



Gaining support for change

Dennis Sleigh

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We all know that we can lead a horse to water, but we cannot make it drink. The truth is that we, as leaders, can go only so far – the rest is up to the other party. I suspect that this applies to all aspects of modern society, although there have certainly been some areas – such as the military, the church, and jails – where it was more likely in the past that people would gain absolute obedience. Even in these previously authoritarian structures, today the resistance is growing. Blind obedience is rarer today than it was in the past and “because I said so” is no longer reason enough to get someone to follow you.

Since *giving orders* is not the answer, the leader must ask: how can I make sure that valid instructions are followed? In the operation of this school, what can I, as the leader, do to ensure that the new policies are implemented by all concerned? A parade commander can yell “Attention” and a thousand trained troops will obey; a principal can ask for attention in staff meeting, and the response will be less dramatic. Gaining support requires a lot more than just giving orders.

I’m reminded of the story of the salesman who lost a major contract. Disappointed by the development, the salesman said to his boss “Well, I guess that proves you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.” The boss was unimpressed and retorted “Your task is not to get him to drink but to make him thirsty.”

In our work in leading a school, there are times when principals just about manage to get people to cross the line, to accept whatever it is that might be the issue of the day, when suddenly the staff balk. Then, often without warning, instead of having a compliant staff to put into effect your wishes, you have a group of disgruntled adults who make it clear that they

are not happy with the direction you are taking.

I remember trying to convince teachers that it was a good idea to invite parents into the staff room for morning tea if they had been working in classrooms before the break and were planning on giving more of their time afterwards. Because I accepted that staff rooms were ‘private spaces’ I was reluctant to impose this basic courtesy without staff agreement, and I set about winning the hearts of those most directly concerned, the teachers. I eventually thought I had won the case but just before this decision was announced, one teacher raised it again at a staff meeting and said “I’m sorry to say this, but I have to oppose the idea. I might like someone enough to be able to work with them in a classroom, but that doesn’t mean I like them enough to chat to them over a cuppa during recess.” The proposal was sunk – and as far as I know, never resurfaced in that school.

Perhaps the trouble with my approach was that I was wedded to a particular solution – giving parents a cuppa in acknowledgement of their efforts – and didn’t see the implications – invading the teachers’ privacy during breaks. This blindness to the alternatives explains why a lot of ideas don’t go across. As the proponent of the change, I could see one side of the argument but the staff, now my opponents, saw other ones. This situation plays itself out in different schools on a frequent basis, and instead of peaceful agreement, administrators find themselves dealing with major dissension. Often what is needed is a middle person to shine the light on both sides of any discussion.

Different strokes for different folks

Imagine your system leaders decide that from now on, all people

answering the school phone must identify themselves by name; you pass on this instruction to your staff but several refuse to take it up. They might not actually say no, but you soon observe that the compliance rate for the 'suggestion' is very low. What can you do? Perhaps the first thing is to explore the issue more carefully, more sensitively, than is often the case.

For example, you can ask the objectors why they are reluctant to take on the new procedure. You might discover several valid reasons from those they see the down-side of the proposed change. One person might say "I don't need to identify myself because every here knows me already; I have worked here for years and they know my voice." Another might explain that her reluctance stems from what she sees as the abruptness of saying 'Good morning, Mrs Jones'. Someone else might like to use a more descriptive greeting such as 'Hello, Wentworth Public School' and yet another might simply be shy. Whatever the reasons, and there are potentially dozens of them, they might mean that a straightforward policy directive is ignored.

The example I have used is a trivial one, but each day, school leaders discover that there are many issues that run the same way: a sensible policy is developed, and yet the take-up rate is embarrassingly low. If only we could introduce a higher level of consultation, it could make a huge difference to the way directives are considered.

At this stage it is easy to imagine some authorities saying "I have no time for this consultation. If I have to debate every instruction I give, nothing would ever get done." Such an attitude – and I have heard it expressed more often than I would have imagined possible – misses the whole point. It is based on the belief that such consultation is always a time-consuming step and also that the current dictatorial process actually works. Neither of these is necessarily correct.

When we wonder whether such an approach would slow down our processes, we need only to look a little more closely at *full picture* of life

in a school. A large number of the interactions that occur each day have nothing to do with dictatorial commands from on high. When we want to determine the date of the annual concert, the best way to support our touring netball team on their interstate trip, or ideas for coping with the unseasonably hot weather that seems to be sapping children's energy, we don't necessarily resort to 'top down' decisions. Instead, we chat about it among ourselves and try to consider the best options. Once the decision is made, we tend to stick with it, confident that it represents that fruits of our joint wisdom. Tell me I'm a dreamer, but my experience tells me that joint decisions, not *diktats*, are the norm in most organisations. (If your experience differs from mine, ask why it is so. After all, you are adults and I assume that adults prefer to solve problems in an adult manner.)

On the second matter – that dictatorial processes work – I would like to differentiate between reality and appearances. One of my favourite television shows is *A Touch of Frost* where Detective Inspector Jack Frost seems to get inordinate joy from ignoring the peremptory demands of his superior officer, Superintendent Norman Mullet, and I think part of its appeal lies in the fact that the two officers have diametrically opposed views on how an organisation should be run. Mullet has an idealised view where reports are filed on time, criminals are tracked down and gaoled, and subordinates speak respectfully to senior officers. Frost's world is more real – even though he is usually smart enough to maintain appearances when his boss is actually present. If you asked Mullet what makes his station run well, he might suggest obedience and compliance; Frost (insofar as he would entertain the question) would more likely suggest creativity or initiative. I have to side with the Inspector.

My point is that when someone is not listening to us when we so kindly offer advice, there is no point forcing them to follow, because even if manage to force our way through their reluctance, the result will not be long lasting. The best solution is to make the circumstances or conditions



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suitable and available. When the time is right, they are more likely to see the rationale behind our advice and willingly follow our suggestions.

If you are one of those (many) readers who disagrees with this claim, don't be too stressed. We are used to the idea that in schools, the senior people (such as the teachers) speak and the juniors (students) listen and obey. In our more honest moments we might acknowledge that this is theory, not reality, but somehow we stay wedded to the theory. When it comes to our own behaviour, where sometimes we are not the ones in charge, we may be less inclined to ascribe to superiors the same aura that we would like to think attaches to our own authority in the classroom. We are probably more open to the idea of having both sides presented – the boss' view and our own.

If all else fails...

I mentioned earlier that when two parties cannot agree, it might be necessary to have an intermediary to help lead to a mutually agreed solution. There will be many times when this is not necessary, but even in the best of worlds it will sometimes prove essential. To use this is not to admit defeat; it is instead to explore a further option when earlier ones are inadequate.

While some leaders might prefer to win the day their own way, unassisted by third parties, this attitude sounds to me too much like

arrogance or pride. It is the equivalent of laying a town to siege, ready to force "the enemy" to surrender. Putting it another way, it is a case of when the horse refuses to drink, just take it to the riverside and leave it there – the horse will drink the water sooner or later. Sadly, such methods are not widely known as ways to get the unwilling party to come onto your side.

Instead of this 'victory by attrition' bring in someone else to hear both sides, and then ask this newcomer to offer some advice. The eventual decision might be in line with the dialectic method (where thesis versus antithesis leads to synthesis) and might not really please anyone, but at least everyone knows that their views were heard, their major points seen as worth considering, and that the final result is probably closer to their own wishes than might have been the case if no intermediary had been involved.

The previous scenario involving answering the phone is a simple example of a situation where we might use a middle-person, someone to mediate between the parties and reach a reasonable compromise. If each participant becomes aware of the reason underlying the directive, they might change their mind; alternatively, if the administrator is made aware of the reasons for the opposition, again there might be a mind-shift. Someone must be able

to explain to the other party just what thinking underpins the opposition.

The role of the intermediary or arbitrator is to help both sides understand that even the simplest interaction might have some unseen complications, but that these can be ironed out, even totally removed, if only we will take the time to listen to two sides of an argument.

Complete victory in such a situation might be the desired model, but it can only really satisfy one side. In the absence of such an outcome, it is much better for all participants to realise that their case has been heard, their wishes have been noted, and the final decision has paid due deference to the objections raised. In that way, it is more likely that we will see everyone moving towards shared ownership of the decision, and surely that is what we really want.

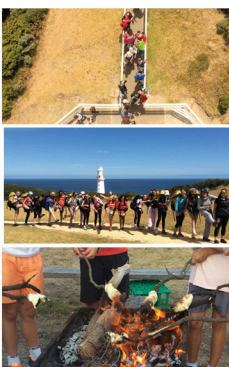
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Dennis Sleigh, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au.

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