



The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme in association with ProSeminar

More mediocrity please!

'Mediocrity in depth' was the proud boast of my old rugby-playing college which had a somewhat dubious academic reputation and where the scholastic was often subordinated to the sporty. Our boast was, of course, a typical piece of British self-deprecation - it's a matter of national pride that we have the objectivity to do ourselves down and we no doubt derive some kind of masochistic pleasure from this form of self-flagellation. But the masochism perhaps misses the point. Isn't there just cause to be proud of mediocrity? Don't we sometimes under-value mediocrity and over-emphasise excellence, distorting as a result career patterns and organisational structures and undermining management performance? Fighting talk perhaps, but it's certainly worth reflecting the importance of mediocrity.

In the 1980's classic 'In Search of Excellence' Peters and Waterman emphasised the importance of successful organisations having a belief in 'being the best'. I doubt that sales and spin-off would have been very profitable for a book called 'In Search of Mediocrity', but Peters and Waterman did recognise that success depended, not upon genius in the boardroom, but upon the effort, commitment and insight of ordinary people at every level in the organisation. In other words it depended upon the 'mediocre'. Unfortunately Peters and Waterman still fell into the elitist trap of drawing their examples from the captains of industry and aiming their message at the corporate leaders or their would-be successors. This 'elitist trap' can easily result in the misuse of an organisation's most significant human resource - its ordinary or mediocre people. Elitism leads to over-emphasis on high flyers, high rewards and career progress. How does this work and why does it matter? It works through the recruitment process, it works through the succession process and, of course, it works through the management training and development process. In recruitment there is the danger of recruiting the 'best'. The Personnel Director of one blue-chip company told me the other day that when he looked at CV's he looked first for some kind of excellence - not for him the candidate with a lower second! Other personnel professionals may be more discerning recognising that 'best' does not

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necessarily equate with academic achievement or intelligence- indeed it has long been recognised that good managers are of above average intelligence but not of genius level. Nonetheless in recruiting management posts, 'best' is still often seen as someone who has career potential and who, within the organisation, may be a 'high flyer'.

In the succession process, organisation structures reward the high flyers (or the visible high flyers) and this leads to often unrecognised ills of 'careerism'. Careerists are not so concerned with doing a good job as with establishing a profile - being seen. Their concerns are often not with the performance of their subordinates but with their own glory and recognition from above. More emphasis is placed on relationships 'up' the organisation than 'down' the organisation. The careerist pursues measurable short-term objectives often at the cost of the longer-term health of the organisation. Having an 'impact on the job' is seen as important and the careerist will often initiate change where the net benefits will be only marginal for the organisation but considerable in terms of the careerist's own profile.

In management development the danger is that too much of the resource is put into educating the few, or worse into educating the many for management positions they won't attain. MBA programmes have long been criticised for their elitism, but we need also to be wary of some of the newer certificate programmes - which whilst ostensibly being geared at a lower level of management, still require of their students the kind of commitment which expects to be rewarded by significant career progress.

There will necessarily be many people who are left behind by these programmes. Management development needs to ensure that everyone is provided with the support and encouragement to fulfil their potential within their job and enhance personal job satisfaction and fulfilment. In other words, training and development should not be for careerists only and should not require the kind of commitment which can only be provided by dedicated careerists. This means really making the development process available to everyone and not just those who are prepared to give up evenings and weekends to study for qualifications.

Enhancing the performance of the mediocre is one of the great development challenges of the future. To meet that challenge we need to think not just about training individuals, but about organisation values and structures and the kind of resources and power we give people so that they can manage effectively. We must remember that merely investing more in an individual's training will soon invoke the law of diminishing returns unless other inputs are increased proportionately. I'm talking here of the inputs we combine with people to make them effective

such as office space, access to office equipment and technology, secretarial and other human support. Management development has to address all blocks to effective performance - not just deal with training needs! The mediocre do matter and need to be given a greater share of resources.

By the way, to be fair to my old college we had our share of academic success and illustrious alumni - we were just too perverse to admit it!

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