

BBx Interview No.2
Chan Abraham
Thursday 18 October 2012



Dr Chan Abraham leads Luminus Group, ranked as UK No. 1 for Leadership, Wellbeing and Strong Moral Principles among The Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For, on which Chan also holds the Special Leadership Award as the UK's top CEO. He founded Leadership International in 1993 to energise a renaissance of leadership. His other experience includes being a non-executive director and trustee of the National Health Service, charities, probation board, school governor and many voluntary leadership roles.

BBx: First of all, how did it all begin?

Chan: I first became interested in leadership many years ago when I was at England's largest church called Kensington Temple (KT), where I met many leaders from different cultures across the world. Over the years, I saw the ways leaders worked and operated. Some of them were very good in what they did. But in too many others, including many churches and other organisations, I saw that people were very unhappy. I also experienced some aspects of very bad leadership. From all of this I began to understand that, while I was also a leader myself, I needed to look at ways in which I could develop a fresh and better concept of leadership..

Often I saw leaders who appeared to be strong but who really were weak through their insecurity. I realised that a leader who is insecure will try to control others, often also displaying impatience, a lack of transparency or even anger. I very much felt that we needed to find a new way of leading people.

I began to develop the concept of 'a renaissance of leadership'; we needed to see a re-birth of leadership, where people of all backgrounds, diverse cultures, and both men and women, can lead and be led in a way that enables us to get better results, whether in business or faith settings.

I therefore have created **"THIRD MILLENNIUM LEADERSHIP"** and I have used these principles very successfully in my organisation in Britain. As a result, we have the highest level of employee engagement and clear evidence that people are positive and highly motivated to be at work for more than just financial reward. Other organisations and the UK media have watched us and are mesmerised, because they cannot understand why it is so different. The fact is that many British people are not happy coming to work; they love their holidays. The UK

has something called 'the Monday morning blues', which is not a song. It is about how miserable people are on Monday mornings, especially when they think about going to work!

But, in our organisation, things are much different. Of course, it is unavoidable that people will experience problems, difficulties and unhappiness. However, your life will be more bearable if the time you spend at work is positive and engaging, if you feel that the social environment is strong and healthy, not dysfunctional. Many people are unhappy at home, and they also are unhappy at work. An example of what this has caused is that, in Britain over the past ten years, on Friday and Saturday nights, we have had big problems with young people binge drinking in the streets. It means they are there on Friday and Saturday nights, drinking vast amounts of alcohol, getting very ill. In the next 20 years, the UK will have a major epidemic of liver disease and ill health among these people. The UK National Health Service will not be able to cope and there will not be enough liver transplants.

I am saying all of this, because the place of work is very important and, even though people may be unhappy in their personal lives, an engaging, motivating and inspiring workplace can make the difference for them. This is where leadership can make its impact, because what leaders do is very vital in creating that kind of workplace. So my passion for what I do arises from my experience, observation and thinking over many years ago and has shaped and influenced my passion to see a more excellent way of doing business and delivering leadership. This is at the heart of everything I do and believe in, and we've seen outstanding results.

As an example, our absenters are very low; people don't get sick through being unhappy at work. Now, people do get sick in the natural order of life, of course. But people in my organisation don't have what we have in Britain called 'duvet days'. A 'duvet day' is when they decide to stay at home, possibly in bed, pulling the duvet over their head to hide from facing up to going to work! If people are motivated in going to work, they are going to feel inspired. And that's why I encourage people to say 'Something good is going to happen to me today.' I have a monthly conference with all the staff, as well as specially invited business guests, in our headquarters. You will find many of them say this on a daily basis.

For follower of Jesus Christ, it's also good to say 'Something good is going to happen to me today in Jesus' name.' I say it every morning, and then briefly pray for my immediate family, and many others. So I start everyday believing that this will be a day in which God will be with others and me.

BBx: Do you think your faith is the foundation side or the influencing side of your leadership style?

Chan: It is the foundation.

The principles of the Bible hold good in every culture, tradition and time zone. The Bible influences my thought processes, what I have done to model my leadership arising from that. Most of them are intuitive. I have not looked at the Bible and looked for what it says about leadership. I know from my heart and by the Spirit what is right. But then I go back to the Bible and look at the leaders in the Bible. Take David, who was a great leader, but with a lot of problems and Solomon his son, also a great leader but with flaws as well. We can learn from their lives and I have given lectures setting out the valuable lessons we can learn. I'm currently doing a series at Daybreak Community Church and you can see the videos on the website (www.daybreakcommunitychurch.org.uk).

So back to your question, do biblical principles influence my leadership style? They are indeed the foundation. And they have to be, because one of the core principles of *Leadership International* is "servant leadership", which I define as "sacrificial love for those you lead". You won't find CEOs talking about loving those they lead. When I have talked about this to business leaders, they have looked at me with surprise, because love is a very difficult word for people to cope with. But people who work at my organisation know it; they know it by results.

It is very unusual for a chief executive to be in this situation, but you see, a leader is also meant to be a pastor, a shepherd, someone who cares for the needs of their people. When people know it is genuine, they respond. They are not disrespectful, and they don't mistake kindness for weakness. People ask, 'How can you be the leader and care for people, especially when you may have to make difficult decisions about them and their future?' Well, the two are not incompatible. What I'm trying to do is to teach and train people to understand that you can be a strong leader but you can also be a responsive leader. And people respond to that.

BBx: You mentioned in your talk that a leader needed to have a vision, a higher goal. Do you think it is possible for a CEO to be a strong leader just to have a goal there instead of having a faith-based calling?

Chan: The approach I took with *Leadership International* has been to demonstrate that Third Millennium Leadership is transferable into any situation. The reason I say that is because the Bible is also applicable in every situation. Whether someone is a person with faith or not, the truth is the truth. My organisation is not a faith-based organisation. When I teach the principles of leadership in a non-Faith setting, I don't use faith type language. You don't need to because the truth transfers.

Let us take one of the core principles of *Leadership International*, 'Leadership without ego.' There are two applications: (1) If you are a person with faith, what you say is accountable to God. (2) If you aren't, then you need to be accountable to something, whether it is to a goal, or to a board, or to the people you lead. The principle is the same. Ego, which is the inner driving force in many leaders, is dangerous and destructive. Those people focus on themselves and are

influenced by their self-interest. When you take ego out of your life, when you say 'I'm not here to serve my own interest, I'm here to serve somebody else, or something else, or the enterprise' then you are opening the door to become a more effective leader.

The principles of Third Millennium Leadership are transferable to any kind of leadership setting. The secret of their effectiveness and strength is that they change the character of the leader, and that's what I'm interested in - building leaders of character, because these are the leaders people in the 21st century want to follow. If you are not a leader with character, if you are an egotist, people may still follow you because they have no choice, but at the first available opportunity they may leave you. A leader is only a leader when they look behind them there are followers. If the followers are dragging their feet, they are not following real leaders but despots and dictators. As soon as there is a catastrophe or crisis, those followers will run away. But if you are someone who is engaging, a servant leader, people will follow you – and very often through difficulty to the goal you are leading them on to achieve.

BBx: I find it very interesting when you said 'When people join a company, they join the organisation; when they leave, they are leaving the manager.' It is so true.

Chan: Research in the UK over the past decade shows that the most significant person in an employee's life is their immediate line manager. That is the person they see (or should see) on a regular basis. If that person thanks them, praises them, gives them constructive feedback (which means 'You did this really well, well done', but also 'You didn't do this so good, let's look at the problems or why you didn't do it so well, to see if we can train you') they are more likely to get commitment, productivity and results. Under this kind of engagement, suppose this person has been off sick, first day they come back to work, there should be an interview (with the line manager), (asking them questions like) 'How are you feeling? Can you come back to work? 'What was the problem? Was it work-related? Was there stress at home?'

This approach to the work relationship means that you will retain your employees for a longer period of time. They will be faithful and loyal, and they will help to grow the business. And this approach also will grow your people. The greatest investment you can make is in someone else. If that person grows with the vision of the company, then you've got strength. Remember a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. So every single member of a company, a business or a church, needs to be behind the vision. Otherwise, they will let you down. They will be terrorists in your organisation who will spread rumors, be negative or in some other way disrupt things.

BBx: We have had experience with organisations who think that their workers are replaceable, that human resources are easy to obtain, thus are reluctant to make the efforts to provide training and improve the way things are within the organisation to retain their employees. What do you have to suggest to organisations like this?

Chan: I see that is a very weak approach to leadership, and is fundamentally flawed, because all you would do is to replace a bad worker with another bad worker. What you need to do is to strive for excellence, where you constantly raise the bar. Imagine what the Olympics would be like, say, in the High Jump, if we were only ever content to have the bar at knee level. The rationale would be, “No one was prepared to jump any higher, so we always kept the bar there.” That’s a ridiculous approach. We want to have people striving for athletic perfection. The same is true with business; we need to realise that ***no one is dispensable***. If we have to fire a large number of people because they are not doing their job effectively, that is primarily a failure in leadership. It is not the failure of the employees; it is a failure of the company.

There are 4 stages of training and developing people that a leader should focus on:

1. I do. *You watch.*
2. I do. *You help.*
3. *You do.* I help.
4. *You do.* I watch.

So you start by being the person who does everything, and the people you are training *watch you*. Then you go into a stage where the people you are training *help you*. You go to the next stage where they *do* and you are helping. Finally, they *do* and you are watching. They are moving into a greater sphere of activity. Perhaps they are moving into leadership. That’s your principle. You try to make the way for the next person to come. That kind of organisation is continually re-energising and self-sustaining and you are growing people from within with a lot of passion about your vision.

BBx: You talked a lot about the responsibilities a leader needs to take and to grow their people. How much responsibility you think employees should take for their happiness or problems at work? How can they do their part to change?

Chan: When I say the leader must take the ultimate responsibility, I mean that. But successful businesses, like the one I lead, train their employees to realise that it is their responsibility as well. I encourage people to live as if it’s their own business. I ask them, “If you owned the business yourself, how would you run it?” And you will find that people become less wasteful, and they begin to look after the work environment, make sure the place is clean, seek to minimise waste and try to ensure the organisation is as efficient as possible.

One principle in leadership, having taken the overall responsibility, is to teach people to have that sense of personal ownership and responsibility. That’s a big challenge, especially in large organisations or bureaucracies, where people don’t have a sense of ownership. You have to try to give people the sense of having their own stake in the organisation. “This business is dependent on how you work.” When someone feels significant in that way, their self-esteem

rises. As their self-esteem rises, they begin to take greater responsibility. As everyone takes greater responsibility, the opportunity for things to go wrong is reduced and minimised.

Ferry boats transport people between England and France. The bottom of the boat is where they take the cars. If the doors are not completely shut and a just a small amount of water gets in, it can destabilise and then sink the ship. It happened some years ago. The ship sank and a number of people died, just because a few centimetres of water got in. the issue was, whose responsibility was it to shut the doors? I use that as an example to say to people, just as it was that person's responsibility to shut the ferry doors, and prevent a disaster, so when it is your responsibility, you have to do it to the very best of your ability, because we depend on you for our safety and our success.

We need to find ways to give people examples. So I give you one example. In our business, we have a simple maxim, and it's called 'the Luminus Leaf.' I came to Head Office one morning in the autumn, when there were leaves fallen from the trees. And a leaf was inside the foyer of the main entrance. I picked it up and I put it into the bin. At the next conference when I saw all the staff, I told them about this and said, 'How many of you would have walked past that leaf and you left it to someone else to pick it up?' I showed them a leaf and I said, ' This is "the Luminus Leaf". From now on, you will remember the Luminus Leaf. Whenever you think about it, ask yourself, "What is my responsibility?" If you walk past it, you should have done it.' You can translate this same approach into many aspects of business life.

BBx: In a large society like ours, morality is something that gets corrupted and nobody takes anything as their own responsibility, because there's always someone else you can blame things on. What would you do to encourage and motivate people to see the value in doing the right thing and taking ownership at work?

Chan: Many nations need to find the Road to Renewal. This is also a principle of Third Millennium Leadership, but it takes time. So we can set ourselves a goal of changing the community, or the nation, for the better, one person at a time. We start by changing ourselves. We begin to introduce into our lives a greater discipline of responsibility, and we have to do that every day.

If you take it into a Christian setting, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come after me, first let him deny himself, then take up this cross, and follow me." So from a Christian point of view, daily we have to change the way we think. In Romans 12, we are told we shouldn't let the world compress ourselves into its mould, but we should be transformed in our thinking. You can apply that Biblical principle to the world outside the Christian community. We need to change the way people think, not by systematic brainwashing but working with their desire to change. They need to see that if they don't do something in relation to morality, the end result is disaster.

Unfortunately, too many don't care; they are more concerned about themselves, because we are innately self-centered. So we need to find ways of training people and persuading them, and of course, the greatest place to do it is the place of work, where we can influence change if we have the right leaders. If we can change the way people work for the better, they also then will change the way they live.

So in my organisation, I encourage people to understand that how they are when they are outside of work is as important as when they are at work. For example, in our organisation, we have a rule of no swearing and no blasphemy – no bad language. That is unusual and we may be the only organisation in Britain, perhaps in the world, that actually has that as part of our code of conduct. How did we justify it? Well we don't justify it on the grounds of faith. We explain that our words are very powerful. Our words create the environment in which we work. They indicate attitudes, ways of thinking and behaviour. Negative words can create an environment of harassment, bullying and isolation. Unfortunately, if people are using bad language, which often can have strong sexual overtones or double meanings, this can make life very uncomfortable for others. So we justify our approach on that basis.

The English language is a beautiful language, a hybrid of many languages. If you are an educated person, I want you to be articulate. I encourage people not to replace words that they can't find with bad words. So I have raised people's aspirations. As a consequence, they speak clearly. This is very important in business because we need people to communicate precisely and clearly in order to make sure the business works well. If I can teach people to communicate clearly without using bad language and be precise so they can't be misunderstood, your business will be more effective.

Just to be clear, you change the world one person at a time. Everyone in my organisation knows that the change has to start with him or her. And they need to be clear about what needs to be changed. Every time I speak at one of our conferences, I ask them to write down one thing they would change or do differently or stop doing as a result of the message they heard me speak. We always seek to be action-oriented.

BBx: Some Christians really enjoy it when they can worship God at church on Sundays, and they do it without a shadow of doubt that this is the truth and the way of living. Yet when Monday comes, they would put a coat of 'the world' and turn into a worldly person to face work. There is a struggle in order to keep true to what they believe is true. Did you ever have to experience it? What advice can you offer to us at workplace?

Chan: Firstly, when at a workplace, it may not be possible (or permitted) to talk about Jesus. However, in John 10:10, we read that the thief has come to steal, to kill and to destroy. Jesus

came so we may have life and have the life to its fullness. So from the time we become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have begun to receive life in all its fullness, the joy in giving thanks. All of this is the eternal truth in the Scripture. So if you go to church on Sunday and you feel inspired (I hope you do), then on Monday when you wake up, the first you say is, 'Something good is going to happen to me today in Jesus' name!' and, hopefully, you will have some time to pray and to read the Bible. And you go out, living for Jesus. You live the Christian life. You live in the sense that you are the recipient of life in all its fullness. You understand that you can do your work with energy and desire because you're not working only for this company, but you are working for the Lord. Because the joy of the Lord is in you, what should be happening is, as soon as you go to work, you smile. If you come to my business, you will find there are a lot of posters everywhere, and one of them says, 'You are now entering a 15 Smiles Per Hour Zone.' Not that I force people to smile, but I encourage them to realise that when they begin to smile, it releases endorphins in their brain, producing a feel-good factor. Smiling doesn't cost anything and it makes you feel better.

A Christian needs to live a life of discipline. When we go to work or are outside the church community, we are a witness to Jesus and the life He has put within us. And this life is real; this man called Jesus lives today. He has sent His Holy Spirit to live with us, therefore, when we go out and about, the Holy Spirit and God's presence are with us all the time. We do not need to fear or be anxious. So we work through the day with the Lord beside us all the time. A Christian should be the happiest person at work. When you live that way, you are telling people about Jesus.

Someone said about a Christian, 'Do you know, when you preach to me, I can't hear what you are saying, because your life is shouting so loud.' I have a high standard for Christians who work for me. Sadly, regular churchgoers can be the worst of your workers, which is a terrible thing to say. Worshipping is not just when you sing songs; it should be when you are doing everything in your life. However, Christian leaders have failed to teach people that work in the world is important. That needs to change. The way we look at the world needs to change.

BBx: What is the legacy you want to leave behind when you go one day?

Chan: We always respect people and highly engage with our employees. I have developed a language of inspired and accountable living, including many maxims, such as 'Be the Best,' 'Seize the Day' and 'Sign your work with pride.' All this should be part of the legacy I leave, which is for all the leaders I train to be number 1 in the UK for inspired living and inspirational leadership.