

## *In conversation with*

# Milo Lynch



***Karen Hands was privileged to talk to Milo Lynch at his home in County Cork in the Republic of Ireland during June 2004. Milo worked closely with Ralph Coverdale from the development of Coverdale Training in Esso to the establishment of Training Partnerships – later The Coverdale Organisation – and became one of the principal guardians of Coverdale training after Ralph’s tragic early death.***

*Milo, you joined Esso in the 1960s when Ralph Coverdale was refining his techniques for turning high-calibre graduates into top-performing managers. They must have been exciting times?*

Indeed. After completing his thesis at Oxford and working for the American consultancy, J Walter Thompson, Ralph had joined the Steel Company of Wales. The most pressing need at the time had been to halt the loss of graduates from the company. Ralph had explored what was on the market at the time and found nothing suitable, so his manager challenged him to develop something himself. Ralph then moved to Esso in order to test out the principles that he had uncovered. Esso recruited large numbers of graduates and held the highest reputation for developing its people. It was ideal in this respect.

*Tell me about the background to the changes that were brought about in Esso. The context would seem to be important to understanding Ralph’s achievements.*

You have to remember that we were at the height of the Cold War in those days. The Fawley Blue Book was a defining moment in labour relations in the UK, in that it introduced the concept of productivity bargaining. Up until that time there had been a culture of low wage, high overtime and indifferent productivity. Esso developed a good relationship with the unions so that it had the capability of going forward on the basis of trust, bringing in the principle of decent wages and low overtime; buying out demarcation and unnecessary mates. Local managers had real vision. There we were in the New Forest yet no one had time to enjoy the surroundings. One manager said that he wanted these guys to be able to go sailing – and that was a very long time before it happened. It was John Harvey Jones who picked up on what had happened in Esso and introduced it to ICI, but one could see it rolling through into Thatcher’s confrontation with Scargill and the miners.

*You describe these events almost in terms of a battle between Capitalism and Marxism. It seems hard to imagine now that the Berlin Wall has long since fallen.*

What has since come to light is that Marxist strategy was to target the unions, universities and the BBC. Marxism was widespread among psychologists and sociologists at that time and they really didn’t buy into Coverdale’s thinking in the UK, although we had no such problem here in Ireland. Ralph worked closely with Bernard Babington Smith, an

experimental psychologist at Oxford University. They both had severe reservations about Marxist theory and practice, which Ralph described as “materialistic determinism.”

*You paint a picture of Ralph Coverdale as a difficult man?*

Certainly he and Bernard were highly incompatible. Bernard had a great appetite for analysis, which Ralph used to deride by commenting that “the last time Bernard got into action was in the 1936 Olympics” where he had been a competitor. Ralph wasn’t the most disciplined of practitioners, but when I suggested to him that it was time he applied some of his own principles, he replied: “Milo, what you’ve got to understand is that I’ve never done the training!” When Ralph died suddenly of cancer in 1973, I do believe that he had more to offer.

*Let’s come back to some of Ralph’s thinking. Where did he fit in terms of the schools of psychology?*

When Ralph was doing his thesis at Oxford, “Modern Theories of Thought,” there were really three schools of psychology which he used to summarise as follows: Freud was about understanding the past; Jung was about the present and Adler was about the future. Ralph would say that he aligned most closely with Adlerian psychology.

It is also worth remembering that one of the prime concerns of psychologists at that time was to avoid brainwashing. In developing his programmes of management training, Ralph was hugely concerned for the need to observe the safety of the participants. The experiences of prisoners of war, particularly from the Korean War, which were emerging at that time, meant that psychologists had a heightened sensitivity to the possible effects of their work and the boundaries that must not be overstepped.

*You mentioned that Ralph observed T Groups and was very concerned about the number of casualties in terms of nervous breakdowns. What exactly were T Groups?*

T Groups came out of the need to deal with the aftermath of the Dieppe Raid. The sheer numbers affected meant that the psychiatric services were hugely overstretched with one-to-one support and they started using groups instead – to great effect. This was the basis of T Groups. However, these consisted of putting people into real and stressful situations, such as being in an aeroplane and being required to decide who should evacuate – deliberately contrived exercises. Ralph recognised that there was a need to put people at some risk if there was to be any learning during programmes, but this was clearly excessive. A balance needed to be struck. In fact Ralph even tested out his training with an Army officer who declared that it was safe.

*Coverdale training relies upon shaping group behaviour to follow what Ralph defined as A Systematic Approach. Indeed you tell the story of a delegate who challenged you that Coverdale training came down to self-brainwashing, to which you replied: “Mental hygiene!” How did Ralph square the need to embed discipline in teamwork with his aversion to brainwashing and manipulation?*

Ralph was powerful about manipulation but also pragmatic and dogmatic. Once you realise you’re being manipulated, you’re no longer being manipulated. Coverdale training raised consciousness which meant the participants would be resistant to manipulation. There is a fundamental assumption in running organisations that information is shared between people in order to carry out their job. Manipulators choose not to disclose such information. If one creates an environment where the body politic demands information, manipulators

can no longer conceal it. Of course there has to be a caveat as one can drown in information. Decisions have to be taken as to what information people need to know in order to do their work.

*I note from Ralph's unpublished manuscript, "Leading Success," that he was adamant that Coverdale training concerned changing people's behaviour, not their attitude: "...it is behaviour in which we are interested, not attitudes. What a man does is of far greater importance and significance than what he says."*

Yes it is unfortunate that Ralph never published his work. He found writing very difficult – you will see from the manuscript of "Leading Success" that much of it is trite and certainly not of a sufficient standard for publication. It has undoubtedly prevented his work from receiving wider recognition. In one sense, perhaps the offering is too rich. Take, for example, time management. It is but one aspect of Coverdale training yet others have successfully profited from this single focus. Perhaps we have got lost somewhere in the jargon. People talk about the need for customer service, for example, to which my answer is simple: no, just do your job! The jargon appears to have blurred the obvious necessity for systems and procedures to be in place. Ultimately nothing replaces working for a good manager, no matter how effective Coverdale methods might be.

*Learning from experience is a key factor in Coverdale training. How did this come about?*

Ralph and Bernard noticed at a very early stage that it was extremely helpful to give the group something to do - a task of some description – in order to engage them in the learning process. The use of neutral tasks evolved out of the need to avoid giving specialists an advantage. Ralph was adamant that Coverdale training was

undertaken in order to get things done, so the need to produce a task result was an entirely appropriate focus. The number of times groups commented in review: "How did we get into so much trouble with such a silly task!" It brings the learning home, without question.

The need for tangible results is absolutely fundamental in my view. We even went through a phase of offering payment by results – with great success. Yet looking back over the changes, the successes never seem to impress. I don't know why, there's always this sense of "So what!" In many respects, the measure of a successful intervention is that the client doesn't remember that you played any part - when they say that they did it for themselves.

*I'm familiar with the problem. When things work smoothly, they just look obvious, even though a huge amount of effort has gone into making it happen that way. The contrast between watching Mary Wanless give a riding lesson and being the pupil would be a good example. As the observer one has no sense of the difficulty in what she is asking the rider to do. The changes she makes to the rider's position just look right!*

Of course one difference with riding horses is that there is some sort of definition of what a good rider looks like. We don't have anything so clear-cut in management. Ralph was adamant that we should avoid pigeon-holing people despite our tendency to do just that. It's a fundamental principle for me that we should take each individual at face value. That said, I do believe that the coach must impose a discipline on group learning. The presumption that the group can dictate the agenda is quite unsound! I introduced the concept of the sequence of themes based on my experiences of coaching tennis: be very clear about what you want to get out of each session and give the client the basic tools to be able to go away

and enjoy himself. In tennis terms, that might comprise forehand, backhand and service. The equivalent in teamwork would be the operative skills of method, aiming and reviewing. It was me who developed the A Group [coach training workshop] originally, in direct response to a request from Esso, and I later found myself in the fortunate position of being able to refine the design considerably during a major piece of work with BNFL.

*Indeed your personal experience over the years seems to tie in very well with the changes in management style that Coverdale methods support.*

I started out in the shipping business originally. A very traditional industry; hierarchical, hide-bound and very much on the feudal model. I used to say that this organisation overcomes inertia by its own weight. Moving to Whitegate Refinery – the contrast! Whitegate was a consortium but was essentially managed by Esso. There was a real “can-do” environment, very much on the American model. Christian aims from top to bottom; very egalitarian and very focussed. They applied very exact principles of organisation. For example there was never a post of Assistant Manager. Either there was one job or there were two: make up your mind. When I subsequently worked in Shell as a consultant, years later, I found that my experience with Esso still carried significant weight. Standard Oil really had been the model.

I was responsible for recruitment at Whitegate and was told in no uncertain terms that we recruit for life. The culture in Ireland was very much to hire people as temporaries, but of course they invariably ended up as permanent because no one would get rid of someone once they'd joined. The Esso rule seemed very severe. In practice the Americans had already been through the difficult step of removing the feather-bedding that the low wage, high overtime culture

implies. Schlesinger's biography of Kennedy illustrates the huge domestic and foreign agenda that Kennedy faced; getting the economy right was absolutely critical.

*You have taken steps over the years to define the typical profile of people who can benefit from Coverdale methods. Tell me about your concept of the Energetic Problem Solver.*

It is my observation that the average young man will have been brought up in a competitive environment through the education system, with a considerable appetite for dominance. He needs to be moved out of that and into dialogue if he is to become a truly effective manager. His resistance to change would in part be due to anxiety at leaving behind a style of working that had proved extremely effective up to that point.

*There are overtones of your observations in a recent article in Harvard Business Review: “Coaching the Alpha Male” by Luderman and Erlandson [May 2004]. We seem to be forever re-inventing this wheel.*

Intellectual property was always a difficult issue for Coverdale. When Ralph left Esso to set up Training Partnerships, senior management saw it as a natural evolution but others considered Coverdale training to be an Esso invention. My personal position is that we are protected only by our excellence, just as sports coaches earn their distinction by their performance not by qualification.

*So what of the future?*

There are certainly challenges ahead. I am seriously disappointed by scandals such as that which has occurred at Enron and elsewhere in the US. Capitalism should go hand-in-hand with Democracy and anything that shakes Capitalism is a blow to Democracy. As for myself, I intend writing my autobiography.