

# **Kelston Deaf Education Centre, management practices and relationships with the Ministry of Education and stakeholder groups 2001 - 2009.**

Sabbatical Reflection by David Foster  
Kelston Deaf Education Centre  
July 2009 – October 2009

## **1 Acknowledgements**

I want to acknowledge and thank the following people for their contributions:

My wife, Kerry and our children, your emotional resilience and flexibility enabled us to navigate significant changes in our family life during the period of this sabbatical. Your support and the everyday examples of living the principles and practises outlined in this report continue to inspire me.

The Board of Trustees and my colleagues at Kelston Deaf Education Centre, for creating the space for me to engage in this reflection

The generosity of those people from Ministry of Education, Residential Special Schools, Deaf Community, KDEC whanau and our international networks who agreed to be interviewed. As always I appreciate your honesty and willingness to engage in lively debate.

The Deaf Community of New Zealand, the opportunity to become part of your community, learn about Deaf culture and to reflect on the learning opportunities that it has opened up for me continues to be a privilege after eight years.

## **2 Executive Summary**

Kelston Deaf Education Centre, is one of only two such centre's in New Zealand. Consequently the Centre is involved, not only in day to day service delivery but also the need to rely on its own efforts and relationship management capability to inform and influence the development of policy and procedure to benefit deaf students nationally

Through a series of interviews my sabbatical provided an opportunity to explore the principles and practises that have contributed to successful change management over a sustained period of time.

A summary of these principles and practises is shared in the hope that it will encourage other school leaders to reframe their views of and subsequent relationships with stakeholders including the Ministry of Education.

### **3 Purpose**

The sabbatical sought to examine how KDEC's relationships with stakeholder groups and the Ministry of Education have been influenced by changes in educational policy and stakeholder expectations.

An opportunity existed to explore the extent to which these relationships may have in fact led the changes at times. This reflection time also provided an opportunity to consider future improvement at our Centre.

### **4 Background and Rationale**

My Sabbatical was granted for one term between July 2009 and October 2009 on the basis that the time would be used to reflect on the changes that have happened at Kelston Deaf Education Centre (KDEC) over the past eight years.

I was appointed as Chief Executive Officer at KDEC at the beginning of 2001. This was completely new: new role, new challenge and new environment. The vast majority of my career experience had been in mainstream primary schools.

My appointment also coincided with the roll out of Special Education 2000 a policy initiative under which the day to day responsibilities of KDEC and the funding structures within Special Education were fundamentally altered.

Why the past eight years?

Change management undertaken since 2001 has included the following activities:

- Formal restructuring undertaken against a background of multiple Collective Employment Agreements e.g. residential staffing, deployment of ORRS funded staff across multiple sites, management and administration structures.
- Negotiations with MOE to determine how to successfully describe and implement the intent of policy in agreements for service that sit outside standard staffing and funding for schools e.g. funding for regional teaching services - navigating the boundaries of staffing orders in council verses population growth, residential funding rates.
- Re-aligning experienced staff to new ways of working and new line management structures in order to deliver consistent quality of service at a distance.
- Working with MOE to develop and introduce new opportunities both within existing policy and where necessary proposing revisions to policy.
- Processes to introduce and disseminate professional practise exemplars e.g. Written English exemplars, NZSL lexicon for mathematics teacher of Deaf students.
- Participation in national reference groups and working parties on behalf of Deaf Education and Special Schools.

These actions were examined to try and identify patterns of individual or organisational behaviour that have been adopted, modified and successfully reapplied through a series of major change management initiatives.

The relationships were explored through a series of interviews – face to face and by phone that focussed on four key themes:

- Describing the Relationship
- Exploring the Relationship
- Improving the Relationship
- Potential for Learning and Sharing

Coincidentally the sabbatical period dovetailed with my opportunity to participate in the Hillary Leadership Programme as one of three Woolfe Fisher Scholarship recipients. Having these two separate opportunities simultaneously created a unique time for me.

## **5 Methodology**

A relatively simple methodology was adopted for this period of reflection. This comprised the following elements attended to in the order described below.

A scan of literature related to managing change in the public sector. Specific text proved difficult to find but a number of presentations and synthesis articles exist that attempt to summarise approaches that have worked. These references are characterised by their focus on relationships between organisations and their stakeholders and generally attempt to provide frameworks. The frameworks on certain principles and practises being evident in the relationship.

This discovery validated my own beliefs about what really matters when managing change and was helpful in framing questions to bring consistency to the content of the interviews in which I planned to engage.

My premise was, and remains, that change, regardless of the imperative or driver, only occurs as a result of the activities of people. The activity of people is best observed in their relationships.

Therefore interviews to understand how change is working would need to focus on describing the relationship, exploring the relationship and testing the potential to improve the relationship. This exploration would hopefully lead to self awareness and opportunities to improve but also opportunities to identify and share successful characteristics of the relationship.

### ***Describe the relationship***

Can you list any events, activities or outcomes which in your opinion have been directly influenced by the relationship you have with KDEC?

What principles and practises characterise your current relationship with KDEC?

Can you isolate any principles or practises that have emerged (especially improved) over time?

Can you identify any aspects of the relationship which consistently frustrate or hinder the relationship?

### ***Explore the relationship***

Which principles and practise would you describe as successful?

Do you think of your relationship with KDEC in organisational or individual terms? i.e. Does it feel like you are you dealing with a person or a place?

Could you try to summarise the characteristics that best describe your experience of KDEC's organisational behaviour?

To what degree has KDEC's bilingual / bicultural perspective influenced your perception of the relationship?

### ***Improve the relationship***

Can you identify principles or practises that are characteristic of other schools successful relationships, which are absent from you relationship with KDEC?

### ***Potential Learning or sharing***

Can you identify any of these principles or practises that, in your experience would provide a learning experience or opportunity for other schools?

## **6 Findings**

### ***Describing the Relationship***

All the people that I interviewed described their relationship with KDEC over an extended period of time as being based on high standards. By this they meant that they can expect to be listened to, experience honesty (i.e. be honest and get honesty in return), they experience us as having a commitment to successfully describing and attempting to solve problems.

They appreciate our ability to keep things in perspective and respect the fact that we genuinely seek to "contain" any tension within a group that can realistically be expected to solve the problem.

We have built up a record of trust and confidence with other people and this is currently being recognised in a number of ways that I had not previously (consciously) considered.

For example we nowadays regularly receive information that is not for public discussion (yet), it is shared so that we can understand where the Ministry's current thinking is up to...e.g. to help us understand how or why something is taking longer than we expected. This only happens because of the level of trust and confidence that we have proved capable of honouring.

## ***Exploring the Relationship***

I asked people to comment about whether they feel like they are dealing with a person or a place when they think about KDEC.

There was learning for me in their answers. Most people said they can work successfully with KDEC, when they feel like they are dealing with a person who knows and understands the issue. Some people playfully pointed out that there is no such person as KDEC, only people who work at / for KDEC.... so to even say KDEC this... or KDEC that... is unhelpful as far as they're concerned.

The more correct way to think is that "this person" is speaking on behalf of KDEC. This uncovers questions like how well do I know that person? And how much do I trust that they know what they're talking about?

The responses to this question have really got me to thinking about who we are as a collective group of people.

When exploring culture in the Hillary Leadership Programme we noted that culture is influenced not so much by leaders or senior managers, but far more so by those perceived as middle managers. In the context of KDEC our culture is expressed in the day to day interactions of our staff with students, teachers and whanau.

Any time one of our teachers says: "KDEC...." then because the other participant in the conversation knows and trusts that staff member they probably won't even consider that the next statement might be an expression of the person's individual opinion – it will be received as an official statement from the KDEC Board delivered through the speaker.

There's a question in here about the quality of information that our frontline staff have access to? And the degree to which they are aware of the importance and credence that people place on the things that they say?

How much is too much information? How little is not enough??

Our wider community also expects leadership from KDEC! This is interesting because the price of the expectation is that – our stakeholders while looking to us to provide leadership, solve problems and represent them faithfully and honestly, - at the same time – feel free to focus their frustration, doubt and at times anger on us as the people they deal with daily.

More than one interviewee captured this well for me when she suggested that we should try to view people's expressions of doubt, anger and frustration as signs that they trust us enough to express these emotions openly.

How do we learn to recognise the paradox of this emotion and handle it with integrity?

## ***Improving the Relationship***

The recurring themes when it came to opportunities for improvement seem to centre on two possible opportunities.

The first was learning how to share more information, without overwhelming people and without breaching the trust that has taken so long to build up.

The second was learning how to utilise the energy people have for getting involved by somehow enabling them to develop the skills they might need to be able to participate in decision making at a higher level than they currently do.

Whose job would this be? And how would it be achieved? These are just two questions that I have wrestled with.

Another dimension of responding to this learning is to consider how to be able to share information about ideas that are not fully formed.

What do I mean by this?

Sometimes people get frustrated with those they perceive to be in leadership roles because they want a simple answer.

They just want an instruction or a directive: - this is how it will be from now on...

The dilemma for us as leaders is that behind these requests for clarity the problem may not be defined yet, let alone ready to be solved. When it comes to policy issues and complex delivery systems there is usually no simple, immediate answer and the truth is more likely to be: Based on what we know right now, the best thing you, me, we can do is.... Even if we do act this way now we must continue to be clear this might change soon

Some transfer from Hillary Programme made a very useful contribution to managing a response to these two needs. During the programme I was introduced to Ned Herman's Brain Dominance Index. This tool, applied to communication with stakeholder groups has enabled me to focus on framing information in ways that are accessible to all.

Each major communication opportunity now tries to provide the big picture, the relevant data, clarity of process steps, timeframes and acknowledge the impact on relationships. Feedback from this methodology is very positive.

In order to address the second opportunity all key managers have been introduced to two concepts (again borrowed from the Hillary Programme). These are the concepts of carrying and framing as ways of approaching problem definition and problem solving.

Framing helps by training people to understand that how they see the problem either limits or creates options for solving. By learning to restate problems in new and different language we have been able to be open to new and different possible solutions. By sharing the knowledge that a problem is "on the table" for discussion rather than "under wraps" until resolved, we are learning to invite broader perspectives. This effort of learning to carry problems more lightly is also very important to being open to possible solutions.

## **7 Implications**

### ***Potential for Learning and Sharing***

At first I was unsure whether there was potential for learning or sharing coming out of my sabbatical experience. Much of the feedback, while thought provoking was both resonating with and reinforcing views that I already consciously held.

There were a number of comments from the people that I interviewed suggesting that KDEC (correction - the people who are KDEC) could benefit by reflecting on the potential contribution that they could be making to leadership in a wider special education context in New Zealand.

These comments were the ones that made specific reference to the behaviours that we consciously adopt. I was led to realise that we have refined an ability to talk about how and why we might use particular ways of behaving. We can describe our strategies for shaping and viewing an issue often before a meeting, sometimes during a meeting and we practise debriefing as a management strategy regularly.

We develop and rehearse arguments before a meeting, try to adopt alternate points of view and develop rebuttal or supplementary information in anticipation of response from those with whom we expect to interact.

At first these comments sat uncomfortably because I did not have a sense that KDEC was doing anything differently to other schools.

Aspects of this leadership may appear to be self-evident but I am noting them here because the feedback during the sabbatical suggested to me that my perspectives might not be universally held.

I am currently challenging myself and encouraging my team, to share these views more widely to test the degree to which they are shared or held by others within our sector.

One way that I'm meeting this challenge is to try and learn to identify and frame each assumption I encounter and then try to rethink my perspective or have a conversation to uncover the facts.

Below I have provided some examples of how I have tried to practise this reflective thought process in order to practise more productive thinking.

**BOTTOM LINE:** there are no enemies or conspiracies simply busy people doing the best job they know how to do. Learn to have the conversations that ask what OUR NEW BEST might look like.

Assumption or Language to be tested:	Alternative thinking to be discussed or practised
<p>1. The Ministry should.... The parents' need to... lead to generalisations. These kinds of labels placed on or adopted by community of people. It is not an entity as such.</p>	<p>Always remember that you're dealing with a person (usually a busy one) therefore the relationship will be central to success</p> <p>Always ask who "they" are?</p>
<p>2. Everyone plays by the rules. With respect to the Ministry there is always some form of constraint: political imperative, limits of financial delegation, current policy, or simply timing in relation to this year's budget.</p>	<p>Always take time to be clear about what the rules are.</p> <p>The person I am currently dealing with might not have the authority or the influence to deal with my request. It is OK to talk about this.</p>
<p>3. People in voluntary groups sometimes take pride in the fact that they're not bound by the same rules and regulations as people being paid to work on the matter at hand.</p>	<p>While volunteers and advocates are free to speak their minds, this does not negate the need to engage with integrity. It is also OK to have this conversation.</p>
<p>4. Find out what the rules are. Make sure everyone knows how these might be influencing the situation and then, either look for a solution within the rules, or find out who to work with IF the rules need to change.</p>	<p>Accept that changing rules is a slow process that requires resilience – and the person you're dealing with might not like the rules any more than you do!</p>
<p>5. Sometimes one thing needs to be done before another (more desirable) thing can even be contemplated. This is not a stalling tactic it is part of how Government processes work.</p>	<p>Never assume that two people know each other or work closely together simply because they come for the same organisation. This is especially true when dealing with personnel across regional or departmental boundaries.</p>
<p>6. The Beauracrats have a master plan, they are adept at using delaying tactics and endless reports to stall action or the things they know need to be done. Delaying tactics are used to save money.</p>	<p>If you haven't heard from someone for a while, it only means that you haven't heard from them.</p> <p>If you want an update, ask for one, don't wait and don't impute motives like lack of interest or lack of skill simply because communication is slow. (refer #1 above)</p>
<p>7. This assumption above became more real for me the first time I actually saw the cover sheet for recommendations to a Minister. The cover sheet contains a series of corrective actions including a box for "overtaken by events".</p>	<p>Sometimes NOW is simply not the right time!</p> <p>Find the next most important thing to focus on until the time is right to reopen a discussion.</p>

<p>8. "Going Public" i.e. taking a story to the news media, will force corrective action. Media personnel, in my limited experience, have not been particularly interested in telling the whole story or waiting for a truly meaningful solution to be developed and implemented. Their day to day work is to "sell the story", or parts of it, in manageable bytes to a public audience, usually by a publication deadline!</p>	<p>The media is ALWAYS a last resort.</p> <p>Primarily I subscribe to this view because playing issues out in the media feels like a breach of the trust and dignity required to achieve a truly meaningful solution.</p> <p>The other consequence of "going public" (especially when the Ministry gets involved) is that the person you most need to work on the problem, becomes completely unproductive while they prepare the briefing for the Minister or the media response.</p>
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## **8 Benefits**

### *Issues important to the Centre*

The current philosophy of mainstreaming for students with special needs relies on Centres of excellence. During the sabbatical period the Associate Minister announced the Special Education Review 2010. Options to be explored during the review included the possibility of fundamentally rethinking the role of special schools.

The feedback gathered during my sabbatical strongly reinforces a view that maintaining a core network of special schools is an important component of the overall environment in which special education can be delivered. The notion that “specialists” are somehow going to be available to all schools to provide assessment, advice, guidance and training, relies on those experts being “retained”. Remembering that in the fullest sense “retained” means to have possession of, to hold in place, condition or position, to keep and remember in one’s services or pay.

KDEC aims to be such a centre where expert staff develop, document and disseminate evidence based practise within the system. Systemic change - how we organise resources and systems of instruction is just as relevant as professional practise change. Special Schools are ideally placed to provide professional leadership if they can adopt behaviours where change is managed and practise is recorded.

### *Links to Centre’s Strategic Plan*

The KDEC Board of Trustees Strategic Plan focuses on four Broad Goals:

- a. Raising Student Achievement
- b. Promoting Excellence
- c. Managing Change to Achieve Results
- d. Strengthening Governance

In Deaf Education change management is almost certainly going to continue. Facilitating effective change has relied and will continue to rely on strong relationships between KDEC and its core stakeholder groups. The KDEC strategic plan includes a programme of work to extend satellite model of delivery into a South Auckland campus<sup>1</sup> (already under consideration by the MOE). This change is on a scale not contemplated since KDEC was opened in 1958.

Special Education Itinerant Teacher projects are looking to quantify the value added to student learning by Resource Teachers. New ways of using existing itinerant teachers and discussions about how the network of Special Schools is configured both in Auckland (Special Education Network Strategy) and in a wider national context will continue to be important as the findings of the Special Education Review 2010 are rolled out.

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<sup>1</sup> Petersen Report to Deputy Secretary Special Education – June 2008

### *Personal Professional Development*

When the KDEC Board appointed me to this role they took a huge risk. I was a U4 mainstream Principal with no real experience in Deaf Education.

Promoting me to a position responsible for over 170 staff and being called upon to lead change on a semi-national scale has been a tremendously challenging, exciting and rewarding experience. I have relied on the expertise of others, their guidance, support, honesty and experience.

An additional benefit to the Board of KDEC has been the opportunity for a member of the current senior management staff to experience higher duties during the sabbatical. This was in harmony with the Board views on the value of succession training.

### *School Sector Priorities*

The benefits to Deaf Education in particular and Special Education in New Zealand in general are manifest. Special Education tends to throw up situations, needs and responses that are outside the norm. Students' circumstances were not contemplated by the generic policy and perceptions of the needs of the students are often charged with the sense of urgency. The opportunity for the CEO to engage in reflection about the way the Board has done business over the preceding eight years is in harmony with the Boards stated goals of improving governance and managing change to achieve results.

Current government initiatives are clearly signalling more changes to structure and delivery in Special Education. This topic is in the NZPF top five as submitted to the Minister of Education at 2008 conference in Christchurch.

The development of a reflection on practise in the Special Education arena provides a basis for more considered and therefore potentially successful change management in future. Professional leadership within Special Education is potentially enhanced.

## **9 Summary of Principles and Practises**

A useful outcome of this reflection for me has been the opportunity to summarise some of the things that seem to work in our relationships. These "things" are a combination of principles, practises, attitudes and values which seem to be universally contributing to any major achievement that KDEC is (or has been) part of:

1. Treat all the people that you deal with as collaborators, partners. Just because someone else pays your salary, or has control over most of your time doesn't mean you can't work together.
2. This enables people to focus on working together. Working together doesn't always mean absolutely agreeing, but it does always mean committing to action.

3. Go back to source documents. Every major decision in the public sector has its roots in an Act of Parliament, a Cabinet Decision or a policy statement. It is always worth the time to hunt these source documents down.
4. Learn to describe the problem as simply and clearly as possible. Sometimes this problem definition needs to be restated more than once to get to the heart of what's at stake.
5. Learn to identify what consequences might occur if certain actions are taken. There are always intended and unintended consequences.
6. Treat others with respect, even when you disagree and always leave the door open for the next discussion. The type of problems we deal with will seldom be resolved as the result of a single meeting.
7. Learn to ask questions, rather than make statements. Phrases like:
  - Would it be helpful if...
  - Can you help me to understand more about...
  - What would I need to do, research or provide in order for you to...
8. Accept that it might have taken years for a situation to have reached its current state. It is therefore worth taking a little bit of time to come up with a long term solution rather than a quick fix. A quick fix should only be used to buy time to work on the long term solution.
9. There is no substitute for emotional intelligence. Show trust and be trustworthy, be honest and accept honesty

This list is not meant to be a manual or “the” definitive set; it is an accumulation, a summary, of the things that recurred during my sabbatical interviews.

### ***Conclusions***

KDEC as an organisation has made a systematic and valuable contribution to the development of opportunities for deaf students in NZ. We have been successful. We enjoy the trust and confidence of our stakeholders and the Ministry.

Our students are achieving at levels that are attracting international interest.

The achievements that we have been part of have occurred as a result of very conscious effort from a large number of people, over a sustained period of time. Our interaction is clearly characterised by certain principles, practises, attitudes and values.

The opportunity for a sabbatical has been a powerful opportunity to reflect on, explore and attempt to summarise KDEC's interaction with a very wide group of people all of whom have the best interests of Deaf students at heart.

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