# The importance of trust in management education

**Katalin Illes**

*'In Africa they say that there are two hungers, the lesser hunger and the greater hunger. The lesser hunger is for things that sustain life, the goods and services, and the money to pay for them which we all need. The greater hunger is for an answer to the question "why?" for some understanding of what life is for.'* (Handy, C., 1997. p.13)

Poverty has always been, and still is, a major issue for the world. However, there are two aspects of poverty. The first is poverty in a material sense and the second is the poverty of purpose and meaning. These two kinds of poverties are present all over the world regardless of a country's GDP. Money not only satisfies our material needs; it is more often than not the measure of our success. Whilst much time and effort goes into the material manipulation of possessions, the fundamental questions of human life get quietly ignored. Most of us know that there are more important things than money, as Aristotle pointed out long ago: 'Wealth

**There are few practical tools for how we can develop the trust needed to be able to work with ourselves and our colleagues, nor on how we can develop the organisational conditions that enable us to trust ourselves and others, and allow us to make meaning of our working lives. Katalin Illes offers some pointers.**

obviously is not the good we seek, for the sole purpose it serves is to provide the means of getting something else.' However, finding that 'something else' is a personal quest for the individual and according to Handy, requires 'Proper Selfishness'. To be properly selfish is to accept a responsibility for making the most of oneself by, ultimately, finding a purpose beyond and bigger than oneself. Management education in its current form provides plenty of opportunities for satisfying the hunger for money and material success; however, it falls seriously short of providing opportunities for soul searching and finding purpose in life.

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There is an acknowledgement of the poverty and abstraction of much management education, as other articles in this issue have shown with a call for a fundamental review of management education (pp. 9–15, 26–30). These have argued that our traditional educational approaches are deeply rooted in a mechanistic view of management evoking the illusion of control and predictability, whereas daily experience in the workplace shows that events are not necessarily predictable or controllable. Most of the textbooks treat the subject of management and management development in a highly detached way, focusing on a variety of sophisticated, often quantitative techniques to yield 'optimum' solutions and often prescriptive training programmes to further the attainment of technical competencies by position holders. This suggests that the manager as a person is not of primary importance to managerial effectiveness. Practice, however, suggests the opposite. Success in managerial or leadership roles depends to a great extent on the level of maturity, growth, self-awareness and personal mastery of the individual. Key to this is having a sense of meaning about work – and arguably, it should be one of business schools' aims to help motivate our students to develop meaning that goes beyond that of satisfying individual material goals, or even the organisation's imperative for profit.

### Real life learning: a matter of trust

To do this requires a rather different approach to learning than that used in most management schools. Learning can only take place when the student has actually had an experience of what is required to develop these individual competencies. Competence cannot be developed in abstract. It cannot be taught in a 'handing over of information in a classroom' sense, because it is not abstract information. It is a set of dynamic skills, alert sensitivity and well honed responses to circumstances that have to be developed in guided practice, just as a football team acquires its skills by practising them under the eye of a coach. It has to be demonstrated by a competent practitioner. In other words it requires proper professional mentoring. Schön (1983) captures the process very effectively in his description of the master class approach to passing on the skill of design in architecture: 'It is as though the studio master had said to him, "I can tell you there is something you need to know, and with my help you may be able to learn it. But I cannot

tell you what it is in a way you can now understand. I can only arrange for you to have the right sorts of experience for yourself. You must be willing, therefore, to have these experiences. Then you will be able to make an informed choice about whether you wish to continue. If you are unwilling to step into this new experience without knowing ahead of time what it will be like, I cannot help you. You must trust me.'"(p.93)

Trust between the mentor and the student is the key to the success of the learning process. Trust is not however simply a quality: trusting is an emergent process, emerging in response to constantly demonstrated active good intent. It is strong or it is weak in human relationships. It is not quantifiable because its quantities and qualities are in continuous motion. It is a basic human need like love without which life is bleak, meaningless and totally impossible. The ability to translate good will into actions that give embodiment to the intention is an ability – a virtue – that one can grow, cultivate and share and can use as a guiding principle in life. When this becomes embedded as a way of behaving and is reciprocated, trust emerges and can be recognised to be present. But in this context, the word is a descriptor of the result of a process being lived, of the processes of good will. It is not something that in some way exists in abstract on its own.

*'Whilst it is important to appreciate the contribution of technical types of knowledge, without the intangible aspects of reflection, mentoring, and practice-based initiatives, management education will not fulfil its true potential.'*

If we can transmit this understanding and experience of trust to our students then they can start to develop these same conditions in their subsequent workplaces. We can help develop in our students a relationship between what they do, and the consequences of it – and thereby create an ethical relationship with their work. This is a difficult task for the management educator, but it is crucial if we want to help our students develop a responsible relationship to their work, and make a contribution to the world in which they live. This is a crucial point where theory needs to meet practice.

### Connecting words and action

This gap between words and meaning was demonstrated quite clearly to me last year, and gave me some ideas as to how we might improve some of our educational content. I was invited to address the UN's Annual Youth Assembly in August 2006. I felt deeply

honoured that I was asked to share my thoughts on leadership with the 400 young delegates who represented almost every corner of the world and many of whom will take an active role in shaping the future of our planet. These young people were invited to the United Nations because of their individual and team contributions to the achievements of the Millennium Goals. These goals represent a consensus on what needs to be done to achieve sustainable and equitable economic development. Ironically, the most significant barrier to meeting these goals is the lack of political will to implement changes that are necessary to meet them. Even where the will is there at a political level, the gap between good intent and actual action is too great to allow significant achievements. On returning home to the UK, I asked my international students how many knew what the Millennium Goals were, or had even heard of them. The answer was none. Just another example of the lack of 'joined up thinking' that infects our world.

## MILLENNIUM GOALS

**Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**
*Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than one dollar a day*
*Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger*

**Achieve universal primary education**
*Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling*

**Promote gender equality and empower women**
*Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015*

**Reduce child mortality**
*Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five*

**Improve maternal health**
*Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio*

**Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**
*Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS*
*Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases*

**Ensure environmental sustainability**
*Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse the loss of environmental resources*
*Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water*
*Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.*

**Develop a global partnership for development**
*Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory*
*Address the least developed countries' special needs*
*Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states*
*Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems*
*Develop decent and productive work for youth*
*Provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries*

## Closing the gap between intent and action

One of the ways in which we could help to close this gap and create real meaning for our students would be on a simple level by raising awareness of the facts behind the eight Millennium Goals. Discussing these urgent global issues through lectures, seminars and workshops and engaging course participants at a personal level could plant the seeds of individual and collective responsibility. Setting assignments where business students would have to work towards creative, practical solutions and find ways of personally contributing to these goals in the local community could be yet another major step. The Millennium Goals are very practical and by setting up local initiatives not only could business students benefit, but whole communities would find a positive focus. Such projects would give students the opportunity to take the initiative, work in teams, discuss, negotiate, communicate, budget, design, develop and practise all the competencies that are needed in the workplace. In so doing, they would also experience and develop a trustful approach to life, and carry this quality with them to their workplace. By helping others we also feed our own spiritual hunger and find meaning in the deepest sense.

*'Educators are in a powerful position and can take an active part both directly and indirectly in the fight against poverty in the world.'*

Whilst it is important to appreciate the contribution of technical, theoretical, tangible types of knowledge to management education it is also important to start fully appreciating that without the intangible aspects of reflection, mentoring, practice based initiatives and opportunities for character building, management education will not fulfil its true potentials and will fall short in giving the support that current and future managers and leaders are looking for which benefits both individuals and the planet we live on. Educators are in a powerful position and can take an active part both directly and indirectly in the fight against poverty in the world. Business and social communities have an untapped reservoir of mentoring capacity. By setting up projects where academics and practitioners can join forces and work with students on pressing, real life issues in the community we can prepare students for life, and in Charles Handy's words 'feed our hungry spirits'.

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