

# MANAGEMENT OF LATE NIGHT HOTEL BREAK-IN

It gives me great pleasure to congratulate my director, Pauline Perry, on being elevated to the House of Lords. Two weeks ago I attended the polytechnic's annual heads of department residential meeting held in Bournemouth, an innovation she introduced. This was the fifth annual meeting, the first having been held memorably in Oxford on the day of the general election.

Since then there has been a tremendous turnover in heads of department. There have also been a number of big changes in organisation, so that some people who continue to attend now hold very different positions.

Over the four years the events have also changed tremendously in format and scope. Hitherto we had engaged in a mix of management training and policy debate and formulation. This year the Grubb Institute provided management consultancy in the form of organisational development. Instead of debating immediate policy issues such as the implications of the White Paper on higher education, we were provided with an opportunity to think about how we work together.

Instead of producing substantive policy proposals to take back to the institution for formal ratification, I for one came away feeling that we had at least begun to think about how to integrate our informal methods of working with the more formal processes.

What has always been a tremendous benefit of these events has been the fact that we as heads of department are given an

opportunity to get together and get to know each others' working methods and "problems", particularly on an informal basis if not on a formal one.

Of course, most of the interesting discussions, even about policy, took place over a drink in the hotel bar late into the night. This year, however, I got myself into a most embarrassing and potentially compromising position. The hotel had mistaken the booking and, at the last minute, had had to place 15 of the 50 participants in a hotel across the road. Since some were members of my faculty and a faculty with whom I do business, I accepted an invitation to drink in their hotel bar. Of course, it just so happened that all of them were men – or perhaps it is not so coincidental since the numbers of women at these events is always small.

When I decided to leave the hotel to go back to mine, I found to my horror that the hotel was locked for the night and that neither I nor any of my colleagues were able to rouse a porter to unlock the door. After much hunting around we eventually found two lounge windows ajar and I beat a hasty retreat by climbing inelegantly through the window. Similarly, although not quite midnight, I had difficulty



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rousing a porter to let me into the main hotel. Lest others tell the story of my rather undignified exit I feel I should recount the tale.

The ways in which the consultants from the Grubb Institute chose to work with us were to focus on helping us to analyse what they called critical incidents and to begin to understand how to study our present purposes and realities, with a view to formulating in a clear fashion our corporate aims. So the overarching emphasis was on looking at processes and methods rather than on solutions, presumably leaving

those open until we had developed a clear perspective on our organisational methods.

In one of my working groups we initially found it very difficult not to think of solutions to problems, rather than trying to understand what is going on. And of course from time to time solutions may come into view from the wider environment than just the poly. For example, I'd been thinking about the Levy report on "pin-down" in residential child-care, given my general academic interest in social policy and child-care policies. On reflection in one of our discussions, I began to wonder whether "pin-down" wouldn't be a suitable method for dealing with recalcitrant staff or students on occasion!

We did have an opportunity to think about and discuss, at least informally, some of the newly introduced methods of selecting new members of staff or promoting members of staff. Given the high turnover and the expansion of student numbers, to be accompanied by some additions to the academic staff complement many of us have been involved in trying out our new procedures. Similarly, we are all quite aware of the procedures used or introduced by other academic institutions since many colleagues and staff have

been involved in interviews in other institutions. There are now enormous variations in selection processes, despite the attempts to introduce new methods in line with equal opportunities procedures.

What seem to be particularly successful about our procedures are the slimmed down selection committees and the formal attempts to be as open as possible about the processes of decision-making with the candidates. In particular, an emphasis is now put on telling candidates exactly when and how the decision will be communicated as well as trying to elicit from them a view of whether they would accept the post if offered. Our processes do seem to be in the van of other institutions.

Similarly this use of management consultants seems to be in the van of other institutions where the emphasis tends to have remained on techniques of management, through forms of management training rather than organisational development. Having now experienced both sets of methods, in a variety of forms, I certainly feel that, given that we are now involved in mature institutions, on the cusp of change, reflecting on our methods and context is not a luxury but a necessity.

The changes and challenges that face us as we move towards the year 2000 are so momentous that we need to reflect carefully and cautiously about how to respond and deal with them. It is important to have begun the process.