

Finding Freedom to Make a Difference

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The challenge

During the deepest world recession for generations, brought about by a loss of what has been called '*moral compass*', every organisation in Ireland, as elsewhere, is now faced with questions about the wider validity of their overall purpose. At the same time there has been an overall loss of confidence in conventional thinking about business which seems itself to have contributed to the failure. As Kate Kellaway of the Financial Times says "The decline of the MBA will cut off the supply of bullshit at source."¹ She warns that 2010 will see a big rise of the 'cowboys, spivs and villains' like those who took advantage of the banking crisis in Britain in the 70s. These dangers pose a challenge of integrity and competence to those who are coaching and consulting to anxious and heavily burdened executives. To avoid falling into the trap of being the purveyors of ease and comfort to the harassed, they need to develop their competence in at least two new ways:

- to work with intellectual discipline
- whilst also trusting their 'hunches'.

But first one thing needs facing up to. There is nothing to be gained by seeking to blame others – bankers, business schools, governments, the EU, discredited/corrupt moral leaders, parents or whoever. Endless talk in bars, at water coolers, in seminars and other forums only feeds the problem and fosters inertia. Sheltering in the trench of 'It's not my job' leads to paralysis – both one's own and that of others who depend on what one does.

A Constructive Approach

First of all, how can one develop the new disciplines that open up new territory? Then, where can one find the confidence and the conviction to trust one's hunch and to search beneath the surface to delve below what seems to

¹ See Lucy Kellaway (December 2009) – 'The End of the Affair' in *The World of 2010* – The Economist - p 129.

be so obvious to everyone else? Two contrasting things provide the competence that is needed:

- A combination of suitable academic disciplines about governance and leadership, not new in themselves but new in being harnessed together differently, which lead to what amounts to 'new knowledge' and a capacity to work with both 'hard' and 'soft' evidence.
- A skill in working with that under-used resource, one's own experience – that rich source of human understanding that encourages action and a readiness to step up to the plate and to be counted. These are those intangible skills (soft) which can lead one into new and unexpected places and illuminate them. The old-time word for this is 'wisdom' which can seem too grandiose to claim for oneself, yet is a natural gift present in all human beings.²

'New Knowledge'

A short article cannot go into all that New Knowledge involves, but for our purposes here it draws on principles originating in the physical sciences, which are now being applied to the human sciences. In short, in the physical sciences, ways of understanding the very small (quantum mechanics) are brought into conjunction with ways of understanding the very large (relativity). Similarly, in the human sciences the details that are emerging from neuropsychology are being related to the behaviour of crowds, organisations, nations and even humankind as a whole.³

Six headlines can give some clues about what this New Knowledge calls for.

- Learning to understand organisational behaviour and the significance of 'role' as the idea in the mind of what the system that one is for, which is expressed by the way a person responds to specific real situations they encounter.

²For a delightful video by Barry Schwartz, a moral philosopher speaking about wisdom today, visit the website TED.com at http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/barry_schwartz_on_our_loss_of_wisdom.html

³ See for example Margaret Wheatley (2006) – *Leadership and the New Science* – Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, San Francisco

- Learning to work by developing and testing working hypotheses, rather than relying principally upon untested assumptions and opinions.
- Using psychodynamic thinking to unlock the richness of what is already in one's grasp but is as yet unused because of what has not been perceived, consciously or unconsciously
- Being equipped to think systemically – that is to say to recognise how each part reflects the whole, and the whole includes every part – translating that thinking into practical action.
- Learning to understand the centrality of *purpose* - which is more than those quasi military terms 'objective', 'aim' or 'mission', but is about profound understanding of how an enterprise continues to exist and flourish by contributing at conscious and unconscious levels to making a difference in the context. Purpose, once fully understood, can then be amplified to yield internal and external benefit.
- Drawing on one's own faith, belief and spirituality (which we all have but which often may not be 'conventional') to illuminate the mysterious, the confusing and the uncertain, so as to guide one towards effective and appropriate action. This is about trusting one's hunches responsibly.

Some examples of what these headlines mean in practice illustrate what we are getting at.

- The CEO of a pharmaceutical company, with her senior staff used a method of exploring their underlying values about the contribution of their products to the well-being in society. They were surprised to discover how far their human and social values were held in common. This meant that new meanings about 'value' began to be worked at which went beyond the conventional financial ones, leading to new conceptions of evaluation and assessment of company and personal performance.

The head of a girls' school, sponsored by a religious congregation in a deprived part of a large city, was concerned about the way the school's performance was plateauing out while there were also growing signs of low level disruption beginning to surface. Her senior leadership team were basing many of their decisions on opinions and untested assumptions. To change this culture, she arranged for a team of 13 year olds to be trained as social science researchers. These girls then became a Task Force that investigated issues referred to them by the School Council such as bullying, opportunities for creative use of the lunch break, assessing work practices in classrooms and feelings about cultural identity. The research reports finally went before the senior leadership and the school's governing body, and work of these 13 year olds. The impact of this innovation was upon the management and leadership culture across the whole school, which had to change to become more scientific, formulating and testing working hypotheses on which sound decisions could then be based. The complacency and the disruption of the past were replaced by excitement at realising the huge reservoir of previously unused resources that now became available.

Skilled use of experience

We all have experience every day but for many our education and training has diminished our capacity to draw on it with confidence. The emerging conditions following 2007 demand that coaches and consultants address their inhibitions about working openly with 'moral compass' and 'wisdom' and reveal the richness that has been present in one's work but underused. As the director of an international consultancy agency has put it *"I was brought up 'religiously' but don't feel connected with church now. I do feel what you might call a 'spirituality' which is relevant to what I now have to do. I feel a consciousness of all who have lived and learned before which is still within us and influencing us now. I feel it but don't know where it's coming from."*

An example can illustrate the point.

In a consultancy assignment about the effectiveness of a hospital, after interviews at all levels of staff, it emerged that only one junior employee showed real awareness of the true purpose of the hospital when she said, *“I sweep the floors to make the ward look beautiful so that the patients get better quickly.”* Everyone else from the Director through the medical consultants to nursing staff talked essentially in terms of meeting targets set by the ‘powers that be’.

Programmes do exist which can help to develop the skill in working with one’s experience and relating it to purpose, often include the use of group relations and institutional transformation conferences of the type developed by the Tavistock Institute and the Grubb Institute in London and by other organisations across the world.

The centrality of person-in-role

At the heart of the work of the Grubb and Tavistock Institutes is the concept of the person-in-role. This brings into view the way a person’s behaviour is not simply evidence of individual desire or personality, but also gives expression at levels below that of consciousness, of what the system that one belongs to is really for, when seen holistically in its context. The Grubb Institute offers a personal development and formation programme, called *‘Freedom to Make a Difference’*, which is built around the concept of the person-in-role. It also offers those who take part in it the opportunity to gain a Masters degree in Organisational Analysis.

In cultures heavily influenced by religious assumptions, which have traditionally interpreted motives that lie below the surface as most likely to be evil, this new perspective frequently releases positive energies that had previously been suppressed, which can now be harnessed creatively. The realisation is that by understanding oneself fully in role, one finds the authority and the power to make a real difference, both within one’s own organisation

and to the world beyond its boundaries. One is released to work with a reality based sense of authenticity and integrity.

To offer an analogy: the fear of the consequence of opening Pandora's box – the release of ills and troubles also prevents the release of hope. Coaching and mentoring are surely essentially about releasing hope: effective coaches and mentors know that facing up to the challenge of the ills and troubles is the only way to access real hope.