

Umbrellas, Funnels and Sifters – Tools school leaders need

Leadership and
'Catch 22'
situations can
be synonymous



A precious but hazily understood concept is about the tone, harmony and atmosphere existing within people-focussed organisations. With so much emphasis on accountability and a loss of faith and trust in people, the importance of 'atmosphere' is often overlooked. Not surprisingly, people working in schools are more stressed than their predecessors. In this context, a metaphor that embraces umbrellas, funnels and sifters can be useful. These metaphoric tools, if understood and wisely used by school leaders, can help shape and develop excellent schools.

Leadership and 'Catch 22' situations can be synonymous. For leaders who are caught in the middle, when the expectations of those above are at odds with the priorities of staff in schools, it's a case of being damned if you do and damned if you don't. The 'catch' situation is that leaders get caught in cleft sticks, hovering between what the organisational hierarchy (the controllers outside) and people within (the ones who make the policies and programs work), want and expect. The two sets of expectations don't necessarily align. In fact, they are sometimes at complete odds with each other.

- **e-Shortcuts** – Wisdom for successful school leadership and management
- **e-Teaching** – Management strategies for the classroom
- **e-Technology** – Technology in the classroom
- **e-Early Learning** – Thinking on early learning

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Sandwiched between

Being caught in the middle impacts on all school leaders. The tensions inherent within the principal's position impacts most heavily on those leaders who are younger and those with strong, yet to be realised, career ambitions. Younger and more easily influenced leaders tend to look over their shoulders more often than their older colleagues, who are usually less susceptible to pressure from above. It can be all about the need to please and the degree of compliance necessary in order to earn the approval of system superordinates.

Experienced leaders should still heed policies and programs that come from above. However, their capacity to synthesise and implement, based on a wise interpretation of what is required, means that new initiatives might be applied a little differently to what was originally anticipated - and for very good reasons. In their eagerness to get on and curry favour with superordinates, inexperienced leaders can lack empathy when insisting on teachers absolutely conforming to directives from system administrators.

These leaders are often mistakenly described as 'exploratory innovators'. In reality their often-uncritical acceptance and application of new ideas, means they habitually frog hop from one new initiative to the next. They fail to devote sufficient

time to the introduction and consolidation of new ideas within the school.

We do well to remember that the implementation of top down change impacts all staff as well as the principal. New policies and programs flow downwards, through the school hierarchy, to classroom teachers and support staff who have the new and different tasks imposed on them. They are the implementers. Quite often the demand to apply these new ideas is done with minimal discussion and consultation.

Some principals may believe that going in new directions is all very easy. It is sometimes assumed that not much is being added to the load teachers already carry. In most cases, very little is dropped off to make room for new work and additional tasks. This has a negative impact on school tone and harmony. Teachers and support staff feel as if they are, yet again, being dumped on.

Umbrellas, funnels and sifters

Metaphorically and as go-betweens connecting government and department with school and community, principals have to juggle with umbrellas, funnels and sifters. They have to determine what needs to be let through and what school staff, students and the community need to have deflected. **The principal is like an umbrella opened above the school and**

community. His or her job is to deflect what comes down, in increasing torrents, shielding the school from poorly considered factors of interference. This context is heightened by the fact that more and more of society's demands about student development are also raining down from on high.

Principals need to be custodians of their boundaries, ensuring that schools and their staff are not overwhelmed by a deluge of demands.

A chorus of complaint can erupt when staff believe that principals and school leadership groups are playing at inversion. There is a perception held by some staff groups that the school hierarchy simply catches, collects and funnels externally motivated change requirements down, onto and into the school and its community. There is a contention that little analysis and consideration of new programs has been undertaken with change requirements being embraced without comment. **Principals can be seen as funnels who automatically catch and cascade untested and untried ideas onto their classroom teachers.**

This perception is not without foundation. It is common for those who want to get on, to grab new ideas and experiment with their application. Staff and students can become guinea pigs.

Change is necessary however, a prerequisite to implementation should be careful consideration, including meaningful consultation within the school and community. Engagement and ownership should belong to students, staff and community as well as to the principal.

All systems and their schools, for the sake of growth and development, need change. Moving with the times, accepting and shaping new priorities is important. However, building on established educational foundations and accepting change incrementally means that modification is built on a stable base. Building on the traditions inherent within school communities is a wise approach.

School leaders need to be like sifters, accepting new system initiatives, considering implications and then gradually sifting change, by a filtering process, into the school.

The danger of too much shelter

The application of the umbrella principle, if carried to the extreme, means that as a thoroughly shielded organisation the school never changes because it is totally sheltered from external ideas. While this equates to the mindset of those who resist change at all costs, excessive use of an umbrella means that the rain of change never influences the school. Too much deflection means that the school becomes one hundred percent change-protected and unable to grow.

'Funnelling' can be embraced to the extent of absolutely water-logging the school. Carefully established precepts and principles are flushed down the drain. New ideas and innovations are an important part of the school's dynamic but not if they flood the

organisation. Washing away good ideas and carefully structured policies is not unlike destructive agrarianism, where topsoil can be eroded and washed away, leaving eroded gullies and a barren landscape. Poorly considered organisational change can eventually lead to despair. No leadership team worth its salt wants to countenance such an outcome.

'Sifting' which infers the careful consideration of change, is the superior way for the school leader to operate. Rather than hastily embracing big-time change, new content and methods are carefully considered and sensitively implanted.

Change needs to be based on rationally and logically considered premises of need. **Part of this must be staff, students, school council and community consideration, including free and honest exchange of ideas central to the issues under consideration.** This ought to canvass the pros and cons of matters being discussed. There should also be a willingness to replace outdated and obsolete practices with those new processes.

That avoids the clutter and curriculum loading resulting from adding and adding, without ever dropping anything off the organisational agenda.

Concluding thoughts:

Weather and climate are important and over-riding atmospheric influencers within any organisation. This is particularly the case in establishments where people are working with and for the development of others.

Atmospheric 'highs' and 'lows' (levels of feeling and worth) impact upon schools. They derive from feelings of satisfaction, well-being and the togetherness that grows as part of the bond forged between the people who are its members. Without doubt the organisational synergy that is generated within schools can help with building positive attitudes and quality outcomes. This influences the way schools are seen and appreciated by the wider community.

There are climatic factors that come into play. In macro terms, the way a school is seen from the outside impacts on the reputation it enjoys. As atmospheric patterns shift, so too can community perceptions that equate with weather (short-term changes) and climate (long-term changes) within schools. Tone and harmony generated from within shape the way in which schools are recognised, appraised and generally regarded.

That is where the concepts of 'umbrella-ing', 'funnelling' and 'sifting' come into play. School leaders naturally want what is best for their schools. The right atmosphere is of crucial and enduring importance. It can be developed and enhanced by principals using these metaphoric kitchen utensils to consolidate and build the organisations they lead.

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