Chapter 1 Why does your school exist?

Introduction

Management in general, and decision-making in particular, is easier if you know where you're going: if you have a set of objectives defining the goals you are supposed to be working towards. It is much more straightforward to plan a sales campaign or to update your school's recruitment policy if you have at the back of your mind what the long-term goals are, and can take action or make decisions in the short term consistent with those long-term goals.

For example, you might be faced with a decision about the allocation of priorities between different projects – a new self-access centre or the development of a secretarial skills course, or how much money to invest in re-training staff to teach young children. Reference to your institution's long-term aims will not affect the short-term needs, but it will tell you which projects are more closely consistent with the general direction and which are not.

Your colleagues will work together better if they know and understand the long-term aims. People have a need to know why they are there. On a practical level, they will be able to work more efficiently and more autonomously, with less need for constant internal cross-reference: 'There's a woman on the phone talking about teacher-training for children. Is that something we're interested in?' could and should be: 'A woman rang to tell us about teacher-training for children, so I asked her to send us more information.'

Externally, it is much easier to present a concise and memorable description of your institution for any kind of promotional purpose if you have an explicit statement of aims to work from; literally 'memorable', because other people will remember a simple clear explanation that includes a sense of direction.

If your school already has clearly-defined, agreed and understood objectives, congratulations! – you're in a small minority. It may still be useful for you to look at the following section (especially if you did not contribute to the formulation of the objectives, or possibly may not even personally agree with them) to see how closely they are actually being realized in practice, rather than displayed in bright lights and then largely ignored. In contrast, most of us work in institutions where the aims have not been clearly specified, and this makes our jobs harder.

The purpose of this short chapter is to set you thinking about the kind of place you work in (Section 1), and so to help in the formulation or evaluation of a statement of aims (Section 2). Working through these activities will clarify what you want from this book. We can't promise to provide all the answers, but you are more likely to find what you're looking for if you have taken five minutes to focus consciously on the reality of your current work situation and have a clear view of how you personally want to develop and move forward.

The first section contains a series of tasks to help crystallize your thoughts about your workplace. Following each task, there are some comments: each school and institution is different, so there can be no right answers, but there are clearly going to be individual and collective values and practices that are more or less desirable in a particular workplace.

If it is appropriate, you can use these tasks as a focusing exercise for a group of your colleagues to work through together. If you can arrange to meet outside the normal work schedule, preferably off the school premises and in an informal atmosphere, it will be worth taking the extra time and effort to elicit everybody's opinions fully in neutral and relaxed surroundings. Four to six people is a comfortable size, and you may want to set a time limit on each task, first working individually, then comparing notes. You may find that an enormous amount of discussion is generated, and perhaps a wide range of conflicting opinions. This suggests that however amicable the working atmosphere may be, people are pulling in different directions, rather than working toward a common goal, and that a great deal of further discussion may be needed to create a sense of focus.

1   What kind of place do you work in?

Look at these tasks and think out or write down short answers.

Task 1

First of all, what is the **profile** of your school or institution? Try to summarize it in a single sentence for the benefit of someone who knows nothing about it. Where is it? Who does it serve? Who owns it? Is it in the private or state sector? Is English language teaching the main or only activity, or is it a sideline in a larger organization or institution?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The profile of the school or institution is obviously of fundamental importance in defining how it is managed. For example, how is the management of change regarded? Is it the stuff of everyday life for colleagues to participate in, or is it something to discuss at the next management committee meeting, with the decisions taken subsequently disseminated? Because there are so many different types of ELT institution, there cannot be any correct answers to these questions, nor to most of the others posed in this book, but it is still vital that you ask the questions (aloud, if you can!).

Here are some examples of different profiles to illustrate the enormous diversity of English language teaching programmes:

1 A private language school located in a native English-speaking country, catering almost exclusively to students who come from 'abroad', owned and managed as a single institution by the resident principal/director.
2 A private language school located in a non-native English-speaking country, catering largely to local students wishing to improve their English, but also to local and perhaps incoming students learning the local language (or perhaps a range of non-native languages).

3 An educational institution in the state or private sector, where English language teaching is a major activity, but not the primary activity, which is to prepare students of partly or entirely non-native English-speaking backgrounds through the medium of English for other academic or vocational qualifications (for example, a teacher-training college or sixth-form college).

4 A governmental department or inter-governmental organization providing language training for its staff, either for use 'on-site' or in preparation for posting to other countries (for example, a training school for diplomats, or foreign office or defence department staff).

5 A large private entity, such as an industrial or commercial organization, whose primary activity is not educational. For example, a bank or an oil company whose employees need English in different skills to differing degrees in order to carry out their duties.

6 A state sector college where English language teaching is one among many academic activities; or may be only for pre-sessional or in-sessional support, to enable students of other disciplines to make the most of their studies.

7 A private language school as in **1** or **2** above but run entirely by its staff on a co-operative basis.

8 A charitable organization training volunteers to operate in remote areas, or local staff to act as interpreters or as a basis for further training in health, agricultural or technological fields.

In this great diversity, each institution has its own unique profile and its own management challenges and rewards. This profile is reflected in the varying degrees to which the different topic areas of this book will be relevant. A school catering entirely for local students will have no need for an accommodation service; a subsidiary of a larger organization or chain of schools may have little local responsibility for formulating strategy or setting prices; a training centre in an industrial or commercial enterprise might have no external sales activity.

However, in many cases, these functions will still be carried out by someone in the organization, in some form, somewhere, and if the immediate staff of the local programme have no contribution to make or are not consulted at all, then perhaps they should be. As a matter of personal development, they can certainly consider the issues involved and how they might apply to the immediate situation. Even where they are not directly applicable, we hope other sections will at least be interesting to read and think about.

As well as areas of difference, there must be substantial areas of overlap too: 'common core' ELT management, if you like, that is practised everywhere, albeit under local conditions, but with recognizably the same basic skills. Among these are:

- operations management, the day-to-day organization of teaching programmes;
- leadership, motivation and support of all staff;
- strategy formulation and execution;
- financial management: essentially, getting value for money;
- programme evaluation and staff appraisal. ∎

Task 2

What is the management structure in your school? Sketch out a simple diagram showing job titles, who reports to whom and who supervises whom. Draw in arrows to show how much daily communication there is between people: use thickness to illustrate the volume of everyday contact.

Is the structure hierarchical and 'top-down', with decisions being handed down the chain of command and reports being handed back up? Are there several levels in the hierarchy, or is it a flattened pyramid, with relatively few levels, but with a lot of people reporting to one manager or principal?

To what extent is there a sense of collegiality, of everybody working together with a common sense of purpose, irrespective of their title or position? Is there a clear communication gap between teaching and administrative staff? Does it make any sense to talk of the 'front-line' people, who are directly responsible for delivering the services you sell, and who are backed up by other staff, such as the management, in the back room?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Is management a set of skills or is it a state of mind? The conventional, hierarchical view of management is that it is something that is done by some people (managers) to other people (staff); in a school, the manager might typically be called director or principal, with some management duties assigned to a director of studies or delegated to others.

This traditional view sees management as a full-time job in its own right, which is necessarily higher in the hierarchy than the staff 'at the chalkface' whose working lives are controlled by the management's decisions. Enlightened managers may consult their staff about the decisions, but ultimately it is the managers who make and implement those decisions. However enlightened they may be, 'management' is an activity that only they engage in, while others are controlled by it.

One alternative to this traditional, hierarchical model is to take the top-down hierarchy and turn it through 90 degrees, so that instead of being at the bottom of the diagram, the 'front-line' people are at the sharp end, at the 'interface' with the customers, and other staff are behind them:
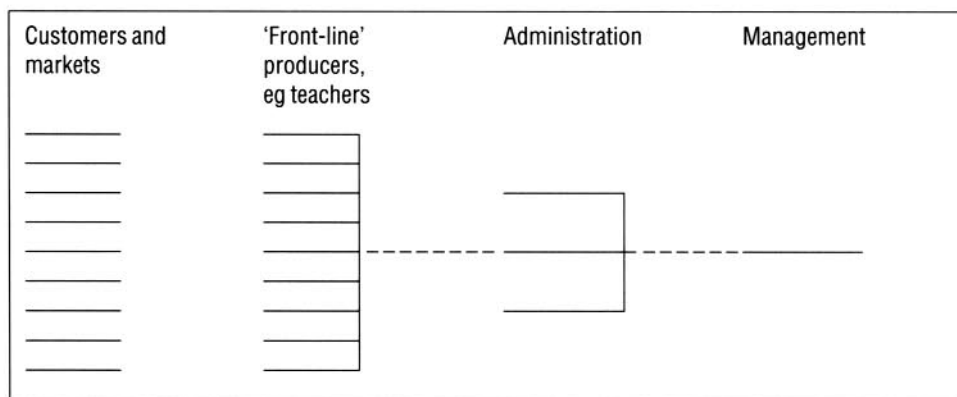

Fig 1.1: The 'front line' (after Charles 1993)

Who are the 'front-line' people in your school? Teachers, mainly, but anyone who is directly involved in delivering the services you sell and dealing with clients. Teachers, all the time; reception and other staff, part of the time; managers, scarcely at all! This produces some interesting points of view:

- It emphasizes that the 'front-line' people are really crucial in an organization, not only the managers (managers get paid more).
- It removes the hierarchy of superiority that places a manager 'above' a 'front-line' person.
- It emphasizes that although we may have different jobs we are all working to a common purpose.

So what do the 'front-line' people have to do with management? With a shared sense of purpose, and a clear sense of their own role in achieving that purpose, they *are* the management. It may not be only to the benefit of the individual teacher's professional development to ask more, know more and contribute more to the direction and management of the institution, it will ultimately be to the benefit of the organization as a whole. ■

Task 3 Are you and your colleagues 'switched on' or 'switched off'?

Which of the following profiles better characterizes your organization?

1 *Are the objectives decided*
   a by interaction with those who have to carry them out?
   b unilaterally, at board or management level?

2 *In communication with senior staff,*
   a are truthfulness and openness genuinely welcomed?
   b do you have to be careful what you say to whom?

3 *At the end of the day, are staff judged by*
   a the achievement of results consistent with the objectives set?
   b the form of company behaviour (following rules, processing paperwork, etc)?

4 *When an unpleasant or difficult decision has to be taken,*
   a is it thrashed out, at whatever cost in time and temper?
   b is it sometimes just left hanging, in the hope that 'something will turn up'?

5 *To introduce an innovation or experiment with variation of routine procedure,*
   a is there sufficient 'headroom' for an individual to try it out?
   b does the decision have to be passed upward to someone to take authority?

6 *Does the remuneration system reward*
   a the people who keep things going?
   b the golden boys or girls of the moment?

7 *Are the demands made on people*
   a sufficient to stretch them?
   b at times quite unrealistic?

(after Harvey-Jones 1988 pp 65–80)

Commentary ■ ■ ■

This is based on a distinction made by John Harvey-Jones between companies that 'switch on' their staff, and those that 'switch them off'. The **a** options, generally, switch people on: they enable staff to operate without fear or favour, to participate in the formulation of objectives and to seek the best ways to achieve them; in the process, they also gain confidence and effectiveness and enjoy high morale. The **b** options switch people off: they reward the dutiful employee who follows company procedures, plays safe rather than innovates, takes his or her cue by looking inwards rather than outwards, and at the end of the day does not feel responsible for the achievement of the objectives. ■

Task 4 The role of the teacher

> How is the role of the teachers seen in your institution? (By teachers themselves and by others.)
>
> **1** *Is the perspective of the teacher*
>   **a** limited to the immediate in time and place?
>   **b** embracing the broader social context of education?
>
> **2** *Are classroom events perceived*
>   **a** in isolation?
>   **b** in relation to the school's policies and goals?
>
> **3** *Are teachers*
>   **a** introspective with regard to methods?
>   **b** comparing methods with those of colleagues and with reports of practice?
>
> **4** *Is value placed*
>   **a** on autonomy in the classroom?
>   **b** on professional collaboration?
>
> **5** *Is there*
>   **a** limited involvement in non-teaching professional activities?
>   **b** high involvement in non-teaching professional activities?
>
> **6** *Do teachers read professional literature*
>   **a** infrequently?
>   **b** regularly?
>
> **7** *Is involvement in in-service work*
>   **a** limited and confined to practical courses?
>   **b** extensive and including courses of a theoretical nature?
>
> **8** *Is teaching seen*
>   **a** as an intuitive activity?
>   **b** as a rational activity?
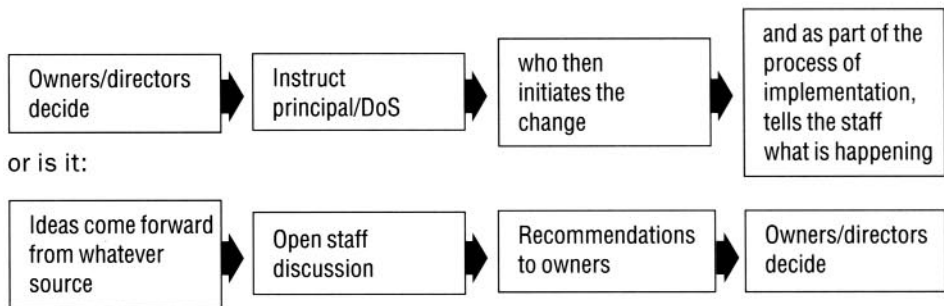
(after Hoyle 1975 p 318)

Commentary ■■■

These questions are based on a distinction between *restricted professionality* and *extended professionality*. In each case, answer **a** is characteristic of restricted professionality, while answer **b** represents extended professionality. The distinction is artificial and simplistic, but the underlying point is central to this book. It is that there is one sense of professionalism for teachers which is restricted to what happens in the classroom, where teachers have traditionally enjoyed a higher degree of independence in determining the style, and often the content, of their teaching. A wider sense of professionalism, however, would extend outside the classroom to include a greater say in the decision-making and management of the institution; as in Task 2 above, each individual would become a manager in his or her own right. To enable teaching staff to make this transition from the role typified by the **a** answers to that of the **b** answers, they will need much greater knowledge of how things work and many more opportunities to acquire and practise the necessary management skills. One purpose of this book is to enable teachers to play a more significant role in the management of the institutions where they work. ■

Task 5 Change

Think of three or four recent examples of changes that have been made – one or two major changes and one or two more minor ones. How were the decisions made in each case?

Generally, who decides what directions the school will move in? Who can participate in such decisions? How easy is it in practice for a member of staff to propose and promote an idea for genuine discussion? What is the procedure for deciding on and implementing changes, for example in the courses being offered? Is it:

| Owners/directors decide | ▶ | Instruct principal/DoS | ▶ | who then initiates the change | ▶ | and as part of the process of implementation, tells the staff what is happening |

or is it:

| Ideas come forward from whatever source | ▶ | Open staff discussion | ▶ | Recommendations to owners | ▶ | Owners/directors decide |

or is it a combination of these, or something else?

Commentary ■■■

Attitudes to change are vital to any discussion of management. The circumstances in which we live and work are constantly changing. We are continuously adapting to these changing circumstances in order to make the most of them; we try to anticipate future changes so that we can accommodate ourselves to them.

On a professional level too, we have to change in order to survive. For all language programmes, there is the constant threat that our competitors will get an edge over us, will find out how to exploit that lead successfully, and will take business away from us. It is no exaggeration to say that a large part of management is about managing change and maintaining the impetus for continuous evolution.

Examples of changing global circumstances in our field might be:

- the development of new markets as people in 'new' countries acquire the freedom and resources to travel abroad, and the desire to learn English;
- the evolution of more integrated trading blocks such as the European Community and ultimately the 'world market', with English as the principal means of business communication;
- cycles of relative prosperity in different countries and the status of the English language in each country.

At the other extreme, examples of changing local circumstances might be:

- an increased demand for one course and a drop in bookings for another;
- a sudden drop in income, requiring an urgent re-evaluation of budgets and future plans;
- changes in ministry requirements, education legislation (eg teaching of English in primary schools) or recognition criteria;
- fiscal changes (eg tax incentives for language training for company personnel).

Change, then, is not something that happens from time to time, an inconvenience that we have to put up with; it is an integral and central part of the manager's concern. As the person in the driving seat, we may be able to see things coming which our passengers cannot. The art of managing change is to keep everybody together, working in the same direction, while still responding fast enough to the changing circumstances around us.

Here are some suggestions for managing change:

1 Identify who is likely to be affected by a particular change.
2 Find out and take into account the different points of view of everybody concerned.
3 Involve everybody concerned in the discussion. You may not expect unanimity, or perhaps even seek it, but always ask for opinions.
4 Encourage people to express their worries and objections. If opposition cannot be aired, it remains a potential threat to the success of the change.
5 Talk to individuals privately about their particular concerns. See if these are hiding other, underlying issues which have not been expressed in public.
6 Within reason, spend as much time as you can at the discussion stage. Allow a group consensus to develop to push things forward. The more agreement you can achieve in advance, the greater commitment there will be to implement the change, and the faster it will happen. ■

Task 6 Who gains what from the school's activities?

Draw in lines, real or imaginary, from the people in the left-hand column to the benefits on the right. Use thickness to indicate, in your own opinion, the size of the benefit:

Who ...	... gains what?
owner(s)	learning English
principal/director	professional/personal development
staff	cultural awareness
students	money
local community	job satisfaction
parent institution (eg college or	servicing other departments/ needs
corporation)	other benefits: _____
parent institution staff	
other people: _____	

Is this a satisfactory distribution of benefits? If you could wave a magic wand, what additional benefits would you like to accrue to which people?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The aim of this task is to identify what you yourself see as the most urgent problems of human resources. It does not mean that you will necessarily be able to do anything about them immediately. However, if you have any say in the running of the organization, then knowing how you would like to spread the benefits will help you to work towards that reallocation, and to recognize opportunities to persuade others to work in the same direction. ■

2 Formulating a statement of aims

Now that you have worked through the tasks above, you should be in a better position to formulate an explicit set of aims for your institution, to answer the question 'Why are you there?' Whether you will have the authority or encouragement to do so is a different matter! Owners/directors may not consider it a necessary or worthwhile task and if you are not able to enlist their support, then clearly the exercise has less face validity. However, it can still be useful as a staff development exercise, and if it produces positive results, you can subsequently put them forward for consideration and, hopefully, adoption by the owners/directors.

The phrase 'statement of aims' is being used here in a generic sense. It is fashionable now to use the rather pompous term 'mission statement' to describe a broad outline of a company's philosophy in terms of its business, the business environment and its internal organization. A statement of aims in the sense used here might indeed include such an outline, but it would also be more specific in setting objectives, and therefore more immediately useful. Where a mission statement is essentially an abstract of why an organization exists, a statement of aims should be a more practical summary of where it is supposed to be going. It is

just as likely to fail to meet its aims as it is to fail to live up to its mission, but at least it should be easier to determine whether or not it has failed!

The statement of aims should provide the focal point to generate a sense of common purpose and direction that allows diverse groups of people to work towards a common cause. It is particularly important, where there is a large proportion of professional staff with considerable freedom in determining how to achieve the aims of the organization, to make those aims explicit and agreed, even if it seems like an exercise in stating the obvious. Often, it isn't obvious at all.

The statement of aims must therefore be a clear and concise statement about the purpose and goals of the school or institution. It should be a source of information for staff and other people, and it should provide a valuable reference point against which to check strategic proposals in areas such as marketing and employment policy. It should remain reasonably stable over time: obviously, schools need to change direction like any other business in response to changing circumstances, but you should not need to redefine your general aims every year.

Core components

Two obvious components are, firstly, that private companies will want to make explicit their *financial aim*: otherwise, they are understating their commitment to their own long-term survival, and shareholders or other investors are not going to be impressed. Secondly, organizations operating in a particular field will want to specify that field as their *zone of activity*.

The financial aim for a private company may be in the form of an explicit growth target or market share. To state that its goal is 'to maximize the return on investment' is only being honest; this is probably the real primary objective of most language schools, but our inherited attitude to education as something that shouldn't be tainted with blatantly commercial activity prevents us from saying so too loudly. Wouldn't it be better to get it out in the open?

Where an educational programme is part of a state-sector institution or a charitable trust, its financial aim will normally be to cover its full costs and allow investment for the future.

Optional components

Beyond the core components, there is a wide variety of other possible elements, and this is where you can show, for both internal and external audiences, what your real philosophy or raison d'être is. Staff welfare including remuneration, motivation and a commitment to their development, and different aspects of social responsibility, eg environmental issues, are common here.

Other possible elements are value for money; standards of service; equality of access and opportunity for staff and students; commitment to and investment in research; contribution to the local community; and co-operation with other institutions or agencies.

Tips for producing a statement of aims

IT DOESN'T MATTER what you call it – *mission, aims, objectives, purpose, philosophy* – the important point is to focus people's conscious attention on why the organization exists and where it is going.

THE PURPOSE OF AN ORGANIZATION is usually defined by its owners, and they obviously have a major say in its formulation. However:

... everybody who works there should have an opportunity to contribute to the formulation of a statement of aims.

A SERIES OF MEETINGS over a period of time will be needed to reap the benefits of this consultation.

START WITH A STAFF BRAINSTORMING SESSION, to generate a list of all the possible components that people think could be included. At this stage, any ideas should be allowed.

HAVE A BALLOT to vote on the possible components, to find out what the staff see as the most important objectives.

TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY also to ask customers whose opinions you value, such as students past or present or company clients, what they would expect to see as the institution's goals.

DEVELOP A DRAFT – a job for just one or two people! – try it out, revise it, edit it, and above all, try to shorten it without losing anything important. The fewer words, the more impact.

ABOVE ALL, BE CLEAR WHY YOU ARE DOING IT. An organization that has a clear sense of direction and purpose is more likely to survive and succeed than one that doesn't.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

- Where typically the purpose has never even been discussed, a lot of time and effort may be wasted by this lack of focus, with people pulling in different directions.
- The aims may be thought to be commonly understood, and so not need to be made explicit. However, making explicit what everybody thinks they know implicitly can be a useful exercise, and often you find that the unspoken assumptions do not in fact entirely overlap – far from it!
- The most useful part of creating a statement of aims may be the exercise itself as a team-building activity. The exact formula of words that is produced may ultimately be unimportant, if the process of producing it in itself engenders a genuine debate which in turn creates the focus that is lacking. However, if you are unable to reach agreement at all, it suggests you have some serious problems ahead!
- The owners or managers may be surprised to find that in open discussion about the goals of an organization, staff may have novel and different ideas that if adopted can stimulate the forward development of the company and its staff.
- If an institution is a state college, a charitable trust or a non-profit-making organization, there are no owners, in the usual sense, to make policy; but there is just as great a need, perhaps even greater if the immediate programme is part of a much larger institution, for a clear focus to give a sense of direction. ■