

Be conscious!

Launched in 2012 by **Ben Emmens** and **Abi Green**, the Conscious Project has one clear aim: to help individuals and organisations think about what they are doing, and do it better or, in other words, to be more conscious

The Conscious Project works with organisations that seek to be more conscious, those who want to engage and bring their people with them, those who strive for impact. As a result, our client base is predominantly non-profit – whether the Red Cross, United Nations or non-government agencies such as the International Rescue Committee, ActionAid, Habitat for Humanity – or organisations with a clear social purpose such as Airbnb.

The Conscious Project has a substantial coaching portfolio and supports senior executives and leaders in countries all over the world. Our consultancy portfolio includes current and recent projects such as: facilitating a people strategy for UNICEF; supporting organisational change and implementation for Habitat for Humanity; designing and establishing a pilot training and development programme for the British Red Cross; and designing and delivering management and leadership programmes for frontline humanitarians in the International Rescue Committee, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), International Medical Corps Worldwide and the Organisation for Islamic Co-operation.

How does the business model work?

Configured in a way that befits a 21st century organisation, the Conscious Project is essentially a values-based platform supporting a virtual guild of “master craftspeople”. The highly agile, networked team of individuals based all over the world functions as a boutique consultancy, occupying a space between established global players such as McKinsey and Accenture and the countless independent experts and consultants who do excellent work in their respective geographic markets.

Technology and virtual working spaces replace costly real estate, which in turn enables a competitive pricing philosophy appropriate to an organisation whose clients are largely non-profits.

Consultancy teams are brought together under the Conscious consulting banner according to the knowledge, skills and expertise required by a project. Whether in Amman or Atlanta, Bangkok or Bangui, Vanuatu or Vienna, or anywhere else, Conscious Project consultants can be found accompanying leaders and managers, walking alongside them and asking questions, giving support, sharing insight, offering guidance.

Values based work...

From the outset, we have relentlessly applied our core values (generosity, humility, accompaniment and stewardship) to our work. Of particular interest to all those that the organisation works with are the combination of generosity and humility, which are at the heart of the effort to shift power.

These values may seem counter-intuitive in an age of individualism and egotism and without doubt they are risky - perhaps at face value they seem to imply naïveté and invite exploitation – but the Conscious Project is reclaiming and re-applying them since they underpin our commitment to achieving impact and our focus on enabling positive social change.

Generosity

It's no coincidence that one of our core values at the Conscious Project is generosity and this is how it is described to clients and partners:

“We think generously, listen generously and live generously. Whether leading, doing or facilitating,





“

Whether in Amman or Atlanta, Bangkok or Bangui, Vanuatu or Vienna, or anywhere else, Conscious Project consultants can be found accompanying leaders and managers, walking alongside them and asking questions, giving support, sharing insight, offering guidance

our work is rooted in appreciative inquiry and positive psychology; we believe people realise their potential when they are inspired to be all they can be. We nurture a growth mindset in one another and those we work with.”

How much does generosity cost?

Certainly generosity takes time and is an investment of thinking and energy: it requires us to give or release something we may not want to let go of. So what can we give that costs us relatively little? Is it possible to apply the principle of generosity to our thinking and to the words we use?

Thinking generously

“Thinking generously” is a discipline that can be nurtured and it costs relatively little. It entails choosing a starting point where we assume the best [in or of the other] and continue to assume the best until proven otherwise. “Assuming the best” means crediting an individual or organisation with honest intentions or motives unless we have very good evidence to suggest that is completely foolish!

Thinking generously also means resisting being drawn into the *cul-de-sac* of cynicism in which motives are continually questioned or time is spent looking for evidence that an action is self-serving. Thinking generously requires us to make judgements based on fact and behaviour not on prejudices and preconceptions.

Humility

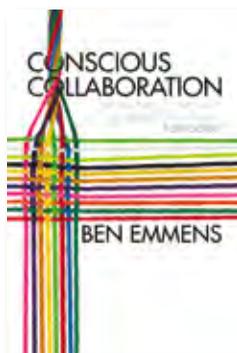
Arguably even less popular than generosity, humility tends to be associated with ancient prophets or gurus and is the preserve of certain leadership models. Attitudes differ around the world but in the West, humility does not generally seem to be a value or state that people aspire to. Certainly an initial reaction to the mention of humility is one of incredulity bordering on disbelief. Understanding humility in the context of collaboration.

Humility is generally taken to mean “having a modest or low view of one’s importance” and this is a helpful starting point. In a collaboration, the vision and outcome are the important driving forces. After that, it is the individuals that participate, what they bring, and how they work together that really matter.

When we say that humility is important, we don’t mean the false modesty or tedious self-deprecation that is often confused with genuine humility and which can poison collaborative relationships.



Above: Ben Emmens and Abi Green



“

Time and again we have seen humility unsettle the assumed power dynamics in a group, allowing quiet voices to be heard, insights to be shared, and enabling teams to be more mindful and make better decisions



False modesty and self-deprecation can be passive aggressive behaviours or associated with the mantle of victimhood; they are to be avoided. On the other hand, it is essential to understand our place in the world and in our working relationships, remain aware of our limitations and blind-spots as much as our assets and skills, and keep foremost in mind what our work is ultimately in service to.

Humility re-balances power

In working relationships and particularly in any collaboration, when individuals put to one side any preconceptions or ideas about how important or powerful they are, they play an important role in the re-balancing of power.

When one individual considers theirs to be the better idea or a more important contribution than anyone else's, they slowly quench the collaborative spirit and trust begins to break down. A spirit of humility involves a conscious relinquishing of power: not an impetuous discarding or jettisoning of power but a conscious releasing of the grip in order that the power that exists elsewhere in the collaboration has its voice and its moment to influence direction.

Time and again we have seen humility unsettle the assumed power dynamics in a group, allowing quiet voices to be heard, insights to be shared, and enabling teams to be more mindful and make better decisions.

At the Conscious Project, humility is a core value. Here's what the team says:

"We don't put ourselves on a pedestal or come with one-size-fits-all shiny solutions! We are human and when it comes to society we are part of the problem as well as part of the solution. Our work is not about 'us' as experts, or reinforcing inequality or vested interest; rather, it is gently disruptive and about the 'collective us' and a connected world. We each have a part to play and our methodologies unlock your own expertise, insight and experience, so that together we can craft the best possible outcomes." (www.theconsciousproject.org)

Humility and 'gentle disruption'

In a culture of genuine humility, questions are permitted, even encouraged, and as we know questions and constructive challenge are essential for organisations and collaborative work to thrive.

Gentle disruption is not the noisy, aggressive questioning approach in which individuals show how clever they are but rather it is about respectful and incisive questions that constructively challenge and momentarily disrupt thinking, leading to more questions that refine understanding and a conscious re-engagement with the vision and clarification of the desired outcome.

Theory into action?

Perhaps your curiosity has been piqued by the work of the Conscious Project and you are challenged by the way we try to apply our values of generosity and humility? If so, why not take a few moments to reflect on:

- How do you act generously as a leader and/or as a business?
- Where can you identify new opportunities to demonstrate generosity?
- When have you demonstrated humility as a business leader?
- How could humility serve your organisation?



About the Authors

Some of the ideas and concepts in this article are drawn from the book *Conscious Collaboration* by Ben Emmens, co-founder with Abi Green of the Conscious Project www.theconsciousproject.org