

PART FOUR

17 INTO THE MARKET PLACE WITH LOCAL AUTHORITY MANAGERS 1991-1993 AND ACTION PLANNING FOR MY FUTURE, 1993 - 2009

Between 1991 and 1993 I have worked as a tutor on a two year action research programme with senior managers from Wiltshire, Avon and Gloucestershire. Whilst my primary interest is in enhancing the professionalism of teaching and education within our schools and universities I also want to see education fully integrated as a life-long activity within all workplaces. Because of the sustained commitment of Conservative Governments since 1979 to ensure that market forces can directly influence all aspects of our lives as citizens and workers I think you will identify with the local government managers below, Bob Elsey, Ashely Wirdnam and John Hodge, who are learning what it means to try to improve the quality of their practice whilst having to respond to the influence of market forces. Their experiences have highlighted the need for urgent action to protect education from a similar penetration by market forces. Hence in my final section I will be suggesting the need to work together to create An Education Council, to enhance the professionalism of educators and teachers and to sustain the values of education in the face of the pressures described below.

Bob Elsey is a manager working in Wiltshire and responsible for providing a purchasing and distribution service for other local authorities. The Government's legislation involves radical change in the way local authorities manage their services and has meant a rapid change in the nature of Bob's work. The enormity of the legislative changes facing local government meant that he had to face the challenge of finding a new sense of order out of the confusion created by such a major transformation. He has expressed his concern and problem in a way which includes 'I' as a living contradiction holding together both order and chaos.

Since October 1992 my work and to some considerable extent much of my life has been dominated by the rapid and voluminous changes imposed on the Local Government by the National Government.. The scope and extent of my responsibility in providing a purchasing and distribution service to some ninety local authorities has meant that the effects of the changes have been extremely complex to assimilate and "manage".....

The problem is that over the last few months the developments, changes and work issues of significance have occurred at such a pace that I am having considerable difficulty in focussing on a real concern and in getting the randomly recorded thoughts in order or at least in such a state that they will help to resolve some of the problems I face.

Bob moved on to develop an action plan of analysing the implications of the major pieces of legislation for his work in order to make an appropriate response. This

included the new Education Act which continues the move to increase the direct influence of market forces on local authorities and schools. This move has been felt rather too keenly by many workers in Gloucestershire. I think it has also been felt by the relatives of those killed by mentally-ill individuals who were on the streets following the implementation of the legislation known as Care in the Community.

Ashley Wirdnam works for Gloucestershire. Over the past two years he has directly experienced the influence of government policy in moving public services into the market to experience competition between business units. Ashley's resilience in the face of these policies as colleagues have faced redundancy is a source of inspiration I would like to share with you through the following action plan.

Action planning is a fundamental part of action research. The action planner used at Bath, contains 'I' as a living contradiction and in the plan below Ashley follows a pattern of questioning I think you will recognise as a common sense, yet disciplined approach to improving practice. I think you will also recognise the value of an individual's creativity in responding to a social context increasingly dominated by market forces. The planner has the form:

What do I want to improve? What are the reasons for my concerns? What might I do to improve my practice? How will I know that my practice has improved? What kind of evidence will I need to gather to make a valid judgement on the quality of my management practice and process? What will I try to produce for our next meeting?

ACTION PLANNING FOR SURVIVAL AND IMPROVEMENT

1. What do I want to improve?

I am in the process of merging my training unit with the teacher training unit located in the Education Department, to form a single training business unit. This conforms with current County policy to establish a range of business units in the professions identified in the 1992 Local Government Act in anticipation of them being exposed to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). The new unit will be formed on the 1st January, 1993 as the Professional Development Consultancy (PDC), with its head (Director) being the current head of the teacher training unit, with myself as deputy.

I am concerned to establish the PDC as a viable business unit which could survive commercially when it is exposed to CCT. This must be my main concern but within it there are many others that inter-relate closely with it. For example:-

a. In the new structure I will be the No 2, whereas at present I am the 'boss' and have enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy for several years. How will the new structure work in practice, and how will I come to terms with it?

b. How will my relationship with my new boss develop, particularly as we shall be working in buildings 4 miles apart, with the inevitable potential for communications problems that that generates?

c. How will I and my staff react to the growing emphasis on commercialism and the need to analyse what we do in terms of what it will pay rather than what the client(s) need(s)?

d. How will I develop my role as a contractor, working with an ex-colleague from the Personnel Department Management Team, who is now taking over my previous duties as the Client Training Manager for the County?

e. What will be the main focus of my work when the business unit is fully established? My client manager role will have gone and I will inevitably be required to take on a more active training role than in recent years. Should I begin to specialise as a trainer and develop expertise in certain specific areas which compliment those of my existing staff, or should I use my experience as a general trainer to 'cover' the work of my staff and concentrate on developing new business opportunities?

f. As far as managing my part of the business is concerned, should my emphasis be on improving the way the unit operates, in order to make it more efficient and responsive, thus making it more cost effective, or should I concentrate on developing the product (e.g. range of training programmes) in order to have a stronger base from which to market the unit's skills and services?

2. What are the reasons for my concerns? The future is full of uncertainty and change. Many issues are beyond my power to influence (e.g. Local Government Reorganisation) and at the end of the day I need to continue to work in order to maintain my standard of living. Staying in employment is therefore a primary consideration and hence making a success of the new business unit must be at the top of my priorities. I also want to maintain the jobs of my staff. In my new contractor role I shall have much less influence on the County's training policy than in the past but believe that a strong commitment to training is going to be vital if the County is to survive the challenges of the next decade.

3. What might I do to improve my practice? The list is almost endless, but what emerges as the focus of my new job will dictate what I need to do to improve my practice. This will become clearer in the next few weeks as a business plan is developed and agreed with my Director and staff. I expect this to highlight those areas within the business needing priority attention, and the process should also help to clarify my new role and key tasks.

4a. How will I know that my practice has improved? The ultimate test will be commercial viability of the business unit, inside or outside the County Council, with the continuance of the jobs of my staff and myself being an obvious indicator of that viability.

4b. How am I going to find out? In the short run the business unit will be protected from direct competition but this is not expected to last more than two years. After that

the signs of success or failure will be obvious, but before then our ability to satisfy our clients and our real costs in doing so should provide some satisfactory evidence of our likely viability.

4c. What kind of evidence will I need to gather to make a valid judgement on the quality of my management practice and process? The evolution of the business against the business plan should provide the basic evidence necessary in the short term, irrespective of how good the business plan actually is. In the longer term the evidence of viability and survivability should be pretty clear to everyone.

5. What will I try to produce for our next meeting? The obvious thing is an agreed business plan but whilst this exists in draft form already, it is unlikely to be completed until the new year as there are several details of our cost base still to be resolved with the County. Progress with it and final agreement by Members to endorse our plans (expected late November) is more realistic.

Ashely has continued to modify his planning in the light of new developments and produced a description and explanation of his own learning and educational development as a local authority manager.

John Hodge works for Avon in the county solicitor and deputy clerk's department. He has worked there since Avon's inception in 1974 and he communicates a powerful sense of humane values in his beliefs and actions. In July 1993 he is facing the probability that Avon will cease to exist in April 1995. His job, until recently, appeared more secure than many colleagues in other departments because of the way in which it was funded. John's action enquiry has focused on improving the quality of his management through the introduction of a process of appraisal. John asked the question,

How will the introduction of appraisal into the general administration division of the county solicitor and deputy clerk's department improve my own management practice and that of the staff reporting to me?

My Concern

I have decided to concentrate on the introduction of an Employment and Personal Development Review Scheme for all Section Heads who Report to me.

What evidence will I be able to produce?

*Details of interviews I have conducted.
Notes of review meeting.*

How will I know if I have been successful?

I will still be here and have coped with an increasing workload with diminishing staff and finance.

John's full report on his learning as he answered the question is too long to include here. It is focused on the introduction of an Employment and Personal Development Review (EPDR) scheme by Avon County Council. The Council states that the scheme is being introduced to support its overall objective of providing the best possible service to the public.

"The scheme recognises that the Council's staff are its most important asset and that its aims are best served by helping staff in achieving job satisfaction and developing their full potential to succeed in providing quality services in response to their needs."

The scheme stresses 'discussion' rather than 'appraisal' to make it clear that the postholder is asked to take an equal part in the event, not merely to receive a plan of action devised on their behalf. This is helped by excluding disciplinary, grievance and pay issues from the scheme. The purpose of the discussion is to establish agreement between the postholder and the Reporting Officer on an Action Plan which will identify the postholders' main task priorities and responsibilities for the coming year and to help develop the postholders and their job skills.

The postholders are asked to prepare their thoughts in a systematic way before the discussion in the following way:

i) Outline what you believe to be your most important tasks and responsibilities (by reference to your job description if you wish).

ii) Analyse your performance in relation to these. Could it be improved? If so, how?

iii) Are there any 'constraints/barriers' which hamper your performance? If so, please list them together with the effect they have.

iv) How does your Reporting Officer's managerial style affect your performance?

v) Do you feel that you have any special abilities which are not fully used? To what sort of work do you consider you are best suited?

vi) What action needs to be taken by (a) you, and (b) your Reporting Officer in respect of your performance and development in the period between this and the next discussion?

vii) Do you have any views on your next career step?

viii) In your discussion you will need to ensure that all issues relevant to your role and relationship with your Reporting Officer are raised. List these if they are not covered above.

Up to this point the EPDR scheme can be understood as a similar form of action planning to that used in the action research programme. However, the action

research approach to professional development is more extensive than a process of action planning. It also includes a postholder's account of their management learning which has been submitted to a form of public validation. In producing an account, which contains a description and explanation for his own self-managed learning and submitting it for validation to a group of participating colleagues, John Hodge has shown how such a scheme can be extended to include criteria and evidence for judging the quality and effectiveness of his management practices and process.

At this point I wish to refer to an analysis which suggests that a movement from 'customer' to 'consumer' to 'citizen' can be discerned in the language of government policies. In offering an account of his own self-managed learning as a local authority officer John Hodge has not only provided evidence on his competent practice, he has demonstrated the qualities of an educated citizen.

This can be seen in John's full participation in the action research programme. He has not only submitted his account for validation, but has also responded to the accounts of others. The criteria used below by participants to test the validity and enhance the rigour of the accounts are taken from one of John's responses to a colleague in a neighbouring authority. I cannot overemphasise the importance of these 'validation' groups in which colleagues would provide evaluative feedback on the quality of your case study. Here are John's comments on the criteria he uses together with some extracts from his judgements,

Criteria

I have read your account and considered it against the following criteria:

- i) evidence of background reading;*
- ii) accurate recording of events;*
- iii) rigorous collection and interpretation of data;*
- iv) demonstration of the relationship between the data and the local problem;*
- v) is the story told in a way which captivates my imagination? ;*
- vi) is the story presented in a clear and comprehensible form? ;*
- vii) are the claims being made backed up sufficiently with evidence?;*
- viii) does the report contain an explanation in the sense of giving reasons why things have happened as they have, as well as looking to see if it contains a description of your management learning?*

Judgements

There is not much evidence of background reading but I think, like me, you were caught out and did not really concentrate on this aspect of the study until the last session... In the penultimate paragraph you refer to personal contact. If you are looking for another book reference, Tom Peters and Nancy Austin make reference to managing by walking about, in their book "A Passion for Excellence; The Leadership Difference".

In the paragraph entitled “Ask The Questions” I think it would be useful to offer an explanation of what you mean by “success” in the second line, and perhaps bring in something there about how should you train your staff so that in the “Establish Proof” section you could offer evidence of how that training is worked. Under “Document” you have probably outlined the actions, the consequences of the actions, as well as the results. Under “Investigations” I would suggest that you test your theories in the validation group.

In conclusion I will leave you with my action plans with their statements of concern, imagined ways forward, and the kinds of evidence I intend to gather to enable me to make a judgement on the quality and effectiveness of my actions. I am asking you to do more than engage with these plans and to suggest improvements. Because of the enormity of the political and economic forces which are restructuring our society on market principles, I recognise that collaborative action is needed to arrest these forces and to insist on the strengthening of democratic procedures to protect the educational values celebrated in this text. I am asking you to suggest ways in which I could increase the collaborative power of my actions. You may have noticed that I have not used ‘we’ a great deal in this text. Yet I fear that unless ‘we’ begin to share a sense of common purpose and work politically to achieve our purpose then many of the values expressed above will be suppressed without much of a collaborative struggle.