



**The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme
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The price of pencils

Talking Theory Y; acting Theory X

'A cynic', according to Oscar Wilde, 'is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.' I was reminded of this Wildean witticism when an acquaintance told me about pencils. Pencils are a big thing in her department - so big that their issue remains under the strict control of the line-manager who has taken unto himself the role of departmental stationery monitor. Even supervisors don't have the authority to issue pencils to clerical staff. Requisitions in triplicate are requisite!

The example may be extreme and the story exaggerated. I've long since learnt to discount for the excesses recounted by staff in tales of their managers. Nonetheless this 'parable of the pencils' illustrates an approach to management which is far from untypical. This sees management as a system of control to ensure there is no abuse of resources.

Responsible stewardship is an important principle, but while the price of pencils is known, the costs of control and the value of trust are so often left out of the account. Trusting professional people to do a professional job - noting, supporting and encouraging what they do well - is a far more effective use of resources than constructing costly mechanisms to control what would probably be minimal abuse.

This may seem like a piece of 'old hat' philosophy. Generations of managers have been on their management courses and learnt all about McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y. The chances are that most managers (and this is substantiated by responses to questionnaires I've used on my own courses) see themselves as Theory Y managers (or at least mark themselves towards the Theory Y end of the spectrum). They believe, so they say, that most people are responsible, keen to do a good job and respond to recognition, trust and encouragement. But here lies the rub. These managers talk Theory Y, but so often their organisations act Theory X.

Short Course for Management & Professional Development

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Accountability seems to have been the organisational watchword of the last decade. Tightening accountabilities, though in principle a wholesome discipline, often leads to a narrowing of perspective. Really important things can be lost from sight as employees focus on meeting the criteria of their accountabilities. 'If that's what they say they want; that's what I'll give them.'

Corporate cynicism easily ensues. It acts as a dead hand on vitality and enterprise. It's catching and soon becomes embedded in the corporate culture. Combating corporate cynicism is the number one challenge many managers face. But instead of facing the challenge they so often contract the disease and pass it on to others. Cynicism starts at the top as hypocrisy - a gap between words and deeds, between policies and pronouncements on the one hand and personal commitment on the other. It grows in a culture of blame and responsibility shifting and it flourishes with its self-realising expectations.

I don't want simply to blame those at the top. (Although they're paid to take the blame, that would be too easy!) Every manager at every level, particularly those in middle and junior positions, has a responsibility. That responsibility is to provide quality management to their staff whatever the quality of management they may receive themselves.

This is the principle I call 'umbrella management'. Each manager needs to use his or her metaphorical umbrella to shelter staff from the problems that come down from on high, preserving enthusiasm and commitment in the team.

Yes, of course, there are some systems of control that need to be applied. But applying the systems should not lead us into petty-mindedness. Above all we must not allow any control system to become the end in itself. We must keep sight of the ultimate goals and the ultimate values.

Now, where the hell did I put that pencil?

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