



# Think again...

Ian Mitchell and Siân Lumsden explain how leaders can uncover their unique individualism and in turn, develop a greater degree of critical thinking.

**J**ust before the holiday season, we received a note from one of our clients – a newly-appointed director working in one of the large London NHS Trusts. His greeting was simple: “Best wishes for the festive period and thank you for making me see myself in a different light”.

According to Dr Simon Western, author of *Coaching and Mentoring*, one of the criteria through which a mentor or coach should examine her or his role is the extent to which they create an emancipatory agenda within the sponsoring organisation. This agenda, he argues, consists of two core elements: micro-emancipation, which works to make teams and individual employees work better and feel better about their work; and macro-emancipation, which works to support employees in challenging the status quo. The first of these elements will encourage leaders to “find their autonomy, their unique individualism... their voice and vocation, and release the passion and energy in their lives”. The second encourages critical thinking and the questioning of, for example, systemic normative assumptions, power structures and embedded behaviours.

#### Constant evaluation

In his book entitled *Reinventing Organisations*, Frederick Laloux discusses the notion of “the organisation as a living organism or living system... ever evolving towards more wholeness, complexity and consciousness”. If this is indeed the case, then it is vital that leaders are empowered to constantly evaluate their organisational infrastructure and stress-test the systemic thought patterns, influences and mores existing within its culture.

“” Most people are doing a second job... spending time and energy covering up their weaknesses, managing other people’s impressions of them, showing themselves to their best advantage, hiding their inadequacies.

For this particular client, “see myself in a different light” was his way of articulating the progress he has made towards “connecting deeply with his own autonomy, individualism, voice and vocation”. It resulted not only in his decision to apply for his current post, but also to have the confidence to hit the ground running and begin to challenge some deeply rooted systemic issues within his place of work. But what kinds of issues do leaders need to confront on the road to both micro-emancipation and macro-emancipation? What is the ‘different light’ that can begin to shine? And where does one find the switch?

#### The first step to emancipation

To begin, we must learn to view ourselves from the standpoint of others rather than always through our own eyes. A question we frequently ask leaders to consider is: “What would change in my leadership if I truly believed that I was as good a leader as my colleagues believed me to be?” Of course, there is always an element of risk implicit in exploring that one too deeply – our colleagues may not see us in a good light at all! More often than not, it is quite the opposite as many leaders suffer from what is known as ‘imposter syndrome’. P.R. Clance and S.A. Imes, working in the 1970s and early 1980s, concluded that

around 70% of the working population suffered from this syndrome where people conclude that their colleagues overestimate their ability. This can lead to a working environment described by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey as one in which “most people are doing a second job... spending time and energy covering up their weaknesses, managing other people’s impressions of them, showing themselves to their best advantage, hiding their inadequacies”.

As leaders learn to deal with this syndrome and begin to see themselves in the light of how they really are, they begin to “find their autonomy, their voice and vocation, release the passion and energy in their lives” and, like our client, find the freedom to bring appropriate critical thinking to their organisational status quo.



#### THE AUTHORS



Ian Mitchell and Siân Lumsden are partners in Eighty20Focus, a firm of consultants,

executive coaches and leadership trainers working to create real-time shift in performance, organisational culture and working practices.