

Management training – the experience

G. J. R. RICHARDSON, Consultant Psychiatrist, York Health Authority, Lime Trees, Child, Adolescent and Family Unit, 31 Shipton Road, York YO3 6RE

A month's residence in an elegant stately home, situated among the manicured lawns and gardens of 150 acres of parkland, sounds ideal; when allied with comfortable accommodation, delicious food and thoroughly professional service, it sounds idyllic. When it is being paid for by Kenneth Clarke, it becomes irresistible.

Those of you with a memory for the minutiae of medical politics will remember the fanfare which pre-announced a health minister's announcement last autumn that thousands of pounds were to be spent on training consultants in management. There seemed to be a departmental belief that sending consultants on management courses could change them all into White Paper addicts and working for patients was a novel concept.

The management development buffs at Yorkshire Region, never ones to look a gift horse in the mouth for longer than it takes to pick up a phone, immediately did a deal with Ashridge Management College and grabbed the lion's share of Kenneth Clarke's hand out. This bulk buy from Ashridge ensured Yorkshire consultants jumped the queue for their management development programme, for which there seems to be a considerable waiting list. Hence, at the end of April, two Yorkshire consultants retired to the Chiltern Hills for a month of monastic management contemplation.

The uniformed chauffeuse (is that a female chauffeur?), who met me at Berkhamsted Station in a college Mercedes was the first marker of the exceedingly professional organisation that is Ashridge. The rooms, the food, the formal evenings, the sports facilities and above all the staff, never faltered from a standard of excellence. My room overlooking the tennis courts gave an inkling of the fitness ethic which pervades Ashridge. The fitness centre, with squash courts, sauna, gym and swimming pool balanced the dearth of televisions. Spare time was to be devoted to physical fine tuning. For the contented sluggards bowls, croquet and putting provided gentler post prandial activity among the luxuriant rhododendrons and vibrant azaleas. Early morning tennis was played to the patter of passing joggers exercising their rites with the rising sun and shortening shadows.

The first morning saw 36 of us in a lecture room, which resembled a miniature United Nations. Our clearly marked places enabled lecturers to address us

by name as if they had known us all their lives. Participants from Hong Kong to Holland and Zambia to Sarawak joined those from many manufacturing and service industries in the UK. A sales manager placed between a psychiatrist and probation officer did just wonder why he had been sent. My impression was of very competent line managers who had reached their present positions through their own skills and effort. There were no sons of the chairman or those with congenital oral silver spoons.

They were here because they were highly valued by their employers, were expected to take on wider managerial roles, and so needed to understand the areas of management in which they had not been specifically trained. They threw themselves into the course with a determination and enthusiasm which bodes very well for the future of British industry. I felt it a privilege to work with the group and was only sorry there was not more time to discover more about them, their jobs, their skills and their attitudes.

On that eager morning, our work areas sprinkled with files and calculators we were taken under the wing of our course tutor who was the lynch pin of the course. He was available from cock-crow to eventide to ensure all was running smoothly. His professionalism, care and dedication were quite outstanding from his cheerful and informative welcome to his entertaining farewell speech. It was as if he had enjoyed flogging himself to death for four weeks! Behind every great man there is a woman, and our course administrator did all but peel our grapes to ensure our creature comforts required no effort on our behalf.

After the pep talk by the Director, known awesomely as Michael O (except to those of us who were at university with him) we then settled down to two weeks of fairly solid lectures. Topics such as the business environment taught me how politicians manipulate local and international finances to their own ends and left me worried that the same people claim to know what is best for the Health Service. I learnt that 'personnel' is now called 'human resources' and everybody is worried by the demographic problems of the next 20 years. Finance lectures taught me how to judge the success of businesses, but by the time we got to lectures IV and V public sector workers were falling by the wayside befuddled by "ratios and gearing". Teaching on computers was too fast for me, the machines were not as forgiving as the staff. Finding

out about oneself in personal management is always fascinating (well to one person anyway), and some useful teaching skills were explained. Operations management led to some interesting computer games at which the public sector showed its inexperience at getting material profitably across a factory floor. Marketing is where we are told the NHS is going and the French mistress who taught us ensured undivided attention. Unfortunately I was occasionally reinforced in what I know, that you cannot lecture for up to two hours and maintain an individual's interest, no matter how dedicated they are and no matter how well plied with coffee and orange juice they are in the breaks. I would have liked more time learning in groups with a few other course members.

After two weeks good behaviour, we were allowed home to our families, who seemed to have forgotten who we were. Relaxation was short-lived for Finance V beckoned at 9.00 a.m. on Bank Holiday Monday morning, and we were all there! We then set about putting our newly acquired skills into practice to the encouragement and groans of our teachers. Looking at other people's businesses, especially over the weekend, while the sun shines outside is a sore test of dedication, but it meant time with other course members whose skills in areas such as accountancy and computer manipulations were quite humbling, as was their willingness to work late into the evening, weekdays and weekends.

There was a little word called Project that kept echoing round the panelled walls of Ashridge and I

certainly thought about, but did not act upon, what the word meant before I went. As a consultant on a management team I felt it was my responsibility to help consultants and managers work more constructively together for the benefits of our patients. Unfortunately, Ashridge did not give me any meat for this project. However, it did keep seducing me with how to market my own service in the brave new world of 'internal markets'. However, all the time I spent on analysing my industry and developing my marketing strategy, I had this guilty feeling it was not what I was really there for, and if my colleagues thought I had taken a month off to get ahead in the marketing race, I did not think they would be best pleased. Our problems are restricting usage in an all carers' market and working to a fixed budget which we have now power to expand. Businesses have not had to address these issues and hence they were not covered at Ashridge.

I emerged from Ashridge a fitter if fatter individual who had learnt about such ephemera as Total Quality Management, Shamrock organisations, Bullet points, the opportunity of redundancy and flexible manufacturing systems. More importantly I had the privilege of working with a skilled and knowledgeable group at a college of excellence. I may now be able to market my own service better in a competitive world, but I am uncertain I know any more about working as a consultant in the management of the Health Service, but thanks Ken, can I book again for next year?

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Trainees' forum

Forensic psychiatry – a tale of two systems

NEIL BOAST, Senior Registrar locum, St Luke's Hospital, Woodside Avenue, London N10

During registrar training I had the privilege of working in the interim secure unit at Friern Hospital in London. To gain further experience in the field of

forensic psychiatry, I secured (if that is an appropriate term), a post as trainee psychiatrist at James Nash House, centre for forensic psychiatry, Adelaide,