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One question can change everything

Tony Manning

Think about this for a moment: On a scale of 1 to 10, how will you rate today? Will it be a disastrous 1 or 2 ... a dreary 5 ... or a whiz-bang 10? The choice is yours. You can take whatever comes, and hope things turn out well. Or you can shape the minutes and hours ahead of you – and everything that follows.

Every now and then, I hit on a “big question.” This one is especially profound. It can help you transform your life. And it can help you transform your organisation.

It has become trite to say, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” But it’s perfectly true. The decisions and actions you take right now have a long-term impact. They’re your stepping stones to the future.

As individuals, we need to think carefully about how we’ll use our time, energy, effort and imagination. We can use these resources or lose them. To allow others to decide for us is to cheat ourselves in the worst possible way. To ignore our ambitions, values and self-worth is the surest way to fall short of our potential.

Success comes in many ways. For some people, it’s a matter of money. Others realise it through their creativity – design, painting, writing or acting. And there are those who invent things, do deals, teach, manage or just do an honest day’s work in a mundane area. Ultimately, however, success rests on one word: integrity.

That’s a common word today. It has become a big issue in organisational life, and for good reasons. There are plenty of crooks around. Many practices are highly questionable. Trust in companies and top executives has taken a terrible beating. But integrity is not just a corporate matter. It’s also a very personal one.

Integrity in an individual does not mean only that you can take them at their word, or that they won’t lie or steal or cheat. It goes much further than that. Integrity means that they are true to themselves. You don’t have to “de-code” them. There is absolute consistency between what they are and what they say and do. They are comfortable in their own skin.

So back to my question: How will you rate today? Or to put it slightly differently: What will you make of today? Will you meander into it in a half-hearted way, wait and see what it brings and do what you must to pass the time? Or will you live it in a way that’s right for you, that makes you feel good and also makes a difference?

We all owe it to ourselves to live our own lives rather than the lives someone else chooses for us. Of course, this isn’t always possible. There are times when we have to compromise and do things or act in ways not of our choosing. But to do that deliberately, with a full understanding of what we are about and why, is one thing; it’s something else entirely to slip into default mode and just let it happen.

If top executives asked themselves my question, they might wonder why they treat their people the way they do. What’s the payoff for being secretive about their

business strategy, for being autocratic or rude, for not listening to others' opinions or for cutting them short in discussions?

They might also reflect on the fact that the job of a leader is to get results through others. And that people by and large work because they want to, and because they seek meaning in their work. So providing the space in which they will voluntarily stretch themselves is the ultimate leadership skill.

If CEOs set out to make every day a "10" for themselves, surely they would achieve that most easily by helping other people also get there. And if only a handful of their employees went home at night having invested themselves heart and soul in the challenges they faced, the impact on innovation, productivity, quality, sales and profits would be incalculable.

Soft stuff, you say? Well, why not try it? You might just discover that my big question is just what you need to re-energise yourself and your team.

Tony Manning is an independent strategy consultant and author of *Tony Manning's Management Toolkit*. He can be contacted at strategist@tonymanning.com.