

## Whose Problem Is It?

This should be the first question you ask when you are faced with a task, problem or issue which seems particularly complex, hard to handle or embarrassing. It is surprising how often a few moments analysis can lead you to break the problem down into manageable pieces, each to be dealt with by separate people. Indeed, you will often find that the underlying problem does not belong to you, or your Minister, in the first place, whereupon you can relax! A few examples might help:

- If you are concerned about the performance of one of your staff then the problem, in the final analysis, is theirs rather than yours. It is for you, not them, to set standards – that is why you have been asked to manage their work. It may be that your colleague can convince you that you have not given them full credit for certain aspects of their work. Or they might tell you about a temporary problem (e.g. health or domestic difficulties) that is affecting their performance. Failing that, they must either change or improve if they are to avoid the consequences of your concern. Of course the colleague might transfer the problem back to you e.g. by explaining that they are not clear about their objectives, or persuading you they do not have the right resources. But now you have something to fasten on to and the step by step identification of the owner of the problem can lead to its resolution.
- If someone applies for some sort of permission, or financial support, and provides insufficient information, or information which suggests that it should be refused, then again the problem is theirs, not yours. You must be prepared to say 'No' and not wimp out by asking further questions. Of course you should also explain the nature of the difficulty so that the company or person can decide whether to commit resource to overcoming your objection. But you must make it clear that the decision to do so is theirs, not yours. For goodness sake do not appear to encourage them to do lots of work flexing an application which is almost bound to fail.
- Much the same applies to the person who presses for a quick decision, before you have been able to carry out the necessary consultations or checks. If it is truly impossible to consider the case properly in the time available, you should simply explain that the current decision would be unfavourable. It is for them to decide whether to require you to meet their deadline, or to extend it. (And it is surprising how often they do the latter.)
- And if you are waiting for a task to be completed, or for money or information, the problem is the provider's, not yours. You should get the provider to give you a definite date by which it will appear, beyond which they know that you will hold them responsible for any consequences. The date is then their problem and they can hardly complain if you take unwelcome action after they have failed to meet a deadline which they themselves have set. And it is much better to accept one distant deadline than be forced into giving frequent

extensions.