
From the President

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Having recently started in a new job as the leader of a very large organisation, I have been reacquainted with the institutionalised problem of being in a privileged position which can, at times, deny me an accurate view of how the work environment looks to those at the grassroots level. It is not that the people I consult with distort the reality; it is just that, often, stakeholders and employees can sanitise the view or present a more positive picture of the work environment, thinking that is what they are supposed to say or that is what I want to hear. It is hard for any leader to see the world, warts and all, as others do. As a result of this need to understand the issues, successes and challenges of my new work environment I will again be resorting to an idea I first invoked about 20 years ago.

The strategy had its genesis when, as an unsophisticated, naive and very young man, I went on an ocean cruise on the Fairstar with a few friends. As would be expected of any young person on their first holiday without parental involvement, I was making the most of all the vessel had to offer. About a week into the voyage I received a most unexpected hand delivered invitation (discreetly pushed under the cabin door during the night) to join the ship's Captain at his table for dinner that evening.

For most of the day leading up to the dreaded meal, I was somewhat alarmed that I may have been singled out because of something I may have done and I considered that perhaps I was about to be pulled into gear! Upon arrival at the dinner (adorned in a borrowed jacket and tie) I was incredibly relieved to find out that the purpose of my attendance was in fact the opposite of what I had been expecting. It was the Captain who wanted to know from me and the other guests at the table if everything was going well with the voyage. He was genuinely interested in my perception as to how the ship's staff members were treating me, and if there was anything that could be done to further improve my time on the boat. He even provided the wine for the meal!

I've never forgotten the feeling of worth and importance that I felt at that time. I was very surprised and incredibly impressed that the Captain valued my opinions and welcomed my feedback on all aspects of the services provided.

As a school principal a decade or so later, I decided to draw on this very positive experience in an effort to find out what parents, staff and other significant community

members thought of the school and the quality of the education that children were receiving. I initiated my own version of the Captain's Table in an effort to effectively address the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders.

Ever since, no matter what position I have held in the organisation, I have randomly selected a group of about five stakeholders each fortnight and invited them to my office for morning or afternoon tea. Over a hot drink and a piece of cake my guests are given the opportunity to share their thoughts or ask questions on any topic related to the school, their employment or education in general.

Just like the Captain on the Fairstar, I listen and take note of what we do well and of what we could better. Like my dinner many years before, people usually arrive with some apprehension, assuming that they have been chosen because something is wrong. Relief is apparent as their career histories, opinions, ideas and concerns are requested, noted and acknowledged. Before too long the room is usually abuzz with conversation as people warm to the task and share their views and constructive thoughts about all kinds of education issues and ideas. Quite often I suspect, their ideas have never been communicated with someone in a position to actually do something about them that would influence a better outcome.

At the end of the session I share the main points that I have noted. Later I write to each participant to thank them for their contribution and to let them know of any outcomes or actions that may have resulted from our meeting. I also provide my email address and ask each of them to keep in touch and to let me know about anything they think I might have a sanitised view about.

Obviously I can't invite everyone, but the random sampling of people in this way is enables me to add another dimension to understanding how others feel about the quality of services we provide. Many real and positive changes have been enacted as a result of the often innovative and constructive contributions from participants at the Captain's Table. A great number have felt more confident about making further contact with me to share new ideas or personal concerns. Most importantly, positive relationships have been established and some of the traditional barriers have been displaced.

The Captain's Table is an effective strategy to assist in achieving that goal and one that I would thoroughly recommend to others.