

1 out of 10: From Downing Street Vision to Classroom Reality

Peter Hyman

Introduction

Peter Hyman was a key strategist and speechwriter for Prime Minister, Tony Blair from 1994 to 2003. Whilst working at Number 10, he was Head of the Prime Minister's Communication Unit. He left this job, to take up an assistant's post at an inner city comprehensive school in Islington, which had been failing. He explores the different leadership challenges faced by a Prime Minister trying to change the country, and a headteacher trying to transform a school. The book also explores the similarities and contrasts between the big picture and the small picture, the Westminster theory and the frontline practice.

Summary

Superficially, this is a storybook, giving an outline of the goings-on behind the scenes at Number 10, and how the author managed to cope with being thrown in at the deep end at Islington Green School.

- Whilst working with Tony Blair, the author had various roles ranging from speech writing and strategic thinking, to heading up the Strategic Communications Unit at Number 10. He liaised with politicians such as Gordon Brown, Donald Dewar and Peter Mandelson, other political advisers, including Alastair Campbell, the civil service and other governmental departments.
- At school, Peter Hymen was given various roles. He participated at the Senior Management Team meetings, was part of the roster for overseeing the detention/exclusion room, participated in remedial teaching both in group and one-to-one sessions and taught full classes, as well as extra-curricular activities, on debating /public speaking skills. His skills were also used in preparing the school for Academy status

However, there are far more serious messages in the book about:

1. Leadership – what makes for good leadership, comparing that of a Prime Minister and a Head teacher
2. Change – and how to affect change, whether it be a political party or a school, the country or an individual.

As these are the main learning points, I shall concentrate on these.

1. Leadership – various qualities of good leadership were identified by the author and these included:
 - a. **Focus** – both in government and at the school, focus was seen as the way lasting legacies were created, focussing on two or three things and relentlessly driving them forward to conclusion, whatever the distractions. It was easy to be distracted by the day-to-day urgent problem-solving rather than focusing on the important agenda-setting. Gordon Brown taught the author that if you focus on an objective

relentlessly enough you achieve it. Staying focussed was one of two essences of good leadership

- b. **Good systems**, allowing consistency and replication – the second essence of good leadership – having the right systems in place to ensure the organisation can replicate and produce high standards day after day – the “consistency test”
- c. **Reflection** – there seemed to be quite a lot of time put aside for reflection in Tony Blair’s inner circle, often questioning themselves with what their mandate was for. Indeed, the author mentions Michael Barber, who ran the Delivery Unit in Whitehall, as one of the most impressive and talented people he had worked with, going on to say that he was focussed (on outcomes), authoritative and reflective.
- d. **Teamwork** – leadership is about taking people on a journey with you. Leaders need followers and good leaders will remain transparent and keep their followers well informed of what they are doing. The headteacher, Trevor, felt this was very important in his dealings with his staff. Different members of different teams performed different roles and both the Number 10 team, and the Senior Management Team at Islington Green had members performing different roles.

Other qualities of good leadership that were mentioned in the book included, networking, getting out and about, restoring and maintaining trust, humility, being oneself and authentic, being able to judge the tone, and balance various roles, the art of persuasion and inspiration.

2. Change – clearly change management needs good leadership skills; other issues to bear in mind include:
 - a. Change whilst one is still successful – in 2000, before New Labour’s 2nd victory at the polls, Peter Hyman became obsessed with renewal and quotes Charles Handy who argued that organisations should re-invent themselves while successful, just as they are coming down from their peaks, rather than waiting for a crisis before moving forward. Tony Blair, in private, apparently used to say, “we will end up suffering, not for reforming too much, but for doing too little”. Charles Darwin wrote, “it is not the strongest or cleverest species that survive, but the one most responsive to change”.
 - b. The causes of refusal / opposition to change – people will often go along with change when it is generalised or means little to them or little work for them, but when it impacts more on them, then change is harder. Those who oppose change use all kinds of excuses rather than just saying they do not agree, often not debating the issue, but instead, attacking the process. Blair said in a speech about the forces of conservatism, “what threatens the nation-state today is not change but the refusal to change”.
 - c. Teamwork – like with good leadership, to enact change good teamwork is essential. According to the “School Improvement Reports”, edited by Tony Attwood, the power to change is in the school (organisation). The

team needs a united goal, in Labours case in 1997, the will to win, and as a leader it is important to take the team with you.

Interpretation and Critique

I found this book very interesting, and in particular the similarities and differences between the two contrasting roles that Peter Hyman undertook. He started as a policy advisor to Tony Blair and then was at the receiving end of that policy, from Westminster theory to frontline practice. In so doing he recognised the similarities and differences, not only of the leadership roles of Prime Minister and Headteacher, but also how change can be affected across a country and a population, and at an individual level with one student.

The interest in the book was maintained because this was a personal journey from the corridors of power to the corridors of an inner city school. It was not a blow-by-blow account of events of the government, or its personalities, nor was it a detailed or academic analysis of educational policy. It was a personal journey, talking about day-to-day events that most readers could relate to.

I chose this book because I have always had an interest in education and politics, and this gave a very interesting insight into the worlds of both fields.

I was struck by the number of qualities of good leadership were mentioned throughout the book, and how many of them were highlighted during the course. Most, if not all are relevant to leadership in general practice – focus, systems, reflection, teamwork, networking, trust, humility, being oneself, judging tone, persuasion and inspiration. I was also struck by the number of contrasts but particularly the one between his governmental role of policies for a population and then his one-to-one work with an individual pupil called Jimmy.

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