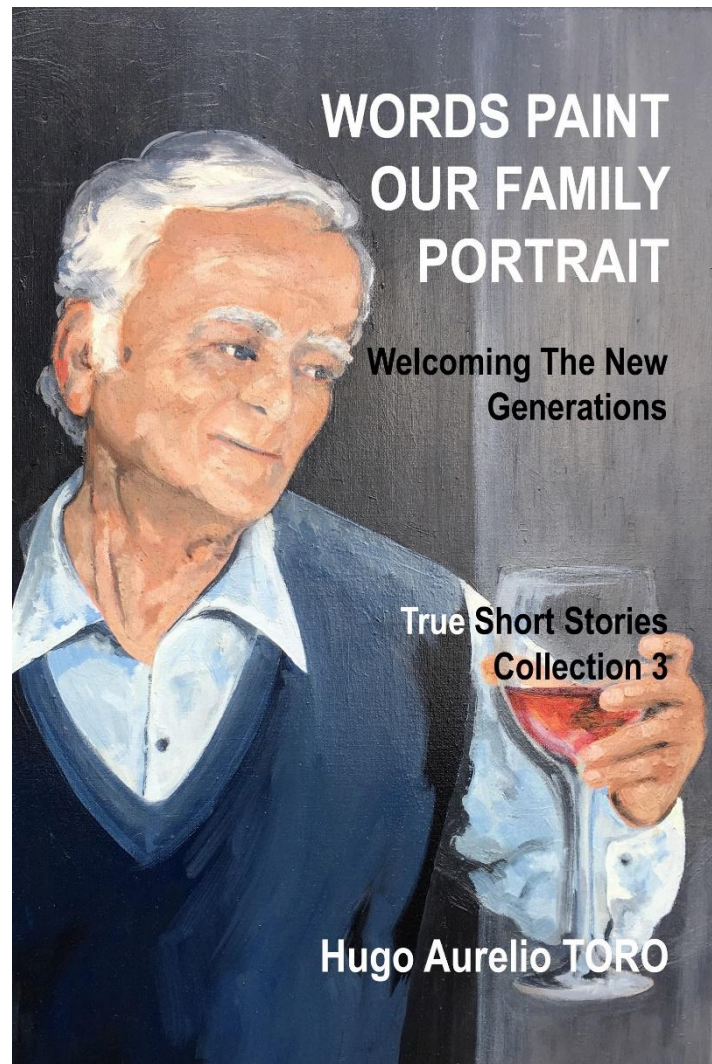


A short story from this collection.



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3.2) The Middle Manager

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro

Remember the sports person, Steven Bradbury? In 2002 he gave us the gift of an incredible sporting achievement. In the Winter Olympics, he was not the fastest or even the best skater, but he won gold for Australia regardless. What was his magic? It was ten years of training and dedication followed by one minute of good luck. Those ahead of him in the race, jostled and tumbled over before the finish line. I took inspiration from that sporting lesson and saw parallels with my own public service career.

I was an older and more experienced worker in my mid-forties. I had the knowledge and confidence to read the requirements of the role well, and to design my own job for better results. A good middle manager should never wait for someone else to tell them how to do their job. More importantly, I came with a 'can do' attitude, that is not to be underestimated.

I was not the 'best' middle manager, who had a clear path to the executive or had leadership ambitions. Yet, like Bradbury, my run was steady and strong. My work included experience as a young public servant followed by five years of consulting work with PricewaterhouseCoopers. You cannot get better training than that. I was ready to re-join the Australian Public Service, holding a huge respect for its work and its contribution to society.

My heart was there, and the long race commenced rather unexpectedly.

Striving To Be Effective

In 2005, a job became available in the Department of Agriculture. It was a middle management role with a technology angle. Gary, a good friend, who was a manager there, alerted me to the vacancy. It matched my skills, and I was grateful for his thoughtfulness.

The job was with the Natural Heritage Trust 2 (NHT2). The money for the trust came from the sale of Telstra. The program is providing grants totalling \$3.4 billion.

On commencement in my new role, our senior manager called me to his office to impart his frustrations. Our team collected the yearly statistics, from the regions and Australia wide. The program's annual reporting data was unreliable and inconsistent. He was ready to give up on the regional bodies. According to him, the network was rife with distrust and conflicting interests. It was my responsibility to improve annual reporting, and to boost cooperation through a yearly meeting with State representatives and their regional contacts. I welcomed the challenge and threw myself keenly into the task.

On the starter's gun, I hired Lisa, a professional environment facilitator from one of the regions. I deliberately chose a non-public servant. My reasoning was that a regional person will be closer to the issues on the ground. Lisa was instantly trusted by the network. I was there with her to answer questions in person.

With dynamic Lisa on my team, the meetings (which were hosted in the states), begun to generate goodwill and enthusiasm. There was open communication and a willingness

to participate by all involved. Reporting to the federal government improved with each year that passed.

My job had two sides, the exhilarating networking, and the less glamorous financial reconciliation. Others run for cover at the mention of ‘reconciliation,’ yet I was comfortable reviewing all the NHT2 grants on a massive spreadsheet.

One project was causing discomfort, like a pebble in a shoe. It was a nine-million-dollar project that had stalled. The money was granted to the Tasmanian Government by Minister Turnbull to clean up the King River. That is the site of Australia’s worst environmental disaster. Acid and minerals leak into the river continuously from closed copper and gold mines on Mount Lyell near Queenstown. The pollution of the river has been occurring since the 1880s.

I called the project manager in Tasmania, a conversation being more effective than emails, and I’m informed that they were waiting on technology from the CSIRO (Australia’s national science agency). He provided me with a contact number. I called and asked about this mysterious technology that will extract acid and mine waste from the river. The scientist on the phone was amused by my question.

‘There is no such technology, and any development of that kind would be unlikely for many years, if at all,’ he said in a finite tone. I wondered, why this question was not asked before handing over taxpayer’s money.

My senior manager was surprised with the wasteful grant. We agreed that we can’t recall the money since, that will embarrass the Minister. On the other hand, we can’t let the project sit idle. Our only recourse was to claim the interest earned from our grant.

A Pube* At university

In the 2000s, I worked full time and studied at night to complete my qualifications at the University of Canberra.

The young students appreciated my no-nonsense attitude towards learning, so they were keen to have me join their study groups. On the group assignments, I took on a lead role with my multi-nation study buddies. This was partly selfish because I wanted to do well and partly altruistic because I enjoyed helping students benefit from the project.

It was not always easy going. I objected strongly to recycled work passed on as their own. This, to me, was too close to plagiarism. I think, *the polite smile from the overseas students will not do, they need to behave ethically*. With original work, we all benefit and achieved good grades.

I was also the nuisance oldie who held up a lecture at the end with questions. I wanted value for money from my lecturer. Protocol required that everyone stay back for question time. The eye rolling and students sitting impatiently was a funny sight.

Work With, Not Against Your People

In 2009, the KPMG report benchmarking the Australian Public Service performance against international public services confirmed that, our APS truly shines. Australia has an honest, and corrupt free public service. For our population size, it is a lean public service. Most important, our APS was found to be vastly responsive to government priorities, despite grumblings from politicians. Going into the next decade, this report was heartening. Australians must be proud of their government agencies and employees.

I was a strong middle manager, and my performance was appreciated. In 2011, I found myself working for the Water Buyback team on the controversial Murray Darling Basin Plan. Water purchase was a particularly important \$3.1 billion program for river health. Simply put, in Australia, water licences are overallocated to irrigators and farmers. The environment is neglected, resulting in rivers and lakes drying up, where historically they had natural flows.

The federal government started to buyback water licences through a voluntary tender process. The department aimed to purchase 2750 gigalitres of water for the health of rivers and inland lakes. I calculated that it amounts to approximately ten percent of average annual rainfall in the Murray Darling Basin so, a modest target in that respect.

Misinformation and anxiety reached a peak in 2010 with the burning of the plan at a community meeting in Griffith. Our executive referred to the target as terrorlitres*. They had an active sense of humour. My new team, however, were not smiling, they were highly dysfunctional.

I was at my first team meeting and the body language was intense in our manager's office. Everyone was giving him the cold shoulder treatment. They refused to contribute and just looked at the floor. I had a reputation for being a good people manager, so I was naturally curious about what motivated this behaviour.

My team manager, who was a young achiever, and I, the old public servant, talked openly after the meeting. He shares that his employees are doing their jobs okay but were not working their full-time hours. He told them that he requested a building pass log to see when people arrive and leave work. My jaw dropped and it was clear why distrust was out of control. I investigated further.

I approached the worst attendance offender, and asked a simple question, 'are you ok'? Her eyes filled with tears, and she explained that she was recently diagnosed with diabetes. The first six months according to her doctors are the worst. Another employee was a highly effective young man. He was awarded a traineeship for his TAFE studies and work ethics. He was bored sitting in the office all day. Three other team members were older employees. They had received no direction or feedback. They were experienced operators, yet in fact were drifting in their roles. They needed guidance.

Eventually our team leader left, to work for a private company, which suited him better than the APS. The team moved under my supervision and did a complete turnaround on their performance. You would think that a revitalised team would be appreciated by senior management, but no, in the APS soft skills* are rarely valued. The vacant position was abolished to save money.

My energised team were ready for a large data migration project. In the APS, people run for cover when you mention 'data migration' and others freeze hoping that you will not see them. Under my guidance, the team embarked on a one-year project, while performing their normal duties. No special project here. Without complaining, the team transferred all tender records (worth \$3.1 billion), from an unsupported Microsoft Access database to the corporate SAP system. As a bonus, we identified a twenty-million-dollar error, and it was in the government's favour. Senior management was pleased, and the team is thanked via a short email.

In September 2013, the Coalition government came into power, and sided with the irrigators, not the environment. They removed the remaining \$600 million from the program's budget. There was a political obsession with budget surpluses, and Joe Hockey and Mathias Cormann have their well-documented cigar moment.

Science focused public servants were in shock and expressed their disagreement. At an all-staff conference, our Department secretary was blunt: *‘if you don’t like it, you need to get a job somewhere else.’* That is a harsh comment, from a Secretary who was under political pressure.

Unsurprisingly, axing of the program generated perverse outcomes. The state governments took this as a signal to undermine and weaken the MDBA Plan. They ignored water usage meters and placed their support behind ‘water thirsty’ companies. Cotton and rice producers were allowed to engage in water theft from rivers already under stress. They claim to be efficient water users, which might be the case, but with no regard for river health.

My team’s fate was made known when our executive (the one with the ‘terrorlitres’) tells us to look for work elsewhere, since the program is not continuing. We respected him for his honesty and the advanced notice.

Not long after, in 2019, the neglect of our rivers was exposed in the news and social media following a mass fish death event. Kate McBride and her father filmed the dying fish in the oxygen poor river. Their shocking message is viewed by over one million people on Facebook. International support flowed in, and Politician David Littleproud is shamed on national television by an articulate Kate. She highlighted mismanagement of the river system.

When Your Views Contradict The Leadership’s

I joined the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) task force in 2014. I felt that protecting the reef was a wonderful and worthwhile job. The GBR was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1981. It is a unique natural wonder on our planet, with remarkable variety and beauty.

My excitement is short lived. Sometimes in our careers a single phrase spoken by a prominent person can totally change our understanding of the playing field. My faith in the system was shattered at a senior meeting.

State ministers gathered in Brisbane, in a small windowless boardroom. They sat around the boardroom table and their officials sat against the walls with laptops on their laps. We sat amongst the officials, representing Canberra and offering support. The opening statement from the chair was a surprise.

‘We are not here to stop development, are we?’ he asked the rhetorical question. The silence around the room confirmed that the GBR comes a sad second.

I didn’t put that comment in the minutes, and perhaps I should have. I realised then, that ministers, and their departments didn’t have the courage to protect the environment, over development and political interests. A sad fact.

Serious political interference followed. UNESCO is concerned about the health of the GBR, and they requested an endangered status. Politicians falsely elevated the health of the reef to avoid the additional cost and effort. The program administrators are pressured to deny the risk despite global warming, bleaching events, and the loss of habitat and species. An embarrassing investment of fifty million dollars was paraded as evidence of our commitment.

Politics aside, and with my information systems background, I supported good data capture. The QLD universities are seeking research funding. Their reef reports are excellent, yet they barely scratch the surface in such a vast area, which is, in fact, the size of Italy. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority proposed a ‘whole of reef information’ program.

Unfortunately, it was not funded, and that great idea goes no further. When I asked why, management revealed that ‘there was no appetite for it.’

Friendship Is A Powerful Work Ingredient

The APS is a strong network to harness. In 2015, I contacted my friend Stuart, while exploring work options. He was pleased to hear from me, and he had a vacancy in his systems support team. I’m of the firm view that friendship keeps the APS running. The APS is not a club, but a friendly attitude does help to achieve results.

Stuart’s team (me included) embarked on a major systems improvement project. He explained that the backend systems are mainly paper based, slow, and unreliable. The business is stressed under the demands placed on it by an ever-increasing client base with ever increasing complex environment referrals. I thrived on these challenges.

We visited various environment agencies to see how they managed automation. Eventually, we selected the Microsoft Workflow system. We hired external contractors skilled in configuration work. It was leading edge technology, yet not surprising, resistance to change came from the older assessors, fond of their paper-based system.

What I didn’t expect was, senior management doing a disappearing act on us, and they fail to attend any design meetings. The senior manager sponsor’s role is a vacant chair, and I wonder, *how will they manage technology that they have not seen?* The project reached completion after two years. Unfortunately, our leadership fails to build in: change management; post implementation support; and ongoing maintenance. The APS is notorious for IT underspend and the new systems suffered as a result.

When the underspend starts to be noticed, the blame shifts towards the system. The executive team, who were missing from the design meetings, then start to revert to paper and spreadsheet. And that is how millions of taxpayers’ dollars are wasted on technology projects in the APS.

Speaking Out Against Nasty Policies

Speaking of blame games, in 2016, the ‘Under Performance Management’ policy was introduced by senior management, to force out the less productive employees.

I objected strongly at management’s attempt to blame their staff for their failures. I suggest in writing and can be quoted saying, *if there are performance issues, management needs to look in the mirror for the problem.* I know, these are tough words from a middle manager, but from my experience, poor management skills lead to poor performance. Poor performance leads to low morale. Low morale leads to poor retention of good people.

In this decade, the union was sidelined, and they were powerless in the public sector. Yet, middle management was surprisingly strong. We acted in unison to block or implement change. It was an interesting phenomenon to witness.

At the same time, the politicians go on a ‘red tape’ reduction drive. In effect, they wanted the government to remove any obstacles to business. Regulation, whether useful or not, was to be removed. In addition, the politicians insult the Environment Department by referring to our work as *green tape**. There is no pushback from our senior management who were feeling intimidated by the aggressive politics.

Again, in my middle management capacity, I raised my concerns, that red tape reduction was a senseless directive. Across my desk pass a large list of good administration and regulations,

which have been designed to protect Australian citizens and are marked for removal. We were to trust industry with a new untested concept, *self-regulation**. In years to come, this proves to be a failure, since profits are placed ahead of people and quality.

In 2019, the APS underwent an independent review as requested by Prime Minister Morrison. His view was that the APS was there to implement the government's agenda and policies. This was naive thinking since the APS administers all legislation, not only the bits of interest to the current government. Soon, the politicians will have oversight of countless disasters: dead fish in our rivers; Robodebt scheme; failed recycling to China; aged care abuse; NDIS disability cost blowout; *not* bridging the gap; and climate change denial.

Placing politics aside, and because my heart was with the APS and public servants, I participated in the public service review with accurate, honest, and objective feedback.

I challenged the myth around self-regulation by companies. As Australia grows, we need more government regulation, not less. I also challenged aggressive people management strategies. For good results, you must motivate people to perform better, not bully them into submission.

The public service review attracted hundreds of enthusiastic submissions online, like the removal of political interference, and the return to listening to what the science is telling us.

Time To Retire The Middle Manager

After 16 years of service as a middle manager, my tolerance for dodgy work practices and poor people management is fading. I still enjoyed my work, and it was rewarding. Despite my positive nature, I was increasingly disappointed with the missing 'thank you'. Managers focused on politics, are too busy to acknowledge the good day to day work. Pleasingly, encouragement and motivation comes from your peers. My team is regularly thanked by other teams in the department for our work. They know what is really going on.

Playing my part in procuring services, I witnessed important governance and transparency rules ignored under the guise of flexibility*. Contractors were given decision making ahead of competent public servants, and procurement and purchasing rules were ignored by inexperienced senior managers taking short cuts. Like Bradbury's race, I can see that they are skating too fast and are reckless. They are heading for a tumble.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic was upon us. We were sent home with our laptops to isolate and work from home. I look in the mirror at myself and realise that I have become jaded. It was time to retire this middle manager.

I'll crossed the finish line on my sixtieth birthday, with a high sense of pride in a long-term career in one of the best public service bureaucracies in the world.

Terms used in this story, from my real-life experience.

**Soft skills – people management is the most important of all skills. Unfortunately, in the APS, it often comes second behind, tyrant and intimidation skills.*

**Pube – a derogatory term for a university student from the public service. Studying when you are a mature age student, you have life experience to fall back on. It is fun messing with the young students.*

**Terrorlitres – a term referring to the effect that water buyback has on irrigators, farmers, and politicians. A senior manager with a sense of humour conceived that term.*

**Green tape – like red tape, but it is in relation to environment protection getting in the way of development. It was used publicly by a prime minister who was clever with slogans.*

**Self-regulation – this is where a business promises to do the right thing if the government gets off their back. Then they do whatever they want anyway, without consequences.*

**Flexibility – this term is used by senior managers who want to bend the rules. Specially those annoying procurement guidelines that are there to ensure fair tenders and transparent use of taxpayer's money.*