

INTRODUCTION

I awoke with a sudden jolt.

Checking my watch, it was 4:11 in the morning, and still dark outside.

Something was going around in my head like clothes in a tumble drier. Round and round and round and... You know what it's like in the middle of the night, when you wake up with a feeling of total clarity, that singular thought that makes perfect sense in the deep dark stillness. Your inner critic is fast asleep, and everything seems possible; there are no limits.

What was tumbling around in my mind that night was a simple image – a metaphor, in fact.

I'd been asked to introduce MasterCard and Centrica Chairman Rick Haythornthwaite at the University of West of England's Distinguished Executive Address, where he was going to speak on 'Leadership in Disruptive Times'. I'm sure you can imagine that, as the day approached, I was wondering what on earth could I say to an audience of business leaders that would be appropriate and wouldn't make me look, sound and feel like a complete idiot!

So when I had that lucid night-time moment, it came with a real sense of relief. This was my thought in a nutshell:

"It's like the Titanic. We're headed for a massive iceberg and everyone's pretending it's not there."

Now, as it turns out, we do all know it's there, but no-one's prepared to say or do anything about it because we all feel so powerless.

During my introduction that evening, I asked the audience – an audience of business leaders, remember - for a show of hands. I asked them, "Who here thinks the current economic model is sustainable?" In a room filled with about a hundred people, only two raised their hands.

"Isn't that interesting," I said, "The majority of us think it's unsustainable, and yet we collectively collude to deny what's happening. And that, to me, represents the biggest leadership challenge of the 21st Century."

Gloom Alert: What on Earth's Going On?

That's what The Titanic Factor is all about: how we continue to behave in ways that keep us heading relentlessly towards the icebergs, even though we know they're there, lying silently in wait; and how we as individuals can take a lead in shaping the changes needed to create a brighter future for us all.

It's not just in business, there are icebergs littered across the whole spectrum of society: politics, inequality, legal systems, education, religion, community, consumerism, and pretty much any walk of life you could choose to mention.

We're at a critical point in our history. We're using resources faster than the earth can replenish them. At our current level of consumption we would need one and a half planets for it to be sustainable, and developing economies are all accelerating this trend. If everyone had the same standard of living as the US we'd need more than 3 planets worth of resources to sustain us.

Then there's global warming and climate change, and everything that comes with it...

Most of us know this. We get it intellectually, and yet both individually and collectively we're behaving in ways that are in denial of what's going on around us.

Just as the Titanic was holed and sunk by an iceberg, we're also surrounded by 'icebergs' that could sink our economic and social systems if we continue to ignore them.

The Problem with Sustainability

One of the biggest obstacles we face is, I believe, the sustainability movement itself. We're forever being told we shouldn't eat meat, or drive fast cars, fly, buy stuff, and so on... There are campaigns like the Descent Movement to wean us off fossil fuels, and Contract & Converge to reduce consumption and encourage greater inter-dependence.

These initiatives are all very noble and good, and way better than doing nothing, but there are three main problems:

- 1) They talk the language of lack and loss. However much we may see the sense of it, our emotional brains – our subconscious minds – don't want us to lose anything. They want to keep us safe and protect us from loss, right now – even at the expense of far great potential future consequences. That's why diets usually don't work, and it's why these ideas in their current form are unlikely to ever gain significant traction with regular people like you and me.
- 2) The vast majority of sustainability initiatives rightly focus on trying to solve a part of the problem, whether it's global warming, resource depletion, species extinction, child poverty or whatever. But what

happens when you focus in on the detail is that vested interests in that particular field will seek to discredit you, and when part of the issue is discredited, so is the whole. For example, sceptics may say (true or not), "It's scientifically proven that climate change is not man-made, so all this sustainability rubbish is a load of hogwash!"

- 3) They're trying to solve problems using the same kind of thinking that created them. They are not informed by a vision of a bright new future that we, our children, and their great-grandchildren can aspire to, rather they're looking for sticking plaster solutions to create short-term fixes to admittedly very real threats.

So the important question isn't so much how to solve individual issues, rather it's: "How can we create a vibrant and sustainable future everyone can buy into, while still enjoying better, richer and more fulfilled lives?"

What we don't want is a lowest-common-denominator future where we have to resort to a primitive 'back to nature' lifestyle, deprived of the joy of being human. In short, if the future is a bland meaningless existence, who's going to want it?

Of course, many people already have bland meaningless existences, even with all the excesses of our modern consumer-driven society. And that's a conundrum.

In the chapters that follow we'll be discovering why this has happened, discussing some of the questions we need to be asking, and looking at ways we can actually do something about it. Without taking to the streets waving placards and shouting, "Bring down the government!"

What's the Answer?

What you won't find in this book is me telling you what the solutions are. I've got my views, but if I try to impose them on others, that's just old-style thinking where someone has a view and others decide whether or not to go with them. Some will, some won't. Which means the solution won't work for everyone and there will be people who feel their needs aren't being met.

What will work is if everyone helps to create solutions that do work for us all, and that needs a very different approach. I'll explain how we can achieve this later in the book.

The significant point is that as long as we feel powerless, nothing will change. When we feel that sense of powerlessness, that's when we individually carry on acting in ways that don't serve us collectively. We think our actions don't make a difference, so we're indifferent about making conscious choices.

The answer then, lies in us feeling *em*-powered. And that comes from us understanding the important part we each play in the world.

Our individual actions have collectively gotten us to where we are now, and it's our future actions that will create either a better world, or some other reality.

It's our choice, and it's your choice.

The power is in you, me, and every individual on the planet, to make that difference. We each count – every single one of us.

But before taking action, we first need to understand where this sense of powerlessness has come from, and figure out what we can do about it.

To do that, we're going to start off by taking a look at how our modern day systems have evolved, and why we've ended up feeling impotent and excluded, despite living in what's supposed to be a democracy.

In short: why do we feel so disconnected from our world?

Who am I to Talk?

I love business, and I love people.

I'm an economist, a capitalist, and I'm also a socialist. In fact, I would call myself a 'socio-capitalist', meaning I believe in socially responsible capitalism.

Over the years I've been involved in the sustainability movement in various ways, drawing on my experience as a marketing professional. I was Marketing Director for the Association of Sustainability Practitioners and, in my role with the Chartered Institute of Marketing, helped set up and launch the Bristol Fairtrade Network.

Then something happened that opened my eyes and turned me away from the mainstream of the sustainability movement...

The turning point came for me when I was part of a team bidding to buy the campus of a former agricultural college in Devon. As part of our networking and research geologist Dr Iain Stewart, a leading ecologist, Professor of Geoscience Communication at the University of Plymouth, England, and presenter of several TV series explained: "Sustainability is a battleground Brett; everyone is fighting for their bit of turf."

That was it! That was the problem: people were fighting over the deck chairs.

And I saw this kind of thinking going on all over the place. People were coming up with great ideas, setting up organisations, NGOs and charities, often with very similar aims. They all want ownership of their ideas, to control their turf. There was no sense of sharing a common purpose, no cooperation. Ego was still getting in the way, even though individually people were acting out of their highest intentions.

I realized that way was not the answer, and turned my back on the whole thing to concentrate on working with business leaders as a coach, mentor and consultant.

Until one night a few years later, I awoke with a sudden jolt...