

# Why tampering will not work in schools or football



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**I**NCREASINGLY education and football are being run on the same lines: the constant analysis of performance and the basing of judgements on year to year indicators or even last week's results. When there is a dip we react - usually by changing the leadership.

The reality with Newcastle United is that the 'statistical average' (mid table obscurity) has remained generally constant over the last 20 years.

One of the biggest influences on managerial theory is Edward Deming, the American who was awarded Japan's highest honour for transforming Japanese industry after the war. I first came across him in 1993 when he published his final book, 'The New Economics'. Deming argued that we tend to tamper with organisational improvement rather than address the underlying causes of poor performance.

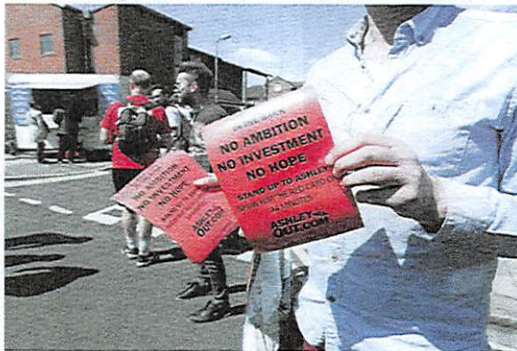
Deming would say that 94% of the problems at NUFC and in education are due to the underlying systems in the organisations. The 'special causes', such as the recruitment of a world class manager or headteacher, have a limited influence on results.

The trouble is that we tend to focus on the 'special reasons' when clubs and schools go up and down the league in a season. "It's the board, the boss, the referee, Ofsted". Of course 'special reasons' such as the recruitment of a world-class manager will influence the league position but essentially variations in performance are inherently part of the total system, which in the end will lead to mid table obscurity.

We also examine and comment on all variations in performance - up or down. This is generally a waste of time and effort. All we are observing is normal variation. If we were to plot club or school league positions over the last 10 years there are only a couple of times when we should get really excited, which is when we enter the top four or get relegated.

So this year if clubs and schools end up in the bottom half - still 'mid table obscurity' - we will put it down to a special cause - for example the management or staff or player recruitment. If we end up a little higher, we will put the position down to the same reasons.

This is because we fail to address



► Will tampering do any good in football or in schools?

the underlying cause which is the total system on which football and education is based (governance, finance, staffing policy, customer relations etc) and instead, we tend to tamper with the system.

Imagine you are firing at a rifle range. Your bullet just misses the centre of the bull. What do you do? You keep moving the rifle, reacting to where the last bullet landed.

Answer 1: Your bullet is one inch to the right. Aim one inch to the left of your first shooting position to compensate. (We do the opposite of what we have been doing for many years)

Answer 2: Your bullet is one inch to the right. Aim one inch to the left from the last bullet hole. (We keep the policy but make some adjustments)

Answer 3: Your bullet is one inch to the right. You are pleased so you aim for that particular position again. (We base our strategy on 'what worked the last time')

This is tampering. These responses are common at Newcastle United and in the world of education.

The simple conclusion is we would have been more likely to hit the target if we didn't move the position of the gun. Quite simply doing nothing may be more effective... if you've not taken the time to get to the bottom of the root cause of the problem.

I have heard clubs and schools say one of the reasons for their poor performance is the inability to recruit good players or teachers.

This may be so but here we go again blaming the whole of the problem on isolated 'special' reasons.

The problem with this answer is that it diverts us from examining the underlying problems and not asking critical questions of the system.

So the football club asks:

Do our values and principles attract players?

How effective is the scouting system?

How attractive are our salaries? How effective is the medical screening and physiotherapy system?

How effectively do we put in systems to cover for the possible loss of our best players?

What is our youth policy which will provide a constant feed of new, young players?

We can apply this thinking to education.

A school has poor mathematics results. The blame will be clearly placed at the management of the individual school and it will be stressed that this is a problem unique to the school. This then allows all of us to avoid questioning the underlying problems in the education system which has led to this situation. So the following questions are asked:

Are the values and principles inherent within the UK education system attractive to potential teachers?

How effective is the national recruitment policy for mathematics teachers?

Do the salaries compare well with industry?

How effectively does the UK screen potential and induct mathematics teachers to ensure they are fit for purpose?

How effective is the inspection regime in encouraging the growth of mathematics teaching?

How good is the education of maths graduates at university?

For too long we have been tampering with education. In fact I would describe it as 'kludging', or tampering on a mass scale. Addressing the limitations of the whole system will take time and effort backed by serious research. However it must be done.

Les Walton CBE, Chair of the Northern Education Trust.