

# Managing professionally...



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A consistent theme of this column has been that the quality of working life for many Australians is being damaged by superficial approaches to management and organisational change. Simplistic solutions to complex problems abound. But the speed with which different answers to the same questions arise is perhaps the most eloquent commentary on their value.

So we see libraries closed simply to save money, without consideration of the cost of acquiring information through other sources. Library and information services are contracted out, as though that were a measure of efficiency in itself, with virtually exclusive focus on cost inputs and almost none on output quality. Jobs for senior professionals are redesignated as 'management' positions in order to remove the need for formal qualifications in professional disciplines. But these criteria are not replaced with mandatory qualifications in management. In fact, management has become an increasingly nebulous concept, wherein the mouthing of contemporary platitudes seems preferred to the hard slog of analysis, planning and method.

Most of this has been justified by the rhetoric of globalisation, deregulation and, especially, competitive pressure. That said, it is therefore fascinating to read a splendid new book co-written by Professor Fred Hilmer, undoubtedly the most influential figure in Australia's recent competition policy development process. In *Management redeemed: debunking the fads that undermine corporate performance*, ISBN 0 684 83162 7, The Free Press 1996, Hilmer and co-author, Professor Lex Donaldson, mount a savage attack on the quick-fix merchants and present a convincing critique of the management best-sellers list. At the same time, the book is a plea for renewed appreciation of more professional approaches to management, based on relentless pursuit of facts and disciplined application of fundamental concepts. There are few remedies through instant cures, the authors say.

The book's loudest warning is: 'beware of fads'. And most of these magic solutions are sourced to five false trails which new-management evangelists all follow: *first*, flatten the structure and abolish all hierarchy; *second*, rely on quick action, rather than reflection, analysis and considered planning — in the jargon, 'action is always better than paralysis by analysis'; *third*, use 'instant cof-

fee' management, find the right technique for every problem, apply it quickly, then move on to the next one; *fourth*, create a corporate clan, based on a happy family rather than a hierarchy, abolish all rule books and rely on 'culture' to define what is good or bad, right or wrong; and *fifth*, leave direction of the corporation firmly in the hands of a part-time, independent board, so that management's influence is removed from the board room. These five general ideas are at the heart of almost all the management new-speak which now bedevils corporate life. Fundamentally, they simplify and trivialise management, replacing ideas and actions based on sound reasoning with mere dogma.

For all its slick presentation and trendy appeal, this is an unprofessional approach to managing organisations. Hilmer and Donaldson very effectively ridicule the notion that long term success in high-performance enterprises can be neatly attributed to just a handful of trite concepts. A more professional approach, they say, would note that success is based on a huge combination of factors and an infinitesimal number of actions and decisions taken over a long period of time. Professional managers would study these organisations carefully and seek to learn from them. Nor would it be assumed that what worked in the past would necessarily work in the future. In this, the manager would be applying and building on the positive characteristics of other developed professions, within which impartial and expert application of proven skills and knowledge are valued.

A professional approach, however, requires hard, thorough work and considerable patience. Many managers clearly feel they don't have time for either. And so management becomes a fertile breeding ground for the fads and quick fix solutions which are now so evident. Most organisational problems are highly complex. Often they cannot be simply solved and left behind. Many, in fact, require continuing management of persisting, even endemic, conflicts. Faced with that reality, harried managers are easy targets for the army of 'experts' who peddle plug-in solutions to a broadening market.

Senior managers whose 'policy' is merely to apply unquestioningly the prescriptions of best-selling pop-management books are applauded. They are seen as being switched on to contemporary management styles, while those who show scepticism and seek more

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considered strategies, based on thorough analysis and empirical evidence, are condemned as out of step, rigid and hostile to change. But by far the greatest absurdity is the branding of their advocacy of an approach based on professional standards and professional ethics as, of all things, 'unprofessional'. Orwell's worst characters would be proud of so blatant an inversion of language's meaning.

When people are stressed and see problems as intractable, the temptation is to lay blame and embrace easy solutions. Just as that fact is causing social dislocation around

race and immigration in Australia, so it is simultaneously damaging the concept of professionalism and the careers of employees. ALIA is continually opposing this myopic trend, on behalf of its professional members. Successes do not come easily but we will continue to seek them. In that context, and given his credibility as a leader in development of competition policy and economic reform, Fred Hilmer's latest book is a very welcome arrival. It shows quite clearly that commitment to professionalism and pursuit of increased efficiency are not mutually exclusive concepts. In fact, each is a natural concomitant of the other. ■

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Essential selection criteria:

- Demonstrated provision of dynamic leadership in a team environment.
- Proven effective delivery of quality customer services with expertise in the provision of information using interactive technology.
- Evidence of effective managerial performance, high level communication skills, policy development, planning and delivery of staff training programs.
- Extensive contemporary knowledge of public library opportunities and constraints.

For an information kit, including the full selection criteria and mailing details, contact the Recreation and Health Recruitment Line on (07) 3403 9036. For further information, contact Ruth Cameron on (07) 3403 0112.

**Closing date: 15 January, 1997**

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### Editor Australian Academic and Research Libraries

Applications are sought from suitably qualified and experienced persons for the position of Editor of Australian Academic and Research Libraries, to succeed Peter Biskup, who will be retiring from the position in early 1997. AARL is the journal of the University, College and Research Libraries Section of ALIA.

The position will primarily be responsible for editorial content. It is expected that design, advertising, production, marketing and distribution currently undertaken by the editor will be managed by ALIA National Office.

The Editor's tasks will include:

- Selecting, accepting or rejecting material according to agreed criteria, in line with general objectives of the editorial board;
- Working with authors to create articles which are accurate, interesting, clearly expressed and of a high professional standard;
- Soliciting materials as appropriate;
- Provision of edited copy in electronic form to ALIA National Office for publication.

A sound knowledge of contemporary library and information science issues and experience in the field of library and information science is essential. A high order of oral and written communication skills is required, with particular emphasis on liaison and editorial skills. A proven ability to achieve deadlines is essential.

An appropriate honorarium will be negotiated with the successful applicant. Consideration will be given to an Editor/Associate Editor arrangement.

Written applications, including two referees' reports, should be sent to Eric Wainwright, Chair AARL Editorial Board, C/- National Library of Australia, Canberra ACT 2600 not later than Thursday, **24 January 1996**.

For additional information and copies of the job description and selection criteria please phone Eric Wainwright on (06) 262 1377 or e-mail [ewainwri@nla.gov.au](mailto:ewainwri@nla.gov.au)