

# Managing the invisible

Working with school culture as a living system means learning to work in the space in which relationship unfolds.

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Believing is seeing. What we believe determines what we see, and fundamentally influences the way we engage with the world.

Seen through the lens of conventional management, education is a multifaceted environment in which winners stay ahead by skillfully juggling detached elements and competing needs and pressures, internally and externally. The language and tools of the standard-issue management kitbag encourage the belief that its many constituent parts - schools, departments, subjects, modules, schedules, grades, tables, teachers, students, exams, work, play and so on - are separate, and can be managed in isolation, just as we might fix or improve a part of a machine in order to keep the whole thing in good working order.

This mechanical way of seeing the world underpins theory and practice in almost every profession, and while it has its place in management, its dominance today condemns those in positions of authority to a life of forensic strategising, planning and forecasting in a valiant attempt to exercise control over the 'machines' under their command.

It also deflects attention away from the intangible elements of the human landscape and explains why much of what managers do in this complex and changing world, is increasingly ineffective.

## **'Seeing' differently**

Seen through a different lens however, people, groups and organisations such as schools or universities are not machines that can be brought to heel with a few more rules or a little more bureaucracy, but living systems that are governed by the principles of life, not the laws of mechanics. Living systems that are not joined in neat hierarchies like organisational charts, but webs of relationship nested inside each other like Russian dolls. Living systems that can't be commanded, but create themselves as they participate with each other and their wider environment through a myriad of relationships that combine and overlap in unpredictable ways. Systems which, despite our best attempts, can't be planned, predicted or changed in the 'normal' way.

Living systems are organic. Dynamic. Alive. Constantly changing. What defines them is not tangible and quantitative but *intangible* and *qualitative*. From a meadow to a human body to an entire school or university, the quality of every living system and its ability to endure over time is determined by the quality of its relationships, both internally between its components, and externally with its wider environment. *Relationship* is the central organising principle of life.

## **Seeing management differently**

Culture is a living system and like all living systems, takes physical form in structures and artefacts we can touch and feel and experience. But the powerful drivers that shape it are *invisible*: the hidden architecture of beliefs, assumptions and values that continually churn

through the processes and practices and relationships that bring the culture to life in its many forms.

Everything comes out of the culture. The quality of the educational experience at a particular school will reflect the quality of the relationships that define that institution. The visible evidence of its culture - buildings, policies and procedures, teaching methods, attitudes to parents and staff, curricula and decisions about how to deliver them, and much more - are only the *secondary* effects of the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values, and the patterns of communication and relationship that bring the school culture to life each day.

This change of mindset, from machine to living system, shifts attention from the mechanics of management to the underlying dynamics of culture, and changes the management task from steering the 'machine' safely into the future, to cultivating the relational space - *creating the conditions* - in which the future will emerge. In a living system, the role of management is not to manage 'things', but to manage culture.

## Managing culture

In our work with organisations, we've identified five overlapping dimensions of culture that we believe are essential in cultivating the relational space, and which provide a more appropriate conceptual framework within which to design the management agenda and make judgements about strategies, actions and outcomes:

### Insight

Changing thinking changes everything. That's why cultivating a new 'common sense' - a practical understanding of the principles and insights of living systems - is an essential starting point. This is not simply a new rule-book but a perceptual transformation, a radically different philosophical orientation from which new practices flow naturally. Seeing, thinking and working this way asks us to let go of the mechanistic habits that maintain the status quo, and place our trust in something else. It may not come easy, but like learning to swim or cycle, skilfulness comes with practice.

The insights of living systems prompt us to place less attention on tasks (the work we do) and more on *processes* (*how* we do the work). To concentrate less

on the component parts (individuals, classrooms, schools, parents and so on) and more on the *quality of the relationships* in the human system. And to shift our concern away from the surface behaviours that shape school culture to the deeper *beliefs and values* that drive behaviour.

### Identity

At the heart of every living system is a story or identity - a sense of who we are, why we're here and what we're trying to become. Without a compelling story or vision to guide it, an organisation can lose its way and become scattered as people pull in different directions. When this happens work can lose its meaning, and the experience for everyone, inside and outside, is diminished.

Developing a clear identity - a deep sense of who we are and what we want to be, and clearly identifying supporting values and behaviours that will bring our vision to life - is some of the most important and strengthening work we can do. Its impact is both material and subtle, and ripples through an organisation in many hidden ways that are hard to define, yet felt and experienced. An inspiring vision provides clarity of direction and a powerful reference point for consistent, day-to-day decision-making, while shared values help to cohere behaviour without the need for deadening bureaucratic controls. Together these provide the cultural space in which managers can let go, and people can be trusted to do what's required.

### Intelligence

Rigid plans and detailed, top-down goal-setting typify the mechanistic desire for control and certainty. From the perspective of a living system however, the human organisation is inherently intelligent, capable of learning and evolving its way into the future, so the management task is to facilitate this process, not try to control it.

Learning is most acute at the boundaries between systems. Where diverse energies engage, communicate and cross-pollinate, the level of intelligence in the system increases exponentially and newness becomes possible in unexpected ways. A communication strategy that creates opportunities for different parts of the system to connect and learn from each other, in a way that invites maximum participation and makes room for diverse points of view to surface, is essential for evolution to happen.

It's also necessary to design new ways of engaging that cultivate trusting relationships from which the future will emerge. Conventional committee structures and formulaic meetings almost always recreate the past, while diverse learning groups that evolve around real-life dilemmas would become communities of interest collaborating differently, and helping the school to become a learning organisation.

### *Integrity*

Integrity describes the state of being 'whole'. For the individual, it means there's no feeling of contradiction between inner values and our day to day actions. For the institution, it means there's no gap between what it claims to be and its everyday practices and behaviour. Such 'say-do' gaps between the promise and the reality damage credibility and trust and weaken relationships. But when what we say and what we do are consistently in sync, the invisible outcome over time is a foundation of trust upon which productive relationships, creativity and innovation thrive.

Cultivating integrity is an ongoing process of managing the values that shape the culture: using cultural mapping processes to identify gaps between what an organisation says it values and people's lived experience, and then exploring those gaps honestly to achieve improvement becomes an agenda for change that's quite different from what might emerge through more conventional analysis.

### *Inspirational Leadership*

From within the mechanistic worldview the role of those with positional authority is to instill confidence by taking charge and being decisive. Through the lens of living systems however, leadership is about inspiring others by holding open the space of possibility, and personally embodying beliefs and values in behaviours that may not yet be the cultural norm.

This leadership territory is subtle, and such leaders operate from a different source and intention. They've moved from a task-driven focus on short-term results, to a more expansive concern for the future and the common good. From managing others, to facilitating their participation. From a need for rules and compliance, to a concern for values and ethics. From a desire for certainty and control over events, to a comfort with uncertainty and a willingness to let go and take personal risks on behalf of the future.

## LEADERSHIP: LESSONS FROM LIFE

### **Insight**

Cultivate a systems perspective and learn to work as nature works

### **Identity**

Hold a compelling vision and walk the talk of shared values

### **Intelligence**

Facilitate communication and learning to help the future emerge

### **Integrity**

Mind the gaps! Eliminate contradictions between core values and actual behaviour

### **Inspirational Leadership**

Take risks on behalf of the future and create a space in which others can do the same

### **Conscious evolution**

While conventional management wisdom invites us to impose our will on life's unruliness, life invites us to stop trying to direct it and begin participating *with* it. Paradoxically, by abandoning the impulse to control and responding instead to life's rhythms, people and organisations grow more resilient and less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of their external environment. They stay relevant by being responsive, and consciously evolving towards a future that they help to create through the quality of their participation today.

While the lessons of life and living systems turn conventional thinking on its head, experience tells us they feel natural, liberating and intuitively 'right', which is really no surprise. After all, we're simply beginning to tune in to what life already knows. ||| dya

### **About the author**

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