Inspiration is a magical feeling, so how can we be inspired more of the time? Andy Bird explores how leaders can discover and maintain their personal inspiration.

Can you think of a time recently when you felt inspired? Perhaps you were impressed by another person’s admirable courage, humility or generosity of spirit. Or maybe you experienced a deep sense of pride after having achieved something challenging or significant.

Moments of inspiration can have a wonderful, invigorating impact on us as human beings. They energise us with a sense of possibility and a renewed belief in ourselves and everything that life has to offer. But given their power and value, it seems strange that we know so little about how to access them. Are all forms of inspiration the same? Do they just happen by chance? Is there anything we can do to experience them more often and more intensely as life goes by?

These questions are particularly important for people who take on the responsibility of being leaders. We live in extraordinary, turbulent times and we need brave individuals throughout our organisations and communities to step up and help shape the world around us in positive ways. But the pressure and scrutiny on leaders has also never been more intense, so inspiration is not just a luxury. It is crucial if people are to make the valiant leadership efforts required and for them to inspire, in turn, the people they need to engage along the way.

It was for this reason that, two years ago, I set out on a research project to explore how people discover and maintain their inspiration as leaders. My initial focus was on people in senior corporate leadership positions. However, I was so intrigued by the findings that I extended my interviews to include a much wider variety of leaders, in spheres such as sport, the arts, education, religion and the armed forces.

At the heart of my conclusions is an exciting realisation that while we cannot choose when we feel inspired, neither do we have to leave it to chance. To understand why, it is necessary to understand better what we mean by inspiration and how it actually occurs.

How inspiration arises

In literal terms, inspiration relates to the drawing in of breath required to give life to our physical bodies. In common parlance, we now use the word more frequently to describe the way ideas and experiences infuse life into our spirit as human beings. To be inspired means to feel fully alive, to experience a surge in our life force, to be motivated positively both to do and to be certain things in our lives.

The title of this article – “The alchemy of leadership inspiration” – was chosen for a reason. Alchemy is a term that relates to a seemingly magical process of transmutation, creation or combination, a description that captures very well what happens when we personally feel inspired. Let me explain.

In my work running leadership development programmes, we often invite...
senior leaders to join us and share their personal stories and insights. What is noticeable is that the delegates sometimes have very different views about which people they find most inspiring. The fact is that there is nothing inherent about any individual that makes them inspiring as a person. It is the characteristics they possess that are interpreted as being inspiring, to a greater or lesser extent, in the eyes of the people they encounter.

The same is true of experiences. Reading a particular book or watching a film may have a lasting impact on us personally, but the same stimulus may often leave other people completely cold. Engaging in certain types of enjoyable activity at work might light our own fire but, for some people, having to do the same task might well be their worst nightmare.

Inspiration takes place in a unique way for each of us as individuals when three elements come together in a magical combination:

- The triggers we encounter in the external world – the situations, events and people we experience as we progress through our lives.
- The mindsets we bring to interpret these experiences and relate them to our own selves.
- The motivations we feel internally, especially the values, interests and talents we have most passion for.

**TRIGGERS**

Claire Chiang leads an extraordinarily full and varied life as a leader. As co-founder of the Banyan Tree chain of luxury hotel and spa resorts, she has been a pioneering force in the field of social and environmental responsibility. She is also a prominent community activist, particularly on issues relating to women’s welfare and rights. And she serves on the boards of organisations ranging from the
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Claire Chiang, Banyan Tree

National Book Development Council and the Wildlife Reserves in Singapore to businesses such as ISS in Denmark and Dufry in Switzerland.

However, the start of Claire’s leadership journey was an unusual and painful one. Back in 1988, she was working as an academic in the Sociology Department of the National University of Singapore when she suffered a tragic miscarriage. She entered a period of severe depression and spent several months attempting to come to terms with her loss.

As part of the healing process, she volunteered for the Samaritans of Singapore. “For four years, I served on the hotline, hearing about other people’s issues, fears and delusions,” she recalls. “I began to realise the problems were so often about them being enslaved to a perception of who they were as people. We all tell ourselves stories about ‘I am this’ or ‘I am that’. Much of my work was about helping people find other ways of thinking about themselves.”

These experiences served as an invaluable inspirational trigger for Claire. As time progressed, she began to discover a new way of interpreting her own circumstances. “I realised that I am just one of a zillion people, so why should I not be one of the very few people who suffer this kind of experience? It was humbling and reductionist, but it was incredibly liberating. It helped me to walk away from my imprisoned self and to re-embrace the world.”

Although Claire never fully lost the sense of pain that came from losing her baby, she began to find a way of loosening the grip it had on her. “The journey of activism I embarked upon helped give me further experiences that enabled me to substitute the painful memories with new, more positive ones,” she reflects. “When people ask me about why I’ve done all these things, it’s because I believe in them – I believe in the causes. I believe in justice, in the independence of women. I believe women should be educated. I believe in marriage, family and the power of community.”

A more specific inspirational trigger came for Claire when she met an exceptional lady called Shirin Fozdar, a champion of women’s rights and education in Asia. At the time, Claire and her husband were in the process of building their first Banyan Tree spa hotel on the island of Phuket in Thailand.

“Shirin came to me with two cushions and she said that if I bought them for our hotel, my money would help put a girl in school,” Claire remembers. “I thought – two cushions, one girl in school; 200 cushions, 100 girls; 2,000 cushions, you can save a whole village. That was the trigger that changed my whole perspective on business and the role it can play as a force for social good.” As a consequence, Claire went on to build up the international Banyan Tree operation with a firm commitment to the artisanal crafts and village communities where it has a presence.

MINDSETS

If the triggers of our inspiration are the people, events and circumstances we encounter externally, our mindsets help determine the way we interpret and make sense of these experiences internally. The shift in Claire’s mindset from a sense of injustice and being a victim, to one of greater acceptance, helped to transform her perspective on both herself and the world more generally. “I truly believe there are opportunities all around us, but sometimes we just don’t see them,” she elaborates. “The reason our mindset is so important is that we have to look for the connections and the possibilities in front of us.”

Juliette Howell, a leader in a very different field, agrees wholeheartedly. Juliette is a film and television executive producer who recently co-founded the independent House Productions company with her business partner Tessa Ross. Her production credits include multi-Oscar-winning Slumdog Millionaire and BAFTA winners Billy Elliot, The King of Scotland, Shameless, Sex Traffic, Birdsong and Landon Spy.

“I suppose I was driven originally by a sense that I wanted to tell stories and to work with writers in the realm of fiction,” Juliette reflects. “As a child, I was an avid reader and I became more and more curious about the mechanics of storytelling.”

“It wasn’t about telling my own stories particularly – I had more of an appetite for the stories of others,” she continues. “I have always been fascinated by people and how their life experiences have influenced their differing viewpoints on the world. I now see my job as giving them a voice and helping them shape their stories to share with others in the best possible form.”

What kind of mindsets does Juliette consider best inspire her leadership of the creative process? “A spirit of positivity is absolutely vital,” she asserts. “We recently won a big commission for a new television show, our first significant production as a new company. It was a huge achievement and the team had worked incredibly hard for six months to pull it off. When we heard the news, it was important for me to go and congratulate them.”

“However, what they didn’t know was that the budget being made available was only about half what we had expected,” Juliette discloses. “In the back of my mind, I wasn’t even sure we would be able to make the production, but I knew that this was not the moment to share that information. Instead, you have to think to yourself: ‘OK, let’s look at this as a positive challenge. Who can we go to for the rest of the money? How do we enthuse them about the project?’ How might that make the possibilities even bigger and better?”

“I also believe very strongly in transparency and openness,” she continues. “Those are two of the qualities that I think are fundamental to me being able to do my job, both creatively and as a leader. In a business that is all about translating the stories in people’s heads, you have to really listen and appreciate their views without judging them. The same principles apply if you want to encourage that same trust and sensibility within your own team too.”

MOTIVATIONS

If external triggers help stimulate our inspiration, and our mindsets influence how we respond to those triggers, the ultimate source of our feelings of inspiration are our internal motivations. Claire talked about her belief in the causes she fights for – justice, women’s rights, community. Juliette shared her passion for storytelling and her fascination for other people’s life experiences and viewpoints.

Claire Chiang, Banyan Tree

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Martin George is a business leader who has come to an intriguing conclusion about the motivations that leave him feeling inspired. Martin has served on the senior leadership teams of companies such as British Airways, Bupa, Thorntons, the Post Office and, most recently, Waitrose.

“I’d always had the ambition of being a main board director in a big, publicly listed company and, if I’m honest, I was very motivated by the status symbols, profile and influence that I thought would come with it,” he admits. “But once I got there, I felt a strong sense of ‘Is this it?’ I recognise that I’m in a very fortunate position to enjoy many of those material benefits, but they certainly haven’t brought me the fulfilment I expected.”

In reality, Martin has found his greatest rewards have arisen from other, less tangible sources. “My deepest satisfaction has come in much more spiritual and emotional areas. When I’ve felt really joyful and inspired, it’s usually been a consequence of human interaction – being with somebody, having an experience with somebody, being able to help someone out.”

Martin’s perspective can be explained by an important distinction made by psychologists between our intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves us doing things because they are inherently rewarding, whereas extrinsic motivation involves us doing things because they lead on to separate desirable outcomes. Extensive research evidence now exists to show that our spirit as human beings comes alive when our motivation is intrinsic – when we feel self-determined and we can express freely our human nature to explore, learn and engage with others.

Martin is not alone in having been attracted by the financial rewards, the social status and the influence that come with a senior role. However, these motivations are extrinsic in nature. We end up enjoying the rewards as a result of our work as leaders – they are not inherent in the actual work itself.

My research suggests that there are three very practical ways in which we can seek to activate our intrinsic motivations and thereby drive our chances of discovering greater inspiration as leaders:

■ Follow our passions, by getting involved in work that we love and find most interesting.

■ Apply our talents, by playing to our strengths and stretching our personal qualities and capabilities.

■ Live our values, by upholding the principles we believe in and care about most deeply.

When these conditions are met together, we feel engaged, enthusiastic and fulfilled. Most importantly, we feel boosted by a sense that we are making the most of ourselves as human beings, as well as maximising the beneficial difference we are making beyond ourselves.

BEING INSPIRED MORE OF THE TIME

There is certainly a wonderful, magical dimension to the alchemy of inspiration. It is not a feeling we can summon at will. Part of its allure and impact is caused by the fact that it lies beyond our control. But there are also some simple ways in which we can increase the likelihood of inspiration visiting us from time to time and of it driving us forward over the course of our lives.

We can seek out stimulating new experiences of the world, particularly ones we know might trigger a lift in our spirits. We can also seek to reflect more internally, attempting to better understand and articulate our motivations and the passions that make us feel most alive.

Perhaps most significantly, we can bring an engaging mindset that leaves us open, receptive and ready to be inspired. By choosing to be positive about life, to embrace possibilities and to look for learning, we have the wonderful opportunity to make our experience of inspiration both more frequent and more energising as our lives unfold.

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