



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

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## What makes ProSeminar special?

***Every service provider likes to think they're special. So what makes ProSeminar special and why should you use ProSeminar to meet your training needs? Journalist, Mary Pierce, puts these and other questions on quality, effectiveness and training philosophy to Philip Moon, ProSeminar's MD.***

*Mary*

Philip, tell me a little about ProSeminar and how you're set up.

*Philip*

ProSeminar's a consultant-led and consultant-owned training provider. We've been set up especially to manage and present the Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme. Our core tutors have all been involved in presenting the Institute's programme for quite a few years and we're building on this good work and taking it forward.

*Mary*

What does that programme consist of?

*Philip*

It's a comprehensive programme of one-, two- and three- day courses on core topics for management development – actually I prefer to say management *and professional* development. There are a lot of people who need help with the kind of skills we're dealing with who may not have the word 'manager' in their job title.

*Mary*

When you say 'comprehensive' do you mean you cover everything?

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*Philip*

No, but I think we cover the core areas and we're certainly keen to extend the programme as we progress. We started by asking ourselves 'what is it that managers and professionals need to be able to do in their jobs' and then 'where and how can a short course help'?

*Mary*

You say 'when and how can a short course help' – can you explain further what you mean by that?

*Philip*

Yes. The first point to make is that not all needs are training needs – problems to do with meeting deadlines etc may not be to do with a lack of time-management skills but more to do with resource allocation or system reform. Secondly, training needs are best met by a variety of means – sometimes a coaching approach may be appropriate, sometimes a secondment, sometimes it may be a media-based learning package which best fits the bill.

Quite frankly, if people are to come on a training course, the course has got to be able to do something for them that they couldn't get, or couldn't get so well, from some other form of training.

*Mary*

What do you get from attending a ProSeminar short course?

*Philip*

I think it has to be about participation – the opportunity to exchange ideas and ask questions, the opportunity to get hands on experience by role-playing or taking part in a simulation exercise or practising a skill in a non-threatening situation like negotiating or making a presentation. If a course is just about listening to a lecture, you might as well just read a book or do some sort of e-learning.

*Mary*

Is participation that what makes your courses special?

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*Philip*

Well yes and no! There are some providers out there who specialise in one-day 'mass events' - taking perhaps a 100 people at a time. I'm not knocking it - some of it can be quite good - but we want to differentiate ourselves from that type of provision. We restrict course numbers to 12 - or even less with some courses such as presentation skills.

We've also decided to extend some of our courses to make sure there's adequate time for learning activities - that for instance is the reason why we're doing a two-day time-management rather than the one-day version we used to do.

*Mary*

I notice also that with presentation skills you've structured it as a 'split' course... What's the reasoning behind that?

*Philip*

Well it's all part of the same thing really. It's got to be the rationale behind attending a presentation skills course that you get a chance to practise your skills and try out the principles developed during the course. And to be fair that's what most courses set out to do - but by giving people a week between Part 1 and Part 2 of the course, we're giving them time to prepare as they'd be able to for a real presentation and thus really test out their skills more effectively.

*Mary*

Okay. I get the point - participation and hands-on practice is important to you - but you're not the only training provider offering small groups and emphasising participation, are you? So why should I choose ProSeminar?

*Philip*

I'd put emphasis on value for money. We're keen to ensure access to training and we've kept our prices down - we're quite a bit cheaper than our main competitors...

*Mary*

But you're still expensive...

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*Philip*

No we're not – there's that old cliché 'If you think training expensive, try ignorance!' – but we do recognise spending money on training is not only an important investment it's also a risky investment. That's why quality is so important to us.

*Mary*

Well you would say that, wouldn't you? I'm sure every training provider says that quality's key and that they're the best!

*Philip*

Yes, quality is the key, but I wouldn't say we're the best. Believing you're the best is the kind of arrogance that leads to complacency. I believe that quality is about an attitude of mind and a philosophy of continuous improvement.

*Mary*

What is that attitude of mind?

*Philip*

It's about every individual at ProSeminar caring about doing a good job for each and every course participant. It's about being self-critical and looking for the scope to do better.

*Mary*

How do you measure quality?

*Philip*

Like other providers we do a post-course feedback form, or 'happy sheet' as they're often called. I think ours are a bit more comprehensive and meaningful than many of the ones you see around and we aim to do a proper statistical analysis to pick up indications if a course isn't going well. But that kind of exercise isn't sufficient to ensure quality – any organisation that depends on customer satisfaction surveys to assess its quality is only getting a limited view of its services. And in this business you have to be wary of 'soufflé' training...

*Mary*

'Soufflé training' – what's that?

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*Philip*

Sorry, it's a little expression of mine. What I mean is that a training course can look pretty good and participants can be very happy with its presentation – they get caught up in the excitement of the event and give really good 'happy sheets'. But when they go away and get back to work, it all goes flat and they find there's really not much substance.

*Mary*

So how do you avoid that?

*Philip*

We've got to be hard-nosed about our training – certain that what we're doing with people is really useful stuff and that we're not just concerned with making them happy on the day. We've also got to integrate the course with on-going learning and application. Getting people to do action plans, following up and tutors being available for further advice.

But let me go back to quality and quality assurance... One of the things we're putting in place is peer review. As tutors we need to get feedback not just from our customers but also from our fellow professionals. They're the ones who can provide us with useful insights into how we can enliven our training or sharpen up the content. And of course the reviewer also learns quite a lot about their own training by watching others.

*Mary*

It's a kind of benchmarking?

*Philip*

In a way, but we've also got to benchmark our standards against other providers. This means going on competitor's courses from time to time. And every tutor's got a responsibility to keep themselves up-to-date in their field.

*Mary*

I notice you put a lot of emphasis on 'supporting continued learning'.

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*Philip*

Yes, this ties in with what I was saying about course follow up. It also means pointing participants in the direction of things they can do after the course and providing good support materials. Part of it is also about helping people to come to the course well prepared – which is where our pre-course questionnaires are so valuable. That way the course is integrated into a pattern of on-going learning.

*Mary*

What about your course leaders...

*Philip*

Yes – they're the bedrock on which ProSeminar's quality is built. We've got a great team. Each of our course leaders combines extensive experience at the 'sharp-end' gained in management and consultancy - actually doing the job – with first class skills as a course facilitator. That doesn't just mean they're good presenters it also means they're good designers of learning activities and good at giving feedback. And it means that the help and advice they give isn't just based on glib phrases and quick fixes but on an understanding of the realities participants face.

*Mary*

I know you can do in-company versions of your courses, but the thrust of your programme is public courses...

*Philip*

Yes that's right. I know a lot of organisations have moved in the direction of having most of their courses presented in-house – it offers advantages in cost and also in tailoring the content – but public courses have an important contribution to make. Sometimes there just aren't the economies of scale available to make an in-company version of the course viable – say for instance if there are only one or two people who've got a particular training need, but public courses also offer something of special value which many people don't get enough of – the opportunity to mix with their peers from other non-competing organisations and pick up ideas from them about how they do things and just see the world from a slightly different angle.

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*Mary*

Where does the Chartered Management Institute fit in with all this?

*Philip*

Our relationship with the Institute is fundamental to our operation and provides a significant reassurance for our clients. The Institute is a highly respected professional body with the promotion of management development at the heart of its mission. The Institute has to approve our courses and also monitors our quality. It's really useful to have their in-put in making sure we keep up to the mark. We work very closely with the Institute in marketing our programmes and helping each other out in many ways.

As I mentioned before the core of our tutor team are all associate consultants with the Institute and have been involved in presenting the Institute's Short Course Programme for a number of years – in fact two of us have been involved with the Institute for over 20 years!

When the Institute decided to concentrate on tailored development and accredited courses, we were very pleased to have the chance of taking on the public courses and the Institute was delighted to find in us a partner they could trust and with whom they had well-established working relationships.

*Mary*

So Philip, put it all together for me – what makes ProSeminar special? What are your USPs?

*Philip*

No selling point is unique. What's special is our particular combination – being practical, participative and professional. There's a danger that these might just be slogans. What we've got to do is make sure they're reflected in reality and that we deliver on our promises. Test us out and hold us to account!

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