

## Creativity and Personal Mastery – what is it?

*A personal reflection by Dr Rosalind Wilson MBBS, MBA; Life Sciences Consultant and former global team leader at F. Hoffmann-La Roche pharmaceuticals\**

To some extent CPM defies description as it means different things to different people. If we were to ask the 1,500 or so people who have experienced CPM and are now part of its alumni community, there would be dozens of responses and all of them would be valid. Nevertheless, in the following pages I have tried to explain what CPM represents to me and why, 4 years later, it remains the most valuable part of my MBA experience and the one thing that I use on a daily basis. CPM has had an incredible impact on my life – I appreciate the significance of this statement and stand behind it – and I would like nothing more than for community and business leaders in Australia to have the opportunity to explore CPM. I believe this experience would not only benefit individuals, but also the organisations, communities and society, of which we are all a part.

The easiest place to start is the logistics. CPM is a programme that runs over several weeks, comprising a series of discussions supplemented by audiovisual material, readings, small group breakout sessions, practical exercises, the keeping of an individual journal and a weekend retreat. The course was developed and is facilitated by Srikumar Rao, who has refined it over time to create an optimal learning environment. A key element is the adage that “you get out what you put in”, which means that while the basic framework enables participants to acquire a superficial understanding of the concepts discussed, deeper learning takes individual commitment and effort. This is not for the faint-hearted in terms of the level of commitment (or amount of “homework”) and, more importantly, openness to explore new ideas, and have some old and dearly-held ones of your own exposed, deconstructed and put back together again.

From its beginnings within the Honours programme at Long Island University the course has grown spectacularly, becoming one of the most popular at the Columbia Graduate School of Business before extending as far as the London Business School, the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley and into a format offered to the public and attended by executives of many well known companies including IBM, General Electric, Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson, Morgan Stanley, McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, American Express, MasterCard, L’Oreal, Google and Microsoft. A lot has been written about the course in the US and European media, a sample of which can be found at <http://www.areyoureadytosucceed.com/articles.asp>

So much for the mechanics, but what about the “core” of CPM, its essence, the thing that keeps it alive in the minds of so many of its alumni?

It’s common sense to most of us that a positive mental attitude is more likely than a negative one to lead to a successful or satisfactory outcome. CPM takes this idea far beyond anything most of us have considered – perhaps it’s never occurred to us to delve further, or we’ve been too busy “doing” to think about it. Simply put, but with massive implications, the experience of CPM is a chance to explore a different way of thinking about...everything. It’s both an opportunity and a challenge to step outside of the world you’ve occupied for the last [*insert your age*] years and at the very least, for a short while see it in a very different way; and if you choose, to radically change that world forever.

The concept that underpins CPM is that people are naturally and powerfully creative, not simply in the traditional sense of “artistic”, “good with their hands”, “good at building teams” or “able to think outside the box”, but rather that *we are the creators of our own experience*. There’s a causal link between what goes in inside our own head and what we experience in the world around us, but very few people are aware of either the existence or the strength of this link. The corollary of this is that very few people truly appreciate *how much we can influence our experience*. As a result, many people may feel as they go about their daily business that they are a small part of a large machine, at the mercy of random chance or even, sometimes, overt vindictiveness and the best they can do is try to control things as much as possible, or react as best they can when “stuff happens”. CPM shows you how to shift from this reactive view of the world – things happen and we respond – to a more proactive and creative one in which we are active participants, making choices that determine our experience. This doesn’t mean we are able to control our environment in order to achieve the things we want; however, it does mean that we can find a way to be passionate and strive for an outcome and yet, *regardless of the final result*, be fully satisfied. This is one of the (many) apparent paradoxes CPM practitioners encounter and if by this point you’ve stopped to think, or are struggling to understand, then you’ve already started down the path.

None of this is said lightly. I encountered CPM in the final term of my London Business School Executive MBA studies at London Business School, while I was studying part-time and working in a senior, general management role within a large international pharmaceutical company. I had 10 years of work experience, 8 of them in the same organization where I’d “risen through the ranks” to a position of significant responsibility, leading a team of highly intelligent people working to bring new medicines to market. It’s an intrinsically rewarding business, I was highly regarded as a competent leader and my company sponsored my MBA

in recognition of my potential. I felt successful and largely satisfied with my place in the world: in fact, I was almost the only person in my class who wasn't pursuing an MBA as a means to career change or advancement.

Nevertheless, through my experience of CPM I learned that most of what I accepted as the *status quo* was in fact highly subjective and flexible and that my capacity to be “competent”, “a leader”, “successful”, “satisfied” – even “happy” – was far greater than I had ever imagined, yet still within my reach. Through CPM I was able to:

- Explore what concepts like success (or failure), leadership (or teamwork), satisfaction (or frustration) and happiness (or not) meant to me
- Understand to what extent they were important to me, and why
- Explore the link between this meaning and my perception of myself, and of my contribution to my team and organization
- Understand how these links could be either constructive or self-defeating
- Learn a different approach to create more constructive links and reduce self-defeating ones

So what?

At the start of the course Srikumar informed us in his typical understated way that this could be a life-changing experience if we chose it to be; the habits of a lifetime could be altered and New Year resolutions would no longer be necessary. A doctor by training, I received this with a degree of “healthy” scientific scepticism. I need evidence. My learning style is classified as Active Experimentation, which means I'll try it once and if it works, I use it and if it doesn't, I lose interest. I don't read manuals. CPM stands out from the crowd of self-help books, leadership courses, personal development seminars, team-building activities and 360 degree feedback because the entire course is designed to be an *experience*. It's an extended period of immersion through which participants gain their own insights and see the effect of putting the learning into practice, rather than a prescriptive list of guidelines or do's and don'ts.

You get to try taking a different approach to the world and see the results for yourself, sometimes without even realising what's happening until much later down the track. And it works – which is why I have thought about and put into practice my CPM experience *every day* since October 2005. The type of results I'm talking about include but are not limited to:

- Significantly less stress and greater enjoyment of “work”
- A sense of quiet confidence and calm in approaching complex tasks or challenges

- A feeling of objectivity balanced with passion and drive, enabling greater clarity of decision-making
- A feeling of greater freedom and choices, hence more willingness to take “risks” and the confidence to try different approaches to situations and relationships
- A deep appreciation for the efforts and contribution of others
- Greatly improved relationships at all levels within the organization
- Receiving expressions of genuine appreciation from colleagues
- Lasting changes – noticed and acknowledged by colleagues, friends and family
- Becoming a more effective leader

Finally, the CPM experience has created a community of like-minded individuals drawn to participate in the programme and remain connected through the alumni group. There are over 1,500 alumni worldwide in industries ranging from journalism to management consulting. Being part of this community helps to keep the experience of CPM fresh after the initial work is over and it’s a privilege to have the sanctuary and support of fellow alums as we move forward on our individual paths. We’ve also learnt the power of knowing how to ask for help and how to offer it and we support each other in whatever way we can. It may sound extravagant, but the annual alumni retreat is like a reunion of old friends, even though we may have never met.

This, for me, is a powerful illustration of CPM in action: through the framework of CPM, we learn how to *create* the experience of forming *genuine connections* with others, which enables us to tap into the tremendous *potential* that exists when people work together towards a common goal.