

What's so good about the Kings Fund management course?

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In an era where management training is vital for any would-be consultant, the Kings Fund training course for senior registrars is the best known and most expensive. Examining it critically, we feel that despite its flaws it is still worth the extra money both for its wealth of practical exercises and for the unique, although not very reassuring, glimpse it affords us of management ideology at source. Local courses, although unable to reproduce the atmosphere, could benefit from its practical emphasis.

It is accepted wisdom among SRs applying for consultant posts that a management course on one's CV is *de rigueur* and the word on the street is that the best one of all is the Kings Fund course. It certainly has a long waiting list; with a course running every three months it is still necessary to book three months in advance. But with a course fee of £700 and rising the potential consumer may need six months to drum up the cash. The 20 or so SRs from diverse medical specialties (curiously none from community medicine) who turned up at the Kings Fund College on the first morning had various aims in mind, some concrete such as learning to hold their own with managers, some more nebulous such as understanding the current health service reforms. As SRs who had been on other management courses and emerged unsatisfied, the authors, two of only three psychiatrists on the course, came to see if the Kings Fund could reach parts that other courses had not reached.

The needs of psychiatrists on management courses have been discussed before, most comprehensively by Jadresic (1992) who pointed out the drawbacks of presenting management theory without any critical discussion. Psychiatrists, possibly more than other specialists, are used to dealing critically with theories and given that much of management theory derives from social psychology her point is valid. Part of the problem, as we have noticed on previous courses, comes from the heterogeneous nature of the syllabus. There is the purely factual (principles of accounting) combined with the almost-factual (history of the NHS) and the highly speculative (various theories of management and team functioning). If

all are presented together in an uncritical way the credibility of the latter is weakened. But there are other, more implicit, requirements from management courses; namely to get a feel for the way managers operate in real life and to appreciate what, if anything, lies behind all these theories and structures.

The Kings Fund College is a substantial red-brick pile that overlooks Kensington Palace and evokes comparisons with a university college with panelled walls, long dining tables and a subsidised bar. This gave the course a sense of identity absent from the majority of extramural courses, taking place as they do in borrowed and anonymous classrooms. The accommodation, in a nearby hotel, was superior to the usual spartan college-style facilities. The course organisers evidently believe that if the delegates are well looked after, they will achieve superior results. This axiom, despite the influential role the Kings Fund has had in the health service over recent years, does not seem to have impinged on the consciousness of those who manage at the NHS coalface.

The course lasted a week. Its composition changes every time, being shaped by the comments of the previous intake, but can be broadly divided into three spheres, didactic teaching, role play or exercise, and self-exposition. The self-exposition, or in management *patois* personal growth techniques, was tame by group analytic standards but one surgical colleague evidently found it too hot for he declined to participate in an exercise involving a pictorial representation of hopes and achievements. The didactic teaching was hampered by the problems with the syllabus already mentioned but was at least comprehensive, leaving most of us satisfied about such management mysteries as business plans, capital charges and robust intermediate structures (hospital trusts).

Most useful of all, interwoven with the didactic sessions were the role-plays and exercises which enabled us to think ourselves into the position of managers. The exercises varied from simple scripted tasks to be worked out in groups to a full-scale 'commando raid' (yes, there was a

