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**Trust into mistrust –the uncertain marriage between public  
and private sector practice for middle managers in education**

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## Abstract

The role of the middle manager has proved to be a difficult one to define due to the fluid nature of the tasks performed and the heterogeneity of understanding that exists for the term. This is further complicated by the differences associated with the context in which individual manager's work. This research, which explores the drive towards neo-liberalism and the subsequent adoption of leadership and management practice from the private sector, makes a comparison between the roles of managers in English education with those in other settings. Using a questionnaire with 252 responses and interviews with six managers in the private and public sector, the role of middle managers was compared to identify the similarities and differences between organisations driven by social policy as opposed to profit. Participants surveyed were based in Primary, Secondary and Further Education and the interview respondents were employed in non-education contexts. The findings suggest that the initial reforms, which required higher levels of accountability through the introduction of key performance indicators, appear to be fully embedded within the education manager's role and there is a high degree of convergence in relation to the expectation of managers at this level in all the settings. The findings also highlighted a fundamental difference in relation to how middle managers were expected to carry out their duties, the autonomy they had to do so and the authority which was bestowed upon them.

## Background

Political and subsequent policy change has had a significant impact on English Education during the last twenty years. The incorporation of colleges which followed the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act has been described as a turning point (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013) and one which marked the beginning of a new era of neo-liberalism inspired by corporatisation and driven by a managerialist approach (Courtney 2015). Similarly, many schools have undergone something of a cultural transformation which has led to a number of changes, including increased accountability, the primacy of key performance indicators such as league tables, forced academisation and a 'Soviet-style' approach to planning and curriculum (Wright 2016).

The reasons cited for these changes are many and varied. Some would argue change was essential to reduce the wastage associated with public sector organisations. Simmons (2008) identifies non-viable class sizes, high student drop-out rates, excess teaching capacity and weak financial management as some of the reasons why incorporation was seen as a necessity to the government of the time. Others might allude to increased efficacy brought about by taking account of the 3 E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Metcalf and Richards 1987). Whatever the true reasons, the goal was to break the “established monolithic pattern of public sector provision and organisation” (Simmons 2008, 362) and to introduce an organisational culture that was more akin to the private sector (Kessler and Bayliss 1998).

Within further education, change is overtly linked to funding with the expressed need to organise the work of academics in ways which support corporate goals, often resulting in “student throughput and income generation” (Randle and Brady 1997, 232). Coffield and Williamson (2011) support this view, using the term 'exam factories' to describe the emphasis placed on quantitative results. In schools the rise of corporatism (Courtney 2015) has resulted in the adoption of the practices and motivations of the

private sector, culminating in an amplified emphasis on competition and the need for continually rising standards. The technical-rational approach to management (Bush et al. 2010) has meant that the end result, both in terms of exam results and public accountability, has become paramount (Gunter 1999). The outcome of this has been an increased focus on achieving targets rather than the broader educational mission, despite some arguments suggesting that a balance between these two functions should be maintained (Bolman and Deal 1997).

The expansion of academies has been described as a 'new educational landscape' whereby schools are working with larger numbers of corporate partners and decisions relating to key aspects of strategic and operational management, such as structure, curriculum design and staff pay and conditions do not solely lie with the head teacher or senior leadership team (Academies Commission 2013). Similarly, the funding changes following the incorporation of colleges have had an inevitable impact on the leadership style of college principals and according to Withers (2000): "The principal's role as a result of incorporation had changed almost out of all recognition to one of 'managing director". (2000, 372). Cuban (1988) takes up this point and echoing Bolman and Deal (1997) suggests that both leadership, which is defined as the shaping goals and motivating others, and management, which represents the process of managing efficiency and organising work, should be part of the role of the manager in education. (Cuban 1988)

More than twenty years after the introduction of private sector practices into FE and fifteen years after the introduction of academisation in schools, it seems fitting that we should explore the influence of the '3 E' approach and question what impact these changes have had on management roles within compulsory and post compulsory education. This exploration may be further enhanced by comparing these roles with similar positions in the private sector in order to establish the extent of the similarities or differences between the two and, as Kessler and Bayliss suggested (1998) to judge whether or not

organisation cultures within education have taken on the characteristics associated with the private sector.

## **Literature**

The corporatisation of education and the subsequent adoption of managerialism has led to a significant shift in emphasis for education establishments. This has resulted in fundamental changes in the relationship between leaders and managers as well as between lecturers and students (Courtney 2015). As a result, teaching is now seen as a process leading to a measurable outcome which may be codified in a similar way to outputs on a production line. Beynon (1975) in his seminal book 'Working for Ford' discusses how processes on the production line had evolved with the sole purpose of ensuring complete uniformity and it could be argued that this approach has been transferred to the education sector (Ball et al. 2012). Whilst it is reasonable to assume that the diversity of education, in particular, the FE sector, does not necessarily lead to homogeneity, there is evidence to suggest that in all phases of English education there exists an unvarying drive towards outputs in the form of success rates and the absence of a measurable result would be considered a 'failure' on the part of the teacher and organisation. Indeed, in some schools and colleges, failure is not seen as an option (Coffield and Williamson 2011).

Ball suggests that this transformation has created something of an 'epidemic' which is "becoming thoroughly embedded in the 'assumptive worlds' of many academic educators." (Ball 2003, 215). As Pring (2015) implies this is something a number of academic staff are not necessarily aware of as the commonly accepted discourse of education has created a situation in which there is an almost naive acceptance of widely held 'truths' about teaching, learning and the professional roles connected with these constructs. Associated to this is the change of language used to describe aspects of an educator's role, for example, it is commonplace to change the word 'teaching' to 'delivering' depicting a scenario of teachers, or 'deliverers' of learning, providing knowledge for consumption in the same way that a

corporation might manufacture a product for sale. This creates a simplified process wherein teaching becomes an artefact which can be produced to a specification, the success of which can be measured in specific terms. This concept, articulated by Ball et al. (2012) is designed to promote conformity and uniformity and hence, encourage an environment which is tightly controlled and predictable, an approach firmly challenged by Atherton who writes: “postmen deliver, teachers teach” (2013 online).

The impact of corporatisation has had an equally significant influence on management and leadership, in particular the ways in which these roles are enacted. The differences between the two roles has been subject to much debate (Corbett 2017; Northouse 2017; Bolman and Deal 1997) and it is not the intention of this paper to examine, in depth, the various arguments other than to note Courtney’s (2015) view that within a neo-liberalist approach, leaders are assumed to be “corporate actors” (2015, 214) who are expected to fulfil a role for the organisation rather than pursue goals driven by values and philosophy. This has clear links with the established corporate model in education where ‘managers’ are expected to ensure that stakeholders are kept happy (Smith 2007) and given the culture of the sector, this suggests that ‘manager’ would be an accurate way of describing participants in this research.

Difficulties in defining the manager's role within education are not unusual. In many cases, managers themselves are unclear about the extent of the role bemoaning a lack of clarity or role confusion (Murphy and Curtis 2013) which creates a situation wherein it is easy to lose a sense of identity and purpose (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013).

There are a variety of definitions of the role yet whether these provide a clear illustration is a matter of debate. According to Bennett, the term 'middle manager' when applied to schools could refer to:

“Anyone with a promoted post in a secondary school .... providing that they hold a defined responsibility area which involves them having to co-ordinate some aspect of the work of another teacher...” (Bennett 1995,109).

Within the FE sector academic middle managers have been described as “mediators of change between senior managers and team members, translating policy into practice by ‘constructing the art of the possible . . . in ways which are acceptable and make sense to both groups” (Gleeson and Shain, 1999, 470). Similarly, in schools, managers are depicted as “translators and mediators, rather than originators of policy and culture.” (Glover et al. (1998, 286). Busher and Harris's four dimensions also suggest a role which involves smoothing the way between different parties through 'bridging and brokering' and 'enabling a shared vision.' (Busher and Harris 1999). With a focus on FE, Briggs, puts forward a typology dissecting the manager's role into its component parts. These include being a 'corporate agent' who understands the 'big picture' and contributes to overall strategy, a leader who is a role model and instigator of action and more operational aspects such as implementation and staff management. This typology also includes the role of 'liaison' which is described as being the 'bridge' between senior management and teams (Briggs 2005). Whilst these attempts to define the management role are useful, they do suggest a degree of stasis which is not indicative of its constantly evolving nature (Dennis and Walker 2016) nor indeed do they look at the manager themselves, instead focusing on outputs rather than the manager as an individual. To rectify this gap, Page (2011) used faith based metaphors to describe the role of the manager, taking into account the belief structure whilst exploring the complexity of balancing the demands of the organisation, the team and the students. The four-tiered approach of fundamentalists (who are student focused), priests (team focused), converts (organisation focused) or martyrs (omni-focused) acts as a useful way of identifying how individual managers balance demands in different ways. (Page 2011)



The above typologies might also be transferred to the private sector. The sense of being the implementers of decisions is a strong theme through much of the literature (Roe 2014) as is the overall definition of what it means to be a middle manager “There is no unifying definition of ‘middle manager’ but hierarchy emerges as a principal focus.....a middle manager (may be) defined as an individual with management responsibility and a minimum of two levels of staff below them whilst possessing a functional speciality.” (Eaves 2014, 68)

Despite apparent confusion relating to the job description, FE managers have viewed their roles positively and see themselves as necessary arbitrators in situations which have the potential for conflict (Gleeson and Shain 1999) often citing a desire to 'make a difference' (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013) as a key driver for taking up the role. The situation is similar in schools with school leaders rejecting 'bastard leadership', described as leadership which is located at a political rather than operational level, (Wright 2001) in favour of transformational leadership models which are viewed as more democratic, visionary and empowering (Gold et al. 2003). This is mirrored within commercial settings by Wooldridge and Pizzo (2014) who highlight the role that middle managers have in ensuring that an organisation is successful by 'buying in' to the corporate strategy, thereby making a difference to the business.

The advocacy of strong professional values and a desire to make a difference depicts a group of people with a genuine commitment to education as a process and leadership models which support this. A scenario which some may see as an unlikely dream. As Wright argues, it is difficult for education leaders to exercise leadership over the values and direction of the organisation as much of this is decided at a political level and measured through performance data (Wright 2001). As a result, leadership models must be applied within tight constraints in order to meet the needs of a range of stakeholders.

Schools and colleges must also meet the requirements of external bodies such as Ofsted, a situation which may result in a difficult balancing act (Gleeson et al. 2015). This focus inevitably has an impact on the ways in which leaders and managers carry out their roles and according to Cuban (1988), the tendency is for education managers to focus on the management, rather than the leadership part of their job by using external factors (such as Ofsted or league tables) to dictate approaches to their staff. Subsequently, staff are discouraged from using their own professional judgement in the day to day operation of their roles thereby reducing the possibility of divergent approaches and maintaining a level of control (Lebor 2016).

This does paint a picture of a slightly impoverished form of management in which a deterministic ideology overrides all other factors and as suggested by Elliott, there is a danger in assuming that managers' behaviours are locked into policy driven performativity: "It is essential to resist the easy assumption that education is epiphenomenal to polity and the economy. It is not" (Elliott 2012). As Elliott further suggests: "... the iron glove of policy determinism should not be allowed to stay the hand of educational leaders who inform and influence policy ...." (Elliott 2012, online).

The middle manager's role as a '*conduit*' between different levels of the hierarchy does mean that this group feels the impact of constraints more than others and for many this was an unexpected part of taking on the job. Within FE some middle managers felt they had been '*lied to*' as they were promised an opportunity to create and follow a vision yet were hampered by corporate objectives which were only revealed once in situ (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013). The response to this element of surprise appears to be similar within schools and colleges as managers '*mediate government policy through their own value systems*' (Gold et al. 2003, 131) by finding strategies which allow them to focus on what they consider important. This approach is similar to what Gleeson and Shain describe as '*strategic compliance*' of the '*artful pragmatism which reconciles professional and managerial interests*'

(Gleeson and Shain 1999, 482). Similarly, within the private sector the role of the middle manager as a mediator is a key theme and is presented in the intervention between senior managers and 'the shop floor' as well as between their own organisation and others (Roulou and Balogun 2011).

## **Research Design**

The data was gathered via an online questionnaire between 5th and 31st January 2016. The questionnaire was distributed to members of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and targeted managers working in primary, secondary and post compulsory education in England.

Statistically, respondents mirrored the national picture of employment within English education. Of the 252 responses received 69.8% of respondents were female, (slightly higher than the national employment figure of 64%). In common with the overall demographic breakdown of the profession, the predominant ethnic origin was 'white' (93% including 19% who chose not to answer). The modal age of respondents was 41-50, with only 3.6% of respondents under the age of 30, this is a contrast to the reported increase in younger entrants to the sector, however, the discrepancy could be accredited to the target audience of middle managers. Cross referencing to responses to the length of time in a management role, 65.2% of respondents had been in role for more than 5 years, suggesting that the younger entrants to the profession were likely to be employed at levels lower than middle management.

In addition to the questionnaire, six managers from the private sector were interviewed to elicit responses from managers working within corporate organisations. A purposive sampling technique was used with one person coming from a similar, quasi-market sector and the other five from private sector organisations. All answers have been anonymised for the purposes of this research.

## Findings

### Knowing your place - Recruitment, role and identity

As outlined in much of the literature, the middle manager's role remains a nebulous one and in keeping with this, the data did not provide a consistent picture of the role requirements. Echoing the work of Murphy and Curtis (2013) the evidence suggested that many of the respondents experienced a somewhat confused sense of professional identity as more than 80% had dual roles which involved teaching and management. This was mirrored within the private sector, indicating a relatively fluid approach to the role, as one participant highlighted *'we're left to get on with it, there isn't a job description for what I do, basically I make it up as I go along and as long as the figures are good then everyone is happy'*.

(Damien - financial controller in a large insurance provider)

For those working within education teaching loads were often significant; 73% of respondents to the questionnaire taught more than 10 hours a week and a number of responses highlighted the tensions experienced as a result of juggling the two roles: *'teaching commitments can get in the way of my management role and vice versa...'*. This appeared to be something managers were not prepared for as a number expressed surprise at their teaching workload: *'I only get two extra free periods compared to a standard teacher to do my management work in.'* and *'I teach 50% and was told it would be 20% at interview.'*

Despite this, for those managers who were still involved in teaching, there was an over-riding sense that maintaining a presence at the 'chalkface' was important, the following responses were typical:

*Teaching is essential to my wellbeing and to the proper fulfilment of my role with colleagues and students.*

*It keeps me in touch with the pressures in the classroom and in touch with both pupils and staff.*

Whilst managers were acutely aware of the demands teaching made on their time they also recognised the benefits it brought in terms of understanding the pressures faced by others and having credibility in the eyes of other teachers. For the minority of managers who did not teach, the value of a dual role was less clear cut, 42% felt that teaching should not be a part of their role whilst 35% thought it should and 23% were unsure. The main reasons cited for this related to lack of time to complete both roles effectively. Within the private sector, managers were also aware of the need to perform dual, or sometimes multiple roles and recognised the benefits this provided in relation to the ways in which they were viewed by their subordinates, as one participant highlighted:

*Most managers have a multi-role, not just people management but being active in the field. As a sales manager I also have direct sales responsibilities but am also directly involved in resolving day to day problems. You have to wear a number of hats and the team recognise this. (James - Sales Director in a multi-national robotics corporation).*

The recruitment of middle managers appears to follow a similar pattern in both the education and commercial sector. Whilst literature (Foot and Hook 2008; Torrington and Hall 2011), outlines a variety of examples of good practice, the reality is that the process appears to be somewhat 'ad hoc' (Jameson 2013). Whilst there is no clear agreement on what makes an ideal recruitment process there is agreement that there needs to be a coherent plan which ensures that the organisation gets the right candidate as selecting the wrong person can have serious consequences for the organisation and the individual (Foot and Hook 2008). Yet, despite overall recognition of the importance of recruitment there is a prevalence of informal practice. Within this research, over half of the participants were internal applicants (59%) and 23% did not have to attend an interview. There were also several responses indicating that there was only one candidate for the role.

This ad hoc pattern, was also found amongst those interviewed from outside education. Two respondents asserted that they got their current job '*through personal contacts*', whilst the one person who went through a structured interview explained the process that his current boss used in order for him to be recruited. Although the formal process was in place, the meetings with people in the team meant that he was given a significant advantage during the recruitment process:

*The post was advertised both internally and externally. On the face of it, I followed the same procedure for all applicants, submitting a standard application form. I was accepted for interview and was offered the post. Apparently, I beat over 120 applicants and maybe half a dozen interviewees or so. (Pam - middle manager in a public sector organisation)*

When asked how he was recruited to the role, James' response was:

*Don't know really. I suppose..... the job became available, I was asked if I wanted to apply, there was an interview process. When you are promoted from within an organisation they know you can do the job and that lessens risk. You have built a reputation and people know how you work and that builds confidence.*

This evidence suggests that the 'best practice from the private sector' advocated within the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), has been successfully adopted within education, albeit in this case, 'best practice' might not reflect theoretical models outlined in management literature.

The prevalence of internal recruitment to management posts does provide the potential to manage the transition into these roles successfully, yet the majority of respondents felt that there were not given sufficient support during the transition period. The key sources of support articulated by respondents related to informal sources of support such as '*knowing the door of the Head's office was always open or*

*'colleagues being available to answer questions'*. There was little evidence to suggest any formalised processes had been put in place, a situation which was replicated within the interviews and within the commercial sector where the expression *'you just get on with it'* was used by two of the participants.

Most respondents (78%) were not allocated a mentor (including all of those in the commercial sector) when they took on the new role and of those who were, only 50% found this helpful, as mentors often didn't have sufficient time to provide the necessary help. Where mentor support was considered beneficial this was linked to the nurturing aspect of the role, in particular having someone to talk to. This echoes findings from other studies whereby the need for a 'safe' place was a common theme. A 'safe' place in this context related to a physical or literal space where things could be discussed without risk of censure: *'... where you can say the unsayable.'* (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2017).

Training for middle managers in education, as well as in industry, appears to be limited, (Teal et al. 2003). In this study, 58% stated that no training was provided and 13% had been given less than one day, in effect 71% had not received any significant form of training. Where training was provided, this was mostly instrumental and relating to specific systems and processes and 39% described their training as 'Sitting by Nelly'. This mirrors previous studies (Briggs 2001; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013) and provides evidence that despite publication of these findings, the situation has not significantly changed in 15 years.

### **Making a difference - Expectations and obstacles**

Previous findings in the literature suggest that there is a mismatch between the expectations of the manager's role and the reality of it (Shain and Gleeson 1998; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013). In particular this frustration was felt keenly by managers when their hopes for the job were thwarted by inflexible systems and sometimes obdurate staff. Although 3.2% of respondents suggested that there

were no real obstacles to the job, the majority cited excessive workload (78%), systems and processes and bureaucracy (42% and 43%). This was mirrored in many of the interviews where managers talked about trying to do everything whilst battling a variety of obstacles that prevented them achieving their goals.

The findings also suggest that in both the commercial and education sector, a number of barriers were created by other members of staff and a large proportion of time seemed to be focussed on mediating tensions between individuals or between people and processes. In the responses, much of this was accredited to unremitting changes such as those created by policy or changes to paperwork. This is supported by managers quoted in other literature: *'My expectation has almost become Heraclitian, I just expect it to be different all the time.'* (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2017). Interestingly, this same manager had a particular view in relation to the main aggravation in the job: *'Was it Sartre who said 'Hell is other people'?'* (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2017). Similar findings have been presented in this research (Questionnaire responses): *'There is a culture of out of the door at 3.45 amongst many staff and a principal who expects SLT to work 60 hour weeks.'* Within schools a further 'people-centred' frustration was articulated as: *'Whining parents.....'* and *'Parents have too much power, unrealistic expectations and little respect for professional judgement'*.

The impact of austerity can also be seen in many responses. Managers within education who responded to the questionnaire, talked about *'doing more for less'* whilst many bemoaned the lack of resources *'there isn't the money to do anything'*. The reduction in finances for the education sector has impacted on the resources available with the most recent figures suggesting that between 2010 and 2014 the adult learning funding budget was cut by 35% (Tickle 2014). Interestingly this theme was reinforced by those outside education suggesting that such frustrations were shared by those working in the private sector:



*I would say the very rapid change has created an uncertain environment. Sometimes it is hard not to let down customers. It is harder to earn bonuses. There is a greater degree of pressure from parts of the business. Mainly the difficulties are financial and the business is still bureaucratic and internally focussed.*  
(Julie – middle manager in a multinational organisation)

One interviewee, when asked what the barriers were to their role went straight to the point '*the poor financial state of the company – it is a basket case*' (Ravi – a human resource manager in a multinational company) whilst another who worked in a quasi-market sector that mirrored many of the structures of education, made a similar point about the role finance played:

*...the lack of money is destabilising. I always have the feeling that there isn't enough time to get things done as we are up against financial and time related constraints and we are always feeling vulnerable to cuts and restructuring.* (Nathan – a middle manager, who joined a large British company recently)

As outlined by Wright (2001) within education there are additional external pressures imposed by government intervention suggesting that leadership is highly influenced at a political rather than local level. This appeared to be something which was keenly felt by the middle managers in this study, many of whom defined their roles as having '*responsibility but little power*' and complained of '*micro management and diminished authority*' alongside the '*Hectoring and changing expectations from strategic management*' which were often linked to '*Paper and government initiatives which are dumped on us with no consultation*'.  
(Questionnaire responses)

Although the picture in the private sector is similar in terms of the middle manager's role, the overall direction of the organisation is much more local, coming as it does from the strategic management team, rather than national policy. What appears to be a significant difference is the way in which managers in commercial settings are trusted to take ownership of change and the ways in which they promote it.

*There is a greater demand on middle managers who are now expected to manage and implement change to take a strategy which can be at quite a high level and then implement it day to day with always insufficient resources and time. The expectation on the manager is to take ownership and have an entrepreneurial view and be trusted to make it happen. (James)*

Whilst the data shows similarities across the different types of organisation, the responses in relation to managers' approaches to the problems were markedly different. Amongst the education managers there was a deep sense of constraint caused by bureaucracy which was attributed to managers at senior levels within the organisations as well as recognition of external pressures from government initiatives. For those working within the private sector any perceived constraints had much less impact and managers took a more pragmatic viewpoint. As (Ravi) added '*but it will be OK as I will make sure I leave the company soon!*' And: '*There are some good people here but the place is a mess. I've applied for a few things and hopefully will be moving on shortly. Hanging around here would be a bad move*'. (Nathan)

And finally... '*at the end of the day, let's face it, it's only a job*'. (Julie)

,

The willingness to leave one organisation for another was not reflected to the same extent in the responses from those working within education but the reasons for this remain blurred. Previous research suggests that initial motivations for taking on the role are grounded in notions of social justice

rather than self-interest (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013) and that a sense of loyalty to people or organisations was a draw (Bush et al. 2010). However, the current economic crisis experienced within the education sector might also suggest that the range of opportunities for managers are much more limited than in other types of organisation and enhanced terms and conditions of employment such as holiday entitlement and pension, are highly valued.

### **Freedom to manage - Autonomy, authority and trust**

In order to highlight individual perceptions of the management role, respondents in this research were asked to outline what they considered to be the 'best bits' or 'worst bits' of their jobs. For managers working within education settings and those in other organisations, the comments had many similarities; people, paperwork and processes were regularly cited as difficulties, whilst 'working with teams' and 'having influence' were offered as examples of the job rewards. These findings indicated a high degree of similarity across the different work contexts, however, an analysis of the responses did reveal noticeable differences in *how* middle managers were expected to carry out their roles and the autonomy and authority which was bestowed upon them to do so.

Results from the questionnaire data showed that 66% of respondents felt that their senior managers allowed them the freedom to determine how they carried out their roles, whereas 34% felt that senior managers were heavily directional. This statistic may be influenced by how the respondents defined their own roles as 44% selected 'senior manager/leader' and 42% selected 'middle manager' suggesting that the majority would see themselves as the senior leadership team. However, the themes which were presented in the open questions illustrated a disparity with this initial response as 25% of responses highlighted senior management, or issues with how the organisation was managed as being the worst things about the role and a further 33% made reference the systems and processes within the organisation which had a detrimental effect on how roles were performed. In part, this disparity may

be attributed to recognition of the influence of external policy such as '*external pressures from government and the constant changes.*' Furthermore, within schools there was acknowledgement of additional pressures with 'parent power' being cited as a particular difficulty in the role, as one manager suggested '*Raising my head above the parapet and becoming a more visible target for parents.*'

A significant theme emerging from the open questions highlighted the control mechanisms in place to determine how middle managers operated. These were specifically referred to as '*micro management*', '*interference*' from senior management and '*being constantly judged*', the majority outlining how additional hurdles were presented by the '*unreasonable demands*' of senior managers and the '*excessive monitoring*' of performance. As one respondent stated '*There is an assumption that my team and I don't know how to do our jobs.*' Whilst much of these frustrations were linked to the ways in which the organisation was managed, there was also recognition that the original edicts came from a 'higher power', alongside an evident frustration that such authorities were not questioned and the perception that senior leaders were ineffective in protecting their staff from external pressures, as one respondent noted: '*Senior management with no leadership abilities that jump to the tune of Ofsted*'.

The majority of responses illustrate work constraints in the form of situational factors which interfered with job performance and although many of these did not directly cite other managers as being the source of dissatisfaction, the comments suggested high degrees of control created by restrictive management approaches and leadership models which were '*reactionary rather than visionary.*' Specific hurdles were presented in the form of tasks which had no apparent benefit to staff or students such as, '*the amount of work I have to do in order to tick boxes for other people*' and '*relentless administration and tracking to prove what we do works.*' Finally describing the overall culture as '*Utterly data driven, an obsession with top down micro management that is dressed up as a need for consistency.*'

Much of this evidence contrasts sharply with espoused movements towards models of distributed leadership within education (Gronn 2002). This approach purports to mobilise leadership expertise to all levels within the organisation in order to build the capacity for improvement. Conversely this evidence suggests that senior managers still rely on control measures that do not differ greatly from those used for production line workers (Mintzberg 1998; Beynon 1975) an approach which suggests a lack of trust.

Within the commercial sector there was also recognition of the situational factors which had an impact on how managers worked but for these respondents, autonomy and the authority to make their own decisions was far more apparent:

*Any job has a certain framework that you have to comply with..... for example health and safety policy, ethics...but then outside that there is a range of decisions you can made that have an impact. It is important to build your own team up and not being afraid to get additional training in ... or take tough decisions if people aren't performing. (James)*

And:

*Really tasks are set and I am able to get on with them without the need for regular updates or discussions about them except when I think they are needed. (Damian)*

Whilst the managers working in private sector organisation clearly recognised the structures within which they operated, the ability to make their own decisions, albeit sometimes '*tough decisions*' were not questioned. Within all the interview transcripts from private sector managers the freedom to manage was clearly evident and is succinctly illustrated in this quote '*I can make my own decisions about how I go about things. As long as the financial goals are reached it is up to me how I do it.*' (Julie) This finding provided a significant contrast to the responses from those working within education institutions which

presented an overall picture of being constrained by bureaucracy led by '*Excessive control, monitoring and increasing demands (of questionable value)*' and a strong sense of not being able to make any changes as one manager highlighted, '*I have responsibility but little power.*'

### **Final thoughts**

When the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) was signed into the statute books, the declaration that many benefits could be derived from adopting good practice from the private sector was viewed as an aspiration for those working in education (Kessler and Bayliss 1998). This belief has been reinforced by recent government policies with the introduction of academisation and the urge for schools to take control of their finances and decision making in order to develop a culture which reflects, economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Metcalf and Richards 1987).

This research has outlined the ways in which this aspiration has been achieved. When reviewing the data it was sometimes difficult to tell the sectors apart as both made references to ad hoc recruitment, limited training, efficiency measures, monitoring and the achievement of targets. In most cases respondents referred to a job which was multi-faceted and complex and highlighted similar barriers in achieving their aims, alongside parallel aspirations to bring about improvements.

Whilst there is a high degree of convergence in the responses from those working in the public and private sectors there were two distinct areas of divergence. The first of these is reflected in the autonomy and authority bestowed upon managers to carry out their roles in ways which achieve organisational and personal goals. The second is shown in the influence of outside stakeholders in the form of government intervention. It is possible that the second of these factors may well be the underpinning restriction to the first, but it is beyond the scope of this research to make that judgement.

The neo-liberalist approach to education is no longer new and it could be argued that many of the practices from the private sector have introduced welcome efficiency measures. Despite this, managers are still hindered by systems and processes which appear to be debilitating. Within the responses from the education sector, perceptions of a culture of mistrust were clearly evident and the subsequent control mechanisms put in place constrained managers' abilities to manage with any autonomy or authority.

It seems that the marriage between public and private sector practice has become strained and the original promise of better times has not been realised. As with some marriages... the promises have '*turned to dust ... , wedding bells just turn to rust, trust into mistrust.*' (Beautiful South)

If we are to continue to make improvements to English education, we need to make a true commitment. As with marriage, sometimes commitment means acceptance that we cannot be all things to all people and trust that we are able to decide on what is important to make the marriage work. The education managers in this research articulated a strong desire to continue towards making improvements but also felt chained by operational activities designed to meet the needs of external bodies. In contrast, the respondents working within the private sector recognised the systems in place as part of the overall structure of the organisation, as opposed to something which restricted their ability to manage.

Trust is considered one of the primary foundations of any relationship and creates the freedom and security to experience the full potential of the union. Without trust there is insecurity and fear and subsequent limitations on the potential to grow and build a strong future. The changes which have taken place within the education sector over the last 20 years have placed trust in what could be learnt from other types of organisation; but this appears to have been with the caveat that those working

within the sector could not be fully trusted to make their own decisions. Perhaps now is the time to embrace these changes and to do so we need to place trust in education leaders to make the right decisions for their organisations and subsequently provide middle managers with the autonomy and authority to manage.

The adoption of systems and process is only the first step, developing a culture in which managers and education as a whole can flourish, is the next. In the words of the Beautiful South:

*'...need a little time, to think it over ....need a little time to find my freedom..... (we) need a little time....'*



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## **Appendix A – A Copy of the Questionnaire Sent to Middle Managers**

### **Demographics:**

Age

Gender

Context

Teaching experience

Management experience

### **Key questions**

**Recruitment to the management role - respondents were asked to select from a range of statements**

#### **Transition to a management role**

**“What support did you find most helpful in making the transition to your new job?”**

#### **Mentors**

**“Were you allocated a mentor when you started your current role?” and “How helpful was your mentor?”**

#### **Training**

**“Approximately how much training were you given for your current role?”**

**“Please indicate the kinds of support and training provided for your role.”**

#### **Dual Roles and Identities**

**“**

#### **Direction from senior leadership**

**What helps you to do the job?**

**“What, if anything, helps you to do your job successfully?” (respondents asked to select from a pre-determined list)**

**What hinders you in your role?**

**“What, if any, are the key obstacles to doing your job successfully?” (respondents asked to select from a pre-determined list)**

#### **Best things about the role**

#### **Worst things about the role**

**“What are the worst things about your role?”**