

Small Change for a Bigger Difference

Ideas, Rules, Risk and Purpose

Ray Charlton

I wonder if you are at all like me. I have masses of child-like curiosity. I am fascinated by ideas. I love to make creative connections. I enjoy being positive. I also like to be practical, resourceful and ingenious. So, when in 1990 I became self-employed, I called my business “Creativity and Commitment at Work”. I imagined these qualities were a recipe for a better world. Now, I think they are ingredients, but *“What recipes are game changers?”*

The Rugby World Cup reminds me of William Webb Ellis, “who first took up the ball and ran with it”. I have seen the plaque at Rugby School which commemorates his part in changing the game of football. Whilst rules are typically changed incrementally, from time to time there is a seismic shift - a shock that alters the paradigm. When I reflect on my relationship with rules I notice both my independent spirit and my risk aversion: generally, with a few exceptions, I follow the rules. I also notice that I can get very upset about unfairness when other people ignore them. *What’s to be done when what is seen as fair by one stakeholder may not be fair to another?*

My upset is also about threats to safety when breaking the rules puts others in jeopardy. I have a great sense of adventure and think of myself as an explorer, of places as well as ideas. I am alert to risk yet have put myself in dangerous situations for the excitement of feeling fully alive. Trekking in the mountains feeds my spirit. I recall as a boy going with my class from school to the cinema to see the Pathe News of the Coronation of Queen Elisabeth, and being inspired by the accompanying account of the first successful climb to the summit of Everest. That inspiration has taken me to India, Nepal, Pakistan, Tanzania, Tierra del Fuego, and New Zealand.

Edward Hillary devoted his life to providing schools and hospitals in the Khumbu region; he continued to do so after the deaths of his wife and daughter in an air crash at Lukla. Last week I listened to Doug Scott speaking about the 1975 Everest South West Face Expedition, and the work which Community Action Nepal (CAN) is doing to rebuild schools and clinics destroyed in the 2015 earthquake. CAN has led the way for responsible mountaineering, providing suitable clothing, equipment and remuneration for the Sherpas. When in the early days of Himalayan expeditions American climbers first appeared at the Tengboche Monastery, the Rinpoche listened carefully to what they proposed to do, then told them he saw no point in it. *What’s the purpose of the game?*

My earliest sense of purpose derived from the care and guidance of my grandfather. His two sons had died in childhood before my mother was born. When my grandmother died and he retired from work and came to live with us, I was fortunate to learn from him about nature and the countryside, and to acquire a love of growing things. This developed for me into a clear mission to contribute to solving world food problems. By the time I left school I had my career plans mapped out; a relevant degree, voluntary service, postgraduate studies, then a job with the UN or the UK Government's overseas development agency. This was not to be. In the words of John Lennon, "Life is what happens to us whilst we are making other plans." Over and over again. *How do we respond to our own (and others') unexpected change: redundancy, illness, injury, homelessness, bereavement?*

Motivation, Responsibility, Wakefulness and Resilience

During these challenges of change I have found myself coping by putting aspirations on hold: focusing only on getting through the day, the week, the month. In times of greatest doubt and uncertainty I have been helped by mentors: individuals who have recognised something in me that matters and provoked me to choose to show up and change my game. *How can we best stretch ourselves, and sponsor others?*

My interests in positive psychology and motivation may reflect what I have most needed to learn in order to help myself. When I have returned from an adventure I like to maintain my vital feeling of aliveness by sharing the story - to make sense of it and to feel acknowledged. I believe that individuals have uniquely different reasons to care; their best contribution is delivered when they are following their intrinsic motivation. This has profound implications for leadership, management and supervision, and how we offer and request help. *How do I really listen to you and respect and acknowledge who you are?*

In my work I have retained my interest in creativity and commitment, and added a desire to assist in managing transitions, developing leaders and providing coaching. I have invested in collaborating with colleagues who value learning and co-creation. In *Alchemy of Coaching* we hold that context is important, plus awareness of self and others, knowledge and skills, and, crucially, integration of these in the relationship. *How do we connect with ourselves and each other and express holistically what we know and who we are?*

In my mind as I write this are concerns about troubles in the world - conflict, war, suffering, injustice, and feelings of sadness for people close to me and for those I have not met. I question my response to the challenges around me: am I doing enough? I can concentrate on enjoying my comfortable life and turn away from problems, or decide what feasible contribution to make to others. *What is my responsibility, and my response-ability?*

I recognise my responsibility to use my curiosity wisely. I aim to replace criticism with curiosity. This is a way to raise my game: to choose presence of mind, to be awake, moment by moment. I can pause for breath and notice what I notice. Then I have an opportunity to inhibit my habitual reaction - and, in place of it, to choose my response. By repeated practice I can lay

down new neural pathways which alter my automatic reaction. In doing so I build my empathy and resilience. *How will I wake up, in the moment, again and again?*

My best example of how I am seeking to change the game is small - and profound. For two years I have followed a daily practice of choosing at the start of the day what two or three qualities I will embody: for example today I will be calm, compassionate, productive; and at the end of the day writing down three things I am grateful for: for example friends, mobility, nourishing food. This practice has helped me to manage my own state: to be resourceful and responsive. Small change makes a difference. *How do I act on those things which I can change?*

Ray Charlton is the proprietor of *Creativity and Commitment at Work* and co-founder of *Transition Partnerships*, and *Alchemy of Coaching*. Previously he worked in community organisation and development and in the automotive industry, in fieldwork, management, leadership, personnel, OD and change consulting roles. He is a visiting contributor to tailored and open programmes at several leading UK business schools and at WMG (formerly Warwick Manufacturing Group) at the University of Warwick. He coaches postgraduate students at Green Templeton College at the University of Oxford, and is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Chartered Management Institute, and the Institute of Leadership and Management. He is also a contributor to the Model of Sustainable Organisation (MoSO) created by the Deming Special Interest Group of the Chartered Quality Institute.