

# Finding The Moral Imperative and The Art of Asking Brilliant questions

*'I've been living on a wing and a prayer and if you don't know where you're going  
any road'll take you there. '*

George Harrison

*"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions  
themselves..."*

*Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live  
along some distant day into the answer."*

— Rainer Maria Rilke

After the Great Fire of London in 1666, Sir Christopher Wren was commissioned to build St Paul's Cathedral. The following year on a visit to the site, his attention was drawn to three men laying bricks. One was crouched down, the second half-standing and the third was working feverishly. "What are you doing?" Wren asked the men. "Laying bricks," the first replied. "Making a living," answered the second. The third reflected for a moment and said: "I am helping build a mighty cathedral and one day my grandchildren will come to pray in the great church their grandfather helped to build."

Without a moral compass, people and organisations are lost and adrift. So, like the third bricklayer, developing a higher purpose is crucial to both individual and collective success. But how do we find that most elusive of concepts, the moral imperative? The solution may be simpler than you think. Just as with great coaches and teachers, effective leadership is not about providing others with an answer but is, instead, the art of helping them find their own way by asking them brilliant questions.

My colleague, Gillian Hamilton, told me of the Columba 1400 Project. Set up in Staffin on the Isle of Skye in 2003 by the Rev Norman Drummond and his team, its vision is clear: 'To elicit the inner greatness in people.' A moral purpose indeed. They begin by asking participants to address three big questions during their time on the island. I would invite you to make that same journey.

## 1. Who are we?

Education has always existed at the crossroads where pragmatism and values meet and for too long there has been a steady drift towards valuing only that which we can measure. The time has come, I believe, to learn to measure what we truly value.

As citizens of the twenty first century we live in a rapidly changing world. Eighty per cent of the jobs our primary school pupils will do have not yet been invented. They will live on average until they are ninety five and will have thirty to forty jobs in their lifetime. There will no longer be such a thing as a job for life just a job for the life of the project. Most of their interests are web-based and they have never known a world without broadband, internet, TEVO, Bebo, Messenger, Facebook, XBOX, iTunes, LOVEFiLM and Netflix. Thomas Friedman says they will need four qualities to cope and thrive in that world - creativity, portability, ingenuity and flexibility. I will add a fifth – a strong set of values.

It is time for us to ask some tough questions on the values pan scale:

For our young people, are we:

Preparing them for a test or for life?

Teaching them or helping them to learn?

Fitting them to the system or fitting the system to them?

Championing cognitive ability or multiple intelligences?  
Sorting winners from losers or making them all winners?  
Focusing on content or life skills?  
Delivering shallow or profound learning?  
Restrictively motivating them (fear) or constructively motivating them (desire)?  
Catching them failing (blame culture) or catching them winning (praise culture)?  
Encouraging compliance or creativity?  
Playing it safe or threshold-adventuring?  
Cherishing their heads or their hearts?

Children will forget most of what we make them think but they will never forget how we made them feel and a student once said to me: "The future is important to me, sir, it's where I intend to spend the rest of my life!" Then he looked me in the eye and asked: "Is that future safe with you?" I knew that both my answer to his question and the security of his future lay somewhere in the debate around such questions and values.

## **2. Why do we live and work the way we do?**

Change is mandatory but growth is always optional. Ask anyone why they do something a particular way and chances are they will say that they have always done it that way. Human beings are habitual and life is a collection of thoughts we accept as true, expressed in our habits of thinking, speaking and behaving. If habit is powerful then our key task is to harness it make excellence habitual. All change is difficult because it 'breaks the habit' and takes us out of our comfort zone. But beware - research shows that the three main excuses for not trying a new way are not enough time, fear of failure and procrastination.

## **3. What might we become?**

While agreement on common values sets the moral compass every team needs, it is only the first stage on a three-part journey.

Stage 1: Where do we want to go? (The future as we want it to be/the values we champion)

Stage 2: Where are we now? (Remaining hopeful while facing the 'brutal facts')

Stage 3: How do we get there? (Turning vision into reality)

Some argue that the first stage is the most important but each question is equally valid and the order is crucial. For vision without action is fantasy and action without vision is passing the time. Shortcuts are fatal. It is the combination of all three and the chronology that gives the process its power.

Driven by a moral imperative, brilliant questions asked at the right time in the right order are powerful levers for change. `So I have one last question for you. When you go into school on Monday will you be laying bricks, earning a living or building cathedrals?