

British Culture is a barrier to Creativity - Leadership needs to focus on Values & Issues

An interview with Bruce Nixon by Liz Wilson, 9th July 2004

*** what motivated you strongly in your earliest job?**

My first professional jobs were in the Peek Frean Biscuit company in Bermondsey, and then in Birds Eye Foods, in Portman Square, London. Meanwhile I studied at the then Regent Street Poly for my IPD Diploma. We read Mary Parker Follet who inspired me with her enlightened and very advanced ideas - despite the fact she died in 1933! - about involving people, how organisations work best, how they change and the importance of diversity. I need to revisit her. I think I was inspired even then by my belief in the idea of making workplaces rewarding and worth-while. Making them creative places where people got good leadership; were given the freedom and encouragement to be creative; and where people's abilities were brought out and their differences valued. Actually my very first job was in a Los Angeles department store and I never forgot a young supervisor who always said when he asked you to do something "Would you like to?" It was a gentle approach I had not come across before.

*** who has helped you/ inspired you on your journey? are they role models for you?**

Quite a lot of people!

First, early influences: Arthur Green, my sixth form History teacher, inspired me with an understanding of history, especially revolution and the long and ongoing struggle against oppression and tyranny. Earlier I had been inspired by the elderly Christian headmaster of my prep school - he taught me about how to bring out people's abilities by giving them encouragement, appreciation and love. Earlier, at another school, I was badly treated by a teacher who destroyed my self-confidence. He restored it. It may sound pompous but as a small boy I was very inspired by an inventor, way back in our family history. Reading his autobiography gave me a sense that anything is possible - he did the most amazing things. I am very grateful for my Oxford education but I have reservations - too establishment and elitist.

Later, it was good bosses, like a senior manager in Unilever called Mr Ellis who really developed people, and later, Jim Wickens at Sun Alliance. He showed me how to work on real issues rather than contrived approaches. Authors and consultants inspired me. Douglas MacGregor's *Human Side of Enterprise* is still in my book case. Reg Revans, Carl Rogers, Marvin Weisbord, Fritjof Capra and Margaret Wheatley profoundly influenced me. Most of my reading is North American, I am sad to say. I also used a small consultancy that had a focus on OD; a "real time" rather than didactic approach to Management Development; and a holistic approach to personal and leadership development

which are so much interlinked. They also educated me about all the forms of oppression - external, institutional and internal - especially gender, including men's conditioning, gay oppression and race. They influenced me in a big way, particularly Michael Simmons and that quiet, creative Californian, Mel Berger. I have also been much influenced by diverse ways I have pursued my own personal development which have taught me about energy and integrating mind, heart, spirit and body.

My six years with Alcan in Jamaica also had a huge effect on me. I admired people like Alexander Bustamante, Norman Manley who fought for independence, and his son Michael who continued the struggle of countries like Jamaica to survive against the odds in the global economy after centuries of exploitation. That makes me think of Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu. I am a member of a large number of NGOs, including the Henry Doubleday Research Association, HDRA, which is about organic cultivation, RoadPeace, Charter 88 and the World Development Movement. Over the years, their literature has made me increasingly aware of global issues and **unsustainability** in the broadest sense. I am back to my sixth form interest in, peaceful, revolution!

* **so what have you found to be the main difficulties leaders have?**

Not finding out what people on the ground think and what those people get upset about. Leaders have difficulty in getting people to take initiatives, be proactive and take responsibility, especially at lower levels in the organisation. They often talk about people on the ground and at middle level feeling really sceptical or cynical and yet there is no history of involving their employees. It's a cultural thing and at its core is patriarchal behaviour. And patriarchy sustains itself by breaking relationships.

Jane Fonda in her speech in Washington in June 2003 said *" Maybe at some earlier stage of evolution, Patriarchy was what was needed just for the species to survive. But today, there's nothing threatening the human species - but humans. We've conquered our predators, we've subdued nature almost to extinction, and there are no more frontiers to conquer or to escape into so as to avoid having to deal with the mess we've left behind. Frontiers have always given capitalism, Patriarchy's economic face, a way to avoid dealing with its' shortcomings. We now have to face these shortcomings and inevitably - especially when we have leaders who suffer from toxic masculinity - that leads to war, the conquering of new markets, and the destruction of the earth. So the leadership challenge is to commit to creating the tipping point and the turning point. The time is right to launch a unified national movement, a campaign, a tidal wave, built around **ISSUES & VALUES**, not candidates."*

* **and the values that some leaders demonstrate are?**

Being absolutely frank. Telling people what they can while the changes are unfolding and the outcomes are uncertain. ie treating people as responsible adults.

*** looking at your career what do you feel most proud of ?**

My children - not the answer you might expect - I feel they are far ahead of me. I am proud of what I did at Sun Alliance, the open programme for Internal Consultants I led with old colleagues, writing articles to share and reflect about my work, two recent books after producing my first with friends in 1980. Most of all I am proud of getting bolder and beginning to speak my mind especially in my second book and my most recent articles.

I have come to the conclusion that you cannot have a good workplace unless, at its core, it is doing good and avoiding harm. Looking good, supporting some charities and having nice employment policies is not enough today. This is because corporations have massive effects, both good and harmful, are extremely powerful and collectively "*rule the world*" - David Korton and Noreena Hertz.

In the 21st Century, we have to come to terms with two big issues: there will be no security or peace whilst a small minority are rich and powerful and the vast majority of people are poor. Secondly, climate change is the most dangerous manifestation of our disrespect for Mother Earth.

*** what one thing would you like to see changed over the next 5-10 yrs?**

I'd like to see us waking up to these two big issues and business leaders becoming activists to change the rules of the game at a global level. Of course Naom Chomsky said "*the right way to create change is not to tell people they are wrong, but challenge them to think things through for themselves.*"

*** what d'you know now that you wish you'd known then?**

I'd like to have realised earlier that being bold instead of timid, being who we are and speaking our mind is scary but it is the best way to live. I was scared that if I did this I would not be liked or I'd get fired and not earn enough to support my family. But I did the best I could at the time and still do.

I'd like to have known what I know now about how change happens and is best encouraged. I'd like to have been educated in what **really** matters, ie about human emotions, energy and loving. I've had to learn these things rather late and I am still struggling with them.

*** what do you think are the crucial issues facing leaders & managers over the next 5 yrs or so, and why ?**

Changing the culture of organisations - a revolution in fact.

In his publication 'Britain in 2010,' Professor Richard Scarse from Kent University delete - Business School, writes "*Issues to do with management and leadership in Britain are about British culture - and British culture is a barrier to creativity. Creativity is essential to the global economy. In global markets there must be continuous innovation and there must be a high trust culture for this to happen. But in Britain employees feel alienated*".

This question also makes me think of:

"What if we discover our present way of life is irreconcilable with our vocation to become fully human?" **Paulo Freire**

Leaders and managers need to understand sustainability, in the broadest sense, not just the climate change issue and the ecological system but *What is it that is unsustainable?* They need to become activists to bring about this understanding, changing our way of life from more and more consumption and power as being the route to happiness and fulfilment. Leaders need to focus instead on meeting human needs and creating a fairer, sustainable world in which everyone has the chance of a healthy and fulfilling life; understanding and becoming more aware of the vital importance of global issues. To make this possible we need to redefine the purpose of business and change global institutions and the global framework for business.

I am not a pessimist at all and I think these things will happen anyway. That is how a living system works. But we do need a greater sense of urgency and without getting frantic, we need to take these issues seriously. In a living system we either learn slowly or it gets really uncomfortable. Think of all the emerging consequences of global warming and of unfair trade. With more and more information and awareness, a change in consciousness comes about and as this happens, human creativity transforms things - just many people doing what really matters to them.

I think of:

"Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it."
Mahatma Gandhi

and

"Activism is my rent for living on the planet" **Alice Walker**

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