

Our experience began with a procession through 20+ locks, meeting the gaze of huddles of penetrating stares. All were wearing bright orange suits; some with a bright red stripe down their trousers to denote their status as serving life sentences. We arrived at a communal area and met with our colleagues for the day. They all looked like somebody's son, and the feeling was one of surprisingly overwhelming compassion. They each introduced themselves in turn, giving their name, their sentence length and then their crime. Sichel, 27 years, murder of two policemen; Peter, 25 years, multiple rape and grievous bodily harm; the rest followed...hijacking, armed robbery, murder and more murder. The litany of heinous crimes went on and on. I remember recoiling as these ordinary young men reeled off their extraordinary histories. Without judgment, we listened to stories about their lives and their actions. We spent the day talking about our own learning journeys as CEOs, and their special leadership programme. We talked together about our values, our beliefs, and purpose, sharing stories about our very different lives. We were there to learn from them, to share with them, and to offer our support with their need for hope. The power of this learning experience was profound - everyone, whatever their history, deserves the opportunity to understand who they are - and I know I can never forget the powerful insight I got there, in the most tragic of places, about human nature and the value of personal transformation work.

One young prisoner, Lindo Hlophe, had written on the wall of his part of his cell, "Love your Life" - the ambiguity of this for someone who would never be free was powerful in itself. The message continued: "one person with passion is worth 99 who merely have an interest!"

Another great insight came from a young man who had killed the two policemen, but who talked freely about his life of continuous crime and violence. He said that until he had gone on this journey of learning about himself to be a leader, he had never questioned what he did, why he did it, or who he was. He eloquently said, "That's who I was. I know now I have lived with a stranger for 25 years - I did not know I had a choice!" We are so indoctrinated by the belief systems of our childhood; when this is challenged, it is a big shock when we see them for what they are.

This was the message I carry from this amazing encounter - how many of us are stuck in the belief that "I am who I am - it's my personality, I was born like this; take me as I am." Stuck in patterns of thought, behaviour and attitude that are perceived as fixed. Transformation is about giving someone the awareness of their patterns, and then giving them the freedom to choose in the moment how to be, and not be driven by their programming. Who we are/who we have become is an unconscious conditioning from childhood. By unlocking our awareness as to the early sources of our beliefs and patterns of thought and behaviour, we start to understand our core nature.

This experience, among many I have been privileged to develop and share with fellow travellers, was yet another endorsement of the real value of engaging and connecting with individuals across disciplines and boundaries. Taking myself and these CEOs outside our comfort zone, outside our own world, we found it to be a journey where profound learning took place.

My own journey of discovery started in earnest 15 years ago when I co-founded an organisation called The Academy for Chief Executives. Whilst striving to bring real value to the members, and enrich their lives and those they lead, I found myself being a co-learner in the process, stepping out into the unknown in order to find my own edges and insight. What sort of experiences could short-circuit the learning processes? Culture changes in organisations are renowned for taking a long time...people do not change overnight...these were pervasive beliefs in organizations. But for me, rapid positive changes are possible; individuals can integrate and implement new learning instantaneously. But what were the experiences needed to upturn our old limiting belief patterns? The big question for me and the leaders I served was: *what is it within us that holds us back from becoming who we can truly be?*

Over the last 20 years working with over 400 CEOs across all business disciplines within The Academy for Chief Executives in the UK and now in my current venture, the Global Leaders Academy with leaders around the world, I have identified four key characteristics that for me make the difference between being a great leader, and being an inspirational leader. It is these four characteristics that have shaped the transformational programmes of the last 15 years, and led me to co-create with an amazing team, *The Global Leaders Academy*, which will take the personal transformation process to the next level. Again, it is taking myself on the transformation journey to the next level; co-creating the programme with others to allow the emergence of the new leadership attributes that the world needs for tomorrow.

### **The Four Key Characteristics of Inspirational Leaders**

1. They are **voracious learners** - of anything and of everything, and particularly about themselves!
2. They **model excellence from others across disciplines and boundaries; across different systems** - including beliefs, values, behaviours, attitudes, self-systems, and the natural world.
3. They are **conscious role models** - what they do when nobody is watching; choosing in the moment who they are.
4. They **communicate in compelling ways particularly their vision** as an unfolding truth.

### **Voracious learners**

Inspirational people are voracious learners; learning anything and everything: how to juggle, cooking the perfect Thai curry, understanding the causes of war, learning how to float a business, understanding the implications of China's place in the world, etc. They are curious and inquisitive.

In my experience, inspirational leaders also work continuously on knowing themselves at a deep level; they are open, vulnerable and allowing.

How can we, as developers of transformation programmes, inspire leaders to themselves be inspired to continue, or even to start to take, the journey of self-discovery, and reawaken us to who we truly are?

Individual leaders are all at different stages on their learning roads. Our experience has been to offer programmes that invoke the heart as well as the mind. We have introduced rapport building skills by learning through the connection of horse whispering. We have developed our need for "gravitas" by joining actors on a stage at The Royal Academy for Dramatic Art in London. We have developed our creative talent by engaging with children, our naive gurus, where anything is possible. Passionate people infuse inspiration. Voracious learning is compulsive, addictive, energising; it is infectious. The more we learn as leaders, the higher our self esteem and confidence. This behaviour and attitude towards learning is then reflected in the organisations they lead.

Our primary approach has been to create meaningful experiences instead of working in the old way of promoting a particular concept. I have always held a passion for the natural world and its importance to business and to us all as spiritual beings. So a few years ago, we planned a journey to take some CEOs to raise their awareness about deep ecology and the natural world. How could we preach about the need to hold environmental values in their business, when they were not really engaged at an emotional level with the planet? They could connect intellectually with the language, and the need to consider CO2 emissions and recycling, etc., but the personal energy output was not wholly resonant. This was an important lesson - in our programmes, it is important to inspire our leaders at a deep personal level before they can truly integrate the learning and then act.

We took twelve CEOs on a two-day deep ecology retreat to a remote centre in Devon in the UK. Historically, this centre had always attracted those who were already on the environmental journey. Our first alarm was to see the professor of ecology being deeply shocked that there were business people who were so apathetic, and even antagonistic, to the environmental agenda. One very powerful CEO sat with his arms crossed and declared, "I do technology and concrete - I do not do bugs and trees!" At first we thought he was just being amusing, but then realised many of these leaders considered the environmental arena to be just another area of effort in an all-too-busy work agenda. Day one consisted of serious academic information on planetary issues of global warming, deforestation, Gaia theory, etc. The real learning took place on the second day, when we took them on a field trip/trek to one of the most untouched parts of the UK. We scabbled over rocks and wonderful ancient moss mounds until we came to a fast-flowing river with salmon jumping in the water. Our professor came alive; he pointed out the granite formations and life cycles that need to continue; he enthused and inspired as he pointed out ancient trees and fungi. He invited us to lie down and look at a square foot of soil...to really look at this mini-world, this microcosm of life. We then had to smell the moss; we had to be blindfolded and led by a colleague to feel the different textures beneath our feet. Then an amazing thing happened...the professor took off his clothes and walked into the river and swam and splashed around. It was October - autumnal and beautiful - but the sun was amazingly warm and then seven of the CEOs did the same thing. It was truly beautiful. The vision for me, sitting on the edge, was of this amazing painting of boys playing, laughing, splashing and swimming. For these CEOs, they had not done this, if ever, since their boy scout days. They had truly reconnected with the natural world. They never forgot this experience, and their later actions in their businesses validated the deep effect this had. The concept of sustainability, the triple bottom line (people, profit and planet), and corporate responsibility manifested into the corporate strategy and was translated into measurable goals.

Inspirational leaders **work continuously on their own journey of self-awareness and insight.** They acknowledge the importance of personal mastery; they know the value of continuously working on the origins of their hampering and nurturing thought patterns, and thereby more consciously choose their response rather than react to their programmed habits.

The quest to engage with others around the world has been a constant reminder as to how strongly we are all affected by the beliefs of our young lives, and how we have been shaped by past experience. As a leader, our highest responsibility is to do our own internal work - it is a continuing journey. It is this important area that has shaped the specialist transformation work of The Global Leaders Academy, and my place and passion in it. The Global Leaders Academy is a community of leaders who are at the top of their tree who consistently work towards continuous breakthrough in their own lives and the lives of the people in the other systems they touch.

My travels around the world in the previous 10 years have opened my eyes and my heart to support this work.

Africa taught me about *ubuntu* - "on my own I am nothing." Ubuntu is a beautiful word that succinctly honours every human being, and acknowledges the interdependence and interconnection of everything. As human beings, we are linked by our smallest cell to the planet and beyond. Our transformation programmes at *the Global Leaders Academy* work on our power to transform our physiology at the cellular level, our power to affect who we are and how we perform through the awareness and power of our mind and emotions, our power to choose happiness and joy!

This systemic connection links us all. Our own personal transformation has a ripple effect. Nelson Mandela says, "Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world." What forms of 'education' are required to lead from the heart, instead of the ego?

On a trip to Mozambique in 2003, we learnt that 60% of the population there live in absolute poverty, surviving on less than one dollar a day. People in this category of life can only think about today; for them, tomorrow is irrelevant. We were told by a certain political leader, "It is dangerous for their mental health to think of tomorrow - there is no future for the majority of the population." This was a shocking realization for me. Addressing the HIV pandemic requires looking into the future - the challenge in Africa, as with other third world countries and the Western world, is to inspire people to take hold of their lives and do something to save future generations. This requires changes in behaviour, and even fidelity... upturning the cultural mores of generations. I read an article recently that said that people can be healed, but still die. I found this very thought provoking; their healing can unlock future generations.

Forgiveness is another important word in both South Africa and Mozambique. So many conversations on our trip delivered the ubiquitous message, "No matter how difficult things are, always forgive and move on... In forgiving, you save yourself." The spirit of reconciliation is heartwarming and also a stark reminder that in both South Africa and Mozambique, the hate, whilst still present in some small pockets, is dissipating, having overcome the ravages of apartheid, revolution, civil war and floods. In Africa, leadership is about unblocking the energies of a whole generation individuals may emerge, may remain nameless, and may still die or wither away, but their contribution and they themselves all count. The lessons for us are identical; our programmes must distil the very essence of this powerful learning. I will not forget the words of Janet Mondlane, the widow of Eduardo Mondlane, the founder and first President of the Mozambique Liberation Front: "the footprints we leave today are the footprints our children see." Janet Mondlane was an inspiration to be with. I came away from our meeting knowing deep in my heart that the issues we experience and learn about around the world are global issues; they are not just their issues, they are OUR issues.

The need to forgive, to reconcile our own lives, is a profound healing journey that brings deep peace. The acknowledgement that our own transformation goes beyond our own self-system and affects the whole, is a responsibility that we cannot overlook.

### **Modelling excellence from others**

Inspirational leaders seem to do this very naturally, but often unconsciously. They find people who have certain key attributes they wish to have in themselves. They step into the physiology, the beliefs, the values, the language and behaviour of the person, the different self-systems, and then integrate it within themselves.

What can we learn from invisible leaders... those exceptional individuals who have no title or profile, but who are doing extraordinary things in extraordinary conditions?

Sanghamitra runs a small HIV hospice in the middle of the slum in Bangalore. Her compassion and persistence to bring a quality of life to a few who are suffering is remarkable. What was the value to me and the small group of business leaders who went there to spend the day in this grim place? This was not poverty or trauma voyeurism, but a deep wish to connect with people in a world that is very different from our own. I wanted to see the world through Sanghamitra's eyes, I wanted to feel her struggles, her frustrations, her deep love for the work she was doing, and meet her as an equal, share my world, and have a dialogue about the things that were important to us collectively and to each other. I was surprised by my total inability to speak. The sights and smells and terrible conditions were so tragic that my heart literally hurt. There was a young boy about 7 or 8 years old dying in a dirty bed with a scrap of cloth for a blanket on his bed. His mother, who had brought him to this place, had carried him for 25 miles from an outlying village, and she was sleeping on the bare floor

under his bed. She was his nurse; there were no drugs of significance to help with these last moments of life. Although there were 4 or 5 patients in this small dark room, it was the mother I was drawn to. Our eyes met in a true union, and she scrambled out from under the bed and we walked out into the bright sunshine of the little courtyard. I think this was the first time that I had consciously connected with another precious human being, who was suffering so deeply seeing her son dying. We held each other's hands and just communicated with the eyes. We talked without words, our spoken word having no meaning for the other. But our message was the shared and deep understanding of one mother's love for her child to another. We silently cried, unashamedly, and then suddenly, she let me go and resumed her place under her son's rusty bed. I learnt that day about the concept and value of creating an energetic connection. Working from inside out, opening up to an unexplained love.

I learnt that to Sanghamitra, the angel in this tragic place, the value of this visit was the opportunity to talk, to share, to laugh with others outside the system who had no agenda other than to be really present. This day was massive for my learning, and nothing will ever take this experience out of my very being. I had underestimated the value of being really present; my previous way of operating in the world would have been to say, "let's do something practical here," but this was not what Sanghamitra needed. My irrelevant thought of practical action would simply have been a way of trying to meet my own needs to make me feel better...

I learnt that the richest person in the world is not the person with the most, but the person who needs the least!

### **Umfolozi Wilderness Trail**

What can we as leaders learn from the natural world? What is the excellence in nature we can model for ourselves? How can we engage business leaders to reconnect with the earth, and to awaken their emotions, as well as their intellect, to create the drive to preserve our planet?

In December 2004, seven of us embarked on a journey into the Umfolozi Park just outside Durban in South Africa. It was an experience that again shaped my beliefs, and reignited my passion about the value of living on the edge; can we trust ourselves, our values, enough to step out beyond our edges?

With a Zulu guide and a conservationist expert, we set out to live seven days in the wild, with no tents, protection, no western luxuries like soap or deodorant, no watches, mobile phones, no mirror, even no toilet paper! Nothing except the very bare minimum of clothes, and food for the time we were away. This was my first big stretch. The second was the self-doubt of my physical abilities. Could I carry up to 40 kilos on my back, and walk 12-15 kilometres every day, in searing heat, with potential danger around every corner? Here, we would be living wild, as one species of many, against the backdrop of one of the most remote, wild, sacred, beautiful places in the world. We were following trails all on foot, during the day, of the rare white rhino, the elephants, the buffalo, the lions. At night we would make camp, with a central fire for cooking and as our source of comfort and security whilst we took turns being on night watch. These lonely vigils of two-hour guard duty were, at the outset, the major source of great fear. Our role was to protect our sleeping colleagues from the intrusion of wild animals. Hearing breaking branches, close-by roaring and grunting sounds, familiar, but not comfortable, cackles from the hyenas; our nervousness was mostly not knowing or seeing what was in our vicinity. There was total darkness except for the small

light of the fire, and the intermittent flash of light from our torch, which we had to scan beyond the sleeping circle every few minutes to see if we could catch the glint of eyes of interested predators! But by day four, I yearned for those precious two hours of night watch duty. Where in my life had I ever experienced such overwhelming peace and isolation of a sleeping world, in the vastness and wildness of Africa? I felt extraordinary love in these early hours on my own, of my sense of smallness in this amazing world, and awe as I looked into the night sky; the enormity of the solar system that just went on and on.

What was the learning for me to bring back by this experience?

Stepping into the many fears, and consciously unpacking what was going on inside, enabled each one of us to rapidly revise some outmoded thought patterns which were often of an irrational nature. My fear of insects was overcome within a few hours of arriving by having to put my sleeping bag on the ground, which was totally alive with an insect world. Sharing my sleeping bag with a six-inch red millipede enabled me to transcend my fear of things much smaller.

I learnt how easy it is to become wild; to overcome the fear of being self-conscious with regard to personal toilet matters, etc. This has to be done rapidly; personal safety requires visibility of each person at all times. I rapidly overcame the ego-concern of "how do I look?" This is an irrelevant thought when living in the wild.

How has this experience shaped our leadership? The time created a very strong sense of self; one's powerful responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of others; a feeling of radical vulnerability in a world we cannot control; the need to surrender. The wilderness embraces violence and serenity. It is not a place for exclusive meditative contemplation - it is a place to embrace, integrate and hold forever what is perfect with the world and our place in it. We learned that the ratio in the wild is 5% of the time there is violence, turmoil, stress, chaos, death and destruction; and the rest is harmonious co-existence. In our business world, the ratio seemed to me to be almost the opposite. All of us on the treadmill of business and home life are fighting our competitors; we are stressed, fearful, and would prefer to live our lives in another way. Just a small part of our lives is serenity, calm, joy, and inner composure in the increasing "turbulence of our lives. Also, I learnt that perhaps we over-emphasise the value of sight, at the cost of our other senses. In the wild in Africa, listening acutely, smelling the air, feeling the tension, is more important than seeing the lion. By then, it could be too late! How valuable to be reawakened to our conditioning. How valuable to learn about the law of attraction, versus the law of promotion. The magic of the animals living their daily lives in ever closer proximity to our small group was the result of the subtle understanding that when we truly connected to the earth, and went beyond the rational mind, the animals would come close. Our experience was overwhelmingly confirmed that connecting at a heart level instead of the head affected the behaviour of the animals... something to think about!

We need nature to show us the way home.

### **Being a Conscious Role Model**

Inspirational leaders are the role models of the behaviour and values they wish to see in others. Everything we do - every decision we make, every action we take, every judgment we have made - reflects our consciousness.

Gandhi (1869-1948) is a very conscious role model for me. He set aside his upper-class, comfortable lifestyle, and started a -revolution that ultimately resulted in the independence of India from British rule. Rather than promote violent revolution, Gandhi stimulated a grassroots movement based in non-violent

protest. Despite several assassination threats and attempts, as well as political harassment and the occasional jailing, Gandhi persevered, rejecting violent methods and continuing to speak out on behalf of India's independence. His words and behaviour inspired many around the world and continue to do so. "If my faith burns bright, as I hope it will, even if I stand alone," he said, "I shall be alive in the grave, and what is more, speaking from it."

His powerful statement: "Be the change you wish to see in the world" has become a mantra, and now resonates in organisations, cultures, and countries around the world.

Conscious leaders give a country, an organisation, a community, a family what it needs, not what the culture or particular society drives, expects or demands. Authentic leaders will speak out even though others might disagree, potentially provoking the anger of the protectors of the status quo. How tempting it is to resort to the easy option, to withdraw when things are not going our way. Most of us have some way of numbing our senses or distracting ourselves when we are feeling pain or discomfort. On my own transformational journey, I became aware of a default pattern of behaving that was not serving me in all circumstances as a business leader. I was unconscious of continuously stepping into a mediation role. This pattern, I later learned, was formed in my very early years, and subsequently I had developed great abilities in conflict resolution, being able to effortlessly step into the shoes of another and look at the world through their eyes. I could also easily feel another's pain, or sense their frustration. What I had not been aware of was the unconscious deployment of that role. In many circumstances, speaking my truth and standing in my own power was the more appropriate action, but I struggled to do this for many years in business and in my personal relationships. Once I learned about the origins of this pattern of behaviour, and consciously stepped more and more into the assertive self, I was aware of the freedom to choose the appropriate option, as opposed to being led by my programming. Such early insight has inspired me to go further and further on my inner journey, and really find out what other patterns of thought and behaviour I deploy unconsciously.

In the development of our transformation programmes in *The Global Leaders Academy*, our aim is to support those who take full responsibility for their work and their life, and awaken them to their own programming, and the freedom to choose in the moment. This is being real. This work also reawakens leaders to becoming models of self-healing. They need to build their capacity to deal with stress, and absorb a huge amount of change in a short period of time. As Annie McKee states in her book, "Resonant Leadership" (2005), even great leaders need to develop their own cycle of renewal to sustain their effectiveness. So our programmes are focused on healing the mind, the body and the soul, as well as the business. My whole and continuing journey leads me to passionately advocate the real benefits and joy of personal inner work. Discovering the truth, and then leading our lives by it, is what sets us and others free.

As a role model are we truly able to answer this question: is our leadership coming from our character - our core essence - or is it coming from our persona, our self-systems, the external personality we've created to cope with life's circumstances?

The conscious role model walks the fine and often challenging line between the intuitive, creative and sensing world and the material world of action, systems, ego, and tangible results - the biggest challenge for us all is nurturing the union between conscious leadership and sound commercial enterprise. Being conscious means being fully aware and personally responsible for the impact you have on the world, as well as the impact the world has on you. The conscious role model acknowledges that, historically, we were given our worldviews; today we must choose between many views.

The Dalai Lama stated a few years ago, "as people see their predicament clearly - that our fates are inextricably tied together, that life is a mutually interdependent web of relations - then universal

responsibility becomes the only sane choice for thinking people." The conscious leader becomes a traveller and a partner in a new evolution for humankind.

### **Communicating in compelling ways particularly Co-creating and Communicating a Shared Vision**

There is so much written about vision and vision statements and their importance. How easy it is to glibly pronounce the company's vision, or a leader's vision, that is full of positive statements. Inspirational leaders have a passion for a journey that is not just a momentary enthusiasm or a finished product. The vision is theirs when they can see themselves in it. A vision for these leaders is not necessarily about the future; it is about living right now, transforming a little every day; a vision is something that keeps people moving. Sadly, many people choose a vision that never really challenges them or creates change.

I loved one of the vision statements of ANZ Bank in Australia which I heard about recently. "Keeping ahead of the curve through conscious continual renewal - the never ending quest; and a way of life." That was inspiring to me. The products and services were irrelevant in this statement. I was inspired by the simple vision we developed in The Academy for Chief Executives, "Developing a global network of leaders learning with leaders." The passion for this vision has not abated in the *Global Leaders Academy*, but the intention is to transcend and include all that has gone before. I have learnt over the past ten years that it is not the words of the vision that are important, but the brightness of the picture painted. On a Leaders Quest trip to Johannesburg a few years ago, we spent a day at CIDA City Campus - an extraordinary university in Johannesburg, created by an extraordinary man, Taddy Blecher. This is a free university to students across Africa from the very poorest backgrounds. His mantra of "nothing is impossible" really connects with everyone, and he has galvanized incredible resources to create this centre. His dream was so huge, "It was so deep in our hearts we knew we would create this university even when we had absolutely nothing," Taddy told us. "We did not know how this was going to be achieved; this did not matter." This wonderful achievement, and Taddy's vision, has inspired hundreds of CIDA's students to create their own vision of a new future for themselves and for Africa. We spent the afternoon with some students, and their hopes and dreams are enormous. This is truly an example of infectious leadership.

I know our vision in *The Global Leaders Academy* of creating circles of leaders around the world dedicated to the transformation and renewal of business leaders and major influencers, is one of the most compelling visions for me and my own journey. It almost hurts, the vision is so big but the excitement creates the energy.

I had the privilege of listening to Dadi Janki at the "Be the Change" Conference back in 2005 in the UK. Dadi Janki, who was then an 88-year-old "spiritual lighthouse," and member of the United Nations' prestigious Wisdom Keepers, was born in India in 1916 and survived poverty, war, and severe illness to rise above the restrictions of culture, gender and a lack of formal education. Dadi Janki writes in one of her books: "A spiritual path is like a school. Not a regular school where you learn ordinary skills, but a spiritual school where you learn the skills of the spirit: like how to remove flaws in your character, or how to remain unaffected by the negative influences around you." In her quiet demeanour, she stated simply at the conference, "you have to awaken, and then you can awaken others." I think this is the critical realization, that inspiration is what people take, you cannot decide to give it.

Inspirational leaders have a crystal clear purpose and vision that people want to follow and embrace. It is that purpose that is the stillpoint, the wellspring, from which everyone else's purpose can bubble forth.

### **Conclusion**



Leadership models of the past provide limited guidance for the business context of the future. A new form of business world, and the leaders within it, is evolving. This world must integrate consciousness, culture and nature, and include art, ethics, science, the environment as well as health, personal values, collective wisdom and technical know-how. We need to be equally comfortable in the domains of spirituality and intention, as well as grounded in sound business acumen. These must be equal bedfellows.

Disturbing complacency is the challenge of the times. Creating experiences that jolt the participant, put them outside their comfort zone, create cognitive dissonance, jar their very being, is where profound learning takes place. It's the type of learning that is not exclusively rational or factual, but harnesses the emotions to create the energy to fix what's wrong, or take action towards achievement of a goal. Fear is at the heart of every problem, and to permanently resolve the problem, we must heal the fear within. Also, by working with the full ranges of human experience, we can be more fully aware of our ability to always return to our centre, our core essence, our inner state of balance, when we choose to do so.

My global experiences have highlighted to me the richness and value of connecting with others around the world, across countries, faiths, disciplines - each of us needs to be a global synthesizer of the best in leadership transformation models. My lessons from life are that the inner learning journey is just as important in the quest for wisdom and insight. The health, resilience and vitality of a cell, human being, organisation, community, country, and planet, are the mission-critical goals of our time'. The quest for profound learning experiences that can support this journey continues...