In 1965, when Charles Handy told a friend that he was going to leave his executive job with Shell and take a one-year course at the MIT Sloan School of Management, the friend said: “I didn’t know you needed to type.” No one in Britain had heard of business schools and they had no idea what would be taught there. “Up to that time in Britain, management was thought of as something that decent people just knew how to do,” says Handy. “People had been in the army and they thought it was the same – you barked at people and they did it.

“But the old ways weren’t working. British industry was becoming uncompetitive and getting unmanageable. And there was clear evidence that we were needed.”

Investing in people
Handy went on the course as research for introducing the Sloan programme at London Business School – the only place to offer it outside the two US locations of MIT and Stanford. The programme takes mature people – mid-career executives, typically around the age of 35 – and gives them a one-year business training. It’s also well known for broadening students’ minds through trips, speaker sessions and extra-curricular courses. And originally it was paid for by the students’ companies.

“These were starred, ambitious people,” says Handy, “and their firms were prepared to invest in them. One guy on my MIT course ran the team that designed the capsule that eventually landed on the moon.”

Selling management development
So back in Britain, Handy found himself touring boardrooms trying to sell bosses the idea that they should pay one of their executives their salary for a year to train them in something few of them had ever considered to be important. And this at a time when the longest business training course was one day.

“Big firms like Shell, BP and Rio Tinto Zinc knew what we were about,” says Handy. “But I was trying to convince places like the Midland Bank, which had a policy of recruiting people at the age of 15 who would then work their way up through the organisation and never think of running things any differently.”

Handy managed to gather 18 people for his first Sloan programme in 1968. Over the years he invited interesting speakers such as the chief executive of the Royal Opera House, a bishop and the head of Christie’s auctioneers. And he organised two big trips a year to the US and to Communist Eastern Europe where students would visit firms and interview top executives to examine the differences between running a company in Detroit and Prague.

Exploding people’s minds
There was also a session on great books once a week – from Plato to Joseph Conrad. Handy says that all students were given two course books when they arrived – the one they expected was an introduction to management accounting by Walter Reid; the one they didn’t expect was Antigone by Sophocles. Handy says this Greek tragedy, revolving around the peril of divided loyalties, was a great way to introduce a discussion about whether anyone had experienced a conflict between their conscience and what they had to do in the workplace.

“I was really interested in the development of people,” explains Handy, who’s pleased the Sloan programme has clocked up more than 1,800 students and is still running at LBS today. “And that was part of the programme, to explode their minds and encourage them not to be so indoctrinated by the way their company did things already.”

Charles Handy was at London Business School from 1967 to 1977 before becoming a writer and ‘social philosopher’. He also ran the MBA programme and set up one of the first exchange programmes where students could spend a term in New York or Paris.