

# Ed Smith

English cricket and sport is innately conservative, clogged up by layers of bureaucracy – strip it all away and creativity thrives, as McCullum’s Test side have shown



**A** question: how would we go about our work if we could work as we wanted to?

Let’s assume that you’re invested in doing well; that you “care”. But beyond that, suppose no one was checking up on you, or hovering over you. Imagine work without corporate reporting lines (often designed to create a compliance paper-trail, anyway, rather than to enhance performance). Of course, you’ll be accountable for your record and your achievements. But not for your methods. The “how” is up to you. Perhaps, if you’re creative, you won’t even understand exactly how you did it yourself.

How would you go about your work if you never wasted a moment trying to justify your actions, or readying yourself to explain things if they went wrong? If your ultimate boss was just you, the voice in your head, and your team – your sense of individual and collective achievement and pride. How would you approach your job, above all, if you didn’t need the job?

This is a version of the question that Brendon McCullum has put to the England cricket team and, by extension, to the wider game and those who love it. It is a question that is particularly challenging for English sport, which is innately conservative, for reasons that we will come to later.

The question gets to the heart of high achievement, raises the difficulty (and mystery) of nurturing creativity, and hints at the essence of education itself.

Let’s frame it in the simplest way possible: are professional and bureaucratic systems, which claim to be the solution, often part of the problem? Instead of more management, what if we need less (and better) management? And in place of things that look good on paper, what if we need less theory and more freedom and imagination?

Of all McCullum’s moves – the no-fear approach, the optional practices, the embrace of risk, the celebration of good times and the shared journey – something very important has slipped under the radar: there are fewer people in the room. A lot fewer. Which means that a higher proportion of the room consists of players – the people who win matches – rather than coaches and “managers”. The protagonists are centre stage.

Stripping back the support staff has consequences. It reduces the risk of energy being dissipated and core



McCullum and Ben Stokes have turned England’s Test fortunes around with a thrillingly attacking approach

mission being diluted. It increases the primacy of player-to-player relationships, which are ultimately the ones that matter. And with fewer support staff and assistants, who inevitably themselves need to be “managed”, the top coaches such as McCullum have more time to have an impact on the players. More time to coach, in other words. (McCullum may claim not to coach very much, yet he has an impact – which raises the question of how we should define “coaching”.) Talent, when there is one less management tier clogging things up, can come to the fore more easily. It’s work, but without the compliance police.

The term “support”, of course, needs careful scrutiny more widely. “Support” is a euphemism that masks many dubious motives. When professional “systems” offer talented individuals “support”, it is often a subtle device for the dead-hand of bureaucracy to worm its way closer to the front line of achievement.

I’m not suggesting that talent doesn’t need help. Even the greatest players sometimes require perceptive feedback to recapture their best game. In some sectors, like

sport, we call these people “coaches”. In other areas, they are called mentors. Opera singers refer to listeners who provide trusted and insightful feedback as “outside ears”. These people, whatever term we use for them, do not hang around looking for something to do or justifying their roles. They are sharply focused on elevating the performance of the people who trust them to speak the truth.

When they work well, these performer-mentor relationships are usually individual rather than bureaucratic. The performer finds someone they trust, and that person is not necessarily in a position of power or control over them.

This leads to the great paradox of professional sport (and the workplace more generally). As elite sport has become more professional

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**It was said that McCullum lacked credentials. But he had belief in talent and determination to empower it**

and bureaucratic – with fantastical organisational charts that map only the delusions of understretched middle management – there is actually a smaller proportion of people around who understand creativity. Especially the fact that creativity cannot be completely captured, defined, repeated and rolled out as a system.

That is because creativity is intrinsically antisystemic and impossible to coerce. That’s its definition. You can only create space for creativity, you cannot force it on people.

And that’s McCullum’s great insight, though he’s too polite to spell

it out. You may be able to draw out greatness from talented people, to create an environment where it is more fully expressed, but you can’t layer it over the top like cheap paint.

Which is why McCullum, though he may not look like everyone’s idea of a schoolteacher, understands real education – *educere*, to draw out.

Why is this particularly un-English? Because English society, and especially English sport, feels a kind of embarrassment about the long discredited amateur ideology. And that’s understandable. Long after it was a relevant framework, a hollowed out interpretation of amateurism exerted a disproportionate grip on how we thought about sport – about appropriate style (effortlessness, please), about practice (ungentlemanly), about money (how vulgar), even about widening social access (not too far, thank you).

This historical legacy tragically created ideal conditions for the opposite mistakes: indulgence of presenteeism, managerialism, unchecked cliché, jobs for the boys, badging exercises, credentialism, suspicion of talent, scepticism about ideas, the duplication and triplication of roles, job descriptions that no one understands, jobs that aren’t jobs. All of which adds up to gradual but assured suffocation by bloated bureaucracies. All very professionally done, of course.

Go back to the critics of Rob Key, England’s managing director, and his head coach, McCullum, when they were appointed: the lack of “credentials”. But in place of credentials they had other qualities: a vision of how the game should be played, confidence to see past the wrapper and look at the essence of things, impatience with how things have always been done, and above all belief in talent and the determination to promote and empower it.

So if you like what you’ve seen so far from England’s Test match coach, remember this: there will be a time when he’ll need the braver voices within English sport to back him through tough spells, not just lightly join the applause during sequences of happy wins.

There will be bumps in the road, a run of defeats somewhere.

Equally certain is that the forces of conservatism haven’t been defeated, they’re just waiting – silently and patiently – before rolling out of the trusty old clichés again: rein it in, no need to reinvent the wheel, play for the draw, steady as she goes. Nod along at your peril.

David Walsh is away