Why I Can Write This Book

I am writing this book because my life has put me at a very particular intersection: between shop floors and cabinet rooms, between mines and ministries, between theory and lived practice, and now between human development and AI.

I did not start in a think tank. I started on a turret lathe.

At thirteen I was working in my father's factory in England, turning brass fittings on piecework. The people around me were mostly unhappy. When I asked my father why, he simply said, "Work's hard. You know it's hard."

When I asked what his job was, he replied, "My job is to make sure everybody gets a pay packet on Friday, and that everybody can rely on that." That lived definition of leadership – responsibility for other people's security – has been sitting in the back of my mind ever since.

From there, my path has run through almost every level of modern systems.

I trained as an accountant in London, doing tax returns for wealthy people when the top marginal tax rate in the UK was around 97.5%. I then found myself in a cable plant in California, as a young Englishman among Mexicans, rednecks and a few black workers, adopted by the crew because I was obviously incompetent at their jobs and honest about it.

In that plant I wandered out of "my lane" and used physics – resistivity of copper by mine, temperature and wire softness – to cut copper costs by roughly 1.5%. That was the biggest cost item in the business. The engineers hadn't done it; an accountant had. From that point on, people let me follow my nose.

I insisted on working a week in each department with the best operator: wire drawing, insulating, pairing, stranding and so on. I learned how the system really worked and, more importantly, how people really worked.

I watched a crew deliver 160% of so-called “impossible” industrial engineering standards in half a day when we treated them as adults with a shared problem rather than as units to be controlled.

Later, in other plants, I redefined inventory as “an inventory of unknowns” – hidden problems – and forced a reduction against all advice. We cut work-in-process bobbins from 15,000 to 3,000 and reduced end-to-end dwell time from around 48 days to about 7. We shifted maintenance from time-based routines to reliability-based thinking and pushed scrap down dramatically. I learned that almost every metric and control system is a game, and that the real question is: what game are we truly playing, and for whose benefit?

I have run non-union greenfield plants in the United States that were tasked with, doubling machine speeds, staying non-union and having zero lost-time accidents. We ended up running at around 180% of “standard” productivity with scrap cut from roughly 12% to under 2%.

I have also run militant union plants where .44 Magnums and Bowie knives sat on the negotiating table and a contract impasse was broken not with money, but by printing the contract in the same day-glo purple as the chief steward’s beloved car.

I have watched sabotage threaten a plant’s survival and seen it stopped not by police or procedure, but by the informal authority of the workforce itself. All of this taught me that power, culture and morality are not abstractions – they are the daily operating system of a society.

From there I was hired into McKinsey in San Francisco and later Amsterdam, unusually without a degree, and had my thinking taken apart and rebuilt by some of the best thinkers in the world. Barbara Minto’s *Pyramid Principle* forced me to think in levels and structure. Bob Waterman, co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, sent my work back three times until the logic was clean. At the same time, I was seeing the

limitations of conventional strategy: brilliant analyses that never quite touched the real, living system.

My work then moved to genuine system scale. Sir Roderick Carnegie, CEO of Rio Tinto Australia and a legendary McKinsey alumnus, asked me to test Elliott Jaques' General Theory of Bureaucracy – the idea that adults operate at different levels of problem-solving capability that ideally this is reflected in levels of management where each level adds value and organisations need the right number of levels of work to be effective not too many not too few. I flew around the world, interviewed manager–subordinate–boss triads, and compared theory with reality. It stacked up to my experience.

At Broken Hill, the original Rio Tinto mine, we found 11 so-called "levels" in maintenance. In a day we reduced them to four. The mine did not collapse. Underground crews later said it was the best change in a century. The theory held: too many levels breed inefficiency and territoriality; too few and the system cannot deliver.

I was then sent to analyse Hammersley – two vast iron-ore mines, two towns in the middle of the desert, a railway and a port. It had around 400 strikes in a single year, rampant bullying, alcoholism and marriage breakdown in the townships, and yet generated roughly $400 million a year in free cash flow because the ore body was so rich.

My conclusion to the CEO and chairman was that this was a morally destructive system, and that we were responsible. They agreed with every page of my report but would not move at the speed required. I told them, bluntly, that I would not work for them and resigned.

I then immersed myself in another civilisation. In Japan I married Misako, who had been my interpreter when I had been studying Japanese organizational design, and spent two years inside Japanese society learning how a different culture designs its institutions, its politeness, its paradoxical cruelty. Later, working in New Zealand with Sir Douglas Myers, I helped lift a regional brewer, Lion Nathan, up a level in organisational capability –

including procurement changes that saved around $300 million – and then took levels-based thinking into the New Zealand state: Justice, Conservation, Customs & Excise, the Prime Minister's office and the central HR Commission. I have sat in Cabinet meetings shifting the emotional tone of a seriously difficult meeting something as simple as a bouquet of flowers in the centre of the table – and watched it work.

At a certain point I stepped off the treadmill. I handed my profitable consulting firm to my staff and spent years reading two or three serious books a week, thinking, and doing pro-bono work.

For the Fred Hollows Foundation I helped design an intra-ocular lens plant in Eritrea, one of the poorest countries on earth, to bring lens costs down from roughly $200–250 in the West to about $1–1.50, enabling up to a million cataract operations. Eritrea had just emerged from twenty years of civil war; almost everyone I worked with had wounds, missing limbs or dead relatives. The port city of Massawa looked like Gaza looks today. There, I wrote an early levels-based document on how a country might evolve over time. I saw, close-up, that beautiful people could live in broken systems, and that the level of a system's development had surprisingly little to do with the basic decency or intelligence of its citizens.

Eriteans are extraordinary people.

I have tried to build schools in Papua New Guinea and failed, despite working with some of the warmest people I have ever met.

I have backpacked and climbed in East Africa, stayed in villages, traveling along the Tana River in dugout canoes, and then compared those experiences with Singapore's seamlessly efficient, often cooler system. I have lived in Japan, Eritrea, New Zealand and Australia and worked in Europe and North America.

Over time a pattern became unavoidable: it is not the quality of people that explains the success or failure of societies, it is the level and design of their systems, their leadership, their institutional design.

Parallel to this, I spent several years reading deeply on the brain to understand how human perception, truths, emotion and habit are formed – and how we change.

When a close friend in Canada started using AI tools to build trading models, something clicked: what I had done intuitively for decades – assessing levels of development in businesses and countries – could now be systematised. If I could give AI a clear, levels-based way of looking at the world – drawing on Koestler's holons, Ken Wilber's integrative systems, Elliott Jaques' levels of work and my own experience – then AI could 'back-sight': infer the effective level of leaders, institutions and nations from what they had actually done and were doing.

That is what I began to build. I developed with AI levelled models of morality, problem-solving, institutional design and technology, and started asking AI to compare, for example, the moral level of Putin with Lee Kuan Yew, or Norway with Russia, or Singapore with Turkey or Australia.

I realised that, if we do this carefully, we can put a diagnostic mirror into the hands of ordinary citizens: an app on a phone that allows them to see their leaders and institutions more clearly – and lets leaders know they are being seen. Building an observer state not a surveillance state.

The same approach applies to education and leadership development. By combining what we know about the brain with levels-based diagnostics and cognitive-behavioural tools, we can accelerate the moral and problem-solving development of children adults and especially leaders, those that build the rules the institutions, exploitative or enabling.

This book grows out of that long arc: from shop floors, mines and militant unions to Cabinet rooms and consulting firms; from Eritrean lens plants and failed PNG schools to Singaporean technocracy and Japanese restraint; from nervous breakdowns and state changes in my own mind to years of reading and, now, the use of AI as a global mirror.

I am not writing as an academic. I am writing as someone who has built, broken, redesigned and morally assessed systems from the inside, across continents and cultures

I now believe we have, for the first time in history, the tools to see ourselves clearly enough to change course – but only if we choose to use them.

If we don’t chaos will force a choice.