

Introduction

For us: why write this book?
For you: why read this book?

This book is based on the confidence we share that teachers and their communities know how to create the schools needed for their children.

Both of us have worked in schools most of our lives. This has brought us face-to-face with the current challenging culture within which schools must deliver. This is work demanding courage, authenticity, and character. Most importantly, it demands of us all to be different tomorrow than we are today.

At the core of our profession is a hunger to be part of learning environments that deliver brilliantly for all involved. We have seen such schools and worked in them and with them. They are a joy. As well, we have listened to many stories of frustration within schools. Teachers share that their school starts on new initiatives, with passion and energy, only to have this fade away with no delivery. The school then starts on another initiative with the same result: nothing absolutely mastered, nothing deeply embedded. Teachers need a sense of completion and achievement as much as their students.

'Posttraumatic initiative fatigue' (PTIF) would be a great descriptor for what is being experienced in many schools across the world. People with high ideals, desperate to do the job they have trained for, are grieving to see their vision lost. This book is about honouring those visions and bringing sanity to the here and now.

Within an evolving culture of disrespect for the people who dedicate their lives to the education of our children, few are questioning systems that no longer serve the interests of our children and society at large. This has resulted in a culture of blame, which creates paralysis. To fill this vacuum, there is a growing body of international literature supplying external processes. Everyone has an answer. This book does not bring definitive answers. Let's be honest: No one size fits all schools. We share skills, models, processes, and insights that enable schools to deliver. These come from real school experiences of successful delivery across six countries and in

single schools containing many cultures. They define an approach that works in our times, facing our constraints and our complexity.

We stand with schools to acknowledge their challenges and face them with courage. This book is based on processes that break negativity and tap the potential currently buried under the weight of external myopia. In the end, only you can discern what is needed in your context. Different contexts demand different approaches. Knowing your own context provides a thread of authenticity. This lights pathways of growth and softens the pressure of external voices. Schools that deliver weave a powerful path between the competing voices and demands from outside. They draw on their inner resources to satisfy both learners and teachers.

Processes clarifying what is in the hearts and souls of your community for your school are at the core of our work. Having the understandings and processes to then make this a reality on your school site is what we mean by delivery.

We work with school leaders, staff, parents/caregivers, and their communities to create the schools they have long wanted. They describe what they have developed, in rich interaction with us, as being a fresh and liberating approach. This book reveals how people are working productively together within schools to deliver what really matters for their children. This collective voice provides one valuable benchmark.

Seeing beyond our own context is difficult for all of us. Our ongoing action research inside schools keeps us in touch with contemporary schooling and the issues faced internationally. Our aim here is to share a rich range of alternative approaches you can use to reflect on your experiences of your own unique school culture.

Everything in this book has passed the litmus test of working across diverse cultures and situations. We provide quotes and examples throughout the book from colleagues we are learning from and working with. These are schools that deliver.

We focus on the six central areas for delivery:

1. Alignment, which enables our school to better tap the potential of our people
2. The Real Work, which puts energy into what really matters for delivery
3. Leadership, a disposition that helps us all hold our true course
4. Authentic Action, through which we deliver on our promises
5. Core Values and Culture, which are at the root of our actions, both effective and ineffective
6. Community, the rich human web in which schools are wrapped

Voices

Friday, September 20, 1985, 12:05 p.m.

My buddy Marvin and I are deputies on lunch duty in the cavernous eating commons of Langham Creek High School in Houston, Texas. The student population mirrors the toughness and diversity of this oil-driven city. The school has tough kids during this booming time. There are 650 teenagers finishing the last lunch session of the day. Marvin and I have been chatting on our walkie-talkies about two things: what bar we are going to after work, and about the rising tension in our boys as we have been pushing them really hard to enforce the new hair length rule that our district has introduced.

‘Crack!’ a noise I have never heard before rings out and the kids, as they are wont to do when they think something is brewing, stand up on the stools of the cafeteria tables, blocking the view. I begin to slowly walk along the wall next to where I am on duty towards the sound.

A boy races around the corner of the cafeteria tables towards me, dressed completely in black, with a 357 Magnum in his hand. He draws down on me in a police stance. My racing thoughts tell me I am about to die. I take a step towards him. The gunman fires, ‘Craaaack!!!’ The shot flies past my head and ricochets off the cement wall next to me, slamming into a student standing behind me, shattering his leg.

Pandemonium – all the students standing atop stools dive under the tables for protection. The gunman turns and runs back towards where he has come from. I slowly follow his path, eyes fixed on him as he races up to the mezzanine floor. I think: He is going to shoot down at us. I shout at the students nearest me to ‘Get out!’ As these kids race towards the two exit doors opposite the shooter’s location, everyone else does the same in utter panic. In a nanosecond, the cafeteria empties as students flee into the cornfields behind the school.

I continue to walk slowly around the end of the cafeteria tables, watching the shooter. As I turn the corner, I see the product of the first ‘Crack’. Marvin lies on the floor in a small pool of blood. As I bend down to cradle his

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hand in mine, a useless question ventures from my mouth, 'Marvin, what happened?' Marvin says, 'I've been shot and it's serious. I want to be life-flighted to Hermann Hospital'. Marvin's fingers are swelling and his wedding ring has started to tighten on his finger . . .

What seemed like 'hell on earth' started for all of us at that moment. You see, the first bullet had been shot into Marvin's back, smashing his tailbone and paralysing him instantly.

When our school district introduced the hair length rule, I had enforced it strongly, as was expected. I felt the growing anger in our boys, I knew the rule was stupid, but I enforced it anyway. The tension in the school was palpable. I did not speak out against this stupidity; I just did my job. This shooting was one young man's unskilled and brutal response. I had colluded.

Never again would I avoid telling the truth.

This incident is about much more than a hair code. When I talk about telling the truth, about integrity and speaking up, I am not talking about mundane rules. I am talking about school culture. Why did the boy bring a gun to school? It was not simply because of the hair code, I can guarantee you that. Was it because he had been marginalised in such a large school? Was it because he had a mental illness that went unrecognised or unreported? Was it because 'Keep one another safe' was not a value of the school, and his buddies who had an inkling of what he was up to did not let anyone know? Was it because he or his family were not connected to the school as a part of a community and had no one to turn to?

We are still unsure what caused him to act as he did, but our collusion connects to the principles in this book. Culture, connectedness, and community deliver schools that are safe. These are what really mattered back in 1985, as they do now.

This book for me is about culture, courage, and voice.

It is December 1959. I am fifteen. It is the summer holidays before I am to start my university studies in metallurgy. Towering above me is a long row of huge, fire-breathing, open-hearth furnaces in the steelworks of one of Australia's largest mining companies. They have given me a scholarship.

It is searingly hot and heavy steel dust is in the shafts of light that cross the room as we enter the beaten-up, galvanised iron hut. Peering into the shadowed corner, I see the outline of a wrinkled, weather-beaten old man.

I hear the depth of his sigh as he looks at this young boy with long red 1960s hair flowing over his shoulders.

The besuited, well-ironed executive officer begins: 'This is young John, one of our scholarship holders; he will be working with you for the next three months, OK?' The old eyes roll.

'Just don't get under my feet!' he barks at me.

'Kit him out' is the next missive; no pleasantries here.

Within minutes, I have a shiny new grey outfit with black buttons down the front, large safety boots, safety glasses, and gloves that have to be tucked up inside my sleeves, so that if molten metal hits me, it will run outside my gloves, not inside.

As I stand, trying to force a large quantity of red hair inside a safety helmet, he slowly rises. Out from the gloom, I feel a massive presence emerge. I will never forget the sight – baggy dark blue dungarees and a blue and black striped woolly shirt with holes in it. Each hole fringed with a brown burn mark where the molten metal has blown through. The scars beneath match the holes. No hard hat here, no safety clothing.

He pushes past me gruffly and with a 'Follow me' we are up on the furnace floor. He is barking orders in every direction as we go. The full force of the man is now on display. He strides to the front of one of the furnaces. The heat is excruciating. After a quick look, he bellows, 'Throw in fifteen bags of ferromanganese and ten bags of coke'.

With notebook in hand, I timidly ask, 'Why did you say that?'

'Looks like it needs it' and he strides on. 'Have a look for yourself!'

I can smell my eyebrows singeing as I peer into the furnace.

It is molten orange.

But you see, for me, it is always molten orange.

My task was to follow this man, their top steelmaker, for three months and make detailed notes on how he made steel. He was about to retire and he could cook a batch of steel like no one else in the plant. They need to know his secrets; they are worth millions. I still have those detailed notebooks and I still have no idea how he made steel.

I learned from this old steelmaker about the importance of delivery. This man had exquisite Personal Practical Knowledge, and he delivered magnificently. He could not articulate what he knew and we could not capture it. He retired and pure gold went with him. This experience helped form my lifelong quest to understand how people think and how to value the power and depth of what people know.

This book for me is about delivering and about deep respect for the knowledge that people carry with them. For us, these blend seamlessly with the culture, courage, and voice mentioned above. Over our years working together the alignment in our thinking is palpable. We have come to our beliefs through very different trajectories: one research based and the other practice based, and we have learned to keep each other honest.

OUR LEARNING JOURNEY

Between us, we have almost one hundred years of research and practical experience inside schools. Between us, we have worked in over twenty countries. We are currently working in schools across six countries. As we work, we are constantly responding to challenges alongside our colleagues in schools. Together with them, we observe what works in their context. Over time, we look for what works across different contexts. We tentatively generalise, then continually observe, share, and test more broadly. Ours is a shared never-ending, collaborative learning journey, with each other and with respected teachers and school leaders. We invite you on board.

For us, theory emerges from practice, not the other way around. We are constantly exploring what works with real teachers and school leaders in real classrooms and real schools. We extend and strengthen our work with every new school experience. We are clear that we do not have 'the answers'. We have powerful insights and many questions. This book is made up of elements of practice, each one of which we have observed in lived successful school practice. Many of them our colleagues have reported as transforming their schools and their classrooms. For us, many promising approaches do not stand the heat of practice. This was the screening test for this book.

Nothing gets into our shared practice until we have used it successfully in our own lives for at least three years. If you cannot make it work yourself, why share it with others? The schools that deliver, around which this book is based, operate in similar ways. Their practice is robust and continuously road tested.

We are both action learners, so our practice is constantly evolving. Both of us regard feedback as a gift and we are totally open to fresh insights. We have each created strong feedback environments for our own growth and learning. This is central to our professional lives. Respected colleagues have critiqued and recritiqued the many drafts of this book and enriched our writing.

This book is woven around the voices and experiences of hundreds of teachers, school leaders, and community members. Our action research with them forms the ongoing reality of our work. As you encounter their examples, quotes, and voices, you are accessing the up-to-date manifestations of what we live every day. They keep our work fresh and relevant, in the here and now.

We robustly challenge each other and invite our colleagues to do the same. We are not 'shrinking violets'. Both of us work hard to expose flawed assumptions behind our work and we are constantly on the lookout for unhelpful inferences. Our shared history is littered with these. Thankfully, our history is also filled with delightful moments. We share the joy of what works to create the learning and growth that each child and each teacher deserve.

This book is our most up-to-date iteration, the 2016 version – what we use today in our daily practice with schools. The book has been written for anyone interested in how schools can better deliver:

for children,
for families,
for teachers,
for school leaders, and
for the community.

OUR WORDING

We have written this book together, using *I*, using *we*, and using *you*.

We do not want to confuse you as our reader, so let us explain.

When we say *I* – this could be John or Bill writing from his heart. It does not really matter to us which of us is the *I* in any of what we write and we hope it will not matter to you, as our reader.

This is a genuinely coauthored book, with two strong core voices. We have also included the voices of many of the people we have learned from and with. To respect these voices, we have used their language and spelling in our quotes.

When we say *we*, it could be both of us saying something that we have talked about in our twenty years together or in the many joyful months writing together. We have loved this process. We have deep respect for each other and writing this book has been an absolute professional and personal joy. We are only stopping so that we can write the next one.

We also write *we* when we are talking about the education community. We have been part of that community for most of our lives: as school children, teachers-in-training, teachers, leaders in schools, principal, educational researcher, university professor in education, teachers of adults, parents of many children and grandchildren. So we are often using that collegial *we* – we are in this together, you and us – people who care deeply about education and learning.

When we say *you*, we are talking to you, our reader. Reading a book is a deeply personal experience and we want to make it as valuable for you as we can. Part of that for us is establishing a rich interaction between you as our reader and us as writers.

This is our current best practice.

—John and Bill