

think AT LONDON BUSINESS SCHOOL

Work: what is it good for?

We will never completely understand people and organisations if we don't first understand why we work, say the LBS authors of a new book

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- Philosophy is more relevant and urgent to organisations than it has ever been.
- Dominic Houlder and Jules Goddard on how the study of philosophy informs their teaching.
- They reveal why business leaders need a practical grasp of history's greatest thinkers.

Too often we leave philosophical questions about the meaning of our lives at home, possibly pondering them between jobs or on holidays. We think our working lives are something separate and we don't think about these big questions until those quiet moments.

Finding this essential humanity in the context of your working life feels like a luxury that is further down the 'to-do list' on any given Monday.

The billionaire Silicon Valley investor and Netscape creator Marc Andreessen said that studying philosophy is a sure path "to work in a shoe store". But this human quest to understand why we do the things we do is not just important to individuals, but it is also of urgent importance to organisations, argue [Dominic Houlder](#), Adjunct Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at LBS, and [Jules Goddard](#), Fellow of the School.

They address these questions in a new business book that puts philosophical inquiry centre stage. Together with David Lewis, Director of the [Senior Executive Programme](#) at LBS, and Alison Reynolds, a member of faculty at Ashridge Business School, they have co-authored [*What Philosophy Can Teach You About Being A Better Leader*](#).

It is a culmination of decades of learning, published as Professor Houlder completes 25 years at the School this academic year and Jules Goddard celebrates 45 years with LBS.

Their book is a pragmatic reference for active leaders, inspired by the late moral philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, who taught all four co-authors. The aim is to introduce and reintroduce some of humanity's greatest thinkers to the business mainstream.

Philosophy on campus then

[Charles Handy](#), co-founder of LBS and Professor of Organisational Behaviour, brought a philosophical dimension to every discussion of management and it was into this tradition that Jules Goddard emerged as LBS's first PhD student. His 45-year career in and around the orbit of the School has been spent provoking searching questions for business leaders about the nature of leadership and organisations. He even taught a philosophy class as part of the MBA during the 1980s.

At the same time in the US, Professor Houlder was studying for his MBA at Stanford under Professor Mike Ray.

"Mike was a mystic and philosopher as well as a tenured marketing professor, who ran an elective called Creativity and Business. A lot of us thought it was going to be about design thinking. In fact, it was very much around philosophical inquiry," recalls Professor Houlder. "Steve Jobs even came into the class to talk about his Zen meditation practice and his passion for calligraphy.

"That gave me the sense that you could be a polymath in the business world. One aspect of the course, which caught my imagination, was being taught to meditate. So when I finished my time at Stanford, I started to explore that more, at same time as embarking on a career in strategy with Boston Consulting Group (BCG)."

“If we want to make the world a better place, then what does better mean?”

Professor Houlder later moved into a senior industrial position for global building materials producer Blue Circle, now part of Lafarge-Holcim, continuing to meditate and explore Buddhism while serving as Group Strategy Director for several years.

When in 1994, Professor Houlder decided to go on a four-month meditation retreat he faced a predicament: “I couldn't bring myself to tell my CEO boss that I wanted to take time out doing nothing on top of a mountain!

“I had gotten to know Jules at this point and he advised me to take a leave of absence, without too much explanation of what I was doing. The leave of absence included time at LBS getting up to date on the latest strategic thinking, wrapped round my four months wearing a robe.”

Professor Houlder never returned to Blue Circle, becoming part of the adjunct Faculty at LBS in 1995 and delivering the core strategy course for the the School's Sloan Masters in Leadership and Strategy Programme. But ironically, among his earliest corporate speaking engagements was with “intensely curious” board members of Blue Circle and BCG Partners. It was an indication not just of interest but a need to explore big questions at the highest level of business leadership and education.

Philosophy on campus now

While philosophy has not been taught at LBS since the 1980s it has consistently been a source of conversation on campus, principally on the [LBS Sloan Masters in Leadership and Strategy programme](#) where mature students have an appetite for existential inquiry.

“Strategy is about the ‘what and the how’, ‘what are we going to become’, and ‘how are we going to get there’? But then the big question, which the Sloans were pushing me on. Is the ‘why’: ‘why are we doing it anyway?’” explains Professor Houlder.

“Bit by bit, over my 25 years at LBS, my strategy teaching on our degree and executive education programmes has been more and more focused on the ‘why?’ The why question also tends to preoccupy those at the most senior levels of the business, government and third sector organisations that I advise.

“Philosophy had been a fascination for me since my undergraduate days at Cambridge, where I studied the history of political thought. I've always felt that there was an opportunity, like the one I'd seen at Stanford, to bring insightful influences together with a business education, even after philosophy went rather underground at LBS when Jules stopped teaching his MBA philosophy class.”

“It seems to me that business schools are a preparation for life in any active and influential domain.”

Another thread which contributed towards the inspiration for the book has been a series of informal dinner conversation events hosted with Nigel Nicholson, LBS Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour. Guests have included historian Peter Frankopan, politician and government minister Tessa Jowell, former police commissioner Lord Ian Blair, Rothschild's Deputy Chair Sir John Rose, Parliamentary Ombudsman Dame Julie Mellor and Sir Roger Scruton.

“Our focus was on where the world is going. What do we want to do about it? Very quickly it become philosophical” notes Professor Houlder. “Because if we want to make the world a better place or a less bad place, then what does better mean? And what does less bad mean? It goes back to the question of why?”

Both Goddard and Houlder are serious that these kinds of enquiries are universal and essential. It was after one of these evenings that they resolved to study – with their co-authors – under Sir Roger.

Fundamental to the curriculum

Business schools have huge discretion for what they determine the curriculum really to be,” says Goddard. “I remember when we didn't teach ‘strategy’ and I recall Charles (Handy) proposing we teach leadership – which was a very brave idea. Of course now strategy and leadership are both fundamental to the curriculum.

“It seems to me that business schools are a preparation for life in any active and influential domain, largely the commercial domain but also government and certain professions.

“I think the curriculum is changing, just as strategy and leadership became of interest in the 80s. So philosophy of morality is becoming absolutely fundamental to our curriculum.

“We do not often paint the really big pictures; we do not teach, for example, a philosophical defence of capitalism. It may be between the lines and in the way in which economics is being taught, but business schools can be like technocracies, and I think we need to grow out of that notion that there are formulaic solutions to moral and ethical decisions. The solution to a problem often lies in the specifics of the situation and it needs firsthand thought.”

Both Goddard and Houlder are convinced that moral judgment is not a luxury for the highest echelons of business but an important thread in any career. Think how essential it could be in developing or even mature economies where rule of law is often weak. This is philosophy not about our place in the universe but grounded in how we can pragmatically apply philosophy to our decisions for better business and a better world, says Professor Houlder. For Goddard it is

about empathy, seeing the world through other people's eyes and taking an alternative approach.

"We've had a lot of encouragement from colleagues to go down this route," adds Goddard. "Charles Handy in particular; [Gary Hamel](#) and [Lynda Gratton](#) have been very influential on the philosophy of management and so has [Nigel Nicholson](#). Dean François (Ortalo-Magné) has been enormously encouraging. Probably more than anyone could do in any other organisation, at LBS we have been able to cross intellectual boundaries and to have open conversations. François has been instrumental in creating that environment for which Dominic and I are very grateful."

Both authors also acknowledge a great debt to [Sumantra Ghoshal](#), a former Professor of Strategic and International Management at the School. He argued in his book *The Individualized Corporation* that the purpose of business was to enable people to flourish. It is a concept of the corporation that has radical implications for work today that is shared with *What Philosophy Can Teach You About Being A Better Leader*. Both books ask us to [humanise](#) the workplace, as courageously and thoughtfully as we pursue our own happiness.

Dominic Houlder, is London Business School Adjunct Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship. He is a business consultant, a Buddhist, a crofter on the Isle of Skye and Chair of his family farming company in Argentina.

A former advertising executive, **Jules Goddard** is a business author and a Fellow of LBS. His special areas of interest are business creativity, strategic innovation, and leadership skills.

Sir Roger Scruton, who inspired Jules Goddard and Dominic Houlder over many years as friend and teacher, and encouraged them to write, died after an illness on 12 January 2020. They recognise the great debt that they owe to Sir Roger, with gratitude.



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