

Not counting the miles, only the smiles

Some weeks are busier than others. Occasionally, they bring unexpected clarity. A week of strategy workshops, executive coaching, board meetings, remarkable young people, an old Peugeot 205 memory, and a slogan my father, sister and I came up with many years ago reminded me that perhaps, after all these years, I have not been working on many different topics. Perhaps I have always been trying to answer the same question.



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The week

The past week has been full.

Two days facilitating strategy workshops with executive teams, discussing behavioural change and why it is so difficult. Coaching leaders who, despite remarkable intelligence and experience, continue to wrestle with self-doubt, difficult decisions and uncertainty. Then two board meetings. New programmes. New ideas.

The week ended at the graduation ceremony of one of the world's distinguished boarding schools that I have the privilege to accompany. Watching these students



receive their diplomas, I was struck not only by their academic achievements, but by the breadth of their development. Many took to the stage to sing or perform music at a level that, not so long ago, I thought was reserved to professional musicians.

They are only eighteen years old, or younger.

The students

It reminded me what education can be at its best. Not simply the transfer of knowledge, nor telling young people what to think, but teaching them how to think, exposing them to different perspectives and cultures, and creating an environment where they can discover who they are becoming.

Bringing together students from every corner of the world, challenging them academically, artistically, physically and socially, and allowing them to learn, grow and prosper together. In a world that too often encourages people to retreat into their own certainties, there was something profoundly hopeful about watching these students leave school with curiosity, friendships and respect for people whose backgrounds, cultures and beliefs may be very different from their own.

The drive

Yet the week actually started on Saturday.

Years ago I would drive my little Peugeot 205 all the way from Holland to Cannes and Monaco with my twin best friends, to swim in the blue sea and simply admire and photograph some of the fastest and most beautiful machines money could buy. And then we had to wait for two weeks to see the pictures we took. Can you imagine?

Last Saturday I was driving one myself. It gave me a real *Hochgefühl*. The sound. The power. The intensity and the concentration. I did get tears in my eyes for a moment. Not too many, I still needed my eyesight.

Life is not that bad after all. Sometimes it is necessary to remember how fortunate I have been. Not because it has been easy. It hasn't. There have been disappointments, setbacks, difficult choices and periods where I genuinely wondered where things were heading. But every now and then it is healthy to stop and acknowledge what has gone well too.

As I was driving, I suddenly remembered something.

Many years ago, my father, my sister and I entered a competition to promote a small convertible car. We came up with the slogan:

"Driving to the sun, just for fun. Not counting the miles, only the smiles."



We won.

That sentence came back to me last weekend. I realised it is actually much closer to the way I aspire to live than I had ever recognised.

The people

What gives me the greatest satisfaction isn't another meeting, another project or another milestone.

It is seeing people move.

I have seen tears. I have seen smiles. I have seen people go from "This is hopeless" to "I know what I need to do next to find my way out of this."

Those are the moments I work for.

The question

Looking back over the week, and perhaps over the past twenty-five years as an aerospace engineer, management consultant, executive coach, entrepreneur and teacher, another thought occurred to me.

I always thought I had been working on many different topics: problem solving, strategy, leadership, communication, decision making with teams and executive coaching.

Perhaps they were never separate topics.

Perhaps I have always been trying to answer the same question.

How do people actually change?

From the hope of improvement through a genuine intention to change to the action and commitment to making change happen. And stick.

The summer

This summer I want to spend some time organising those thoughts. I certainly don't have all the answers. Far from it. But I do feel that some of the pieces are falling into place.

Coincidentally, this summer also marks the beginning of a new chapter in my life. One that I have been looking forward to for quite some time.

Not counting the miles, only the smiles.