

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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I suppose that after thirty eight letters it is time to say something about the art of school leadership – in the full knowledge that no-one actually knows, and the realisation that I can only report what was...not what is nor will come. But maybe some of the lessons I learned will amuse, if not teach, and in the interests of historic record it is worth a few old man's musings. So I will devote the next two Tales to reminiscences about the light-hearted side of school management – or leadership, if you prefer. You may ask, so what is the difference between this and the first thirty eight letters? I have no idea.

The Pink Paper

Before there was sufficient research and writing about the specific requirements of school leadership some Heads and senior staff took their management cue from industry or business or academic sources, and became absorbed in 'Management by Objectives' or the 'Classical Economic Efficiency' model or the 'Scientific Study of Work Methods' approach.

There is nothing wrong in following well established advice on effective management practices, even though many headteachers questioned whether school management was quite the same as managing a profit-making business, or a government funded service, like the National Health Service, the police, or waste collection, where the organisation tended to be split into those who 'do' and those who manage the 'doing'. Heads argued that running a school was vastly different from all of those, mainly on two grounds – (1) there was no profit motive; (2) there were no shareholders to satisfy; (3) the managers of other organisations did not also do the doing i.e. like Heads teaching classes or supervising playgrounds at lunchtime.

It is true that there were, and are, significant differences, but there are important similarities as well, and senior leaders in schools could always learn from other organisations. No, it wasn't the expert's advice that bothered me. What always troubled me more was that it all came from 'experts' in the first place – high-powered students of management, or very successful practitioners...that is to say...those up there.... What about those down there... the ones who have to enjoy or suffer the outcomes of the managers' management? Might they not have a great deal to offer, too?

This is better acknowledged these days....I think. But before the 1980s growth of management theories, there was precious little to hang on to that reflected everyday experience.

At the time when I was intent on becoming a Head....and for the first ten years of being a Head.... I received no specific training at all. And the books I was referred to made little sense when I met the diurnal round of events in school. In my terms it was 'seat of the pants' management.

In fact the principle of management that I and most Head Teachers subscribed to, for pretty well the whole of the 20th century, was set out clearly in chapter 8 of *the Gospel according to St Matthew*, where Jesus says to the centurion:

'For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me; and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.'

It suited the Messiah and it did the job for the centurion. But I was neither. And so, over time this approach caused many a fraught, sometimes tense and sometimes hilarious, confrontation in schools. I decided early on that I would be 'different'..... how many managers have toyed with that idea!?

I was determined to embrace 'the collaborative approach' - to 'involve' my colleagues in the management of 'their' school. You must bear in mind that these were early 'management' days. 'Collaboration' had an unfortunate Second World War connotation....scenes of collaborators having their heads shaved, or simply being shot. It was not the favourite word of the generation....but it did say exactly what it meant.

We had a lot to learn about it.....not least that 'the collaborative approach' involved many hours of meetings, sub-meetings, committees, sub-committees, minutes and reports. O dear! That spelled trouble! And it took less than a term of opening the new school to lead to mild rebellion..... to my innocent astonishment.

In a bout of candour I published a proposal for a pay structure that I wanted to put to the governing body. It was printed on pink paper and became known for years afterwards as 'The Pink Paper Plot'. Pink became the colour of warning, of danger.

The problem was historic. Teachers had clamoured for some rationale in pay structures, but once such a structure was down on paper then many realised that it would indicate to others what they earned, and in the teaching profession at that time one's salary was very personal, often negotiated within narrow ranges between the Head and the teacher.

So very quickly, under union pressure, I withdrew the dreaded paper and reverted to mystery, and covert negotiation. If that is what the staff wanted it was of no great consequence to me – except to my ego and my disappointment that openness had been so quickly rejected.

Ever-after any attempt I made to introduce something novel would be eyed suspiciously. *'Is this another Pink Paper, headmaster?'* It never was – ever again.

But it had not stopped my trying to engage in a *'collaborative'* style of management. That also came to a somewhat abrupt end one winter evening after school, at a staff meeting when debate and wrangling over some footling change had gone well over the hour and a half allotted for such meetings.

The Head of the Sixth Form, a learned and formidable lady of many years' experience, who always occupied the same arm-chair, *her chair*, could no longer hold back her frustration.

'For goodness sake, Headmaster, show some leadership, make a decision and we can all go home!'

There are all sorts of ways to bring a meeting to a close.....and a dream.... that was one!.
