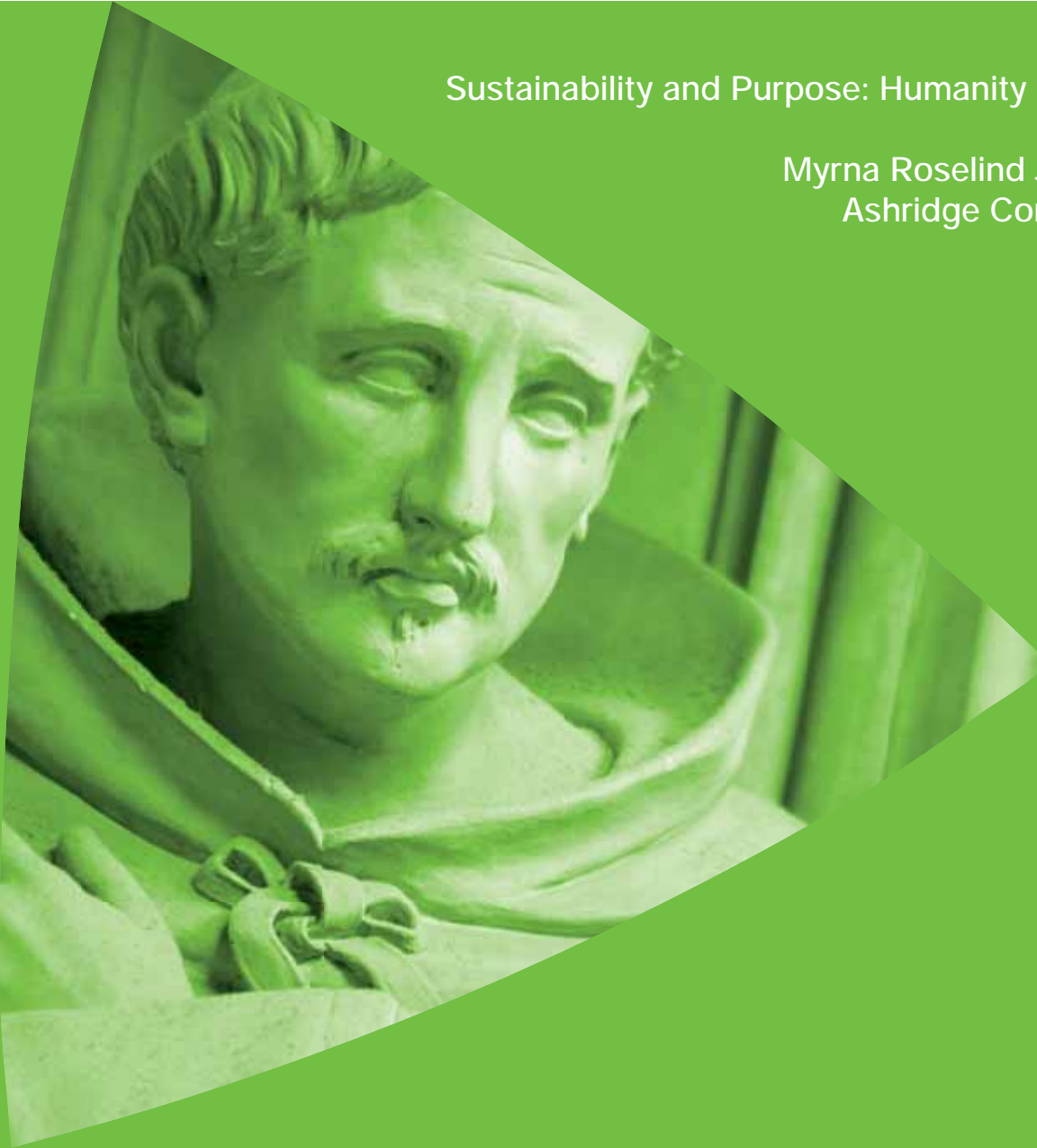


THOUGHTS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability and Purpose: Humanity at Work

Myrna Roselind Jelman,
Ashridge Consulting



ASHRIDGE



SUSTAINABILITY AND PURPOSE: HUMANITY AT WORK

Myrna Roselind Jelman, Ashridge Consulting

“The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life. I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy – I mean that if you are happy you will be good.”

Bertrand Russell

Asking oneself “What can I contribute?” is in my mind an inevitable consequence of an honest engagement with the big issues of the day: widening inequalities, depletion of natural resources, social disintegration, corruption, war, etc. With the overwhelming need for change ‘out there’ we can find it difficult to know what our contribution might be ‘from here’ and can easily fall prey to denial, confusion, paralysis and guilt.

Ponder the following: The French queen Marie Antoinette, while the French people starved, found it hard to entertain herself in Versailles. To ward off boredom, she built herself a replica French hamlet within the grounds of her private castle Le Petit Trianon and played at being a peasant. She lived her life dimly aware of the social problems around her, protected or so she thought by the gate of her palace and the vertiginous difference in status and power between her and her people. How ironic that the outcome of such disconnection between her and her context resulted in an altogether more painful disconnection of head and body. In my view, anyone currently aware of but not involved in transforming business, society, science, culture, politics, etc. is behaving like Marie Antoinette, and I count myself in this group. Can we really continue to respond to the turmoil out there like she did the French famine? But what, you might ask, is the alternative?

In this thought-piece, I intend to share with you the insights I gained from a Co-operative Inquiry on Purpose that I led in 2003 and the model that has helped me to make sense of

the experiences I had then, which I have called the Cycle of Becoming. Living this model ever since has given me resilience when asking the deep questions, patience in co-operating with the process of growth and development in my life. It has made me experience profound purposefulness as well as helping me make unique and hopefully welcomed contributions to the world. These experiences have now confirmed my then belief that the more we are ourselves, the more we contribute to something larger than ourselves. We *can* lead what I call a ‘twice-good life’, one that makes us happy *and* does good at the same time. I will recount how living the model in practice has shaped my life over the last few years, helping me to become a film-maker, an entrepreneur and very recently one of the trustees of a charity on top of my identity as a consultant and coach at Ashridge Consulting.

In the second part of my thought-piece, I will explore how we can support people to experience this commitment to living a twice-good life using personal, leadership and team development. I will then move on to the unique opportunities currently facing us. I personally consider the sustainability crisis and its little sister the economic crisis to be a gift to us, giving us an opportunity to re-evaluate, choose and design how we want to live with each other and in relation to our planet and its inhabitants. This re-evaluation requires us to scrutinise all aspects of our lives including of course work and its natural habitat: organisations. I see a potential for us to invest in ‘Leadership development’ in order to move towards increasingly democratic organisational

forms which can release the potential of human beings to self-organise in support of a meaningful purpose in a sustainable way. I also see an opportunity and a need for organisations to co-operate across sectors in service of urgent human needs. I will balance my natural optimism with a few hypotheses on the habits of mind that form obstacles to this vision but which also point a finger to the choices we now have at this important juncture.

I will share my model and insights in a style that I know can sometimes come across as over-certain in my wish to communicate concepts close to my heart. I hope that you will receive my offerings as insights to compare against your own experiences, as a stimulus for conversation and perhaps as an invitation to ask the question that will nudge you into the wondrous unknown.

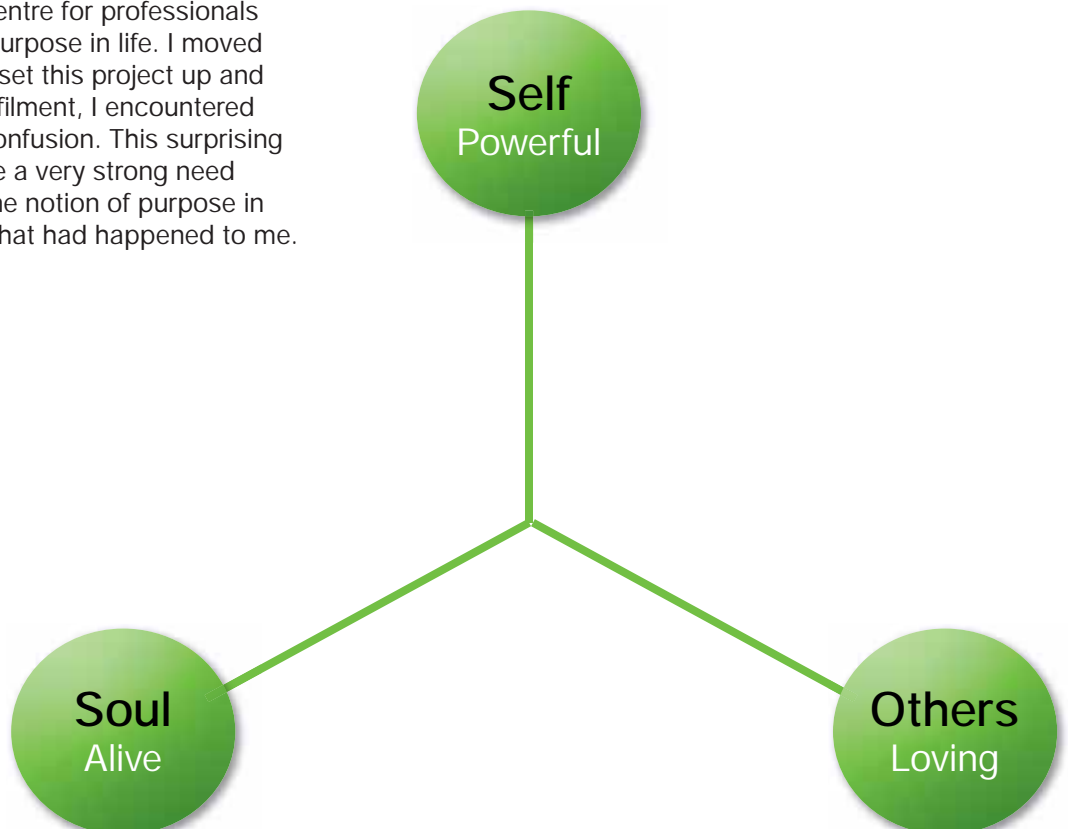
THE BACKGROUND TO THIS STORY

My interest in purpose started when, aged 26, I achieved my goal of becoming an organisation development consultant like my father before me. I quickly entered what is now called a quarter-life crisis where I saw myself as a healthy, capable, willing individual privileged to live in a democracy and yet unable to find a sense of my own unique contribution to the world. After several years of searching, I finally got my revelation, and what a logical one! I would start a retreat centre for professionals to find *their* sense of purpose in life. I moved to Portugal in 2002 to set this project up and instead of flow and fulfilment, I encountered difficulty, failure and confusion. This surprising turn of events gave me a very strong need to know more about the notion of purpose in order to understand what had happened to me.

I invited like-minded individuals (consultants, coaches, personal development enthusiasts) to join me in a Co-operative Inquiry into the journey towards purpose. Co-operative Inquiry is an Action Research method developed by John Heron and Peter Reason providing a broad structure for groups to venture into the unknown around a topic of interest, through an iteration of cycles of action and reflection. The inquiry was held over a year and followed by several months of personal reflection and avid reading to deliver me to a place where I finally discovered a model that quenched my thirst for answers and by which I have lived my life ever since.

INSIGHTS FROM THE CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE JOURNEY TOWARDS PURPOSE

I will share here the main insights from the Co-operative Inquiry first before sharing my own unifying model. The first insight emerged from our attempt to describe the state of purposefulness, as we had experienced it in our lives. We concluded that for all co-researchers, it had been experienced as a state of equal balance between feeling powerful, alive and loving and in such was also a balanced interaction between self, others and soul.



Our second main insight was the realisation that paradoxes are at play in the search for purpose. From analysing our own stories, we discovered that the more we seek purpose the more we might feel purposeless and the reverse is also true: the more we accept purposelessness, the more we might find purposefulness. As one co-researcher said: *“On the journey, the first thing to remember is that you are looking for purpose. The second thing to remember is you may not find it if you look too hard”*.

Our third main insight was that all our experiences of purpose were times when we were most ourselves, thus ‘letting ourselves be ourselves and letting others be themselves’ became a shared rule in our group from then on. I have since found the following quote which has become a favourite and a good reminder to commit to being nothing more or less than being ourselves: *“In the coming world they will not ask me: Why were you not Moses? They will ask me: Why were you not Zusya?”* Rabbi Zusya of Hannipol.

Our next insight was once again a paradox. Spending some time in relatively passive enjoyment of a community of people all allowing themselves to be themselves seemed to be part and parcel of the process of being purposeful. I was astounded to discover later in my research process that Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs is misrepresented as it is known to us now. In the model, the hierarchy of needs is represented – but Maslow specified that two forces or human characteristics are crucial in helping individuals to move up the hierarchy of needs, yet these do not appear in the versions of the model handed down to us. These forces are the human need for inquiry (curiosity, having an inquisitive mind, the quest for answers) and the human need for contemplation (appreciation of life, of beauty, enjoyment, contemplation, rest).

Our final insight was the realisation that facing our deepest fears, despair, letting go and confusion also seemed part of the journey. We concluded our inquiry in the autumn, after holding a meeting at every season that year and we suspected that the experience of the seasons could also somehow relate to the journey towards purpose. As you will see below, all these insights are represented in some way in the unifying model I created for myself.

At the end of the Co-operative Inquiry, although I experienced completion on some level, I felt that my journey was not complete and that I needed more understanding and clarity. I allowed myself the luxury of reading widely and reflecting on my experiences. After several months, I got a flash of insight and elaborated the Cycle of Becoming model that seemed to capture everything I had lived in a simple form.

THE CYCLE OF BECOMING

I will present the model by alternating between the description of the stages of the model itself and how these stages manifested in my own life.

It seems that people start engaging in a search for purpose out of some form of crisis of meaning, dullness or emptiness, a waning of the sparkle and enjoyment in one’s work or life. “I don’t know what I want any more” is a typical utterance at this stage. For some, this existential crisis might be caused by having reached mid-life, for others it can be the result of having achieved a cherished life goal to their satisfaction. In other cases, a search for greater meaning emerges after a trauma or crisis in what is known in psychology as post-traumatic growth. In all cases it consists, in my view, of feeling a sincere wish for something better and an inability to grasp quite what that something is or how to make it happen.

The Buddhists talk of Dukkha or disquietude (also defined in Wikipedia as suffering, pain, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, anguish, stress, misery, and frustration) which they believe to be an integral part of life. They warn against falling prey to Dukkha Dukkha, a state of disquietude at our own disquietude. Indeed, without reassurance that this frustrating disquietude is the start of a wider process, people can add to their emptiness a layer of unnecessary anxiety about the state of their life.

In my model, I called this stage of the cycle 'Ask', a stage of inquiry which I compared to the experience of Autumn, a time when we have to accept that darker days are approaching, we need to prune branches and accept that the leaves will fall. In my experience of this stage, it helps to accept the discomfort and uncertainty, the fact that we are 'unknowing' that we cannot find the answers yet. This is the stage that I think we sometimes resist most ferociously because to truly connect with the questions that matters is a transformation in itself and once hooked into a quest, we cannot turn back.

In my own story, the completion of the Co-operative Inquiry marked the start of a brand new Cycle of Becoming. My personal insight at the end of the inquiry was a quiet intuitive sense that 'working in the media' would be the next big development in my life. Once my dissertation was completed in 2004, I started seeking to create this future for myself but everything I attempted seemed to fail (except client work, thankfully). I was in 'Ask' where I wanted to know how my life would be and was rather impatient about it. I tried getting a job at the BBC, I started writing a film script, all without success. I eventually accepted that I couldn't control my future in this way, accepted to continue being a consultant. I found my current job at Ashridge Consulting which happened to be the gift at the end of a long earlier quest for finding a human organisation. I soon became very busy with client work. Without thinking, it seems, I started reading film-making books during my free time until I eventually booked myself on a film-making workshop in the summer of 2006.

Returning to the model, after surrendering to the questions that present themselves to us, we eventually connect with a revelation of our next purpose which for me has often manifested as a joyous realisation that can seem both obvious and new, a marvellous fit between who I am now and who I had always dreamt of being in future. I called this stage 'Know' or Revelation, and I liken it to Winter when everything is clear and sharp. We can now perceive our destination on the horizon, we can see the mountain summit we are about to climb without the confusion of the undergrowth and forests. Just like in winter, the outside conditions are not always favourable for the progress of our endeavour and many obstacles might slow us down.

When I have lived this stage of the cycle it was as if as my goal increased in ambition, so did my fears and the obstacles that came my way, perhaps as a test of my courage and my trust in the source of the vision of my path. Through this experience, I believe that our 'little self' is grown in preparation for action and once again, commitment, patience, surrender and acceptance help smooth the journey.

To continue my story, I booked myself on a film-making workshop with an undeniable fear. What I hoped might become a new passion might actually reveal itself to be a disappointment and the workshop would be the end of the illusion. After an intense week making a short fiction film in beautiful Florence and while the technicians were creating my first DVD, I took a moment for myself and while I gazed upon the golden light hitting the rooftops of Florence, I wept. I knew that my life was going to change irrevocably because I had unveiled a new side of my identity that had been waiting for so long to be given life. The magnitude of this certainty overwhelmed me with joy, gratitude and fear... I returned to work after this life-changing holiday to find that my work would leave me absolutely no time to do anything about my new love affair with film-making for a long, long while. I had to wait nine very frustrating months before I could connect with my passion again. Doing nothing about starting my film-making life and having to accept this state of affairs required more courage than any challenge asked of me later on in my story.

Back to the model, after getting a revelation of our next purpose and after we surmount various obstacles and fears eventually, and just like spring, we start seeing unmistakable signs of new developments. Like new green shoots, they emerge fast and furious from the ground and we are exhilarated at the progress we are now making. Suddenly outside conditions seem supportive of our work and life brings us unexpected sources of support.

In this phase, which I called 'Do' or Manifestation, I have often experienced working hard to keep up with the activity laid out in front of me. I found that once this phase had started in earnest, I often made much faster progress than I could ever have hoped for. What emerged was often a finer reality than I could have imagined in my wildest dreams. In the metaphor of the seasons, new forms take shape and the bulbs we planted in autumn start showing their true form. Things change and progress very fast and in a most beautiful and organic way. During that stage, I have often been immersed in tasks with not much time for reflection, simply following what needed to be done next without thinking ahead, like a dance partner to life. This stage is, I think, most people's idea of excitement and happiness, a thrilling time where everything is possible, where we are at our best and therefore probably a state most of us would like to hang on to as long as possible.

In my story, after awaiting nine months at first very impatiently, I once again reached a time when seemingly naturally I could finally reconnect with film-making. A few weeks before I was due to take a week's holiday after a very busy time, I realised that instead of spending my money on a week's relaxation abroad, I could try to make my first documentary film instead. It seemed so obvious and simple... I had three weeks to find an idea, organise contributors, plan a shooting schedule and get equipment and crew. The idea presented itself to my mind quite spontaneously. Several months beforehand, I had spoken with a friend who accompanies people in their dying process and a sentence she had said then still rang in my head: "There are so many things people need to know about death and no one talks about it". I had done pro bono work in a retirement home in the past as well as supporting a friend when she lost her mother in the 2004 tsunami and so I decided that I would make a film on 'Dying Well'. I completed the planning by lining up a selection of contributors. The week's filming was as exhausting as it was exhilarating. It then took me a year to edit the 20 hours of footage shot that week. I had to learn many new skills and balance the engrossing film editing with my busy life at Ashridge but it all seemed to flow because my project was meaningful to me. I never seemed to run out of energy to work on my film. David Whyte, the inspirational organisational poet and philosopher, suggests that the antidote to stress is indeed not rest but wholeheartedness and I certainly experienced this during this period of my life.

If we go back to the model, soon enough our pace slows down or we come to a natural completion of our work and we need to accept the end of action. Summer has arrived, a time when we realise the true nature of the work we have accomplished which is now starting to bear fruit. I called this stage 'Be' or Appreciation. In my experience of this stage, I have felt calmer, less busy. I naturally looked back to the path I had travelled. I became aware of my new expanded self, of having grown into a new, better version of myself, making me happy and grateful about the whole journey. I have often felt quite amazed at what had actually become possible and how my normal wilful little self could never have achieved such an outcome on its own. During this quiet, more reflective stage, I also recognise that the cycle eventually starts again with a new quest, a nagging question or a new feeling of emptiness.

In my personal story, I finished editing 'Happy Endings' in June 2008 and at the premiere I organised to mark the birth of my first documentary film, I knew that I had now undoubtedly become a filmmaker. I had a whole new identity. Another full cycle has occurred since and I have created a film production company and accompanying website to market the film which has already been used in cancer patient support groups, shown to hospice care professionals and might be used in training doctors. I have also become the trustee of a charity set up by one of the main contributors in the film, aiming to train and provide a network of professionals to support the dying in a more holistic way. I see these outcomes as the rich fruits of trusting my own journey and they are incomparably more impressive in my view than anything I have ever dared to hope for myself at the start of that particular cycle, when all I knew was that 'working for the media' would be a part of my future.

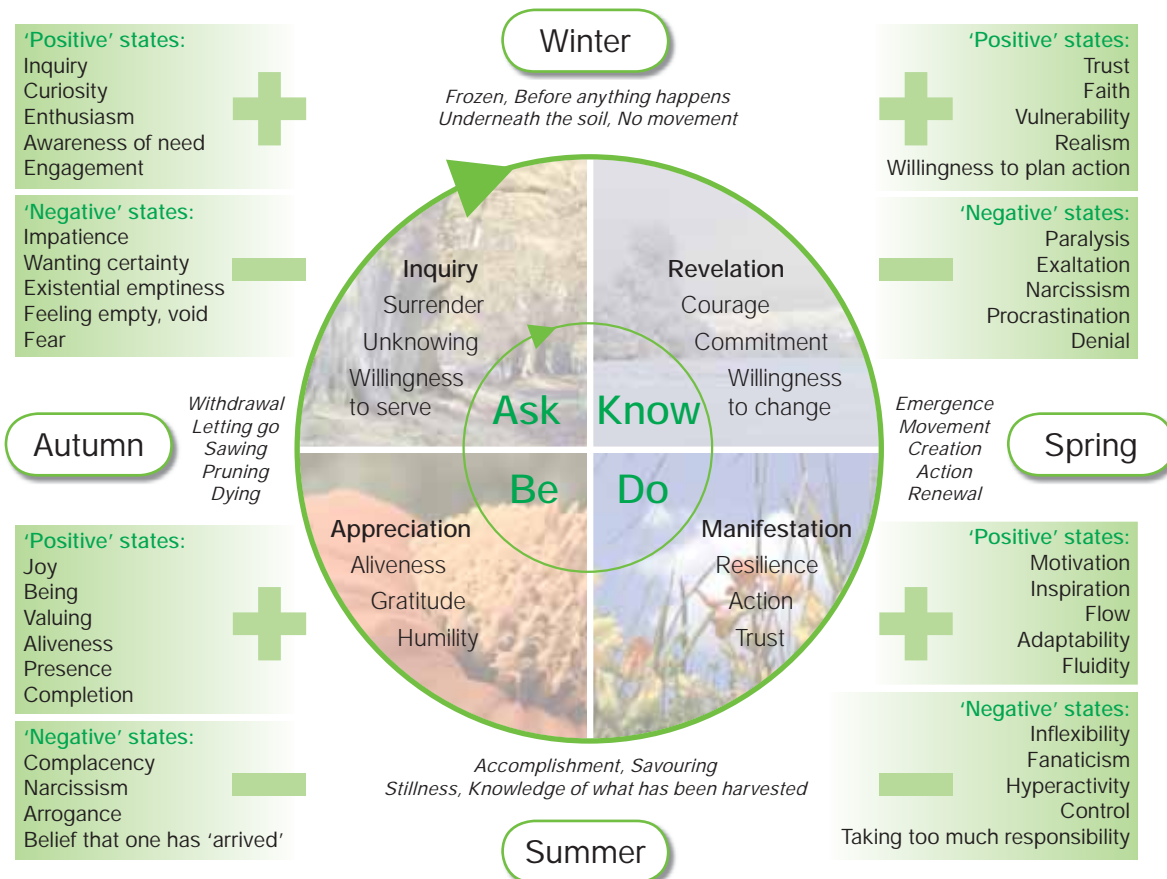
Of course I contributed to creating this life for myself, but I also consciously co-operated with a force larger than my ego. This force can be called the collective unconscious (Jung), the implicate order (David Bohm) or the unfolding process (Claus Otto Scharmer). Regardless, I am astounded at the fact that so far in my life, by choosing to co-operate with a very intuitive process manifesting as a whispering inner voice, I have obtained everything I have truly wanted from my working life. It always brings to my mind the saying: "Seek and ye shall find".

The diagram, right, summarises the model.

My reading of humanistic and transpersonal psychology texts tells me that my offering is nothing new, just a new metaphor for a well-known human process of human development (e.g. Maslow's self-actualisation, Rowan's phenomenology of the Centaur, Gestalt's cycle of functioning, Jaworski's account of synchronicity, Claus Otto Scharmer's U model, Campbell's Hero's Journey). I hope that you recognise some of your own experiences in the pattern of the cycle.



The comprehensive diagram, below, summarises the whole model and the various states and attitudes I believe to be useful in order to move as smoothly as possible through the cycle. I have labelled them positive and negative states, but I assume that the cycle is a learning journey in which we often need to live some of the negative states before being able to surrender once more and start embodying the positive ones...



THE SUSTAINABILITY CRISIS AND THE CYCLE OF BECOMING: A PERFECT FIT

So why might it be useful for us to consider this model? I sincerely believe that we now have no other way of knowing how to be and how to act in response to the world events around us than to commit to this cycle or journey. The facts are too complex to analyse, our worlds too interconnected to know what will have a positive or negative effect on connected stakeholders. Instead of scrambling our brain with analyses of what ought to happen 'out there', we can engage with what is happening 'in here' and nurture the connection with that small voice of certainty guiding us through the cycle.

"Sometimes the greatest acts of commitment involve doing nothing but sitting and waiting until I know just what to do next... It is in this state of being that we alter our relationship to the future and become part of the unfolding universe" (Jaworski, 1996).

The journey paradoxically requires of us to both trust our deepest dreams, to follow our enthusiasm, to accept ourselves as we are *and* to sacrifice and surrender our own will to the larger process at play, including having patience when obstacles block our path, being faced with our deepest fears and facing the emptiness of the unknown. We are required to start travelling without fully knowing the destination, to make a leap of faith in following what makes us happy or what we know to be our truth, to develop an attitude of patience and surrender once the obstacles come. The result is reaching a place in our life where we are both more ourselves *and* we have contributed something good and unique to our community.

As we continuously live and complete new cycles, we are able to sustain deeper periods of doubt, engage in increasingly courageous acts and find we are serving more and more meaningful purposes. And so this commitment to living an authentic life, to becoming ourselves, to self-actualisation is not after all a selfish one. By committing to becoming increasingly ourselves, we end up living a twice-good life: one that makes us happy *and* that does good to the world around us.

If the Cycle of Becoming and other similar

models of self-actualisation are how human beings discover their unique contribution to something larger than themselves, then surely we should be hoping for more people to engage in those journeys. The sum of all the human endeavours that will result from these journeys will surely help shepherd the transformation we need to create a sustainable world. In which case, we need to place our efforts in creating environments to support these journeys.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR PERSONAL JOURNEY: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

I notice more clients than ever starting to address the sort of questions that characterise the 'Ask' stage of my model: unexplainable deflation, a loss of meaning but also a commitment to contributing something good to the world. Some are already striving for more meaning and have started changing their life by negotiating for part-time work or refusing promotions in order to have time to find something more meaningful to contribute to the world. These are very successful Babyboomers who until recently would amaze and worry me in equal measure by their capacity for hard work and devotion to their organisation. I also know from research and personal experience that some (not all) Generation Y need their work to be meaningful and that they are ready to sacrifice some of their income and future career prospect to serve meaningful causes. These individuals have all entered 'Ask'.

The first time people enter such a journey, they sometimes need to leave their current life to learn the lessons of living in the unknown, just like I did by moving to Portugal to start a retreat centre. Typically and hopefully they will, like me, eventually reintegrate their community or profession. People engaged in such a personal journey can find support in reading books, getting a coach, entering therapy, starting a spiritual practice, joining a group of like-minded people, travelling, going on retreats or personal development workshops, etc... There are many sources of support at this level and seeking the right option is probably part and parcel of the journey for each individual although there is arguably a case for offering a specialised coaching service for supporting such a transformation.

It is important to recognise that we may well recognise the cycle but we can never control or predict it, so finding a place that

supports all the states of the cycle over time will be most important. In my own life and for the past seven years, I have belonged to a self-facilitated action learning set formed of like-minded professionals in the field of learning and development. We have seen each other through the ups and downs of many cycles and helped each other become who we are. I would wish for anyone to find a place where they can receive the quality of support, challenge and acceptance I have received over the years in that group and will gladly welcome inquiries from individuals wishing to belong to such a group.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Individuals who wish to serve a higher purpose sometimes find that they need to leave their organisation (however good it is) in order to fulfil the call of their emerging purpose. This is what I imagine happened to Shai Agassi from SAP. During my consulting work there, he was widely regarded by people I came across as a visionary leader, a youthful, dynamic presence on the board. He was a figure I have never met but about whom I kept hearing good things. I have recently discovered that he has started his own company to deliver a fleet of electric cars and infrastructure network to Israel, with the purpose of freeing his country from its dependency on oil for domestic transport.

When it comes to supporting individuals to move towards purposeful work and purposeful business from within their organisation, leadership development is of course crucial in accompanying individuals on their personal journey of discovery. It provides a reflective space, a mirror, a special time when new insights can emerge, new relationships can flourish and courage for action builds up. This is typically currently achieved through creating learning communities, providing coaching support and opportunities for taking initiative through action learning.

There are also more unusual ways to develop leadership as we have discovered when Judith Gunneweg and colleagues from Ernst & Young invited Martyn Brown, Hugh Pidgeon, Rory Hendrickz and myself to come up with a programme that would be out of the ordinary for their experienced partners, one that would beg the question: Who am I and what is my contribution to the firm and the world? The

result is the *New Frontiers* programme which we have been running for nearly five years and uses contributions from the arts, psychology, mythology and the wonderful Ashridge grounds to encourage personal transformation towards stewardship, resilience and building a legacy.

SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP TEAMS TO DEFINE THEIR ORGANISATIONAL PURPOSE: TOP TEAM AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The people who are touched by a revelation of purpose thankfully do not always leave their organisation, they sometimes transform them. This is of course what Ray Anderson did with InterfaceFLOR. After his 'spear in the chest' moment in which he realised that his actions as CEO of an oil-based carpet manufacturer was contributing to depriving his grandchildren of their right to a secure future, he decided to turn his organisation into the first restorative organisation. His intention and subsequent leadership has made InterfaceFLOR revolutionise the carpet-tile industry and become globally regarded as the most advanced private sector company in the field of sustainability.

Our global context desperately needs small groups of committed individuals within government, public and private sector organisations to engage in the same process of questioning that Ray Anderson has experienced. The people who have the power to change their organisation need to find the space to ask themselves the sorts of questions that will launch their journey, hoping that it safely delivers them to the shores of a new mindset where their organisations can contribute to our world's most pressing needs *and* still deliver on their commitments to shareholders, governments and donors.

A meaningful purpose can be a powerful driver for performance but also for change in organisations. It catalyses commitment, loyalty and motivation both inside and outside our organisations. This is the power of purpose. It makes work and business become an aspiration to meet humanity's needs. In my view this power does not manifest itself for a purpose other than one that strives of a better world. It is the result of asking ourselves "How can we contribute?" not "What can we gain?" or "What's the business case?" We can after all decide that a business case is simply the proof of our ingenuity to find profitable solutions to pressing human needs. The growing social

enterprise movement is already thriving on this basic principle. How much longer until the concept of 'doing well by doing good' reaches the mainstream of corporate life? Top team and strategy development are all standard offerings of Organisational Development consultants and can support committed leaders willing to enter the unknown.

SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONS TO BECOME ENVIRONMENTS WHERE LEADERSHIP FLOURISHES: LEADERHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Most will agree that leadership development has been the organisational learning solution of choice for the past few years. I believe that investing in the leadership development process alone is too slow for our current global context and that we now need to invest in 'leaderhood development'. On my darkest days, I believe that my leadership development work helps to make the inhuman prison of what we currently call a job a little bit more padded for their poor inhabitants. During those days, I feel I am returning renewed, inspired, responsible, trustworthy individuals to toxic environments where they are not trusted, responsible *or* inspired. Why develop leadership for environments that actively protect themselves against it? It can be like nurturing plants back to life only to return them to their careless owners who will not provide the water, nutrients and light needed to let the plant do what it would naturally do: grow.

I believe it is time we addressed the fundamental principles by which we organise people and work to achieve results. We *can* choose to transform our organisations into 'Leaderhoods', i.e. environments in which leadership flourishes. Such organisations support the process of human development so that people at all hierarchical levels would feel they can be themselves, engage in the Cycle of Becoming and as a result create new services, new ways of working or new relationships that contribute to the organisation's continuous adaptation to changing circumstances, customer needs and stakeholder expectations.

It gives me hope that some organisations have already turned our familiar practices upside down and now afford extreme levels of freedom and accountability to their employees. The most famous example is probably SEMCO, the Brazilian heavy engineering company and the subject of Ricardo Semler's book *Maverick* in which he tells the story of how

he transformed a traditional organisation into the first democratic organisation. In his 1993 account, he describes an organisation that employs several thousand people in clusters never bigger than several hundred so that everyone can know each other well enough. Employees can be at one of three hierarchical levels. There are no job descriptions because employees make sense together of what is needed in their ever-changing - indeed sometimes downright turbulent - environment and do the work that needs doing. Employees select their bosses and everyone sets their own salaries, openly displayed for all to see. This results in a sense of motivation and meaning at the personal level, deep accountability at all hierarchical levels and agility at the organisational level. Semler explains:

"at Semco, 20 years of success has taught us that ignoring growth, avoiding long-range business plans (we don't have one), and downplaying profits (I'm not sure of the actual figure) are why we thrive. We focus instead on whether the people who work for us are able to balance their aspirations with Semco's purpose. Once balance is achieved and self-interest kicks in, new business, growth and profit inevitably follow".

Of course, we don't all need to be as radical as Ricardo Semler. We can choose to only dip a toe in the water of leaderhood. Nokia has been experimenting with developing a culture that values collective intelligent action in its customer care department, affording a larger than usual level of autonomy and trust to employees in order to enable creative, emergent action in service of the customer experience. This strategy has yielded impressive cost savings and huge internal recognition for the department in question.

Others have introduced the principles of employee democracy in their Corporate Social Responsibility work. Since 2005, the Mahindra and Mahindra brothers, owners of the Indian multinational of the same name, have committed 1% of annual profits after tax to social projects. These projects are set up and managed by employees themselves based on their knowledge of the needs of their local communities. This CSR commitment not only does good in itself but also serves to develop a culture of accountability and trust.

UNDER THE HOOD OF LEADERHOOD

The idea of working in Leaderhoods might seem unrealistic to some who have never experienced it and it is indeed a very different way to work as I have discovered by working for Ashridge Consulting for the past five years. It is perhaps helpful for me to describe my belief about the guiding principles or pillars of Leaderhood and the behaviours they engender.

Guiding principle	Engendering the following behaviour
Democracy: Members of the organisation shape its form, function, internal processes and can participate in decisions about its future.	Ownership and engagement in the organisation and commitment to its continuing improvement.
Transparency: Information is shared (including salary levels, grades, promotions, financial results).	Honesty including openness on performance problems, risks and mistakes.
Autonomy: People are trusted and allowed to choose how they work, when they work, where they work, who they work with and what they work on.	Personal leadership and self-management. Ownership of one's motivation levels at work.
Accountability: People work to clearly understood, meaningful and realistic targets.	Focus on results and on performance.
Simplicity: Minimal levels of hierarchy and organisational structure mean that energy is focused on the work itself and the organisation can change quickly.	Organisational adaptability and agility.
Alignment: Members of the organisation share common purpose and values. The organisation's form (strategy, processes, culture) and its purpose are congruent.	Love of the work and commitment to the community in which it is delivered.
Humanity: People are recognised to be human being with desires, emotions and changing needs. Individuals are supported in managing both their day to day well-being and their continuing development. They are encouraged to participate to and contribute to a healthy community life within the organisation.	People develop their human potential and creativity and build relationships within the organisation that can sustain increasing level of strain without losing harmony and enjoyment.
Commitment: Employment terms and conditions are fair and can sustain long-term employment (e.g. flexible attitude to part-time work, good maternity and paternity leave, sabbaticals, etc.).	A balance of financial safety and flexibility enabling individuals to change contracts and level of commitment as life changes.

The leaders of organisations taken by the idea can be supported in their endeavour by OD consultants, HR specialists and Internal Communications experts who can accompany the organisation's leaders and its people through the probably painful transformation process.

In her book *The Democratic Enterprise*, Lynda Gratton has created a useful map for the early stages of the journey. Hers is a very pragmatic method for commencing the journey to democratisation and one that should appeal to many corporate environments. For her the building blocks are:

- individual autonomy (letting people choose how they build and nurture their intellectual, emotional and social capital)
- organisational variety (promoting diversity, learning, work variety and variety in employment contracts and rewards) and
- shared purpose (clear organisational goals, obligations and responsibilities).

Beyond first steps, it is likely that many organisational processes and assumptions will need to be reviewed in organisations committed to the process of becoming Leaderhoods. In highly democratic structures, hierarchies can probably be further flattened with a great reduction in the number of management roles but an equivalent increase in project work and coaching and facilitation roles. Pay differentials between very senior and very junior people will likely need to be reduced too in what might be the most painful element of the transformation. The reason for working hard might not then be career progression anymore but fulfilling a meaningful purpose and developing new skills in one's portfolio career and thereby becoming a unique resource to others in the organisation.

The outcome would be an organisation where people find meaning in its statement of purpose and have enough autonomy to decide how to fulfil that purpose in a way that suits their personal style and motivation. In such organisations, if they are trusted and given enough accountability, people would voluntarily spot anything that does not serve the organisational purpose and adapt it accordingly, whether they are the actual products and services the organisation provides, its internal processes or even its culture and norms. And so, after a certain point, the organisation becomes self-transforming and sustainable. Its people are engaged in a virtuous cycle where their attachment to a community that lets them thrive as human

beings motivates them to continually find and deliver products and services that will sustain that community – while at the same time, the freedom to engage in meaningful work grows their experience of community by helping them to work on something larger than themselves.

SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONS TO WORK TOGETHER TO SERVE A MEANINGFUL PURPOSE: PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Increasingly, organisations and their leaders are called upon to be connected to a wider range of stakeholder groups than ever in order to simply fulfil their current organisational objectives (as highlighted in the *Global Leader of Tomorrow* project). Some organisations have gone one step further and have decided to become the conveners of cross-organisational co-operation in service of meaningful goals.

One such example is WWF, who explain on their website:

“WWF have come together with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, Reos Partners and the Said Business School to launch a programme called the Finance Lab... a collaborative initiative that aims to re-think the financial system and take practical action to stimulate transformational change, so that finance serves the interests of society and the environment. WWF believe change will come through people from finance and business, government, academia and civil society working together in creative new ways”.

Similarly, the British Council is currently designing a programme for senior leaders of public, private and charitable organisations in Africa to support each other in shaping and implementing breakthrough initiatives as home-bred solutions to pressing problems.

Leaders who wish to engage in or lead such initiatives can get support in consulting, event design and facilitation for convening such forums, whether these are face to face or virtual.

CONCLUSION

Let us recap. The sustainability crisis is posing an inescapable question that everyone of us is probably called to address as some stage: "what can I do?" This question, if we let it, quickly leads us into the territory of the search for purpose which demands of us to travel well through the stages of a cyclical process where we constantly seek, find and manifest meaningful purposes as they arise ('Ask, Know, Do, Be'). In so doing, individuals who engage in this journey find that they experience a new level of both suffering and happiness, and that they can contribute very unique gifts to society in a way that perfectly matches real and pressing human needs. The current sustainability and economic crises seem to be creating a motivation for more and more people to want to live a life of service. We can support these individuals at many levels: in their personal development, in their leadership development, in their team and strategy development, in transforming their organisations and in helping networks of organisations work together better to serve a meaningful human purpose. So what's still stopping us?

One change theory suggest that we can only change if we understand 'what is', i.e. the reasons why current reality exists. I will try here to identify the habits of mind which I hypothesise to be in the way of committing our working lives to serve human needs.

I believe that we still follow the irrational seduction of feeding our desires instead of paying attention to meeting our actual needs. We refuse to surrender to the questions that matter and instead continue functioning according to a conventional and parallel cycle of 'Want', 'Plan', 'Achieve', 'Enjoy', a cycle that is reinforced by every bit of advertising we are subject to. It is the great illusion of consumerism that getting what we want will make us happy. We should according to this logic be happier we have ever been, which sadly is not the case. Perhaps we need to remember to distinguish what is a desire from what is a genuine need.

A related set of obstacles lies in the fact that the journey I have described above requires a certain level of emotional development. As Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs indicates, the Cycle of Becoming is a journey for individuals who have satisfactorily met their belonging and self-esteem needs. Our consumerist, youth and beauty obsessed

culture is currently nurturing a chronic dissatisfaction with self which might be putting a brake on the human development process towards self-actualisation and meaning seeking. In organisational life, the stellar hierarchies of most global organisations make their employees believe that there is and should always be a higher place to reach out for, thereby unconsciously encouraging people to continuously need to prove themselves. How do we recognise when we are successful or rich enough and that it is now time to 'serve'?

By far the largest obstacle to my mind is our lack of habit at exercising our freedom. By that I mean that we have lost the habit of making choices for our life and therefore do not feel at ease with taking the responsibility that comes with freedom. Most people's biggest choices are their profession, life partner(s) and lifestyle. The most demanding choices in our lives take place when we need to change any of those things and only then might we be faced with the eternal challenge of choosing to listen either to the voice of habit, internalised family patterns and common opinion on the one hand, or to the internal voice that subtly communicates our own unique truth if we only dare to trust it. Certainly, our current organisational structures are built to minimise choice and freedom through job descriptions, key performance indicators, quality standards, brand attributes, service level agreements, competencies, annual strategic planning and personal targets, reducing human beings to mere human resources. This has, over the years, made countless individuals feel powerless at work. How can we take full responsibility for our lives and in so doing become choiceful and therefore powerful and accountable once again?

Finally, the last major obstacle I perceive is our embarrassment at idealism, as if idealism was ridiculous and a belief system best kept under wraps. It transpires throughout our culture. As a budding filmmaker, I have been warned that the films that will typically win awards will not be the life-affirming films but those that delve into the darkest areas of our human tendencies and that feed our fears. Perhaps this truly is the root of everything, how can we make it admirable again to wish for a better world? Has the 20th century been so painful for us that we have not only stopped believing in God, but we have also stopped believing in good?

Even some of our laws protect us from the embarrassment of idealism. As Bakan explains in *The Corporation*, the sole purpose of a corporation by law is to maximise shareholder

profit. We seem to have stopped believing that the purpose of our work is to 'do good' and instead, over many years, we have created a parallel universe where money drives most of what we do. We can of course sustain ourselves in this parallel universe, but only if we disconnect ourselves from our internal reality constantly pointing the way to the illusion of it all. We work when we are tired, accept tasks we hate, function according to a daily, monthly, annual timetable set by others, we have to work with people we don't like, and don't find it strange for someone else to rate how good we are thereby shaping our future and our self-image. We don't think it is our job to think of the ethics of what we do because surely it is the job of someone better paid somewhere else, making the decisions for us.

We might from time to time get inspired by the stories of those who have followed their calling, but we choose not to take risks in our own life. We compromise our sincere wishes whispering their invitation in the quiet moments and instead we do what society expects of us. We call this being responsible adults. To manage our resulting unhappiness, we give ourselves treats, go shopping, plan a holiday, watch a movie or redecorate the house.

We don't follow what makes us happy or hopeful and instead we live a reasonable life. We are disconnected from our bodies, our instincts, our needs and live our lives as if ruled by a disconnected head, shouting orders to a subservient being. Our body attempts to reconnect with us through illness, depression, eating disorders, allergies, panic attacks, etc.

Humanistic psychologists have named the self-actualisation stage of development the stage of the centaur. The mythical being was half-man, half-horse and represents the integration of our head and body, the container for our feelings, energy levels and intuition. Let us not remain the disconnected Marie Antoinette for too much longer. Let us instead trust our instincts and enter the journey towards purpose when it next calls us. Let us discover how, by following what makes us truly happy, we can also do good and thus live a twice-good life. Let us create the conditions where humanity can serve its own very pressing needs by supporting the natural process of human beings becoming themselves. Let us amplify people's wish to contribute to something larger than themselves. The future has to be towards greater humanity, sustainability, peace, justice, prosperity, health, education, development.

References

- Bakan, J. (2004). *The Corporation*. London: Constable & Robinson.
- Campbell, J. (1968). *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gitsham, M. et al (2009). *Developing the Global Leader of Tomorrow*. Ashridge and EABIS. www.ashridge.org.uk/globalleaders
- Gratton, L. (2004). *The Democratic Organisation*. London: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Jaworski, J. (1996). *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Reason, P. (ed.) (1988). *Human Inquiry in Action: Developments in New Paradigm Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Semler, R. (1993). *Maverick!* London: Random House.
- Senge, P., Scharmer, C.O., Jaworski, J and Flowers, B.S. (2005). *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People*. Organizations and Society, London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing.

Ashridge
Berkhamsted
Hertfordshire HP4 1NS
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1442 841178
Fax: +44 (0)1442 8411181
Email: eileen.mullins@ashridge.org.uk
www.ashridge.org.uk

Registered as Ashridge (Bonar Law Memorial) Trust.
Charity number 311096.

*Printed on paper from well managed
forests and other sustainable sources*



ASHRIDGE