

# Eighty years in learning and development

Old friends share contrasting perspectives on transformation and turbulence

## Peter Sheal and David McAra



**Peter** has been a supporter of the North East Scotland AMED group that **David** coordinated for a number of years in Aberdeen. He responded to our invitation for contributions to this Summer 2020 edition of e-O&P, wondering about the contrast between David's more humanistic orientation, emphasising autonomy and facilitation and his own, more training-based approach with its emphasis on practical solutions using tools/checklists etc.

How would our different attitudes inform our dialogue about contrasting approaches to management development and training? Might their similarities and differences shed any light on the place of AMED in the world of learning and development and the challenges and opportunities we are examining this summer.

Peter proposed a set of questions in hopes of finding creative tension for more interesting reading. We exchanged our written responses by email, as set out in the two-column format, below. Then we discussed them via Skype. A recording of our conversation (53 minutes) is available here: ([PeterandDavid7June2020](#)).

## Tell me a little about your career?

**David:** Oriented and inspired by Harold Wilson's, "white heat of the technological revolution" and Presbyterian guilt about the privileges of my birth. I thought the problems of the world were technical. Took me 15 years to discover my error. No regrets (well, not many): engineering studies (including irrigation. Seriously??); unregrettable jobs: Rolls Royce, Merchant Navy, Africa, Manchester Ship Canal.

Transition into learning and development through Engineering Industry Training Board (EITB). (This is more like it.) Shell, during the dismantling of the in-house training function (not core business): a traumatic setback. Effectiveness Consultants: joyful, quixotic. Petrotechnics: a near miss.



Harold Wilson in 1964. Photo: PHC Harold Wise.

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**Peter:** I was similarly inspired by Harold Wilson's 'white heat of the technological revolution' and was a Labour activist during the 1960s elections. As an English Literature graduate, I started teaching but until the 1970 election defeat kept open the possibility of a political career. Later that year, I was recruited by the British Council and taught at the University of Libya for four years and Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria for three years. I began to write textbooks for the Longman Group and joined the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in Saudi Arabia as an English language teaching advisor. Eventually, I became Head of Staff Development, responsible for teacher and trainer training, and finally moved into management training. I began to write training and staff development textbooks for Kogan Page business publishers. In 2001, I joined MDT International, an Aberdeen based company specialising in training managers and finance professionals in the international oil and gas industry. Most of our course participants come from developing countries.



## What job did you enjoy doing most and why?

**David:** 'Why' is easier than 'which'. The EITB showed me a wonderful diversity of organisations and I wrote a list headed, 'McAra's next job'. (It might have been the best piece of advice I ever received. I didn't always take it.)

Moments at EITB, Effectiveness and Petrotechnics (even at Shell) where I felt I knew what I was doing and what needed to happen and projects which contributed in significant ways to bringing it about.

Engaging with an organisation, more as an organic, rather than mechanical system, can bring about remarkable changes: dramatic improvements in performance as well as (because of) more effective and rewarding engagement of the humans involved.

**Peter:** My most enjoyable and difficult job was as head of Staff Development at a time when ARAMCO was running the largest non-governmental vocational training programme in the world.

We established a Trainer Certification for On-the-Job trainers and I organized an annual training and development conference for over 1,000 participants with guest speakers from overseas and within the company.

We believed in being up-to-date, not just in technology, but in our approaches to teaching/training/development and I learned a lot.

## What's the best piece of advice you ever received?

**David:** After an assessment centre, my feedback suggested: Don't try to run anything yourself but you can be useful to those who do. Might sound a bit limp but felt a good fit to me. (Petro was a near miss because, if I'd been more skilful at engaging with the leadership there, the outcome would have been significantly better for them and for me.)

**Peter:** My father's advice was 'Moderation in all things', apparently based on Aristotle's '[Golden Mean](#)'. I've received lots of good feedback from colleagues, courses, and assessment tools and know that I tend to be a perfectionist and, in Team Management Systems terms, an Organizer/ Producer/ Concluder.



Aristotle and his pupil, Alexander  
Engraving by Charles Laplante, 1866.  
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

## What book last changed your thinking?

**David:** This is a great question, making me think. I am disappointed that I have not been able to share, more effectively, the changes that have come about in my own thinking. The big changes came about long ago.

In Search of Excellence (1982) astonished me. I thought that ineffective organisations (and the suffering they entailed) were a fact of life. It hadn't occurred to me that people studied them and worked at improving them.

The Fifth Discipline (1990), (especially Chapter 2 describing 'The Beer Game') reinforced my developing appreciation for systems thinking.

Edgar Schein's 'Process Consulting' (1969) pointed out the tension between: short- and long-term priorities, task and process, diagnosis and prescription.

I'm embarrassed that I can't think of a book from the current millennium. I hope my thinking has changed since then but the foundations seem to have been pretty solid since the 80s and 90s. My more recent 'best reads' have reinforced and elaborated upon these foundations rather than changing them.

**Peter:** In management education, I'd agree with the influence of In Search of Excellence, the Fifth Discipline and the work of Edgar Schein. I'd add Charles Handy, Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership approach (1969) and John Naisbitt's *Megatrends* (1982) with its emphasis on high tech/high touch. We've clearly followed high tech but generally neglected 'high touch'.



"An expert is not someone who gives you the answer, it is someone who asks you the right question." ~ Eliyahu M. Goldratt

Image: [Eliyahu M Goldratt](#), Fair use, Wikipedia



"The most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st century will not occur because of technology but because of an expanding concept of what it means to be human." ~ John Naisbitt

Image: [Global Leadership TV](#)



## In terms of management education, what have been your key lessons learned?

**David:** Oh dear! Nothing profound here.

Telling people stuff isn't an effective way of helping them to understand it. (Originally learnt in late 80s via Eli Goldratt's 'Theory of Constraints' (1984): beautifully constructed approach to bringing about change.)

Working on the parts, without an appreciation of the whole system has a detrimental effect. Corollary, helping an organisation discover an appreciation for itself as a system transforms it.

Theory Y leads to better outcomes than Theory X (McGregor, 1960), for shareholders, employees and customers (as does giving these priorities in the reverse order).

Culture is the determining factor and changing culture is all but impossible.

It helps to try to be honest about what you're thinking and feeling.

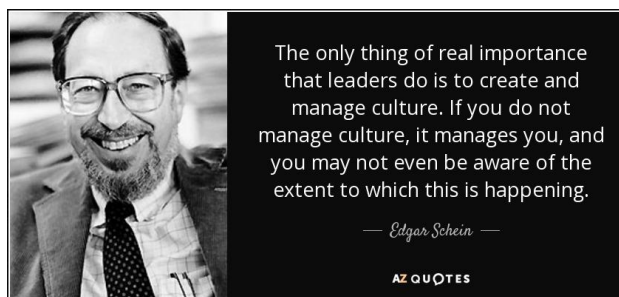
My enduring affection for [AMED](#) is that it seems to attract knowledgeable people who recognise the limitations of their own understanding. They are always curious and have no idea where the next insight is coming from.

So the culture is open, curious and respectful. I wouldn't say there is zero dogma. Everyone is susceptible to a failure in listening but we remain alert to the dangers. So members are generally more interested in knowing what others are thinking than in pontificating and persuading.

**Peter:** I agree that in management style, Theory Y tends to be more productive, but X is more appropriate in crisis situations e.g. in the early stages of the current coronavirus situation when, unlike Asian societies, we were reluctant and slow to Lockdown.

Generally, I agree that working on the parts without an appreciation of the whole system tends to be ineffective and sometimes detrimental. A holistic approach is preferable to just tinkering with a system, which can lead to unintended consequences.

However, I disagree that changing culture is all but impossible. I grew up in the 1950's on the outskirts of Manchester and have seen radical changes in British culture – from a collectivist, disciplined society which deferred gratification to a more individualistic, less disciplined society which encourages speedy gratification. In the oil and gas industry I've also seen cultural change. In the 1980s, many of the American and British managers had a military service background and a 'command and control' approach. By the 1990s, management training and development together with changes in society led to a more flexible situational approach.



[AZ Quotes](#)

## What's currently bugging you?

**David:** Looking outwards: What are the business schools doing? Why is the outdated, command and control paradigm still so embedded? Systems thinkers don't have an answer to the concentration and misuse of power.

Looking inwards: I think it may be time to stop, let go and try something different.

**Peter:** When I teach leadership and management courses, I like to give good examples like Nelson Mandela, Alex Ferguson, Martin Luther King etc. Yet increasingly, we see bad examples - narcissistic leaders who succeed despite corruption and personal scandals. I wonder if we should focus more on Machiavelli's pragmatic approach of [virtu](#) – a pagan resolve to 'do whatever may be necessary' to succeed. Don't think I'd like to teach that though.

## Is there a particularly Scottish perspective on management education?

**David:** I was a surprise 'Yes' voter in the independence referendum. I am not a supporter of independence but of interdependence. The Scottish Parliament was created with consensus in mind, unlike the adversarial Westminster system. Given my scepticism about the prospects of bringing about change, I am more hopeful about starting from scratch.

The Scottish Government is supporting some creative approaches to management education. This is the best encouragement I've seen for hope in a change in organisational culture.

**Peter:** I agree that the Scottish Parliament is less adversarial than Westminster and generally Scotland is a more collectivist society and open to collaborative approaches in business and industry.

In the 2014 Independence referendum, I was a firm unionist and campaigned for a 'No Vote'. Since 2014 and the Brexit debacle, the political case for independence has grown stronger but with the collapse in oil prices, the economic case has virtually disappeared. Currently through the [1978 Barnett Formula](#), Scotland enjoys an annual government spending subsidy of £1,900 per head. Independence would bring a loss of jobs, drastic austerity and maybe a 'lost generation'. I wouldn't want to inflict that on Scotland's young people.

## What do 'turbulent times' mean for Scotland and the oil and gas industry?

**David:** 'Turbulence' doesn't add much to the conversation for me. It has been our way of life since the industrial revolution and the oil industry specialises in it. Even though it has to invest with decades in mind, the fluctuations of the oil price keep it trapped in a culture of short-termism.

As a manifestation of what it means to have an

**Peter:** I've lived in Aberdeenshire and worked in the international oil and gas industry for the past forty years. Historically, the industry has always been subject to 'boom and bust' cycles and I well remember previous collapses in the oil price and redundancies during the 1980s and 90s.

When I was teaching management courses in the

unsustainable lifestyle, the present crisis is probably causing some reflection but I'm still not very optimistic. Some of the power may be leaking away from the oil industry but its concentration in the tech giants doesn't seem to offer much encouragement.



[Hanze Platform](#) (2003) [Stan Shebs](#), Wikimedia Commons

late 90s and early 2000s, participants often worried about working in a 'sunset industry'.

Of course, the industry recovered and in 2014, the SNP (Scottish National Party) based their economic case for Scottish independence on a North Sea oil price of over \$100 a barrel. The current crisis however is not just about price – the industry has to some extent been demonized and greener alternatives to fossil fuels have become well established.

By 2040, world energy consumption is expected to increase by 25%, largely driven by China and India. Yet the use of fossil fuels – coal, gas, and oil – is estimated to diminish from 85% now to 75% of world energy needs in 2040. I think that last figure is an over-estimate and companies will struggle to survive, unless they change significantly and leaders are prepared to go beyond 'business as usual'.

### What do our turbulent times mean for management and management education?

**David:** The ability of organisations to change can some-times creep above zero in a crisis. Organisation Development (*real* OD) sounds pretty whacky to British managers. Our best work at Effectiveness was for clients at their wits end. They'd tried everything and thought they might as well give us a try.

My last employer, on the other hand, cottoned onto the '[agile methodology](#)' (2001) with gusto but without ever understanding what it really offered. It could have saved them but they lost over £15M and had to sell out.

**Peter:** Maslow pointed out that '[if you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail](#)' (1966). One style or technique can only be successful with a limited number of problems and situations.

Managers need to be more flexible or 'agile' (the current fashionable word) to manage changing situations. They need to be more skilled with different approaches and tools and one of the key tasks of management training is to give managers practice and confidence in using this variety of approaches and tools.

## Have you got some optimistic things to say about the 'turbulence' and management education/training?

**David:** I am neither particularly optimistic nor completely without hope.

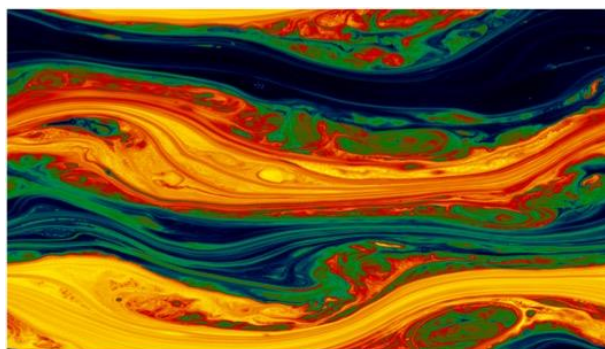
At Effectiveness, we worked with lots of teams using intensive, week-long, experiential workshops. In preparation, it was important to warn the senior people involved that they would come under some kind of attack from one or more of the group, probably on Tuesday afternoon or Wednesday morning. It was that predictable and quite independent of the personalities involved.

The foundation for hope is here: the emergence of conflict in a group tells you that you are getting somewhere. You are ready to start telling the truth as you see it and addressing important work. The curb on my optimism is that our culture is so averse to conflict that we will avoid it at all costs, unless the stakes are very high ... and sometimes even then.

There is hope from systems thinking too. Most of our problems arise from the way we think. Changing the way we think is extremely difficult but it doesn't involve enormous (or usually any) capital cost.

**Peter:** For me, grounds for optimism during the current Covid/Brexit turbulence include: the expansion of online learning, the resilience and desire to learn that people have found in themselves during the pandemic, and some signs of a reaction to the confident simplicities of populism.

Change arises out of feeling uncomfortable or threatened in the present situation, and the metaphor of escaping from a 'burning platform' is used in the oil industry. Decisions were made in 2016 and I hope we can learn the right lessons from the consequences of those.



[Dialogue of regimes](#), [Giannandrea Inchingolo](#), (2018).  
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## Reflections after our conversation

**David:** I was reminded of my habitual tendency to see the world in binary terms. You either 'get' systems or you don't. You subscribe to Theory X or Theory Y. You're for training or for learning. These simplistic distinctions can be so disabling in the complexity of real life turbulence.

**Peter:** 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,' W.B. Yeats, the Nobel prize winning Irish poet, wrote a hundred years ago in his poem, 'The Second Coming'. We live in a similar time of turbulence where individuals and organizations often struggle to find their bearings.



Our careers which started in the late 1960s, are coming to a close after four turbulent decades and the previous half century wasn't exactly tranquil. Any early misapprehensions about the relentless forward march of progress by now have been comprehensively overturned but we agreed that society is very different today and many of the differences are for the better.

Our grounds for sustained hope rest mainly in human creativity and our greater connectedness and access to knowledge but we both remain anxious about the immediate and mid term future.



Like David, I was a believer in the 'relentless forward march of progress' until that comforting belief came up against the realities of Gaddafi's Libya, wholesale corruption in Nigeria and the lack of progress in the Middle East. We have a tremendous amount of evidence and information (lessons learned) about what works and what doesn't but many of our leaders/managers don't seem to have the time or self-discipline to learn from it. 'Unconscious incompetence' and a desire to 'wing it' too often seem to prevail.

Later in 'The Second Coming' Yeats wrote that:

*'The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity'.*

We need to regain our confidence and be more proactive in responding to the populism of 'gut feelings', simple three- or four-word slogans, and organizational BS.

William Butler Yeats by George Charles Beresford (1911)  
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## Acknowledgements

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# A note about AMED



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk). We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk), or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: [amedoffice@amed.org.uk](mailto:amedoffice@amed.org.uk), T: 0300 365 1247