

Bleating on...

I have been writing these columns for about 18 months now, in my capacity as President of the Association of Tertiary Education Management (ATEM). Just in case you don't yet know about ATEM, it exists to provide professional development based on a big picture view of the management of tertiary education institutions, that moves beyond functional specializations, and allows cross-fertilisation and sharing of ideas and good practice. It is, at the moment, primarily an association for general staff who are involved in the administration and management of universities, but sees its future as a more inclusive organization for anyone who manages universities, in any capacity.

I have in these columns, in the words of some of my colleagues, been 'bleating on' about how badly done by general staff are in universities. But 'bleating on', I think, is the first step in a long-term process to make policy discussions at the sector and institutional levels a bit more inclusive of all staff, and to consider alternative, non-academic, worldviews in these discussions. 'Bleating on' has also involved making some very broad generalizations as a way of highlighting the issues.

As a reminder of one such issue, I think universities make a big mistake if they assume that because general staff do not have a PhD, they cannot possibly understand what an academic institution is all about, and by inference, cannot therefore manage an academic institution, and can therefore be dismissed as irrelevant. I also think that administrators and managers make a big mistake if they think they can impose their will on an academic institution, simply because they 'manage' a function or a role. The worldviews of both groups probably need to shift a bit before anyone will really listen to my 'bleating on' - particularly since ATEM is not yet viewed in the sector as an organization one has to listen to, so why would anyone listen to its President?

The listening has to begin, however, before we can start to have any sort of meaningful discussions about how and what general staff can contribute to the institutions and the sector in which they work. I know all the theory behind change management, and political positioning in organizations, and the impact of egos on new ideas, but I cannot help but wonder what it is about viewing general staff as an integral part of a university that is so frightening?

Right now, we have two professional groups in universities responsible for its management. One group is established, one group is emerging. The basis for acceptance and recognition of these groups, by and large, has nothing to do with knowledge and expertise and everything to do with academic background and qualifications. Right now, we have the situation where the two groups are at a bit of a stand-off, both not trusting each other, both skeptical of each

other's value in university management. We have the situation where Vice-Chancellors are telling general staff they should be seen and not heard, until they somehow miraculously acquire an understanding of academic institutions over considerable time. That sort of long-term induction program might have worked in the 1950s, but it won't work today.

I will 'bleat on' a bit more. Universities are big, complex organizations. Their core is academic work, and that needs to be at the basis of any management models and processes that are designed and implemented. We need to have both academic and general staff involved in the management of universities, to make sure that the best of both worlds is combined to produce innovative management practices. That is, academic staff can learn from the general staff who often have management qualifications and expertise, and general staff can learn more about the value of academic traditions and work models from academics. And, we need a program in place that ensures that anyone who manages a university understands the nature of the beast they are managing every day - this learning needs to occur from the beginning, not over time, and the learning process needs to be explicit, not endowed somehow by osmosis. And this learning needs to apply to those who have only worked in universities, and those staff who universities appoint from business organizations and government. While managing a university has a set of functions and tasks that may be viewed as generic, we need to acknowledge that it is the way those tasks and functions are carried out that is unique, and embedded in the academic core of institutions.

But, no one seems prepared to **really** listen. In my experience as ATEM President, people are polite, and will listen, but then generally dismiss the words as irrelevant. I guess I don't really blame them. We have research on why academics shouldn't listen to administrators - because they have antithetical values, and can't possibly understand. Then we have research that tells us that the work of academics and general staff is blurring, but I'm not sure if that is viewed as a positive or negative development by either group. And, of course, there is the research that tells us that there is a great deal of continuing hostility and tension between the two groups. What sort of organization would continue to let this sort of situation exist among their management staff - where there are competing values, unclear and fuzzy work boundaries and simmering tension and hostility? Only a university I suspect.

What have we to lose here? Not much, but we have a lot to gain. It's almost as though we need a 'fresh sheet of paper', to try to design a new blueprint for university management that is free of historical models and their associated baggage. Or, to 'draw a line in the sand' and acknowledge that what we had in the past doesn't work all that well anymore, and what we need in the future needs to be re-worked and re-developed. Designing an inclusive management model for universities is a pretty exciting challenge, and I think the only people who can actually design that model are the people who manage the universities - not

government review committees. That idea though, I suspect, is wishful thinking, and just a bit more 'bleating on'. Ah well...