Moral purpose
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You don’t have to be Mother Theresa to have moral purpose. Some people are deeply passionate about improving life (sometimes to a fault, if they lack one or more of the other four components of leadership: understanding of the change process, strong relationships, knowledge adding, and coherence making among multiple priorities.) Others have a more cognitive approach, displaying less emotion, but still being intensely committed to betterment. Whatever one’s style, every leader, to be effective, must have and work on improving his or her moral purpose.

Moral purpose is about both ends and means. In education, an important end is to make a difference in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial – if you don’t treat others (for example, teachers), well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers (see Chapter Four, in which I describe how effective leaders constantly work on developing relationships at all levels of the organization). Of course, a case can be made that leading with integrity is not just instrumental. To strive to improve the quality of how we live together is a moral purpose of the highest order. Sergiovanni (1999, p. 17) draws the same conclusion about what he calls the lifeworld of leadership.

Ask the next five people you meet to list three persons they know, either personally or from history, who they consider to be authentic leaders. Then have them describe these leaders. Chances are your respondents will mention integrity, reliability, moral excellence, a sense of purpose, firmness of conviction, steadiness, and unique qualities of style and substance that differentiate the leaders they choose from others. Key in this list of characteristics is the importance of substance, distinctive qualities, and moral underpinnings. Authentic leaders anchor their practice in ideas, values, and commitments, exhibit distinctive qualities of style and substance, and can be trusted to be morally diligent in advancing the enterprises they lead. Authentic leaders, in other words, display character, and character is the defining characteristic of authentic leadership.

At the loftiest level, moral purpose is about how humans evolve over time, especially in relation to how they relate to each other. Ridley (1996) and Sober and Wilson (1998) trace the evolution of self-centered and cooperative behaviour in animals, insects, and humans. What makes humans different, says Ridley, is culture. Ideas, knowledge, practices and beliefs, and the like enter consciousness and can be passed on, “by direct infection from one person to another” (p. 179)

Ridley raises the interesting evolutionary hypothesis that,

“cooperative groups thrive and selfish ones do not, so cooperative societies have survived at the expense of others” (p. 175)

Thus leaders in all organizations, whether they know it or not, contribute for better or for worse to moral purpose in their own organizations and in society as a whole. Sober and Wilson (1998) also state that it is futile to argue whether people are driven by egoistic (self-centered) or altruistic (unselfish) motives. The fact is that all effective leaders are driven by both-what Sober and Wilson call,

“motivational pluralism, which is the view that we have both egoistic and altruistic ultimate desires” (p. 308)

This is why everyday leaders shouldn’t expect to be like Mother Theresa. (And who knows, maybe she got a lot of pleasure out of helping others). Most of us have mixed motives, and that is perfectly fine.
I will also show that moral purpose doesn’t stand alone. We will see that leaders who work on the five qualities in this book—not just the obvious first quality, which is moral purpose itself, but all four other components—will, by definition, find themselves steeped in moral purpose. Whether you are an insurance executive or a school principal, you simply cannot be effective without behaving in a morally purposeful way. And if you follow the lessons in this book, you won’t have to plan to be more moral in your pursuit; it will come naturally. Moral purpose is profoundly built into the five components of leadership as they are carried out in practice.

The complexity of pursuing moral purpose in a culture of change can be best illustrated through case examples. I select cases equally from education and from business to show that the issues of leadership are increasingly common across both types of organizations. A major education example comes from our current multiyear large-scale evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in England.

The Case of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

Let us descend from this elevated abstract level and consider a real case, a very large scale case involving a whole country (twenty thousand schools with seven million students up to age eleven), namely the case of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NLNS) in England. Here is the proposition: a new government comes into power in 1997, and the prime minister declares that his three priorities are education, education, education. We have heard that before, but this government goes further. It says that the initial core goal is to raise the literacy and numeracy achievement of children up to age eleven. The government sets specific targets. The baseline they observe is that the percentage of eleven-year-olds scoring 4 or 5 on the test of literacy was 57 per cent in 1996 (level 4 being the level at which proficiency standards are met); for numeracy the baseline was 54 per cent. The minister announces that the targets for 2002 are 80 per cent for literacy (up from 57 per cent) and 75 per cent for numeracy (up from 54 per cent). He makes a commitment that he will resign as secretary of state if those targets are not met.

Further, the leaders of the initiative in the Department for Education and Employment set out to use the change knowledge base to design a set of pressure-and-support strategies to accomplish this remarkable feat. Finally, they know they are going to be watched carefully as this highly political and highly explicit initiative unfolds. A team of us at the University of Toronto are monitoring and assessing the entire NLNS strategy as it unfolds during the 1998 to 2002 period.

The main elements of the implementation strategy are summarized by Michael Barber (2000, pp. 8-9), head of the government initiative:

- A nationally prepared project plan for both literacy and numeracy, setting out actions, responsibilities, and deadlines through to 2002
- A substantial investment sustained over at least six years and skewed toward those schools that need most help
- A project infrastructure involving national direction from the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, 15 regional directors, and over 300 expert consultants at the local level for each of the two strategies
- An expectation that every class will have a daily math lesson and daily literacy hour
- A detailed teaching programme covering every school year for children from ages 5 to 11
- An emphasis on early intervention and catch up for pupils who fall behind
- A professional development programme designed to enable every primary school teacher to learn to understand and use proven best practices in both curriculum areas
The appointment of over 2,000 leading math teachers and hundreds of expert literacy teachers who have the time and skill to model best practice for their peers

The provision of intensive support to circa half of all schools where the most progress is required

A major investment in books for schools (over 23 million new books in the system since May 1997)

The removal of barriers to implementation (especially a huge reduction in prescribed curriculum content outside the core subjects)

Regular monitoring and extensive evaluation by our national inspection agency, Ofsted

A national curriculum for initial teacher training requiring all providers to prepare new primary school teachers to teach the daily math lesson and the literacy hour

A problem-solving philosophy involving early identification of difficulties as they emerge and the provision of rapid solutions or intervention where necessary

The provision of extra after-school, weekend, and holiday booster classes for those who need extra help to reach the standard.

The impact of the strategies on achievement, measured as a percentage of pupils reaching levels 4 or 5, is in many ways astounding (recall that twenty thousand schools are involved). By the year 2000, the whole country had progressively moved from 57 per cent proficient achievement in literacy in 1996 to 75 per cent; and from 54 per cent to 72 per cent in numeracy. We have no doubt that the targets of 80 per cent and 75 per cent will be achieved by 2002, although I do not present it as a problem-free case because a preoccupation with achievement scores can have negative side effects, such as narrowing the curriculum that is taught and burning people out as they relentlessly chase targets.

There is a lot more than moral purpose operating in this case, and we will draw on it again in subsequent chapters. I use it here to illustrate the value and dilemmas of moral purpose. In terms of moral purpose, there are several points to be made. First, getting thousands of students to be literate and numerate who otherwise would not be so is not a bad day’s work. This is bound to make a difference in many lives.

Second, moral purpose cannot just be stated, it must be accompanied by strategies for realizing it, and those strategies are the leadership actions that energize people to pursue a desired goal. In a recent interview in the Times Education Supplement, ‘Charisma and Loud Shouting’ (2000, p. 28), Sir Michael Bichard, the permanent secretary at the Department for Education and Employment in England, said it this way:

“For me leadership is about creating a sense of purpose and direction. It’s about getting alignment and it’s about inspiring people to achieve.... (There is a) need to enthuse staff and encourage a belief in the difference their organization is making—whether it is a school or a government department. We can do a lot by making heroes of the people who deliver. It’s important to make people feel part of a success story. That’s what they want to be.”

Third, pluralistic motives abound. The government wants to be reelected, and leaders may get a lot of personal gratification if it is successful, and their careers may be enhanced, and there is an explicit measurable purpose.

Fourth, who knows whether this is a right purpose? Is there collateral damage: do other subjects like the arts suffer? Are schools becoming preoccupied only by the test results? Are teachers getting burnt out? Will short-term success be followed by deeper failure? And so on.
Fifth, is the strategy really inspiring people (principals and teachers, for example) to do better? How deep is their commitment? I have written about this case elsewhere (Fullan, 2001), and there are numerous legitimate questions about the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategy case. Our conclusion at this stage is that the strategy has indeed caught the interest and energy of the majority of principals and teachers and that they are getting a sense of pride and accomplishment from the results so far. Nevertheless, to use Argyris’s terms, the leadership strategy has generated only external commitment on the part of school educators—albeit real commitment that got real results. In order to go deeper, for example, to get at the creative ideas and energies of teachers, additional leadership strategies will be needed—strategies that will foster internal commitment (that is, commitment activated by intrinsically rewarding accomplishments).

In summary, leadership, if it is to be effective, has to 1. have an explicit making-a-difference sense of purpose, 2. use strategies that mobilize many people to tackle tough problems, 3. be held accountable by measured and debatable indicators of success, and 4. be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens people’s intrinsic commitment, which is none other than the mobilizing of everyone’s sense of moral purpose.

The Case of Monsanto

Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja (2000) report on the case of Monsanto, a life science company that underwent a remarkable transformation in the years 1993 to 1999 under the direction of its new CEO, Robert Shapiro. Shapiro used a series of town hall meetings to introduce the new direction and to begin a dialogue. Pascale et al. (pp. 80–81) quote at length from one of Shapiro’s presentations in 1995, attended by three hundred of the company’s informal leaders:

Here’s what bothers me. There are almost six billion people in the world but the global economy works for only one billion of them. Even for the favoured group (and the two billion that are about to join it), there are rising expectations as to the amounts, choice, quality, and health of food. At the other end of the continuum, at least one and a half billion of the world’s population are in real trouble. Eight hundred million of these are so malnourished that they cannot participate in work or family life and are on the edge of starvation. Finally, over the next thirty years, most of the additional people joining the planet will be born in poorer places.

The system we have is unsustainable. We burn a lot of hydrocarbons and waste a lot of stuff. There is not enough acreage on earth to provide for humanity’s food needs using traditional technology. In developed countries there is the interesting challenge of aging. The elderly consume a lot of health care as technology offers more costly interventions. Fewer people in the workforce end up supporting the higher bill for those who are old. This, too, is politically unsustainable.

Food is shifting from an issue of fuel and calories to an issue of choice. With growing nutritional and environmental consciousness, food must inevitably command a larger share of mind.

These problems for humanity can also be seen as a trillion-dollar opportunity. These are all unresolved problems. It isn’t just a question of modular extensions of what we have (via technology and innovations in distribution). We need to reinvent our approach fundamentally. Biotechnology is a profoundly different avenue for agriculture and human health. And information technology provides enough of a difference in degree that it represents a nanotechnology. Biotechnology is really a subset of information technology. It does not deal with the information that’s encoded electronically in silicon but with the information that is encoded chemically in cells, not used for E-mail or spreadsheets but information that tells what proteins to make, when to make them, and how to make them. The rate of increase of knowledge in this field puts Moore’s Law to shame, doubling every twelve to eighteen months. We will map the entire human genome by 2005, and will understand most of the functionality of the genome in this same period.
I believe our agriculture and health care systems will be revolutionized by the intersection of biotechnology and information technology. There is something of great consequence in the convergence of these technologies with our market knowledge, and I want you to help me discover what it is.

Pascale and his colleagues portray the interplay between Shapiro, as leader, and the employees:

“Shapiro points to pieces in the puzzle (life sciences breakthroughs, agriculture, information technology, market knowledge); listeners relate his words to their own experience and fill in the blanks with their detailed knowledge of the business; Shapiro focuses on the unsustainable problems facing humanity—immense challenges that cry out for nontraditional solutions” (p. 81)

The authors observe:

“many in the room are moved at the prospect of contributing to the elimination of world hunger and chronic suffering” (p. 83)

All of this sounds very much like moral purpose. Ideas, energy, and action follow, with some ten thousand of Monsanto’s thirty thousand employees becoming involved. Through leadership that mobilized the energies and ideas of employees, Monsanto made a rapid impact in the market. The consulting firm McKinsey called it one of the most thoroughgoing transformations in business history (p. 86).

Pascale et al note:

“Within three years following Monsanto’s introduction of genetically modified seeds, farms had shifted 50 per cent of all cotton and 40 per cent of all soybeans grown in the United States to disease- and herbicide-resistant crops. American cotton growers alone reduced herbicide consumption by $1 billion” (p. 6)

The share price, they report, “rocketed from $16 to $63” (p. 86)

It would be too simple if we concluded that Monsanto was an out and out success. There was growing objection on environmental grounds to genetically modified seeds; Monsanto initially regarded this objection as political backlash and as a public relations problem. Shapiro and his colleagues still felt that they were making a valuable contribution to the world, but by 1999 Shapiro finally acknowledged:

“Our confidence in this technology and our enthusiasm for it has, I think, widely been seen, and understandably so, as condescension or indeed arrogance. Because we thought it was our job to persuade, too often we forget to listen” (Pascale et al., 2000, p. 87)

Today, Monsanto has merged with Upjohn to form Pharmacia, with Shapiro as nonexecutive chairman. It is too early to tell how well Pharmacia will pursue the moral issues embedded in its biotechnology goals. It is still a strong financial competitor, but what are the lessons here? First, a sense of moral purpose on the part of employees is important and can make a huge difference in the performance of the organization. Second, and of growing significance in the global economy, moral purpose applies outside as well as inside the company. Pascale et al put it this way:

How a system connects with its external world is also a key source of that system’s health. Connectivity is not just about good relations with those outside the company. It impacts the quality of strategy and design and has direct bearing on a company’s success.
Biotechnology presents just one example of issues that are too complex to address without a design for broadening the participation of people with diverse concerns and stakes in the questions. Seeking out the views of scientists and government regulators, people affected in different ways by the product help everyone imagine and design for unintended consequences. To talk only to oneself as a company will lead to strategic vulnerability (Pascale et al., 2000, p. 91).

Commitment to the environment and to the broader global community as part and parcel of the long-term success of the organization is moral purpose writ large. Pascale and his colleagues conclude:

"we can no longer afford to look at our business as atomistic agents alone in a world to which we connect only through competition" (2000, p. 92)

If you want more than short-term gains, moral purpose sincerely sought is good for business. Pluralistic motives can coexist: do good, worry about the environment, and derive a profit. But leaders have to be explicitly aware of the interplay of these three forces.

I do not for a minute think that moral purpose automatically attracts people to do good things. Acting with moral purpose in a complex world is, as we have just seen, highly problematic. First, there are many, many competing goods, which cannot all be pursued. This is why coherence making is such an important quality for effective leadership, as we will discuss in Chapter Six. Coherence making, which involves prioritizing and focusing, is greatly facilitated when guided by moral purpose.

Second, and more fundamentally, moral purpose is problematic because it must contend with reconciling the diverse interests and goals of different groups. Diversity means different races, different interest groups, different power bases, and basically different lots in life. To achieve moral purpose is to forge interaction—and even mutual purpose—across groups. Yet the problem is that people are not equal, and the privileged have a vested interest in the status quo as long as it works in their favor.

Still, profit-minded businesses do better when they pay attention to moral purpose. De Gues (1997) worked for Royal Dutch/Shell for almost forty years and studied long living companies. He found that in many countries, 40 per cent of newly created companies last less than ten years and that even the big solid companies do not hold out for more than an average of forty years (p. 2). By contrast, long-lived companies (those lasting more than fifty years) had a strong sense of purpose and were adaptive to their environments without compromising core ideals.

De Gues (1997) talks about both the negative and the positive case:

"Companies die because their managers focus on the economic activity of producing goods and services, and they forget their organizations’ true nature is that of a community of humans” (p. 3)

In contrast:

A healthy living company will have members, both humans and other institutions, who subscribe to a set of common values and who believe that the goals of the company allow them and help them to achieve their own individual goals. Both the company and its constituent members have basic driving forces; they want to survive, and once the conditions for survival exist, they want to reach and expand their potential. The underlying contract between the company and its members (both individuals and other institutions) is that the members will be helped to reach their potential. It is understood that this, at the same time, is in the company’s self interest. The self-interest of the company stems from its understanding that the members’ potential helps create the corporate potential (p. 2001)
Whether we are talking about a biotechnical company or a school, having moral purpose—both in terms of contribution to society and development of commitment in employees—makes excellent business sense in the middle to long run. Organizations without such purpose die sooner than later. At best, they win the odd early battle and steadily lose the war thereafter.

The message of this chapter is that moral purpose is worthwhile on just about every meaningful criterion; it may not become activated on its own accord, but it is there in nascent form to be cultivated and activated. I have argued elsewhere that moral purpose has a tendency to become stronger as humankind evolves (Fullan, 1999). Thus, in evolutionary terms, moral purpose has a predestined tendency to surface. Effective leaders exploit this tendency and make moral purpose a natural ally. Although moral purpose is natural, it will flourish only if leaders cultivate it.

There are signs that moral purpose is on the ascendency in schools and businesses. A good example is Palmer’s The Courage to Teach (1998), in which he shows how the best teachers integrate the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects of teaching to create powerful learning communities. With respect to businesses, Garten (2001) interviewed forty prominent men and women around the world who held CEO, president, and chairperson positions in major companies. Garten describes how some executives have made the direct link between social responsibility and the morale, productivity, and loyalty of employees, such as Jarma Ollila, chairman and CEO of Nokia Corporation, whom Garten quotes:

> People want their company to be a good citizen. They want it to show true concern for the world, for the environment. They want it to have a social conscience. There is now a very clear expectation which is coming from political life as well as our employees, that companies will have to have a soul, a state of mind which represents a social conscience. That’s very different from the early 1990s when we were applauded just for employing more people. There is a very high expectation, something I did not see when I started as CEO in 1992 (p. 184)

Similarly, Bolman and Deal (2000, p. 185) predict that

> “culture and core values will be increasingly recognized as the vital social glue that infuses an organization with passion and purpose. Workers will increasingly demand more than a paycheck. They’ll want to know the higher calling or enabling purpose of their work.”

Garten (2001, p. 192) goes on to say, however, that most leaders,

> “are badly understanding the rise of global problems that will affect their firms and the environment in which they operate. They are failing to see the gap between society’s expectations of what they should do and what they seem prepared to do.”

The most fundamental conclusion of this chapter is that moral purpose and sustained performance of organizations are mutually dependent. Leaders in a culture of change realize this. Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja (2000, p. 92) found elements of this kind of leadership in the seven companies they studied, and call sustainability the challenge of the century:

> “The theory of sustainability is that it is constituted by a trinity of environmental soundness, social justice, and economic viability. If any of these three are weak or missing, the theory of sustainability says that that practice (what the organization is doing) will not prove sustainable over time.”

We are now ready to extend our thinking, because in a nonlinear world it is easy to lose one’s way, even if one is motivated by moral purpose. If we live in a culture of change—and we certainly do—to understand the change process is a vital quality of all leaders.