



# Brutal Questions





*We must create an environment where the truth can be heard by 1) Leading with questions, not answers 2) Engage in dialogue, not debate 3) Conduct autopsies without blame 4) Build red flag mechanisms that turn information into information that cannot be ignored.*

JIM COLLINS

## What's it all about?

Confronting the brutal questions (and facts) is an approach developed by Jim Collins (2001, 2009) from The Stockdale Paradox, which highlights the challenge of holding unwavering hope at the same time as confronting the brutal facts. Admiral Jim Stockdale, was a United States military officer who was held captive for eight years during the Vietnam War. As Stockdale told Collins, he never lost faith during his ordeal: “I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

The paradox is rooted in the fact that, while Stockdale had remarkable faith in the unknowable, he noted that it was the most optimistic of his fellow captives who did not survive the ordeal. They could not contemplate the brutal reality of the situation they found themselves in.

## What's it for?

The purpose of this tool is straightforward: it is to help you adopt Stockdale's approach and balance hope with the brutal facts. There is no doubt that we are now in an economic maelstrom, and hard as it may be confronting the context head on may help.

## Using the tool

This is not so much a tool as a series of reflective prompts to help you ask the brutal questions and confront your brutal facts. If this set of questions is not brutal enough for you, feel free to amend or add!

The questions:

1. Are you happy?
2. So, you're in charge. So what?
3. Do you or others put personal interests above your business interests?
4. What is working best in your business today? What do you do to contribute to it?
5. What is not working in your business? What do you do to contribute to it?
6. When was the last time you really talked to your customers/audiences/users about what they really, really want from you?
7. Are you prepared to give them what they want?
8. What are your most treasured assumptions about your people, customers, markets, products, services and yourself? What if one of them weren't true? What would you do then?
9. Are you out of your depth?
10. Now, having looked at your brutal questions, what are your brutal facts? What are you going to do about about them?

Brutal facts	Actions

# What Next?

Think of two work environments that you have experienced. The first being an environment that did not confront the brutal questions (and facts) and where people (and the truth) were not heard. The second being an environment that did confront the brutal facts and where people felt they were heard.

What accounts for the difference between the two environments? How will you create a business where the brutal questions can and will be asked?

## Quick tips

- You have to be brutally honest with yourself. If you are struggling with this on your own, seek the support of someone you trust
- Understand your comfort zone – are you more comfortably an optimist or a pessimist?
- Don't make confronting the brutal questions a one-off activity. Ensure you find time to revisit them from time to time
- Look after yourself, this can be a challenging exercise so make sure you put whatever support you need in place when you attempt it
- Don't attempt this with a group unless you are certain of everyone's psychological safety

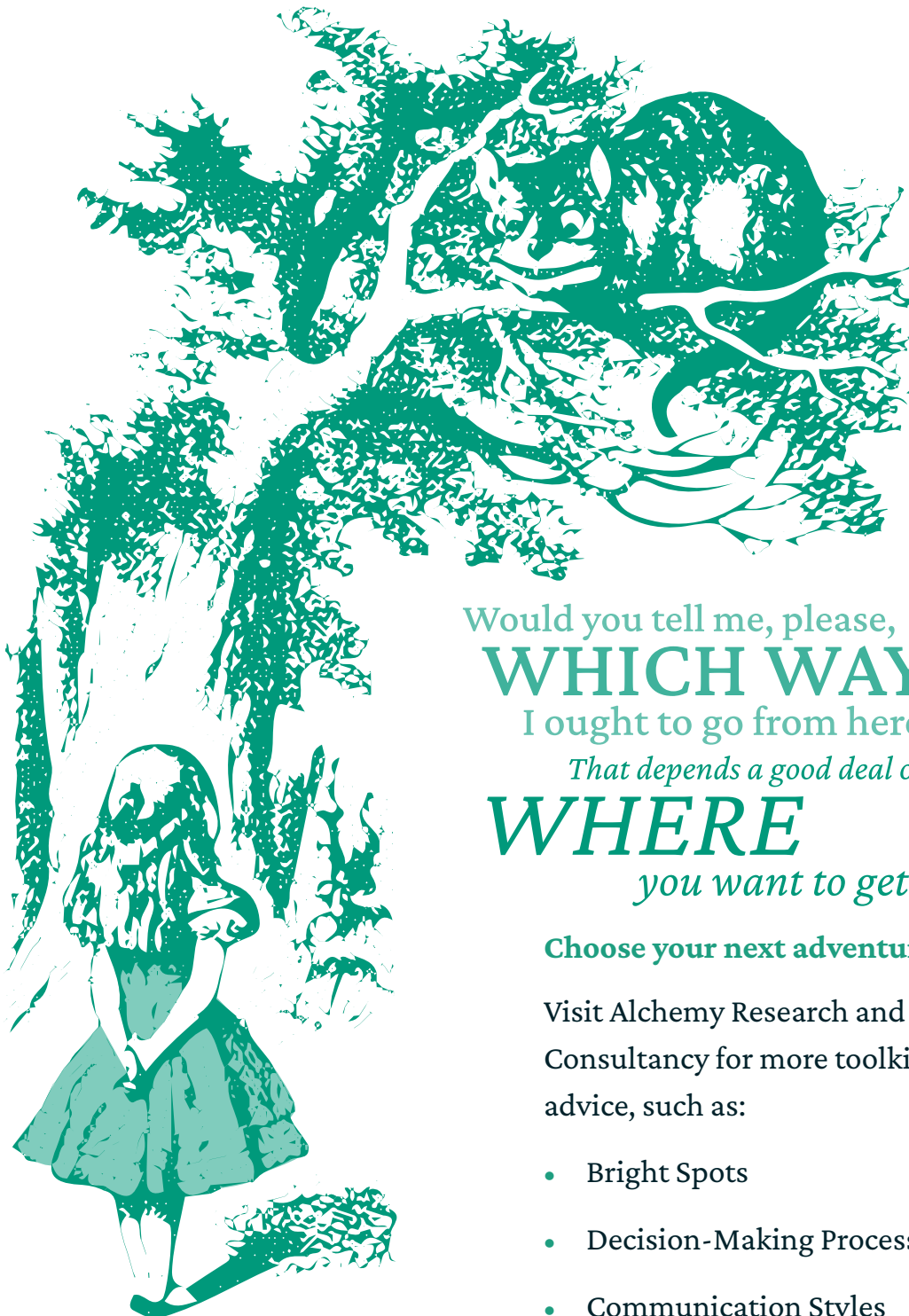
## References

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. London: Random House.

Collins, J. (2009). *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In*. London: Random House.



Alchemy was founded to help people navigate change.  
We are passionate about organisational learning and  
supporting people to understand change in action.



Would you tell me, please,  
**WHICH WAY**  
I ought to go from here?

*That depends a good deal on*

**WHERE**  
*you want to get to.*

**Choose your next adventure**

Visit Alchemy Research and  
Consultancy for more toolkits and  
advice, such as:

- Bright Spots
- Decision-Making Process
- Communication Styles