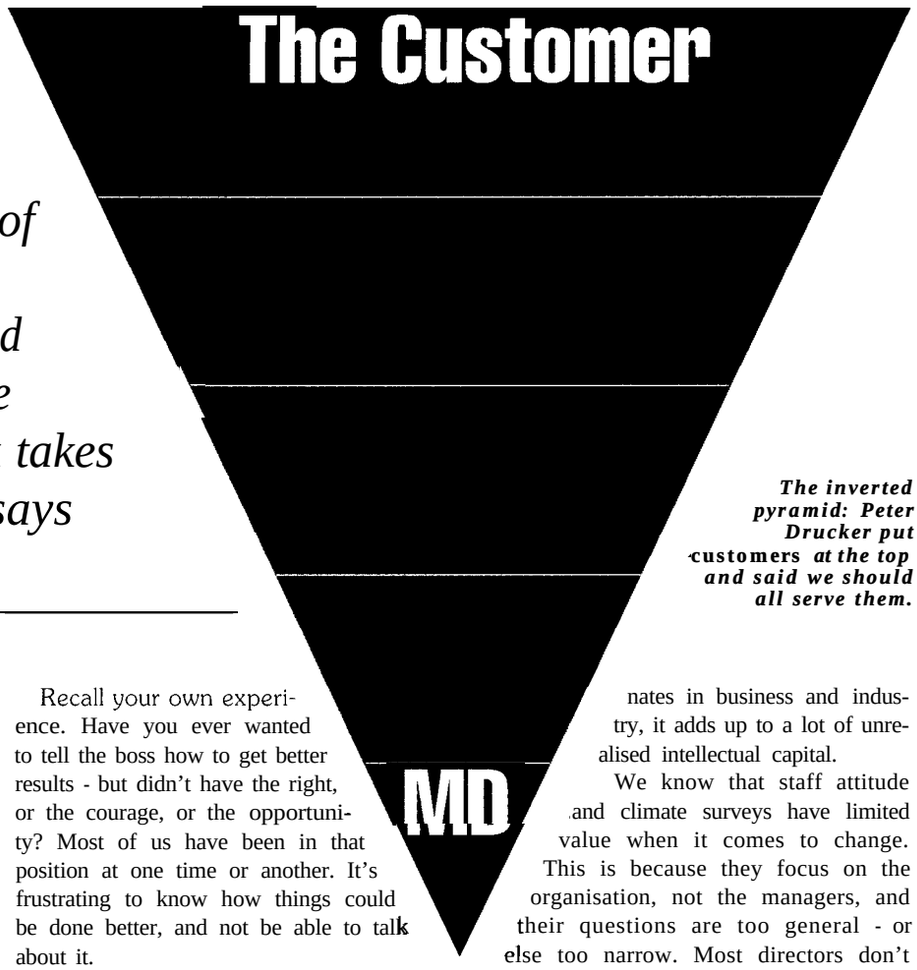
What Karpin forgot

Peter Farey's study of 50 years of research led to the development of his Leader/Manager Map as a tool of Upward Feedback. In light of the Karpin Report, his work takes on added importance, says Dr Ronald Forbes.*



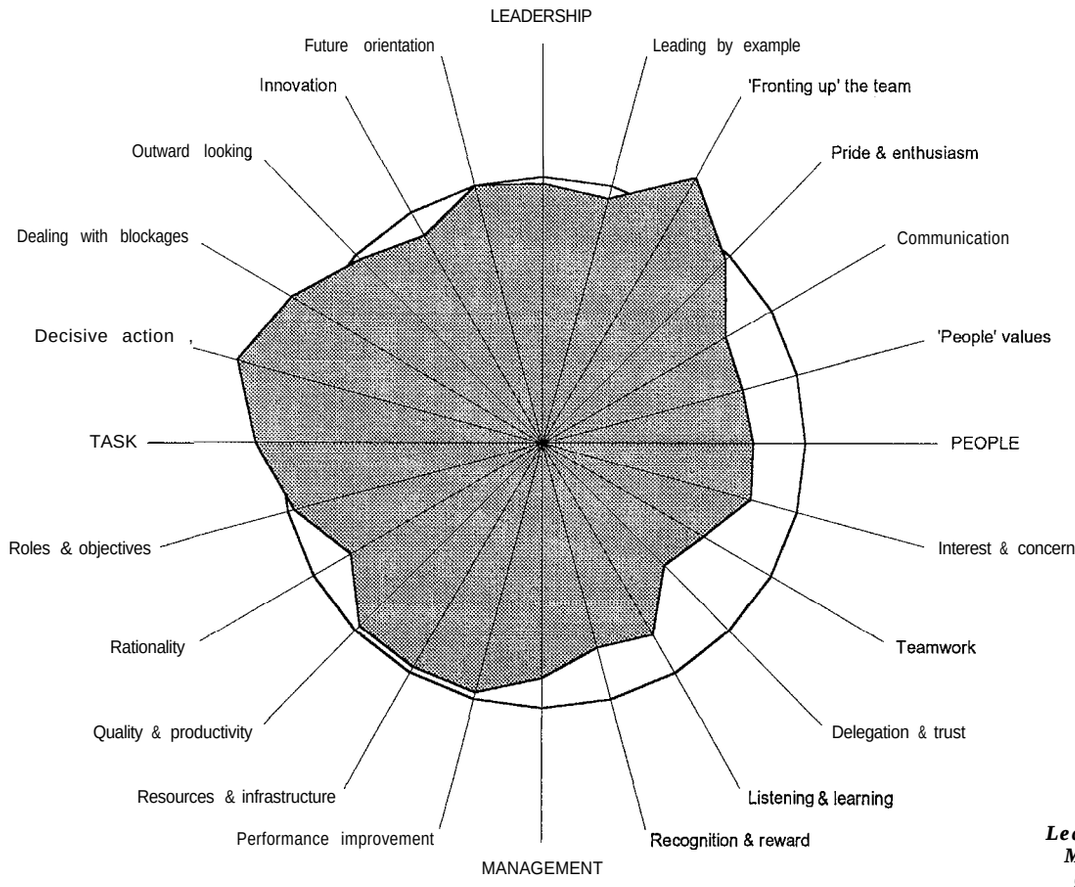
The inverted pyramid: Peter Drucker put customers at the top and said we should all serve them.

It is increasingly recognised that the keys to organisational performance today - productivity, profitability, sustainability - lie as much in the know-how of the workforce as in that of management. The recently released Karpin Report, Enterprising Nation, brings home the point that Australian managers are losing out through lack of communication and participation with their teams. The competitive edge lies in utilising everyone's know-how.

Recall your own experience. Have you ever wanted to tell the boss how to get better results - but didn't have the right, or the courage, or the opportunity? Most of us have been in that position at one time or another. It's frustrating to know how things could be done better, and not be able to talk about it.

If you take account of all the suggestions locked away in the minds of subordinates in business and industry, it adds up to a lot of unrealised intellectual capital.

We know that staff attitude and climate surveys have limited value when it comes to change. This is because they focus on the organisation, not the managers, and their questions are too general - or else too narrow. Most directors don't walk the shop floor to find out for themselves, even though there is a strong ▶



Peter Farey's Leader/Manager Mao: Its shave gives a bird's-eye view of the team's perceptions.

case to suggest that perhaps more of them should. But if they are to make "high quality" decisions about control and direction then, just like their managers, they rely on those reporting to them to know what is really going on. They must have access to full information on how the company is operating. Information from the shop floor must continuously flow to the top - and one route should be via supervisors and managers. However, this can never happen if upward feedback is blocked.

The pyramid upside down

When Peter Drucker turned the organisational pyramid on its head, put the customers at the top and said that we all must serve them, the surveying of customers became a critical issue. Organisations moved through three stages. The first was: No complaints? It must be OK. The second stage: Was it OK? Give us your general impressions. The third: What specifically do you most want from our department, and how well are we doing it?

In today's organisation, we recognise that the role of a manager is to serve the people who report to him or her. We have come to accept that there is a chain of support leading fromfrontline staff right down to the managing director. What organisations have been much slower to realise is that the same kind of detailed and accurate surveying is required at every level.

Information from the shop floor must continuously flow to the top - and one route should be via supervisors and managers. This can never happen if upward feedback is blocked.

Feedback to the manager

Peter Farey, as a senior manager with British Airways, introduced a process of getting managers to receive feedback from the teams they led. He had already gained credibility by introducing the technique in 1973 at the Air Transport Staff College in the UK.

His investigation of the research suggested that most attempts to measure the ways managers behave are concerned with task management versus people management (two of the most popular instruments have been the Managerial Grid and Hersey & Blanchard's Situational Leadership).

On the other hand, the leadership dimension was more clearly defined by the behaviours of transforming or transacting (improving).

By allowing for the possibility that a manager must behave at times in each of ▶

these four areas, Peter Farey created his Leader/Manager Map, in which:

Managers are characterised by the relative emphasis on task and relationship.

Leaders are characterised by the relative emphasis on transformation and improvement

The sequence of 100 behaviours combine to make up 20 dimensions which are plotted on the map. Its shape gives a bird's-eye view of the team's perceptions.

With this instrument, a subordinate can give feedback on a boss's behaviour with a high degree of precision. For instance, within the 'Outward Looking' dimension of People Leadership there are five questions, such as 'Awareness of the business world 'outside". Each person indicates their view that the boss should be doing either 'more', 'less' or 'as now'. The questionnaires are computer-processed to produce a map, together with graphs of the individual responses.

Giving the feedback

Detailed as the questions may be, the feedback still demands clarification: "What did you mean when you said I was too much focused on the business world outside? What did I do that gave you that impression?"

To obtain a valid response, the process must continue to be confidential. If the manager agrees to go further (and they almost always want to), a dialogue begins between manager and team that leads to the breaking down of barriers of fear, misunderstanding and frustration. The outcome of the process is not necessarily all change for the manager.

It may be change also for the team. In our example, the team may be unaware of the need for strong focus on the outside business world. However, the manager may be unaware of team needs that are being neglected in favour of this outside focus. Or the team may have to learn how to meet these needs itself.

While the Leader/Manager Map does not set out to measure competencies, it does include behaviour in all of the areas (and more) that good competency models for managers currently measure (excluding some very industry-specific details). Since it is used as a tool of management development, it must lead to development of competencies - specifically the ones required by the manager in managing their team in their company.

As well as providing the dialogue that brings team and manager together, the process leads to action plans for all involved. In general, well functioning teams place less day-to-day requirements on their managers and thus allow the managers to get on with the most important part of their role - planning the future, charting the course, and linking with customers and other managers.

> When directors begin the process they give it the greatest chance of success; they lead the new positive culture of openness and support for those higher up on the inverted pyramid.

An unexpected spin-off from the process is that once the team starts talking about the issues, they open up new areas of communication for themselves and begin their own process of discussion and feedback to their customers.

Two other perceptions are added to the team's upward feedback: a self-assessment, and an assessment from the next manager up. While we continue to operate on the myth that managers are the best ones to tell their subordinates how to improve, Peter Farey's research over more than two decades has convinced him that it is the team's feedback that is the most effective.

Neither peer groups nor more senior managers can ever know what it is like at the coal face. Nevertheless, it is obviously important to deal with your boss's perceptions, and there is generally some clarifying to do there also.

The process

The process of Upward Feedback as developed by Peter Farey involves facilitated dialogues and meetings and coaching/counselling as required. Often managers approaching the process feel distinct apprehension - what are they going to hear? Will they be criticised? Will it weaken their position with their staff, or in the organisation?

One factor that makes the experience easier for them is that the process has begun (as is usual) at a very senior level. Their boss has already taken the step of getting their confidential feedback and has talked it through with them. He or she has listened to honest feedback. They then feel supported in taking the risk themselves.

It follows that when the directors begin the process, they give it the greatest chance of success; they lead the new positive culture of openness and support for those higher up on the inverted pyramid.

The process, just now beginning in Australia has been very successful in the UK. It has found application in organisations including broadcasting, electricity, insurance, information technology, food manufacturing, retail industries and government.

For those organisations now moving towards semi-autonomous or self-managing teams, Upward Feedback can be the 'soft' path. Many organisations have plunged into self-managment ("from July 1. you won't have a manager") with varying consequences. In contrast, Upward Feedback can offer a smooth transition in which the team divests itself of management requirements step by step, while the manager is freed to take on the essential strategic and linking roles.

Directors who take up Karpin's challenge will want a fast and effective means of management development that creates a positive culture and directly supports the enterprise strategy as it applies to each level and team.

Managing as they must from the bottom of the inverted pyramid, they will feel more confident of their information and decision-making when Upward Feedback is 'closing the loop' between them and the workplace.

Dr Ron Forbes is a managing partner of the Leaderskill Group, a consulting and training organisation. He has led the organisation since 1978 and developed it to the point where it has become an integrated consulting company able to take the client enterprise through the full process of organisational transformation. Leaderskill pioneered the application of Accelerative Learning and other innovative approaches to empowerment and continuous improvement.