

# 1. Introduction

About five years ago I was a speaker at a leadership seminar in Melbourne. These days, as a psychologist who has spent twenty years leading people in public and private sector organisations, this kind of corporate training is increasingly my day job. On this occasion I was presenting leadership strategies for a gathering of recently promoted managers and, as you can imagine, they were captivated with me. That's my story anyway.

Of course, nothing is ever that easy. There was one reality check in the form of Jane. Jane was a smart, professionally dressed young woman responsible for supervising staff in a legal firm. She was polite enough to wait until I had finished my presentation, then she approached me with the toughest question I have ever been asked.

She began ...

*“I want my team to be positive, I really do. But my organisation isn't interested in any of this. I've suggested better ways of supporting staff, but even with obvious staff turnover problems, my boss just brings me back to the more pressing issues of productivity and deadlines. I have no control over strategic planning or job design, and our HR department decides how people are rewarded*

*and how performance reviews are done. How can I build a positive team when I'm in a damned straitjacket?"*

I'm not often lost for words, but Jane's question had me stumped. I fumbled about with some platitudes about the need for perseverance and bringing evidence to support new ideas, but Jane remained unconvinced. And she was right. In fact, her question captures the dilemma that exists at the heart of middle management. Managers, team leaders and supervisors are often the meat in the sandwich, carrying out the demands from above while supporting their people below. With these real-world pressures, fancy ideas about happy staff and positive teams are fine in theory, but implementing real change is like pushing against the tide.

Of course, none of this is particularly new. It was just that Jane's rather direct way of putting it made the point unmissable. Positive managers do work in damned straitjackets, and over the next twelve months this problem would gnaw away at me.

A year later my home city of Melbourne was preparing to host the conference of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA). Positive psychology is a relatively new discipline within the behavioural sciences, and has grown significantly in recent years. I usually explain positive psychology to people by comparing it with sports psychology. Most people understand how sports psychologists build on

what's already strong; helping high performing athletes transition from good to great. Positive psychology simply applies the same thinking to other areas of life. For example, positive psychology studies how to improve on current happiness, wellbeing, job satisfaction, relationships, educational outcomes, parenting techniques and, of course, leadership practices.

The Melbourne conference was the largest positive psychology conference ever held, with 1600 delegates from fifty countries gathering to review the latest advances in the field. I had the privilege of presenting a paper outlining a new wellbeing program I had developed with Aboriginal communities. But the real highlight was a “positive leadership” panel discussion scheduled for the final day. This panel featured several top leadership researchers from around the world. Between them, these experts had published some of the most widely cited studies and textbooks in the field, and this would be a rare opportunity to put questions to them as a collective brains trust. With Jane's question having gnawed at me for twelve months, this was one opportunity that I was determined to seize.

I entered the main auditorium early enough to see the esteemed panel still being assembled on the stage. With my outdated “presenter pass” clearly displayed, I pushed my way forward and secured a front row seat. Manners further aside, when the session was opened

for questions, I grabbed the microphone and made sure my question, that is, Jane's question, got in first.

As I asked this rather long question, I was pleasantly surprised, and a little flattered, at how carefully the panel listened. They waited silently as I detailed the difficulties in building positive teams in negative environments, and the frustrations described by middle managers at having their hands tied.

Not only did the panel listen in complete silence, they remained silent after I had finished. Then they looked at each other, then back at me. Finally, one panel member offered some platitudes about perseverance and bringing evidence to support new ideas. Then they moved on.

Of course, this answer was no better than my own half-baked attempt a year earlier. And yet, funnily enough, I wasn't disappointed. By now I had accepted that positive leadership is more complicated in the real world of diverse organisational cultures, and these experts had no magic to the contrary.

### **Few positive ideas survive contact with HR**

We could spend a lot of time analysing why organisations stiffen against positive ideas. There's enough "blame" to go around, and some levels in the hierarchy make soft targets. For example, Human Resource departments are too easily portrayed as the "cop on the beat" ensuring overzealous team leaders

don't overstep. However, it helps to remember the definition of "how we do things around here" is usually decided higher up.

Other factors in organisational rigidity include simple time pressures. Sometimes contractual agreements mandate specific work practices. Sometimes people resent being told how to do their job better. Some organisations have well-meaning traditions, or less well-meaning office politics and empire building. And sometimes the decision-makers are dinosaurs.\*

Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Big ships turn slowly and assigning blame doesn't change that reality. The bottom line is that if you are waiting for positive cultural change to sweep through your workplace, like a rising tide lifting all boats, you will be waiting a long time. It is much better to start now with strategies *you* can implement, regardless of what's happening more broadly across the organisation.

Therefore, the best team-building strategies are those that don't attract attention and don't rock the boat. The best strategies are those that can be implemented under the radar, with or without permission. Such covert strategies have the advantage of avoiding a "please explain", or "that's not how we do things around here". Team building works best as an act of subversion.

As I developed this doctrine of subversive team

building, something else occurred to me. My existing leadership seminars already featured certain strategies that fit this description. And looking back over years of participant evaluations, those strategies were consistently the most popular. I could have kicked myself. In hindsight it was obvious. When managers are being shown various ways of building positive teams, they naturally prefer any strategies they can implement straight away without getting permission first.

Thus began a journey of 1) researching more of these “subversive” strategies, and 2) testing them in future training sessions, and 3) allowing the participants to evaluate which ones are more useful.

This book is the result of that journey – a new toolbox of practical strategies to build positive teams, regardless of what’s happening in the broader organisation. A collection of covert strategies that can be implemented under the radar, without attracting attention and without rocking the boat. A new toolbox to liberate positive managers from their damned straightjackets.

But what to call this new toolbox?

- \* Historians have noted the “Semmelweis effect” to describe how good ideas get punished. Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician who in 1847 demonstrated mortality rates on hospital wards fell by 90 per cent when doctors washed their hands. Despite his hard evidence, the medical establishment was so offended by the suggestion their hands carried disease he was dismissed and later died in a mental asylum.

## 2. What is the Matilda Principle?

The Matilda Principle takes its name from the popular children's book, *Matilda*, by Roald Dahl.

Most people remember the story. Matilda is an extraordinary little girl in very difficult circumstances. Despite being intellectually gifted, her self-obsessed parents treat her like a misfit. When she learns to talk at a young age, they dismiss her as a chatterbox. When she teaches herself to read, they insist, "What's wrong with the telly?"

When Matilda is finally allowed to attend school her situation grows even worse. The local school is run by the fearsome headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, and is more like a prison than a school. Dahl describes Miss Trunchbull as "a fierce tyrannical monster who frightens the life out of the pupils and teachers alike". She despises children and runs the school as if showing everyone who's boss is more important than educating the students. With so much working against her, both at home and at school, surely Matilda is set up to fail?

But Matilda does not fail. She thrives. She excels academically, matures emotionally and even develops her own special powers. So how does she do it? What is

the active ingredient that allows Matilda to thrive when so much of the world is trying to destroy her?

Matilda has one key element in her favour. Her class teacher is the wonderful Miss Honey. Miss Honey can't do much about how Miss Trunchbull runs the school. She has no authority over the school's administration. Nor is she a match for Miss Trunchbull's imposing physical presence. In fact, Dahl describes her as a "mild and quiet person who was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over she would smash into a thousand pieces like a porcelain figure".

So how does the meek and mild Miss Honey support her students to thrive against a culture of chaos and dysfunction?

Firstly, Miss Honey has a genuine and trusting relationship with her students. She cares about them and wants them to succeed. Secondly, more than just being kind, she is wonderfully subversive. Without openly defying Miss Trunchbull's reign of terror, she very quietly creates a subculture of sanctuary within her classroom. Unlike the broader school, her classroom is like a safe haven and the students know Miss Honey has their back.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this sanctuary is not about the physical walls of the classroom. Miss Trunchbull still has the authority to enter the classroom



and menace everyone without notice. However, more important than physical walls is the *immediacy* of the relationship Miss Honey has with the students. When it comes to relationships, immediacy matters. Although Miss Trunchbull is bigger and stronger, she has one disadvantage. She is remote. And not just physically remote. She is less likely to know each student's name. She is less familiar with their individual quirks and personalities. She knows less about what each student is currently working on, or their current challenges, or their strengths and weaknesses.

In contrast, Miss Honey's connection with the students is immediate. And, when combined with the right coaching strategies, this immediate connection gives Miss Honey more power to lift her students up than Miss Trunchbull has to tear them down.

Beyond this magical children's story, there is a growing body of evidence to support this "immediacy" effect in the real world of organisational leadership. These findings have been summarised by Gallup researchers Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman. The Gallup team spent several years investigating why some managers are more successful than others. One of their key findings was the following ...

The talented employee may join a company because of its charismatic

leaders, its generous benefits, and its world-class training programs. But how long the employee stays and how productive they are while they remain there is determined by their relationship with their immediate supervisor.

This book is about how you can become such a supervisor.

### **References**

Buckingham, M., & Coffman, C. (1999) *First, break all the rules: What the world's greatest managers do differently*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Dahl, Roald. (1988) *Matilda*. London, United Kingdom: The Penguin Group.