

Life management

by JOHN CLEMENTS

"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 has all the insurance cover he needs. Thank you for calling."

What an opportunity missed! The elusive Mr. Smith 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 invaluable art called life management. Regrettably, most people are 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 talked about lifeskills. This term has been popularised over the last decade by authors like Egan, Cowan, Hopson and Scally; and especially 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 specifically for use in schools, on YTS courses and for other youth-orientated programmes. Creative Mentors Ltd. is one of the first companies to recognise that nearly everybody could benefit from such discovery-based self-empowerment; and to this end the Company has produced a series of twelve 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.



... the best

And yet some will still crib: *"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 massive part in the effective management of one's own life, with all its shifting priorities of money and career and relationships and 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 sometimes even their dreams?

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



way of being the best.

Why is this happening?

A major factor is the recent change in lifestyles. As a human race 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 live in nuclear families, and to move away from our birthplace to seek work, education and new relationships. Accompanying this change has been a growing disrespect for the elderly, who, in previous centuries, were considered a great source of wisdom. The only "wisdom" that gets handed down today is the kind gained at university or on Information Technology courses. Academic theory and Artificial Intelligence are the oracles of the nineteen-nineties!

The negative results of these changes are legion: increased marital breakdown; widespread drug-dependency (with related antisocial behaviour); record crime statistics; and an all-time low in

the standards of our educational system. 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 individual alike is to establish effective lifeskill-development programmes. Only by such structured, customised, holistic discovery-learning systems can Britain rebuild its foundations of EXCELLENCE and resume its former role as a leading actor on the world stage!

So what 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.

Certain superficial attempts have been made to haul us out of the abyss: the recently-introduced National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) and the Management Charter Initiative (MCI) are the current government's contribution to the lifting operation. These assessment systems are intended to establish, define and examine levels of competence in a wide variety of disciplines. They have given rise to new kinds of coaching and guidance in training circles, centred around the catch-all buzz word: skills.

But something is lacking there. The concept of skills cannot be viewed merely as an "either/or" matter in which you reveal either your mastery of or your incompetence in a particular field. Rather, it is better to envision yourself as the repository of a mixture of abilities and potentials, strengths and weaknesses. You may, for example, be good at understanding people when they talk, yet poor at showing that you have grasped the content of their communication.

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

1. They are 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 at work or at play.
2. They facilitate personally responsible choices - the means by which you can wholeheartedly embrace rather than studiously avoid personal responsibility for your life. They are vital self-help tools that empower you to hone average ability into the fine cutting edge of EXCELLENCE.
3. They are conducive to mental health. The majority of lifeskills can be observed in action, since they tend to be revealed by cognitive behaviour. 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, 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:-

- a) to describe lifeskills with practical examples;
- b) to define their score;
- c) to underline the benefits of cultivating them; and
- d) 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:

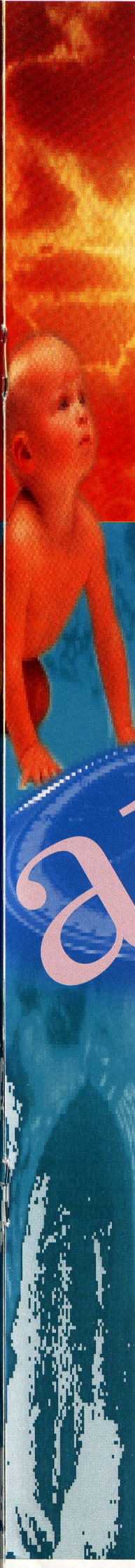
Using the A/B/C/D rating scale, place one letter beside each skill described. When you have completed the whole list, and read the interpretive material at the end, you will have taken a giant step forward in your assessment of your own skill level - and you may even begin to perceive the blind spots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

YOUR
RATING

LIFESKILLS1: 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	.....

YOUR
RATING

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.	.....

YOUR
RATING**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, 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 (Some people would add spiritual health to this list)	.....



The best way of being the best . . . continued

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.

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 the next paragraph.

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 just has to ask: 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, please - DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT CRIPPLING 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 as a parrot 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. Creative Mentors Ltd has a customised course - validated by the Associated Examining Board - which may well meet your needs.

But let's return to Victor Ree (an allegorical name, if you hadn't realised -say it fast!). 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 the same sort of ritual. We are often so intent on our purpose that we are blinkered to the possibility that the target of our communication may not have a clue what we're on about. This happened with Mr. Smith. He simply didn't know what life-management programmes were. Now Victor Ree might have instantly struck gold if his initial words 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 some recent research on new ways of saving management time and 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! Paydirt! The crock of gold!

So what does all this boil down to? What is the key concept underlying this article? What is the personal skill that the assessment list and the anecdotal examples are designed to highlight?

Common sense cogitation! Plain old constructive thinking! ⇐

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which offer a wide range of corporate and
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