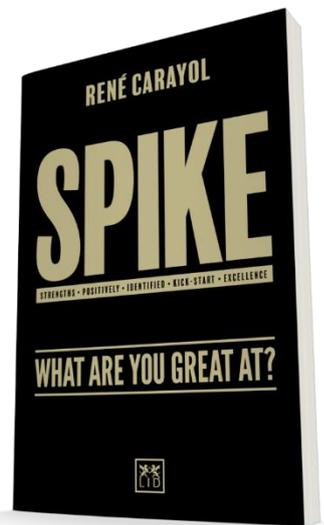


A Review of Spike by Rene Carayol

By Zahida Hammond



**Management is all about doing things right.
Leadership is about doing the right things.**

After being invited to read and discuss the first couple of chapters as part of our Leadership Symposium at Evolve Trust, I was left wanting more. I downloaded the book as an audiobook, hooked up to my newfound Bluetooth earpiece and headed out on several very long bike rides. After listening to Rene narrating his book with a gentle passion for many hours, I felt as if I knew him, indeed it felt as though I was being privately mentored by him for free. His common-sense ideas which are explained through life experiences resonated strongly with me and led to me cycling long stretches of local cycle routes grinning like a Cheshire Cat and blurting aloud 'hear, hear' and 'absolutely!' on more than one occasion- which procured some strange looks from dog walkers.

Rene's theory about 'Spikes', finding and working on the strengths of your staff, makes much sense in a world where we seem obsessed with developing everyone into an 'all-rounder' and in doing so can miss the unique gifts of some staff

His proposals on how performance management processes should focus more on developing further the areas of existing strength rather than seeking to develop areas of weaknesses, and thus dampening down spikes, gave me much fodder for reflection ... and reminded me of The Curriculum Fable.

Spike is about valuing unique strengths in others and developing them further to enhance the team. It's about being inclusive and seeing beyond first impressions and prejudices.

Rene's humble reflections on his own strengths, weaknesses, triumphs and failures share so much of himself that it is difficult to write a review without revealing one's own struggles and revelations.

His experiences as an executive in a range of organisations which are household names, give his writings a credibility that is harder to attribute to so many leadership texts written by people who have observed or coached leaders or made a success of one company but have not always worked in a range of environments. Rene recognises that dedicating one's career to one or very few organisations can nurture blind sides and even a possible arrogance born of ignorance – as well as a lack of confidence to make bold business moves or even to leave an organisation even when it is in the best interests of oneself and / or the company to do so.

Rene has demonstrated the moral integrity to move to new pastures when his values were compromised or when he no longer felt his Spikes were able to develop the organisation further.

Spike is interwoven with biographies of colleagues with whom Rene has worked. Shalimar's story resonated with me particularly as a woman who has had to overcome many intersecting prejudices on her leadership journey.

It is perhaps as a migrant to the UK himself and experiencing multiple identities and prejudices, both in the UK and Africa, that Rene recognises the power of cognitive diversity at leadership as a multiplier of productivity. There seems to be a skilful humility that is required to manage these

varying talents, ambitions and egos to unite them effectively behind a common goal. Indeed, I pondered on the extent to which it is genuinely possible to learn such leadership skills or whether they are innate qualities/Spikes in themselves.

He articulates beautifully the need to value each individual on the team for their unique and perhaps unusual strengths, rather than measuring them by their ability to fit into a preconceived idea of their role. By focussing on what people can do exceptionally well, rather than what they can't, Rene demonstrates a talent for understanding the culture of a business, for seeing the glue that brings teams together and then cutting one's cloth as a leader to gel the team further.

I was particularly interested in the latter chapters where Rene delved into wider observations of business practices such as how overcautious approaches to business have paralysed the hunger for success in many sectors. He describes a culture that I recognise from many schools and trusts that I've encountered in which it is easier for staff and leaders to do nothing than for them to do something wrong. He challenges this with some takeaway mantras 'Failure is the master educator' 'fail quickly, fail often, recover in a hurry' 'attract the Spikes of courage and curiosity' 'a culture that's unwilling to break things can't move fast'

His work in identifying traits of the most successful entrepreneurs is equally fascinating – over 50% dyslexic / over 60% from disadvantaged backgrounds (similar statistics to the prison population!). They represent a demographic of people who had faced rejection early in life and so seek only to please their hardest task master- themselves! They work hard, are able to make difficult decisions quickly and drive ahead without being embroiled in emotional ties.

As an educationalist I recognised much that we can derive from Spike in the way staff, leaders and school communities are nurtured as teams of uniquely gifted people. Perhaps though more essentially in the post-covid landscape, Spike theory can challenge us to reject the UKs 'one size fits all' standards agenda that bluntly informs more than half of our pupils at a very young age that their Spikes will have no value in the world or worse that they have no Spikes at all. We might instead create more opportunities for teachers to recognise every child's unique gifts and then develop a flexible and diverse curriculum offer to suit. It's perhaps a utopian extreme but one wonders what sort of culture and child would evolve if a school chose only to run 'interventions' that further developed students' strengths, rather than focussing on their areas of weakness...