

Let's Talk About Leadership

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Earlier this month, I spoke about leadership and what I think the future will demand of leaders in the UK philanthropic sector at the UK Community Foundation's Annual Conference in Manchester, where the tagline for the event was 'Foundations for the future'.

The session was organised as a chat with Steph Taylor, Director of Give Bradford and the Deputy CEO of Leeds Community Foundation. I began our chat by giving a speech to everyone there, and I thought it would make sense to share a version of that here on our website too. The speech I gave is also based, in part, on pieces I wrote last month about leadership and the future of philanthropy for Alliance Magazine's September Issue and the Luc Hoffmann Institute. You can find links to the Alliance Magazine issue where my article features [here](#), and to the Luc Hoffmann blog [here](#). Some of the comments below were also shared in Episode 5 of KEDA Consulting's Charity Impact Podcast, which can be accessed [here](#).

It was a real privilege to be at the Conference, and to share the space with Steph who I haven't seen in some years, but who was incredibly generous with her time some years ago when I was carrying out a Strategic Review at another funder I was working for.

I began my speech by setting out the wider context we are all operating within, namely that people, planet and society all face intersecting and seemingly intractable crises and challenges, such as the climate and nature crises, entrenched economic disparities, and societal injustices and inequities impacting those experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation. Philanthropic leaders, like leaders from other sectors, are grappling with the role they can and must play in responding to these.

Since becoming John Ellerman Foundation's Director in January 2020, I have reflected a lot on what leadership is and what it means to me. In 2021 and 2022 I based my dissertation project for my executive MBA Masters programme on leadership in our sector and the kind of leaders we need to be in the future. This research involved interviewing 28 leaders working in, or alongside, UK-based institutional grantmakers in leadership roles. The speech I gave was largely based on my research findings alongside my own experiences as Director of John Ellerman Foundation for nearly three years now.

The rest of my remarks are set out below, with some editing so that they work in the written context. One of the main findings of my research was the realisation that philanthropic leaders are somewhat unusual and that we have a near unique vantage point on the world because we operate at the nexus between the private, public and charitable sectors. This is an advantage and perspective in need of further harnessing, particularly in terms of our influencing and change work.

The group I interviewed did not often think about what it takes to be a leader, or what traits they have that make them particularly well-suited to leadership. They did however present as a group that is deeply committed to their work, often driven by their values, their ethics and less often but still relevant their life experiences. They were motivated to ensure their work is in service of their charitable purposes and aims. Many spoke about not necessarily setting out to be in leadership roles or to work within or alongside grantmaking institutions – often remarking on the relatively unknown nature of so many of these institutions that work and lead in the background to bring

about some of the most remarkable changes in society, be it supporting the development of life-saving vaccines or ensuring our legislative rights are retained.

All were positive about their experiences, and many described their leadership approach as intuitive, rather than learned, and driven by their innate values and qualities. However, many spoke about their leadership style developing over time as a result of more experience being gained professionally and personally which they had learned from, thus highlighting the importance of considering intuition and learning as interconnected, rather than two binary states. As more trends within leadership studies move to praise the intuitive or authentic leader, I would argue that we mustn't lose sight of the importance of the leader that learns and evolves. Or the more diverse leaders that recognise that their diversity markers, like their race, disability, sexual orientation and gender, don't afford them the luxury of being able to act and react to their every single intuition with the same ease as some of their peer leaders.

What came up less in my research, that I think is something we need to see more of now and in the future relates to a few different areas. I will start with how as leaders we must embrace and manage leadership paradoxes – be it the idea that a leader must be steady and stable, whilst also showing spontaneity and creativity. Within the philanthropic sector, we must also deal with the paradoxes of the fact that our organisations exist at all in the first place. Ostensibly our work does good, we make grants and other forms of financial and non-financial investments into work that supports civil society, and creates and embeds significant positive societal, economic and environmental change. However, there are other perspectives on philanthropy that we as leaders now, and in the future need to grapple with, such as the origins of our wealth, how our money was and is made, the way in which wealth disparities exacerbate many of the inequities and injustices we seek to address through our grantmaking. Perhaps this will be the ultimate paradox for us to reconcile going forward – that we are both part of the problem and part of the solution. This requires us to be proactive in identifying the ways in which we uphold problematic structures and systems, and work to improve or dismantle these – and examples of this would include moving to more open and trusting grantmaking processes and ensuring the equitable distribution of our funds, interrogating the origins of our wealth and moving towards a reparative justice model of philanthropy, and challenging the way we make our money, especially for those of us with endowments invested in markets. All things we are proactively thinking through and working on at John Ellerman Foundation.

Future leaders will need to normalise things like operating with greater transparency and trust and the centring and empowering of people that have experienced marginalisation and that have lived experience with a clear recognition of their experiences as assets. This work requires long-term and sustained efforts, it is more than just using a hashtag or writing a blog (which I say as someone who enjoys writing blogs regularly). It is about us as funders ceding our own power and privilege and recognising the power and expertise of people and communities who live and breathe the causes that we care about. It is about truly embracing the notion that applying an equity and justice lens to our work isn't just a nice to have or a tick box exercise, it is the essential thing for our organisations to do in pursuit of our own ambitions to be excellent grantmakers. The reality is that to deliver this well requires leadership – at all levels of an organisation, especially at the Board and CEO level.

I wanted to end by sharing **five key capabilities** that I think all leaders now and, in the future, must build. Of course, there will be many more beyond these, and I will also add in the caveat that I am assuming that it goes without saying that leaders now and in the future must be committed to decency, strong ethics, respect, kindness, justice and equity for people and planet and more besides.

1. The first capability is committing to the art and science of **sensemaking**, which I take to mean as understanding the context in which an organisation and its people operate. This isn't just about mapping out a situation, it is about mapping out that situation with creativity

and doing so from a place of real humility and learning. It is a continuous process too, the map emerges from a melding of observations, data, experiences, conversations and analyses. It requires continuous improvement and a testing of principles, and an openness to applying different frameworks, and not just the existing ones.

2. The second capability is **relating**, which for me means building trusting relationships within and across organisations and networks and to understand the ways in which we are part of interdependent systems and sectors. Relating for me is also about trying to understand other perspectives with an open mind and without judgement and creating shared spaces where diverse views and ideas can be shared. Done well this won't be about seeking agreement and civility all the time either, relating is also about how you can disagree and engage in conflict, but to do so in a way that is productive.
3. The third capability is about **visioning** in ways that mean we create a compelling picture of the future. This means becoming less linear in our thinking and embracing uncertainty and complexity. We need to train ourselves to be much more comfortable holding diametrically opposed ideas simultaneously and using those to generate new ideas and new ways forward. We need to become much more comfortable in embracing options and solutions that involve multiple working hypotheses to deliver on a vision from multiple standpoints. We will need to look further than our own networks and the current and nearer term, instead looking to other global philosophies and traditions. We may have to voyage into the past to re-learn and re-discover ways of working that meet our current and future needs – I find this is happening quite well in the environmental movement where you sometimes see the learning that is happening from the Global South and indigenous communities to respond to the climate and nature crises.
4. The fourth capability is **inventing** so that we can develop and imagine new ways to give life and meaning to the vision we are pursuing.
5. The fifth and final capability is about **how we make judgements and decisions** as leaders. There is of course no one best way for doing this, but I hope that within our approach to this we celebrate quiet leaders and not just the charismatic leaders. Quiet leaders are those that do the hard and necessary background work through which the building blocks of oppression are dismantled and replaced with a new world order that prioritises environmental, economic and societal justice. We must never lose sight of these quiet leaders. They are as important to listen to as any other kind of leader. Think - who are we not hearing from who is just diligently and effectively getting work done and how might we hear from them more.

And that's where I left it on the day, before diving into an interesting discussion with Steph and audience members. I am very interested in this topic, and it is certainly something that I am happy to discuss further too with others.