



Cohesive management styles in disparate ELT organisations

Valerie Ainscough explores some of the organisational and cultural variables that affect management style.

On reading various articles in the ELT Management SIG concerning good management, quality of product, professional practice and so on, I am constantly reminded of the complexity of many ELT operations and the limitations imposed on individual ELT managers by a plethora of factors over which the individual has no control, limited control or perhaps more control. Helen Mattacott mentioned Directors of Studies being caught "in the firing line both from teachers and from the Director" (ELT Management SIG no.18 p.11) whereas for many the fire seems to be coming from all directions. Similarly David Charles describes a clear, neat structure in his model (ELT SIG no 12 p.13). These two, chosen at random, portray relatively simple structures whereas many ELT managers work in structures vastly different. Consider the following two general models of ELT operations that many ELT specialists are involved in.

Some complex operations

First, there is the operation in which a British team is working within a host country institution with varying degrees of outside control. This could be a British Council DTO, an ELT project of the kind funded by the ODA that operates within an overseas Ministry of

Education or any other similar situation in which a foreign company or ministry recruits native speakers to direct and teach a language programme. The British operation has its own aims, policy and system of management, but is working within a structure with a separate culture, hierarchy and priorities. When such projects are set up, aims and objectives are discussed jointly and all interested parties pay lip service at least to having a common policy. However, it often becomes apparent that individuals or groups within the wider structure may have widely different needs and interests in the project. The difference in need is exacerbated by the difference in culture, economic factors, and educational infrastructure. The ELT manager in such situations may well find that what logically is good practice or policy in reaching the aims as he sees them, can be undermined by a whole variety of factors over which he has little control.

However, we do not have to look overseas to find equally complex systems operating much closer to home. Certain foreign companies are choosing to set up their own teaching operations in English speaking countries. A noticeable case is the establishment of Japanese colleges in the United Kingdom in recent years. Many of the factors applying to British operations

abroad are mirrored in such projects at home; the institution becomes extremely complex.

The contrast between simple and complex models

This can be demonstrated by looking first at a relatively simple model of a self contained private British ELT institution. Such a company can set its own mission statement which would be the same for all employees. A clear structure can be drawn up with the Director and his Assistant/Deputy at the head, and the different departments each with their heads responsible for the areas of finance, education, recruitment, marketing, welfare, facilities, administrative and secretarial support answerable to the Director. Though it would be naive to say that any institution is free from external factors, legal requirements and so on, at least in this case, the management structure and general policy are set internally with the academic director playing a key, if not *the* key role. In the case of a foreign operation operating in the United Kingdom, any of the areas previously mentioned may be totally out of his control. For example, the overseas company/institution may set any aspect of the operations in the controlling position in the management structure. Areas such as marketing and selection

Cohesive management styles

of students, disciplinary procedures for poor attendance, social and welfare concerns of the students may all be taken out of control of the academic director. Again, cultural factors and a whole range of interests known only to the 'non British party' control and limit the scope of the work of the academic director or director of studies. Ron White wrote about characteristics of Japanese management styles in education in Japan, but they could equally have been written about the home situation or indeed many situations worldwide; for example, "to the Japanese, consensus appeared to be more about establishing alliances and loyalties than about reaching a shared agreement on rational grounds" and "egalitarianism and consensus are far less salient than the principle of hierarchy" (White 1993 p.58)

In fact, hierarchical management styles still persist in probably the majority of countries, and more 'democratic'

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management styles prevail only in a minority of relatively advanced Western countries. Consequently they do not represent the norm for many project managers or Director of Studies who work in relatively rigid systems overseas. It can be depressing, to say the least, to be in a situation working with local people, trying to encourage them to express ideas, formulate their own policies and plan for the future when they know that 'number one' in the hierarchy has the power to quash any initiative they show. Furthermore, the Director of Studies wishing to put into practice consultative approaches to decision making, and reaching consensus among teachers on the best way to handle situations often has not

only to put his own feelings put aside but the difficulty of communicating this to the team he is leading.

Coping strategies

After more than ten years working within such complex structures I have come to see, and accept, the common factors which characterise our multifaceted profession both at home and abroad. In coping with vastly different professional situations I have found it useful to bear in mind the following factors:

1 Never to lose sight of the complexity of the whole organisation within which one is operating. Bowers' well-known article on the interrelatedness of interlocking systems affected by curriculum development focuses on the fact that a change in any part of an organisation often has a whole series of repercussions, often beyond the limits of those originally foreseen: "Whenever the 'spider's web' is touched, the whole trembles." (Bowers 1983 p.104). In practical terms this means for the Director of Studies that not only should proposals for changes in the academic system be considered in the light of all the possible 'chains of implication' for all the other sections of the organisation, but that the decision-making process is unlikely to be linear, different interest groups each having to reach decisions within their own sector first.

2 As someone in a management position, it is important to be positive and optimistic, seeing difficulties as 'challenges' and complicated new situations as 'projects'. The director is able to influence the atmosphere of the workplace positively or otherwise and if he is 'down' this will transmit itself to the team he is leading.

3 To try to be pragmatic and accepting of situations one is unable to change. Work in the areas over

which you do have control and do not try to push the boundaries of your influence. The chances are that in time and with patience, others may come round to your point of view as situations evolve. Particularly in situations where cultural sensitivities operate, it takes a long time to develop the trust of the host institution. They may mistrust your motives for wishing to change the status quo, or may resent the fact that you thought of a good idea before they did.

4 Bear in mind that if you, as a director, feel like 'a cog in a wheel', those under you must feel even more so. Look to ways of encouraging staff development not just to meet institutional needs, but for their wider professional development, by encouraging individuals to attend workshops, write articles and materials, lead seminars and any other outlets in which they can develop and demonstrate and their abilities.

5 To be culturally sensitive at all times. It's all too easy to be judgmental when you are an outsider to the reality of the culture you are working with. The ODA and other aid agencies use the term 'host country' or 'host institution' and it is well not to lose sight of this relationship.

Does gender help?

In summarising thus, I hope I am not displaying the negative feminine trait of submission to paternalistic systems of management which White, quoting Saso, refers to in his article. (White op cit.:p.66). Rather, I would suggest that some of the feminine gender values which Claes and Loerzer (1994 p.15 - 17) discuss work well at the cultural interface. Among those they listed are: importance of good relations, feelings, intuition and consensus, and the ability to compromise and negotiate on a basis of equality. Masculine values such as assertiveness, competitiveness and confrontation are unlikely to achieve results when working within a culturally complex hierarchy. Gender traits seen as

Cohesive management styles

negative in some management appraisals may in fact be positive in other situations, that is, "what has been considered as a weakness in women is found to be a cultural factor in other societies, and a necessary element in cross-cultural communication".

Personally, I do not like such an analysis based on gender any more than I can relate to generalisations based on age, race, class and so on. Nevertheless I would agree that some of the values they highlighted as being 'feminine', are fundamental to good management by either sex in complex, cross-cultural situations: these include intuition, team behaviour based on a network of relationships, implicit (polite, nonconfrontatory) communication rather than explicit (liable to offend).

Conclusion

In conclusion, managers in ELT, by definition of the geographical and

cultural scope of the different situations within which they operate, rarely find themselves in simple organisational structures. Keeping a cohesive management style calls for patience and sensitivity in order to maintain a positive stance in working steadily towards the success of a project.

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Valerie Ainscough's article is based on her experience working on ODA projects in Senegal and the Congo and more recently for Hilderstone College at Chaucer College in Canterbury.

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