

Dear Colleague,

I thought you might find this management development material useful. This sample focuses on the theme of recruitment and selection.

Please feel free to forward it to colleagues, print copies to hand out, and post it on your organisations intranet. (All the publishers ask is that you use the PDF in its entirety, so that all copies retain the details of the source and copyright information.)

The management 'stories' attached are all taken from my personal experience. They can be used as part of your management /leadership development programme to stimulate discussion and encourage insight. I have used it successfully in management learning sets and in one-to-one mentoring and coaching.

If you think this approach will offer something extra to your management development programme these stories and a further thirty-three can be found in:

### **UnLearning Management Short Stories on Modern Management**

Available from Russell House Publishing, this training manual, which comes with limited photocopying permission for use within small organisations (as defined in the book), is full of material to help in the development and mentoring of managers within your organisation, and costs just £19.95.

The manual stands alone, but in addition it is also available as a PDF, which comes with permission for unrestricted use within your organisation (again as defined in the book), including posting on your organisation's intranet, for £175 + VAT. To obtain the PDF you must buy the book first and use the order form at the back.

If you would like to find out more about the book, please visit [www.russellhouse.co.uk](http://www.russellhouse.co.uk).

Yours,

Blair McPherson.  
Director of Community Services, Lancashire County Council

**Unlearning Management** (both book and PDF) will be available from late February 2009.

# **UnLearning Management**

**Short Stories on  
Modern Management**

**Blair McPherson**



**Russell House Publishing**

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We are always keen to receive feedback on publications and new ideas for future projects.

## **UnLearning Management - Recruitment and Selection**

*UnLearning Management* is about a different take on modern management - slightly irreverent but based on experience. The theme of this selection of short stories is recruitment and selection. The stories give a Director's insider view on recruiting managers. The stories cover the process from how to complete an application form for a senior management post to understanding the assessment centre approach and performing well at interview.

# Interviews are like penalty shootouts

Interviews are like penalty shootouts, lots of pressure and just one opportunity to get it right. Some remain calm and composed, others let the occasion and significance undermine their performance. Could the techniques of sports psychology help individuals remain confident, focussed and in control in interview situations?

As a senior manager and a mentor, I am involved in management development and I often help people prepare for job interviews. I know from experience that some very able candidates do not do themselves justice in interview situations, they let their nervousness undermine their performance or they try too hard and come across as unfocused or even desperate. For example, they talk too fast, or say too much and instead of answering the question they tell the interview panel everything that comes into their head.

Just as in sport, when it comes to interviews, mental preparation is key to success. It's not just about anticipating the questions and working out the answers, it's about remaining calm, confident and focussed. In sport, mental preparation involves positive self-affirmation and visualisation. Affirmation is what you say to yourself to stay positive and confident. Perhaps you are sitting with the other candidates waiting to be called for interview, you realise one is an internal candidate and another is already doing the job in another authority. This could undermine your confidence and make you more nervous. You could start to think that the competition is stronger, more experienced and has an 'insider's knowledge' of the organisation's culture. Or you could remind yourself of your strengths, skills and your successes.

You can practice your presentation to ensure you are word perfect and within the allotted time, then you could visualise your performance. Think about the perfect presentation, see yourself in front of the interview panel, where are you standing, what does it feel like to be confident, calm and in control of your emotions. Your voice sounds strong and confident, your speech is clear, the pace of your delivery is just right, you are keeping eye contact with the panel and smiling. Your enthusiasm is infectious. They smile back and nod encouragingly. They like you. You get the job.

**After reading this article ask yourself these five questions:**

- What issues does it raise?
- What does it say about management?

- How relevant do you think this is?
- What can you take from this?
- How can you apply it in your situation?

**It should also help you answer two further key questions:**

- What type of manager do I want to be?
- What type of manager does the organisation want?

# Getting an interview for that senior management post

You're ambitious and capable with an impressive track record. You have considerable management experience in your area of service. You're good at what you do. But can you show how the skills and experience you so clearly have in your current job can be transferred to the post you have applied for.

As a Director I have recently been involved in recruiting for a senior management post within my team. A number of potentially strong candidates fell at the first hurdle because they did not know how to write an application form for a senior management post. Basically they failed to do themselves justice when it came to the *supporting information* section of the form. Too many candidates fall into the trap of submitting a really good application for their **existing** post. They submit up to six sides of A4 describing how extensive their responsibilities are and how effective they have been in carrying these out.

It is not sufficient to simply provide evidence of how successful you have been in your current role. It is essential that you demonstrate how this success and the skills and experience you acquired are transferable to the new more strategic role you have applied for. Remember it is your management and leadership skills that are transferable, and therefore significant, not your professional and service background.

But demonstrating transferable skills is not sufficient when applying for a senior management post; you also need to be able to demonstrate your understanding of how the post you have applied for will contribute to corporate objectives. To do this you need to show familiarity with the vehicles for bringing about change at a strategic level – that is Local Area Agreements (LAA), Multi Area Agreements (MAA) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP). You will need to evidence that you can see the bigger picture that is how the service can contribute to achieving corporate objectives like social and economic development, healthy equality, community safety, community cohesion and community engagement. You need to explain how you would seek to influence the agenda at a local, subregional and regional level. To do this you will need to evidence your experience and skills in working with partners at a strategic level since these objectives cannot be achieved by one service or organisation working in isolation. You will also need to demonstrate that you are a leader – not just a manager. Show that you can inspire staff, you can paint a vision of the future, explain what success will look like and the contribution individuals will need to make to get there. This will involve

talking about your values. What's most important to you? Hitting targets? Staying within budget? Improving customer satisfaction? If you are driven by the desire to make a difference to people's lives how has that shown itself in the past? What's more important, getting the job done or retaining your integrity?

Make your application a good read that hits all the points on the person specification without resorting to a list of bullet points which:

- look ugly
- are inappropriate
- is lazy
- disrupt the flow

Make your case without resorting to bland unsubstantiated statements such as 'I am an excellent communicator', 'I am passionate about my work' and 'I am an innovator and very effective in bringing about changes'.

Convey all this in two sides of A4.

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# Head-hunters, beauty parades and trial by sherry

This article is taken from *An Elephant in the Room: An equality and diversity training manual* published by Russell House in 2008.

Have you ever wondered how the top jobs in local councils are filled? What head-hunters do or what trial by sherry means?

Head-hunters, beauty parades and trial by sherry are the characteristics of modern senior management recruitment in local government. The standard process for recruiting staff in local government is fairly straightforward. The post is advertised in the professional press, candidates are selected for interview on the basis of their application form and the successful candidate is identified on the basis of their performance in the interview. The process is a lot more complex and drawn out when it comes to recruiting senior managers.

In most cases the recruitment process is contracted out to an executive recruitment agency. Their fee is based on their ability to deliver a strong shortlist from which the council can choose. The agency will ring people up and say 'Have you seen this post? Would you be interested in getting the details, if not do you know someone who might be?' This is called head-hunting. The first time you are head-hunted it is difficult not to feel flattered. However, you quickly come to realise that a lot of people are getting these calls and it does not indicate your name is being mentioned in high places for great things.

The first surprise is that head-hunters most often ask you to submit a CV rather than a local authority application form. From these CVs they draw up a long list of people to be invited to an 'informal interview'. This interview will be held in the up-market city centre offices of the recruitment agency – a world away from the average local authority office accommodation.

The informal interview is in fact a structured interview where you are asked the type of questions you would expect to be asked in a management interview. 'Tell us a bit more about your current post and responsibilities. How would you describe your management style, what are your strengths and areas for development, what do you think are the key drivers for change in local government?'

Don't be surprised if the interviewers are two white males, the head-hunter with a HR background, the other a 'specialist adviser'; someone who knows something about the

area of work you have applied for. The specialist adviser is most often a current or recently retired senior local government officer, a director or chief exec. They will recommend to the leader of the council/cabinet members who should be shortlisted and invited for what is most often a two-day assessment process.

Head-hunters are therefore influential people. They decide who to 'longlist' and who to put forward for the shortlist. Their activities fall outside the local authority's recruitment and selection process. Three big recruitment agencies have the largest share of the business so you are likely to keep coming across the same individuals if you are interested in a senior management post.

It has become the norm to have a two-day final assessment phase. This can involve psychometric tests, in-tray exercises, role-play, an evening event and a bumpy trip around the patch in a draughty minibus. I quite enjoy the battery of tests and exercises, however, some people describe this as like sitting exams. Since everyone shortlisted has a degree or equivalent and most have a management qualification I am not sure how these tests help select an applicant. Most candidates think that this part of the process is not going to determine who gets the job. However, candidates do think evening social events with elected members and partner agencies have the potential to rule you out of the running. These social events can be a formal sit-down meal at which the candidates change seats after each course so as to have the opportunity to talk to everyone or a buffet in which the challenge is to balance a plate of food and a drink whilst appearing intelligent. Such events are sometimes referred to as 'trial by sherry'. The secret is to not eat or drink and to smile a lot.

Sometimes there is an opportunity to have a one-to-one with the chief exec or members of the senior management team. This is usually included to give you an opportunity to find out more about what it's like to work here. Never forget that anything you say could be fed back to your disadvantage. Some people seem to delight in putting you off by telling you at this late stage how bad the budget position is or how poor the relationship is between officers and members. However, this could just be that they favour the internal candidate.

At some stage there will be a formal interview with the leader, cabinet members and opposition spokesperson and there will be the requirement to do a short presentation. This is where the decision is made by an interview panel of anything from 6–12 people. A 10-minute presentation is followed by an interview that lasts no more than an hour. The presentation is a challenge; you are required to demonstrate clarity, brevity and passion. Content doesn't seem to be as important as you might expect.

Successful candidates seem to be those who come over as confident and agreeable. Since all the candidates can demonstrate they have the experience, skills and knowledge to do the job, the senior management recruitment process is often described as a beauty

parade. The final decision being based on whether you look and sound like the type of person the panel could work with.

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# The candidate blew me away but I didn't give them the job

'I really enjoyed that interview' the rest of the interview panel nodded in agreement. 'But they're not appointable' the interview panel again nodded in agreement. The candidate was enthusiastic, engaging, well prepared and a little bit cheeky. The presentation was one of the most entertaining, original and well informed I have heard in many years of interviewing. The candidate established an instant rapport with the interview panel and I knew this person would be a big success with councillors/board members.

If the interview had ended there the job would have been theirs, no question. But the interview didn't end there. The panel had a few questions. Nothing that I thought should prove a problem to this candidate based on their presentation. But I was wrong.

This was a senior management post; the advert had stressed the strategic nature of the post; the job was all about changing people's lives for the better through strategic partnerships. This exciting and inspiring candidate was unable to make the step up from partnership working to strategic partnership working. Their focus was on the individual. I was willing them to make the connection with the bigger picture but each answer stopped short. Increasingly it became obvious just how 'small town' their experience was.

The questions presented the challenges posed by working in a complex organisation with a large staff group and a large budget, challenges the individual just didn't recognise. Enthusiasm and charm can't overcome lack of managerial skills and experience. Enthusiasm can carry you a long way it certainly helps in engaging with people but it needs to be tempered with recognition of the constraints as well as the opportunities of working in a political environment.

Sometimes very able people try and miss out a couple of rungs on the career ladder. Sometimes their sheer enthusiasm and engaging personality can help them gain a post they are not yet equipped to deal with. Once in post the lack of experience resulting from being promoted too quickly too soon is exposed, their credibility is questioned and their confidence undermined.

Sometimes the best thing that can happen to a candidate is not to be offered the post.

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# 'You asked for it' – Giving feedback to unsuccessful candidates

It's disappointing and frustrating when the phone rings and you are informed that you have been 'unsuccessful this time'. Disappointing because you really wanted that job, frustrating because you are not really sure where you went wrong.

I always encourage people to ask for feedback and I always recommend interview panels provide it. However the best time to receive feedback is not when you have just been told you have not got the job but a few days later when you are less raw and better able to take in what you are being told.

Providing feedback at a later date also gives time for the interviewer to prepare, to review their notes they took at the time and to identify what would be most helpful to the candidate in improving their future performance. Generalised feedback like 'your interview was good but the successful candidate had more experience' is not helpful.

I usually start a feedback conversation by trying to establish how much insight the candidate has into their own performance. How do you think it went? Often the candidate admits they waffled on a couple of questions or that they were surprised by a topic or a line of questioning. Sometimes they say that nerves got the better of them on the day and they recognised they spoke too fast and said too much. These people will learn from any feedback you give them and it's often helpful to start by telling them which questions they answered well before moving on to discussing the questions they did not answer well. It's extremely helpful to explain to the candidate what would have been a good answer and what the interview panel was hoping to get from the candidate by asking that question.

Some people will realise that better preparation would have helped them anticipate the questions and therefore prepare an answer. The job advert and the person specification provide strong clues as to the areas that are likely to be probed in an interview. In these feedback conversations it often becomes clear that people thought a more complicated answer was required than is usually the case. For example I recently asked candidates in an interview for a senior management post what they understood by the expression 'businesslike', as in 'we want to ensure managers in this service become more businesslike'. The panel just wanted candidates to identify activities like marketing,

customer care, income generation, budget management and bench marking. A short simple question requiring a short simple answer.

Some candidates don't have much insight into how they performed. Initially you hope to let them down gently by saying that they were being a little over-ambitious applying for this post and their lack of experience came across in their answers to the questions. You then illustrate this by quoting back to them their answer to one of the questions followed by the type of response you were hoping for. Unfortunately even then some individuals don't seem to recognise the poverty of their performance. Recently once such individual made me run through all the questions that we had asked, with me gradually becoming more blunt in my feedback yet still they did not acknowledge the weakness of their performance. Instead they concluded the conversation by inferring the panel had asked the wrong questions!

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