speaking and listening, but also conduct of meetings small and large, networking, media engagement and much else). For senior management, boards and councils Alexandria Agenda provides fresh insights on how to optimise governance arrangements and create a more dynamic organisational culture.

By the very nature of change which is all around us and shows no sign of abating, responding to and anticipating change is a critically important function. This is why Alexandria Agenda emphasises the practice of forward looking evaluation of projects, practices and stakeholder relationships. The key here is how to assess past performance in ways that create new possibilities for consolidation, expansion and innovation.

A word about the team. Currently we have five team members. I am joined by:

* Mendo Kundevski is a strategic consultant with research, advocacy, policy, business and government experience spanning some fifteen years.
* Tasneem Chopra is a cross-cultural consultant, curator, author, project coordinator and prominent social commentator
* Dr Aran Martin has been a project manager at the Centre for Dialogue, and is a lead investigator on a major mediation Project at the Melbourne School of Government.
* Dr Adrian Soh teaches and researches international business at RMIT University, where he mentors students in work-integrated-learning.

I expect to be able to announce two new members of the team over the coming weeks, who will bring different yet complementary skills and expertise.

In short the team we have assembled is well placed to enhance capacity for responding to risks and opportunities – making it possible to deliver a number of desirables: products, services and projects that are well received; sustainable relationships, strong and dynamic partnerships, more effective governance, more productive staff, and importantly enhanced reputations.

We see Alexandria Agenda as a venture in ethical consulting where the emphasis is on larger horizons. This means viewing governance arrangements, relationships and products in terms of their consequences for the orgnaisation itself, for its stakeholders, and for the wider public. Where necessary, the focus can be on the short-term, but Alexandria Agenda’s added value is its focus on medium and longer term goals and aspirations.

With all this in mind we have committed ourselves to providing *pro bono* services from time to time for organisations we are especially keen to support. We aim over the next few weeks to reach agreement with two such organisations to provide services relevant to their operations and central our areas of interest. We see this as a socially useful contribution we can make and as a practical demonstration of the value of our approach.

At the same time we are exploring several promising commercial opportunities.

We very much believe that the venture on which we have embarked, and its emphasis on collaborative relationships and dialogue is an idea whose time has come.