

Michael Pain's Keynote Speech to the National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2021

29th September 2021 - Nottingham

Good morning,

And how fantastic is it to be back, meeting 'face to face', as a national network of Chief Executives? Welcome back to Nottingham, and welcome back to a little bit more normality for all of us. We're not all here – understandably – these things take time, but good to see so many.

And as we return to a familiar place and – for many of us – a longstanding network of colleagues, after such tumultuous times, I wanted to start today with this:

“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.”

— Nelson Mandela

I think we will all be struck a little by that today.

When we last met face to face in this room, two years ago, who could have known what awaited our world, ourselves as leaders, and – indeed – so crucially, our young people.

It feels a lifetime ago. And so much has changed for all of us. I, myself, have changed, you yourselves will have changed too.

Yet, what we believe in hasn't changed. Indeed, the last two years have helped us to crystalise some things.

I'm reminded of how at that last event we spoke of two important themes

- **The potential of academy trusts to be at the very heart of their communities; Serving communities first and foremost – both loved by them and accountable to them.**

- **And the second theme, the role of Chief Executives – as leaders - in embodying the change those communities wish to see;**

Those themes could not have been more pertinent for what was to greet us in 2020. And they remain hugely pertinent as we rebuild and forge ahead together. So today we revisit them.

COVID19 has dominated our lives. It dominates our news. It dominates the thinking of governments and policy makers everywhere.

Yet – and I don't mean do downplay it at all – it is part of a much bigger story, particularly for the generation of children and young people you all serve. A generation who simply do not want to be defined as the COVID generation.

If theirs' is to be a life not defined as such, we quickly need to tap into exactly what it is that they (and their parents) need and expect from us as leaders and from the organisations that serve them, as we emerge from this pandemic.

The bandwidth of governments is narrow. Just under two weeks we welcomed the sixth Secretary of State for Education in just over seven years. That is another new person who needs to learn about how the system works, what the key needs and dynamics are, and how to help serve leaders and embed sustainable change. That will take time, and we can't simply sit with the 'so called' vision from the last Secretary of State that is limited to 'lets get more schools in trusts'. It lacks sophistication.

So, I don't mean to play down the potential of a new government team – I'm an optimist, but I don't think we can wait for them to catch up. And I don't think our communities want us to wait either.

The fact is that communities are increasingly looking to CEOs and leaders of organisations – more than governments – to identify and address the change they wish to see. They see greater stability, commitment and consistency in you as leaders. Indeed, a few of you have reminded me in the last week or two how your tenures as CEOs have now outlasted seven Education secretaries!

Let me share this quote from this year's Edelman Trust Barometer

“the public are looking to CEOs of organisations (across a wide range of sectors) to fill the void left by government, taking the lead on change, stepping in to address societal issues and holding themselves accountable to the public. 68% said CEOs should step in when the government does not fix societal problems and 66% said CEOs should take the lead on change rather than waiting for government to impose change on them.”

Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021

Meanwhile, according to the OECD, trust in government among young people has declined across the developed world since 2016.

Simply spending our time digesting government announcements, guidance, and pronouncements is not going to get us far as strategic leaders serving young people. Important though it is, that's management not leadership.

The Edelman findings are incredibly important and represent everything that Forum Strategy is about as an organisation. We recognise that change in our system, and for our young people, is driven by the vision, strategy and day to day actions of the people in this audience – who inspire and motivate people to deliver. And driven by your boards of course. That is why we get up in the morning.

The challenge is that – in the last eighteen months – whilst some leaders have had or made some space to think ahead, to consider the bigger picture and the strategic implications and broader needs of their communities; others – often understandably – have seen their working lives dominated by reacting to the latest government guidance and pronouncements.

So how do we do re-calibrate? How do we get ahead of the curve for this generation and the communities they are growing up in? How do we be and create the change they wish to see in the world? Because as we have heard from Saeed – it is their world we are all shaping.

As the leader of a strategy organisation, I believe that the best strategy emerges from great intelligence on the ground. I like to call it 'contextual wisdom'.

We are seeing strategic academy trust CEOs shifting their leadership focus to spend less time looking upwards than they have been able to of late, and more time looking outwards for contextual wisdom – and capacity to deliver too.

Looking outwards, not upwards.

And what are they hearing? What does that intelligence, that contextual wisdom, tell them?

Well we will hear much about that today.

However, we do know that parents want to build on the partnerships that came through COVID19 and to make sure technological developments and the lessons from remote and online learning is harnessed – **ensuring, as we do so, that children are the masters, not the servants of technology** – through high quality

and safe digital learning. As we will hear from Liz Williams later, the shift to an online world for our young people – including the way in which they learn and prepare for their future lives – is inevitable. It will define their futures, and trusts and schools need to be at the heart of preparing them for that.

We hear from communities that **diversity matters – and that the leadership of organisations that serve communities should better reflect the communities they serve**. As things stand – until today – we have no real grasp about how well trust leadership models diversity and inclusion. Under the leadership of Alice Gregson, Forum’s COO, who we will hear from in a moment, we now understand more.

We hear that people – particularly young people – **want the organisations that serve them to be sustainable and greener**. 58% of children and young people surveyed said governments were “betraying me and/or future generations,” while 64% said their governments are not doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe. 59% of children and young people surveyed were very or extremely worried about climate change. This Summer Place2Be - a charity offering counselling in schools - said the issue was becoming "more and more prominent". The

organisation said that climate anxiety was brought about by a sense that politicians and big business were not acting quickly enough.

And we hear from pupils and staff **that a culture that values wellbeing, flexibility and care – above high stakes accountability – really matters now.** It's time to put behind us the high stakes cultures that once existed pre pandemic in some trusts and schools. Whether it's the Good Childhood Index from the Children's Society, or the DfE's own research into staff wellbeing and retention, the data tells us we cannot afford for mental health and wellbeing to be collateral for bigger numbers and top down plaudits. A post COVID world has to be less high stakes for everyone in the education system, not least teachers and young people.

So this is about

- Generating rich and purposesful digital inclusion and learning, equipping young people to be healthy, safe and creative in doing so
- Striving for diversity and inclusion modelled from the very top of our education system

- Committing to sustainable and greener estates and practices and responding to the concerns of young people on climate change

And

- Fostering culture that prizes wellbeing, care and employee flexibility and puts it first

Now the trust sector has made some leaps on some of these areas. There is very little strategy or plan from government on any of these issues. It is down to boards and to Chief Executives to model the change communities wish to see, and to be held accountable for it by communities themselves.

As Campbell MacPherson – the author and change management expert – wrote in a recent article for Forum Strategy:

“As the CEO, we need to lead the way. We need to be resilience personified, for the whole organisation is looking to us for reassurance, honesty and the confidence to thrive in a world of change.”

So how are you doing on being safe and purposeful digital natives, and setting expectations for healthy and productive use of technology? How are you doing in

shaping diverse teams that reflect the communities you serve? How are you doing on modelling a more sustainable, greener approach that young people say matters more than anything else? How are you doing in demonstrating a commitment to your own wellbeing and flexible working, and that of your team? Is your board and through them your communities genuinely holding your trust and your leadership to account on this?

This is about walking the talk of course. And within that lies your greatest power and influence as a CEO. People will watch you, they want to believe in you, and they want to be inspired by you. They will also take inconsistency and mixed messages badly.

We are increasingly seeing CEOs in all sectors spending more time and energy on these areas.

The thing about all these areas is that they represent investments, long-term investments in our people, our estates, our technological capacity and our reputation as great organisations to belong to and to work for.

The author of *The Outsiders*, William Thorndike, often refers to the CEO as ‘the resource allocator in chief’. I think the next phase of trust leadership will be defined by how you lead as chief resource allocators – be that focus, energy, time, and/or money

So are you embodying the commitment? Is your role as the resource allocator in chief reflecting the hopes, concerns, dreams and aspirations of your communities? Is it responding to the contextual wisdom as you gather it?

It’s a big ask, a big leap. And the CEO role can quickly become a lonely of course.

Looking upwards to government and to minister for ideas and solutions won’t help with that. The world is too complex, too fast paced.

But looking outwards to the potential and capacity of your communities, to your strategic partners, to your staff – but importantly – to one another within this network will help. In fact you won’t get anywhere without doing this.

So we arrive here in Nottingham at a defining moment for our young people, for our communities, for our education system, and for you as leaders.

You have come through crisis with a determination and commitment driven by huge moral purpose. For that we thank you.

Now I believe is the time for returning to strategic leadership, based on contextual wisdom. The reason I'm sure so many of you came into the job.

Young people expect that change, they expect you to rise to the challenge, looking outwards to them and their communities, modelling the commitment to a better world that they wish to see.

This is now an exciting time to be a leader again. An exciting time to be the CEO of an academy trust again. So today, and beyond today..

Enthuse each other,

Enthuse your people,

Enthuse your young people

It's time for us to move from crisis, the true business of Being The CEO, nurturing and growing organisations – in the widest possible sense – that serve, that enthuse, that inspire a better world.

In the words of Joni Mitchell

“We are stardust, we are golden and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.”

— Joni Mitchell

Let's - together – reconnect with the power of strategic leadership and take our place in nurturing a better world, and a better future.

After all, isn't that why we all get up in the morning?

Over to you.

Thank you