

# Being the best

**John Clements explains why life management skills are for everybody**



“Good morning! I’m Victor Ree from ACME Training Ltd, and I’d like to see Brian Smith about our exciting new Life Management Programme!”

“Just a moment, Mr. Ree — I’ll find out if Mr. Smith will see you.”

The receptionist leaves. Three minutes later: “Mr. Smith says he has all the insurance cover he needs. Thank you for coming.”

What an opportunity the elusive Mr Smith has missed! He may be hot on productivity; he may eat, live and breath efficiency; he may be thoroughly committed to excellence...and yet he remains unaware of this priceless art called life management. Regrettably, most people remain unaware of it - even those whose careers could be immeasurably enhanced by it.

Perhaps Mr Smith would have shown a flicker of interest if Victor Ree had communicated the word *lifeskills*. This term has been popularised over the last fifteen years by authors like Egan, Cowan, Hopson and Scally; and especially by Professor Richard Nelson-Jones, a man whose lectures I have personally found to be extremely informative. Even today, however, the material that is being produced on the subject of lifeskills tends to be written for use in schools and other youth-orientated institutions.

But nearly everybody could benefit from such discovery-based self-empowerment; there are now a series of modules designed specifically to assist today’s (and tomorrow’s!) working population towards ultimate fulfilment - not only in their careers but also in their private lives and relationships.

And yet some will still cry: “But I don’t need modules and courses and academic stuff like that! I already manage

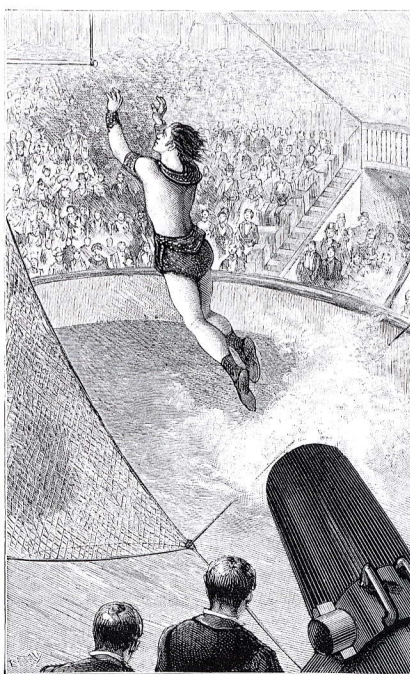
my life perfectly well! It’s just a matter of common sense, isn’t it!”

Well — yes and no. Common sense certainly plays a big part in the effective management of one’s own life, with all its shifting priorities of money, career, relationships, leisure, and image...but how many people actually practise common sense these days? How many can even think straight amid the daily whirlwind of noise, stress, frustration and fear that sweeps through their waking lives, and invades their dreams?

Clearly, there has been an upsurge in quantity and a downslide in quality. Each of us carries on his or her back a sackful of assorted responsibilities, all jostling for priority; yet the one faculty that would enable us to organise and manage those responsibilities maturely is now less in evidence than at any time in living memory. Common sense is a vanishing resource!

## WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

A major factor is the recent change in lifestyles. As a civilisation we have moved, in the last few decades, to a type of social structure that has never before been seen in the whole of history. Long gone are the days when everyone lived in extended families, and often in the same location, for most of their lives. Now, with ever-greater social and geographic mobility, we tend to move away from our birthplace to seek work, education and new relationships; and one of those relationships may well require us to construct a nuclear family. Accompanying this change has been a growing disrespect for the elderly, who, in previous centuries, were considered a great source of wisdom. Today, the only “wisdom” we hand down





is the kind gained at university or on Information Technology courses. The oracles of the twenty-first century will apparently be academic theory and artificial intelligence!

The negative results of these changes are already becoming visible: increased marital breakdown; widespread drug-dependency (with related antisocial behaviour); record crime statistics; and an all-time low in the calibre of job applicants. What is the solution to this catalogue of calamity? How can we arrest the decline in this country's corporate competence? By what means can we empower individuals to scale the soaring peaks of achievement that were once a natural and welcome challenge?

Opinions vary, particularly among our political masters; but one of the very few positive and reliable solutions for industry, community and individuals alike is to establish effective lifeskill-development programmes. Only by such structured, customised, holistic discovery-learning systems can the Western world rebuild its foundations of excellence and resume its former role as a leading actor on the world stage!

So what exactly is life management? Can we create a formula to describe it? Well, possibly; but first it might be a good idea to pinpoint those aspects of human nature that show why we need life management — because they also show why we are so prone to failure. The famous self-development pioneer Dale Carnegie summed it up best:

"When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudice and motivated by pride and vanity."

The merciless accuracy of Carnegie's observation leaves us in no doubt what follies we fall into when left to our own devices. Untutored, unguided and unmentored, we become unskilled, uncreative and unsociable.

Life management consists in developing and using a variety of skills, then cultivating the proficiency to shift the balance more in the direction of our strengths. There are thus three main routes to approach a definition of life-management skills:-

They are not a goal, but a process. Seldom static, they require effective sequences of choices. Throughout our lives we have to make choices so as to engineer specific outcomes from an infinity of possibilities; and to optimise our success in this process, we need a repertoire of skills to draw on — plus the perception to select the most appropriate skill for the purpose at hand, whether work or play.

They facilitate personally responsible choices — the means by which you can wholeheartedly embrace, rather than studiously avoid, personal responsibility for your life and actions. They are vital self-help tools that empower you to hone average ability into the fine cutting edge of excellence.

They are conducive to mental health. The majority of lifeskills can be observed in real life, since they tend to be

revealed by cognitive behaviour (ie thinking skills). A simple example would be hair-combing. A person of low intelligence, low motivation and low ability grooms himself less often and less competently than might be considered normal. Conversely, then, we can predict that people who neglect to groom themselves are likely to have a poor self-image. Indeed, lack of personal care is frequently the most obvious thing to notice in a person suffering from depression. So the message becomes clear: the more you are personally committed to the pursuit of excellence, the more you will be motivated to "groom" yourself in your career and relationships: to extend the boundaries of your confidence and competence in those essential lifeskills.

The following (abridged) exercise outlines specific lifeskills which have been categorised into seven clear life-areas. It is not philosophical quiz, a diagnostic test or a therapeutic instrument - though it could turn out to fulfil any or all of these functions as by-products of its main purposes, which are:-

- ☉ to describe lifeskills with practical examples;
- ☉ to define their score;
- ☉ to underline the benefits of cultivating them; and
- ☉ to focus your awareness on the blind-spots

that you may be hampered by, and the opportunities you may be wasting through your failure to cultivate insight.

Those are the goals. Here are the instructions:

Using the A/B/C/D rating scale, place one letter beside each skill described. When you have completed the whole list, and read the interpretative material at the end, you will have taken a giant step forward in your assessment of your own skill level - and you may even begin to perceive the blind spots which have so far caused you to stumble on your pathway to excellence!

- ☉ A. I am already the best that I can be in this skill and I could not possibly develop it any further.
- ☉ B. I am very good at using this skill but there is still room for useful improvement.
- ☉ C. I do use this skill at some level but I could certainly learn to use it more effectively.
- ☉ D. I am very bad in using this skill and need to improve it enormously.

So - having spent time doing the exercise and understanding the point of it all, your next step is to analyse your responses by totalling up the number of A's, B's and so on. Do this now, before reading on.



# SKILLS FOR LIFE

Mark each one A, B, C or D

## LIFESKILLS 1: Feeling

Willingness to be in touch with your feelings  
Acknowledging and acting on your feelings  
Awareness of your wants and wishes  
Awareness of physical sensations  
Understanding and exploration of your feelings  
Capacity to experience your own sensuality  
Ability to act spontaneously  
Existential awareness - of life, death, suffering, providence etc

## LIFESKILLS 2: Thinking

Ability to grasp abstract concepts  
Taking responsibility for your own life-choices  
Talking yourself into a positive coping framework  
Devising your own set of ethical rules  
Devising your own mode of perception  
Assessing amount of risk and potential reward  
Formulating a personal achievement-plan  
Cultivating visualisation skills  
Cultivating decision-making skills  
Cultivating problem-management skills

## LIFESKILLS 3: Relationships

Knowing your own mind and accounting for your own actions  
Appropriate disclosure of personal information  
Appropriate expression of feelings with voice and body  
Handling shyness effectively  
Initial-contact skills  
Conversational and listening skills  
Making helpful responses  
Self-assertiveness  
Visible caring attitude  
Relating sexually  
Handling anger and conflict  
Awareness of gender issues  
Awareness of inter-cultural issues  
Skills in specific roles: parenting, teaching, caring for the sick etc

## LIFESKILLS 4: Study

Making rational educational choices  
Practical goal-setting and time-management  
Meeting deadlines  
Effective reading and writing skills  
Coping with anxiety over academic and personal matters  
Using creative and critical thinking skills  
Participating in group discussions and speaking in public

## LIFESKILLS 5: Work

Identifying personal work values and interests  
Evaluating skills and seizing opportunities  
Gathering information and making decisions  
Presenting yourself effectively for job interviews and promotion  
(producing CV and covering letter; competent interview technique)  
Skills to develop competence at work, team-work, supervising, delegating, handling customers, using phone effectively  
Assessing one's own performance and initiating an on-going skills development programme

## LIFESKILLS 6: Leisure

Balancing work with leisure activities - holidays and social events etc  
Cultivating personal hobbies and interests  
Participating in restful pastimes

## LIFESKILLS 7: Health

Keeping to a personal fitness programme which includes exercise and healthy eating habits  
Controlling excessive personal use of drugs, drink, and smoking  
Managing stress levels  
Taking full responsibility for your own mental and physical fitness and spiritual health

Remember: this exercise is not intended to test you, diagnose you or cure you. Its purposes are to guide your awareness towards an understanding of lifeskills and to stimulate your resolve to change pernicious blind-spots into precious insights.



Got your four totals written down? Fine. Do you have a preponderance of "A" responses? Hmm...well...you may feel like having a wild party to celebrate your achievement of perfection, but one has to ask: just how honest were you in your answers? The truth is, no human being even approaches perfection. I suggest you ask a close friend to go through the list with you - to check where your blind spots are.

Do you have a majority of 'D' responses? Oh dear! Things really can't be that bad! I suggest you are seriously undervaluing yourself. Like the 'A' respondent, you would be wise to engage a colleague to look over the list with you. I'll bet my considerable reputation that s/he will confirm that you are actually in a very much better state than you think! Please - do something about your self-image. It's such a waste not to!

As for the rest of us: we are either "B" or "C" people. So that makes about 99.96% of us! We can improve most of our talents by measurable degrees over a certain length of time. What we mustn't do, however, is try to improve everything all at once. We will be disappointed! After all, could we digest a whole week's food in one day?

Not a chance. So instead of biting off more than we can chew and feeling sick afterwards, we can more rationally develop each of our skills as part of a structured on-going process, working at comfortable speeds on several levels, as circumstances, resources and moods permit.

The skills you will need to develop in the course of your life are not, of course, definitively represented in the list above. Having seized the gist of the exercise, perhaps you could now think about some other lifeskills that you need to work on, and add them to the list. You might even consider keeping a notebook of "new things to work on." Not only will this expand your self-awareness, but you'll never be short of motivation for self-development!

And there's something else, too: One of the best proven methods of developing your own skills is to help someone else develop theirs.

Another way, of course, is to seek out a personalised training programme.

We all need to develop rationally each one of our skills as part of a structured on-going process, working at comfortable speeds on several levels, according to circumstances, resources and moods.

The skills you will need to develop in the course of your life are not, of course, definitively represented in the list above. Having seized the gist of the exercise, perhaps you could now think about some other lifeskills that you need to work on, and add them to the list. You might even consider keeping a notebook of "new things to work on." Not only will this expand your self-awareness, but you'll never be short of motivation for self-development!

And there's something else, too. One of the best methods of developing your own skills is to help someone else de-

velop theirs. Another way, of course, is to seek out a personalised training programme.

But let's return to the allegorical Victor Ree. What went wrong for him? How was his approach inadequate? — Well, it's fairly obvious now: his initial communication skills let him down. And this is no small point, for it is no uncommon thing. Just as fax machines require a certain time to give each other an initial "hand-shake", so human beings need to go through a greeting ritual. We are often so intent on our purpose that we are blind to the possibility of our target audience being clueless about our intentions. This happened with the elusive Mr Smith. He simply didn't know what life-management programmes were about. Yet Victor Ree might have instantly struck paydirt if his opening gambit had been:

"Good morning. I'm Victor Ree from ACME Training Ltd. Could I see Brian for a few minutes? I'd like to discuss lifeskills training and some recent research on new ways of saving management time and company money."

"Just a moment, Mr Ree - I'll find out if Brian will see you."

The receptionist leaves. Three minutes later she brings Brian's secretary back. "Hello Victor. Brian would like to see you, but he's in an important meeting just now. Have you got your diary so that I can arrange an appointment for you?" Bingo! The crock of gold!

What is the key concept here? What is the personal skill that the assessment list and the anecdotal examples are designed to highlight? Common-sense constructive thinking!

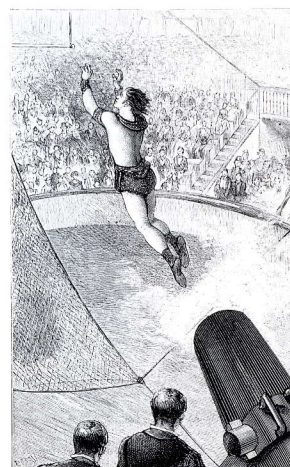
*Creative Mentors' Life Management course consists of twelve modules and can be run in different ways:-*

*One-to-one*

*Fast-track in groups (one module per week for three months)*

*In-depth for maximised benefit in groups (one module per month for twelve months)*

*This can be an ideal programme for training mentors and managers. People who apply themselves to this course will notice a marked improvement in their performance at work and a more fulfilling lifestyle in general.*



*Dr. John Clements is Managing Director of Creative Mentors Ltd and an international writer, speaker and trainer in the facilitation of personal and corporate change and empowerment. Tel: 01603 436658 Fax: 01603 700734 E-mail: creative.mentors@zetnet.co.uk Web site: www.users.zetnet.co.uk/creative-mentors*