

ELIS.org: a management experience

ELIS started in 1962 as an association: the acronym means Education, Labour, Instruction, Sport. The initial goal was to assist capable and hard-working young people to best develop and maximize their qualities, overcoming the difficulties due to family and environmental conditions, therefore enabling them to enter the social environment and workforce. After many years of social changes this objective continues to be significant. More than ten thousand young people coming from many parts of Italy and from abroad have developed work and sport skills in ELIS, with the focus on the complete development of the person without distinction of nationality, race, religion or social condition. This goal has been applied in Rome, in other Italian cities and throughout the world, cooperating to the development of many countries.

The idea of setting up such a centre came from Pope John XXIII who decided to utilize some funds his predecessor Pius XII had gathered for social assistance purposes. He entrusted the project to Opus Dei which was very small in Italy in the early 60's, but its founder, St. Josemaría Escrivá, accepted the endeavour. As usual in Opus Dei, the institution did not organize the schools or own the premises: this Catholic entity, a Personal Prelature, invited its faithful to undertake the task, together with other professionals, also non Catholics. Eventually, the Association Centro ELIS was set up by a group of people who could erect the buildings with the money provided but very soon they ran short of it and had to find new ways of financing.

Managing ELIS has always been a big challenge, first of all because of its non profit nature and the lack of a primary source of funds. We do not have an owner who pays for all the running expenses. In 2010 the breakdown of the 11 million Euros was 48.1% from private companies, 33.2% from public funding, 10.6% from tuition fees, 8.1% from donors. This situation well preserves our independence, leaving us free to start or close activities according to our criteria. Remember that our goal is to have students find a good job as soon as they finish their courses in ELIS. To ensure this fast track we gather the thirty big private companies that form Consel, the ELIS Consortium, and we ask them which will be the market's requests in three years time. We tailor our courses to these demands and "produce" the first young experts in those new fields in Italy. It happened with Multimedia, UMTS, Digital TV, Telecommunication security, Cloud computing, etc. The companies pay for the scholarships of the young students and for courses designed to train their employees and managers.

In the last years we have worked hard to set up specific Masters courses for top and middle managers, mixing the technical education with ethics and behaviour topics. The teachers are often people coming from the companies of the ELIS Consortium, in a co-operative scheme in which each one gives what he or she has. Some of them become ELIS Fellows – there are a hundred of them – who decide to devote to ELIS activities thirty hours in two years on a volunteer basis: they realize that they can share their experience for free, satisfied of seeing the improvement of their colleagues and especially young people.

As our teachers come from different places, beside the permanent faculty, we do not have a standard optimized and detailed educational model: we believe in innovation, but we have our pillars.

We were one of the first schools in Italy with a leased line connected to the Internet and we used the Web as an important source of information for our students. But from the very beginning we thought that our role on the Net had to be active. Therefore in 1997 we set up the first learning server in Italy with streaming video lessons: most of our classroom teaching was recorded and recoded to a suitable format which we assembled. There is no copyright on our lessons, and I think we started before MIT or Stanford in this field. We have thousands of recorded hours and we recently adapted them to the new standards: we now need to reorganize the categories database in order to make the best use of it. We could have spent more energy in distance learning. We actually ran some full e-learning courses in the past, but we soon realized that we were not able to interact with distant students in the same way we do with our local ones. If big and small companies appreciate our boys and girls, it is because they find in them those personal qualities (you could call them virtues, in the Aristotelian sense) which have unfortunately been lost in most of the Western world in the last years. In order to teach virtues you need virtuous people and personal relationship: it's not just something you can learn on TV or books, even though some American managers are making money out of it, dealing with these topics. Students coming out of ELIS are therefore reliable people, which is just what the companies want.

Our educational model is based on tutors, coaches, mentors and we recently introduced shadowing, by allowing some students to follow for a full day top managers of our Consortium companies (we are talking of Telecom Italia, Wind, Vodafone, HP, Cisco Systems, Eni, IBM, Rai, Sky, Trenitalia and many more). The asset is the person: the trainer and the trainee. Both of them with their freedom and responsibility: we never separate the two. Each of them is always responsible of what he or she decides and he or she takes all the consequences. We help them if some problems occur but we do not act in their place.

By the way, this statement reminds me to explain a cornerstone of my vision of management: do not fill the gaps. If someone does not fulfil his or her duty we are often tempted to overcome him or her and do the job instead. I think this would be a mistake. Unless it is an emergency (the fireman is away and nobody knows how to use the fire extinguisher), it's better to show what happens when there is a failure. This gives everybody the correct view of their importance, even in small things, like cleaning or providing beverages. I know it's not easy to let things go wrong and I realize that sometime I do not resist the temptation of filling the gap, but it's worth while showing how any action of your personnel is of paramount importance. You will build a very good team.

Obviously this does not mean that the boss should never move a finger for manual tasks, "using" instead other people to execute those duties. Surely the manager is the one in charge of distributing the tasks among the others, but it does not mean that he or she does not act personally. If at any moment there is some litter to collect from the floor or you need to regulate the sound of an amplifier, you'll better do it yourself and all the people will understand which is the performance level of your institution. It shows that you are keen on details even though you are not overwhelmed by them. But remember that your attention should be directed toward people more than things or activities. It is a lesson confirmed by the 9/11 disaster: the people who wanted to save objects or data delayed their escape and died. Those who ran fast forcing other people to rush away saved a much more valuable asset of their companies: the life of their employees.

When I was 30, I worked in the small group that started the Campus Bio-Medico University and Clinic and I had to study hospital management. I am a physicist and a computer scientist, but I had a proposal of running that institution in its first years. One interesting topic was the difference between "management by exception" and "management by wandering around". The first one seems the best because it allows your middle managers to act by themselves and come to you only when they are not able to solve a problem. But it has a drawback: you are not fully aware of the good

things they do. You give them for granted and rarely thank for them or show appreciation. The second one, also called “by walking around”, is wearisome and time consuming but it gives you a fuller vision of what happens in your company. It does not mean you have to intervene immediately every time you see something that is not perfect according to your standards. You should better take note of it and discuss it later with your colleagues or managers in charge of the activity, without addressing directly the worker who failed: never overcome the middle management.

This is another focal point of my vision of management: deciding together. In Italy some experts in non profit activities (which sum up to 5% of the GDP and employ 750,000 people and 3.3 million volunteers) complain that there are too many institutions which are run by a single person. These managers are often charismatic leaders and therefore they succeed in running their associations or foundations. But, especially when they get old, they risk remaining stuck to their ideas without understanding the changes around them, and when they die, nobody is prepared to take the leadership effectively. In ELIS we have a turn-over system that ensures changes in the boards after a specified number of years, and we have an even more important procedure: collegiality.

In any decision we always ask some of our colleagues (there are six different formal institutions acting in ELIS with different presidents and directors) their opinion and we change our mind if all the others agree on something different from our solution. Eventually, we go through the decision and act consequently with full personal responsibility. For example, if an action is in charge of the social cooperative Cedel of which I’m the president, I suffer all the consequences of it, never saying that it was another person’s decision which “forced” me: I make the collective decision “mine”. I know that this model is not applicable, as is, in a commercial company, where the owners measure the CEO just in the goodness of his or her decisions, but I think that there is room for meditating on it. By the way, in meetings, I suggest that the most important person should always talk at the end, so that lower managers or young people have the chance of expressing their opinion in an unbiased way.

This policy of collegiality is an expression of trust, which extends to anyone in the institution. The dignity of the human person requires that you trust him or her in the beginning. You will be able later to evaluate how he or she responds to this trust.

Collegiality means also management as a service. We serve the company, the institution, the society. We do not rule it.

Michele Crudele

www.crudele.it