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## **ProSeminar Forethoughts Series**

# **Can Managers Manage?**

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### Can managers manage . . . or is it a matter of priorities?

There's a lot that's good about British management - I'm always impressed by the honesty, dedication, intelligence and humanity of most of the managers and professionals I deal with. Heartening though this is, self-congratulation can lead too easily to complacency. Really good managers are those who are constantly self-critical and looking for the scope for improvement – both in their own approaches and skills and in the systems and processes they manage.

Two recent pieces of research have thrown up concerns about the quality of British managers.

The first produced by the CMI purports to show that many managers are not as good as they think they are. While 44% of managers polled said they excelled at managing people, other tests carried out by the CMI suggest that only 14% of managers actually excel in this area. Similarly, while 19% of those polled said their greatest strength was in managing themselves, the CMI tests showed only 9% excelling here.

The second piece of research, much trumpeted on Radio 4 and in the national dailies, is from management consultants Knox D'Arcy and produced headlines such as 'Council staff waste two-thirds of working day'. One of its conclusions was that managers – in both public and private sectors – spend too little time managing their staff with the consequence that they are often unproductive and idle, while managers themselves spend too much time doing routine

administrative tasks which could be delegated. According to this research, managers spend on average only 3% of their time each day (around 15 minutes) on actively managing their staff. Of particular concern was the finding that many 'managers are uncomfortable at confronting the poor performance of staff'.

So why the problem?

The CMI suggests it results from a lack of skills development. A fair comment - it's perhaps human nature for people to avoid doing the things they are not good at, preferring to busy themselves with tasks which fall within their comfort zone.

But the problem here isn't just a matter of skills - it's also a matter of priorities. Delegation and staff management are not only difficult, they're also time-consuming. Time given to staff to support their performance has to compete with time to be given to managing other relationships, particularly those up and across the organisation. It's no wonder that the proactive element of managing staff gets squeezed out, leaving only time for reactive staff management when problems arise.

Unfortunately too, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking 'It's quicker and easier for me to do it myself rather than to delegate'. Of course, most managers would recognise that this is a legitimate barrier to delegation when the task is a one-off, but not legitimate if it's something which is going to be repeated. However if it is to be repeated and delegating is thus seen as worth the investment of the time required, the problem remains with protecting quality time for the delegation process well in advance of

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the deadline. 'I'd like to delegate this job to John, but the deadline's this afternoon and I just don't have the time to show him the ropes. I'll make the time for it next month.' Unfortunately, too often the same problem occurs next month as well.

'I can't explain it' is another frequent barrier to delegation. Sometimes, of course, it's legitimate – managers and professionals will often have to do things they don't fully understand themselves until they've done them at least once. The challenge for managers is, however, to take the tasks that they can explain and 'routinise' these into structured processes that others can follow. This, in turn, may mean writing up guidelines or running training sessions. Again it's a matter of time and a matter of priorities in the context of all the other demands a manager faces.

This then takes us back to our theme that all good managers need to be self-critical. Everyone needs to ask themselves every day (or even every hour) 'What am I here for and what am I actually doing?' and 'Am I giving the right the right kind of time to the things that are really important?' Good management is not just a matter of skills development and knowledge - it's also a matter of priorities and above all attitude. Make sure you make time for the things which really count.

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For details of the CMI research [click here](#). For details of the Knox D'Arcy research [click here](#).

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