

# TWENTY YEARS IN AND TWENTY YEARS TO GO

by Khurshed  
Dehnugara

*The title and timing of this book is apt because I often think of my work as particularly for those in organisational life that are 20 years into their careers with 20 years to go. The picture this conjures in my mind is of someone who has been educated formally and informally in a particular frame of reference and is now in the middle of a phase shift towards something new they are not resourced to lead within.*

As is the way of things, there is no sudden change after 20 years in a workplace and this makes it all the more difficult to navigate. There are endings, beginnings and 'in-betweens' going on all around us, all at the same time. We are left disoriented as some aspects are disintegrating and others are emerging. In essence a paradigm in which the superior value is placed on planning, security, control, individual accountability, consistency, positional power, perfection, size, high growth and profitability is adapting to one in which instability, disturbance, emergence, networks, informal learning, trial, error, adaptability, low growth, fluctuation and momentum are playing a much greater role in organisational leadership. The old constructs (typically masculine and industrial, full of certainty) are less capable of meeting the changing nature of the world their strategies are designed to navigate.

This growing awareness is underpinned by a paradoxical reaction. A realisation that the old ways are no longer working as effectively as we wish combined with a response that generates more of the same. A frantic desperation to have the old ways work by working harder at them. It is understandable that we want to hold onto the old winning formula. In the Western world in particular we are the beneficiaries of an industrial society that has contributed health, wealth and wellbeing on an unprecedented scale, through organisational practices that we are reluctant to question.

The difficulty we are having with this challenge is manifesting in a range of ways in all our large institutions, not just the corporate ones. The anxiety is expressed from both leaders and followers in ways that spiral downwards through blame of each other, self-protection, fewer risks, less creativity and participation, new rules and regulations and less engagement.

I have been coaching executives and facilitating teams that are navigating this territory and in line with a coaching philosophy I thought 20 questions may be more appropriate than 20 answers. The overarching inquiry underpinning the 20 questions is: "How do we turn our destructive anxiety about this phase shift into one that can be used creatively?" I have split the 20 questions into two categories: Inner Work and Outer Work. Inner Work is a challenge to your personal hard wiring, your mindsets and habits. It develops your courage, authenticity and resilience. Outer Work is a challenge to your relationships, approaches and acts of leadership. It creates the environmental conditions that enable the shift to occur 'out there' in your workplace and marketplace.

## INNER WORK

### 1. How are you tranquilizing yourself?

Habits, winning formulae, the things that have made you successful to date, the cultural norms you have had to live by and grow up in. How might you allow yourself to change a long held position and be effected by the events you are experiencing today?

### 2. How do you react to disturbance?

It might be caused by a mistake you have made or something unexpected coming in from your competitors, regulators or colleagues. How does your anxiety manifest itself? Where do you turn? Who do you turn it on?

### 3. What are you willing to give up?

What are you finished with? How has it served its purpose? What could come into the new space that is created? This new entrant may be physical, emotional, behavioural, psychological or spiritual.

### 4. Where is your true north, what will be the inner compass that guides your choices when things get difficult?

Ethics, morals and choices don't have to be collectively shared in this domain. If you can develop an understanding of yours and test them against your real life scenarios -that will help. Knowing what you stand against is as helpful as knowing what you stand for.

### 5. How do you actively inspire yourself?

What is the diversity of your network? What are the sources of experience you have day to day that help anticipate change? This is not about receiving advice handed down by others more experienced than you operating at some point in history; it is about exposing yourself to experiencing and learning about today's trends that will cause some kind of discontinuity in your work. The inner work element of this is in your head, the work of translation, connection, interpretation and meaning making.

### 6. What is your version of 'just enough' certainty?

Play and experimentation can only happen when you feel in just enough control of your life and able to take responsibility for your freedom. What is that internal version of just enough certainty for you in your work?

### 7. What happens in the magical time when your psychological defences drop?

Even if just for a moment, it can give you access to a host of insight that has lived for years behind a wall of defences that are difficult to get past. How might these moments be realised? Staying up too late? Fasting? Meditating? Being under unbearable pressure? Suddenly being tripped up or exposed?

### 8. How does your ego cope with ups and downs?

You need a practice of some kind that helps you maintain your resilience in the light of all the difficulties you will inevitably encounter.

How will you keep going without damaging yourself or the people around you? How will you develop your capacity to 'bounce back' and keep going?

### 9. What can you do to strategically, profoundly, madly let go?

Throwing ourselves into the domain of not really knowing what is going on or what we should do about it. So much of our current leadership value is predicated on knowing the answers. To everything. Or at least being a good enough actor to convince ourselves and others that we do.

## 10. If you just focused on noticing, what would you see?

Internally, interpersonally, externally without recourse to explanation, justification, defence, analysis or complaint. Just be interested in the observation not the perceptions that subsequently arise from it.

## OUTER WORK

### 11. What do you already know you would not be allowed to do?

No go zones, no entry signs, keep out, private, beware of the guard dog type areas. What are they? What are you creating in your interpretation of the situations? How is this keeping you blocked? What assumptions are you making? How do you know that they are true?

### 12. What are the anomalies and hidden failures you can keep pointing at despite a reluctance to see them in the organisation?

Keep speaking, louder when possible, hold onto the little assurance you receive, keep going past those who want to avoid, collude with or get antagonistic about what you are saying.

### 13. What are your most testing and fulfilling relationships?

This space in between us is incredibly potent if we allow ourselves to think of it in physical rather than simply spatial terms. The in-between that contains projections, reflections, conflict, tension, strife, delight, exhilaration and the unspoken. What are they telling you about challenging the status quo?

### 14. What are the most symbolic acts you could undertake to demonstrate you are serious about challenging the status quo?

These are not always the most difficult or resource intensive acts. Symbolism is a function of meaning created not effort expended.

And sometimes it is important just to get started!

### 15. What are you trying to cause?

This is the domain of possibility and hope and ambition - the thing that is worth standing for and expending yourself in the pursuit of. Don't be embarrassed to let it come from your (impossible) dreams. How does your individual cause contribute to the collective ambition of your team and the other people around you?

### 16. What are all the means by which a helpful disturbance could manifest in your workplace?

Can you challenge, break, stretch, fold or combine something that 'shouldn't' be?

### 17. What is going on out there?

At the edges, in the places you would not usually visit, with the people that you are nothing like? What are all the 'field trips' you could immerse yourself in to learn about the next phase of your organisation? These trips aren't just about the content they are also about what happens to the quality of your thinking when you are in a different context.

### 18. How much longer can you keep the inquiry open?

We often rush past the questions and conversations so that we can move quickly to action. There are many times when you may benefit from slowing down, allowing the conversation to stay open for a while longer so that what is trying to make itself heard has more of a chance. It also helps access the depth from which much magic arises.

### 19. How can you create enough anxiety in others to unfreeze this situation?

What can you surface, confront, face into, make a declaration on or commit collectively to that turns the anxiety up a few notches. The intention in doing so is to release creativity and momentum, not to persecute others for your own gratification.

## 20. How are you staying light on your feet and keeping things moving?

When you cause anxiety in others, the first place the reaction comes back to is you! What are the strategies you have in place to keep moving through the noise and drama?

### Doing The Work

It is easy to rush past these questions isn't it? Despite working in this area for a while I still find myself doing so. When I catch it I realise that it is another manifestation of my anxiety. I tell myself it isn't happening to me or around me, that I will be OK if I just keep my head down and focus. If you have just rushed past, I would ask you to go back and spend some more time with them, allow them to be your companions, reflect, muse, write things down, ask the questions of others, take your experience with them seriously.

There are stories emerging of those that are doing this work successfully. They speak of having more straight talk in the dark unseen corners of their institutions; cross collaboration and trust across previously disparate departments; a focus on insight and rapid action rather than presentations and input; difficulties become an opportunity for learning and progress rather than drama or persecution; emergence and the unexpected becoming as much part of the work as certainty and clear direction. The most enjoyable part of these stories is the common realisation that leading in this way allows people to move their internal state from one that often felt underpowered, irrelevant and tired to more potency, relevance, fulfillment and fun. If you are 20 years into your working life with another 20 years to go it has got to be worth shooting for hasn't it?

- **KHURSHED DEHNUGARA** is the co-founder of Relume, and the co-author of *The Challenger Spirit - Organisations That Disturb The Status Quo* (2011)