

Sunday 20 December

In this last blog of 2009 join me for a cautionary Christmas tale. It's the night before Christmas, but all is not well in Santa's workshop.

It was the night before Christmas, but it was eerily silent in Santa's workshop. It should have been a hive of frenetic activity, with the last toys being finished and the sleigh being loaded. You would have expected to hear music, shouting and laughter, and see elves rushing here and there but instead the large room lay empty, half finished toys on the workbench and a large sleigh with just a sack or two carelessly thrown onto the back.

High above the workshop, in the executive board room, Santa angrily paced the floor, looking at his large gold pocket watch. 'What is going on, where is he?' Santa bellowed, his face as bright red as his suit. 'Calm down dear' Mrs Claus said nervously. 'What do you mean calm down dear, this isn't an insurance commercial' retorted Santa, continuing his incessant pacing, 'it's the night before Christmas, there's so much to do, and all the elves and reindeer have disappeared, where is Frosty?' Shaking his head angrily Santa went and warmed himself by the roaring fire at the end of the room.

At that moment the door flew open and Frosty the Works Manager burst into the room. He was well named because he was well known for being frosty by nature as well as by name. 'Frosty, what's going on' shouted Santa, 'why has worked stopped? Come over here and explain.'

'I won't get too close if that's okay,' said Frosty, 'I don't want to melt, I've got enough problems with that lot downstairs as it is.'

Santa banged his hand angrily on the table, 'what's going on? It's Christmas Eve, I need to be airborne in a few hours.'

'They're refusing to work', said Frosty, 'they say they won't finish loading the sleigh or go out tonight.'

'Damn them, what's the matter with them' roared Santa, his face now redder than his coat.

'They've invoked the grievance procedure.'

'Grievance procedure, I'll give them grievance procedure'

'Calm down dear, you'll have a heart attack' said Mrs Claus, a worried look on her face.

'They've got a list of complaints', went on Frosty, 'they say the sleigh is unsafe the way it's being loaded, they want a risk assessment before they agree to take it out. They say you haven't honoured the increase in their carrot allowance, and you've removed the free coffee machine from the works canteen.'

'Carrots, carrots, it's the stick they need not carrots'

'You're quite right' continued Frosty, 'we need to stay firm, we're too good to them, they need teaching a lesson. They're to blame for all of this mess. They're lucky to have jobs at all what with this credit crunch stuff.'

'But what about tonight' said Mrs Claus, 'it's Christmas Eve, what about all those children?'

'Never mind the children', roared Santa, 'this needs sorting once and for all. Frosty, get them up here, we're going to have a meeting and I'm going to tell them what I think of them.'

One floor below, in the works canteen next door to the deserted workshop, the reindeer and elves sat round a table.

'That's it' said Blitzen, the oldest of the reindeer, who was fast approaching his 500th year of service, 'he's gone too far this time, the free coffee is the final straw.'

'Can't we negotiate?' asked Comet, one of the younger reindeer.

'There's no point' retorted Blitzen, 'we tried it in 1842 and it didn't work then so it's not going to work now, we have to take a stand.'

The other reindeer and elves nodded in agreement,, with various comments of 'bloody management', 'there's no way', and 'they never listen.'

There was a knock at the door. 'Yes, what is it', roared Blitzen. The door opened and Rudolph, the office junior, slipped quietly into the room.

'What do you want Rudolph?'

'I've got a message from Frosty, he wants you to come to a meeting in the Board Room'

'Right lads' said Blitzen, standing up and gathering his various papers, 'this is it, come on Comet and Prancer, lets go and tell them what we think of them, this needs sorting once and for all.'

The reindeer delegation entered the Board Room. Santa, Mrs Claus and Frosty were already sat along one side of the long table, arms crossed. Blitzen, Comet and Prancer came and sat opposite them, curtly nodding heads in greeting. Rudolph busied himself nervously serving tea and biscuits.

'Sit down at the end there Rudolph' said Santa, 'you can take notes.'

'Right then' said Santa, opening the meeting, 'we're here to sort this nonsense out, and I'm going to tell you why you are wrong with these ridiculous demands. For a start?'

'Stop right there' said Blitzen, raising his front hoof, 'we're not wrong you are, you said back in 1952?'

'No I didn't'

'Yes you did'

'Let me tell you what I think' said Frosty importantly.

'We're not interested in what you think' retorted Prancer angrily.

There was a babble of angry voices as each side tried to make their points, each voice getting louder as they attempted to make themselves heard about the general roar. Tempers were rising. Only Mrs Claus remained silent, while Rudolph, who had never been to one of these meetings before, looked on in disbelief and tried to take notes.

'Stop' roared Santa, standing up and raising his hands. 'This is getting nowhere.'

'Of course its not' shouted Blitzen, 'it never does with you lot, you never listen'

'I don't listen, I don't listen?.'

'That's right, you never do'

'That's it' shouted Santa, 'I've heard enough, either you lot get back to work now, or else.'

'Not until you carry out that risk assessment, and honour the carrot increase, and give us back our free coffee.'

'Never'

'Right that's it, the sleigh doesn't go out tonight'

'And that's your final position.'

'It is'

'Right, this meeting is over, you can all go home.'

There was a general murmuring and moaning and shuffling of papers. Then a quiet voice at the end of the table said 'no, it's not right.'

All heads turned towards Rudolph in disbelief. 'Shut up, who asked you to speak' said Frosty menacingly.

'Yes be quiet Rudolph' said Blitzen, 'you're only here to take notes, this is important stuff, what do you know about union and management business.'

'Nothing, but I know this just isn't right.'

'Santa, Blitzen, let him speak' said Mrs Claus, 'it can't do any harm, let's hear what he has to say.'

'Go on then Rudolph' said Santa, 'what is it?'

Nervously Rudolph looked around the table. 'I'm sorry but this just can't be right. This is too important.'

'What do you mean?' Santa and Blitzen asked in unison. (Actually Blitzen was in the National Association of Reindeer and Elves, not Unison, but you get the point.)

'What's the most important thing at stake here?' asked Rudolph, looking scared but determined.

'That we get our carrots and coffee back' said Blitzen, looking defiant.

'That they come to their senses and agree to our modernisation agenda' said Frosty, glowering across the table.

'No its not'

'Yes it is.'

'No, listen to me, what's far more important than that?'

Santa, Frosty and the reindeer looked confused, but it was Mrs Claus who broke the silence.

'That the children all around the world get their presents?'

'That's it' said Rudolph, 'and I'm listening to all your arguments, but nobody is focussing on what the most important outcome is, and surely that's one thing you can all agree with.'

'Well yes I suppose'

'Now you put it like that'

There was a general nodding of heads. Only Frosty glowered, but he didn't like children anyway.

'So' continued Rudolph, growing a little in confidence, 'surely you can come to some kind of agreement that means the children get their presents.'

'Well I suppose?.' said Santa

'Maybe?.' said Blitzen

'If we were to move forward on some of the issues'

'Perhaps we could compromise, and get the presents out on Boxing Day, it'll only be a day late.'

'That's settled then.'

Even as Santa and the reindeer started to stand up, a small voice said 'no.'

'What do you mean no, Rudolph.'

'You can't compromise on this. It's too important, Boxing Day is too late. The children will be expecting their presents on Christmas morning.'

'There's no way.'

'It just can't be done.'

'It's your fault.'

'No it's your fault.'

'Please listen to me' said Rudolph. Even though he spoke quietly, the shouting ceased and those around the table looked at him thoughtfully. All except Frosty, who just glowered.

'Go on Rudolph' said Mrs Claus.

'Please stay focussed on what's really important' pleaded Rudolph, 'that the children get their presents on Christmas morning, that's the goal we can all agree on.'

There was a general nodding of heads, apart from Frosty, who stood up and glared at Rudolph.

'It just can't be done' he shouted. 'Santa, we have to take a stand, it's time these lazy good for nothing reindeer were taught a lesson.'

Even as Blitzen opened his mouth Santa spoke.

'No you're wrong Frosty, I'm sorry, but Rudolph's right, the children have to get their presents.'

'Damn those children' roared Frosty, and stormed from the room.

'Go on Rudolph, you need to help us here.'

'Okay' said Rudolph, 'now you are all agreed on the goal we can try and find a way forward.'

'We can never agree with them' said Santa and Blitzen together.

'You don't have to' said Rudolph, 'I'm not expecting you to agree with each other, just to respect each other and your different views.'

'Okay.'

'And to be willing to believe there could be an outcome which is a win for both of you.'

Santa and Blitzen looked doubtful, but they had heard enough common sense from Rudolph to want to hear more.

'Go on' said Santa

'And to be willing to listen to each other rather than interrupting with your point of view. To listen to each other until you really understand each other.'

'Okay' said Santa and Blitzen 'we'll try.'

'But not here' said Rudolph, not in the board room, please come with me.'

And he led them all down to the workshop, where some comfortable chairs were gathered around the Christmas tree and a fire burned brightly. They sank into the chairs, sitting next to each other rather than across the board room table.

'Now' said Rudolph, 'are you willing to focus on the goal, to treat each other with respect, to think a win for both of you might be possible and to listen deeply to each other for understanding?'

After a moment's pause Santa, Mrs Claus and all three reindeer nodded in agreement.

'We'll try' said Blitzen, 'will you stay and help us Rudolph if it all goes wrong?'

Rudolph nodded, and haltingly at first, but then with more confidence they began. First Blitzen laid out his position. He talked of his concerns over the safety of the sleigh, how he felt upset when the carrot increase was refused and why the free coffee was so important to them. At times Santa seemed indignant and wanted to interrupt, but he glanced at Rudolph and forced himself to hold back. When Blitzen had finished Santa repeated back the main points he had heard until they agreed he understood.

Then Santa did the same, setting out his views, and the reindeer listened deeply.

It took a long time, far into the night, but gradually, with a new spirit of wanting to move forward, wanting to understand and to focus on their common goal, progress was made. Occasionally Rudolph would intervene, but more and more he found he didn't need to. There was a new-found respect, and they also began to realise that they were not far apart in their views.

Bit by bit they reached agreement. The reindeer would work with Santa to load the sleigh and make sure it was safe, a small carrot increase would be introduced in stages in the new year, and a new coffee alternative was explored.

Finally Santa and Blitzen stood up and shook hand and hoof warmly, and then embraced Rudolph.

'Come on' they said, let's go to work.'

And because Santa's workshop is a magical place time stood still as everyone worked together to finish the last minute toys, to load the sleigh, to put on warm clothing for the journey ahead and to programme the sat nav for countless roofs and chimneys. The renewed sense of purpose and shared commitment was wonderful to watch.

Finally, with a cry of 'come Prancer, come Blitzen' the sleigh shot high into the sky, Santa holding on tightly to the reins and sipping from his hip flask. He turned and smiled, waving at Mrs Claus as she watched far below. Thanks to Rudolph it was going to be a wonderful Christmas morning for children across the world.

Meanwhile, up in the board room, next to the dying fire a colourful scarf lay on the ground next to a puddle of water. Sometimes you can be just too full of hot air.

Okay, so I know it wouldn't really happen quite like this. Change in mindsets and attitudes of this kind takes time, but they have to start somewhere. And when these changes do happen magic occurs, and amazing solutions emerge to previously intransigent situations. There's a Rudolph somewhere in every organisation. They're called 'natural leaders.' They just need to build up the courage to speak up, to understand that, however lowly they feel they are, they can make a difference.

Imagine what Rudolph could achieve at British Airways, at Royal Mail, even in Copenhagen. Or maybe in your organisation?

Thank you for reading my blog during 2009. I really appreciate it. Have a wonderful and magical Christmas. See you in the New Year.

Sunday 13 December

Unlocking the potential that drives change, values-led decisiveness, a proud day in Newcastle and my failed contribution to sensible drinking.

Regular readers will remember how proud I am to be working with the Managing Director of a traditional manufacturing site. His desire and challenge has been to transform the negative culture built up over many years to one where people enjoy coming to work, feel they can and want to give their best every day, have freedom to act, are held accountable and have some fun.

The last year has been very hard work but also very rewarding. This Managing Director and his senior team understood that the journey started with them and they have worked hard on their own behaviours and actions, role modelling the type of behaviours they wanted to see in others. A year on and there are real signs of progress, evidenced by measured improvements in staff satisfaction and by a significant move forward in financial results. Although this financial performance is by no means all down to culture change we know it has been a contributory factor.

But what we also know that it will take two to three years to deliver the changes we want to make and to transform the site, and that this leader and his senior team cannot do it on their own. Now is the time to engage more people on the site directly in the journey.

The 'normal' route to do this may have been to work with the next level down of managers, (and we will do some work with them later in the year), but instead we have started off by identifying a group of people across the site whom we believe are 'natural leaders.' These are people from every level in the hierarchy, drawn from operations, maintenance, the laboratory and finance. Several of them have no line management responsibility. What they all have in common is that they demonstrate leadership every day, not through the position they hold but through who they are. They are 'natural leaders.' They already display positive attitudes and energy. In their own way they are already making a difference every day. We know that if we can harness this positivity and energy they can make a real contribution to our journey.

We met with them at the end of last week and explored with them how they could help. It was a superb session. Although they obviously have a certain amount of trepidation (peer and colleague leadership is not without its challenges) they are really behind the changes and welcome the chance to play their part. Critically they have already seen the difference the senior team has achieved over the past year.

They realise that part of their roles will simply be around demonstrating positive attitudes, and challenging negative behaviour but that they may also be able to do more. They will meet in the new-year and consider what else they could arrange or orchestrate as a group.

It is so exciting and satisfying to watch this kind of change in action, to understand what can be achieved when you involve, engage and empower the right people. Those 'natural leaders' are there in every team and organisation, including your own. Sometimes we just need to dig a bit deeper to find them and to understand how we can unlock their immense potential. I'll keep you up to date with what they get up to in 2010.

An experience last week vividly demonstrated to me the very different approaches managers have to dealing with poor performance in their teams. I understand how difficult it is to deal with under performance, sometimes it feels far easier to ignore problems in the hope they will go away, but they very rarely if ever do.

I was coaching two managers in a large company and both have problems with one of their team. The first manager's approach is, I am afraid, typical, and one I was definitely guilty of on occasions in my previous corporate life. They have a member of their team who is simply not performing. He is a nice enough person (which makes it all the harder) but he is not delivering the required results. This has been going on for some months and the manager knows it needs to be addressed. But for a variety of reasons (and excuses) it has not been tackled. Instead I suspect the manager is hoping the problem will go away somehow ('perhaps he will look for another job') and has fallen into the trap of taking on some of that person's work themselves, because they are so anxious to deliver for their stakeholder. Sound familiar? The result, of course, is that the problems have not gone away, indeed they have got worse. We spent the last week talking through what needed to be done and putting an action plan in place to begin to address and resolve the issues. This starts with setting really clear measurable deliverables, and then reviewing progress regularly. This lies at the heart of effective performance management.

The second manager works in the same organisation and has similar issues with one of their team. The difference is their absolute determination to deal with the challenges. They are not willing to let the matter rest, or to ignore it. They want to find a way to address the issues quickly and effectively. This is only a young manager, and she needs support and guidance in taking her actions, but this does not mask her determination. The other thing that I find amazing is that she wants to do things in the right way. She wants to ensure that her approach and the action she takes is both firm but also fair. I find this rare in so young a manager and was interested to find what was behind this approach. We had a fascinating discussion over who has been the role model for her when it comes to doing things right, and it is her father. She spoke about how she has learned so much from him, about life and about doing the right thing in business (he runs a successful business of his own.) She might not have used the words but her approach is totally values-led, based around deep rooted beliefs about firmness and fairness she has learned from her father. She is a pleasure to work with and, if she chooses to, I believe she has the ability to build a very successful business career.

Which brings me through the most wonderful of links to my own eldest daughter, Lindsay, who graduated from Newcastle University last week. I hope I have played some small part in the person she is today (as every Dad does) and graduation was the opportunity to feel so proud. I think that the graduation ceremony is a really important recognition of achievements at University, academically and in very other way. I actually love the pomp and ceremony that accompanies it. It was a relatively small graduation ceremony (a 'mop up' mainly, Lindsay had been travelling in the summer and missed graduation with most of her course mates and friends), but great nevertheless. My only disappointment was that the Pro Vice Chancellor's speech was all about the University and its future. While that's no doubt important (alumni donations I would cynically suggest) I think it would have been far more appropriate to focus on the graduates themselves and what the future holds for them.

The best example of this was at Jakkie's son Lewis' graduation a few years ago at Durham. The Chancellor there is no less than Bill Bryson, one of my favourite authors and all round good person. He gave an absolutely superb speech in the grand surroundings of Durham Cathedral, but that he managed to direct personally to every one of the hundreds of graduates in the room. It really was about them as an individual and the contribution they could make in the future.

Connections abound because I am currently reading Bryson's book 'Made in America.' If you are familiar with his writing you may agree with me that he is a superb author, with a truly funny and engaging style. I am so jealous! If you haven't read any of his books start with 'Notes from a Small Island', an irreverent trip round the UK and just brilliant. I thought I had read all his books but then came across 'Made in America.' Bryson is fascinated (as I am) with language and its origins and this book is a six hundred page dip into the origins of hundreds of words and particularly sayings in everyday use. And it really is more exciting than I have just made it sound!

Take three examples, all in a chapter on politics, the terms 'left and right', 'filibuster' and 'gerrymander'. You may already know where these terms came from, but if you don't I hope you will humour me as I explain.

'Left and right' emerged from France when, after the 1789 French Revolution, the French National Assembly was formed. It was customary for more radical commoners to sit to the left of the President

and more conservative nobility and clergy to fill the seats to the right. These labels transferred to British and American politics even though the terms did not reflect actual seating arrangements.

'Filibuster' began as the Dutch 'vrijbuitter' meaning 'pirate.' By the time it had morphed into the British word 'filibuster' it was used in America to describe those who formed private armies with a view to taking over Central American countries, as was the vogue in the nineteenth century. From there it was a short leap to describe any vaguely disruptive debating tactic in Congress and on to its present sense of a willful delaying action designed to thwart the passage of a bill.

'Gerrymander' is, however, my favourite and most obscure. Meaning to re-draw electoral boundaries to favour a particular political party it dates from 1812. Governor Elbridge Gerry was engaged in an 'audacious cartographic manipulation' (Bryson's words) to preserve its grip on the state assembly. Noticing that the outline of one district now resembled a reptile in shape someone sketched on to the map a head and legs and called it a salamander. 'No', cried an onlooker, 'it's a gerrymander.'

So there!

One other connection from Newcastle was that Jakkie and I stayed in the same hotel Monday as Joe and Cheryl from X Factor, who had been appearing at the Sage. Unfortunately we did not see them. I am writing this on Sunday afternoon, half way through the X Factor final, and am hooked, as I have been throughout the series. The obscene amount of money involved in the show amazes me, not least the fortune being amassed by Simon Cowell himself, who I have not forgiven for saving the misfits at the expense of Lucie. Apparently there are 96 adverts over the course of the two programmes, at a total cost of £18 million, or £187,500 per advert. And some of the adverts are only ten seconds long, but I assume people at Oxo and X Box consider it value for money.

I was amused to see regular adverts for Crabbies alcoholic ginger beer, which I suppose demonstrates how lucrative the alcopops industry is. But it all could have been so different. Back in the early nineties I was asked to be the sales representative on a top secret new product development team in Bass. In hush-hush discussions, something akin to MI5, they told me they were developing Hooch, an alcoholic ginger beer, and had plans in place for an alcoholic lemonade as well. They asked me my views. My salesman's nose and insight leapt into action. 'Alcoholic soft drinks. Don't be stupid, they'll never sell' I said.

The rest is history, but at least I would like to think I played my small, if unsuccessful, part in trying to save society from the problems alcopops would cause in the almost twenty years since. Funnily enough I was never invited to another meeting.

And finally, if you recover from the excitement of X Factor in time, join me next week for a cautionary Christmas tale. For it is the night before Christmas, but all is not well in Santa's workshop?.

Sunday 6 December

Chaos at the heart of education, dream boards, board women and the horror of a six foot singing Santa.

It's Sunday evening and I'm currently recovering at the end of a very sociable week (by my standards anyway.) The week gave me the opportunity to catch up with friends and ex work colleagues, and inevitably to get involved in all sorts of deep conversations putting the world to rights.

One particularly disturbing chat was with a friend who runs a business giving life skills training to school students. Over a few beers he explained his complete frustration with current education policy as it affects disadvantaged teenagers. It goes something like this. The Government has decided that it must increase the number of GCSE passes in English and Maths. As such (and this is so familiar from this Government) it has poured resources at this goal and introduced tough targets for schools to obtain. It has demanded absolute focus on achievement of these targets, at the expense of all else. It no doubt

has put some pretty big penalties in place for those head teachers and schools who fail to comply or deliver. And I'm sure it wags an impressively large stick.

The result? I have no doubt that GCSE passes are improving (what gets measured tends to get done) but to what purpose and at what cost? While resources are focussed on these achievements they are being diverted away from the life skills development so crucial for disadvantaged teenagers.

The outcome is that many teenagers are leaving school, maybe having scraped a GCSE pass in Maths and English (and I know that is important), but completely lacking in the social skills, the personal responsibility, the values and the wherewithal to apply their new found academic success.

What I never understand about the education system is how little attention is paid to the development of life skills in our children. Of course it is important to focus on academic attainment. Basic Maths and English skills are crucial, as is an understanding (a common sense understanding that is) of history, geography and science, but just as important is the preparation of our teenagers for the social challenges that lie ahead.

That should include a significant investment in teaching such things as social responsibility, financial awareness, values, their role as citizens. If this was approached with as much rigour as the academic targets, and taught by specialist teachers or outside support, not as an additional burden for non-specialist or form teachers, we just might begin to see disadvantaged students leaving the education system with something really worthwhile, maybe even ready and willing to contribute to society.

And yes, I know the primary responsibility for this part of education should lie with parents. But where they are unable or unwilling to provide it, where their examples are not to be followed, teachers can become role models and fill that gap.

I am well aware from my friend at how frustrated head teachers are with this whole situation. They feel their hands are tied with this single minded drive for minimum academic achievement. They find themselves unable to divert resources to where they think it would have the most impact. Releasing head teachers from bureaucracy and government interference, giving them the freedom to allocate their own resources, is crucial.

Another conversation over a beer during the week was altogether more positive. This was with a friend who runs a large property company employing hundreds of people. Anxious to encourage people throughout the organisation to contribute to business improvement ideas they have introduced a fantastic concept they call Dream Boards. It runs something like this. Anyone in the company is encouraged to submit an idea for improving business performance. This could be anything; one that generates sales, reduces costs, improves efficiency, builds morale etc. Alongside that idea they can also submit their dream. Again there are no limits, it could be scuba diving in the Seychelles, climbing Everest, or volunteering in Africa. All business ideas are vetted and if they are valid (and by that I mean relevant, in whatever way, not necessarily ones to implement) the dream is entered into an anonymous ballot. Every six months colleagues throughout the company vote secretly for which dream they want to make come true. The company then funds the dream (to a generous expenditure limit.)

What I find so stunning about this scheme is its simplicity and attraction. They are generating hundreds of business ideas, many of which are implemented, and letting everyone participate in selecting which dreams they want to make happen. Brilliant.

Just as brilliant was the news this week that the French Government is seeking to introduce legislation that would require all French publicly listed companies to increase the number of women on their Boards to 50% by 2015. While I am not usually in favour of positive discrimination I think sometimes a problem is so deep rooted that only intervention can change it.

This may seem to be inconsistent with my comments above on targets for GCSE attainment, but I think it's all about balance, and picking the right cause. The problem is that without intervention real change will just be too slow, it will take generations, just because of the imbalance and inherent sexism that currently exists. Well done Mr Sarkozy (and I never thought I'd write that!)

I believe a similar approach would reap so many dividends in the UK. Maybe 50% is too high a target, but at least increasing representation above its current 12% level amongst FTSE 250 companies. Indeed one on four of those Boards are currently all male, which is appalling.

I guess there is still a long way to go though. It takes me back to a wonderful episode of 'Yes Minister' when Hacker tells Sir Humphrey of his latest plan, to increase the number of women in his department. Sir Humphrey is momentarily thrown into shock but quickly recovers, 'Oh Minister', he says. 'I don't think we have any vacancies for cleaners and tea ladies at the moment.' Priceless.

As I've already mentioned last week was a delightful mixture of great client days and socialising. My daughter Charlotte and I went to see James Morrison on Tuesday evening (that guy is a star, and so lacking in ego), then after a drink with friends on Wednesday evening and a Christmas night at a local stately home on Thursday (very festive indeed) it was off to London on Friday for a very alcoholic lunch with ex colleagues from Voyager Pub Group. It is eight years since we worked together but the camaraderie and story telling is still going strong.

All this has left me in a very amiable and even a bit excited Christmas mood, which was helped with a very warm and friendly Christmas Fayre and Coffee Shop at our village hall Saturday morning (even if I was a bit worse of wear after London!)

It was nearly all a bit of a disaster though when I got home Monday evening to find a six foot tall intruder in our lounge. Closer inspection showed this to be a singing Father Christmas, very amusing for about 15 seconds, but now the next few weeks stretch ahead. It's all very well but when you are halfway through a television programme and someone walks into the lounge we are subjected to a full minute's singing and dancing routine from a somewhat sleazy character in the corner.

A friend of mine, who was the least supportive of me buying Dennis the fire engine, did point out that I seem to make a habit of buying big useless red things. I have some sympathy with his view.

But another week begins and tomorrow Jakkie and I are off to Newcastle for my daughter Lindsay's graduation. I am going to be one very proud Dad.

Saturday 28 November

The challenge of mediocrity, assiduous measurement, dinner reservations on the Titanic, a perfect Christmas shopping morning, and the death of my tooth.

I had a fascinating insight during the last week to the extraordinary difference great leadership can make. There are two organisations in the same market sector and I have been watching the progress of both of them over the past three years. They are both membership organisations, providing a host of activities, services and support to a large membership base.

The first organisation was, by a whole series of measures, seriously failing three years ago. Staff morale was at rock bottom, performance was poor and it was spectacularly failing to deliver for its members. At that point it appointed a new Chief Executive, someone with a proven record of success. Many were surprised he took the job, seeing it as a poisoned chalice. Last week I met up with someone who knows that organisation very well today, and who had no hesitation in describing it as being truly great, delivering superbly across its wide range of activities. In my view the sole reason for the turnaround has been this Chief Executive, his leadership, clarity, vision and determination to succeed in the most difficult of circumstances has been amazing. They have made dramatic improvements in each of the last three years.

The second organisation has had the same Chief Executive for over fifteen years. He is a thoroughly decent and likable man. Three years ago I would have described his organisation as being mediocre.

Not failing by any means, financially very sound and with high levels of involvement in certain areas, but simply not delivering at anywhere near the potential it has. Today it remains mediocre, it has 'flat lined' for the past three years, and is now far behind the performance of the first organisation. In truth it has flat lined for every one of the past fifteen years. Financially secure, doing one or two good things, but scandalously failing to deliver for its members in the way it could.

I had the opportunity to visit that organisation last week and could just sense the feeling of frustration amongst staff and trustees. They know they could be doing so much more, but frankly until there is a change of leadership at the top it is simply not going to happen. The trustees have some difficult decisions to take.

There is a word of caution here. The rise of the first organisation has been dramatic, and it can only be regarded as truly great if it is sustained. Most importantly the existing Chief Executive will leave at some point. He has much still to offer and will do so in bigger jobs. If he is a true 'level 5 leader' he will ensure he leaves his organisation in exactly the right place to continue its success. He will already have a succession plan in place.

Over the last few days I have run two workshops examining various aspects of measurement. I believe that the constant measurement of performance lies at the heart of a high performance culture. For me this is a culture in any team or organisation where people really know what is expected of them, they want to deliver, they feel enabled and supported to do so, their performance is regularly reviewed and a whole series of targets and measures are in place to make that a meaningful exercise.

There is no rocket science here, what gets measured gets done, and it would be pretty pointless watching a football match, for example, if no-one kept the score. Well I think it would, anyway.

My model is that everyone, in any team or organisation, should have a clear, unambiguous role statement. This should be capable of being written in no more than twenty words, it is not a job description. It should set out clearly why the role exists.

This should be a small number of clear objectives. I personally favour just three, there is ample evidence that if we are focussed just on three things at any one time the chances of achieving all three with excellence are pretty high. (See my stuff on 'Power of 3' elsewhere on my web site.) I believe these should get to the heart of what the job is about, and should not be add-ons to the day job. As such they should account for around 70% of what that person does in their role.

Ideally they should also give 'line of sight' enabling that person, wherever they work in the organisation, clarity that what they are doing is important because it is contributing to the overall goals, strategy and vision of the organisation. Where this works that line of sight can be awesome and compelling. I think that usually those objectives can be set for a full year, because they are at the heart of what the job is about. In certain roles, such as those responsible for delivering specific projects, the time scale may be shorter, and new objectives needed during the year.

Now comes the hard part. It is essential that those objectives can be measured and therefore they must be SMART. Most of us are familiar with that acronym for goal setting, but have slightly different definitions of the letters. I prefer 'simple, measurable, audacious, realistic and timely'. 'Audacious' is a strange one, people usually use 'achievable' but that is too close to 'realistic' for me, and I think that 'audacious' pushes us to set objectives which truly take us forward, that will make a difference, with 'realistic' providing a counter-balance.

The hard work is making them SMART, and particularly measurable, but you can get there and it is really worth the effort.

That makes a monthly sit down between manager and subordinate (which I think is at the heart of a high performance culture) such a simple exercise. The meeting is focussed on reviewing performance against the objectives, with the manager's role being to clear the path, to enable the subordinate to deliver.

I see the need to adopt an assiduous approach to measurement. Be relentless in setting objectives for your team that are measurable and then making those measurements happen. You will be repaid in great performance and results many times over.

A further sophistication as a measurement tool is the balanced scorecard, which I think particularly works well at a team level. A balanced scorecard is, as the name suggests, a tool for measuring a range of results instead of simply financial targets. It recognises that far more goes into a rounded performance by a team than just delivering numbers, and in fact achieving those numbers is an outcome of getting a series of other things absolutely right.

Typically I see a balanced scorecard as having four quadrants. One of those will almost certainly have financial targets within it, and another will have some other numbers, maybe some clear numerical non-financial targets. It is impossible to be more precise than that because there are so many variations depending on the team and organisation. I then believe that the other two quadrants should focus on staff and customer measures. These could include staff training, development, reviews and satisfaction, and maybe customer complaints and customer satisfaction.

As ever the hard work is in putting together the right things to measure, and then creating viable targets and measurements. I think that ideally there should only be two targets and measures per quadrant, no more than eight in total. And only ever measure the most important things. As the Titanic was sinking the number of bookings for dinner that night was somewhat irrelevant.

I'm just back from a really enjoyable annual Christmas shopping trip with my daughter Charlotte. I seem to have got this properly organised now as Charlotte has got older. Now she sets off on her own round town while I headed for Starbucks to while away an hour or so, followed by a quick browse around the market to buy some food, before meeting up for lunch. Perfect! Not a great trip for buying presents myself, but I have earmarked my one day in a couple of weeks where I will head out and complete all my shopping at one go.

I had some quite sad news this week. I suffered from a nagging toothache last weekend and booked an emergency dentist appointment on Tuesday. I hate the dentist (it's a long story and goes back to some sadistic treatment when I was a kid) but was anxious to be relieved of the pain (us men are not great at pain!) The dentist's verdict is that one of my teeth has died. Funnily I didn't know teeth died. I find it really sad because it's been a part of me for a very long time, almost as long as I can remember. Looks like it's going to have to come out before Christmas, and then I'm thinking a quiet funeral with close family only. No flowers please.

It must be getting near Christmas because there's a busy social week ahead. Going to see James Morrison on Tuesday evening, a night out on Broad Street with friends on Wednesday and then off to London for lunch with the old Voyager team on Friday. I'm hoping that toothache stays away!

Sunday 22 November

Why personal effectiveness lies at the heart of the leadership journey, two fat ladies prove to be a hit, a leaking roof and lots of ball scratching in the planning department.

I spent two stimulating and enjoyable days this week working with senior managers from a major environmental charity. They were participants on a leadership programme designed to equip them to deliver major changes within their world.

I have rarely come across a group of such intellectual and focussed people. They are deeply committed to their cause. But they also understand that in order to succeed intellect alone is not enough. They also need to hone their leadership skills in order to engage with their stakeholders, to set out their vision, and to execute their strategy through their people.

We began their leadership journey with two days focussed on building personal effectiveness. Sometimes people find this a strange place to start. They expect me to leap into a session in setting vision and strategy or empowerment or team leadership.

But I believe deeply that personal effectiveness is the only place to begin a leadership journey. By this I mean how effective leaders are within themselves, how they build mutually beneficial relationships with all those around them and how they model the behaviours they want to see in others.

When we are personally effective we have managed to build and to maintain balance in our lives. We understand that although on occasions we end up spinning a few plates this is not sustainable over a prolonged period of time. We know that we need to challenge beliefs, our own and those around us. Only when we challenge those beliefs, persuade ourselves and others to see situations differently, will we act and behave differently and get different results.

Truly effective people also understand that they always have the freedom to make choices, about anything. They exercise that freedom to choose whatever the stimulus, basing their choices on what they know is the right decision or course of action to take. They also constantly set goals, at every level, thinking out what they want the outcomes to be, whether it's a meeting, a project, performance review targets or a business plan.

They then have the ability to deliver those goals through the highly effective management of their time. This is the breakthrough point at which spinning plates ceases. They take control, understand what their most important things to deliver are, plan their time effectively every week, making sure they devote sufficient time to their most important priorities, and then execute daily with integrity and discipline.

Highly effective people then build great relationships with those around them. They understand that those relationships are important and that they have to be nurtured. They invest time in them. They seek win-win solutions through deep win-win thinking and take the time to always listen first, in order to truly understand other people. They also understand that there is always a better solution available to issues and disputes than simply compromising.

Finally highly personally effective people are role models. They understand that they cannot expect those around them to behave in a certain way unless they model those behaviours themselves, constantly and genuinely.

Personal effectiveness really does lie at the heart of the leadership journey. It's the only place it can start. When people are personally effective they have the inner confidence, the willingness and the ability to lead those around them, to build clarity, engage their people and influence their boss and colleagues. Through that they can then contribute to a much bigger journey within the organisation and beyond.

I'm sorry if this all sounds like a bit of a sermon, it's not meant to be. I hope you are still reading! I do believe that over the course of our two days last week the participants understood why personal effectiveness is where the leadership journey begins. Through combining superb leadership with their intellect they will be best positioned to achieve their amazing ambitions.

Talking of amazing ambitions, our plan to build a new village hall here in Fradswell continues, albeit very slowly indeed. Regular followers will be aware of the poor, even decrepit, state of our current hall. It is a tumble down wooden structure, over 80 years old, having started life as an army hut.

But over the past year or so a group of us have revived it, building a series of events, including a monthly coffee shop, which are now being attended by a wide cross section of our small rural community. Village hall meetings still resemble something out of the 'Vicar of Dibley', but we are making progress.

Last night we held a 'beer, burgers and bingo' evening, and it was fabulous. What I hadn't realised is how popular bingo is, with enthusiastic participation from all ages. I took on the role of bingo caller. This onerous responsibility was based on a part time job I had in a bingo hall while in sixth form many

years ago. Lots of things haven't changed. Back then the bingo took place in a dilapidated hall patronised by a group of almost entirely female devotees, who seemed very old but probably ranged from forty upwards. I was scripted by management to open every session with the line 'good evening ladies and welcome to the Ritz. Does anybody want to shake my balls before we start?' Night after night the same audience would erupt into laughter with calls of 'I'll shake your balls anytime sonny.' This was quite a lot to take for an impressionable seventeen years old and probably scarred me for life. Funnily enough last night's response was very similar.

Our big problem at the moment is that our village hall roof has started to leak. Should we commit money to repairing it when we are going to build a new hall? What makes the issue more complicated is uncertainty over how long it will take before we can start building. I thought gaining outline planning permission would be quick and simple. How naïve I was. The great cogs of local government planning are turning, or to be exact barely turning at all. It has been some months since we submitted the application and it seems to have fallen into a great black hole of nothingness.

I guess that's the issue of local government. It reminds me of a friend of mine who once applied for a job in the local planning department. He was asked at the interview if he had any health issues. He explained that he had been in the army and on active service he had been injured in an explosion and lost both his testicles. He also explained that he was allergic to caffeine. He got the job and was told that the hours were 9am to 5pm, but he should arrive for work at 11am daily. When he queried this anomaly he was told 'this is local government, we stand around and drink coffee and scratch our balls for the first two hours every morning so there'd be no point in you being there.'

Monday 16 November

On taking a new leadership position, vibrancy, innovation, a rant at budget airlines, and on Barry, a fish with fingers.

Last week I spent time with the newly appointed Chief Executive and Operations Director of a large organisation. The Chief Executive took up his post some eight months ago and has already begun to come to grips with addressing the many challenges he inherited.

He has just appointed his Operations Director, and sees this as a crucial part of his jigsaw, for this person is inheriting the most dysfunctional part of the organisation. His areas have under-performed, there has been little evidence of leadership, systems and processes are poor, and a 'don't care' culture has, not surprisingly, grown up. There is also evidence of at least doubtful practices, due to lack of basic controls.

Sound familiar? The challenges this new Director faces are certainly not unique. The challenge we were chatting through last week is where to start. The problems are so many and varied, it is difficult to know how to begin addressing them.

I have a view that whenever a new leader is appointed to head up any team or organisation (and this could be through an internal move as well) they should not be tempted to rush in and try and solve everything overnight. Instead they should follow three distinct steps during their first months in the job.

The first step is to listen and to learn. This does not mean doing nothing. This process is essential if the new leader is to make informed choices about what to change. But it means really listening. Digging deep into the team or organisation, not just to the immediate reports. And it also means listening to understand, not thinking you already know the answers. Ask a couple of questions to everyone you meet with, maybe such as 'what are the best things that happen round here?' and 'what is the one thing you want me to do first?' This can build up a real picture of where to focus action.

There is no set time scale for this listening and learning phase, it depends on the size of the team or organisation and the extent of the challenge. But ideally it should take the first 100 days, and will require real discipline to stop you leaping in and taking action.

The next step is then to fix those things that just immediately need fixing. They are so obvious and so crucial that they cannot wait. It is important to stress that these first and second steps are sequential, but one will not neatly stop to allow the second to begin. During the listening and learning phase you will come across things that simply cannot wait and need fixing immediately. Some of these fixes will be quite small, an obvious process that needs to stop, a control that needs to be put in, but some will be much larger, and could even involve someone 'leaving the bus' who is so blatantly now going to be part of the journey.

Remember also that your people are watching you intently during these first two phases, they are studying your every move. The way you model your behaviours to them during this time be fundamental to the way they work with you in the future.

Now, and only now, is it possible to commence with the third step. This is the plan and execute change phase, where you take what you have learned and really map out how you are going to make a difference, how you are going to build a great team or organisation. Of course you will have been building up your ideas during the first two phases, and you will now be in the best possible position to get on and make them happen.

You will still need a robust framework for planning that final phase, and in our discussions last week I introduced the Operations Director to the 'Circle of Organisational Effectiveness', a model I use many times with leaders to help them deliver great things.

I don't even think you necessarily need to be joining a new team or organisation to make changes happen. Too often we have become a bit stale in a role, we know we need, as leaders, to provide new impetus, energy and direction. Begin your listening and learning phase now, even afresh in your current role. It can deliver amazing results.

I also spent a day last week with an organisation I have been proud to support for three years or more now, one who is at the other end of a journey of change. They have a challenging and exciting vision in place and are well into the execution phase. What has been really special is how the senior leadership team have involved so many people right across the organisation in the planning and execution of the vision and strategy. Last week we ran a workshop where around forty people drawn from all levels came together to present their ideas for achieving the vision. Their vibrancy, energy and enthusiasm was amazing. They had also come up with some really innovative ideas that went beyond any thinking the senior leadership team could have developed on their own.

It re-enforced my firm belief that people throughout organisations have so much latent potential, and that if you take the time and effort to unlock it they will deliver amazing results for you.

So no sooner did I blog last week on the decline and fall of British Airways than they announce their merger with Iberia. This is a great example how, even when a mighty company falls, it does not have to be terminal. I shared with you last week Jim Collins' views on the five stages of decline, and how, with new thinking and the right strategy, it is possible to arrest that decline (see below to remind yourself of them.) However, only time will tell if, for Willie Walsh and his colleagues, this is a bright new, well thought out dawn, or if it is simply a grasp for salvation.

And while on the subject of airlines a flight to Edinburgh last week reminded me of how, in my view, budget airline travel has gone too far with its 'low fare, add on everything else' model. This flight was with BMI Baby, an airline I quite like, who until recently have avoided the policy followed almost evangelically by the likes of Ryan Air and Easy Jet. Not any longer. First of all I had to check in on line to avoid paying at the airport. I would quite have liked to sit next to Jakkie on the way up, and assumed checking in at the same time would allow this. But we were allocated seats 19F and 20A, which might be sequential according to the strict laws of logic, but resulted in us travelling up several seats apart. A cynical ploy to make us pay extra to guarantee we could sit together. Then on the way back we had to pay the check in booking fee. They assured me I could have found the option to do so on line, but I hadn't seen it.

I would far rather we returned to a slightly higher flight cost with at least a basic level of service included.

I do understand that the simple answer is not to fly, but when I have to travel that far flying is still the most efficient way to do it. And the final part of the approach to Edinburgh, over the Firth of Forth in the early morning sunshine, is one of my favourites and almost made up for my simmering discontentment.

I had a very pleasant weekend with my children in Newcastle while Jakkie and her daughter headed off to London. I enjoyed a few drinks on Saturday evening around the bars (an unusual way for me to spend a Saturday evening these days but it allowed me to get my X Factor boycott underway) and a walk round the market on the Quayside yesterday morning. I was slightly less enamoured to get the following text from Jakkie 'On Carnaby Street, been to Libertys, off to Harrods now then the Ritz.' I'm looking forward to the next credit card bill with some trepidation!

Finally, I have blogged in the past over my continual frustration that whenever a character who shares the name Barry appears in a film or on television it is always given to the village idiot character. Honestly, it happens all the time and its outrageous. What is wrong with such a fine name that it obviously causes hilarity amongst script writers. I have been putting together a list of heroes who share my name and have so far come up with McGuigan, White, Blue, Manilow, Sheene and Cryer. Even 'Brummie Barry' in 'Auf Weidesein Pet' is a kind of hero.

Imagine how pleased I therefore was to come across a children's book the other day called 'Barry the Fish with Fingers.' The hero of the story is a fish called Barry who, well, has fingers. And he is very brave, using his fingers to great effect to save his fishy friends. Can I propose it as a Christmas stocking addition for you this year?

Monday 9 November

A week full of stuff- the Berlin Wall, the fall of the mighty, thoughts on poppies, a wonderful teacher, the shocking discovery of a 112 years old relative, and a slight incident involving Dennis and a gatepost.

Blogging a day late this week. I was due to post yesterday evening, but ended a great weekend absolutely apoplectic over Simon Cowell's decision (or non decision to be precise) to save the moronic John and Edward on the X Factor. What a hypocritical, ratings obsessed idiot that man is. It doesn't help that I had a hot inside tip that Lucie would win the competition, but there you go.

Yes, I know there is more to life than X Factor and here on a cold, bright Monday morning I am just starting to calm down. That stupid man pales into insignificance next to the celebration of 20 years since the Berlin Wall came down. I actually passed through Checkpoint Charlie back in 1974 on a school trip (12 countries in 21 days on a coach but that's another story.) I do share the distinction, along with 50 other spotty teenagers, of being yelled at by an East German border guard who boarded our coach, just because we found his accent so funny and began mimicking him with typical 'we have vays of making you talk' and 'don't mention the war' kind of lines. Not sensible on reflection (he had a big gun) but, hey, we were young.

It seems to have been a week for fascinating and sometimes controversial news so let me share some thoughts on a little more of it. Continuing the theme of how the mighty fall the results announced this week by British Airways and the Royal Bank of Scotland may pale into insignificance next to the Berlin Wall but they are still worthy of comment. They have both posted massive losses at the half-year, and are a superb demonstration of how companies considered once great can disintegrate. Jim Collins analyses this very well in his new book 'How the Mighty Fall'. You could argue that the book is a chance for him to justify why it has gone horribly wrong for companies he featured in 'Good to Great' (Fannie Mae is the best example), and he does do this extremely well, but he does produce an excellent evidence based assessment of the five stages of decline typical in organisations that fail.

I will summarise these in more detail on my web site, but the five stages he identifies are as follows:

Hubris (or arrogance) born of success
Undisciplined pursuit of more
Denial of risk and peril
Grasping for salvation
Capitulation to irrelevance or death

You can see the recent stories of both BA and RBS graphically illustrated in the above five stages. Collins demonstrates that companies sometimes move quickly through the various stages (as with RBS) or the whole thing can take several years (as with BA). For me the decline at BA began when it started to believe its own publicity (that they were really 'the World's Favourite Airline.') That's then they moved into their opulent head office (complete with fountains) and messed about with their tail plane designs. What a great example of arrogance born of success. Now, several years on, they are grasping for salvation, cutting another 20% of their workforce, facing the prospect of a cabin crew strike, a pale shadow of their former selves.

And what about RBS? It's easy to argue that they were a small pawn in a much bigger picture, and that the global economic bubble bursting was the reason for their spectacular fall, but they were led by a Chief Executive who was the epitome of arrogance and bullying, they allowed standards and controls to fall out of the window in their greed-driven pursuit of more and denial of risk and peril. Once more a company grasping for salvation, saved from death only by you, me and a few million other tax payers.

Collins does have some good news though. The progress to stage five (capitulation to irrelevance and death) is not inevitable. Decline can be reversed in any of the previous four stages. But it takes enlightened leadership and new thinking to bring about those changes. I work with one client who is a shining example of this. She is the Chief Executive of a large third sector organisation (these issues are not unique to the private sector.) Although she had built up and was leading a highly successful organisation she did not allow this to turn into arrogance. She recognised that this success was not sustainable due to a myriad of external trends and factors. She did not allow her organisation to slip into denial, but faced the brutal facts and took the necessary action to deliver radical change. She describes the life cycle of organisations as being like a series of mountain peaks. When an organisation is at its most successful it is climbing towards the peak of a mountain. Too often, however, warning signs for the future are ignored, and the organisation finds itself past the peak on the downward slope. The secret is that before you reach the peak you take the necessary action to make the leap to the next mountain and a climb up the next peak. I wish I had a flip chart (groan) because I could draw that much easier than I can write it but I hope the analogy works for you.

So yesterday was Remembrance Sunday, a chance to remember all those people who fell in the many conflicts we have been engaged in, from the First World War to Afghanistan. The last week saw heightened and at times very emotional debate over the wearing of poppies as a symbol of remembrance. I listened to one exchange on the radio where someone was virtually being accused of being a traitor for choosing not to wear a poppy.

I feel really strongly about this (seriously much more strongly than about John and Edward.) I care just as much as the next person about the sacrifice those who have fallen have made for their country. I support the war in Afghanistan, we are there for the right reasons and it is the right thing to do. I have concerns about the way the war is being executed and about a lack of clarity on the ultimate goal but it is a necessary evil. But I will not have anyone telling me I have to wear a poppy in order to demonstrate my commitment and beliefs. Whether I wear one or not is a personal choice that in no way diminishes my beliefs.

And never forget that war is at best only ever just that, a necessary evil. There is nothing glorious about it. Just spend a day visiting the battlefields of the Somme to understand that. I am a keen student of the First World War and Wilfred Owen's poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est' sums it up far more powerfully than ever I could.

It has been a sad and thought provoking week in more ways than one because it also saw the death, at the age of 90, of a person who was a very special part of my life for a couple of years. Fred Lee was

my geography teacher for my A Levels many years ago. He was in many ways a very ordinary man, but remarkable nevertheless. I thought of him as being so old at the time, but have worked out he was about 55 at the time, not far from the age of me and my school friends, who have been reflecting on his death on Facebook this week. I think that great teachers leave an indelible imprint on you, that you remember all your life and Fred was one of those people. He also must have had a patient sense of humour. Every day me and my mate Richard would walk to school past his house ensuring we arrived just as he was leaving and scrounging a lift in his little blue camper van. I hadn't seen him for 35 years but this week I have missed him a lot.

It was also the week in which I made a rather shocking discovery. It appears I may have a 112 years old relative, living in Somalia. Imagine my surprise to be sent the following story from the BBC's website:

Hundreds of people have attended a wedding in Somalia between a 112 years old man and his teenage wife.

Ahmed Muhamed Dore, who already has 13 children by five wives, says he would like to have more with his new wife, who is 17 years old.

Mr Dore said he and his new wife, who is young enough to be his great-great-grand-daughter, were from the same village in Somalia, and he had waited for her to grow up to propose.

Mr Dore was born in 1897, and has a traditional birth certificate, written on goat skin.

Altogether Mr Dore has 114 children and grandchildren. His oldest son is 80 years old.

Remarkable. I am now hoping to get on to one of those genealogy programmes in the hope of discovering whether this Mr Dore is in fact a distant relative (we share an unusual name) or simply a role model.

And finally Dennis the fire engine was moved to winter storage in a friend's barn yesterday, but not without mishap. I donned the helmet, switched on the blue lights, and proudly drove it out of my gate. Or almost, just when I thought I was clear there was a horrible crunching sound and I noticed that my rear wheel was jammed against the gate post. At this point I was at a loss about what to do. And before you mock how many times have you had a fire engine wedged up against a gate-post? It's just no something you're trained to deal with. After frantically analysing the situation Jakkie and I decided that the only way was forward and with a crunching of metal we came free. The gatepost now has a liberal amount of red paint on it, and a slightly bedraggled Dennis is safely in winter storage.

The only good news is that the colour on the gate-post is the same as the local post van, so I think I can get away with blaming the postman. Sorted.

Saturday 31 October

Difficult conversations, expanding the mind at Christmas, back to the pub and cobwebs everywhere.

A common theme that often emerges when I talk with groups about their leadership experience is how much of a challenge so many managers find having difficult conversations with their people.

For many it is the hardest part of being a manager. They are painfully aware that there are issues with a member of their team, maybe to do with under performance or attitude, but they avoid tackling it, thinking, wrongly, that ignoring it, brushing it under the carpet, is the best thing to do.

Often this is compounded by the fact that these issues have existed for a long period of time, since well before this particular manager took over, and have never been addressed, therefore it is easier to avoid the difficult conversation in the hope the problems will go away.

The problem is that they rarely, if ever do, and it is the first conversation that is always the hardest.

Sometimes the issues are really serious. Using the bus analogy once more, these are those people who are sitting firmly at the back of the bus, wither through poor performance, or poor attitude, or a combination of the two. At worse, they are causing damage within their team or organisation, often through spreading negative energy. They may even be an assassin, placing nails under the wheels of the bus, a real threat to the journey.

However difficult those issues are they cannot be ignored. You cannot leave someone at the back of the bus, it has to be addressed. Even if the situation has been ignored before managers have a responsibility to take action. Take advice from HR by all means, but it is the line manager who must address it.

Of course there are many potential outcomes, but the approach should always be based around the principles of determination, honesty, consistency and fairness. And there's an important point here, all too often the person involved may simply be unaware of the impact of their ineffectiveness or poor attitude. They have never been told. After the initial anger or denial, once the person has had an opportunity to reflect, they may even begin to understand their impact and welcome guidance in moving forward.

In the most extreme cases, the first conversation will be part of a process of a person leaving the bus. And, critically, even though they may not recognise it immediately, in those situations it is nearly always the case that it is the right decision for the person concerned as well, at least in the longer term. No-one wants to be unhappy at work and often the person is simply in the wrong role or job.

I am often asked by leaders to challenge someone along those lines in my coaching capacity, and so often it ends with someone leaving the bus at their own volition, and it proves to be the best decision for everyone.

But of course in most situations it is not that serious an issue. An action plan, jointly agreed and executed, can lead to a resolution of the issue, and things can move forward. But engagement is critical, nothing gets sorted by being ignored.

So jus take a few minutes to reflect. Is there a conversation with one of your people that you know needs to take place but perhaps has been ignored for too long? Resolve to do something about it within the next week. With the right approach, based on the above principles, you will see positive outcomes.

So its getting closer to Christmas and you will be thinking of what presents to buy for those special people in your life. Can I promote the thought that, along with the latest DVD or packet of handkerchiefs or kitchen gadget, you consider broadening the mind with a leadership book or two?

Now before you put your head in your hands and groan (ok you are already) let me try and justify my suggestion. Over twenty or so years in 'corporate life' I never read a book on leadership or management. I was never encouraged to and in all honesty never saw the point. Maybe I thought I knew all I needed to know about leadership. How arrogant was that? Since working for myself I have read far more widely. Some books I love. Others are poorly written and a real struggle. But they do help broaden the mind. They are not there to provide the answers to the ancient mystery of leadership but they do encourage you to think about what makes a great leader and what kind of leader you want to be.

It just may be that dropping one or two into someone's Christmas stocking just could be a great investment of a few pounds.

Here are a few suggestions. Everyone is different and some prefer weighty evidence based texts, some like to be inspired by tales of heroic leaders and others enjoy books where theories are told as fables, so I've tried to include a variety of different approaches.

Servant-Leadership (edited by Ralph Lewis & John Noble)

The concept of Servant Leadership was developed by Robert Greenleaf in the 1950s. This book brings it to life with real examples presented in a thoughtful manner.

Leading Change (John Kotter)

An excellent framework for driving change in any team or organisation

Our Iceberg is Melting (John Kotter)

For those who prefer the fable approach and lots of pictures, the above book with cute penguins!

The Speed of Trust (Stephen M R Covey)

Stephen R Covey's son, makes a great case of the economic benefit of high trust in an organisation, and how to build that trust.

Gung Ho! (Ken Blanchard)

Once you get through the squirrels, beavers and geese, a compelling story of how to build a high performance culture

Head First (Tony Buzan)

The creator of mind mapping takes a look at our ten intelligences and how to develop them

All of these books are readily available from Amazon. Of course theory is all very well, but it's what you do with it that counts but these books just could provoke some resolutions on leadership styles and approaches as you enter 2010.

Yesterday marked the end of my alcohol free month, and last night I was dragged kicking and screaming (yeah, right) to the pub for a well deserved pint of Rod's excellent Adnams. I did receive some comments from one or two people (including my daughter Lindsay) as to why an alcohol free month finished on the 30th, and included one night off in mid month for a wine tasting evening at the village hall but overall I think it's a pretty good effort.

Tonight is a Halloween dinner at home with friends. How big a deal has Halloween become over the past few years? Luckily we live remotely enough not to be bothered by trickers and treaters. The worst I have to endure is a house that is completely festooned with decorations, there are bats, skeletons and cobwebs hanging from every wall. And this is the genuine article, I've checked and the cobwebs are real. My house full of women are obsessed with decorations, I worked out that with Christmas, Halloween, Easter and various birthdays there are decorations of some sort up for over 25% of the time. I always end up sounding like a grumpy old man here and I know decorations have their place but for example I would put them up for Christmas around the 23rd of December, not the 1st.

And, to emphasise my point, I went into my local Costa one afternoon last week and they were playing Christmas carols, and had mince pies and gingerbread Christmas trees on sale. In October! Ridiculous!

But time to stop moaning. Halloween is a fun time of ghosts and scary stories and I'm particularly looking forward to helping get rid of the spirits tonight.

Saturday 24 October

Bankers, morals, an amazing pitch to Richard Branson and slinking home with a pocket full of underwear.

As I left home at 5.30 one morning last week I tuned in as usual to one of my favourite programmes, 'Wake Up To Money' on 5 Live. For those not used to being up at such ungodly hours 'Wake Up To Money' is a business programme presented by Andy Verity, a knowledgeable and relaxed presenter, and Mickey Clark, an old business journalist hack who makes the dinosaurs seem like John and Edward on 'The X Factor.'

Normally they spend a lively half hour meandering through the markets and company results, but this time were trying to tackle the big and thorny question of whether banking and finance can take place within a moral framework.

This led to an extremely uncomfortable debate. I'm not sure Mickey understood the question, and the 'expert' guest, more used to reporting on Barclays pre-tax profit and the price of steel in the far east floundered around with the kind of vague bull?. that would have done full justice to a politician wriggling under the Jeremy Paxman spotlight.

The issue, of course, is that politicians simply cannot impose some kind of moral framework on the banking and finance sector and expect it to make any difference. It doesn't work like that. It especially can't happen if it is politicians who try to impose it. That is one group who the public hold up with as much contempt as the big bonus earning bankers. Gordon Brown's well-intentioned comments about having a moral compass looked ridiculous as soon as the expenses scandal broke.

The problem is that when the melt down in the finance sector occurred following the behaviours of the banks in pursuing their sub-prime lending strategies, and the sheer greed of the people involved was exposed, there was some kind of belief that things would change, that somehow a new order would emerge with new behaviours, based on responsibility not greed. But now the papers are full of stories of bonuses being paid again, and there's this sense that no lessons have been learned, and we'll just slip back to where we were.

But trying to impose morals can This could never drive the changes in behaviour that are needed. That is because behaviours only change when beliefs change. Of course its possible for the Government to legislate and to introduce a set of rules which, for example, limit bonus payments (and they probably should), but all that will drive is behaviours where individuals spend all their time looking for loopholes, how to cheat the system. And that's because beliefs will not have changed.

In fact Barack Obama has announced just this last week his intention to significantly reduce executive reward in bailed out companies. A timely move.

So there is no quick fix here, no easy answer. But there is some hope. I wrote some months ago about the need to develop leaders who genuinely believe in 'capitalism with a conscience' a free market which encouraged the making of money, but in the right way, with a principled approach, where rewards are proportionate. A second guest on 'Wake Up To Money', who makes investments on behalf of the Church, reminded us that there are a whole number of organisations who already pursue an ethical investment strategy, and also that through history there have always been moments when moral questions have triumphed over greed (the ending of exploitation of child labour would be one such example.) But it will take time and enormous commitment.

The journey has to start somewhere though, and here are a couple of thoughts.

Firstly it starts in the education sector. This kind of change can take a generation. We need to place values-based leadership, in society and in business, at the heart of the curriculum in schools and in universities. The culture of celebrity and greed must be addressed at a young age. We need to encourage volunteering, community awareness and social responsibility through a comprehensive and committed approach, not through paying lip service with an hour's lesson a week.

Secondly, put third sector leaders onto the boards of the major financial institutions. Legislate to make this compulsory. And give them real influence. Let them challenge beliefs and behaviours. It works the

other way too. Get finance leaders out into third sector organisations, where they can learn, but also where their own expertise in the right fields could make a difference.

This is as tough a journey as there is but it has to start somewhere.

Compare this to the amazing group of people I worked with last week. This was part of a leadership development programme I am running on behalf of a large environmental charity, and the participants were senior managers from around the country.

Two things stood out. Firstly their absolute commitment to their cause, a truly emotional attachment. They are passionate about what they do and determined to instill that passion in their staff, their volunteers, their members and the public as a whole. And secondly their personal visions of what they each wanted to achieve in the future, dreams and plans that would actually make a difference to the world around us. Their challenge is to turn those dreams into reality in the years ahead, and I am privileged to play my small part in helping them to realise those dreams. This was not a room full of bankers counting their bonus earnings.

We also shared a great example of how much is achievable if someone really sets their mind to it. One of the group attended a fundraising conference of 1,500 people at which Richard Branson was the star attraction. He was there to listen to ideas with a view to providing the funds to make some of them happen. This person was determined to get her idea to him, and succeeded against stiff competition in being given the opportunity to state her case. He listened, and the outcome is work in progress with 'his people' which promises to deliver real sustainable environmental benefit.

What a great night we had last Sunday in the company of Tom Jones. At the age of sixty nine he remains an amazing showman. Delilah almost brought the house down. Age has matured him, however, and no longer does she encourage hoards of underwear to be thrown at the stage.

Which was a shame because I had to slink back home with three pairs of knickers still in my pocket.

Sunday 18 October

Values, camper vans, Newcastle Brown, and an underwear frenzy with a sex bomb.

I spent a day with a client last week running values workshops with a number of managers and supervisors. This client has recently taken the decision to seek to embed a set of values within their organisation as a framework for building the right behaviours.

A values based approach to leadership is nothing new, but so often it fails, for a variety of reasons.

Sometimes it is introduced into a team or organisation just because it is flavour of the month. I experienced this some years ago in my corporate life. Someone high up somewhere decided that 'purpose and values' was the 'new thing.' They drafted a set of values and instructed their divisional managers to launch them to their people. What followed was an uncomfortable and at times excruciating few months. Most of the divisional managers just didn't know what to do, and many didn't believe in this latest fad anyway. How could they possibly marry this 'soft behaviour nonsense' with their management style, honed over twenty years of experience, based on 'floggings continuing until morale improves.'

The result was predictable, a period of chaos and confusion followed by a swift return to 'normality' as soon as there was even the slightest hint of a hiccup in results.

Visiting a potential new client a few years ago, in a very traditional manufacturing set up, I asked if a set of values existed in their business. Most people gave me the answer 'no' but the Managing Director

insisted they existed. Eventually someone pointed me to a framed notice on the wall, displaying a list of values, signed by the boss of the head office in Italy. They had been sent to their international subsidiaries some months before. Somewhat ironically the first value spoke of 'open and honest communications.'

It is just not possible to impose a set of values from above and expect them to be accepted by a work force, especially when so many examples of the behaviour they see every day from their managers are contra to the values. You cannot impose values in an attempt to change a culture that does not reflect them.

That is why it was so good to be working with my client last week. They have made a genuine attempt to involve as many people as possible in the creation of the values. This has take place over several months in a variety of forums.

The result is a set of five values as follows:

- Treat people with trust and respect
- Choose a positive attitude to work
- Use creativity and innovation
- Demonstrate professionalism and integrity
- Consistently practice effective two-way communications

None of these are rocket science, but they have been created by the people themselves, and to judge by the comments and attitudes from last week's sessions there is at least a chance that they could make a real difference. Of course everything is not perfect in this organisation at the moment. At the sessions there was a real push back over the current lack of effective two-way communications, for instance.

But they do provide a framework to judge behaviours in the future, and as ever it starts with those at the top. Only when the people I worked with, middle and junior managers and supervisors, see their managers behaving consistently in line with the values will they be willing to do so, and their behaviours will have the crucial impact on their front line staff.

It's exciting stuff.

Values based leadership requires a really enlightened approach to employing people, and I've recently come across two instances in the same company of this in action.

Almost two years ago I was working with a management team in a large private sector company on their personal effectiveness, and did an exercise where people draw how they would like to spend one magical day, (it's a great icebreaker for any group by the way and not as daft as it sounds.) This one guy, in his mid twenties, drew a picture of a camper van in the Australian outback.

That morning was the stimulus for that person to realise he wanted to make that dream a reality. He chatted it over with his boss, who agreed to give him a year's unpaid leave with the guarantee of a job on his return.

I worked with those same managers again last week and this guy has now rejoined the group after an amazing year which has taken him and his wife to South America, where amongst many other experiences they lived with a Bolivian family for a week, to New Zealand for Christmas, to Australia, where they hired that camper van and spent two months exploring in the back of beyond, onto Borneo, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, and then to India and Japan before returning home.

He is back with life changing experiences, and a new motivation for his work.

This same boss has also recently faced the challenge of an excellent member of staff, with great potential, looking to leave because her partner, a professional rugby player, had joined a French team. Again this leader had the courage and imagination to work up a solution. For a trial period this person is now based in France for half the month and in the UK for the other half. Remote working in the extreme, but perfectly possible with modern technology and communications.

I met this leader one evening last week and explored why she had taken the decision to make these two things happen. She understands that there is a risk in both, not least with the blinkered attitudes of others, who will criticise and hope it fails. But she now has two talented but also highly motivated individuals who recognise the steps she was willing to take. I think both will repay her with loyalty and performance many times over. In fact the woman working from France half the month recognises that she will need to be even more highly disciplined and effective, and produce even more quality outputs, if the experiment is to be successful.

This is win-win thinking of the highest order, sadly missing from far too many employers I come across.

I'm not normally nostalgic about this kind of thing, but I did get somewhat depressed at the start of the week with the news that production of Newcastle Brown Ale is to move from Tyneside to Tadcaster. Heineken, the international drinks giant and owner of Scottish & Newcastle, have made the decision for economic reasons, stressing that the quality of the product will be unaffected.

To me that misses the point. I am sure I could not argue with the business case, clear black and white numbers, but this is about far more than that. It's about a black and white tradition, about a brand which is synonymous with that part of the world. There's just something deeply wrong with moving the brewing of Newcastle Brown away from its heartland of Tyneside (and yes I do know it relocated from Newcastle to Gateshead some years ago but that's still local as far as I'm concerned.). I hope drinkers of this fine product in working mens' clubs across the area and in the Bigg Market bars launch a campaign to stop this move, starting with a boycott of the ale. I just think this one is a step too far.

So tonight Jakkie and I are off to Birmingham to see Tom Jones. Over the past couple of years or so I've enjoyed catching up with legends of that kind of age (Tina Turner, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, the Eagles and the like), but I do approach tonight with a certain trepidation, not least because Jakkie's Mum is coming with us. Now Joan is quite a big fan of Tom Jones and last time she saw him, 20 years ago, she did throw a certain item of her clothing at the stage. In my worst nightmare I am sat there quietly foot tapping to 'Sex Bomb' when I am suddenly engulfed by various pairs of size 20 undergarments.

I did wonder if I was alone in being concerned about this, but apparently it's not unusual.

Sunday 11 October

So what have hierarchy, the Post Office, a care home warden and Barack Obama got in common? Read on.

I really enjoy writing a weekly blog, for two main reasons. Firstly, the discipline. Sitting down and writing between 1,000 and 1,500 words every weekend pushes me to think about what I want to write about and then to actually construct it. Secondly, I love the feedback, especially when someone I had no idea reads it comments that they have found something useful or thought provoking.

Some weeks its hard to come up with themes or subjects, but in other weeks things just occur during the course of the week which ring bells or link together.

This has been one of those weeks. One conversation and three pieces in the news just seem to interlink perfectly into a common theme.

The conversation came as part of some fascinating work I am doing with the Chief Executive of a regionally based third sector organisation. He has been leading work setting out a vision for his organisation for the future, and the strategic themes which will deliver the vision. In order to shape the vision and strategy we set up a series of project teams. Typically those teams could have consisted of people who worked within that particular area but instead we chose to make those teams genuinely

cross functional, to encourage wider thinking. We also decided to give those teams wide terms of reference, no interference from above and little supervision. To give them a high level of freedom within a broad framework.

The results have been outstanding, far better than we had anticipated. Free from shackles, and benefiting from the cross functional input driving new thinking, the groups have produced some outstanding results.

This led to us last week chatting about the future of hierarchical management (pretty big stuff for Tuesday lunchtime over a sandwich!) In terms of organisational leadership hierarchy seems to have been around for ever. Our current system is basically identical to the one that existed around the time of the industrial revolution. Factory or mill owners sitting in their big office at the top of their organisation (literally, usually high up on the top floor) telling their people what to do.

And nothing has really changed in many organisations. We still have industrial revolution structures and attitudes. In the worst instances (and I have experienced and witnessed this many times) we still have bosses at all levels who rule by fear and authority, with weak management who believe the only way to get things done is to demand and to bully. The result is a culture where people are scared to put their head above the parapet and challenge and where resentment and lack of trust is high. Of course these types of organisations still churn out results, but is it sustainable?

But you do get hierarchical structures that work. At best you still have a boss at the top, and managers throughout the organisation, but they make a concerted effort to lead in the right way by building trust and empowering their people.

I have no doubt (and ample evidence) that this approach produces better results than authoritarianism, but is it good enough? Is there a better way, a new way of thinking which challenges the traditional organisational structure?

One way it is done is through servant-leadership, which, at its best, turns traditional structures upside down. Leaders in those organisations 'invert the triangle.' They genuinely believe that the role of a leader is to serve others, and devote their efforts to making sure their people have the direction, resources, knowledge, skills, freedom and support to succeed.

Another way is to create self managing teams across the organisation (and I think this cross functional approach is crucial) who are given wide briefs, minimal interference, and the resources they need to deliver on a whole series of projects. These teams are given responsibility for delivering results, and are held accountable for that delivery.

I do appreciate that both of these ways of working fall within the broad principle of a hierarchical structure. To break that down completely could be seen as a recipe for anarchy. But I am convinced that it is a step in the right direction and that far more debate is needed on what lies beyond hierarchy. How can you truly unlock potential? What will follow the industrial age?

In the meantime the leader I am working with is planning to develop further the team working concept by giving those teams responsibility for delivering on the strategic themes they have created. I look forward to watching what results are possible through this enlightened and empowering approach.

Compare that with the current shambles that goes by the name Royal Mail (or is it the Post Office, I am even confused about that.) The Communications Workers Union have balloted successfully for a national strike, and there cannot be a more horrifying example in modern industrial relations of a complete breakdown in trust and respect between management and trade unions.

I am not trying to apportion blame to either side here (the mere fact I use the words 'either side' captures the heart of the issue.) What I am trying to say is that current beliefs, attitudes and entrenched positions and deep, deep bitterness will solve absolutely nothing.

The irony is that the management and the unions are arguing while their business dies around them. It's a pointless approach. It's like officers and crew arguing over how to patch the hole on the side of the

Titanic even as the ship is disappearing under the water. Electronic communications or alternative ways of physically delivering mail, are taking over more and more, and entrenched disputes and strike action will only hasten the process.

And from a personal perspective what is the point of 95% of the stuff my cheery postman Steve delivers every day? Take last Wednesday morning for example.

I got: three letters asking me to donate to charities (no point, I have already decided who I donate to and do so on line, and their pens are rubbish)

A business stationery company writing to me as 'Mr B D Communications' (get my name right at least).

Various items of junk mail not even addressed to me but presumably pushed through every door (for a local discount supermarket and a double glazing company)

A letter for the person who moved from my house 12 years ago (12 years!)

It all just goes straight into the recycling bin, what a waste. (of paper, money and effort.)

The serious point I am trying to make is that unless beliefs and attitudes change, unless there is new thinking we are seeing two dinosaurs battling each other and on the slippery slope to extinction.

Which leads me on to the nonsense that is a combination of European legislation, a nanny state and lack of common sense. I'm beginning to sound like Mr Angry of Tunbridge Wells, and it gets worse because this is from an article in Saturday's Daily Telegraph. Let me hasten to assure you that I primarily buy the Telegraph at the weekend for the sport, business news and travel sections, not the news, and I am sensible enough to be able to strip out the bias, but this is article headed 'Unlock the door? I've done my shift' caught my eye because it says so much about the issues we face.

It tells the story of a vulnerable pensioner in her eighties locked out of her care home for several hours because a 'controversial EU directive allegedly prevented the live-in warden from opening the door.' According to the story the warden had just finished a shift, and was meant to take an 11 hour break between shifts. 'If she had walked downstairs and opened the door she would have been in technical breach of the EU working time directive.'

Now I am as pro European as you can get (I am one of the few people I know who openly believes we should adopt the Euro and get rid of the pound) but some of its legislation has become crazy, not in its principles but in its bureaucratic interpretation. But also, of course, her ewe have a complete breakdown of common sense. Would opening that door really have resulted in the combined weight of Brussels and her employer bearing down on the poor warden?

I do get the impression that an empowered culture is not at the heart of that particular warden's organisation.

And finally we leap from the Daily Telegraph and Europe to the wonderful news that Barack Obama has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. There are those (not least my appalled relatives in Texas) who think this has come far too early. Obama is only a matter of months into his Presidency, they argue, how could this prestigious award have been made so early.

My view is that it is entirely appropriate, well-deserved and a wonderful acknowledgement of how someone has already done so much to make a difference, not necessarily in results yet, but through new thinking and new approaches.

Take what happened just a couple of weeks ago. In the space of a few days Obama was fighting to pass health care reform which will give medical cover for the first time to millions of the most vulnerable people in his country, making a major speech on America's new commitment to the environment and throwing down the challenge to create a nuclear free world. Awesome. He has also made an enormous leap forward (taking the first step himself) to a new alliance with Russia by abandoning Bush's missile defense proposals.

This is a great example of where integrity and intent can be just so important. And it is on the basis of that intent that the Nobel Peace Prize is so richly deserved. After the unmitigated disaster of George W Bush, Obama offers such a positive hope to billions of people.

So what's the theme linking a challenge to traditional hierarchy with the Post Office, a warden following EU legislation, and Obama? It's simply that if we are to address the challenges and issues around us, be they local, national or international, to really make progress then we have to think differently about those issues. We cannot be bound by the constraints of the type of thinking which created those problems in the first place. Leaders everywhere have to take a new approach, to challenge their own beliefs and the beliefs of those around them.

And it doesn't matter if its you doing it in your 50 person organisation or Obama doing it on the world stage. The principle is the same. Without that type of thinking, everywhere, so much potential remains untapped. But it can be so different.

Sunday 4 October

Taking personal responsibility for realising those dreams (with inspiration from Joan Baez)

A postscript to my blog last week on taking personal responsibility. During the past few days I received the following note from one of the NHS front line staff I had been working with.

Well, what can I say, your training is great. I walked into work on Friday and to my great surprise, I have been poached by another department to help head up a national project, my line manager was quiet miffed and didn't want me to accept the challenge, but I positively jumped at the chance (which is not like me, usually I hide away in the background with my head down). Anyway, although I must admit to being a little concerned we won't meet the extremely tight deadline and I have only one member of staff to lead in my team, (normal for the NHS) we are motoring through the work and I am enjoying the busy workload. I finally feel I am being productive, motivated and effective. It's GREAT! Also people are noticing, I have had a comment of thanks from the Acting Director of Facilities and from the Maintenance Manager and we are not even a week into the project yet. I hope the results are as good as expected but I am being positive which is making my colleagues positive too.

Just thought you should know your course does have positive effects.

What a great note to receive, and a wonderful example of someone who has taken personal responsibility for seizing an opportunity (even against the wishes of their Line Manager) and spreading positive energy. To me this is about seizing opportunities and doing what you really want to do.

Last Thursday evening Jakkie and I went to see Joan Baez at the Symphony Hall in Birmingham (stick with this there is a link.) This woman is a legend, 68 years old and still going strong. She has been performing for over fifty years, having started on the folk circuit in Boston. During the concert she recounted her story of her upbringing. Her father was a famous physicist and was anxious for the young Joan to following his footsteps with an academic career. But she was determined to find her own way and to live her dream of a musical career. She began hanging out in coffee shops in Boston (with her father's permission who thought she would find intellectual conversation) and the rest, fifty years on, is history.

Receiving the note from the NHS staff member and listening to Joan Baez got me thinking about how many people have dreams inside them, things they really want to do, which they so often fail to realise. When working with clients at personal effectiveness workshops, or in one to one coaching, I explore these issues by asking people what one great ambition is that still lies inside them. There are a variety of answers, which often include travel, adventure, a change of career, voluntary work, running their own business. We then talk about the barriers which could prevent these achievements being realised. The list is at first predictable, money, time, other people, family commitments, their job, but then we

dig a little deeper and other factors emerge, such as lack of confidence, fear of failure, lack of courage to take the first step. So often that first list are excuses, not real barriers.

Even when people are describing the achievements inside them they use words like 'I'd really like to do this but I know I never will'. Not surprisingly this is so often a self fulfilling prophecy. But I also come across people who make it happen, like the friend of mine who has left a successful job in the leisure industry because she has a tremendous desire to become a teacher. This decision involves real commitment because of the financial hardship of giving up a well paid job to return to college for a year, but that is far outweighed by her wish to make a difference.

I guess the other connection from the past few days was the news that over half of all children now being born in the developed world will live to be over a hundred (and the revelation that the first person in the UK to live to 120 is female and already 60). Today we are living so much longer, and the traditional view of a full working life followed by retirement in our sixties has become outdated for a whole number of reasons. This gives so much opportunity to approach our working lives with a different mindset, maybe to experience a number of careers, and to continue working part time in our sixties and seventies.

So here's the challenge to you. Does what you do with your life truly fulfil you? When you look back in the future will you have achieved your ambitions? Do you dream of an alternative career, maybe doing something where you believe you can truly make a difference? Do you have a travel bug inside you or an idea for a business of your own? If so, please focus on what you can do to achieve those ambitions, not just on the barriers. And start to develop a plan for how to realise them. It's a well-worn cliché that the first step is the hardest, but it's true. And that first step does not have to be huge. If it's a desire to travel start to plan when it might be possible, and read up on the places you want to visit. If it's to learn a new language go today and buy a book or CD. If it's charitable work, start by volunteering for just a few days a week. Haven't got time? Think again, is that a real barrier or an excuse?

I'm having just these discussions at the moment with my elder daughter, Lindsay. Fresh out of University with a good degree she has started to apply for graduate entry programmes. But inside her is a long held desire to run her own business. That is her dream, what she really wants to do. Her challenge is to make the plan which will enable her to realise that ambition within a realistic time-scale. That's about combining personal responsibility with big ambitions. Exciting stuff.

Each year I forget how much I love autumn. The colours out in the countryside are amazing. I am writing this on Saturday early evening having just returned from a walk with Jakkie. The wind was blowing and the sun was shining and the whole experience was so invigorating. I've also started a month of de-toxing and no alcohol (for the second year running and just so boring!) I know I'll feel better for it come November, but it sure is tough!

Sunday 29 September

The journey to greatness, taking personal responsibility, and Sarah Brown, Queen of Twitter

Two assignments over the last week enabled me to engage in the parts of my work that I find the most enjoyable and challenging.

One was a coaching session with the Chief Executive of a national charity in which we began to set out the path that can give her organisation the opportunity to become truly great. I have recently been working with a number of leaders across a range of organisations of all shapes and sizes on this challenge, how to turn an already good organisation into a sustainably great one.

The concept is, of course, borrowed from Jim Collins' book, and can only even be considered when the leader themselves recognises that their organisation could achieve so much more, and personally has the desire, energy and vision to lead such a journey. Where this does not exist, a good organisation will not improve, and therefore will not remain good for ever, at some point it will slip into decline, usually through a combination of complacency and neglect.

Even when a leader is committed to the concept of a 'good to great' journey the challenge is where to start. Often the challenge seems so big and is difficult to articulate and map out.

I use two pieces of material to enable leaders to commence the journey. The first is the 'Good to Great' book itself, it is based on the premise that breakthrough to greatness only occurs when the organisation has undergone a whole series of disciplined thought driven by disciplined people. The second framework I use is my 'Circle of Organisational Effectiveness', a holistic model that can be used by any team or organisation driving significant change.

There are then four absolute fundamentals which must be in place before the journey can begin:

1. The right people must be on the bus. It is impossible to commence this journey if there are a significant number of wrong people on the bus or if people are in the wrong seats. Leaders must ensure that they have in place a team capable of delivering greatness, and where there are changes to be made they must be resolved before the journey can begin.

2. Absolute clarity of purpose. This is the time to revisit the organisation's mission and purpose. Is it absolutely clear about why it exists? Is it focussed down onto a clear, simple, unambiguous purpose which makes absolute sense? There is a one off opportunity here before the journey begins to test that purpose, and this will often result in a direct challenge to some activities the organisation is currently involved in. The Hedgehog Concept from 'Good to Great' offers the perfect model to base these deliberations on. This demands that organisations only focus on things they are truly passionate about, and best in the world at, and make economic sense.

3. A clear and compelling vision. The organisation must be able to clearly articulate where it is going. What does 'greatness' look like? What will be different, really different, when you get there? How will you know you are there? What measures will be in place? Is the vision really audacious and stretching enough? Will it engage your people, and other stakeholders, so that they really want to be part of the journey?

4. Involving and uniting people across the organisation in a compelling reason for change. The leadership team can work on much of the above. But there comes a point when people throughout the organisation need to become involved, to immerse themselves in the need for change and the journey ahead. They must understand the compelling reason for the change if they are to fully buy in.

All of the above takes time to put in place. There are no short cuts. I believe it takes a minimum of a year from committing to the journey being worthwhile until it can commence in earnest, and it may often take longer. And of course while all this is going on the organisation must continue to deliver good results. There can be no eye off the ball.

The leader I coached last week is absolutely committed to the journey ahead and is very excited about the opportunities. She is under no illusions as to the size of the challenge, but the potential rewards are enormous.

My second assignment last week, and an equally challenging and enjoyable one, was a personal effectiveness programme with front line staff. This time it was a group from the NHS, but it could have been with anyone. I love working with front line staff, those who have day to day involvement with customers (in this instance their patients) and who are wonderful people, really committed to making a difference.

However, these people are not without their issues, usually connected to the way in which they are managed, and last week was a prime example. Among the delegates were a group of five from the same team who were extremely de-motivated. They had many stories to tell of feeling undervalued, not listened to and abused. They felt that they were far too short staffed and were expected to deliver the same amount as always with far less people. They felt powerless to do anything about their situation.

Although I find these situations challenging I spend a lot of time on the programme getting the group to think about and to understand what they can change, not what they can't change. I draw for them three

concentric circles and propose that leadership takes place in each of the three circles. The innermost circle is about leading ourselves, in this circle we can decide how we deal with situations, we can challenge our own beliefs, grow our personal effectiveness (inside and outside work) and behave in a way we want others to behave. Although still tough this is relatively the easiest circle in which to drive change because it is the one over which we have full control, even if sometimes we don't recognise it. It's about us.

The middle circle is about how we lead and influence those immediately around us. In this circle are our boss, our work colleagues, our direct reports (if we have any), our family, friends and neighbours. It is more difficult to exercise change in this circle, because it requires influencing other people, but still possible because they are immediately around us. Metaphorically we can touch these people every day. My delegates boss lies in this circle, a tall order to change, but maybe they can at least work at influencing them.

In the outer circle is the wider organisation. This is where change is really tough. Out here lies decisions on staffing levels, other resources, organisation culture, systems and processes, and even, in last week's instance, government health policy. A lot of the issues these people face lie in this circle, that is why they feel so helpless.

But the point I try to get across is this. They can do nothing about most, if not all, of the stuff in this circle, so it is just not worth having sleepless nights about. They can influence some things in the middle circle, particularly how they interact and approach issues with their colleagues. But it is the focus on the innermost circle which is most important, here they can examine their feelings through self-awareness, they can make choices about how they deal with their situation, they can focus on things they can do, not things they cannot control.

It was a hard challenge last week but by the end of the two days I believe there was a light bulb moment for many of those attending, and they went away determined to focus on that inner circle.

And so Sarah Brown has overtaken Stephen Fry as the most followed person on Twitter. I think this is great, even if many of her followers are hoping for some insights about the struggles of her husband, the Prime Minister. If they are they are likely to be disappointed. Sarah Brown comes across on Twitter as a warm, generous, caring, intelligent human being who is deeply compassionate about the causes she champions. In short she comes across brilliantly, with none of the shallow back biting that inflicts the political world.

I love following her tweets, whatever fate the electorate deal Gordon next spring Sarah will emerge with her credibility intact. I believe after that, if she wanted to, she could go on to eclipse her husband on the world stage as a force for good and for change in whatever field she chooses.

Sunday 20 September

How a paperclip, not Poundland, can drive such incredible creativity, 'Shorty' comes home, and raising a glass to the greatest TV chef of them all.

The lead story in my local paper this week summed up everything there is to know about my nearby town of Stafford. Having agonised over the effects of the recession on the town which has forced a number of retailers out of business, the paper sees signs of things getting better because 'Poundland is opening up.'

Now I have nothing against Stafford, it is as quiet and delightful a county town as you could hope to come across, and Jakkie and I have just returned home from an overnight stay in a great hotel in the town centre, (a birthday gift from the children), but Poundland, come on! This just sums up for me the lack of imagination in a town which, with a creative approach, could rival places like Chester and Harrogate as a retail and leisure destination.

But that kind of vision, imagination and creativity is just so sadly lacking in all kinds of organisations, from councils to companies.

I had the opportunity last week to work with young managers in a major UK company, and to just see what could be achieved when creativity is released. I based a day's exercise on the idea behind the book 'One Red Paperclip' by Kyle MacDonald. The premise is simple, you start with one paperclip, and have to find a way to swap that for a 'bigger and better' item, and then swap the new item again for something better, and so on. In the book MacDonald managed to end up with no less than a house, but that was done over several weeks or months and my teams only had four hours to make their swaps.

When they were first given the brief the people involved were like rabbits trapped in headlights, but gradually their own light bulbs came on around the room and what followed was amazing. Over the next few hours, through phone calls, the internet and frantic dashes around the town they swapped their paperclips up and up and ended up with breaks in hotels, a spa weekend, race days, a flight experience, theatre tickets, restaurant meals, a fridge and (get this) a signed photo of Linda Lucardi! One team even got onto local radio to promote their cause. All of the goods were eventually donated to charity, and what had seemed like a daunting if not impossible exercise ended up being loads of fun as well.

How did this happen? Because people were forced to think differently. They were being pushed well outside their comfort zones and had to think creatively about what could be achieved. And this is my issue. At work we stifle that imagination, people are just expected to turn up and get on with their job, but so much creativity exists inside people, if only it could be released. Indeed, as I blogged a couple of weeks ago, it is one of the ten Intelligences each of us possess, and it is just waiting to be released.

So why don't managers release the creativity of their people at work? Maybe its because they are worried that chaos will result, or they are fearful that it might be a threat to their authority. Maybe they don't think they have the time to do it, there is too much work to do to be messing about with all this stuff.

But how can we really move teams and organisations forward without releasing that creativity? For me this is the breakthrough point to achieving amazing results, the kind of amazing thing that allows people to turn a paperclip into a flight experience in a few hours. Imagine if that same level of energy, thinking and imagination was focussed on your biggest challenges at work?

The most important thing we can do as leaders is to create the conditions that allow people to think creatively. Its so difficult to do in our normal day to day working environment. There we have become creatures of habit, beavering away doing the same things day after day. 'If we keep on doing what we have always done we'll get what we have always got'.

But maybe we could:

1. Create a different environment by taking your team away somewhere for the day. It needn't cost a lot of money. Find a location in the countryside, go and climb hills or walk on a beach together, go and volunteer together for a day. But then find time to run a session around a specific issue you need to move forward, and see what happens.
2. Put together a cross functional team who don't normally work together. Se them an issue to consider. It doesn't have to be something that many of them normally work on. This drives a different perspective, new thinking.
3. Don't get involved yourself, leave them to it, set them a brief but then stand back and let them get on with it. Be available to help, to support, to clear the path but give them the space to come up with ideas themselves.
4. It's essential to stretch people well outside their comfort zone. If I'd briefed the teams last week that they just needed to generate small swaps we may have ended up with a pencil or two. When people are stretched they have to think differently.
5. This takes a bit of courage but consider the pre-approval route. Tell a group that whatever the proposal they come back with to move an issue forward, it is already approved and will be

implemented. The secret here is to ensure you have set an appropriate framework for the decision making, one they cannot step outside. But within that framework they have absolute freedom. This is an incredibly powerful way to engage people in creative problem solving.

So give it a go, if we want to turn good teams and organisations into great ones we must release the creativity that is bottled up in all of us.

So we have finally reached the end of Jakkie's 50th birthday celebrations. I feel rather like a marathon runner entering the stadium and passing the finishing line, although this particular runner is so full of food, drink and good living he feels he might burst! On Friday part of Jakkie's present came home in the shape of an ex military lightweight Landrover to add to the collection. Anyone who thinks this particular gift is for my benefit should be ashamed of themselves. These beautiful machines were built to tight specifications to allow them to be dropped out of planes by parachute over war zones. He has already been christened 'Shorty' and is magnificent.

Finally, let's raise a glass in a very sad week to Keith Floyd. Maybe his death at the age of 65 is not surprising, this is one person for whom abstinence was a word that passed his lips rather less than a glass or two, but as a TV chef he was an absolute legend. My favourite scene would be Floyd cooking chaotically in some square in Italy or France while bemused locals passed by, boiling up a fish soup and waiting for the clock to strike twelve so he could quaff contentedly from the glass that was always by his side. But along with the theatre this was a man who was a cooking genius, and who had decided to live his life according to his rules.

I will really miss him. I suspect at this very moment somewhere Floyd is creating a dish for George Best and Oliver Reed and the three of them are contemplating a hell of a night out.

Monday 14 September

How a combine harvester may just hold the key to perfect harmony (with a nod to the Wurzels)

I spent eight hours yesterday on a combine harvester. Now this may seem a strange way for me to spend a Sunday but I've been watching my friend and neighbour Colin spend weeks on end at this time of year on his big yellow machine and I've always wanted to see what actually happened. So yesterday I joined him for the afternoon and evening as we harvested a 20 acre field.

It was great. I'd expected it to be dusty, noisy and uncomfortable, but the cab is air-conditioned. Best of all was that we were still going long after it got dark, and there was something really exciting and special about watching the combine harvester, the tractor and trailer working with us, and further tractors doing the bailing, charging round the great big field with lights blazing like we were taking part in some crazy midnight pagan dance ritual.

I even got a chance to drive the combine although I was banned after a while on the basis that my wavy lines were creating havoc. It's not that easy. Most exciting of all was emptying the corn into the accompanying tractor and trailer, which is done on the move reminding me of an aircraft being refuelled mid-air.

It was fun but I also got a great opportunity to talk with Colin about what he does, and the following three thoughts have stayed with me.

Firstly, farmers work incredibly hard, especially at this time of year. I think we under-estimate just how hard they work. It is not unusual for Colin to put in eighteen hour days, day after day. Okay so it's a bit quieter in winter, but there's still lots to do in far less pleasant conditions. This re-enforced the tremendous respect I have for what they do.

In eight hours I was never remotely bored. It may sound a repetitive job going up and down the field but there is so much to see around you, beautiful countryside and loads of animals and birds. It also provides the perfect opportunity to spend time reflecting and thinking.

Finally, if you'll excuse the analogy, you can't cut corners. You have to do the job properly. You can make it as efficient as possible, and use the latest machinery, but every acre has to be properly harvested, or you will never maximise your income from the corn. If you take that a stage further, every farmer knows that harvesting a perfect crop is the result of a year long activity, not (like me) just turning up on the final day for a ride around. The field was prepared and planted last October, and was sprayed regularly throughout the year. Yesterday was the reward for those efforts.

And that's the link to becoming effective in so many parts of our lives. Following the model of the farmers, real effectiveness is not a quick fix, not something we can quickly learn through a few hastily taught techniques. True effectiveness is character based and lies deep inside us. It is based on deep roots of building and maintaining balance in all aspects of our lives, challenging beliefs and understanding that we have choices and how to make the right choices. Only when these roots take hold can we then set out with clarity what we want to achieve and how we are going to do it, and then build effective relationships with those around us to help us achieve our goals.

If we want to build perfect harmony in our lives maybe the combine harvester is the key, and no, I can't get that bloody Wurzels song out of my head now either!

I guess all of the above is about unlocking potential within ourselves, but in the work place even then not all our full potential is often realised. That is because it is far too often held back by authoritarian managers who stifle their people, who have to be in control at all times.

They do not realise that if they could unlock the potential inside all of us people would achieve amazing things. The buzz word for all of this is empowerment, but I still describe it to people as giving 'freedom within a framework.'

I worked with a client last week on how they could develop an empowered culture with their people. This senior team have set a challenging vision, and are currently implementing the strategy to deliver that vision. Historically they are the first to admit that their organisation's management model has been built around command and control. People at all levels have looked to the senior team for direction, to be told what to do. They understand this is no longer an option of they are to achieve the vision.

They have a lot to do to change that culture but we know so much potential to do so much more exists amongst their people. So we are looking for the senior team to take the lead by example, and to begin to demonstrate to their people that they will trust them and released them using a simple three step model:

1. Set the framework. Let people know what you are expecting them to deliver. Let them know the parameters in which they are operating. Set out the playing field. Make it as large or as small as necessary based on a combination of confidence and level of risk.
2. Then step back and release people, give them the freedom to deliver. But also ensure they are responsible and accountable for delivering. With empowerment must come responsibility and accountability.
3. But none of this is about abandonment. We need to regularly ensure that those we have empowered are able to deliver. This can take many forms, but would often include a scheduled series of meetings based on giving support, recognising achievements, clearing the path and coaching.

Continuing the agricultural theme I often use growing tomatoes as an analogy for empowering people. When we grow tomatoes we first provide the right conditions (the framework.) We plant the seeds in the right place, ensuring there is sufficient sunlight and the right soil. We then allow the seeds to grow into plants, but we do not abandon them. We regularly check they are okay, and free of bugs. We water

them. Sometimes we even talk to them. Over time, in the right conditions, the plants prosper and we can enjoy the fruits of their labours. Maybe corny but the analogy does work.

As George Washington no less said 'Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth.'

The final farming connection of the week is the produce auction we held in the village hall on Friday evening. A superb auctioneer made all the difference and the evening was both hilarious and successful, with rogue bidders pushing up the price and being caught out once or twice! I have no idea what we are going to do with the various jars of jam and chutney we somehow accumulated!

Saturday 5 September

Our Ten Intelligences, your opportunity to tap into your natural genius (via a doughnut or two)

My holiday reading this year as we floated across the Atlantic was a book I picked up from the Queen Mary's library called 'Head First' by Tony Buzan. I'm a great fan of Mr Buzan anyway, he being the 'inventor' of mind mapping. I was first introduced to the concept of mind maps about fifteen years ago, and it is no exaggeration to say that this simple tool revolutionised my ability to organise presentations, take notes when with clients and to plan just about anything, inside or outside work.

If you haven't tried using them (and they are so simple, but a really powerful way of working) then grab any of Tony Buzan's books on the subject, or try his web site www.mind-map.com, or drop me a note and I'd be delighted to give you an introduction, because it really works.

Anyway, back to the point of the blog. In his book 'Head First' Buzan explodes the myth that intelligence is all about your IQ. Too often, especially at work, that is how people are judged or measured. Often promotion, the chance for high office, seems to be completely dependent on the number of letters after a person's name and the level of their IQ.

But how many times have you come across seemingly intelligent people in big jobs who are just so poor at organising themselves, at leading and managing others, at building relationships, at taking decisions. I certainly came across so many people like that in my corporate life and I continue to do so as I work with all sorts of organisations.

As I began to work for myself I came across the concept of EQ, or Emotional Intelligence, our ability to build relationships through empathising with people and truly understanding them. At that point so much fell into place, and I perhaps began to understand what had held me back in my previous working life. I had been working in a culture where the very existence of EQ was not even recognised, let alone valued.

But Buzan takes it a whole stage further by proposing that as a human being we each possess no less than ten intelligences, and if we choose to we can expand and develop each one of these intelligences, transforming our abilities and tapping into our natural genius.

I'd love to briefly introduce you to these ten intelligences, but if you are interested to know more, get hold of the book, it is very readable, well laid out and contains a load of practical ways in which you can develop each of the intelligences.

Buzan divides the ten intelligences into three groupings: creative and emotional intelligences, bodily intelligences and traditional IQ intelligences.

Each group then sub-divides as follows:

Creative and Emotional Intelligences:

1. Creative Intelligence: this is about our ability to think in new ways, to be original. It includes the speed and ease with which we can come up with new ideas, our ability to challenge beliefs and to see things from a differing point of view, our originality and our ability to build upon ideas. Buzan gives

Richard Branson as an example of someone with high creative intelligence, someone who was severely dyslexic and struggled through his academic career, considered to be not bright by his teachers. Look what happened to him!

2. Personal Intelligence: this one is about understanding ourselves, and our own personal effectiveness. It's the sort of stuff I train regularly with my Breakthrough Personal Effectiveness programme, the kind of thinking and material in the personal victory part of Covey's 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People'. It's about our ability to take control, make the right choices and organise ourselves. Christopher Reeve is the very powerful example of someone who has managed to do this despite the most horrendous of physical disabilities.

3. Social Intelligence: this is the one which comes the closest, for me, to the concept of EQ. This is about our ability to build highly effective relationships with others, to understand them, to build empathy, to be at ease in social situations. Nelson Mandela is Buzan's very interesting example of this, the way in which he conducted himself and influenced others after three decades of imprisonment.

4. Spiritual Intelligence: I guess this one takes a bit more explaining, but for me it's about our personal values, the things that are deep inside us, our beliefs, how much at peace we are with ourselves. Mother Teresa is perhaps the predictable but nevertheless powerful example quoted.

Bodily Intelligences:

5. Physical Intelligence: so we move on to the three bodily intelligences, and the premise here is that the more healthy you are, the more balanced and physically fit your body becomes the more balanced and mentally fit your brain becomes. The two work in harmony, as in the saying 'a healthy body is a healthy mind.' I guess we all understand and appreciate the link, it's just doing something about it, through regular exercise that's the tough bit! Michael Jordan is the quoted example but there would be many we could all think of.

6. Sensual intelligence: this is about using each of our five physical senses (and intuition, our 'sixth sense') to the full extent of their quite incredible powers. Walt Disney's work in translating the senses into film is a great example. The opportunities to look, listen, smell, touch and taste, as well as to use our intuition, are around us every day. And did you know that research has shown that when we act on our intuition it is the right decision more than 80% of the time?

7. Sexual Intelligence: this was the one I didn't expect to find here, and the chapter was so interesting that I read it three times! So what is it that makes us live longer, has inspired many of the greatest works of art, music and literature, makes the skin glow, has inspired renaissances and revolutions, reduces stress and is the main reason the human race still exists? Yes, the answer is sex! By the end of the chapter Buzan had convinced me of the link between a healthy sex life and the development of the brain. Mind you, it wasn't hard! And yes, Marilyn Monroe was the quoted example.

Traditional IQ Intelligences:

8. Numerical Intelligence: back to earth with a bump as Buzan examines the traditional IQ intelligences. So many people rank their numerical intelligence as the least developed of their intelligences, but we all possess it and we can all develop it. A Cambridge mathematician is the quoted example, but as with all the examples it doesn't have to be about famous people. We all know people around us who demonstrate or more of the ten intelligences brilliantly. Sad to say I love numbers, I wasn't that great at Maths at school but it's not about algebra and logarithms, who needs those anyway?

9. Spatial Intelligence: this is another fascinating one. Spatial intelligence is about being able to see the relationship of shapes to each other, our ability, for example, to read a map and to turn the information it gives us into actions. It's our ability to understand and use the space around us. Michael Schumacher is the example given.

10. Verbal Intelligence: the last of the ten and again a very traditional one. It's about our ability to use language effectively. Don't forget that we have managed to learn the language we speak and our brain is therefore far more intelligent than the world's most intelligent computer! Here's another intelligence

we can really develop. Did you know that the average person writes, speaks and recognises only about 1,000 words! Shakespeare is the inevitable example.

I guess the main point that comes through for me in the book is that we each possess all ten of these intelligences, it's just that some are more developed than others. So even if you claim you are not creative, or no good with numbers, it doesn't mean you don't have the potential to be so, you have just not developed that particular intelligence.

So get working on all ten and unlock your unique and enormous potential!

I'm writing this blog on Friday afternoon, in the arrivals hall at terminal 5 at Heathrow (in Krispy Kreme Doughnuts to be exact, but that's another story) as I await the return of my daughter Lindsay and her boyfriend Danny from three months working and travelling in the USA. There will be lots to catch up on during the journey home. Then tomorrow we are off to Newcastle for the first of Jakkie's 'Big Zero' celebrations, this one with the 'northern relatives.'

Time first though to put my spatial intelligence to the test and see if I can fit in one more doughnut.

Saturday 29 August

Reflections on a grand Atlantic voyage, on being an Englishman in New York, and on unlikely connections between the Big Apple and Stoke-On-Trent.

Well I'm back. A few pounds heavier (oh the food!), many pounds lighter (in the pocket) and totally relaxed after an amazing couple of weeks.

The first of those weeks was spent in the most beautiful and luxurious of surroundings, on the Queen Mary, as we crossed the Atlantic on the most traditional of voyages from Southampton to New York.

If at this point you just want to delete this blog because doing this sounds like the most boring or pretentious thing imaginable, just stick with me and let me share with you ten reflections.

1. There were 2,500 passengers on the voyage, and of course that included a whole number who had their heads up their own arses or were just bigoted and obnoxious. Breakfast companions shared their views with me on everything from their dislike of Germans to their even more racist views on immigration. But these people were in the minority, and are around wherever I go.
2. There were also many fascinating people, and in seven days at sea I had some great conversations, including meeting a German who claims to be a distant relative (via several bastard encounters) of Prince Charles. I think he was a little disappointed to find that my comments on the monarchy were not particularly supportive. There was also the funny, including over hearing a delightful elderly couple packing away Trivial Pursuit with the words 'we're just no good at these new-fangled games.'
3. What is most amazing about crossing the Atlantic in this way is that feeling of timelessness. We flew back in less than seven hours while the ship takes seven days. The clock going back most nights increased this sense of time standing still.
4. Along with the timelessness is the vastness of the emptiness that surrounds you. Day after day besides seeing no land (obviously) we also saw no other vessels, it was just us, a pin prick on an unimaginably large ocean. I found walking round the decks in mid-Atlantic staring into the distant nothing to be a really strange experience.
5. And although we were just a pin prick it was a pretty big pin. The Queen Mary is the World's largest ocean liner, and to put it into some kind of context the four pods under the hull which steer the ship (technical term) each weigh 250 tons, which is about the same as a fully laden jumbo jet.

6. Being in the middle of nowhere also gives you time to think and to attend stuff I would not experience normally. I went to lectures on subjects ranging from the Vikings, to architecture, to the Bermuda triangle. My only complaint is that they were dumbed down a bit (which I assume is for the Americans).

7. We passed over the spot where the Titanic sank. I did find this quite thought provoking. We passed the spot on a calm sea in the middle of the day in the middle of summer. I cannot imagine what it must have been like as the Titanic sunk. I did spend a nervous few minutes scanning the horizon for icebergs, and the waters below for Leonardo DiCaprio but fortunately neither made an appearance.

8. On reflection, nothing much has changed from the Titanic to the Queen Mary (except the number of life rafts I hope.) There is still that sense of grandeur in dressing for dinner, and the sense of timelessness adds to the comparison. Maybe the main difference for me is one of communication, no need for morse code telegrams, I could wander down to the computer room and use Facebook or check the cricket score (missing the final Ashes test is another story.)

9. The level of customer service is extraordinary. It's not just about the staff to customer ratios (which I know you are paying for) but about the way they deliver perfect service time and time again. Cunard have a service framework called 'White Star service' and it is brilliantly executed. All my frustrations of UK service surfaced once more, watch out for a future blog. And I just wish I could adopt the gay French guy running the champagne bar. Outrageous, camp and hilarious. But enough about me, he was pretty good too.

10. Of course all good things come to an end and as we got within 100 miles of fortress America the first military plane started to buzz us obviously under the impression that the Queen Mary represents a significant terrorist threat, and as we picked up the pilot early on the final morning he was accompanied by a small platoon of machine gun totting homeland security operatives. It was quite a way to break the spell of a wonderful voyage.

And so to New York. What a city. I just love it and can even forgive the unrelenting heat and humidity (well I chose to visit in August). As I mentioned above arriving was a little onerous, in addition to the armed guards on board we were buzzed constantly by a military helicopter. I understand that life changed dramatically for New York (and America) in September 2001, but this was like arriving in North Korea or Burma. In fact it made my entry into the Soviet Union from Finland and my journey through Checkpoint Charlie in the Berlin Wall when I was seventeen seem like a walk in the park in comparison. Once we left the ship I can only liken the customs experience to what it must have been like arriving at Ellis Island, but without the niceties.

I'm being a little bit harsh, the arrival into New York by sea remains undoubtably the most magnificent experience with the majesty of the Statue of Liberty and Manhattan skyline as the sun rises.

Talking of a walk in the park, I adore Central Park. It's fun to wander round, but for me the best view of it is from up above. We went to the Top of the Rock, which I think is as good a view of Manhattan as you get from the Empire State Building without the queues. It is only from up there that you get a true picture of how grand Central Park looks, perfectly symmetrical, surrounded by tall buildings on every side. Awesome. Visiting Central park was also my first chance to see the Dakota building where John Lennon was shot back in 1980.

We also did a few different things this time, including spending time in Harlem, which is a fascinating neighbourhood. I also saw Ground Zero for the first time, both my previous visits to New York were long enough ago to have included a tour of the twin towers. I understand arguments are still continuing on what to place on the site. It seems straightforward to me, leave it as empty as possible with a suitable monument and space for people to reflect and think. What could be better than peace gardens? I think that the Vietnam memorial wall in Washington could provide a perfect model.

On to much more mundane things, how many places to eat must there be in New York? And how much do these people manage to eat? We set out on a personal mission to eat every thing we could think of that was traditional to New York, but after grits (the most disgusting things ever), pretzels, doughnuts, cheese cake, hot dogs, hamburgers, breakfasts of eggs over easy and bagels we had to give up. And yes, the service was just as amazing (in a very different way) to that on the ship.

Perhaps the last word on New York should lay with Jakkie, who was on her first visit. I was explaining to her that New York consisted of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx etc. 'Oh', she said, 'you mean it's made up of lots of different towns, a bit like Stoke-on-Trent.'

How can you compare the greatest city on earth with a 1960's back water? It's time New York dragged itself into the 21st century.

We flew back with Continental, and that's where the bubble burst. I'm not saying it was cramped but even the sardines on board were quoting their human rights. And getting back brought my service illusions crashing back into reality. Quite why we have to wait for half an hour in the baggage hall before the handlers can start working is beyond me. I guess it is something to do with custom and practice and possibly the fact it was raining.

So after a month off it's back to work next week, which will be a shock to the system, but actually I'm really looking forward to it. While I was on the Queen Mary I read an amazing book on our various intelligences, which made so much sense to me, and I'll share it in next week's blog as well as putting something onto the web site. I also am dying to get on with my piece of work on the Characteristics of Great Leaders, and have some great new work with clients about to commence.

But before that there's the small matter of my birthday, and a trip to Chester to celebrate over the Bank Holiday. It really is good to be back.

Saturday 15 August

Hands off our amazing NHS, Peter Pan and the voyage commences.

How dare they! How dare a group of right wing, reactionary, gun loving neo-conservatives criticise our wonderful NHS. And if it wasn't bad enough that conservative MEPs are doing it, the Republican right in America are at it as well.

How dare Sarah Palin describe the NHS as evil. This from the least credible candidate in American history (except possibly Dan Quayle, and George W). How dare Daniel Hannan (who!) state that it's a 60 year old mistake or that he wouldn't wish the NHS on anyone.

What this unholy alliance of Republicans and gravy train riding Tory MEPs have done is to galvanise support for the NHS across Britain in a way Gordon Brown and Andy Burnham can only have dreamed of. The Twitter campaign has been immense and a great example of how political mobilisation has changed for ever with the arrival of social networking sites.

Over the past couple of years I've regularly blogged about my respect for the NHS and the people who work in it. Of course its not perfect, but it is the envy of sensible people across the world. The basic principle of universal health care based on need, not on the ability to pay, remains as important and as amazing today as it was in 1947.

I would go further. I would say we are so fortunate to have a universal health care system free at the point of delivery augmented by a range of private health care options for those with the ability (through money or employment benefit) to access them. To me it's the perfect combination.

Loads about the NHS is far from perfect, but at least it covers everyone and does not deny 15% of the population the right to basic cover in the way the American system does.

But of course this wonderful institution could be greatly improved. Picking up on my theme of two weeks ago, it too could achieve greatness. Here are my five basic steps for that journey.

1. Stop government interference. Of course the government want to ensure improvements when they are putting in so much cash, they want a return on their investment, but a top down target driven approach, centrally controlled, is not the answer. Back off, set basic principles, and then let the NHS manage its own affairs.
2. But it cannot do so as one enormous monolithic organisation. It is simply too big for any sustainable change to be driven from top to bottom. Focus autonomy for decision making at a lower level, into existing Primary and Acute trusts. But demand accountability along with that autonomy.
3. Invest massively on building highly effective leadership at every level, from the Chief Executives and Chairs of Trusts to the front line. This is the single biggest breakthrough piece. I would say this wouldn't I because it's what I am passionate about and what I spend my life doing, but every experience I have of the NHS suggests that poor leadership is the biggest barrier to achieving greatness. Develop leaders who will take responsibility, inspire and deliver.
4. Then let those leaders genuinely involve and empower their people. The NHS employs thousands upon thousands of amazing, caring, talented people, who's creativity and drive is currently stifled by poor leadership. Give these people the skills and tools they need to do the job, given them a clear framework to operate within, then step back, release them and watch the magic unfold. Build a sustainable high performance culture where people are given freedom with accountability.
5. Do all of this within the biggest cultural change of all, one which puts the patient at the centre of every single thing the NHS does. Work tirelessly to promote this principle at every level, with every Trust, everywhere. Base every single decision, from Government to the front line, around this principle.

Change of this magnitude will take a lot of time, probably a decade, but it is achievable, if the willingness and drive is there to do it. It can also be delivered whether it is a Labour or Conservative government that is in power. I do believe that David Cameron is being genuine when he speaks of his support for the NHS. In fact its possibly the case that Cameron would be more likely than Brown to devolve power in the way that must happen to achieve greatness. He just needs to deal decisively with idiots such as Hannan.

August continues to be a relaxing month, apart from the angst at England's performance in the last test match. We are just back after a week at our cottage in Aberdovey. I wrote last time about memories of similar holidays when I was a child, and I did reflect last week on how I seem incapable of growing up once I get on the beach. Why is it that when I walk out to bat when playing cricket on the beach with the children I still pretend I am opening the batting for England at Lords and am about to face Lillee and Thompson or Marshall, Garner and Holding? I can almost hear the anxious murmur of the crowd as I take guard , although asking my son to move the sightscreen is probably over the top! I even record my score, and the beautiful cover drive to the boundary off Lillee is greeted with thunderous applause and the chance to doff my imaginary cap.

But it doesn't stop with the cricket. To the left of our cottage is an 18 hole links golf course and I will still announce I am off to play golf before turning right instead and heading for the slightly more modest putting green. And holes in one are still celebrated with a lap of honour. I love ringing the bell in the castle on that final hole though!

Thinking about it, growing up is going to be really boring and something to be put off for a few more years at least. Especially since the hook over long leg into the Mound Stand (okay the sea) is still eluding me. Anyway what's wrong with wanting to be Peter Pan?

And that's it for another fortnight. Tomorrow we are off to Southampton to celebrate Jakkie's 'big zero' birthday in style with a voyage on the Queen Mary to New York. Seven days of luxury await, made all the more civilised by the fact that the clocks go back one hour every night, creating 25 hour long days for almost a week. We have allocated the extra hour as 'casino time.'

And at the end of the voyage is a few days in New York, my third visit to my favourite city, with Central Park, Greenwich Village and Ellis Island top of the agenda. I'll let you have some reflections on the Big Apple in a couple of weeks.

Saturday 1 August

The humble hedgehog at the heart of greatness, an amazing Ashes day and some thoughts on the Great British Summer

In the course of a year I work with several dozen clients on a variety of issues. Some assignments are short-term interventions, but increasingly I am working with clients over a sustained period of time. This is really important to me, and just where I want to be, because it is in these assignments that I feel I can make a real contribution in assisting an organisation on their journey to achieving greatness.

That term 'achieving greatness' may well sound a bit cliched, but I believe that any organisation, of any size, (or indeed any team) should always be striving to better itself, should develop a clear picture of where it wants to get to, and then focus daily on the plans that will make that happen. If you don't have an aspiration to become great then you are just treading water, and that delivers nothing long-term for your stakeholders, whoever they may be.

But of course its not organisations that do that, its leaders within that make it happen, and this week was a breakthrough point on the journey with one leader. This woman is the Chief Executive of a large national charity. She has already been in post for five years and in that time has delivered many good things. She has brought stability to her organisation and has been focussing on getting the right people in place (the essential pre-requisite to a greatness journey.) Now she knows it is time to drive forward, to lead her organisation to achieve amazing things. She wants to set out a journey over the next five years to greatness.

Obviously any journey like this requires a picture of the future, a vision, one that sets out clearly what greatness will look like, one that can capture the hearts (and minds) of everyone involved. But there is a stage that sits even before that, which is about the organisation defining its purpose, understanding why it exists, where its areas of focus are.

In 'Good to Great' Jim Collins and his team found that one of the significant points of difference between sustainably great organisations and those that did not achieve greatness was around this absolute clarity of purpose. Every great organisation they studied had achieved this clarity. He calls it the Hedgehog Concept. Every great organisation had answered the following three questions:

What are we truly passionate about?

What can we be best in the world at?

What are the essential resources we will need to deliver in order to achieve greatness?

Collins demonstrates that only those organisations that achieve and deliver absolute clarity in all three circles can make that transformational leap to greatness.

The reasons are easy to see once you study the evidence Collins uses to back up his arguments. A team or organisation may be deeply passionate about something, but if they cannot be best in the world at it they are unlikely to prosper. Equally they may be superb at something but without the passion they will fail to deliver. But even when those two are in place, if they cannot deliver the necessary resources everything else falls down.

So great organisations do not try to be over complicated. They drill deeply down until they arrive at the centre of the three interlocking circles of passion, best in the world and resources. If they cannot be best in the world at something they don't do it. If they are not passionate about something they don't do it. And if the resources are not available they don't do it. They get right to the centre of their Hedgehog Concept and pursue it relentlessly.

Incidentally, why it is called 'the Hedgehog Concept' is not really important, but it's based on the fact that when under attack hedgehogs have one simple defence mechanism, they curl up into a ball, with their prickles warding off attackers. And no matter how cunning the fox, however varied the attack, the hedgehog always does the same thing, ensuring the fox gets a bloody nose.

Having been introduced to 'Good to Great' this leader intends to use the Hedgehog Concept right at the start of her journey. She is sharing with the principle with her stakeholders and will lead an engaged process over the next few months (because it can take months) to develop the Hedgehog Concept for her organisation. It will be the essential starting point on her journey to greatness.

What an amazing day I had yesterday (Friday) at Edgbaston. I have been looking forward to that day for a whole year now, and the weather could not have been kinder, a rare oasis of sunshine in a dreadful summer. A keenly fought Ashes contest is surely the pinnacle of sport, and Edgbaston looked superb. I was there with good friends, the sun shone, the beer flowed and England were superb. Is it possible to ask for more? Luckily I was in my seat in time to watch the first two balls of the day or I would have missed the first two Australian wickets, and after that great bowling by Anderson and Onions, an obdurate knock from skipper Strauss made sure it was England's day.

Test cricket is one of those few sports where you don't need to be present for the beginning or end of a contest to enjoy an absorbing day, and it also gives such an opportunity to socialise with friends, and do a little business as well. An excellent day.

Which is more than can be said for this summer as a whole. What a disaster! August 1st today and the rain is falling heavily. And to cap it all the Met Office has just admitted that their prediction of a 'BBQ summer' was mistaken. We now have a month of rain ahead. I feel particularly sorry for those thousands of people who changed their plans this year and decided to holiday in the UK. Stories of wash outs are everywhere and there is a last minute scramble for cheap flights anywhere!

Apparently long-term weather forecasting is incredibly difficult, even with the gadgets and gizmos available today, so I'm not sure they should even bother. It would certainly prevent expectations for a hot summer being unnecessarily raised and plans spoiled. I read the other day that there is only a 50% chance of being accurate when forecasting the weather for the next day, let alone several weeks hence. But get this, you have a 70% chance of accuracy if you simply say that tomorrow's weather will be the same as today's was. It may put Michael Fish (or whoever does it now) out of a job but it sounds like a better approach to me.

I've fallen into the trap recently of believing that all those summers when I was young were much warmer and sunnier and drier than they are now. That may or may not be true, I suspect it's one of those myths. But I do remember that we used to holiday every year in the UK when I was growing up. We used to load up the tent and make marathon journeys overnight from Oxfordshire to Weston Super Mare or Tenby or Great Yarmouth, distances that seem astronomical then but that we would do there and back in a day now. My dad used to talk in reverential tones about Porlock Hill and its sandy escape routes, and we would stop at the top to test the brakes.

Over the years we progressed to a trailer tent and then to a camper van. Horrendous when I look back but such fun at the time, and all I have fond memories of is days of sunshine playing cricket on the beach.

No blog next week because we are off for a week to our cottage in Aberdovey. No tent, thank goodness, but I suspect no sunshine either. Better load up the wine. See you in a couple of weeks.

Sunday 26 July

An unhappy postscript, re-enforcement of the right people message, debriefing the London pub crawl and advice from the swine line, but only after 11am.

Following my thoughts in the last couple of blogs over people who are unhappy at work I received the following e-mail, which I think sums up the situation much better than I can.

I've been reading your blog over the past few weeks and have to say it rings so many bells. I find myself in a tricky situation at the moment, working for people who I feel lack the foresight to give people underneath them the opportunity to show their talent. As you said in your last blog, they tend to rule by fear and hide behind the power they have.

It's all rather sad really and the effect on morale is telling, lots of people I know here are sick of it, they are leaving, I myself feel little choice but to move on. The most frustrating thing for me is knowing I'd do it differently, treat people with respect, harness their ideas and really give them the support and training to reach their potential. That is how an organisation like this will flourish in these difficult trading conditions.'

How depressing. I don't know this guy too well, but I know he is part of an organisation that could be doing great things, The situation he finds himself in is so typical.

The one ray of light I would offer, to him and anyone else in a similar situation, is to remember that as human beings we always have choices, about anything. We must never allow ourselves to become victims of a situation like this and to believe we can do nothing about it.

I think this person has three choices. Firstly they can resolve to leave the organisation, because they can. With this action comes consequences, particularly in the current job market, but that choice exists. People who truly exercise that choice will ensure they move to a role in an organisation where the right leadership will ensure they are treated with respect and that their potential is unlocked.

Secondly they can choose to work from within to do something about the situation. They can use their influence to manage upwards and to try to change the way things are. I am not naïve, I completely understand that this is a very difficult option, but sometimes it is made more difficult when we cannot see the woods for the trees or we believe anything we do will make no difference.

Finally, they can accept the situation they are in, because these things happen, but resolve to do the right things for their own team, to create a model of how things should be done within a wider organisation that is far from perfect. Again this takes effort, persistence and courage for there will be many knock backs along the way. But leaders can exist at any level of organisations and can make a difference for those immediately around them even in the most dire of circumstances.

It's a tough choice, but I do hope he just doesn't jump ship into the first alternative that comes along.

Right at the heart of any organisation lies the right people. It is people within organisations who develop the plans and strategies, build great teams, delight customers and deliver results. Without the right people no organisation or team can sustain success and there is probably no more important thing that leaders do.

Last week this simple message was brought home to me time and time again in discussions with clients and in a book I have been studying.

The first session I had was with the newly appointed Managing Director of a company. He has inherited a senior team of three and has the opportunity to appoint three others to the team, from within and outside the company. He knows the crucial importance of these choices, not least because he has concerns, to a greater and lesser extent, with each of the three existing members of the team. He has promoted two people from within and already has seen the early impact of their enthusiasm, their positive attitude and their new thinking. He is currently recruiting the final member externally and will ensure it is absolutely the right choice. As Jim Collins tells us in 'Good to Great', 'if you are in any doubt don't recruit.' He then has to address the differing issues with the original three members of the team, some of which are more urgent than others, but getting absolutely the right team in place is top of this new MD's agenda, and crucial to the success of him and his company.

This issue was brilliantly re-enforced this week when I caught up with the Director of another company. He leads a large sales team supplying the pubs, bars and restaurants industry, as hard a business as you could be in at the moment. When I last worked with him just over a year ago things were far from good. His business was in decline, he was lacking in energy and was questioning his own drive and ability to continue. We identified that he did have issues, for differing reasons, with each of his three direct reports. The whole senior team, including this Director, had gone stale, and it was time for change.

What a difference a year has made. All three senior team members have left, one to a competitor and two to internal moves, all of which were right for them. In their places are three new people, who again have arrived with new energy and enthusiasm, and are thinking differently about the business issues they face in the most challenging of market places. Performance has been turned around, with both sales and profit in growth.

As importantly the difference in the attitude of the Director was amazing. He had regained his enthusiasm, his desire to succeed. Again its all about the right people.

I ended the week by meeting with the Chief Executive of a large third sector organisation. He sits at the centre of a federal structure, and therefore so much of his leadership is based on influence and legitimate power, not through the position he holds. Along with others he is driving major change through his whole movement. He knows that building an organisation based on finding and developing the right people is absolutely crucial. At a major conference speech recently he used Jim Collins' findings in this area to throw down a challenge to his whole movement to focus on this area as a central plank of their mission to build greatness. Powerful stuff.

One of the issues I find when introducing the work in 'Good to Great' with public and voluntary sector organisations is that all the research is based on private sector companies (and American at that!) Although I am convinced it's messages are absolutely transferable to the other sectors (this is about creating great organisations wherever they may be) it is nevertheless useful that Collins has published a short 'monograph' to accompany 'Good to Great' focussing on the social sectors. This again re-enforces the need to build an organisation around the right people, but understands that in the social sector there can be formidable barriers to delivering change. One inspiring story in this short book (I guess that is what a 'monograph' must be) is about a physics teacher at a high school. He was not at the top of his organisation, but understood that his school could be so much better. He could only influence so much. In his own words 'I couldn't change the whole system but I could change our 14-person science department.'

His challenge was made even more difficult because of the 'three year tenure' systems that existed and the fact that re-appointment for the next three year terms was virtually automatic regardless of performance. He had to break that culture to make progress, but through relentless determination, and an absolute commitment to the principle of finding the right people he succeeded.

The other message there is that you can change things wherever you are in an organisation, you do not need to be at the top. A neat link back to the challenges facing the guy at the beginning of this blog.

Jakkie and I finished the week on Friday with the tough task of exploring London's '10 best pubs'. Now this is obviously a highly subjective list, whether we like or don't like a pub is such a wonderfully personal thing, but we took these recommendations in a London guide book at face value and set out on a voyage of discovery. Fortified by breakfast in Borough Market we spent the rest of the day and evening wandering the Streets of London (meeting Ralph McTell a couple of times along the way.) We got soaked on Hampstead Heath, found that one pub had disappeared completely, sat on a balcony by the Thames in Docklands and braved the West End on a Friday night after work.

The pubs were many and varied, here for those who are interested is the full list we visited:

The George, Borough High Street (17th century coaching inn)

The Grapes, Narrow Street, opposite Canary Wharf (overlooking the Thames, our favourite of the day)

Spaniards Inn, Hampstead Heath (where allegedly Dick Turpin planned his raids and Byron wrote poems in the beer garden, yeah right)
O'Halloran's, Clerkenwell (except we didn't because it is no more)
The Eagle, Farringdon (great gastro pub)
Jerusalem Tavern, Farringdon (fantastic Suffolk ales served from the barrel, highly recommended)
Cheshire Cheese, Fleet Street (is there a more overrated London pub?)
Zebranos, Soho (yes there is, this one)
Dog & Duck, Soho (excellent, small rooms, rammed)
Lamb & Flag, Soho (good place to finish)

We did manage an eleventh, Skinkers, a great wine bar at London Bridge, which has long been a favourite of mine.

An arduous and great day, and all of course in the name of research into the health of the UK pub industry!

Finally I was delighted to learn that my son Chris was looking for a part time job this week along with his friends to supplement his income during the University vacation, but I was somewhat horrified when he told me he was being interviewed to be part of the Swine Flu advice line. Apparently a couple of his mates have already got jobs there. Now Chris is a great lad, charming and friendly (like me you say) and has developed a great entrepreneurial spirit, but the Swine Line? I guess they will be trained well, and maybe it is no different in principle than fielding questions over car insurance or a mobile phone but I am not absolutely convinced I want to put my future well-being in the hands of students on vacation.

And please don't ring before 11am, because even if Chris and his mates are up the chance of a coherent reply rather than a tired mutter is extremely unlikely!

Sunday 19 July

Hopes and fears for an amazing year, defining leadership in a soulless box and plans for a wonderful summer.

I was lucky enough to spend a day last week working with the newly elected board of trustees of a large youth organisation. This young team have been elected to serve as trustees for one year. This is a unique opportunity for each of them and they really want to make a difference over the year, to the organisation, to its members and for themselves as they get as much out of the experience as possible.

We looked at their hopes and fears as they begin the year and some common themes emerged. They hoped to make an impact, to deliver some specific improvements, to learn new skills and to deliver their plans.

However they feared they would let people down, they would lose sight of their objectives and forget why they are there. As one of them brilliantly articulated, 'I don't want to make any bad decisions that will last a generation.'

Perhaps above all they feared that they would lose clarity on what they were trying to achieve because of how much there was to do, not knowing where to start, where to focus. They didn't want to end the year by looking back at a mass of lost opportunity.

That is why I spent the day working with them on creating focus around a limited number of really clear objectives. We worked on goals they want to deliver as a whole team, I return in two weeks and we will work on their personal objectives.

I guess the reason for this is obvious but it cannot be overstated. If we do not know what we are trying to achieve how can we be successful at anything? Also, even when we do have an idea of where we want to get to we try to take on too much, setting countless objectives. The result of this is that we deliver none of them with excellence.

People who work with me know I am a great believer in the power of the number 3. In this case setting just three objectives will give that team the maximum chance of delivering all of them with excellence. Those objectives must stretch them. They should be audacious, challenging stuff that will make a difference. But they must also be realistic, capable of being achieved. They need to have absolute clarity on what they are trying to deliver and the compelling reason why. Measures of success, and an action plan with clear targets and interim measures along the way must be in place.

Over the course of the day this team, having accepted the principle of focussing on a small number of challenging objectives, did some great work and came up with things that will really make a positive difference over the year.

We had a really great day together. As I have said on countless occasions in this blog I love working with young teams, their energy and enthusiasm, and their determination to make a difference is infectious. This team in particular have bonded very early in their time together, and this, together with their clarity, will be their abiding strength.

Working with young people such as this, and the conversation I had later that evening with two of their predecessors from two years ago, both in their early to mid twenties and starting their careers, continues to give me real hope for the future leadership of our organisations. I do believe a generation is emerging who will want to lead differently, to move away from the poor practices of so many managers I come across who hide behind the authority they believe their position in the hierarchy gives them and try to lead by fear, control and through the stifling of creativity. I think this new generation will sweep away management practices that frankly haven't changed much since the industrial revolution.

Talking of which I have at last begun work on a piece around the characteristics of great leaders. I am really excited about this, it is an attempt to bring together so much I have observed and experienced in terms of leadership over the last thirty years. I have spent the last seven years working with leaders in all types of organisations and I have seen so much that is good, loads that is mediocre and some behaviours that are frankly appalling. But I have seen and read enough of the good now to have my first stab at characterising great leadership.

I locked myself away on Friday to commence the work. I needed thinking time and space in an inspiring environment. Quite why I therefore chose a grey box of a hotel room in the middle of Sheffield as the rain hammered down outside is beyond me! I sense that as Jim Collins and his team put together 'Good to Great' or as Stephen Covey mused through his 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' they were looking at mountains or lakes or forests. I suppose at least I had the water part of it.

The rain was another reminder that we are in the middle of summer. We are already in the latter half of July and apart from the odd week or two the glorious forecast has failed to materialise. But I'm looking forward to the next couple of months, there's a load of good stuff happening. In September Jakkie 'celebrates' a 'big zero' birthday (and I mean big zero.) Plans are in hand for a party or two with friends and relatives. I'm off to the Ashes Test at Edgbaston in a couple of weeks, and then am again taking almost all of August off. We are going to our cottage in Wales for a week or so then as part of Jakkie's birthday present we are sailing to New York on the Queen Mary. It sounds very glamorous and we are really looking forward to it.

Now that Dennis is safely home I am also turning my focus to something else for Jakkie, which is a wonderful 1981 ex military lightweight Land Rover. It's currently in quite a state of disrepair at my friend Pete's but the pressure is on for it to be ready for mid-September. How lucky Jakkie is! I think it will go down better than the set of mixing bowls I bought her on the first birthday we were together. It even still has the brackets where the parachute was attached when it was pushed out of aircraft, which should be jolly useful.

And next Friday we are off to London to join Jakkie's brother and his friend for a tour of 'London's top 10 pubs.' I look forward to describing some of them to you next week. If you are a fan of Twitter tune in next Friday for live updates!

Sunday 12 July

Dennis comes home, fun and potential unlocked as Dragons Den meets The Apprentice, unblocking toilets at 30,000 feet, and a Poet Laureate in the family.

There was great excitement this afternoon as Dennis the fire engine finally came home. Since I purchased him some weeks ago he has been living at a friend's truck business, and undergoing welding, repairs, registration and an MOT. But last Friday he was finally ready, just in time to provide transport for another friend's daughter and her friends to turn up at their end of school prom in style.

Then this afternoon he arrived home, and I had my first drive before a ribbon was cut and he was carefully reversed into the position outside the house. He looks magnificent. I have spent half the evening sitting in the cab operating the lights and sirens much to the chagrin, I am sure, of our neighbours. It's pathetic really, but I love it!

Now all we've got to do is to decide what to do next with him. Getting him home, safe and legal, was the challenge and now that's over, what next? We have investigated all the wonderful compartments and worked out opportunities to use him as a mobile bar and BBQ. We are also going to try filling the water tanks, which would be very useful if the BBQ got out of control. Any suggestions for other uses are very welcome.

I had an excellent day with a client last week as we experimented with a format for a workshop loosely based on Dragons' Den and The Apprentice. (I stress loosely based to make it clear that we did not infringe any copyright laws). I was working with the Marketing team members of a large company. The idea was to challenge them to work in teams and for each team to come up with a proposition for a new product or service connected to their industry, and then to present their ideas to a panel of dragons. The Marketing Director and colleagues from across her business came along to act as the dragons (and played their parts very well!) We were looking to judge the teams against four criteria, creativity, business acumen, clarity of presentation and teamwork in putting their ideas together.

What was amazing was the sheer quality of the ideas that each of the teams came up with. These are young people, typically in their mid twenties and in their first roles after graduating, but they came up with some brilliant stuff, which far exceeded the expectations the Marketing Director had for the session.

None of the participants found it easy, in fact for many it lifted them well out of their comfort zone and stretched them but they really went for it and produced some well thought out and excellent and original ideas. Most tellingly the Marketing Director believes that each of the propositions has a genuine chance of being implemented within the business, something she was just not expecting.

It just proved to me once more that when people are given the right encouragement and environment they are capable of doing extraordinary things. People rise to the challenge and it is possible to unlock so much potential, more than we realise exists.

We also had a lot of fun during the day and in the afternoon we moved on to look at team work, feeding back on how the morning had gone. This allowed me to live another fantasy (not fire engine driver this time) and play the roles from The Apprentice of Alan Sugar, Nick and Margaret all at once. 'So who was your team leader?' 'Good team leader?' Brilliant! I am delighted to report no-one was fired.

I worked with another client this week who is the Chief Executive of a charity which finds employment for people with disabilities. She is a very special person who is an inspiration every time I meet her. She does struggle sometimes, however, to balance all the demands placed on her as Chief Executive, dealing with a Chair and Board of Trustees, her staff, future funding challenges and her various clients and other external stakeholders.

She has developed a new three years strategic plan for her organisation, and has real clarity on purpose, vision and strategy. She also has a well-established and deeply rooted set of values which genuinely permeate her organisation. It is translating that plan into action, getting on and executing that, as with so many people, provides the challenge for her. There is so much to do and so little time.

We spent some time together re-visiting the principles of highly effective management of time, central to which is focussing on those things that are truly important. Sometimes we need to step back and take stock, thinking through what they really are, and what else we think is important, but is just getting in the way.

Only when we are clear on what they are can we ensure that we spend sufficient time on them every week, and every day. When you are at the helm, even in a fairly small organisation, you cannot do everything. You must delegate, or sometimes just stop doing things that are adding little or no value.

During our discussions this Chief Executive recounted to me an experience on a long haul flight. Most people in the cabin were asleep when the captain (identified by lots of braid on his uniform) made his way through towards the toilet. She was sat in the adjacent seat and the captain confided in her that he as on his way to unblock the toilet! Now I know that those at the top of organisations sometimes have to get their hands dirty, I am just not absolutely convinced that this fell into those most truly important things for the captain of a 747, thirty thousand feet above the Atlantic!

We had a very proud evening during the week as we attended a BAFTA style award ceremony at Charlotte's school. It was a really well run evening as a number of children collected awards across the subject areas. Charlotte received an award for English, and in addition a poem she had written won her the Poet Laureate award for the whole school.

I was particularly pleased the awards were for English, to me still the most important subject on the curriculum, and I also was able to share with her my Headmasters Prize from 1968, a copy of Tom Sawyer which still resides proudly on our book shelves. I tried to get across to her my pride that she is following in my footsteps but for some reason she just didn't get it!

Sunday 5 July

The stifling of potential, the 1% mind set, a ladybird incident, the Ashes, Hazel and Dennis.

I was in the pub on Friday evening (or in the pub garden to be precise, a beautiful summer evening) talking to someone about their experiences of work. This person is in his mid twenties and has just started out on their career as a research scientist.

His story was just so typical. Just commencing his working life, one that could span over fifty years, he is already frustrated and disillusioned. He has so many good ideas about how things could be better at work, from scientific solutions to the organisation of the office, but he already feels that no-one is listening. His manager is disinterested in his suggestions and is already also taking credit for this guy's work. A negative culture exists where people seem to focus on picking out what is going wrong, not right, where praise is non-existent and morale low.

This is the situation so many thousands if not millions of people find themselves in everyday at work around the country and is just tragic. I come across it all the time, whichever sector or type of organisation I am working in, and it is just so reminiscent of a lot of my corporate career. And so often the problem can be traced back to the same root cause. I call it the clay, middle managers who, having climbed the greasy pole to their position of assumed power, are now determined to exercise their authority and stifle creativity in those around them. They exercise the control they have to really negative effect. The outcome is a dis-empowered workforce who are not listened to and rapidly become disillusioned and cynical.

But it doesn't have to be like this, and I spend a lot of my working life challenging leaders at all levels to think differently at the way they treat their people. So much potential exists throughout organisations

and where it is harnessed, where people are treated with respect, listened to and encouraged to think for themselves they will do amazing things with amazing results. It takes courage for leaders to unlock that potential but stifling it is a recipe for disaster.

As George Washington said, 'liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth.'

But even when people feel powerless to change the attitudes of those above them in organisations there is another way to deal with it. I was considering this issue last week when I worked with front line staff in the NHS. (Incidentally, having blogged last week about the right environment being crucial for learning it was somewhat ironic that I spent two days in perhaps the hottest training room in the world!) These people, who as ever in the NHS were amongst the nicest and the most committed you could ever hope to meet, have just the same frustrations. They want to change things in their organisation but feel they have so little influence.

My work with them challenged them to think not about what they can't change, but what they can. Imagine three concentric circles. In the inner circle is the person themselves. The middle circle consists of those people and things with whom they come into day to day contact (in their case their manager, their colleagues, their patients and maybe people in other departments or agencies.) The outer circle consists of the organisation itself, with its hierarchy, policies, procedures, systems and culture, and even beyond that into Government health policy.

So often we get frustrated because what we want to change lies in the outer circle, where we have little or no influence. We need to change our mindset, and not worry about this outer circle stuff. Start in the inner circle, by changing things about ourselves, such as how we deal with our feelings and frustrations, how effective we are every day and how we need to constantly behave ourselves in a way we want those around us to behave. It's the easiest circle to make changes in, because it's about us (and it's still really hard sometimes even in this circle!) When we have begun to make progress in the inner circle we can move to the middle one, and begin to influence and work for small changes in those around us. We cannot make significant changes here overnight but over time, maybe by influencing our boss and their attitudes, or working with our colleagues, progress starts to occur. It's called working within our circle of influence.

The other thing I urge people to focus on is making 1% improvements all the time, making small changes happen, not expecting to make 100% improvements. This journey is possible by making 1% improvements 100 times.

I began an important new assignment this week, coaching the Chief Executive of a major wildlife charity. I have been looking forward to this for a long time, as I see it as a real chance to make a difference to someone involved in amazing and worthwhile work. We met for the first session in the courtyard of a hotel on a lovely afternoon, and all was going well until I felt an irritation on my face. My natural instinct was to swat it away, at which point I heard an anguished cry from the other side of the table as she dived on the floor to rescue the ladybird that was now writhing in mortal agony beneath the table. A tense five minutes followed while she nursed it back to life, and when its little legs were moving properly she gently placed it on a nearby plant. How was I to know it was a ladybird or that they are an endangered species? Not a great start and a somewhat tense period of time followed as I strived to re-establish my wildlife aware and caring credentials.

But I did feel better by the end of Friday evening. A little frog (or toad, who knows) hopped in through the open door to our lounge and I supervised proceedings as Jakkie and Charlotte performed a rescue mission. I felt a bit like David Bellamy and quite proud of myself.

Along with what seemed to be most of the UK population I agonised on Friday evening as Andy Murray lost his Wimbledon semi-final. What I cannot stand is the media frenzy every time Wimbledon comes around. Poor old Andy Murray is hyped up to such an extent that losing is seen as a national disaster. We did it with Tim Henman and look what happened there. The difference is that Murray is the real deal, a brilliant tennis player, and already, at 22, the third best tennis player in the World. At 22! In some ways I am pleased he lost in the semis, the frenzy today would have been horrendous.

Murray will win many Grand Slams, including Wimbledon, very soon. Just get off his back and leave him to get on with it.

Now that Wimbledon is over the real sport of the summer gets underway this Thursday. The Ashes is just the most amazing sporting contest. I'm biased because of how big a cricket fan I am but I have always loved England v Australia test matches and a long time before it came to such prominence with the superb 2005 series. As long ago as 1968 me and my friend David would spend days on end playing out complete test matches between us. We would go to the local cricket club complete with pads, bat, ball, all the kit and create the most extraordinarily complicated rules to decide when we were out or not as we made our way through four innings games for hours on end, recording it all diligently in a scorebook. Arguments about whether or not an edge from Boycott had been taken at second slip by Redpath off Mackenzie would go on for hours!

In those days my heroes were Edrich, Snow, Underwood and above all Basil D'Oliveira for England and Walters, Redpath, Cowper and a young Ian Chappel for Australia. Today it is Strauss, Ponting, Hussey, Broad and Anderson but my love of the game is no less. I have a ticket for the second day at Edgbaston at the end of July and can't wait.

Yesterday here in Fradswell we organised a 'paintathon', where we asked people to come along and help re-decorate our poor old dilapidated village hall. We now have submitted plans for a brand new hall to the council but needed to do something to brighten up the existing building. Around twenty five people turned up and we had a great day. The results were staggering, it's amazing what a bit of paint and de-cluttering can do. The stuff we threw out dated back fifty years and had to be seen to be believed. As important as the painting was the sense of community during the day, people who rarely see each other in our busy day to day lives giving up a few hours to do something really worthwhile. Have a look at www.fradswellvillage.co.uk if you want to see the results.

During the morning I got talking to a lady called Hazel who, for many years, and tried to run the village hall virtually by herself. When we got involved last year it was with the mission to revitalise the hall, plan the new one and build a sense of community in our village and I had fallen into the trap of being cynical and dismissive about what had happened before. Over a half hour chat I changed my beliefs. Hazel had done a sterling and so often thankless job over so many years with little support, and was so pleased to see it pass on a generation with new enthusiasm. What might have seemed to us were old fashioned events, like a whist drive, harvest supper and Ray entertaining on his organ (yes, really) were absolutely right for their time. They were just as appropriate as our plans for wine tasting, a Christmas fayre, coffee mornings and a beer, burgers and bingo night (yes really again!) Every community needs people like Hazel who worked selflessly over many years and I'm glad I now appreciate it.

Finally Dennis is almost ready to come home. My 1983 beautiful red fire engine has his MOT on Monday and it won't be long before it is gracing our house. Even though my initial burst of enthusiasm when I bought it has been tinged with some reality (what am I going to do with it, I don't even have the HGV license I need to drive it) I can't wait. And as my enthusiasm has waned slightly Jakkie's increased when she finally saw it. She has worked out that champagne buckets will fit neatly into the holes that originally contained the breathing equipment and already sees its party potential! Watch this space for more blues and twos news very soon!

Monday 29 June

Some amazing leadership experiences, and thoughts on sexism in sport, egg and spoon races and Parliamentary traditions.

A day late with the blog this week due to a very hectic weekend including a trip to see the children in Newcastle and the annual village picnic.

The weekend also came on the back of a very busy week with clients. Possibly the thing I enjoy most about my work is when I can see the leaders I work with succeeding in building effectiveness and unlocking potential. Last week was great, it was just one of those weeks when things seemed to fall into place, and included the following:

1. Agreeing and scoping a new leadership programme for senior managers across the country who work for a major environmental charity. I know if we get this right it will significantly enhance the charity's efforts to raise money and to deliver its goals.
2. Commencing a coaching relationship with the Chief Executive of the same charity as it enters a crucial phase of its development.
3. Discussing plans for his first hundred days with the newly appointed Managing Director of a technology company.
4. A great workshop with the leadership team of a chemical company, where we were able to celebrate significant progress on culture change.
5. A day with a young management team in a building supplies company working together on developing leadership skills
6. Facilitating an induction for the new Trustees Board of a major youth organisation, where the excitement of participants at the start of a new journey was infectious.

As much as I sometimes despair about the state of leadership I often encounter there is also so much good going on as these examples testify.

The other thing that was re-enforced during the week was how important the right environment is for a meaningful thinking and learning experience. I find that too often training programmes and strategy sessions are held in completely inappropriate venues. This is particularly the case when sessions take place in the normal office environment. The issues here are obvious, if you are still in your day to day setting the chances of thinking deeply and differently about issues will be significantly reduced, and you are also far more likely to be interrupted, or succumb to the temptation to check e mails and deal with problems all day yourself.

Using an external training venue or hotel can help, but again it has to be the right environment (I have found myself in some very small hotel rooms!) I also understand that when times are tough the cost of these facilities can be prohibitive. That is why this week we held two events at homes and they really worked brilliantly. I worked with the chemical company at my house, and we ran a whole day's workshop outside, which was very different and really worked, and with the building supplies company we went to one of the team members house's and met round the dining room table. This very different environment was very stimulating and really worked, creating a much more informal atmosphere than even a hotel training room would have been.

Finally the week ended with the Trustee Board induction in a hotel, but the choice was excellent. This was a small, inexpensive and very friendly venue in the countryside, next to water. Again the environment was really conducive to learning with plenty of opportunities to sit outside and to walk in peaceful surroundings.

So if you are going to commit time and money to training your people, or need to spend time as a leadership team considering the future make sure you select the right venue. The more different you can make it to your normal working environment the better, and it does not need to be expensive. You also discover hidden talents, our host on Wednesday made stunning soup for lunch.

So last week we won the World Cup. Now this just might have passed you by because, unlike the football triumph in 1966 and rugby victory in 2003 it got very little coverage, but our England cricket team did win the World 20-20 Cup on 21st June, beating New Zealand in the final at Lords. And what is more this was their second World Cup victory in just three months, for in March they beat the same opponents in the final of the longer format of the game. The problem is that the coverage of this

amazing achievement was almost non-existent. The following morning it was only the fifth story on the Radio 5 sports bulletins, behind the start of Wimbledon, Formula 1, the USA golf open and the men's cricket final. For me this just re-enforced the sexism that is alive, well and rampant in sport still, and particularly in the media's reporting of sport. Winning World Cups are amazing achievements and should be properly acknowledged and celebrated.

Without wanting to castigate the Radio 5 sports bulletins further, I was also surprised this morning that there was no mention of this weekend's greatest sporting achievement. This was not Andy Murray's progress at Wimbledon or the Lions bloodbath in South Africa, but the egg and spoon race at the village picnic here in Fradswell yesterday. The picnic was a quintessentially English event, with marquee, bunting, egg sandwiches and Pimms, but it was the obstacle and egg and spoon races that stole the show. Great fun!

Some things quintessentially English are just so good, and this was a great example, but sometimes they desperately need updating, dragging into the 19th or 20th, let alone the 21st Century. A really good example was the election of the new Speaker in the Commons last week. What a laborious process it became with voting over several hours. No doubt its full of tradition and theatre, but simple electronic voting could have completed the election in a fraction of the time. I guess it's the same argument for so many of the traditions of Parliament. These are highlighted at events like the Speaker's election but are there all the time with the way people are addressed, what people can say, the Speaker's robes and a host of other archaic traditions. And don't even get me started on the House of Lords! I sit in the camp that believes that so many of these traditions are outdated and just need to be swept away and consigned to history. I have some hopes that the new Speaker will make some progress in doing this but it will be slow. We need a modern Parliament with 21st century ways of working.

Finally, the death of Michael Jackson this week was traumatic for many. What it did remind me of was where we were when we heard these significant events unfold. There have been many comparisons made to the death of Elvis and I remember learning of that when I boarded a train to find a number of people crying. I was in New York when Diana died, and all that day random people would come up to me, ask if I was British and then place a consoling arm around me.

Incidentally I learned of Michael Jackson's death on Twitter which demonstrates how technology has revolutionised communications.

I am also just old enough to remember where I was when JFK died. I was leaning out of the window of a book depositary in downtown Dallas. But that's another story for another day.

Sunday 21 June

Building a high performance culture through coaching, a Caribbean Calypso and life at Pigeon Towers.

Last week I spoke at the annual conference of a national environmental charity. My brief was to talk about the value coaching can play in an organisation, and I used the opportunity to dispel the myth that coaching is some sort of specialist skill which can only be carried out by so called experts who have discovered some mythical formula.

My view is that the ability to build a high performance culture which unlocks the potential of people is what great leaders do. I put it up there alongside building absolute clarity and constant role modelling. In a high performance culture people know what is expected of them, they are treated with respect and are listened to. They are equipped to succeed, supported and empowered to just the right level of freedom within a framework. Their progress is regularly reviewed.

There is also nothing soft about a high performance culture, for poor performance is simply not tolerated. It is nipped in the bud, and dealt with, in the right way, fairly but firmly.

When leaders do succeed in building a high performance culture, in their team or organisation, they really do unlock potential, their people feel willing and able to give their best every day. And it is constant and consistent coaching, at all levels, which can build and maintain that culture.

The breakthrough point here is that coaching can happen all the time, and does within highly effective teams. But so many myths have been built up around it. You can buy many books or research it on the internet and you will find a myriad of advice, structures and questions which might suggest that only those with special training and skills can deliver it. But coaching is what great leaders do with their people every single day. Every time they sit down with one of their people and engage in a conversation about performance they are coaching.

I understand that a definition of true coaching is where the coach does not give answers but encourages and enables the coachee to develop their own, (while mentoring involves actually giving advice and answers), but I believe these definitions are too narrow. For me coaching is much broader, and those delivering it will vary their approach depending on the needs of those they are coaching. Sometimes they will help them find the answer, sometimes they will be teaching, sometimes mentoring and occasionally directing. Every coaching interaction is different and requires an individualised approach.

So I believe that in great teams and organisations it just happens constantly. It starts with the discipline of a scheduled monthly sit down between boss and subordinate. At this session the boss will let their people know how they are performing. They will set clear goals together for the next few weeks, and the boss will ensure they understand what they can do to clear road blocks.

But it is not just about a monthly formal sit down. Coaching can take place during a quick weekly catch up, or even in a brief daily conversation next to the coffee machine. That is when it becomes a constant process, a natural way of working, which of course is what you need to build a high performance culture.

Of course there are many variations of this, it can be supplemented by buying in external coaching, a system of peer coaching can be developed, but I believe these are add-ons to supplement the basic relationship between boss and subordinate.

And I emphasise again that this is not a soft approach, coaching is at the bedrock of dealing with poor performance. And dealing with poor performance does not always have to be through a disciplinary route. I have often been involved in coaching relationships where the interaction has enabled us to pursue the reasons behind that performance, which often will not be connected to work at all. Sometimes people are at the back of the bus because it is the wrong bus, and coaching can help them to arrive at their own decision to leave the bus at the next stop and find a more appropriate journey.

So I would urge you, if you do not do so already, to develop a way of working and build a culture where coaching lies at the heart. Over time you, your team and whole organisation will reap the rewards.

Yesterday afternoon I held a party at home to say thank you to my clients. This is turning into an annual event, last year the theme was Lazy Sunday Afternoon, with a jazz band, this year we moved to a Caribbean Calypso, complete with a steel band.

Last year the sun had shone brightly all afternoon (a rare great day in a lousy summer), this year was not as nice, but the rain stayed away and we had a great day nevertheless, with significant amounts of rum punch, champagne and jerk chicken consumed. I particularly like bringing together clients from all sectors and types of organisations who would normally never meet, and watching them chat during the afternoon.

We had some rather unusual visitors at the house over the last few days (and I don't just mean one or two of my clients yesterday!) Early in the week a racing pigeon suddenly appeared, presumably resting during a long trip. To say it was tame is putting it mildly, after a few hours it had virtually moved in. (I refer to it as 'it' because my talents do not extend to the sex of pigeons if you see what I mean). At one

point it made its way into the lounge and settled on the settee next to Jakkie, it spent most of its time under the verandah or following us around the garden, no more than a pace behind.

After a couple of days it moved on, but whatever the equivalent of an internet bulletin board is in racing pigeon world obviously has been working, because today another one appeared displaying many of the same behaviours. If this goes on we'll need some kind of reservation system and maybe a loyalty card.

Sunday 14 June

Star gazing, ignorance, cloning the Apprentice and as one great adventure begins another one ends.

I spent some time last week gazing up at the stars and contemplating on how little I know about anything. I was in the planetarium of the Centre for Life in Newcastle, and the exhibition we were watching was telling the story of the discovery of planets, stars and galaxies over the centuries by astronomers.

It really brought it home to me that I now so little. Maybe I wasn't listening the days we learned about space at school, but frankly I don't even remember the lessons. I do have a vague memory of being in the school hall watching a crackling black and white television set as Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon, but to be honest the historical enormity of it passed me by, I was too interested in getting the chewing gum off the bottom of the seat in front to flick at David Gibbard.

Now I was laying back listening to scientific terms that made no sense at all as computer generated images flashed across space, and realising the depth of my ignorance.

But of course it's always been the case. Four hundred years ago even the great astronomers of the time believed that the Earth lay at the centre of our Universe, and that the sun and all other planets revolved around us. Today we know so much more. Or do we? I wonder if in four hundred years time people will gaze upwards in planetariums (or whatever the equivalent will be then) and marvel at how little we knew in the early years of the Millennium.

The experience did bring home to me the level of my ignorance. And it's not just about space, it's about everything else around us. I consider myself to be a reasonably intelligent person (don't laugh) who tries to take an interest in things but there is just so much I don't know, about science, the arts, the environment, the world in which we live, other cultures, languages, history, the list is endless.

You may well ask why it matters, but ignorance is such a dangerous thing. It's why people vote for BNP members and elect them to the European Parliament, it's why so many people have such prejudiced views about other cultures and religions.

There is a view that we should know something about everything and everything about something. The one thing I have tried to explore and to learn about particularly over the last seven years is leadership. It's become my passion to try to understand the secret of what makes a truly outstanding leader. But even after reading dozens of books from so called experts and observing leaders of all shapes and forms in all kinds of organisations (and outside work) I'm still no closer to the answer.

And that of course is because there isn't one (although that did cause a mini riot on a leadership programme recently because people there, having paid to attend, were somewhat disappointed that I could not reveal the secret to them on the final morning!) Despite the best efforts of so many so called gurus there is no secret, no one model of a 'perfect leader'. And that's because it's forever evolving. As Sheila Bethel says:

'Leadership is not something you learn once and for all. It is an ever-evolving pattern of skills, talents and ideas that grow and change as you do'

Indeed if you were to think about the perfect leader you have come across in your life I suspect you would struggle. You may pick certain aspects from one person and some from another and so on. It also depends on the situation, leaders require different skills in the heat of a battle to they do when considering the development of a long-term strategy.

The leader I respect most on my search so far is the Chief Executive of a large voluntary organisation. I have observed her at work on regular intervals over the last two years, she just has this ability to inspire and engage people so they will do anything for her, together with a firm and clear grasp of the direction and strategy for her organisation. She also seems to base her leadership approach on deeply held values and to constantly role model the behaviours herself that she wants to see in others.

But my search goes on and I am excited, as I mentioned last week, that I am emerging with a set of characteristics that I believe, after seven years of study and thirty years of experience, are shared by great leaders. I'm looking forward to sharing them with you very soon.

While on the subject of leadership the latest series of 'The Apprentice' ended a week ago with Yasmin defeating Kate in a close final. However much I dislike so much about the format of the programme I remain hooked and the two finalists had very different leadership skills, and were impressive in their own ways, especially as they are both only 27. Yasmin was the entrepreneur, she had already opened and run her own restaurant (even though her grasp of the numbers was appalling.) Kate came across as an extremely structured and organised person (she has a 'ten year career plan' which is almost certainly colour coded.) If you could combine those talents into one person you would get an impressively rounded leader. But that's the point, both those individuals need to develop new skills to complement their existing ones.

Incidentally I hope that Alan Sugar's slightly ridiculous appointment into the Lords and Brown's team doesn't jeopardise the continuation of the Apprentice next year, I'm ashamed to say I would really miss it!

My daughter Lindsay and her boyfriend Danny came to stay for a few days last week before they embark on their latest summer adventure. They fly out this week for eight weeks at Camp America before travelling around the States, visiting New York, Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Chicago, Las Vegas and across the border into Canada. I pick them back up at Heathrow on 4th September and that seems a very long way away. Lindsay was in Australia, Thailand and Laos last summer and these are great opportunities for adventure, and to learn more about the World around them (and themselves.) I wish I had grabbed those opportunities at their ages.

Of course knowledge comes in many shapes and forms. You may recall that I blogged some months ago about the local farmer, still working in his late eighties, who, however busy he was, always found the time to stop and talk to Jakkie and me whenever we met. Not for him the ever present Blackberry and the dash to yet another meeting. He just knew so much about what was around us, about the seasons, his crops, his animals, wildlife, the weather. To me that was real wisdom. He passed away this week after a rich and fulfilled life and I will really miss those chats.

Saturday 6 June

Why Sainsbury's missed a trick, icebergs, and words of wisdom from Sir Alan Sugar.

This blog may well be posted late this week, although I am writing it on Saturday afternoon, sometime after the England cricket team's shock defeat to the mighty Netherlands and a little before I hope there is no repeat performance from our football team in Kazakhstan. The reason it may be posted late is because once more our phone lines and therefore broadband are down at home. This is a regular occurrence, not helped because we still have overhead lines, which seem incapable of resisting even a breeze let alone a gale. We have enquired about wireless, but our charming BT engineer collapsed into

laughter at the suggestion, explaining that we are so far from the exchange that it would be impossible. Meanwhile our broadband connection delivers us a snail like speed even when it is working. I am encouraged by Gordon Brown's commitment to provide much improved broadband performance across the country, although I fear he has enough else on his mind at the moment.

So we soldier on, although when I awoke this morning to find the power temporarily off as well as the phone lines it did feel a little like living in a third world country, and made my tongue in cheek comments about life in Europe's poverty zone in last week's blog seem somewhat portentous.

It was with great excitement that I tuned in to Channel 4's new reality TV series 'I'm Running Sainsbury's' on Tuesday evening. From what I could make out from the title and the trailers here was a great experiment, letting shop floor workers loose in the Boardroom and giving them an opportunity to make decisions that would improve the company. I have to say that by the end of the show I was really disappointed, and I think that both Sainsbury's and Channel 4 missed a great opportunity here. The title of the programme is very misleading. The people involved are not running Sainsbury's at all, but are simply participating in a company wide suggestion scheme, where the winners have the opportunity to trial their ideas. That didn't even work particularly well, the first week's 'winner' had what seemed like a good idea, but then was left entirely on her own to implement it, with a complete lack of head office (or 'store support centre'- yuck) support (such irony there). What may well have been a successful innovation was allowed to fail, which the producers may have thought was good television, but I just felt sorry for the obviously de-motivated shop assistant.

The series could achieve so much more if Sainsbury's had actually taken a group of front line staff and really gave them some opportunities to make changes at the top. In any organisation it is the people at the front end who really understand what works well and not so well, who know what frustrates the customers, what systems and processes are inefficient and what needs changing. But far too often they never have an opportunity to do anything about it. They are rarely listened to. At the top of an organisation, leaders would love to improve things, they genuinely want to communicate, to gather ideas and to listen. But it is the middle-management group that so often gets in the way. They tend to stifle ideas, communicate poorly and ignore suggestions. I call them 'the clay'. Now I am generalising, and I come across great people in these roles, but far too often I see the inertia this group creates. Maybe it is fear of being usurped by someone from below. Maybe they feel they have not got the time to listen, to communicate, but if they did, and if they could create a culture where ideas from the front line were welcomed, encouraged, listened to, and, where appropriate, acted upon, the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations would greatly increase.

This was a message brought home to me strongly at the start of this week when I visited the Chief Executive of a group of Co-Operative stores in the south-west. This man is an inspirational leader, who has spoken at a couple of leadership cohorts I am involved with. This was the first time I have had the opportunity to visit his business and to see if he does what he says he does, and he passed with flying colours. We toured his stores and I was astonished at how positive and involved the front line staff we met actually were. They really do seem to contribute what is a very successful business. In conversation I learned that this had not always been the case. When this Chief Executive first took over in his role he encountered that clay in his middle managers. He and his senior colleagues realised that they had to break through it if they were to get the best of their front line staff, and over the course of his first year they did just that, by persuading his middle managers of the need to change, by communicating directly to staff, often by-passing middle managers, and, where necessary, removing middle managers if they could not or would not change. The results are there for all to see, a vibrant, successful, customer responsive business where people at all levels feel they can be heard and can change things for the better.

That was a great start to my week, and it continued to go from strength to strength (unlike poor old Mr Brown's.) I spent the middle of the week working with front line staff in the NHS (wonderful people) and then ended it with a two day Workshop with a group of positive and enthusiastic commercial managers in leisure and retail roles. We have worked together in a leadership cohort for two years now, and I have seen each of the participants grow in stature, confidence and self-belief as the programme has developed. We have explored a mass of leadership material together, and culminated by compiling what we believed to be the characteristics of a highly effective leader, and the tools and frameworks

that could support that leader. We ended the Workshop on Friday in a really exciting place, the characteristics are coming together, and I will look to share them soon via this blog and my web site.

I think the word 'characteristics' is really important because it recognises that true leadership is character based, it comes from deep inside us, and is based on values, self-belief and inner strength. Great leaders do not and cannot rely on their personality and on a few techniques. It is important to differentiate between character and personality. Even Sir Alan Sugar managed that this week on 'The Apprentice.' Or should I say Lord Sir Alan Sugar as he heads for the dizzy heights of Enterprise Tsar. After weeks, or indeed years, of cringing at his approach to leadership he came up with a gem out of the blue,

'Personality opens doors for you, but it's character that keeps them open'

I could not agree with this sentiment more. Think of it in the context of an iceberg. If there is one thing we all know about icebergs (along with the fact that they are cold) it is that we only see the tip above the surface of the water. It is the same with people. Above the surface is our personality, it is what you see when you meet someone for the first time. You may notice their appearance, the way they dress, their smile, their mannerisms. You may make certain assumptions about the person depending on what we see but we do not really know them. It is only when we know someone well that we understand what they are really like. Then we know if they are trustworthy, honest, sincere and genuine. These are character based attributes, and in exactly the same way great leaders display traits from deep within their character.

Finally, in a week of almost unprecedented turmoil in politics (and it's not over yet by a long way), one ludicrous action passed almost unnoticed. A Labour MP by the name of Tipping introduced a motion in the Commons to set a maximum wage, at a level ten times that of the minimum wage (which would be about £120,000 a year.) To make my position clear I am a total advocate of the minimum wage (I believe it is the most important piece of legislation introduced by Labour in their 12 years in power) but to suggest a maximum wage is completely ridiculous. I have no time for excessive greed, and I believe that reward packages (and company profits) should always be proportionate (I completely abhor the City bonus culture) but proposing a maximum wage is possibly the most stupid thing I have ever heard of. Great leaders should be paid a proportionate package related to their achievements, not governed by legislation.

I'd have thought that Labour MPs have enough to think about and focus on at the moment, like the future of their leader, the expenses scandal and their very survival.

Sunday 31 May

Life in Europe's poverty zone, the servant-leader and a plea for a Cash-less society.

Last week Jakkie and I went along to the Fradswell Parish Assembly. This fine sounding body has no doubt existed for hundreds of years. I can picture poor tenants using the opportunity to plead for lower taxes from the Lord of the Manor.

In some ways nothing seems to have changed. The Assembly was presided over by the Chairman of the Parish Council (who comes from the neighbouring larger village, Fradswell being small to be trusted with a Parish Council all of its own), and the Clerk read the minutes and Parish accounts in the formal and somewhat quaint way I suspect has been done over many years. Then, after reporting on such mighty matters as road signs and missing teacups the Chairman invited those parishioners present to raise any items of business.

And there was the problem. Unfortunately there were only the two of us there. The other 156 members of our Parish were noticeable by their absence. Which is not surprising seeing that, to the best of my knowledge, the Assembly had not been advertised at all (we had heard about it by chance.) Now it may

be that after 400 years everybody knows that the meeting takes place on the fourth Sunday before harvest when the moon is full, or maybe the Clerk had simply forgotten, being tied down with more weighty matters like the teacups, but it still seems to me, a virtual outsider still having lived here only 11 years, that there must be a better way to go about these things.

But it was well worth attending for one reason. Also present was our local District Councillor who informed us that Fradswell is regarded, under EU regulations and measures, to be a poverty zone. Now I have to say I found that somewhat surprising, seeing that the 60 odd houses seem to have an average of about 3 cars each. And that even includes the farmers. Or should I say especially the farmers, if you ever hear the term 'poor farmers' do not be fooled, there's certainly no sign of that around here. But no, Fradswell is indeed regarded as a community suffering from poverty, placing it in the Euro zone somewhere alongside Romania and parts of southern Portugal. The reason, it appears, is our lack of facilities, we have no shop or pub or post office, and no public transport. (And I mean absolutely no public transport, there used to be a bus that ran once a week to the local town, taking an hour to do the six mile journey via every single other farm and hamlet on the way. Apparently it was a real community experience to take that bus, and I picture goats and chickens alongside farmers wives with shopping baskets, but it was stopped a couple of years ago due to lack of use.)

So the exciting news is that this newly found status entitles us to grants and funding from Brussels, maybe something for older people in the community or younger people. All we need now are some ideas. The Chairman and Clerk seem devoid of any so we have got our thinking caps on. Your suggestions would be most welcome. If you get a chance have a look at the village web site we have set up, www.fradswellvillage.co.uk where you can follow progress on the tea cups and post any ideas.

I was working with a client last week discussing the concept of the 'servant-leader.' You may remember that from time to time those at the top of organisations have spoken about 'inverting the triangle.' Often this is within the heady atmosphere of the annual conference or sales meeting, and the boss puts up a slide with an inverted triangle, showing him or her at the bottom, then their direct reports, then managers and supervisors, and finally front line staff right at the top of the diagram, often with customers shown at the top of the slide. The boss will talk about their role being to support everyone else in the organisation, with each level of management being there to support the front line in dealing with customers. It sounds inspiring, and apart from the surprised and worried faces of the boss's direct reports it's positively received, if with an air of cynicism.

And unfortunately too often the cynicism is well founded because the idea, even if it was proposed with the best of intentions, never lasts longer than the next mini crisis, when the boss and reports revert to type finding it easier to sit at the top of the triangle barking orders.

Maybe that is a bit unfair but unfortunately I find the true execution of the 'inverted triangle' very rare. But where it happens it can make an incredible difference to the effectiveness of organisations. It can create a culture where real empowerment takes place and where front line staff feel truly supported. This is the principle of the 'servant-leader' first coined by Robert Greenleaf, an American 'management development guru' (whatever that means) in 1970. As a recent excellent article in People Management Magazine pointed out, Greenleaf believed that great leaders are motivated by the desire to serve others, a refreshing break away from those recent leaders motivated by self-interest and the pursuit of power (step forward Sir Fred Goodwin and a host of moat cleaning and duck house building MPs).

Greenleaf goes on to say that the best test of a 'servant-leader' is whether those who are served grow as people. Now there will be a view that in these difficult times this is just too wishy-washy. That what we need is strong, decisive even autocratic leaders taking the hard decisions. But there is nothing weak or indecisive about being a 'servant-leader.' They still make the tough decisions but they ensure they are made for the right reasons and implemented in the right way.

A great example from the article of a 'servant-leader' is Chesley Sullenberger, the US Airways pilot who on 15 January safely ditched a passenger jet carrying 155 people into the Hudson River. After his aircraft hit a flock of birds and lost power in both engines soon after taking off from La Guardia airport Sullenberger performed a textbook emergency landing and ensured everyone was evacuated before himself, walking the aisles more than once to check.

In a 2005 essay, Larry Spears, who worked closely with Greenleaf, outlined the ten characteristics of a 'servant-leader' as follows:

1. The ability and willingness to listen to people
2. The determination to strive to understand and to empathise with others
3. The potential to heal (in organisational terms the ability to resolve issues)
4. Being aware and understanding issues involving ethics and values, knowing right from wrong.
5. Able to persuade, seeking to convince others rather than to coerce compliance
6. Able to think beyond today's realities and to conceptualise solutions to problems
7. Displays foresight, the ability to predict the likely outcome of a situation
8. Stewardship, playing their role in holding their organisation in trust for the greater good of society
9. Commitment to the growth of each individual in the organisation
10. Seeks to find some means of building a community among those who work within an organisation

Take a minute to consider your own role as a leader, whether you lead an organisation, or a team, or as a peer leader within a team or as a leader within your family. To what extent are you a 'servant-leader', how truly dedicated are you to serving others?

Which brings me neatly to the subject of my local MP, who, after 22 days of waiting with baited breath (me and probably him) finally made the front page of the Daily Telegraph on Friday. Bill Cash, 'Tory grandee and Euro sceptic', is accused by the Telegraph of claiming £15,000 in second home expenses to rent a flat from his daughter. Now I have no knowledge as to the validity of the accusations, but I do have a perception of Mr Cash as a pompous person who has probably had this coming to him. I say a perception because like probably 99% of the electorate here in the Stone constituency I have never seen or heard from Mr Cash in the 11 years he has been my MP. He truly is invisible. He has a huge majority, and the nearest I came to meeting him was when he sent one of his minions to our house on polling day in 2005. What irked me most was the natural assumption from his minion that I, and everyone else around here, would be voting for him. I think it is that arrogance that made me smile the most on Friday.

David Cameron says that Cash has 'serious questions' to answer, and I hope he means it. Cameron has been impressively decisive so far in dealing with his miscreants (much more so than the once more indecisive Prime Minister) and must see this as a one off opportunity to change the face of his party by getting rid of the grandees and the 'bed blockers'. I just hope he seizes the moment and banishes Mr Cash into obscurity. If we must have a Tory MP around here at least a young, energetic and visible one would be a welcome change. But preferably not Letita.

Sunday 24 May

Unassuming Lisbon, an amazing journey, an honourable man falls on his sword and a rant at a rag.

What a beautiful sunny Sunday morning. Just finished having breakfast outside, always a treat in this country. Hopefully it's the start of a great summer.

It was certainly a sunny start to the week, with three days spent in Lisbon. It was my first visit to the city, and I was really impressed by it. One thing that stands out, compared to a lot of European cities, is that it does not go out of its way to attract tourists. It has this very impressive laid back approach, if you are here you will be looked after without going over the top. I saw it described while I was there as an 'unassuming' city and I think it's a great description. A typical example was a restaurant we ate in, it

had a superb write up in a travel magazine, but we struggled to find the non-descript entrance on a small back street. The food was excellent, the service low key and the price very reasonable.

Of course there are touristy things to do, the castle and cathedral are both magnificent and there are enough bars and cafes to keep you going.

I also learned:

1. Fado, the local music and dance, makes Leonard Cohen and Damian Rice seem upbeat. I understand it's deeply part of the Lisbon history and culture but my goodness the word dirge springs to mind.
2. Lisbon students can start out on a pub crawl to celebrate the end of exams at 3pm, and at 1am can still be well behaved, reasonably sober but still seem to be having a great time. Carnage it is not.
3. Mateus Rose is as bad as I remember it, although of course we had to try it. And the bottles did make great table lamps!
4. There are decent citizens everywhere like the businessman whose alertness prevented my pocket being picked.

Having recovered from our Lisbon excesses, (my ex work colleagues sure can still drink while moderate me struggles to keep up), I finished the week with a workshop at home with the senior team of an industrial site. We have been working for the past few months to bring about a culture change on the site, linking our journey to the principles of Gung Ho!, a true story of business turn around described in Blanchford's book.

Holding the meeting at home gives the team a chance to get away from the day to day issues on site and think creatively. It even creates a different environment to a hotel meeting room, and we were able to include a long country walk.

The best part of all was sharing some breakthrough moments as we reviewed the journey. This is a site where a combination of previous poor management, a long history of decline in a very traditional business and reductions in the number of people employed has, over the years, resulted in a very negative culture. This team have taken on the challenge of changing that culture and building an organisation where people want to come to work and give their best. It was never going to happen overnight, but, six months in, through a combination of their actions and behaviours, the first real signs of change are emerging. It really is an amazing journey and one I am proud to be playing a small part in. Best of all is how much this senior team is enjoying the journey, and the changes I have seen in them, particularly in how well they are communicating with each other and working together.

As the news continues to be dominated by the appalling behaviour and lack of principles of many MPs one story you may have missed last week was the resignation of Tim Clarke, Chief Executive of my old company, Mitchells & Butlers. Tim resigned after fresh losses emerged on financial instruments linked to a failed property venture. While the background to the issues are so complicated they make my brain hurt, for me this is a human story, all the more relevant because of knowing Tim. I first met him around 1990, when as a newly appointed Retail Director running pubs in the West Midlands I took Tim into trade in Walsall one evening in his capacity as head of strategic planning. Three things struck me about Tim that night, his immense knowledge of the pub industry, his local knowledge of my pubs (which was far better than mine) and his awesome capacity to drink pints of Highgate Mild!

Whenever our paths crossed after that my respect for him continued to grow and over the last few years he has built a formidable business which is the envy of its competitors.

Tim may well have been at fault in listening to bad advice over the past couple of years but I do know that he is a man universally respected and liked within Mitchells & Butlers and within the leisure industry as a whole. Most importantly he understood when he needed to do the right thing and has acted in a truly honourable way. If only so many members of Parliament would follow his example. Cheers Tim.

Finally, what on earth is the point of local newspapers? I am becoming increasingly depressed with the pathetic outputs of my local rag, the Staffordshire Newsletter. I blogged last week about its ludicrous lead story about a petition to bring smoking back into pubs, and even took the step, for the first ever time, of sending a letter in letting them know my views. Needless to say it wasn't published, any criticism of the paper never is. It reminds me of a trip to a small hotel once where the comments book was there to sign, except that every negative comment in the book had been erased with corrector fluid! While there are real stories around (local MPs expenses for instance, or the reports on the horror stories that emerged from my local hospital in Stafford) this paper continues to lead with such world exclusives as 'Single Mother of Three enraged as Pizza Hut Opens Half an Hour Late.' You think I'm joking. I'm not.

With local newspapers losing circulation and going out of business all around us I do question the point and existence of this pathetic offering.

So it's relegation Sunday, and probably the only people not enjoying the hot sun this afternoon will be several thousand supporters of Hull, Sunderland, Middlesbrough and Newcastle. Sky and Setanta couldn't have wished for any more drama. For the neutral it's going to be great!

Saturday 16 May

Why the catastrophic breakdown of trust in MPs may just be good for leadership, no smoke without fire, and a short trip to Lisbon.

The extraordinary revelations over the last few days on MPs expenses has been well reported and much commented on, and who am I to add to that debate. But I would just like to give one or two observations, and then, much more importantly, make the link from there to leadership within organisations.

As each new revelation has appeared in the Daily Telegraph what has been fascinating is watching how the mood and reaction from MPs has evolved by the day. They began the week in denial ('we've done nothing wrong, we were only playing by the rules, it's just media hype'), moved swiftly through anger (amply demonstrated by the unbelievably arrogant Speaker) and onto acceptance, with a flood of members cheque books being waved before the cameras, and the inevitable posturing, sacking and resigning. Never can there have been such a woeful misreading of public opinion and anger.

As I said much has already been written (including Alistair Campbell's excellent blog) but just one or two thoughts:

1. The excuse that 'we were only following the rules' is indefensible. Who set the rules? Also rules are artificial laws, the far more important and powerful natural law is knowing what is right and what is wrong.
2. Of course we have all been creative in our expenses (although if my ex boss is reading this that 1998 claim involving the tin of Vaseline and a bottle of vodka was genuine) but not by elected representative who hide behind the word 'honourable' and display breathtaking arrogance.
3. Because all parties are more or less equally tainted it's been fascinating watching them being unable to attack each other for once but having their collective backs against the wall. This has just started to change, but the attempts to gain party political advantage are just seen through by an increasingly angry public.
4. Cameron has done an admirable job in emerging strongly but his fury must be because the claims have re-enforced the truth that for all his efforts his party has not changed at all, swimming pools, horse manure and, best of all, moats for goodness sake!

5. I am not suggesting solutions to the actual issue of MPs remuneration except to say that I actually believe they are underpaid for the job. Their current basic salary is about the equivalent of what, say, a regional manager might earn but these people are supposed to be running the country. I'd pay them a salary nearer to six figures, but then cut right back on expenses.

What is undeniable is that the catastrophic breakdown in trust of our elected 'leaders' is bad for democracy. At the very heart of a functioning and effective democratic system must be a basic trust that those we elect to high office will seek to do the right things for those they represent and to behave in an honourable way. A survey this week suggested that 83% of us now trust our MPs less. I can only assume the other 17% had no trust to start with. Rebuilding it is going to be a long and painful process.

But there is hope here. These events have at least started a debate about doing the right thing. An understanding that just because something is 'within the rules' does not make it right. People have begun to talk about a sense of fairness and about deeply rooted values. Maybe this is a signal of the beginning of the end of an era of greed and hypocrisy which began with Thatcher's legacy from the eighties, and doesn't just pervade politics but has sadly been all too prevalent in organisations as well.

Just possibly from this catastrophe leaders within all sorts of organisations may reflect on the lessons they can learn. Is it time to stop running organisations through fear, greed and arrogance, where results are delivered with scant regard for people, but instead for leaders to genuinely develop a leadership approach based on values, principles, care and fairness.

There is a wonderful and underrated book called 'And Dignity for All' by James Despain, which tells a true story of unlocking greatness with values-based leadership. In the book Despain tells a frankly honest story of being brought up and schooled in management in his early days in a way that led him to believe that the only way to get results out of people was to shout at them, use authority based on power, to threaten and to bully them. Through this approach he managed to rise from being an hourly paid worker in Caterpillar to the position of Vice-President and General Manager of one of the Company's biggest manufacturing facilities. But here it all stalled, this business was in serious decline and shouting simply did not work. Despain went through a massive transformation. He began to realise that there was a different way to lead. If he could treat people with respect and dignity and build their self-worth he could get so much more out of them, in not just productivity but also in new ideas, new attitudes and new ways of doing things.

He built an organisation based around a set of deep, meaningful values created by the employees themselves. And the secret was ensuring, however hard things got, when a decision had to be made it was made in line with those values. Over time together they transformed a seriously unprofitable division into one of the company's most important profit centres. And, as importantly, he tells the story of how, through the journey, he found his own dignity and self-worth.

Before you groan, give the book a go. Critically, it's not management theory, it's a true story of personal and organisational transformation in the heart of manufacturing industry, and it's principles can be applied by any leader, in any type of organisation, anywhere.

I already work with some great leaders who demonstrate every one of the qualities Despain developed and wrote about. They want to succeed, to build great organisations delivering great results, but they are determined to do it in the right way. They deeply respect and care about their people and are determined to deliver their results in the right way, to treat everyone, be they employees, customers, suppliers or other stakeholders fairly and honestly. Through this approach the great results they do deliver are sustainable. These are wonderful people who are a pleasure to work for and with. I hope and believe that the next generation of leaders will much more commonly display these virtues and attributes.

Just in passing, and building on the back of my recent blog on saving the Great British Pub, I notice my local paper's lead story this week is a campaign to re-introduce smoking rooms in pubs. This is simply an unbelievable knee jerk reaction to a downturn in fortunes in the wider economy. Banning smoking in public places was one of the greatest pieces of legislation in the last ten years. Since then pubs have become a delight to go into and food sales have risen sharply. Turning back the clock would be absurd, not least because of the clear argument of the effect passive smoking had on bar staff over the years.

It's just the same as the proposal to abandon the minimum wage. These are examples of hard won progress which it would be criminal to reverse. While we are at it we might as well bring back child labour, abandon votes for women and maybe re-introduce slavery. Maybe that's next on the agenda of pub owners as a way of reducing costs!

So tomorrow I am off to Lisbon for a few days with my ex work colleagues. This is an annual trip which has already taken us to Barcelona, Palma, Nice and Brussels. It's a chance to put the world to rights over a few beers as well as taking in the local sights. I've never been to Lisbon, and know little about it so I am really looking forward to it.

But before I head for the airport I have things to do. I have noticed that my moat is silting up badly. Now where's that shovel and expenses claim form?

Sunday 10 May

Encouraging Alice in Wonderland to produce a business plan, tipping and Fradswell rocks

'Without clear goals we become strangely obsessed with daily acts of trivia'

I'm not sure of the origination of that quote, but it rings so true for me, and I use it when working with people in teams and organisations on the management of their time, and on the preparation of business plans.

Over the past couple of weeks I have been working with different teams on their business plans, some for the year ahead, and some as part of a review of strategy for the next three to five years. Different teams, different organisations and different time scales, but the principle in each case was the same; unless people invest the time up front to produce well thought out and crafted plans, based on clarity of vision and goals, the chances of them moving forward is remote.

But too often I come across teams and even organisations who seem to have no sense of where they want to get to. Without that sense of direction at best they are merely treading water, at worst they are heading off aimlessly in the wrong direction.

To borrow from Alice in Wonderland:

"Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?"

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat

'I don't care much where?' said Alice

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat."

Therefore every team and every organisation should invest the time, at the start of a year, or a three year cycle, or at the beginning of a project, to produce a business plan, a carefully thought out picture of where they want to get to, and road map of how they will get there.

The problem is that can seem quite daunting. For some the challenge will be where to start, there are so many possible templates available. For others it will be finding the time to focus on pulling one together, there is so much to do, they are just too busy doing stuff (which of course is the problem). At the other end of the scale some organisations will just have turned business planning into such a bureaucratic nightmare that it will alienate everyone who becomes involved. The organisation I used to work for was one of those. Over the year many, many hours would be spent producing wonderfully detailed plans charting the year ahead. They even had a whole department which did nothing but

develop strategies which they turned into business plans and on into operational plans. At the beginning of the new year us operators would be handed a thick file containing the 752 page long plan for the year ahead.

We would take it back to our offices, gaze at it in awe and slip it quietly into our desk draw, and that's where it stayed. It was not joined up, in any sense, to the real world in which we operated. Not that the department minded. They had produced the plan and ticked their boxes, and were now heavily engaged in producing the following year's plan.

I tell this story just to offer a word of warning, planning is essential if you want to succeed, but it needs to be timely, relevant, and produced by the people who are actually the ones charged with executing and delivering.

So I don't think plans need to be complex, and for a team should probably be never more than three or four pages long. They should be a simple guide to what you intend to do over, say, the next year, and then should be working documents regularly referred to as you progress through the year.

I said before that there are many templates available, but may I suggest the following as a simple framework for any team producing a plan to focus it for the coming twelve months:

1. Review of stakeholders

Who are your main stakeholders (customers, suppliers, team members, senior management, other colleagues etc.)? What do they want from you in the next year? How do you know? How do you interact with them?

2. Purpose

Why does your team exist? Unless you can state this clearly, in 25 words or less, you do not have clarity on why you are there, and therefore why should anyone else?

3. Vision

Where do you want to be one year today? Can you paint the picture which is compelling, aspirational, stretching but also realistic? Can you articulate that vision in a way that engages your stakeholders?

4. Strategy

Can you turn where you want to get to (the vision) into a simple top line strategy (how we are going to get there)? This is where so many teams and organisations fall down. Spurred on by MBA thinking they over complicate strategy, turning it into a document a hundred pages long full of graphs, figures and mind numbing detail.

But a top line strategy can be so simple. Tesco, hardly a small or unsuccessful company, summarise their strategy into five areas of core UK food, community, UK non food, retailing services and international growth. Each is underpinned by a simple statement of a dozen words or so and is easily accessible on their website.

Five simple statements under which lies a host of detailed plans but the point is that their strategy is accessible and can be understood by any employee, and even more importantly, wherever a person works in their company, on a till, behind the meat counter, in their financial services, or in a head office function, they can see how what they do every day can directly contribute to at least one part of the strategy. It joins up brilliantly. (They also communicate it brilliantly. I was running programme and mentioned this strategy. A women delegate recalled the statements. She said her son had stacked shelves at his local Tesco for three weeks over Christmas while a student, had been told the strategy and had mentioned it to her. Awesome.)

5. Roles and Goals

This is the crucial bit which turns the strategy in a plan into execution. Every single person involved should be aware of their part in delivering their part of the strategy, and be clear on their role (why they exist), and their goals for the year ahead. Although it may not form part of this short business plan they should now feel able to produce their own action plan for delivering their goals. As with the Tesco employee they should be able to see how delivering their goals will enable the team to deliver its strategy to achieve its vision. It's called 'line of sight.'

6. Targets, Milestones and Measures

The final part of the plan maps out the journey for the year into a series of targets, milestones and measures. What must be achieved by when? How will you know you have been successful?

That's it, just a six step process. I have used this framework countless times with teams in all sorts of all organisations, and I use it for my own annual business plan. It's simplicity and clarity really works.

I mentioned this briefly last week, but in a week dominated by the Telegraph's exposure after exposure on MPs expenses I was delighted to see some focus on the real purpose of Parliament with the passing of legislation outlawing the practice of using tips to make wages up to the minimum wage. This is a disgraceful practice, widely prevalent in the hotels, pubs and restaurants, and nobody should be in the least bit surprised that it leads to the poor levels of customer service that give our country and the leisure industry such a bad name. I have ranted on far too much in past blogs about poor service (and I become even more intolerant of it as I grow older) but for any person to offer great service they have to have the knowledge (what they have to do) but also the desire (to want to do it.) If there is no incentive to do so, why should they have that desire? Ensuring tips reach those who deserve them (not management) may be one very small step to changing the culture of indifferent and poor service that pervades this country. We shall see.

We had a wonderful Friday night here in Fradswell with our first ever curry night in the village hall. If you have not picked this up from previous blogs (or from my updates and photos on Twitter) Fradswell is a small village of just 60 or so houses in rural Staffordshire. At the centre of the village is a decrepit village hall, an old army hut, over 80 years old, which leans alarmingly towards the road. The 180 or so inhabitants of the village fall roughly into three categories, those involved in local agriculture, retired people, and 'newly arrived people' (meaning in the last 15 years!) most of whom commute to work outside the village. Without a pub or shop it is difficult to develop a sense of community and a handful of us have been looking to build that through a rejuvenated series of events in the village hall.

Friday night was the culmination of our efforts to date. We organised a curry evening, brought in an Indian restaurant from the nearest town to provide the food, and 80 people crammed into the hall for a superb evening of eating, drinking, more drinking, dancing and, most importantly, talking and laughing. I ran the bar, worked hard all night, and enjoyed every moment.

Thinking about it I took £500 on the bar and didn't get a single tip. So what was the point of the new legislation?

A busy week ahead, including two days with Alice, the White Rabbit and the Teapot in a planning session before they go through the looking glass. Wish me luck.

Monday 4 May

Save the Great British Pub (or at least those that deserve to be saved), and some words of advise for the new Poet Laureate.

I had rather an unpleasant shock one evening last week as I finished my training for the day in Wiltshire. I drove to the village pub/hotel I was booked into for the evening (where I had stayed a couple of times before) to find the car park deserted, the doors locked and a sign saying that they had ceased trading the previous day.

As I lay on my park bench that night, the reality of how tough it is for many businesses to survive the recession was brought home to me. Pubs are great examples of this. The British Beer & Pub Association recently calculated that 1.7 million less pints were sold each day in January to March this year compared to the previous year, and that six pubs a day are closing down. Now we can all be wary of statistics (as Ricky Gervais once said in *The Office* 'statistics are like lamp posts, great to lean on but not very enlightening') but they do bring home the challenge that my ex industry is facing. My closed hotel was a more stark reminder than a sheaf of statistics.

The British Beer & Pub Association have joined with CAMRA and the All Parliamentary Beer Group (bet their expenses make interesting reading) to mount a campaign to Save the Great British Pub. Now I love pubs as much as the next person, they are an absolute bed rock of our heritage, but I just would put one proviso into that statement; Save the Great British Pub by all means, but only those that deserve to be saved.

It's important not to put the blame for falling beer sales solely on the economic conditions. Beer sales, particularly those in pubs, have been falling annually for many years, for a variety of reasons, including changing lifestyles, increasingly negative attitudes towards 'binge drinking', and the growth of a host of other leisure alternatives, inside and outside the home.

But one further reason is that in so many pubs the offer is just so poor. Shoddy even. There are great pubs out there, many of them, but there are also far too many where service is at best indifferent and at worst rude, which are dirty and uncared for, with overpriced second rate food. These businesses are obviously struggling, and the recession may be the thing that pushes them over the edge, but they were already struggling long before this economic downturn came along.

I worked with some young managers last week who run bar and retail offers in a multi faceted leisure operation. We were talking about what constitutes the 'customer experience' as we prepared business plans for their outlets for the year ahead. The model I use is to suggest that the customer experience consists of three elements, product, service and environment, and this model holds true across any retail operation, from pubs to restaurants to shops. In the context of pubs, product consists of everything they offer (food, drink, entertainment etc.) together with those elements of the marketing mix, such as pricing, merchandising and promotions. Service consists of both soft elements (the interaction between the server and the customer) and harder elements (management of queues, the way the food and drink is presented etc.) Environment is about everything around you, your first impressions from outside the pub, the décor, cleanliness, temperature, and also safety.

Great businesses get every single one of these right and know that if they fall down in any part of the three elements they cannot deliver a great customer experience.

Examples where I scream with frustration are:

1. Poor or indifferent service. How many times do I find myself being ignored as I wait to be served (perhaps it's something to do with me) when there are no other customers? The person serving me then has no enthusiasm or interaction and a complete lack of interest or knowledge in the products. I know there are exceptions to this, but that's the point, they are exceptions, and when you experience great service it is so noticeable and uplifting. Having said that in an industry which pays the minimum wage, has far too little training and then pockets the tips do not be surprised with what you get.
2. Frozen food, badly cooked and poorly presented which takes an age to arrive, and is then often cold. No food on sale in the middle of the afternoon when actually I want a meal. Can you imagine going into a bar in Spain at 3pm and being turned away when you want to eat?
3. Dirty glasses smeared in lipstick, dirty toilets, plates and glasses uncleared from tables while staff stand around talking.
4. Negative signing (sounds like nothing but it's one of my pet hates). Before I even get into many pubs I am assaulted by a plethora of signs telling me what I can't do not what I can. Why do I read a sign telling me that food is not available on Mondays rather than one telling me that great food is served here Tuesdays through to Sundays?

Of course not all pubs are like this, there are thousands of great pubs across the country with fantastic offers run by committed people who really care. Many of them are round where I live, including my local. And as ever in a recession great businesses will prosper and emerge stronger. But I pass far too many boarded up pubs with 'to let' signs that have become increasingly desperate in their wording. And letting them to inexperienced people is not the answer. I ran pubs before and during the recession in the early nineties and we were far too willing to take redundancy cheques off people as they lost their jobs in heavy industry and set them up as tenants. I'm ashamed to say that very few of those businesses survived long, dreams that for too many ended in tears.

So my challenge to the industry is to run a two pronged attack. Of course campaign to Save the Great British Pub, but get your house in order as well. Redouble your efforts to drive improved standards. Do that and I'll be at the front of your queue of supporters.

Many congratulations to Carol Ann Duffy on her appointment as the new Poet Laureate. I think that appointing a woman to the role for the first time, and an openly homosexual one at that, sends positive messages of change. I can also claim an almost personal connection as well, because Jakkie went to school with Carol Ann Duffy.

What I'm not clear on is what the Poet Laureate does. I understand they pen poems for important occasions, and sometimes write poems for the Queen. Here a wonderful picture emerges, not dissimilar to Queenie on her throne in the early Blackadder series, demanding her Poet Laureate to think up poems on the spot to entertain her. I guess the problem now is that so few words rhyme with corgi, irrelevant and drain on the taxpayer.

The serious point for me is that the appointment is for ten years and, having broken the mould with the person appointed, maybe those years could be spend inspiring the next generation to appreciate the wonder and beauty of poetry. Is there anything more powerful than Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' or as evocative than 'The Highwayman' by Alfred Noyes?

Thinking about it in ten years time I will be in my early sixties and slowing down at work. Maybe an appointment as Poet Laureate may be the perfect job. So just to get me started this is for you Ms Duffy

'Carol Ann Duffy
Don't make your poems stuffy
Now you are Poet Laureate
Carol Ann Duffy
Don't make your poems fluffy
Or boring, or sappy, or wet

Write us great poems
To read to our children in our homes
That we may inspire them yet.
Make that the crusade
That fills the decade
That you are Poet Laureate.'

Okay, it's not great but it did only take me two minutes to write. And it may not scan well but at least it rhymes.

Monday 27 April

Arthur the peanut seller, Paul Getty and leadership lessons from sport

Just back from driving through pouring rain to visit the dentist. Great start to Monday morning, not made any better by radio doom and gloom on swine flu and financial meltdown!

But that's on the back of a great weekend of sport related activities. On Friday I took Jakkie's Dad, a life long Newcastle United fan, for a tour around St. James Park. I love looking round sports stadia, and you certainly don't have to be a fan of the club to enjoy the experience. But I guess it does make it extra special. The last time George was at St. James was about 42 years ago, when he paid 1s & 6d to get in, and a further 6d to sit in the stand! The trip around was great value, a truly impressive stadium, and it's always good fun to visit the dressing rooms and then walk out through the tunnel and sit in the dug out.

The guy who showed us round, really added to the experience. John is also life long supporter, now in his sixties, who used to climb over the wall and get in free when he was young. He inevitably was full of stories. My favourite was about Arthur the peanut seller, who provided the only source of food in the stadium back in the fifties and early sixties, and was somewhat of a legend. He used to walk around the edge of the pitch just before kick off selling loose peanuts wrapped in newspaper for sixpence. Fans would hurl their coins down to him and in return he would throw the bags of peanuts up onto the terraces. Inevitably few found their intended target but would be passed back until they found the right person. John compared that experience with Drogba's recent fine and ban for returning a coin to the crowd. 'In those days there would be coins whizzing back and forth past your ear in the general direction of Arthur.'

John's pre match eating habits changed, however, on one visit to the gents toilet behind the Gallowgate End. Apparently toilet is a bit of a grand description, it consisted of a long open wall and drain and was always flooded. One day John was in there when Arthur appeared beside him, placed his basket of peanuts down in the tidal wave of urine and did his business. He then picked up the basket and continued on his round. Needless to say John didn't buy from Arthur again.

Inevitably the whole club is obsessed with that man Shearer. We ate lunch in Shearer's bar, saw his photo on the wall everywhere and marvelled at his place amongst their 'great number nines' (and to be fair there have been a few). Now he is in temporary charge on his rescue mission his aura has risen even higher. But with that comes so much expectation. The reality is that this great club with its extraordinary stadium may be playing Championship football in a few months. No-one has a divine right to stay up, not even Newcastle. We shall see.

Then on Sunday a complete contrast in terms of sport and location when Jakkie and I were guests of our good friend and former England cricketer Tim Munton at the stunning Wormsley cricket ground. If anything cricket edges out football as my favourite sport and locations don't come any better than this. Wormsley is the cricket ground created by the late Paul Getty, a lover of all things English and a cricket fanatic. Nestling in the Chiltern Hills, the ground has been described as the most beautiful in England and it would be hard not to agree. The setting is perfect, with a thatched pavilion and score box and even a red telephone box. Can there be anything more perfect than a champagne lunch followed by watching cricket sat in a deck chair in such a setting? Okay you can probably come up with alternatives, but it certainly works for me. A world away from Arthur and Geordie passion but equally wonderful in its own way.

The sporting theme of the weekend was completed by the London Marathon (no of course I didn't run it before going on to Wormsley but it's a great sporting occasion nevertheless, and all of us know someone who was running in it). And I must also mention the brilliant decision by Frank Lampard to ring into the LBC show after he received such criticism from the presenter. I'm no fan of Lampard as a footballer but I'm not qualified to comment on his private life without knowing the facts and neither was that presenter, or the media reports he was commenting on. It's too easy to jump onto the bandwagon of negative celebrity bashing and it's about time someone took a stand.

I try to combine into these blogs some leadership messages as well as an update on my week, and it is obvious and straightforward to make some connections between leadership in sport and leadership in any organisations. Indeed many ex sports stars earn a living out of doing so, some more effectively than others.

Just three observations based on some thinking I was doing while enjoying this weekend.

1. You can't just drop a leader into a team or organisation, no matter how bright their star is, and expect instant success. Newcastle may stay up, and I guess that would be regarded as the immediate goal, or they may not. But that doesn't build a long-term highly effective organisation. If they do survive they will struggle again next season unless they plan for the medium to long term future. To do this stability and patience are essential. Manchester United and Arsenal are often quoted examples of this for the right reasons.

2. To achieve anything, in sport or in any organisation, requires thought, sustained effort, great planning and application. You just can't turn up on the morning of the London Marathon and expect to succeed unless you've put in the necessary planning and training (although Jade Goody did try). Great leaders have a carefully thought out strategy, linked to a vision, which is then broken down into individual plans, roles and goals, and then superbly executed.

3. Great sports coaches understand where their roles begin and end. They need to ensure they have absolutely the right people (which may be as much about nurturing and developing talent from within as it is about buying it in.) They then need to set out the playing field and decide on the strategy and tactics. But execution is with their team on the pitch. The sports coach, and leaders of any team and organisation, need to allow their people the freedom to express themselves within a framework.

So good luck to Newcastle as they take on Portsmouth tonight in a crucial game. I'm sure Arthur will be watching from afar. Thinking about it, if Mr Shearer is really stuck for something to do from next season selling peanuts to the Geordie faithful may be one option.

Tuesday 21 April

Time, our most precious and most abused resource

After that frenetic weekend I've finally managed to surface enough to find time to write this blog.

Just back from a great few days in Palma, Majorca. I think that Palma is one of the most under rated cities I have ever visited. Many people only think of it in terms of the airport, a place to grab their baggage before heading for the varied delights of Magluf or Alcudia, but it's a beautiful city which deserves exploring. It has a spectacular cathedral, great museums, an enormous marina and miles of winding streets with hidden courtyards at every turn. It also has its fair share of great restaurants and bars, and we made it our mission to explore as many of them as we could.

We also took the old electric train to Soller, a journey which takes about an hour through mountains and orange groves, followed by a tram ride to the sea at Port de Soller, a highly recommended day out.

Three thoughts that occurred to me, however, as we were flying back:

1. Why is airport check in such a laborious, painful process? Why do you have to stand in a queue for ages and ages, shuffling forward just so you can hump your bags onto the belt and answer repetitive questions about who slipped what into your bag when you know the answer is not being listened to. And with the cheap airlines you even have to pay for the privilege of standing in the queue! I know on-line check in provides an option if you don't have a bag, but there has to be a quicker, better, and still security aware way to get the job done.

2. As I struggled to sort my coins between pounds and euros to buy a bottle of water on the plane I just wondered once more why don't we just get on with it and adopt the Euro? I know it's controversial, I am sure there are a ton (or kilo) of economic reasons why it's not a good idea at the moment, but it's going to happen one day, so why not just do it now and get it over with. It would certainly have made my journey a lot less complicated.

3. On the flight back (with BMI Baby) the cabin team were just absolutely brilliant. Not only were they efficient but the Cabin Manager in particular was very funny and had great interaction with his customers. (I know 'anyone found smoking in the toilets during the flight will be asked the leave the

aircraft immediately' is an old line but it still made me smile.) The thing is that he led a motivated team, delivering superb service while clearly having fun, and that in a role where his number one priority is safety. It brought to life to me last week's Fish! messages of play, make their day, be there, and choose your attitude, they demonstrated all of them throughout the flight.

The reasons for going out to Palma were to spend time with family and friends (10 of us made the trip) but also for some relaxing time after Easter before another hectic few weeks of work. Time is such an incredibly precious resource, we never seem to have enough of it. But it is also an incredibly abused resource. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, could become so much better at managing our time. That certainly includes me, I teach principles of effective time management but still struggle to live by those principles far too often. Sunday was a great example, out during the day and rushing around late on trying and failing to write a blog and getting more and more frustrated.

When I work with clients on the management of their time we focus on just four principles, which are as follows. These apply equally inside and outside work.

1. Be in control. If we are not in control how can we possibly be managing our time effectively. Too often we rush around like headless chickens spinning plates (yes I know that is a mixed metaphor but you get the picture). Too often other people, inside and outside work, are dictating what we should be doing, giving us their urgent things to do, distracting us from what we should be doing. We end up being purely reactive and out of control. Only when we take control, which is a mental state as much as it is a physical action, can we start to become effective at managing our time.
2. Focus on the truly important. Unless we know what our most important things are how can we ensure we are devoting sufficient time to them? Take a few moments to think through and to write down what your most important things are, inside and outside work. Here are mine. In work they are delighting my clients, marketing my business and developing myself. If I don't devote sufficient time to those three I cannot run an effective business. Outside work they are spending sufficient quality time with Jakkie and with my children and also spending time on myself, fulfilling my interests, such as writing. Try and compile your own list.
3. Plan weekly. Get away from the chaos that a daily 'to do' list too often is, and take the time at the end of each week to plan the week ahead. Put into the plan first time for those most important things you listed above. Remember to include the weekend. This is not easy at first, there are too many urgent things in the way, but be ruthless in working out which of those things you can stop doing. Over time this approach will pay massive dividends.
4. Execute daily with integrity and discipline. This is a crucial piece. You can make the most beautifully crafted weekly plan in the world but if it has fallen apart by the end of Monday it's not much use. Sticking to the plan requires both integrity and discipline.

These four simple principles, which are based on Stephen Covey's 7 Habits, are difficult to argue with because they are just common sense, but equally difficult to consistently apply. But if we can make even small steps to adhering to them the difference they make can be massive. It's not easy at first, but stick with it.

I forgot to mention that on Sunday, having returned from Palma, we went as guests of Jakkie's daughter Victoria to a County Council celebration day at Shugborough, a local stately home. The day was an opportunity for the Council to thank its staff for their work. It was actually a great day, well organised, well attended, great weather and a lot of fun. I missed the tea trolley racing and the risk awareness obstacle course but the rest was great. Just one observation, right in the middle of the event, slap bang outside the house, was a large white tent, surrounded by fencing and security, marked for VIPs only. I vaguely hoped the VIPs may have been those with long service or awards winners, but no it was for Councillors and Senior Managers. To me there is no better example of shooting yourself in the foot, something confirmed by the cynical comments of Council employees as they passed the tent with their families. What kind of message does it send?

Another busy week, when managing my own time effectively is crucial. I've just finished a workshop with a client based around scenario planning for future possible events, including significant reductions in income. This is a large, successful voluntary sector organisation, but the Chief Executive and her senior team recognise that complacency is very dangerous and planning future scenarios is essential. I wish that the senior teams of more organisations would spend more time doing this, too often they fail to anticipate approaching challenges until it is too late, then spend too long in denial before knee jerking into action.

Next weekend is also going to be hectic. On Friday we are off to Newcastle where I am taking Jakkie's Dad, a life long Newcastle United supporter on a tour of St James' Park. Then on Sunday we are travelling down to Sir Paul Getty's beautiful cricket ground in the south for some hospitality and (weather permitting) some cricket. It's not a good time to be visiting Newcastle United as Alan Shearer battles to save them from relegation. Maybe it's time the club did some serious scenario planning, after all away trips to Plymouth and Brighton will take some organising. It will be a late blog again after the weekend, with an update on life at the Toon!

Sunday 19 April

A rather ironic apology

Over the last eighteen months I have succeeded in writing a blog every weekend, almost without exception. Until this weekend!

We got back from a few days in Palma, Majorca late on Saturday and then today was filled up with a visit to a County Council Celebration Day. There is much to write about both, but unfortunately I have run out of time.

And that's the irony, the main subject of this week's blog was to be the effective management of time in our busy lives, getting the most out of that most precious and so often abused resource. It's something I was thinking about a lot when I was away last week. But it's easy to teach the principles and so much more difficult to consistently and constantly apply them, as I've proved to myself today!

So instead I will seek your understanding, spend the rest of this evening preparing for a busy week ahead, and blog later in the week. Promise!

Monday 13 April

Michelle Obama, fish, and some thoughts on personal responsibility.

Happy Easter! I hope you have enjoyed your weekend, whatever Easter means to you. For many people it will be its deep religious connections, for some a chance to overdose on chocolate, and for others the opportunity to catch up with friends and family. For me it's definitely the friends and family thing, but also the bright weather over the weekend, sunshine and daffodils, gave me a real lift.

I thought that the real highlight of the recent G20 summit was not the outputs of the leaders, or the protests, but rather the coverage of Michelle Obama's visit to a school. Her comments there to the pupils really hit the right note for me. To paraphrase she talked about how special every single individual is and how anyone can achieve great things if they set their mind to it. She illustrated these points by talking about her journey from her upbringing to the White House. I think the line 'it doesn't matter if you are born on a country estate or a council estate' was especially poignant.

A lot of my work involves helping people to understand what they can achieve if they really set their mind to it. At the heart of the message is developing a belief that we should focus on what we can change (ourselves) rather than what we can't change. If we want to change anything around us we can

only start with ourselves, by examining our own effectiveness, our own beliefs and attitudes and the effect we have, positive or negative, on those around us.

With that belief comes the message that every one of us can and must take personal responsibility for making a difference to those around us. This applies in our whole lives, but a big part of it is the difference we are all capable of making where we work. I am currently working with a young team in a large company, a team who initially felt disengaged. Over time we have sown the seeds of personal responsibility, and the difference it can make. To help me I introduced them to the training film *Fish!* This film has been around a long time and will be familiar to many of you, but its messages of how individuals can take responsibility and create a great place to work are as powerful today as they were when it first came out.

For those who have not seen the film, it is based in the Pike Place fish market in Seattle. But it could be anywhere, which is the point. The guys there have come up with four messages and together they have created a great place to work, and in turn a brilliant experience for their customers.

Here are the four messages:

Play: when people have fun at work they just perform so much better, and the positive atmosphere rubs off on colleagues and customers alike. That doesn't mean that work isn't a serious business, of course it is, but neither does it mean people can't create fun. And you don't have to wait for bosses to give permission to have fun.

Make Their Day: this is where every individual takes personal responsibility for giving every single customer a great experience. Customers can, of course, be external, or internal, people in other departments they come into contact with and service.

Be There: to me this is a really powerful message for any interaction with another person, be they a customer or a colleague. Too often we go through the motions in those dealings. When we 'be there' we focus, intently and genuinely, on the interaction. We do not let our own lack of focus, or external distractions, get in the way. How often have you been frustrated in dealing with someone who is not 'there', is simply going through the motions when dealing with you.

Choose Your Attitude: I think this is the most powerful message of all, and when people 'get it' lights come on. Every single one of us is capable of choosing our attitude every day, and no-one can stop us. When we get up in the morning we can choose to make it a great day, where we spread positive energy, or a rubbish day, where we spread negativity. And spread is the right word, our attitude so quickly translates to those around us. Making that choice is at the heart of personal responsibility.

The joy of all of the above messages is that anyone can do them, they require no capital investment, no edict from above, no permission. And when people take personal responsibility for acting consistently in this way they influence those around them and before long a brilliant culture develops and becomes unstoppable.

It's a great film, if you haven't seen it take a look and think how you could use it with your team. There will often be a copy or two lurking in your organisation's training department, possibly gathering dust on the shelf.

The team I am working with got hold of the film and presented it to their managers along with a list of things they committed to do to make things better at work. But be warned, it can be unsettling for those managers when people start taking personal responsibility to make changes. It can be a lot easier and safer bottling creativity and telling people what to do, but nowhere near as rewarding.

We are just completing a great Easter weekend. Last week we went to see Tina Turner. She was just superb. I cannot believe that someone almost 70 years old still looks so good and has such an amazingly powerful stage presence and voice. The whole show was spectacular, a mixture of concert, theatre and circus.

My daughter Charlotte arrived back from skiing with her school on Good Friday, after a 30 hours coach journey back up from Andorra. How the teachers put up with it is beyond me, although a look at their bronzed features suggests that free skiing and sunshine might have something to do with it. It was Charlotte's first experience of skiing and she loved it, which isn't necessarily a good sign of things to come!

Tomorrow ten of us are off to Palma, Majorca for a family break for the rest of the week. I'm already smiling at the prospect of a few days relaxation in what is a really attractive and often-underrated city, it shouldn't be too difficult to have fun and choose my attitude!

Saturday 4 April

Emerging stronger, the Apprentice again (sorry), a 70 year old Diva and a fire engine update.

I remain convinced that the current economic downturn offers many opportunities alongside the tales of deep despair. I still believe that the way companies deal with it broadly falls into three categories. There are those that will go under, and frankly for many of them that should be no surprise. Some that fail, but not all, will do so because they entered the recession badly led, with a poorly thought out business plan and a disloyal customer base. They were an accident waiting to happen and the recession simply pushes them over the edge.

Others will limp through to the other end where they will emerge in a weak position and their recovery will be slow and painful.

However, for some organisations this downturn does become an opportunity to take stock and to rethink their strategy. These companies will emerge stronger, leaner, fitter and ready to prosper as the economy begins to grow again.

I am working with one such company at the moment, and you only have to spend an hour or two with their Managing Director, which I did this week, to gain the confidence that here is a leader who knows exactly how to deal with the current realities and already has his plans in place. This is a high tech company which has the same challenges as anyone else, but we discussed a number of actions they are taking during these difficult times that stands them out from so many others and equips them for the future.

1. From the very start of the downturn they have been communicating brilliantly with their people, telling them honestly and openly what is happening. This can only help in galvanising people to understand what they can do to contribute fully in difficult times.
2. They have used this engagement to ensure that everyone understands their role in doing what is now important, which in their case includes reducing stock levels to create more cash and focussing more on debtors and creditors. They have encouraged and welcomed the ideas of their people in finding creative solutions to save money.
3. They have worked hard to avoid the 'busy busy' syndrome that so often blights organisations when people are concerned about their future. They are challenging any activity that does not add value, recognising that now is the time to eliminate the 'nice to dos.'
4. They have invested in support to develop lean manufacturing processes, again to take unnecessary costs out of their operations, and have involved their people fully in the implementation of these new ways of working.
5. They have refused to turn off the tap on the training and coaching of their people. They recognise that in difficult times more support and development is necessary and will deliver great dividends. If you turn off the tap at this point you may save some money in the short term but will emerge ill equipped to exploit future opportunities.
6. Leaders in the organisation are consistently role modelling the behaviours they want to see in others. They are not just giving the messages, they are supporting them with demonstrable actions.

7. They are taking the time to review their strategy. Is it still right, to what extent should there be some changes of direction to confront head on the current reality, while not losing sight of their future vision.

None of these actions are rocket science (although this is some of what they do!) Instead, they are well thought out straightforward actions which have put this particular business not only in the best possible position to survive this recession but in the strongest of places for the future.

I said last week that I was getting my Apprentice rant out of the way early this year, so I could sit back and enjoy the show. I'm really sorry, but I was wrong, I cannot let this week's antics pass without comment. This time the two teams were engaged in producing lunch and dinner for 'city slickers' (as Sir Alan described them.) Let's not worry about the boys, they were a complete disaster, it's what the girls team did and Sugar's reaction which concerns me most, and I want to make a serious point about it. They negotiated with the businesses they were supplying food to, and then went out and purchased the cheapest ingredients they could find. They then served up rubbish, poorly presented food, which was universally criticised by their customers. The client reduced the amount they were willing to pay but the profit they made was still high enough to give them victory.

But here's the thing, Sugar was only interested in their profit, he congratulated them, brushed over the lack of customer satisfaction and sent them away for their reward. But it's a disgrace, their customers were left with a bitter taste in their mouth (literally) and would never have given this team repeat business. It's a terrible message to send out. If you want to be successful in any business you must grow customer loyalty, you cannot treat them with contempt, supplying shoddy goods and ripping them off. It's a recipe for disaster. I know it's just made for television but the message it sends out is appalling. Show me one sustained successful business that has prospered over time by ripping off their customers with shoddy goods. Apart from Sir Alan Sugar's Amstrad of course. Now there's the link.

Next Tuesday Jakkie and I are off to see Tina Turner in Birmingham. This rock legend is, amazingly, 70 years old this year. I'm really looking forward to seeing her for what I am assuming will be her last UK visit. Then on Thursday I am taking Jakkie on her surprise Valentines day out. How lucky a woman is she?

Thank you for all your feedback on my proposed purchase of the fire engine. With just one exception the body of opinion was a resounding yes. So, always valuing your advise, the project is on. It should be here at home within a few days. I'm not absolutely sure what I am going to do with it yet, but the opportunity is too good to pass up. Never again will a cat stay stuck up a tree round here and children's heads between railings will be a thing of the past.

I just hope Jakkie doesn't mind driving it back on Thursday

Sunday 29 March

Inspirational visions, the Apprentice and a dilemma over a big red fire engine

I think this is probably my favourite time of year. It's a beautiful sunny spring day, the clocks have just changed so we have lighter nights, the daffodils are everywhere and this afternoon I had my first drive of the year in JUT, my 1966 series Land Rover. JUT spent the winter safely tucked away under a barn, and getting it back on the road signals that spring is here.

It has been a really busy week with lots of travelling and some challenging assignments, and it ended with a very stimulating day working with the Trustees and Directors of a large voluntary sector organisation helping them to scope out their future vision as part of a strategic planning process.

If any organisation large or small, or indeed any team or department is to grow, to improve, to deliver better results it has to have a picture of where it wants to get to. A vision is no more than that, it should

be a clear and compelling picture of the future which can unite people in a common purpose. If an organisation, or team or department, does not have a picture of where it wants to get to then it can only tread water, it's an acceptance that where it is now is good enough, that there is no need to strive to improve. Especially in today's challenging environment, but actually at any time that is a recipe for stagnation at best and disaster at worst.

That principle applies in all organisations, including already successful ones. The organisation I was working with last week are, by every measure, already highly successful. But they understand that there is no room for complacency, and they need to strive to become even more effective and relevant over the next few years. You cannot sit back and bask in current or recent glories. As Jim Collins says 'good is the enemy of the great.'

The other thing about a vision is that it needs to inspire, it should be something that people within the organisation can relate to. It needs to set out the destination in a way that will persuade people that the journey is worthwhile and hopefully exciting. Ideally there should be an emotional connection, something that makes people feel engaged and excited.

Before we started our discussions on Friday the Chief Executive shared with us some vision statements from other organisations.

"Together we will beat cancer" Cancer Research

"A computer on every desk" Apple

"To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world" Nike

"To grow a profitable airline, where people love to fly and where people love to work" Virgin

"We want our customers to love where they live"
Notting Hill Housing Association

To me this really powerfully brings to life how a vision can build an emotional attachment with people. I particularly love the Cancer Research and the Notting Hill Housing Association ones, where words like 'together we will' and 'love' build that connection.

The other thing about creating a vision is that it must be relevant. In some shape or form it must be based on what stakeholders actually want. This requires really great engagement with stakeholders, listening to them intently. Once they understand what stakeholders want great organisations then use that knowledge to inform their thinking and to create their vision. They do not slavishly try and deliver everything they have heard but they also realise it would be a nonsense to ignore it.

We made a great start on Friday by reviewing the immense amount of stakeholder engagement this organisation has undertaken. Work is now in progress to develop a relevant, powerful and emotionally engaging vision.

Now, let me get my Apprentice rant out of the way early this year, then I can sit back and enjoy compelling television. That's my dichotomy with the show, disgraceful behaviours and great viewing. This year's participants seem to be even more extreme than ever, and the first episode contained everything I love to hate about the programme. I watched people who are completely self obsessed, never listen, are horrendously opinionated and have not a single ounce of care for their colleagues. But that's enough about Alan Sugar, the contestants were just as bad.

Somewhat depressingly business acumen seemed to be strangely absent also! I cannot imagine how these people can survive let alone prosper in the real world of work.

So how's this for an idea of a new reality television show, Apprentice meets Gladiator. Give the contestants a sword each and let them loose at each other. Last one standing gets hired and business would be spared the misery of working with the rest of these people over the coming years. It would also make a great one hour show.

But in truth I'm hooked on it and will watch the whole series even just so I can cringe at their vitriolic attacks on each other. It's also an opportunity to monitor this year's favourite sayings, which are 'at the end of the day', and 'it's as simple as that.' The first one won by 17-14 in week one but there's a long way to go.

I spent Saturday morning in Newcastle with my eldest daughter Lindsay, her of the football injury fame. She finally had her operation to pin a broken collar bone on Thursday, after just over a week of pain and discomfort. It seems like an amazing operation because she should have full use of her shoulder back within a couple of weeks. Now she has to refocus on her finals, which are only weeks away before this summer her and boyfriend Danny head for America for eight weeks at Camp America followed by three weeks travelling. I just hope she can survive the metal detectors at the airport!

Finally I have a dilemma and would appreciate any sage advice you have. I have been offered the opportunity to buy a fire engine, for a very reasonable price. It's been based on the site of one of my clients, on a chemical complex, but is now surplus to requirements. It's the real deal, 30 years old but fully equipped with blue lights and two tone horns, and it's big and shiny and very red. To be honest it's every boys dream, but how practical will it be? The idea has caused quite a stir in the local area with interest from the Young Farmers for their carnival, and a suggestion I could form the Fradswell volunteer fire brigade. I think not.

I'm currently urgently researching the mundane of tax, MOT, license requirements, transportation etc, but your views would be most welcome. I was taken for a test drive in it the other day and it felt pretty good. They are even willing to throw in a yellow helmet, which just might be the clincher.

Sunday 22 March

The scandal at my local hospital, pigeons, and an unfortunate end to a football career

Many readers will know that one of the things I am truly passionate about is the NHS. We are just so lucky to have such a comprehensive health care system free (or almost entirely free) at the point of delivery, and it's a cliché but we are the envy of the world in this regard. The Labour Party should proudly regard the creation of a national health service as it's greatest ever achievement, which is why I get so angry and frustrated that the current Labour government seems determined to shoot itself in the foot with the NHS.

One place you would certainly not want to go for treatment if you had been shot in the foot would be my local hospital in Stafford. It hit the national headlines for all the wrong reasons this week with the shocking revelations of dreadful failings in standards, patient care and leadership. Now hundreds of deaths will be investigated to see how many could have been avoided. The agony for relatives as this unfolds can only be imagined.

The scenario of what went wrong is just so obvious and avoidable. The Government pours millions into the NHS and set a series of targets as their measures of improvements and success. They impose those targets on the Trust and demand they are achieved. They then offer the carrot of foundation status for the Trust, which would allow them considerable opportunities for greater autonomy. Weak management and a culpable absence of leadership then allows the focus on achieving targets to become all pervasive. Four hour waiting times is a typical example. This is a laudable intention in principle but if it becomes the sole area of focus, and serious cases are ignored while less serious ones are prioritised over them just to deliver the target, then common sense goes out of the window. Wherever I go in the NHS the frustration and despair amongst front line staff over target delivery is paramount. At best this is a distraction, at worst it creates the conditions where the scandal in Staffordshire can happen.

This is just the same as the disclosure yesterday that Royal Bank of Scotland traders bought up billions of pounds of sub-prime assets. That was the target they were focussed on, incentivised by huge bonuses. Focus was on that target, regardless of what was good for the patient, in this case the bank.

The only difference is that patient is now very sick, and the implications have caused misery for many people. At Stafford it may well have cost many lives.

The investment this Government has put into the NHS since 1997 is great in principle, but throwing money at any problem can never be the answer on its own. What has been missing in Staffordshire and elsewhere has been investment in people, and particularly investment in leadership, building leaders who are strong enough to translate Government desire into sensible action, to put patients at the centre of all decision making and to motivate and inspire their people to deliver superb care.

I would say this wouldn't I, because leadership development and training is what I do but I believe that weak management and leadership in the NHS is a scandal in its own right, and the Government will never deliver the improvements they want until they recognise and address it. Until then they will continue to throw good money after bad and my local hospital will not be the last one hitting the headlines.

Weak management allows itself to be bullied by government into slave like pursuit of targets, and it in turn then bullies staff along the same lines. Strong leadership understands that targets are a necessary part of measuring improvements but always has an eye on the bigger picture and understands what the most important goals must always be.

The people I feel most sorry for are those front line staff who are left to pick up the pieces. Morale must be on the ground. I just hope lessons are learned, by Government and the NHS and a new era of common sense emerges.

One aside to this terribly sad situation has been the fun of watching my local newspaper, The Staffordshire Newsletter, rise to the challenge of reporting this story. This is a rag whose normal headlines run something like 'single mum appalled as Kentucky Fried Chicken closes early.' Suddenly it found itself at the eye of the storm, a national story breaking on its doorstep and I can only imagine the frenetic activity in the Editor's office as plans to run a lead on the stolen garden gnome from number 56 were quickly shelved.

Jakkie and I are just back from two days in London. This is something we do quite regularly, it's like an escape valve from work, and we tend to spend it with Jakkie's brother discovering new parts of London and visiting many of the capital's hostelrys. This time we did a Charles Dickens walk around the Fleet Street and Temple area, and once more it was amazing to find how much history lurks in the alley ways behind the main roads I have hurried along so often. Also, having experienced Friday evening in the pubs and restaurants around Waterloo I am amazed that we are still officially in recession. Busy or what!

We returned home via Euston yesterday, which gives me a chance to rant about another passion of mine, pigeons, or to be precise the desperate need for their elimination from the face of the earth. The seating area outside Euston should have been a pleasant experience in the warm Spring sunshine, but it's a national disgrace, pigeons swarming onto tables to consume scraps whether or not someone was sitting there. I cannot for the life of me come up with any good these birds do. Yesterday was the first day of spring, officially, but if I ruled the world (as the song goes) I wouldn't mess about with all that stuff, I'd get straight onto pigeon elimination duties. I might make an exception for official fanciers clubs (northern heritage and all that) and I might be persuaded over military carrier duties but for the rest of them, sorry?.

My poor daughter Lindsay. This week was the climax of her University football career. For four years she has represented the Newcastle University Womens' second team, and this year had the honour of being captain. Wednesday was the last game of the season, her last ever game, and still with an outside chance of winning the league. Seven minutes into the match she goes up to clear a corner, falls awkwardly and breaks her collar bone. Even the excitement of a pitch side ambulance with flashing lights could not lift her pain and disappointment. Now she awaits an operation to insert a metal plate on what is thankfully a clean break.

Which brings my thoughts full circle. She has spent the last few days at hospital in both Leeds and Newcastle and has had nothing but kind, caring treatment from wonderful front line staff. Invest wisely, develop strong leaders who always put their staff and the patients first, and what couldn't the NHS achieve?

Saturday 14 March

The 3 Rs, Soup and Educated Butterflies

I was delighted to receive such positive feedback to last week's blog, in particular about the need for leaders to devote time to learning and to thinking, and about Kotter's eight step framework for delivering change (see below).

I am, however, the first to accept that however great the theory is putting it into practice, making change happen, is an entirely different ball game. This was brought home to me vividly this week when I worked with the head of a Directorate in a large UK charity. I have been supporting this woman over the last year as we attempt to develop, find funding for and deliver a major change programme to build leadership capability across a diverse movement.

Her frustration is that she does not seem to be able to make the progress she desires and the movement needs, and a quick review of Kotter's framework makes it clear that the main reason for that is that we are still back at steps 1 and 2, because we have yet to reduce complacency and increase urgency, and pull together sufficient people who have the belief and commitment to guide and drive the needed change.

This in turn is leading her to lose confidence, to question her own belief on the need for change and to even take the setbacks as a criticism of her own ability.

We therefore spent time this week resolving how to take the whole programme forward, but also analysing how this very capable leader can rebuild her self confidence and play her crucial role in creating urgency and building a guiding coalition.

It was a useful opportunity to review with her that leaders can lead, and must lead, at three different levels, which I draw and explain as being three concentric circles. Firstly, in the innermost circle, leaders must first display personal leadership, they must lead themselves. They do this through being personally effective, and role modelling the behaviours they want to see in others. It all starts in the centre, as Gandhi said

'we must be the change we wish to see in the world.'

In this instance we decided that this leader needs to focus on building her resilience, understanding that knock backs will occur, and occasionally driving change that is needed but resisted can be very lonely. This resilience will enable her to pick herself up, dust herself down and re-focus her energies.

In the middle circle leaders then lead those around them, they direct and inspire their team and influence their boss and colleagues. This is about investing time in building highly effective relationships, an essential component of creating and engaging a guiding coalition for the change programme.

Finally, the outer circle is about driving change through the whole organisation. Leaders cannot be effective in this circle unless they are already effective in the first two circles, and success requires energy, drive and determination, overcoming obstacles and remaining fixed on a clear goal. This requires an incredible degree of relentlessness.

I left our session this week convinced that we were heading in the right direction again, and that this leader will be the catalyst that delivers much needed and far reaching change.

Resilience, relationships and relentlessness, three Rs, and a powerful combination for highly effective leadership.

As I visit a variety of organisations across all sectors, another frustration for me is how little time many managers spend listening to their people and in particular seeking great ideas. This especially seems really important to me in the current economic climate. I am not talking about the earth shattering ideas that might change the world, but all those ideas about how to make small improvements around here, how to save some money or how to stop doing those pointless tasks and activities that nobody challenges.

People at all levels in organisations will have these ideas, but unless leaders actively seek them out after a while those people will lose enthusiasm and believe it is not worth suggesting things because they never feel listened to. And I am talking here about leaders creating a culture where good ideas are encouraged and listened to, not simply a process like a suggestions box, which all too often has no credibility because no-one sees the suggestions being out into action.

I fear this is all part of the risk adverse culture which pervades so many people and organisations, one that does little or nothing to encourage creative thought.

That is why I was so pleased at the start of last week to come across a leader who had really listened and had gone out of his way to encourage entrepreneurialism. The guy in question runs the commercial services on a University campus in the north of England, including a number of retail premises. Two students approached him a year and a bit ago and asked if they could set up a table selling home made soup outside his shop. He explained this was not possible due to University regulations, a genuine reason and one difficult if not impossible to overcome. Normally that would have been the end of it, and two more potential entrepreneurs would have had their idea nipped in the bud.

But this leader had an idea. He offered the students a small amount of space in his shop linked to a profit share deal. The students jumped at the chance. They started small, just a container or two of soup a day, but then it started to take off, they increased their range, the retail outlet benefited with more and more customers, and the leader supported them further by creating a small kitchen from an old stick room toilet. In their first year the soup business turned over £60,000! I saw it in action myself this week, very impressive and a great story of backing a hunch and supporting entrepreneurs. We need to find ways of building that spirit of ideas generation and encouraging entrepreneurial thinking everywhere, in every organisation. I'm particularly pleased at my son Christopher's talents in this regard. He is combining his University studies in Newcastle with a variety of activities around event management and promotion. Every time I see him he bombards me with his latest ideas. Many need to be honed down and thought through better, but his enthusiasm is being matched with increasing business acumen. He is also finding bar owners and promoters who are listening to him and giving him a chance to put his ideas into practice. If only he was as enthusiastic about his studies!

Regular readers may remember my exciting elevation late last year to the dizzy heights of the Fradswell Village Hall committee. With this position comes the trusteeship of an 80 year old wooden village hall which is about to fall down. Fradswell is a delightful place, (I have mentioned that before as well) , just 70 houses in a rambling rural community. The village hall has served it well, but desperately needs replacing. Inactivity in that direction prompted me to get involved, that and the need to generate enthusiasm in a programme of activity in the current hall. I am convinced that a rural community like ours needs a heart, we have no pub or shop and without village hall events there would be little opportunity for people to get together.

The new village hall project is underway (we are currently seeking a generous land owner to maybe donate us half an acre of land for a new build, more to follow soon) and a new committee has put in place a reinvigorated programme of events. I guess we are also following Kotter's eight step change model, but I would never dare present it as such, and have so far resisted turning up for a meeting with my flip chart!

This morning we had a coffee morning and book swap/sale, which went well. My only concern was for a poor butterfly which spent the morning in the hall evading attempts to set it free. I'm told butterflies only live for a day, so at least I have the consolation that this one will have had a stimulated and educated short life!

Saturday 7 March

Penguins, Dinosaurs and Dodos

Trying to practice what I preach (heaven forbid!) I have been thinking in recent days on what my most important areas of focus are as I approach the start, in April, of another year running my business.

Delighting my clients inevitably comes top of the list. I know that if I succeed in doing this consistently I will retain loyal clients who will be more likely to keep engaging me, and will recommend me to others. Second is the need to continually market myself and my business, through whatever (inexpensive) means are available to me, which includes stuff like this blog.

The third and final area of focus is my need to keep on learning. If I fail to do this I know I will become stale, and less relevant to my clients. This learning can take a variety of forms, from reading leadership and management books and articles to online exploration and just listening to the unique and experienced people I meet every day.

I think that becoming stale is such a danger for people at all levels in organisations. But I come across too many people who have stopped challenging themselves to improve things within themselves, their teams and their organisations. Whether it's driven by complacency, lack of ambition or arrogance they are just treading water, going through the motions. As one guy in a middle management job in the NHS once told me, 'I've only got ten years to go until retirement so I'm easing off now.' Good grief!

During parts of my corporate career I was as guilty of this as anyone. I certainly never read a management or leadership book and was not encouraged to do so. I always seemed to be so busy. I am not suggesting for one instance that keeping abreast of the latest thinking is the answer to solving organisational challenges, but I do believe that it can stimulate people into recognising those challenges before they become a crisis, thinking through solutions and then making them happen.

The problem with reading so many leadership and management books is that they are just so dry, hard going, and in all honesty just plain boring. That's why I prefer the simpler ones, and often using a fable or story can be the most powerful at conveying what are often simple messages.

That's why I particularly like a book I've just read called 'Our Iceberg is Melting' which is a compelling fable about driving change seen through the eyes of a penguin colony in Antarctica (don't groan, it works!) It's co-authored by John Kotter, who also wrote 'A Sense of Urgency' which I referred to in a recent blog.

The premise of the book, (easily and quickly read at only 140 pages, and that includes the pictures of cute penguins!), is that leaders of any team or organisation need to be constantly aware of the challenges their organisations face, and to plan to drive and deliver successful change to meet those challenges. That includes overcoming those complacent and doubting, who bury their heads in the sand, those Kotter refers to as the 'No-Nos'.

It was Charles Darwin, no less, who wrote in the 'Origin of the Species'

'It is not the strongest of the species that will survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change'

In the fable one of the penguins (not a leader at the top of their organisation) notices that their iceberg is beginning to melt and then faces the challenge of convincing those at the top of the problem, then galvanising them and eventually the whole colony into action, overcoming the many barriers and obstacles to change along the way.

The book summarises the eight steps that lie at the heart of any successful change programme, big or small, as follows:

1. Reduce complacency and increase urgency
2. Pull a team together to guide the needed change
3. Create a vision
4. Communicate the vision (by capturing hearts and minds, not through 144 power point slides!) Build understanding and buy-in.
5. Empower others to act, removing barriers so that those who want to make the vision a reality can do so
6. Create some short term wins
7. Don't let up, be relentless until the vision is a reality
8. Make the changes stick, because tradition dies a hard death.

And yes, the penguins do succeed, they find a new home on an even nicer iceberg, and if Disney ever made it into a film there wouldn't be a dry eye in the house!

I just think that eight point framework for driving any change is just so powerful, and is the basis on which I see many of my clients drive successful and sustainable change in their teams or organisations.

So my challenge to you, whatever your job, is to spend sufficient time focussing on three essential parts of being a great leader

Firstly, make the time to learn. Do it in a variety of ways, read books, read articles, use the internet, study, or just listen to people around you and feed off their experience and wisdom. Don't restrict yourself either to just learning about your organisation and it's business or service. Explore what is happening in the wider world and enrich yourself.

Secondly, find the time to think. In twenty years of corporate life the amount of time I spent thinking, really thinking deeply about organisational issues and about the future, was negligible. And I didn't find much thinking going on around me either. There was always too much doing to do, and in the culture I worked in thinking would have been seen as a luxury. The consequence is that I am convinced we were less successful than we should have been at recognising opportunities, threats and the need to change. Break the mould and find the time to do so, take a morning at home, go for a walk in the country, and just think. Pull together a group of people and get thinking together!

Finally, become a true catalyst for change in your organisation. Grab hold of 'Our Iceberg is Melting' and resolve to become a Fred or Alice (read it and it'll be clear!). Use the steps outlined above as a framework for change.

I can already hear the cries of protest. 'How have I possibly got the time to learn and think?' 'Barry you no longer live in the real world.' 'It's just too busy around here, too much to do.' 'Have you any idea of what it's like round here at the moment?'

I understand all of that and I would have said the same, but if we keep running round being busy and failing to step back and learn, think and change, do not be surprised if, to come back to Darwin, we and our organisations go the way of the dinosaurs and the dodos.

Penguins, dinosaurs and dodos in one blog, wow!

Sunday 1 March

Maybe just a glimmer of hope in this greed driven turmoil, and a challenge for Fred Goodwin

Another week of turmoil for the banks as more salary and pension arrangements are revealed and the cost to Lloyds TSB of its shotgun wedding to HBOS becomes clearer.

Dr Binna Kandola, an eminent psychologist, suggested this week in Management Today that bank bosses may have psychopathic tendencies, demonstrated by their refusal to accept any personal responsibility for the crisis and their 'apologising' sham. There is no suggestion that they are about to slaughter people but rather that it is characterised by an almost total lack of empathy. This psychopathic behaviour perhaps suited these bosses well as they climbed their greasy corporate pole, (why can't I get a picture of a mixture of Fred Goodwin and Alan Partridge pole dancing out of my head), but ultimately it caused them to over-reach and the whole edifice came tumbling down.

Kandola argues that a great example of this was RBS's decision to take on Barclays for ABN, pursuing an expensive acquisition, through greed and vanity, while demanding that their staff count the pennies.

These tendencies really do ring a bell amongst some of the bosses I have worked with in the past, like the guy, as I blogged some weeks ago, who was obsessed with cost cutting to the point where he demanded half the lights in a meeting room be turned off to save money before heading home in his chauffeur driven car.

I believe that empathy is a crucial character trait for any great leader at any level in any organisation. It means no more than the ability to truly understand people, and through that to absolutely get the most from each of them as a unique individual. It's about having a high EQ as well as a high IQ, to care about building a successful team or organisation, but about doing it in the right way, through people.

I just have this feeling that possibly something good could emerge from the current turmoil, that there is light at the end of the tunnel. More and more now excessive greed is being challenged, and maybe, through a combination of legislation and increased corporate responsibility, both driven by public opinion, a new age could develop which I call capitalism with a conscience, where there is nothing wrong with making a profit and rewarding individuals for their contribution and achievements providing that profit and reward is fair and proportionate.

If ever there was a test case of this new way of thinking it will be over Fred Goodwin and his £695,000 annual pension. Public outcry is driving a furore of activity from Government. A very unscientific survey by me last week suggested that opinions are divided. There are those that think Goodwin is entitled to his payments as it was all previously agreed and those who believe he must be forced to give at least some of it up.

I find it difficult to have any sympathy for the man even though he has ended up in the eye of the storm, but here's my challenge to you Fred. You are only 50, and have years of business experience. Why not resolve to spend the next 15 years putting that to good use by giving something back to society. Re-invent yourself but mean it. Decide yourself to voluntarily give away a large proportion of this income (even you can't need £8,000 a week, after tax, to live on), and do something good with your experience and undoubted talents. But do it voluntarily before the courts try and force you to.

I won't hold my breath.

This thought that some good could possibly come out of this mess, a new age of responsibility, has been re-enforced by a great book I am currently reading called 'Philantrocipitalism' (by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green) which, based around the decisions made and work now being undertaken by the likes of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, sets out a picture of how private money can solve even the most difficult public and social problems. It's an engaging and well written book which is really opening my eyes to the art of the possible. Maybe the perfect birthday present this year for Fred.

A good weekend with children visiting and a chance to catch up with my two eldest on their immediate challenges. My elder daughter, Lindsay, graduates from University this year at a really difficult time for graduate employment. She is in that timeless dilemma of whether to put her efforts into applying for graduate programmes with companies or on getting the best degree possible. Her and her boyfriend are also off to Camp America for the summer, thinking about moving to London when they return, or even spending a year in the States. It's just too much to have on her plate at once, and on Saturday

morning over coffee (and without a flip chart!) we talked it all through and tried to focus on what her most important things were at the moment.

The outcome she arrived at, which I was delighted with, was to put job applications on hold for a few months and to focus on her degree. I reflected with her on how, with forty years of working life ahead of her if that's what she chooses (she was horrified!) one year is not going to make a difference. We also talked about how each generation has so many more opportunities than the last. Going to University would have been unheard of for my dad, I was the first in my generation to go and then had to find a job straight away with no time for travel (or at least that's what I thought.) Things are so different for Lindsay, and my other children. They have so many choices, it's just about taking a step back, expanding your horizons to understand them all, and then making the right ones. Sounds simple, I know it's not, but the opportunities are amazing.

So have a good week, but be careful, keep an eye open for psychopathic bankers wielding machetes behind the counter of your local Macdonalds!

Saturday 21 February

Consistency, compassion, trust and excitement...a powerful leadership formula

A recent Gallup survey on leadership makes very interesting reading. The survey was intended to look at leadership from the point of view of their potential followers. They asked 10,000 adults to identify their top leadership attributes.

As reported in Management Today the top answer was stability. Followers like leaders whose behaviours are consistent, predictable and in line with their organisation's expectations.

Next came compassion, whether the leader cared for them as a person, followed by trust, not only whether they could be trusted on a personal level, but also whether followers trusted their instincts and integrity.

The final attribute was hope, the ability to instill optimism and excitement about the future whatever the current circumstances.

The survey also revealed other fascinating insights. If people are confident about their organisation's financial stability, they're nine times more likely to be engaged employees. And if they think their leader cares about them as a person, they're also more productive, more likely to stay and will make higher profits for their company or contribute more to their organisation. Also, if employees are optimistic about the future, seven out of ten will be highly engaged, if they're not just one in 100 will be.

So what does this survey tell us? Loads of it, as ever, is just re-stating the blindingly obvious, but I do believe it is a great re-enforcer of what superb leaders are and what they do, they are consistent, they show compassion, they trust and are trustworthy and they deal with the current reality while instilling optimism and excitement for the future. A simple but powerful formula, and one even more important during these difficult economic times.

We spent the start of the week down in Aberdovey (pub and beach walks) so it was a bit of an effort to get back to work on Wednesday and Thursday with a two day Workshop. Overnight in Coventry on Wednesday I followed my normal pattern of not eating with the delegates, but escaping for a quiet evening. As I often do I found a restaurant to eat in, and encountered the normal experience of eating alone. The staff always assume single eaters are sad and lonely individuals probably speculating about relationship break ups or personal hygiene problems. As usual I was shown to an out of the way table, I assume because they find a person on their own somewhat embarrassing and believe it will put off

other diners. The truth is I love it, it's a great opportunity to people watch without the distraction of having to make conversation.

So with a sense of inevitability the English cricket Allen Stanford relationship has ended in tears. Stanford (who has talked about his 'hatred' of Test cricket) has been charged in the United States with an alleged \$8 million fraud and the ECB are left to lick their wounds. I wish I could find words to describe my contempt for this whole situation. I just hope lessons have been learned and we hear and see no more of this ludicrous circus. Of course cricket needs to move with the times, embrace 20-20 matches and the Indian Premier League, but the Stanford debacle went right to the heart of what's left of cricket's integrity.

Contrast that totally with the book I've just finished reading, Marcus Trescothick's excellent autobiography 'Coming Back to Me.' This book says everything about cricket that Stanford is not. It has received great reviews and won the sports book prize in 2008. In the book Trescothick candidly and honestly talks about the stress related illness and depression that ended his international career. He returned home early from two tours with England and at first tried to cover up the personal nightmares he was facing with stories of a virus. Eventually he faced up to his illness, and the book gives a deep and compassionate account of his battles with his demons. A great insight into a little understood physical illness and well worth reading.

Far more mundanely do you ever get that week where everything seems to go wrong with your car? Having had an electrical fault addressed for the sixth time, (it was a lot easier when mechanics used spanners rather than technicians using lap tops), I was then advised that they had found a further problem, a rodent has been hard at work and gnawed its way through the breather pipe above my fuel tank, leading to a fuel leak. It was a familiar problem (mice had all but destroyed Jakkie's electrics a few years ago) and I assumed that a new breather pipe could be fitted. Alas no, the part does not come separately and a complete new fuel tank is needed at a cost roughly equivalent to the gross domestic product of Rumania. And then, to top it all, I also need four new tyres. Not a great week!

Finally, I have at last got round to arranging some Master Classes. I've put dates on the web site for the first two of the 2009 series, on Monday 11 May and Thursday 25 June. Both will be based on the theme of Building Personal Effectiveness, and will be held at my training facility at home in Staffordshire. It would be great if you wanted to register, or knew someone who would be interested, further details on 2009 Masterclasses page

Have a great, and hopefully rodent free, week.

Saturday 14 February

Twits, Twerps and Tweeting Twitters

Ah, Valentines Day. A day of romance, even if a lot of it is very last minute judging by the long queue outside Thorntons this morning. Regular readers may remember how last year it all went wrong for me when I bought Jakkie a Swiss army penknife as her Valentines present. I still maintain it would have given her hours of entertainment but the frosty silence that followed has lived with me all year. This time I think I have got it just right, an understated card and an invitation to a mystery day out in the spring. I do believe she will find the penknife factory in Sheffield fascinating.

Following on from my theme around building a sense of urgency last week I had a great meeting this week with one of my clients, a Director of a FTSE 250 company. This person's organisation operates within the construction and home improvement sector, which has been as hard hit by the recession as anyone. Inevitably therefore they are having to make cutbacks, including redundancies. This Director

was charged with making significant reductions in the size of her department. While colleagues procrastinated before Christmas she developed a clear plan to deliver the savings she needed to make.

A transparent and fair process was implemented and those at risk identified. Necessary decisions, however tough, were made as soon as possible and implemented quickly but fairly. It was all completed within time scale. The result, after Christmas, is that the department could move forward. The pain had been difficult but to a great extent it was over. People could look forward.

The other thing this Director has done superbly is to recognise that if her department was being significantly downsized it could not carry on doing everything it had done before. Now was the opportunity to review everything it did, to engage with its stakeholders to understand what was truly important to them and then to cut out every single activity that was not truly value adding and important. When times are good every team, department and organisation gets fat, it takes on extra people, it starts doing things that do not really need doing. Using an onion as an analogy it adds skin after skin without ever shedding any. When times are harder there is a real opportunity to cut through all that and to return again to a focus just on truly important activities.

This has permeated through to individuals within the Director's team, who have challenged what they have been doing, and even taken this opportunity to sort out their work-life balance. One person I have been working with has recognised that she has been working excessive hours, long hours in the office then home and logging on again. Sounds familiar? For a while she thought that long hours equalled effectiveness but then the penny dropped. She took control, made choices, and reduced the hours she works. The outcome, in her own words, is that she now has her work life balance under control, she 'works better, is much more effective and more decisive.'

I am convinced that when we move out of recession this Director and her team, will remember these messages and remain lean, focussed on their most important priorities. This kind of approach could well signal something good that could come out of these difficult times.

So onto some other observations of the past week, summarised as twits, twerps and tweeting twitters.

First the twits, those in the Conservatives who, it was reported this week, are calling for the abolition of the minimum wage as a way to cope with the recession. Their view is that this will keep more people in work because employers and employees can then negotiate a pay rate. I have no doubt these are the same voices which opposed the introduction of the minimum wage in the first place. I believe this legislation, which would never had happened had the Tories held on in 1997, was perhaps the most important thing the new government introduced. To turn that clock back would be unthinkable.

Onto twerps, and those heart warming pictures from the Commons select committee this week of bankers apologising (or at least as close to apologising as they are ever likely to come.) The bit I find most aggravating is the debate on bonuses, not necessarily for those at the top, who of course should not receive them, but for other staff throughout the banks. As the debate rages on there has been a suggestion that people rely on their bonuses each year, something articulated by Trade Union leaders during the week.

It is ludicrous that a situation could be allowed to develop where anyone automatically expects a bonus and therefore relies on it. Just look at the dictionary definition of a bonus, 'an unsought or unexpected extra benefit.' That is exactly what a bonus is meant to be. When organisations are failing so spectacularly individual employees simply cannot expect to be rewarded with bonuses regardless of their individual contribution.

And so to my new found delight and obsession, the wonderful world of twitters, tweets and twittering. It has been billed as the new Facebook, but seems to me to have a complementary and different application, where people can keep in touch with each other constantly, whether it's family, friends or work colleagues. It still seems to be in its early days, but it is fascinating to see it growing and multiplying daily before your eyes. The other fascination is the number of well known people you can follow on twitter who seem obsessed with sharing what they are doing night and day. Stephen Fry is perhaps the best example. Go to www.twitter.com, follow the instructions, start tweeting and make sure you find and follow me!

Sunday 8 February

Farewell Bill Frindall, the greatest statistician, bowled for 70.

I know all cricket fans will be mourning with me the passing of the legendary Bill Frindall, who died on 31st January. Bill seemed to have been the scorer on Test Match Special on BBC radio for ever, and indeed had been since 1966. His encyclopaedic knowledge of cricket facts was extraordinary.

One of the main reasons I love cricket as a sport is the depth and breadth of its statistics. When I was young I would be glued for hours on end to the radio whenever a test match was on. While my friends would dream of being Gary Sobers or Clive Lloyd or Basil D'Oliviera I would sit there with my scorebook meticulously recording every dot ball and leg bye. The revelation from Bill that a maiden over from John Snow was his tenth of the innings could send me into raptures of delight. Sad really, although I was also doing some train spotting at the time which was probably even sadder.

The interest was still with me in my late teens and while my mates would be out scoring on a Saturday night my delight was doing the same thing at my local cricket club all Sunday afternoon. Okay, I exaggerate but you get the point.

Bill was an integral part of some amazing commentary teams. My favourites were John Arlott (the greatest of them all), Brian Johnston (of course) and now Jonathon Agnew (who I think could grow to almost Arlott's stature), Christopher Martin-Jenkins and Vic Marks.

Rest in peace Bill, I know you'll soon have scoring charts in place for the annual Heaven v Hell test match.

Well it's good to be back in the wonderful winter UK weather after a week in the Caribbean! Stepping off the aircraft at Birmingham at 6am last Monday morning into swirling snow was something of a shock. Not that I'm looking for sympathy of course. I did try in a couple of e-mails during the week and got fairly vitriolic replies!

This was our first visit to the Caribbean, and we fell in love with it. We had the opportunity to visit six islands on our cruise, and the overall feeling was of a wonderfully laid back way of life, under-developed communities and a strong sense of pride and values, particularly with regard to the education of their children. Perhaps our favourite island was Grenada, where it rained in the rain forest! Two things stood out in Grenada, the island is still recovering from a hurricane that struck the island around five years ago, and it values its democracy above all else, as I guess any nation does who has experienced a dictatorship even for a short while.

Antigua was the most beautiful island we visited, with white sand, turquoise sea and palm trees stereotypical yet breathtaking.

Holiday reading was 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' by Khaled Hosseini. I thought his previous book, 'The Kite Runner' was stunning, but this takes it to a far higher level, and it is up there with some of Sebastian Faulks' works as the best book I have ever read. Give it a go, you will not be disappointed.

Sadly I did also manage to read one leadership book on holiday also, a book called 'A Sense of Urgency' by a guy called John Kotter. I approached the book with my normal cynicism but I was quickly hooked. The book's premise is really simple, leaders in organisations are so often aware that change is necessary, be it a new strategy, a new IT system, an acquisition or a re-organisation, but too often the change comes too slowly, or a great new idea stalls.

What is missing is a true sense of urgency in the organisation, led from the top but demonstrated at every level. The sense of urgency which does not time in pointless meetings, drives action, encourages people to grab opportunities, to make very minute count and to remove non value adding activities.

I do visit many organisations which believe they have this sense of urgency. But time and time again they are confusing this with simply running around indulging in pointless busyness. Those leaders I

come across with a true sense of urgency focus every day, indeed every hour on actions that will make a difference, move forward and execute at pace on the truly important things.

A typical example of a sense of urgency would not be an attitude that I must have a project team meeting today, but that the meeting must accomplish something important today.

The book sets out a series of practical examples for how leaders can first adopt this sense of urgency themselves and then build it through their team and organisation.

I do recommend this book to you. I can recount countless examples of leaders desperately in need of a sense of urgency. Their teams and organisations are drowning in complacency. Things are being allowed to drift, and in today's financial climate that is a recipe for economic suicide. In other organisations people run around like headless chickens always busy, always busy but achieving nothing.

But I also come across great examples of a true sense of urgency, like the Chief Executive of a successful organisation I work with who has recognised that current achievement is no reason for complacency. Even though sales and profit are growing she is already engaged in scenario planning, thinking about the future and demanding action and new thinking today that will sustain success in tomorrow's new world.

Think about your own team or organisation? Do you see a sense of urgency around you? Or is your organisation being strangled by complacency? If there is a sense of urgency is it real urgency, focused on driving forward the most important things, or is it false urgency where people rush around, are always in meetings, work ridiculously long hours but in reality achieve very little?

Spend a bit of time this week thinking about what you can do to create a real sense of urgency where you work.

Saturday 24 January

Welcome back Beast, now go save the Early Starter

So the Beast is back. The venerable Kenneth Clark has returned to the opposition front bench as shadow to Business Secretary Mandy at the ripe old age of sixty eight.. I am delighted because Ken is such a big character, something sadly missing from Parliament at the moment. In a way he is the complete antipathy of the image Cameron has been trying to build in his party. My two personal (or nearly personal) Ken Clark stories confirm his legendary status for me.

Back when he was Chancellor I was invited to Edgbaston for a test match as a guest of the club (we did a load of sponsorship there) and found myself at the start of play on the pavilion balcony two rows behind Ken and John Major, then Prime Minister. It was 11 on a Thursday morning, the Government machine was turning in Westminster, and here were the two most powerful politicians in the land in shirt sleeves with their feet up on the seats in front, sipping pints of Brew XI! It was, for me at least, the refreshing human face of politics.

Incidentally a couple of hours later I was in the gents having a pee and in walks John Major to use the next urinal. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity to make my views known to the man at the top but pathetically I could think of nothing to say and an embarrassing two minutes ensued. It's funny how easily you dry up at those moments, and I couldn't speak either. However, I do consider myself one of a privileged few (including Edwina Currie) to have seen the member for Huntingdon at close quarters.

The other story about Ken concerned colleagues of mine from his Nottingham constituency who went down to visit him in London to lobby him on beer duty or something. They met him in his office at his Ministry. For the entire meeting he sat with his feet on his desk, tie undone, jacket off, sipping a spirit and puffing on a big fat cigar. The Secretary of State for Health setting a fine example to the nation!

But now Ken is in the business role his mind will be focussed on how to stem the tide of business failures and rising unemployment. We have already seen famous names like Woolworths disappear, and I fear possibly the most iconic restaurant chain of all. Little Chef, may not be far behind them. This week for three nights on television I followed the efforts of Heston Blumenthal, he of ice cream eggs and bacon and snail porridge fame, to save the brand with the introduction of a new menu.

Frankly it was one of the most stupid pieces of television I have ever seen, but compulsive viewing nevertheless. It was also a tremendous insight into the culture of Little Chef, from the resigned black humour of the restaurant staff to the entrenched attitudes of the Chief Executive and his board. The boss, Ian, came across as simply ridiculous. He seemed bemused on strategy, was unwilling to share basic financial information (as if a competitor is going to rush out and copy the Little Chef concept!), and was an indecisive rabbit in headlights when challenged by Heston.

There was lots of talk of a new menu, so this week I decided to put it to the test with a visit to a Little Chef for breakfast. This has always been one of my favourite experiences, but was my first visit for a long while.

I was excited in anticipation of the changes, the prospect of a mouth watering new menu, maybe needing to fight my way through hordes of hungry travellers, but it was not to be. The restaurant was just the same as it always was, empty, with three bored staff standing around chatting. The menu was exactly the same as it always was also, and in the hour I spent in there I was the only customer.

And there's my dilemma, I loved it. The Early Starter was excellent. Familiar, like an old friend. Who wants Heston's fancy creations in Little Chef? I don't want it changed. But the problem is it can't survive as it is. Not with no customers, and a bill of over £10 for the Early Starter and a couple of cups of very average coffee. Not when pubs are doing perfectly acceptable food at two meals for a fiver. I don't know what the answer is, but I don't expect the brand to survive this recession. Unless Ken, who look's like he's put away an Olympic Breakfast or two in his time, can step in. Go for it Beast!

Everyone has a story to tell of Little Chef. I was asking delegates on a programme this week for their memories from when they were young. They ranged from the family sitting in the car park of Little Chef eating sandwiches while the child in the back gazed longingly through the window at the wonders within to the guy who grew up in a remote part of Cornwall where the arrival of Little Chef on the nearest main road was the highlight of the year, 'we used to turn up to watch them building it, there was nothing else to do.'

The advertisement of breakfast served all day did remind me of one of my favourite Tommy Cooper jokes. 'I stayed in a hotel last week, and the sign said breakfast served 6am-10am. What a con, I was stuffed by 8.'

Sign of the week, which I passed on Friday morning, 'Road closed for one week from 26 January. Expect long delays'. Hmm, I think I'd be bringing sandwiches and a good book.

Well that's it for a couple of weeks because Jakkie and I are off tomorrow to the Caribbean for some winter sunshine. I'm looking forward to rum punches, white sand, and a visit to a rain forest. And I bet the Early Starter is served with pineapple!

Sunday 19 January

Loads of thoughts- living in the 'now', NLP and leadership.

I've always been a bit sceptical about Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). I think I got off to the wrong start with it. I was organising a launch event for a new way of working for Retail Managers in my pub business days and we wanted to do something that would challenge people to think differently. I was talked into using an NLP Practitioner, but for a variety of reasons the day just didn't work. It was based around convincing people they could, through the power of focus and belief, chop through planks of wood. My problem with this is that it comes across as a bit of a gimmick, and I think

chopping through the wood is the memory of the day people take away, not the deeper learnings about challenging beliefs, making choices and focussing on goals.

Having said that I know enough people in my world of work now who I trust and respect who are really into NLP, and I also know a lot of the training I have received from Stephen Covey's organisation leans very closely towards NLP. Therefore I'm trying to keep an open mind and have just finished reading a book by Lindsey Agness called 'Change Your Life with NLP.'

I enjoyed the book a lot, it's an easy and compelling read, and although I'm still a bit sceptical, the approach to living your life and to goal setting she sets out makes real sense.

One thing that really struck me in the book was the challenge to live your life in the 'now', not in the past or in the future. The example she gives is of someone in a relationship who only sees their partner for short periods of time, maybe on occasional weekends. Too often they would spend the weekend worrying about parting at the end of it rather than living in the now, and enjoying every moment. Then at the end of the weekend, they can tend to feel sad for the rest of the day, rather than enjoying the next moment in the 'now'.

It made perfect sense to me and I realised that I all too often fall into the trap of looking back too much, or worrying about my assignments next week rather than enjoying every moment of the now. This weekend I've therefore made a special effort. Yesterday I had a brilliant day in Newcastle with Lindsay and Christopher - catching up on their various trials, tribulations and fun of University life and I've just come back in on a lovely cold and sunny Sunday morning after Jakkie and I have walked across the fields next to the house with Dilger, our occasional dog visitor. Living in the now really does enable you to look around you and take in the sheer beauty of the English countryside on a bright winter morning. Magnificent!

I'm on a bit of a high at the moment, because we are only a week away from disappearing for winter sunshine abroad, but particularly because I had such a brilliant week at work last week. I was with two leadership groups I have been working with every few months for a couple of years. The make up and learning styles of the groups is very different, in one we just tend to laugh all the time while the other group is much more serious but both groups really engage, want to learn and we have had a superb experience together. It reminded me of how important it is to take the time to explore and understand individual learning styles when working with people.

We brought in a guest speaker last week, who is the Chief Executive of a retail group in the south-west. I've worked with him before, and inviting him along has a number of advantages for me. He's an engaging speaker, his approach to leadership is completely consistent with the messages I try to teach and he has the advantage of actually putting those leadership messages into action now and delivering results.

He took over a £20 million turnover business a couple of years ago. The business was profitable but stagnating. His insights of how he approached the challenge and built the business are fascinating. I have distilled them down into ten leadership lessons:

1. Leaders should constantly focus on two things, today but also tomorrow.
2. Before you accept a new role, always make sure that it offers real opportunities, it is a job in which you can make a contribution. And try to ensure there is affinity between your personal values and those of the organisation.
3. The first 100 days in the job are crucial. Make every hour pay. Look everywhere (including every cupboard!). Speak to everyone. Look, learn and listen, don't jump in. This guy asked five questions of everyone he met and was able to draw up a real picture of how people felt and what needed to be done. (Have a look at the programmes section at www.barrydore.com for more on the importance of the first 100 days).
4. Once you have listened create a vision for the organisation. Where do you want to get to? Make it simple, appropriate and meaningful. Everyone needs to be able to understand it and to engage with it. Then communicate it brilliantly.

5. Decide your priorities within the organisation using a simple model (called STAR). What parts need to be turned around, where do you need to sustain success, what needs simply re-aligning and what new opportunities are there that need starting up.

6. Then turn that vision and those priorities into a simple and powerful strategy. Make sure it is easily understood. This leader had six strategy streams, set out as simple statements. Of course loads of detail lies behind these (his broke down eventually into 56 work streams) but keep the headlines straightforward.

7. Have the courage to take the big decisions, including taking risks when necessary. He learned that Tesco were to open in his backyard, took them on by refurbishing one of his stores, and he is out-performing them 3-1.

8. Put in place extensive programmes and development opportunities for your people. You won't get their potential out of them unless you invest in them. He stresses effective communication time and time again. But where you have a people issue act, quickly and decisively. Do not prevaricate, act straight away. When someone needs to leave the bus make it happen fast.

9. Constantly role model the behaviours you want to see in your people. Remember that while you are watching them they are watching you. Act and behave appropriately constantly.

10. There is no magic formula for great leadership. (How true!) Lead in your own style, use models that work, be sincere, be relentless and turn winning in the right way into a habit.

None of these messages are rocket science, but then neither is effective leadership. So much of it is just common sense.

The other thing is you don't need to be taking a new job to put these lessons into action. You can do it in your current role. You can decide to start a 100 day process and to spend time listening and learning anywhere, in any role, at any time.

Just a couple of other thoughts to finish with. The best fun last week was in the evenings when I went ten pin bowling with each group. I remain convinced that there is no better team building activity.

And I am really excited that this week is inauguration week for President Obama. - a really significant moment in history. I am already so impressed at how the Obama team is leveraging the use of technology. Alongside no doubt millions of others I received my You Tube message from Obama via the Facebook group I signed up to before the election. And it really felt like a personal message, and that I had a part to play in delivering change in America and in the world. Very powerful.

Hmmm, maybe video blogs for me soon?

Sunday 11 January

Challenging times demands new thinking, not egos

There are so many strong connections between leadership of organisations and leadership in sport, the analogies run and run, and the debacle this week at the ECB over the departure of both skipper Kevin Pieterston and coach Peter Moores gives us yet more great examples.

I'm trying to avoid a bout of 'told you so' (don't you just hate that) but I blogged at the time of Pieterston's appointment that there was a really strong chance it would end in tears. Business and sport is littered with examples of how the bigger the ego the less likely a person is to be (in my humble view) an effective leader.

Really great leaders, those that can consistently get the best out of their people, are those who just don't have an ego to get in the way. Their greatest desire is to see their people succeed, to work relentlessly to achieve success for the organisation without taking the credit themselves. Without banging on about

it again it's the Level 5 Leadership brilliantly analysed by Jim Collins and his team in 'Good to Great.' It may have worked out for Pieterse and England, we will never know now, but that guy's ego just made the self-destruct button just much more likely to be pushed.

For what it's worth I think the appointment of Andrew Strauss in his place is a brilliant move. He should have had the job before. I see there someone who will put ego aside and do what is right for the team.

Life continues to be tough in so many aspects of business, especially as we enter the beginning of 2009. Everyone knows it's going to be a horrible year, and the early news on the job front emphasised the problems. The job losses at Nissan amongst others is simply a time of more to come. I do think, however, that we face a grave danger of talking ourselves into a worse position than is necessary. I spent the weekend reflecting on this. We have been down in Aberdovey with friends, and although Friday night was freezing cold in the cottage when we arrived, the fire soon warmed things up, and we had a superb weekend, combining walks on the beach with wine, food, a visit to the pub and loads of chat.

Two discussions I had this week with clients emphasised to me that many opportunities do exist in difficult times, and the right mindset from leaders is essential.

The first was with the Managing Director of a large leased pubs business. This is one sector which is really suffering as lessees face falling beer sales and intense competition as legislative costs rise. These publicans therefore need all the help they can get if they are to survive. However this does not fit the traditional pub company model, where the emphasis for the company has been to ensure rent is collected and bills paid on time, protecting its own profit streams while doing little to help the individual licensees. This particular leader recognises that this is no longer a viable way to do business. He needs to create a new organisation where a genuine partnership develops between the company and the lessees. Such a change is obvious but will not be easy. There is mistrust on both sides, and he is facing traditional entrenched views on all sides, not least within his company's management. Nothing less than transformational culture change is necessary. But that's the thing, what was good enough in 1989 or 1999, or even 2008 cannot survive in 2009 and beyond. Dramatic circumstances require dramatic new thinking, and the courage and conviction of leaders to drive that new thinking and fundamental change. But it can be done.

I also had a fascinating discussion during the week with the Chief Executive of a large organisation in the voluntary sector. She leads her organisation really successfully and is the ideal example of Collins' 'Level 5 Leader.' But her financial situation is far from secure in these difficult times and she knows that relentless effort will be necessary over the next few months to survive, let alone prosper. Central to this will be getting the most out of her team. One fascinating insight from her last week was her frustration over the negative attitudes of one or two members of her staff. In our view never has there been a better time to point out to people that those attitudes are just not acceptable at the moment. All around us people, really good people, are losing their jobs, through no fault of their own. People in relatively secure roles need to understand how lucky they are, and how their full and positive contribution is not only vital to their organisation but the very least that should be expected.

So I do think we have two choices. We can talk ourselves into a downward spiral or we can resolve to work both smarter and harder in difficult times, and to focus on what we can do. I know my 2009 will be harder than the last couple of years. A number of long-term assignments are approaching their natural end and also one or two conversations with companies are clearly going nowhere as belts are tightened. But if I let that get me down it is a self fulfilling prophecy that my business will suffer. The only mindset to have is not one of blind optimism but an understanding that there is still loads of work out there and those with the right offers, great relationships and creative thinking will prosper.

But enough of that, it's Sunday evening and a chance to relax at the end of the week. Unfortunately there is no 'Heartbeat' to watch this evening, surely the best escapist hour of all, taking us back to the simpler times of the 1960's. PC Mason is something of a hero of mine with his willingness to challenge authority and find new ways of doing things. Maybe another analogy for business in 2009 to add to all those sporting ones.

Sunday 4 January

Make 2009 'One Amazing Year'

Happy New Year!

Around the turn of the year I received two pieces of really good news.

Back at the start of November I wrote about my trip to a homeless project in Bristol run by my friend Richard. I was delighted to learn that in the New Years Honours list Richard was awarded an MBE. I'm not normally a big fan of the honours lists but this one could not be more deserved.

But I almost topped that myself when I was granted my own title. I am now the proud owner of land in the Highlands of Scotland, a generous gift for Christmas from my son Alex, and as such am apparently entitled to call myself 'Laird'. Jakkie and I are intending to visit the land soon and to stay there. There is a slight issue in that the plot is only one square foot, and therefore will require a degree of balance and vertical sleeping techniques, but I am very excited nevertheless. I also intend to use the title 'Laird' to curry favour and upgrades at airport and hotel check in desks whenever the opportunity arises!

Now tomorrow, the first Monday in January, is often thought of as the most depressing day of the year. People go back to work after the Christmas and New Year break facing icy and dark mornings and the prospect of little to cheer them for weeks to come. This year is, of course, far worse with the economic gloom affecting so many people.

And so today I have an opportunity for you, a chance to brighten the gloom. I would like to help you make 2009 'One Amazing Year' for you. Imagine if, during the year, you could focus on and achieve one really big goal, something truly important to you. This could be any kind of goal, connected to your working life or your personal life outside work. It could be about a project at work, a customer relationship, a financial target, a promotion or even a new job or career change. Outside work it could be about a relationship, your family, your health, your fitness, a hobby, travel, whatever you choose. All you will need to ensure is that it is something you have a real desire to achieve, a compelling need to deliver, and something which, if you were to really focus on it, would at least be possible to achieve.

The goal does not yet need to be well crafted. You just need to have a general idea of what it is going to be about. If you e-mail it to me (barry@barrydore.com) I will work with you to turn it into a 'smart' goal, one which is specific, measurable, audacious yet realistic, and timely. I will then work with you, by e-mail, and by telephone where necessary, to agree the steps you will need to take to achieve it, and then work with you throughout the year as you deliver it. My role will be to challenge you to stay on track and to keep focus throughout the year until the goal is achieved. And all of that will be absolutely free!

Of course this is not a New Year's Resolution. What nonsense they so often are. Made in the artificial glow of New Year celebrations they are just setting themselves up to be broken within days.

I do have my own goal, which is, finally, to do all I can to move forward with 'The Lobster Pot Café' the novel I completed the first draft of a few years ago which I have let lie in a drawer rather than improve on the draft and push for publication. So my goal for 2009 is:

'By the end of 2009 I will have completed the re-draft of 'The Lobster Pot Café' and it will have been accepted in principle by a publisher. I will be working on the improvements required by the publisher.'

Please have a go at this, I would love to help you. What is the one goal, inside or outside work, that if you achieved it in 2009 would make it 'One Amazing Year'? E-mail me a rough draft or even an outline idea in the next few days and let's get the ball rolling.

Good luck!