

The failure of modern leadership

John Frew

I have long been of the opinion that modern leadership of organisations is flawed. The contemporary approach taken by management is disconnected from the purpose of the enterprise. Modern leaders, in true top-down style, impose their strategies on an organisation assuming they understand the conditions at the work place. This is a departure from the time-honoured approach where problems were solved where they occurred, and management existed to support those solutions. The current disorder in NSW's schools is an excellent example of this failure.

In NSW public schools, the working conditions have created a crisis across the state with many schools unable to provide teachers for their students. In May 2021 there were 1,148 teaching positions vacant with too many schools having ten or more positions unfilled. For example, in the troubled Walgett Community College there are 12 vacancies for a student population of 117. This deficit is repeated across the state and these raw statistics ignore the lack of availability of casual teachers who traditionally cover for those on leave.

This shortage is directly linked to the growing and intensifying administrative demands on teachers, and these are a result of the managerial style of the Department's senior leadership. Teachers' focus is no longer solely in the classroom but dealing with prescribed compliance hours of training to meet the Teaching Standards, assessment of the School Excellence Framework and unreasonable workloads. As a result, teachers are leaving in droves: 40% - 50% are leaving within the first five years in the job, up to half those who start a teaching degree leave before completion. Over-worked teachers' mental health is in crisis, 58% of teachers suffer what they describe as 'quite a bit' of stress with workloads that require 10-20 hours of unpaid labour just to get their work done.

The current conditions are the culmination of changes that began in the late 60s and early 70s. These changes resulted from the application of the scientific model of the physical world being applied to the social world. Academics in teaching subjects like psychology, economics etc longed to be accepted as scientists. The resulting changes were shaped by two of the giants in the philosophy of science, Karl Popper who believed that theory was legitimised by data and Thomas Kuhn who supposed that theoretical paradigms are discarded when they no longer predict events. Together, their reliance on data made way for the scientific, physical or social approach that was dependent on measurement – if you can't measure it, it's not worth doing.

With this new approach those 'social' faculties in universities, who had long suffered the barely concealed contempt from the pure physical sciences, embraced this new approach. Amongst the most successful was the Business School at Harvard University who scrutinised and 'measured' business practices to produce their celebrated Master of Business Administration. The attractiveness of their course was based on the principles of leadership that focused on data, on costs and profits – more bang for your bucks, value added practices – more from less and marketing. This approach paid early dividends in the market economy and business enthusiastically embraced the idea of 'the manager' who controls everything. This is classic 'top down' management.

The adoption of this 'administrative' approach swept through the public service and soon 'would be leaders' adopted this methodology to run their Departments. The education bureaucracy enthusiastically embraced it with leaders being appointed because of their understanding of administration principles. This was in direct contrast to past practice where leaders were promoted from the ranks because of their understanding of that portfolio and the problems faced by those who functioned within that structure. The focus shifted

diametrically from bottom-up practices where those in the classrooms and schools 'solved' problems and leadership supported their approach, to top-down where leadership defined the problems and directed those below to implement their 'managed' solutions.

The emergence of this top-down model coincided with the time when politicians began to take an interest in education. They realised that they could influence what was taught and so how it should be taught. In education, more than in other portfolios, Ministers had a sense of familiarity: they had all attended school. This direct action started with Cavalier, followed by Metherell, and they really embraced this new-found power.

An example of their self-importance saw Metherell, on a whim, mandating that every child should be bilingual and so a whole new department was founded just to implement his idea. This became known as LOTE (Language other than English). Programs were written, resources developed and mandated hours of instruction imposed on each school. Teachers in classrooms across the state wasted hours teaching those mandated hours, students at best learned to count to ten in a variety of languages. It was a misuse of money that took years to eventually 'disappear'.

A more expensive example was the introduction of the Learning Management and Business Reform, the famous LMBR that wasted well over \$750 million of taxpayers' money. Schools were pushed through probably the most incompetent and expensive reform I ever witnessed and it made no secret of its purpose, to replace the existing finance, human resources, payroll and student administration systems that had emerged across the state's 2208 public schools. This lust for control from the top has preoccupied the Department since 2006.

The decisive move to take an active role in the education portfolio coincided with the developing practice where the Minister appointed their Departmental Head, their Secretary. The qualities of that appointment were not necessarily or not even preferably from the education field. Candidates impressed the Minister with their administrative abilities. Successful Secretaries are not thoughtless, they understood if you want the job and want to keep the job you serve the Minister above all others. The most convenient way to impress the Minister was embedded in all the trappings of the MBA, cost-based approach, more bang for the bucks and appeal to the 'market'; this is music to any politician's ears.

As the Secretary owed their position to the Minister it was not long before the Senior Executive were appointed by the Secretary and the same loyalty to those above was mandatory. In theory, these positions are designed to be the link between the classroom and the leadership. They are specialty portfolios where they apply their 'administration' techniques, directly to those below and report how those orders are implemented to those above.

As a result of this insulated approach to senior management, exchanges between these levels of the Department became an echo chamber with each reinforcing the beliefs of the other. They are almost completely unaware of the problems at the school level.

In the study of top-down leadership by Sidney Yoshida entitled '*The Iceberg of Ignorance*' he concluded that:

- Front line workers knew 100% of the problems they faced
- Supervisors were aware of only 74%
- Middle managers were aware of just 9%
- Executives were only aware of 4% of the problems.

Like a lot of these studies, the actual percentages are arbitrary but they do provide a metaphor that describe the Executives' severely limited understanding of what is wrong within the company. This incompetence is easily applied to the Department of Education.

In reality, the Minister is completely in the hands of the Secretary and the Senior Executive. The Secretary soon 'educates' the Minister drawing on their 4% of what they know about the problems and before long the Minister becomes an 'expert' believing they understand the prepared speeches they read at conferences and in the parliament.

In more recent times, when problems become too obvious to ignore, a new and increasing phenomena has been appropriated and that is the use of professional consultancy firms.

This brings us to the last desperate effort of the leadership to solve the problems caused by their top-down approach and, ironically, that is to go up to the world of consultancy.

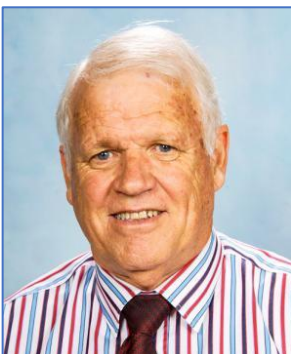
Millions of dollars of public-school funding is now being gifted by the NSW Department of Education to high cost global consultancy firms such as KPMG, PwC, McKinseys, BCG and others. As the Department uses the top-down approach to management, the use of consultants that sit atop of the Minister and Secretary puts these firms one more step further away from the problem. Yet, despite having no prior knowledge about schools they fabricate the most sophisticated analytical tools to investigate any problem. In reality their investigations are directed by what they know and that is less than the 4% understood by the Secretary. The fact that they are one step further away from the problem doesn't seem to matter, they create glossy reports, produce fancy graphs and come to conclusions palatable to the Department leadership.

In the current situation it is obvious what they, the leadership, are doing is not working. Unfortunately, those at the top have no insight about the cause of this failure. They conclude that failure is not in their planning but in the implementation of those plans by the schools and teachers, it is the teachers' fault. To address what they believe is perceived 'failure' bureaucrats have initiated a two-pronged attack to make them succeed, to get their solution to work. They have introduced compulsory training, particularly in more focused administration and compliance checking of all teachers, to make sure they are implementing the dictated solutions. This has resulted in a substantial increase on the demands on teachers' time, the very thing that has pushed the teacher's real professionalism and loyalty over the edge. **With no sense of introspection or irony, the current 'solution' is to focus on leadership training for all teachers. They conclude that if the teachers are like them then their problems will be solved.**

The sad thing is that the answers to our problems lie at the chalkface, with the teachers and their students. Teachers see problems first and, if their professional training and experience is trusted, they apply solutions and if those solutions don't work they can be quickly discarded and another approach tried until something works. This emergence of an organisation is how evolution works, what we currently have is 'intelligent design' – an approach that embraces theory based on unsubstantiated beliefs that requires blind faith. Schools need more than this.

Contributor details

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John was the Principal of Holsworthy High from 2000-2016 and before that, Campbell House School. He is interested in behaviour management of children with extreme behaviours.

John has written numerous books on behaviour management and publishes a free Newsletter to help teachers who deal with children with severe behaviours. These are available on his blog at [Frew Consultants Group](#).

And he loves to travel!