

## **National #TrustLeaders Conference 2020: Michael Pain's Keynote Speech**

*24<sup>th</sup> September 2020*

Good morning,

One year ago – when we met together in Nottingham - the focus of our national conference was academy trusts at the heart of their communities.

Never did we for one moment know how defining a theme that would become in the twelve months that have since passed.

I usually begin my speech to this conference with some kind of anecdote or quote. This year I want to begin by saying this:

### **Thank you**

As Sarah has outlined, you have carried the weight of enormous responsibility over the past six months not only with care, but with a determination to do what is right for your communities. Almost always in very difficult and very uncertain circumstances.

The stories from across our #TrustLeaders network were not only of leaders and colleagues reassuring their communities, creating a sense of calm and stability through the chaos - but also of trusts and schools proactively organising food parcels and playing host to food banks; producing PPE for local NHS providers; supporting suppliers – local employers, often the employers of parents - who found themselves on the brink; and much more. It's been humbling and inspiring.

We have seen community-centred leadership at its very best.

I also want to say thank you to your central teams, many of whom lead and work behind the scenes to support trusts and schools to deliver, and have risen

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to the enormous challenges of re-calibrating buildings, ensuring the IT delivers, putting in place unprecedented health safety policies, communicating with parents and pupils on a daily basis, and ensuring staff and pupils have been safe, resourced and equipped throughout. Where would the sector have been without these expert leaders?

And, of course, a huge thank you to our teachers and support staff, who have risen to the challenge of balancing keeping classes going in school, whilst delivering online learning too. All of you against a backdrop of uncertainty, challenge, and change in your own lives.

As Sarah has also said, a CEO's ability to rise to these enormous challenges – professionally and, to a degree, personally - has not only depended on your inner well of determination, but just as importantly on the quality of the team around you.

The importance of recruiting and investing in a great team – probably the most influential and defining aspect of the CEO role - has never more clear than through the crisis of COVID19. As CEO of Forum Strategy I can vouch for that.

So, where now?

The answer cannot be just more of the same. You're doing what needs to be done. But you're also doing the incredibly demanding jobs that you do because you want to achieve a legacy that is about so much more than managing a pandemic, critical though that is.

As one our member CEOs said to me at the start of term:

***'I've now become comfortable with crisis management mode – perhaps too comfortable, I now want to rediscover the bigger picture, I want to get back***

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***to not only doing things that make a difference today, but set us up – our children and the trust itself - for all our tomorrows.”***

I think that captures how many CEOs are feeling.

We come together in this virtual setting after six months of relentless pressure, change, guidance and anxiety.

It's hard to stop. It's hard to take time out to think. To spend at least a few hours above the business and the day to day realities of the situation. But doing so matters.

A recent paper by INSEAD found that well over 60% of CEOs are tending to focus on pressing issues, leaving strategy and institution building for better times. That's completely understandable, but it's a huge risk.

We must remember that as human beings, each of us is sustained – above all else - by our sense of purpose and our relationships with those around us.

The sociologist and counsellor Dr. Steve Rose tells us that human beings are predominantly driven by the desire

**“to fulfill the need for a sense of significance. This is achieved through a perceived sense of control over one’s life, a sense of social belonging, and a sense of effective social contribution.”**

Our system leaders have big hopes and aspirations, a desire to build and grow for the common good – but with that sense of control too. It's also what sustains organisations and ensures they not only survive, but they thrive. We all owe it to this generation of children and young people, those at the heart of

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all we do, to ensure that they are a generation that thrives, not simply survives COVID19 or its collateral.

So, that is why the theme of our conference this year is:

## Purpose and People

In 1980, management consultants Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman undertook an extensive analysis of the world's leading companies.

***"The project showed, more clearly than could have been hoped for, that excellent companies were, above all, brilliant on the basics. .... these companies worked hard to keep things simple in a complex world. They persisted. They insisted on top quality. They fawned on their customers. They listened to their employees and treated them like adults. They allowed their innovative product and service champions long tethers. They allowed some chaos in return for quick action and regular experimentation."***

I really like that book and I particularly like that quote. I think it helps us capture – to a degree - where we need to be right now going into this new year.

Brilliance on the basics. Fawning on our 'customers'. Listening to and treating our employees well. And yes – using this situation to do things differently and to innovate. The last few months have been all about reacting and managing complexity, uncertainty and operating in territory we don't necessarily understand.

A couple of months ago I wrote a blog:

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***“four months or so into this crisis, simply reacting to events and managing them as well as we can do is not enough. CEOs and organisations that make the most of the hand they have been dealt will no longer begin to approach these events simply with a ‘steady the ship approach’. They will want to do much more. They will want to have the greatest impact possible, whilst creating a lasting and positive legacy as we emerge – but they will need to do so in a world of so many unknowns. Rather than embarking on extensive strategic planning, what CEOs and executives teams can instead do is to first of all begin to reconnect with their purpose, their sense of intent.”***

That is why I am encouraged that this half-term, we're hearing from many CEOs who are working with their boards and teams to get back to basics – to reflect what really matters to them and what they want to do really well - by revisiting their sense of purpose.

They are asking: “What is the business we are really in, what are the basics we need to be good at? What do those we serve really need from us right now and in the months ahead – beyond the guidance from on high and crisis management - what is that contextual wisdom telling us? And from that, what are the small number of goals we are working towards in the year ahead, yes with some innovation and experimentation as we respond?

I think being a strategic leader right now is going to need two approaches –

In the short to medium- term I think we need **purposeful intent** – deep awareness of the needs of our people, that allows us to drive a small number of initiatives and priorities that quickly make a difference, with a dose of innovation, giving talented people within our organisations freedom to move quickly, with purpose.

Many CEOs speak of pupil and staff wellbeing initiatives, ensuring technology and online learning continues to be improved and refined, and that catch up programmes are impactful. These are initiatives with purpose and focus, not simply reactive to guidance.

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In terms of the medium- long term – and we can't lose sight of this – I think we need to be **shaping and working towards a vision for a better, brighter, and slightly different future** than the one we thought we were.

One that responds to the new world around us, the needs of our communities, and the changing expectations of our workforce. That requires an even deeper, and emerging conversation with those around us. Our people.

The shorter to medium-term and the medium to longer-term considerations are not necessarily exclusive, and the real skill of CEOs will be ensuring they strike a balance and focus on both, aligning them where possible.

Some of the big themes that keep emerging:

- **Health and wellbeing;**
- **Technology and remote learning / working**
- **Sustainability and the environment**  
**&**
- **The evolution of skills and the changing jobs market**

Have both immediate and long-term implications. The pandemic has only accelerated the need for strategy and solutions.

However, I am concerned that – unlike in those organisations highlighted by Peters and Waterman – we are seeing leaders embark upon this year with a sense of the never-ending, desperately trying to prioritise purpose and people, but overwhelmed by the need to react to events, directives, and a higher than average 'to do list'

There's a need to rebalance from a reactive approach – important thought that has been, to a purposeful approach.

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How do we reset the balance from reactive to purposeful?

Reactive leadership comes from a different place than purposeful strategic leadership.

In my book *Being The CEO*, I talk about the dynamics that surround the CEO, using the analogy of the generational farm.

**The weather** – policy, guidance, compliance, directives. The weather comes in and we have to respond. There has been a lot of weather.

**The market** – the evolving needs and expectations of those we serve, our communities. This is where we've seen some of the most inspiring leadership over the past six months.

**The soil** – the resources and the people who help us to respond

And

**The family farm** – the expectations and framework of governance. Those who ensure values and vision rem

This last year has been dominated by weather. It's been relentless. We've had to – quite literally – stay indoors, take shelter. As a system, our focus has been almost entirely on the weather. Reacting to our circumstances.

But our purpose – as you know - doesn't come from the weather. Our purpose comes from the market – the people we serve, and it is brought to life by the soil – our teams and resources. Today's conference is all about this. Really developing, as much as we can, our connection with the market and tending to the soil to shape organisations ready for the next stage.

As Yusuf said in his opening speech this morning,

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Purpose drives people

People drive purpose

That is why I am delighted that at the heart of today's conference we will be hearing from Mark Russell of the Children's Society. Bringing us back to the people and the voices that matter most.

The Children's Society's Good Childhood report is probably the single most important piece of strategic national intelligence that you as CEOs of academy trusts can have. Not the Ofsted annual report, not the government guidance on this or that – these are the weather.

I don't want to give too much away. This is not a spoiler. However, Mark has a very serious message for us. There is much to do.

The UK is at rock bottom in terms of children's life satisfaction and sense of purpose. This has been a trend that has continued for a number of years, where our focus as a system has perhaps been on quantitative outcomes rather than the qualitative for children.

Children and parents need us to listen more as system

Alongside this, it's also fascinating to listen to other views from other sources in our communities, and the implications for how our organisations move forward...

- from IPSOS, that half of the population accept that home schooling and online learning may be around for the long-term;
- from Education and Employers, that young people report only limited careers support from their schools and colleges,

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- from Future Advocacy, that 8 million jobs in Great Britain are at risk of automation by the early 2030s, with the most affected in retail (1.2m jobs at risk), manufacturing (1.1m jobs at risk), and transport (800k jobs at risk).

These are strategic issues that may easily be lost if we're just looking at the weather.

That's not to say we shouldn't stay attuned to the weather, and how government and its agencies see the world - that's why HMCI also joins us today. But I think we can all hope that Amanda will bring us news of calmer, more clement times. Quieter skies so that we can also go and listen to the market and tend to our soil.

I'm also pleased that today we will hear from Jo Causon, the quite brilliant CEO of the Institute for Customer Services, on how we can be even better at listening and connecting at a local level in order to keep our purpose front of mind.

So purpose driven organisations, are connected, listening organisations.

Today is a good chance to consider purpose and intent, with the help of people like Mark, Raj and Jo. Consider what it is you truly want to achieve in this next year, those small but potent priorities that will help you shape the next phase.

I now want to say a little bit about **our people in terms of staff and teams.**

If we are to inspire and motivate our teams, we need to have both the space and energy to ignite that collective sense of purpose for the next stage, rather than letting reactivity take centre stage. However, a few weeks into a new year – I am concerned that reactivity fatigue is setting in.

That goes for you as CEOs as well as your central teams, heads and staff.

I want to be frank here. I don't think enough CEOs or central team members have been able to get a good enough break this summer.

In a recent article for the FT, Camilla Cavendish wrote:

***“Many executives who powered through the pandemic with no Easter break are approaching an uncertain autumn insufficiently revived. The ability to rest is an advantage in the workplace. And many of us are very bad at it.”***

***Camiila Cavendish***

I also think in some case – due to the sheer uncertainty, and in some case the lack of capacity – you've had little choice.

One of the things I am most proud of that we have done at Forum Strategy this year is to establish the #TrustLeaders wellbeing group to champion the importance of wellbeing, rest and good practice throughout the pandemic.

Schools Advisory Service, and CEOs such as Nick Blackburn and Gary Wilkie and many more have really contributed to our thinking.

I think – and I hope – that many of our members modelled a calmer Summer for themselves and their staff. It was not by chance that our last session of the last academic year was called #WellBeingTheCEO – open to all our members. You needed a break.

However, this year is going to be a test.

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As I mentioned last year, we are approaching a demographic bugle. Many of our CEOs and senior leaders are just a few years away from retirement.

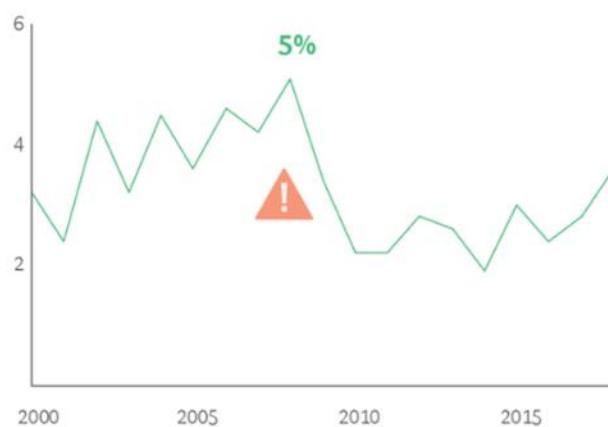
I am hearing more CEOs and more headteachers – particularly those heads who have been isolated without the support of a trust central team through the crisis – talking about bringing forward retirement or moving on to other things.

Indeed, the EIS has warned that headteachers and senior leaders have said they face “unsustainable” and “excessive” workloads amid the pandemic and changing policy around school operations.

My worry is often for heads who are not within a trust – and have not had access to those central teams. But in trusts, my worry tends to be for CEOs and COOs who have been the conduits of huge amounts of information, and have taken great weight of responsibility.

CEO turnover spiked in the financial crisis

Forced CEO turnover as % of total CEOs<sup>3</sup>



Credit: Boston Consulting Group 2020

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In trusts executive leaders have borne the brunt. If we look back to the last big crisis – the financial crisis – CEO turnover across the economy hit a peak. We risk that again. The problem is we're going to struggle to replace those of you that go.

The recent NGA national governance survey found that “Nearly two in five governors/trustees surveyed agree that it is difficult to attract good candidates for senior executive leadership posts (such as headteacher, executive head or CEO).”

That's only going to get more challenging. We know that following the demographic bulge going into retirement – those in their mid to late fifties, there is a demographic dip of experienced leaders in their late forties and early fifties.

That sense of wanting to bring forward retirement is understandable – it is a major risk for an education sector and for our school communities that have been through so much upheaval in the last six months.

So what do we need right now to mitigate that risk? I think we need three things:

- An end to the lack of stability and the uncertainty around government guidance. We need careful dialogue and partnership with the profession in making changes, and giving leaders a lead in time to engage and respond. This culture of guidance landing in inboxes without warning at 6pm on a Friday evening can't carry on. I cannot emphasize this enough.
- We need to avoid returning to high stakes accountability, taking this opportunity to rethink how we ensure our trusts and schools are subject to much more intelligent accountability, purer accountability to their communities (the market), not the intense weather created by changing governments and officials. This is our greatest chance in a generation to move to a more sophisticated approach to accountability. You can begin

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- to create that pure accountability in the vacuum that exists, then we need to convince government to help sustain that balance.
- We need boards that understand that they need to support and protect their leaders, investing in coaching and development where necessary. Giving them the time to plan and be strategic.

I'm also under no doubt that the role in facilitating networking and peer to peer support that Forum Strategy plays is going to be even more essential in the year ahead. We will play our part and continue to make a difference.

But it's clear. As Harvard Business Review said this Summer: "To help your organization build resilience, you need to first build your own. Even small steps will help (leaders) recognize the icebergs ahead and the hidden opportunities."

And that's the point colleagues – it's about surviving, but it's also about thriving.

And, as we reengage with those purposeful strategic priorities - we must also be disciplined in approaching these with focus, rather than exacerbating the demands

In her article for Forum Strategy earlier this year, Rachael Gacs highlighted the importance of having a small number of clear goals. For CEOs right now, it is all too easy to be pulled in so many different directions and to have far too many priorities:

According to Mark Helow, founder of 'The CEO Project': "**The top CEOs spend a lot of their time on a few things. They spend more than half their time on what they determine as their three top priorities. Contrast this with an average CEO who will spend time on a whole myriad of priorities and never gets to many of them. This ability to focus is one of the key things that sets top CEOs apart. They will focus on a small number of priorities at one time – they will not give up and they not get distracted.**"

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That's been easier said than done in the last few months, but must be our aspiration.

And in terms of staff, beyond our executive leaders and heads – we now need to consider both the shorter- and longer-term implications on our teams.

As I have said, many trusts are now focusing on those purposeful initiatives around staff wellbeing. I think in the short term, we are not going to lose staff as the economy battles to recover. There are less jobs, attitudes are changing – with more young workers intending to stay in post. The sector has a stay of execution in terms of the recruitment crisis. But we need to ensure – morally and organisationally – that our staff are healthy and supported.

The next few months are going to continue to be challenging – staff may have partners impacted by job losses, they may have health issues themselves, or have lost loved ones to the pandemic.

We need to be purposeful, but also caring, people-orientated organisations.

Into the longer term, I think as executive leaders we need to recognise that the world of work has changed for good and we need to recalibrate if we're going to hold onto the most talented people.

Just as COVID has accelerated pre-existing trends around the shift to technology and delivery of online learning; it has also shifted those trends around employee expectations.

As the Korn Ferry Institute wrote in the Summer: "***working from home is no longer a trend, but a business necessity***".

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The article suggests that more full-time employees require the flexibility of working remotely. For employers, this can lead to increased engagement and productivity and help with recruiting and retention; but working remotely does present significant challenges for organisations and employees

I know from leading my own organisation that flexible, remote working is essential for the recruitment and retention of the most talented staff in today's economy – and also for ensuring they can be at their most creative and collaborative.

The pandemic has changed people's measures of success. They don't want to be tied to their workplaces. They recognise how much they value flexibility, they value family time, and they value the ability to do a good job without it compromising their relationships or their health.

Now, I know this is going to be challenging for the education sector.

We cannot simply ignore this if we are going to be truly people-centred organisations. There is an organisational need to attract the best people, and to attract the best people, we have to keep up in a world where employees expectations have shifted dramatically.

One of the most important things we can do as leaders is – like with our pupils and communities – is to listen carefully and connect with and stay in tune with our staff. Indeed, I think one of the most valuable things those trusts that have managed the pandemic well have done is to listen, listen, listen.

In his excellent book, Julian Richer of Richer Sounds, one of the country's most celebrated entrepreneurs and employers of choice says:

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***“Focusing on people requires listening to what they are telling you, paying attention to individuals and finding out what messages you are sending them. It needs action. I cannot tell you it will be easy, but I can tell you it will work.”***

This isn't yet a universal trait in education. The NGA's annual survey found that **26% of governors/trustees reported that they had not used any formal methods of engaging with staff within their school or trust in the past 12 months. Those that did engage reported monitoring results of staff surveys (70%) or holding staff consultation (27%).**

We must not forget to keep listening and engaging. And I think to lead to the action Julian Richer describes, yes, it can be introduced through the culture of the organisation, but it needs to be reinforced by trust-led accountability measures – those year in year out pure accountability measures where boards hold their trusts to account publicly through the judgement of parents and staff – not simply government officials. Empowering people is about support and listening, its also about giving them a real stake.

People elevate purpose

Purpose elevates people

We cannot leave our people behind, leading in not so splendid isolation. It is they will take us forward in the months and years ahead.

So, there is much to think about ....

And much of it begins with reconnecting with purpose and people.

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The key thing for CEOs in the year ahead is to make the time to connect and to listen, to prioritise, and to look after yourselves and your teams. It's unrealistic to say that the reactivity will stop, but aside from the reactivity we have to make the best use of our time and our energy. How you use that time and energy will define the future of a generation.

Do not lose sight of why you are here, do not lose sight of those around you. When it comes down to it, we need you more than ever, we need your purpose more than ever, we need your people more than ever. Purpose and people, People and purpose, - it begins with you.

In the words of Dostoyevsky

**“The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.”**

**Fyodor Dostoyevsky**

Colleagues, we need you to not only help our people survive the collateral of this current situation, but to thrive both now and in preparation for a better future – we need you to lead organisations and a sector that enables us all – your people - to connect and reconnect with their innate purpose.

That will sustain us. That will elevate us. That will give us the hope for a better, brighter future – especially for the next generation.

Thank you