

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

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[about us](#)

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[back page](#)

## Yesterday: the deadline for management change

**With sport, leisure and culture sector facing challenges from austerity, technology and changing social attitudes, the Commissioner argues that traditional concepts of leisure management have become redundant. The time has come to embrace the roles of idea managers and production managers to transform our sector and its chances of survival.**

The term 'systems thinking' came about many years ago and was advanced by in the 1940s. Systems thinking is often used as a catch-all term to discuss how interrelated parts cooperate in processes that achieve measurable outputs and outcomes.

It is, of course, evident that some things rely on other things to produce stuff. During my many visits to higher education institutions I can recall doing production theory and lean systems with the 'management speak' I encountered including: MBO, active learning (Kolb), hierarchy theories, TQM, product control, project and programme management, Taylorism, LEAN, and Six Sigma; the list goes on.

During my many years working in and around the sport, leisure and culture sector that so many, including me, are so passionate about, I have met individuals that apply their knowledge and experience, which has often been gained by attending higher education courses and peer learning sets. These people tend to understand the differences between the various management terms and tactics. They can differentiate between project and programme management, and understand the systems at play. However, it is a surprise to me that these individuals are few in number and unfortunately an increasing minority. I tend to get on with these people because they think like I do: they understand the 'big picture'. My Myers Briggs type is ENTP so I like big-picture thinking.

The big picture is often lost on day-to-day managers, those stuck in the cycle of shift work and opening/closing centres on a daily basis. They simply do not have the head space –the thinking and planning room – to do things differently. Those who 'get' the big picture are the ones generating outcomes, which they are measuring, communicating and joining up. They understand the multiple systems at play and how these produce synchronised systems working.

I have also come across people who do not get it. These individuals follow a path that has no destination, reproducing a photocopy of previous year's performance, balancing the bottom line and remaining safe in the knowledge that they are just doing enough to keep their head above water. Often these people are lacking the vision and communication skills that enable them to sell the story and to take people with them. Goldbrickers. Back in the 1910s, the days of Taylorism and the analysis of workflows, goldbricking was a term used to refer to those that bring about disruption to flow and act as blockers to production; often they are people who do the bare minimum.

Some of these people appeared as an organisation leader or manager by growing up from a pool attendant or, more likely in current times, a gym instructor. They grew out of shorts into trousers or skirt but never really grew an understanding of the wider strategic drivers for change. I am certainly not saying that these individuals do not deserve promotion.

**“The concept of four-walled facilities is redundant. These facilities will not survive the next round of customers who shape-shift according to their social networks, which are often here today and gone tomorrow.”**

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What I am saying is they have not undertaken the many forms of management and leadership training or developed a wide range of experience to inform their decision-making process. Just because they happened to be a good 'poolie' or 'gym bunny' does not make them a manager or leader.

What I think I am saying is this: many people have been promoted from within during a time when the majority of organisations are simply chasing a bottom line; a time when the customer is seen as a cash cow; a time when programming has simply matched the next best thing to fall off a Californian guru's idea ladder (think Phiten or dumbbell utensils). I'm not sure the sector needs this type of management any longer. In fact, I think it is a massive risk.

I believe we need a mix of production managers and idea managers.

Industry has evolved. Not too long ago we were faced with an industrial revolution that finished off many organisations because they could not keep up with technological progress or successfully manage change. They failed to adapt. Managers could not see further than the edge of their desk or their closed office door. Their organisations were wound up and probably taken over by others who were quicker to adopt new ideas and improved methods of working.

We have since seen the emergence of the information technology age. Who can recall the first time they used a computer in their office? It had a 'nuclear green' glowing screen and MS-DOS, 8MB of memory and a 51/4 floppy disk drive that took an age to spin through its search cycle. I am showing my age but at home I had a VIC-20 with a Datasette, the first personal (home) computer to sell one million units! Feel free to Google it.

The point is that whether we like it or not we have changed rapidly and we need to think and act differently. We need people who operate and think outside the box that this sector has built for itself. The concept of four-walled facilities is redundant. These facilities will not survive the next round of customers who shape-shift according to their social networks, which are often here today and gone tomorrow.

This is where the idea manager and the production manager come in.

For idea managers, think Disney Visionaires. Ideas are one part of the solution process but getting ideas into practice is a whole different ball game. Idea managers are those that live in a dark and padded room, or perhaps a shed. They are the ones others leave to get on with inventions and devising solutions, someone like Trevor Baylis. International blue-chip organisations put only the best of their best on idea generation. And that is all they do: generate ideas. They also pay these people well so they do not leave and they provide them with all the luxuries and play things you could ever want – think Google Inc.

Idea managers then hand over to production managers. Production managers know what it is they are responsible for producing. Maybe it is a product, a thing, an item; something tangible, measurable. It could be a service or a specific output or utility; something that is useful and serves a purpose.

We need production managers in the sport and leisure sector. Why? Production is a process of combining various material/immaterial inputs (plans, know-how) in order to make something for consumption (the output). It is the act of creating an output, goods or service which has value and contributes to the utility of individuals.

A production manager understands the various stages of production. They understand the concepts of the division of labour' and 'just in time'. They get the idea that what is produced serves to satisfy need.

The dawn of capitalism shaped markets to serve wants and generate profit but a production manager can string a racquet to suit the many serves aimed at a shift-shaping public. They can call upon many theories, which they have learned about and applied in practice to develop experience, to enable them to generate the goods required. On time. Every time. We need owners of outputs. We need people who can apply theory as well as experience-led knowledge of what works under different environmental conditions.

This means we require a learned, as well as an experienced, workforce; one that is competent and fit for practice; one that has standards and can prove it. After all, if we only rely on those who grew from shorts to trouser and skirts we will never achieve the change we really seek. As Mahatma Ghandi said, "We must become the change we seek."

With the emergence of new technology has come the concept of game theory. This is the concept of a homogenous group working together in a social environment, whether virtual or real, to achieve a personal or collective output that enables people to celebrate success. Competition reigns in the game theory universe and comes in many forms. Physical activity is probably the best example of where performance achieves the greatest accolade or the celebration of failure; by way of example look at Strava, Endomondo, RunKeeper and the like. All these have grown from an online community where game theory, or 'gamification', has become the norm.

Technology is ruling our lives and yet our sector does not use the mass of data it generates to develop information that can be used to respond to and shape programming to match need. Inspired operators would be using this data to drive their business forward, not hold it back.

My long-held belief is that unless we adopt a production analogy for much of what we do we will never deliver solutions to address people's needs. We need idea managers able to generate interventions based on evidence and need, which are then handed over to production managers who understand how to deliver something fit for purpose. Keeping pace with innovation – hitting customer inboxes, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, SMS message box and Bluetooth- and WiFi-enabled device – is essential and without it we may as well pack up now and turn off the lights.

It is my belief that we need to remove the goldbrickers who are holding this sector back. These people are probably more prevalent than we would like to admit in a sector that requires leadership and innovation before it is reduced to a piecemeal side order that no one really wants responsibility for, or ownership of. We need to take a whole-systems approach and apply idea generation and production theories before the next wave of austerity hits. And one thing is for sure: the current process of cost-cutting is not over; we have not even scratched the surface. Change is required.

Yesterday.

**The Commissioner is a senior health improvement specialist with extensive experience of the sport, leisure and culture environment.**

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