

From the Introduction to 'The Art of Fairness'

Summer 2012, and Danny Boyle in east London has a problem. The opening ceremony he's organizing for the Olympics is to go live on Friday, the 27th of July – a worldwide audience of over half a billion is expected to be watching – and he needs rehearsal after rehearsal to get everything right: the aerial choreographers and moving cameras; the riggers on the new stadium's roof and the stage operators far below; the hundreds of dancers, singers, bicyclists (both flying and terrestrial); the giant beds and flaming cauldron; the live sheep, inflatable chimneys, and million-watt sound system; the sundry smoke generators, machine operators, animators, drummers, stagecoaches, video screens and – why not? – Rowan Atkinson's Mr Bean, and the entire London Symphony Orchestra.

The technical details aren't what's difficult. He's good at these things, and his Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* was a masterpiece of organization on a tight budget. The problem is that Boyle wants to keep everything a secret till opening night. Like a new product launch, it will have greater impact that way. Yet as the opening gets closer, ever more people need to be brought in. In the final dress rehearsal, just days before the official opening, the entire Olympic stadium is going to be filled. London's tabloid press will do anything to get images of what's taking place.

Boyle's known for being a considerate man. His mother hadn't lived to see his success, yet he'd taken her belief in the basic goodness of mankind to heart. It's a matter of pride for him not to be rude. When the Olympic committee representatives ask how he will guarantee no information leaks out, he says 'Let's just ask nicely.'

How could someone with that attitude ensure that from 10,000 people, involved for a whole year, not a single one would leak what was going on?

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I've always been fascinated by a simple question: 'Can you succeed without being a terrible person?' At first it seems obvious that the answer must be 'No.' When a man like Donald Trump was able to be elected President and remain in office, it's impossible to say that good guys always win.

Business seems to show us this all the time. Like a frog puffing up its vocal sac to look fearsome, a bullying tone in the office suggests the speaker has superior authority, or superior knowledge, or just a stunningly superior pedigree. If new hires gunning to rise in a consultancy or bank or in politics learn the further trick of bullying only those below them, while smiling in a knowing yet ever-so-slightly-submissive way to those above them – a psychological two-step understood in seemingly every culture – their advancement is nearly guaranteed.

The logic appears impeccable. But yet, does that mean you have to go to the other extreme, and be a bully or Machiavellian to get anything done? What I've found, in my research, is that the answer is No. There really is a better path, leading neatly in between. When fairness is applied with the right skill, it can accomplish wonderful things.

It led to the Empire State Building being constructed in barely a year, while the same techniques brought a quiet English debutante to become an acclaimed jungle guerrilla fighter. There's better information; better creativity; more honest alliances.

I've been looking into this for years now, starting in courses I taught at Oxford, then moving on to observations in hi-tech firms, hospitals, banks, law firms, top military units, and other organizations. The same point kept coming up. Terrible people often succeed. That's a given. But decent people also often make it to the top, even in hard, competitive fields, and can help shift matters for the better. It's just often not noticed because more monstrous egos grab our attention.

The quest to advance this better way isn't new. The Bible asks, 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the world, and lose his soul?' It's especially pressing now, with society pushing selfishness to a stunning degree, and democracy under threat once again.

No one can teach you all the details in advance, for the needed skills are subtle ones, where advice is easy to state; hard to carry out. That's why it's an art rather than a science. Biographies are a good way forward, so I've arranged this book as a series of profiles, concentrating mostly on ordinary, decent people who succeeded in life this fair way – albeit including enough about scoundrels to keep us on our toes.

The first half of the book goes through six detailed case studies. The Empire State and guerrilla fighter studies are there; so too are Texas pilots, French anaesthetists, the Game of Thrones producer – there's even a look at the man who coined the phrase 'Nice Guys Finish Last' (yet who – his vindictive temperament putting him firmly on the scoundrel side – did, himself, end up finishing last). These are proofs that the decent approach can work, since here are numerous times when it did.

There are ethical subtleties along the way, but in real life there's often a great deal on which everyone will agree. Harvey Weinstein, for example, famously bullied and assaulted his way to the top in Hollywood. Yet Bernadette Caulfield, immensely effective as Executive Producer of Game of Thrones, was known for being the fairest of souls. There's no need for unarguable definitions of 'good' or 'fair' – there's no need even to insist that our preferred individuals are candidates for sainthood – to want to know: 'How can I succeed in a way that's more like Caulfield, and less like Weinstein?'

It also turns out that selfishness often sets up its own destruction: through the resentment it creates, as well as by blinding those on top to things they really need to see. Sometimes – as with Weinstein – the consequences take a long time. Yet once dedicated reporters finally revealed what Weinstein was like, everyone who'd suffered from him watched in satisfaction as an awesome, Aeschylean collapse took place.

Having looked at individuals, the second half turns to what happens when you pull all the lessons together, and on the largest possible scale. Here I show how a master of human behaviour – the American President during World War II, Franklin Roosevelt – turned all the seeming constraints of fairness and decency into advantages, even in the harshest of settings: allowing him to help defeat one of the greatest evils the world has seen.

There's no guarantee of course that matters will always turn out this way; no magic that awaits. But often, surprisingly often, it works. You just have to handle it with skill.

That might seem hard to believe, so a brief taster of how successful it can be is in order. Danny Boyle's experiences in east London in 2012 are ideal: displaying on a reduced scale everything we'll explore at greater length in the full studies to come. The entire book in miniature appears there.

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Boyle realized his secrecy in the year leading up to the Olympics would only hold if he managed to change the mindset of his thousands of volunteers for the better.

He had a head start, for he'd always treated his film crews with respect: never letting them go without decent meal breaks; never asking them to work extra hours without pay; respecting their judgment where they had expertise. When his name was later suggested for a knighthood he turned it down, explaining: 'Not my cup of tea. I'm embarrassed even being called Mr Boyle . . . When people say we're all in it together, it's a lovely catchphrase for politicians to use, but I actually do believe it.'

The Olympic committee, for example, had told him that in previous opening ceremonies all camera phones were confiscated, and strict non-disclosure agreements had to be signed. Boyle immediately told his staff that no phones were going to be confiscated, and nondisclosure agreements for everyone were out.

Now Boyle realized that if that were all he did it would likely fail. Although from his mother he believed that most people are good, he knew that not everyone was like that. He had grown up in a working-class Irish-Catholic family near Manchester in the north-west of England. His secondary school 'wasn't quite

Angela's Ashes, but it was hard. The teachers were tough.' His father had left school at age 14, and had needed to push vigorously to educate himself. From him ' . . . I [also] inherited . . . aggression, stubbornness, doggedness.'

Those traits were of the greatest value as the preparations began, more than a year before the opening. He had 10,000 volunteers to organize and inspire. A few of the volunteers might be trusted not to leak what was being planned, and if asked once not to take pictures would keep to that for all the months of rehearsal. Most, however, would respond to the dominant mood.

This is where skill in the first of our fundamental domains – listening – appeared. If Boyle had puffed himself up and mocked all Olympic committee members as interfering 'suits' he wouldn't have been able to learn from any of them.

That would have been a shame, for right at the start the very much besuited ex-Olympian Sebastian Coe, chairman of the London Organizing Committee, had an excellent idea to propose. The word 'secret', in his view, could feel malign, dangerous; with overtones of something pushing to get out. Abusers, for example, terrify their victims into believing they must keep a secret.

Why didn't Boyle break with the idea that there was a great 'secret' to keep, Coe proposed, and instead call it a surprise? A surprise is something you can feel ownership of; something that you get the pleasure of revealing later.

Boyle accepted Coe's idea immediately. 'Kids love surprises, and there's nothing sinister,' he said. From the first rehearsals, at a disused car factory in London's Dagenham, then on to the final full run-throughs at the new Olympic stadium, the bold hashtag 'SaveTheSurprise' was displayed on screens everywhere.

That still was only a start....

And then the introduction goes on, with what else Boyle did to succeed, before circling back to what that means for the book.