

# The Leadership of Change — A TAFE Study

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## ABSTRACT

TAFE NSW is currently experiencing a number of changes aimed at meeting the requirements for a more flexible and responsive vocational education and training sector. These changes are occurring as the result of a government policy of economic rationalism and the belief that competition in the sector will enhance the quality of training provided and better meet the needs of the customer.

Research in the vocational education and training sector is diverse. Current attention in TAFE is clearly focused on the introduction of new work practices aimed at ensuring TAFE can take its place in the restructured training and education environment.

But what of the leaders within TAFE who have to play a major role in the implementation of these changes? Contemporary Management Theory argues that a transformational style of leadership should be used in both private and public sector organisations to facilitate the progression of change and innovation.

This paper examines the paradox between the push towards a change-focused culture in TAFE that, theoretically, requires transformational leadership and the restrictions of a TAFE system that appears to hinder the use of this management style. It is part of a larger study (currently under review) that investigated the management styles of women managers within TAFE.

The paper presents the views of a number of managers interviewed for the larger study. It is a snapshot view of their feelings and perceptions which raises questions about the ability of TAFE personnel to implement changed work practices in an environment that does not appear to fully support its members in doing so.

## BACKGROUND

Since the 1980s organisations in Australia, and indeed across the world, have been subjected to change in proportions not experienced in the past. The changes have resulted from a realisation that global competition is a major driving force behind the productivity and success of organisations. To meet the challenges thrust upon them organisations have undergone massive changes in structure, culture and workplace practices.

There has been an attempt to transfer private sector corporate management to the public sector bringing with it private sector effectiveness (Sinclair & Mariott 1990, 17; Adler, Laney & Packer 1993, 3). This 'managerialism' is a result of the economic rationalist approach of a government requiring an increase in the flexibility, efficiency and responsiveness of a system that has traditionally been organised along very bureaucratic, protected lines.

The same economic imperatives driving changes in private organisations are therefore demanding changes in the way public organisations are organised. It is not only the government demanding changes in the way these institutions are run but the community and, especially in the case of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), industry. TAFE faces an increasing need to cooperate with other educational providers, to meet government demands for a competitive vocational education and training system and to be accountable to the community and industry for the quality and efficiency of its services.

Joy Selby Smith (1995, 10) enunciated the government's argument that TAFE had not been responsive to changing demand conditions in relation to training provision therefore it was in the public interest to foster a more open and competitive publicly funded vocational education and training market. 'There is a need to recognise that the TAFE sector...must embrace significant changes in attitudes, approaches and the way it goes about its work. Cultural change is required at all levels' (Selby Smith 1995, 25).

While Selby Smith agreed that some people had embraced the change and had become true entrepreneurs others, still committed to the old system, would feel that to commercialise many of

TAFE's operations was to go against the 'higher' purpose of TAFE (Kell 1992, 6; Raethel 1996, 12; Anderson 1996, 37). They believed that TAFE would lose the support of the community if it perceived the organisation was moving away from its central role of teaching and supporting students especially those who were economically and socially disadvantaged.

Goozee (1993, 170) felt the next decade in TAFE would be a time of instability as its systems and managers attempted to meet the new demands placed upon them within a climate of sluggish economic activity and funding constraints. At a time when sources of funding were becoming fragmented and marginalised TAFE would have to battle to maintain its status and identity as a major provider of vocational education and training.

Management in TAFE, therefore, faces twin tensions - between the demand for flexibility and responsiveness and the imposition of tighter management structures to ensure accountability within a system of much stricter economic restraints (Daws 1995, 97).

## **A NEW MODEL OF LEADERSHIP**

It has been argued that the traditional style of management is inappropriate for today's organisation. A more flexible, responsive leader displaying high trust, participative management styles is needed to replace the autocratic, individualised, competitive leader who was found to be effective in the past (Smith & Hutchinson 1995, 93).

Current management literature focuses on the 'transformational' leadership style as meeting the requirements for organisations of the future (Rosener 1990; Limerick & Cunningham 1993; Alimo-Metcalfe 1995; Parry, 1996).

Sergiovanni (1990), Hallinger (1992), Duignan and Macpherson (1992), Ozga (1993), Adler, Laney and Packer (1993) and Burford (1996) argue that this shift to a transformational leader is required in educational institutions. They contend that the leaders in these institutions should no longer be administration managers or instructional leaders. Rather they need to decentralise authority over curriculum decisions, expand roles for teachers, students and the community in decision making and emphasise active learning. The transformational leader in education is envisaged as one who communicates a sense of excitement, originality and freshness to the organisation. The transformational leader also challenges others to participate in defining the vision and the preferred way of acting in education. According to Chui, Sharpe and McCormick (1996, 31) this last characteristic, vision, is 'essential to effective transformational leadership' and is what 'distinguishes leader from manager'.

## **THE STUDY**

A study was conducted to examine the management styles of senior women managers at the Head of Studies level within the context of TAFE. The aim was to gather information on how the managers perceive their styles and to obtain the perception of others influenced by their management style. Interviews were conducted with three women executives (Institute and College Directors) in the first stage of the study to supplement a very meagre literature review of the cultural context within which women managers find themselves in TAFE. The second stage of the study involved gathering information from four women Head of Studies and seven of their nominated colleagues (both male and female). The participants in the study came from different discipline areas in different TAFE colleges located in the metropolitan area of Sydney.

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study using the case study methodology because it allowed an understanding and an interpretation of the world as seen from the experiences and perceptions of the study participants (Fonow & Cook 1991). It also allowed an interpretation of conceptual categories developed from thick description (Patton 1980). As the case study simply provides a snap-shot of a situation at one point in time there was no attempt to generalise the findings of this research to another time or place.

Whilst the main focus of the study centred around the management styles of women in TAFE (Rice 1997), a number of interesting issues regarding the impact of changing work practices on this management style came to light. This paper presents some of these findings. It must be noted that the

words presented on the following issues are not necessarily direct quotes from participants in the study. In some cases their words have been paraphrased to allow for clearer sentence structure.

## **THE CHALLENGES**

The change in the political context in which TAFE operates was seen as the major cause of structural and cultural change in TAFE. There was a recognition that the economic rationalist model or philosophy being embraced by past and present governments has driven TAFE to alter both the way it delivers vocational education and training and the way this education is financed. The study participants perceived the difficulties for TAFE were in coming to terms with the resulting increase in competition and the destruction that could result from a loss of focus on TAFE's traditional role. They said:

This new philosophy is at odds with the values that we hold near and dear with respect to the educational philosophy which underpins what we do and... the strong sense of social justice which we have been committed to.

TAFE is operating in an environment of tangible political intervention under an economic rationalist approach that has not given itself time for reflection. How the economic rationalist approach affects what TAFE actually does, what TAFE's core business really is and how the two can live cohesively has not been well thought through.

Economic rationalism is destroying TAFE...Managers in TAFE, while fighting for their survival, are constrained by their lack of knowledge of where TAFE is going and what they are supposed to be doing.

One of the major implications of the 'new' approach to vocational educational and training has been a perceived reduction of resources to manage the TAFE system. Participants in the study felt that the concentration on dollars caused a loss of staff expertise, a loss of flexibility in decision making and a deviation away from TAFE's traditional 'second chance' education role:

When there is not a lot of money around the way of resolving the tension for an institute to operate and do more with fewer funds is to centralise. If you actually want people to produce good things in colleges they have to have ownership and this ownership is lost with centralisation. The situation creates an 'us and them' mentality and a lack of responsibility.

There is a conflict between being flexible and proactive and the enormous restrictions placed on what managers can do, how they can do it and how much they have got to do it with. No-one has identified how managers can cross the great gulf between what they are asked to do and how they actually do it given the structural, process and financial constraints placed on them.

I know that if we don't get the income, if we're not out there promoting fee-for-service courses and trying to raise funds we will be in dire straits.

There are a lot more limitations on managers in terms of budgetary constraints in the current climate with TAFE becoming more and more dollar driven. This could make managers fairly ruthless in what they are doing and they could actually suffer a loss of flexibility in using their common sense in making decisions about things like class sizes because they are so concerned about cost pressures.

A number of the nominated colleagues commented on the perception that the Heads of Studies spent a disproportionate amount of time on administrative matters instead of on their educational leadership role:

Many managers in TAFE (particularly at senior levels) do not get around the colleges enough to see what's going on.

Managers work off crisis management most of the time with the paper work tying them down to the detriment of meeting educational goals and objectives.

The main problem for managers within TAFE is their concentration on administrative matters at the expense of keeping up to date with what is happening educationally.

Managers can no longer afford to be involved in the operational paper work that can be handled by lower level managers.

## **THE MANAGERS**

Future TAFE managers need the 'soft' or 'people' skills that have been described by many management theorists (Feuer 1988; Randell 1993; Smith & Hutchinson 1995) according to the participants in this study. Words used by participants to describe these managers included integrity, honesty, sincerity, humbleness, courage, openness, trust, empowering, supporting, developing, empathetic, flexible, team centred, adaptable, encouraging, approachable, fair and ethical. Specifically it was said that:

There are a number of strengths required by managers if they are going to lead TAFE through the changes that are currently and constantly occurring. These include courage - the courage of your convictions, the courage to speak, the courage to be different, the courage to be non-conforming, the courage to lead when it would be easier to sit, the courage to confront issues when it would be easier to just ignore them. Judgement is also important - judging people, judging the situation, seeing the situation and coming to conclusions from it readily. Being able to see the way forward is another important strength. Managers must support others to make decisions - they must empower them to run with the decisions and the carry them forward. Above all managers must care - they must care about the people and the community they are serving.

The management style has to be less directive and more collaborative with the best results coming from people who are working as a team, who are working in cooperation, who have the same sense of objective about where they are trying to go.

A management style that emphasises ownership and empowerment rather than autocracy is required otherwise staff work every way they can to buck the system. Managers need to be out there with the staff, discovering their potential.

Managers need to be informed about what is happening in the training market. They need a good education and understanding of education and the trends in education. Managers have to be flexible and ready to change with the times.

Managers should be there to support their staff.

## **DISCUSSION**

TAFE is operating in an unstable, uncertain environment with demands from the government and the community for a more flexible, competitive and cost effective vocational education and training system driving organisational changes.

There was some apprehension exhibited by the participants in this study about many of these changes with the feeling that they could compromise TAFE's traditional role in the vocational education and training sector - a role that has provided 'second chance' education to many who would otherwise miss out.

These changes were linked to economic rationalism - a model seen as bringing private sector managerialist procedures to the public sector in an effort to enable stricter accountability for public funds.

Budgetary constraints resulting from this move were seen to restrict the ability of managers to operate in a flexible and proactive way. It was felt by some that the new TAFE operating environment did not support risk takers but instead engendered a fear of breaking the rules and regulations that still dominated the system.

Positive outcomes from the changes in TAFE were perceived to include a shift to a customer and quality focus, the implementation of new technologies and a recognition that access and equity should be part of the mainstream education system.

While the participants in the study were certainly concerned with the changes occurring in TAFE they also felt TAFE was strong enough to survive the movement to a competitive environment. They recognised the need, though, for TAFE managers to become more strategic in their problem solving and decision making. This movement, they felt, was difficult given the current reporting requirements - requirements that necessitated Heads of Studies be involved in administrative and operational functions at the expense of higher level duties.

Sinclair and Marriott (1990) found the introduction of managerialism in public service organisations promoted bureaucratisation and centralism through an increase in control over budgets and accountability. For organisations trying to become more responsive to their external environment this poses a huge problem. This problem was related to management styles by Ozga (1993) who asserted that the demands of the external environment were causing anxiety and distrust within educational institutions making it difficult to establish the supportive culture needed within these organisations. Managers, in this case, use traditional, authoritative styles instead of the transformational styles that are linked with effective leadership.

These 'traditional' management styles, though, are not relevant in the current TAFE climate where people are being asked to cope with enormous changes. When participants in the study were asked about the management styles needed within TAFE they responded by outlining the manager described by Rosener (1990), Limerick and Cunnington (1993) and Smith and Hutchinson (1995) as the interactive, collaborative individual. That is, the executive in this study perceived that a transformational manager was needed in TAFE to cope with the changes occurring in the organisation.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The ability for managers to use the transformational style of leadership is very much determined by the structure, culture and climate of the organisation in which they manage.

TAFE, though, is still hierarchical, it is still dominated by rules and regulations and, according to the participants in this study, it is still inflexible and unsupporting of risk takers who wish to operate in a proactive way. Many of the managers actually appeared stifled in their management style expressing a concern with what they could and could not do in the current climate. Powell (1993, 54) also recognised this conundrum and believed 'in many settings, individuals cannot deviate from traditional standards of behaviour without taking considerable personal risk'. It is the level of personal risk that concerns some of the managers in this study.

The belief that budgetary constraints could force managers into a management style more reminiscent of the traditional authoritarian style is also an important concern.

If the TAFE organisation is going to rely on its managers to successfully lead it through the coming years then these issues have important implications. TAFE, as an organisation, must be prepared to accept and support the transformational management style if it is to become an accepted way of managing.

A fundamental cultural change must accompany the structural changes currently being implemented to enable managers to cope in the new environment. The paradox between the necessity for a creative culture that supports transformational management styles and the need for increased accountability must be addressed. While the participants in this study believe the transformational style of leadership will address this need their concerns for more flexibility within existing structures must be acknowledged.

A perceived lack of knowledge of TAFE's strategic direction was another constraint on managers identified in the study. Concern was expressed with the lack of knowledge of a vision for TAFE and how different its future role would be compared to its traditional 'social' role. Arguments and viewpoints abound in the literature about the direction TAFE should be pursuing and how this direction is going to impact on the role of TAFE in vocational education and training. This direction should be clarified and communicated to TAFE personnel who can then direct their energies toward achieving established goals.

The lack of knowledge of strategic direction appeared to impact directly on the ability of managers to be truly transformational. Parry (1996, 3) remarked that too often managers are tied down fighting fires that erupt on a daily basis at work to be able to think clearly about where their organisations are going. This prevents them from enunciating and communicating the future to others. This study identified the need for Heads of Studies to become less involved in the day to day operational running of their colleges and more involved in the educational planning for the future of TAFE.

TAFE management needs to examine why this transition is so difficult to make. Why, if people agree the Heads of Studies should be divesting themselves of low level administrative tasks, do they

continue to perform them? Is it, as some suggest, a fear of ministerials and a concern with political correctness or is it a lack of appropriate systems within TAFE tying managers down with the paper work at the expense of concentrating on 'bigger picture' issues? The expectations placed on these people must be examined to determine if there is a conflict between their perceived and actual roles.

The results of this study indicated that all participants would like to see transformational managers in TAFE. Many, though, appeared disillusioned with TAFE's current direction and revealed their need for support, encouragement and development. Managers need to build the confidence of the people they work with as well as challenging the rules and regulations contributing to the inflexibility of TAFE. In this way they will assist their staff in becoming proactive and change oriented - skills necessary for survival in the push to a more competitive vocational education and training system.

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