

Sir Steve Lancashire's Keynote Speech to the National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2022

– 22nd September 2022

Good morning.

What an absolute privilege it is to be here today amongst so many of our CEO network members and Forum Strategy colleagues to share with you what I hope will be a very special day. It's a day where we can reconnect with each other after the summer break, take joy in the comradery that always exists when we meet, take comfort from knowing that we are amongst supportive colleagues who share the same challenges we do as Trust leaders, and take courage from the fact that as a network we are here to face these challenges together and find our way forward, together.

Many of you will know this is the first year in 10 years that I have not started September as a Chief Executive, having stepped down this summer from what has been undoubtedly the most challenging but rewarding role of my career, to pursue two great passions of mine – on a personal front – travel, because it's true that it really does broaden the mind and nourish the soul (something I feel I need after a relentless few years) and professionally, to use the knowledge, skills and experience I've gained as a Chief Exec to try and help and support those currently in the role, thinking of moving into this role or in another senior position in a Trust. In a sector about learning I'm keen that my learning is used to help others. And it's a sector I have always been passionate about. What a privilege it is to have the opportunity to be a positive influence on so many young lives, so many families and communities across the country. What a privilege, also, to be the guardian of those who work for us, our leaders, our teachers, our support staff: to nurture them, safeguard their well-being, guide their careers, help them when they are struggling and celebrate with them when they succeed.

But of course, with this privilege comes great responsibility. A responsibility to be the very best leader that we can for the people in our care, a responsibility to ensure that we create the greatest schools that we can for our children to learn in, our staff to work in and our communities to turn to and have confidence in, and a responsibility to clear away all the

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problems that stand in the way of us doing these two things.

And herein lies the rub of course, because this is a tough job, and the problems and challenges are acute.

From the round table we held a couple of weeks ago and the results of the Cost-of-Living Survey carried out by our partners at The Key, together with Forum Strategy, it is clear we are all feeling the pressures of what is a very challenging context right now.

Let's briefly reflect on what these challenges are:

Undoubtedly, pretty much everyone in this room and beyond is feeling the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, whether this is rising energy prices, food prices, inflation, rent increases, you name it. And to be honest, if people in this room, including me, are feeling the impact of it, let's remember how it must be for those in our most disadvantaged areas, those on low wages, those who are vulnerable – the very families that many of us serve.

Add to this what is a very real health and wellbeing crisis amongst many people and particularly young people. I was so sad last week, which was suicide awareness week, to read how many young people took their own lives last year, many seeing no other way out. And to read how help lines are being swamped by calls from families desperate for support.

For example, I was stunned to be told that at Reach2 last year calls to our Employee Assistance Programme had increased 10-fold in one year and this is from families who, you could imagine, are probably better placed than most to weather this.

On a macro level, there is the political uncertainty and turmoil we are experiencing, which not only impacts on our personal lives, but our professional lives too. How many Secretaries of States in how many weeks? Almost farcical. My favourite being a Secretary Of States appointed at the start of the summer holidays and replaced in September. Tough gig.

And on the theme of politics, my view is the same as the rest of the Forum Strategy team, the Government's White Paper and the DfE's policies do not yet fully cover the challenges

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we face now or the key trends of the coming years including the issues I've just noted but also challenges such as likely economic and labour market changes, climate change and sustainability issues. There's also the ticking time bomb, discussed at the round table, of the need for a once in a generation investment, of significant proportions, to make the education estates sustainable and fit for purpose. I was having discussions with Lord Nash on this very issue 8 years ago, and we are no nearer a proper solution.

Finally, before I depress us all, there is a real need to herald in a new era of respect for the profession from government. A need to create a strong dialogue over the issues I've covered so that we don't get the kind of surprises we got this summer over pay rises etc. The job is tough enough without this kind of last-minute curveball.

I'm teasing, of course, about depressing you all, as I list the multiple challenges that face us, but it is imperative that we are realistic about the scale of the challenge ahead so that our response can be robust and commensurate with the task at hand.

But colleagues, I am speaking honestly when I say, I am not depressed or disheartened about the journey that lies ahead. (Those friends who like to tease me are not allowed to shout out 'That's because you're not doing the job any more Steve').

Let me say again. I really am not depressed or disheartened about it. In fact I feel quite the opposite, I feel invigorated and excited. Why do I feel like this? because I have hope.

I want to use the rest of this speech to talk about why hope is so important and why the hope and optimism I have is well founded I believe.

There are many definitions of the concept/virtue/ characteristic of hope, and I suspect it means something slightly different to all of us.

I think I first really came upon the concept through my love of reading and fascination for Greek Mythology. I wanted to be Mighty Zeus and defeat all the Titans (No delusions of grandeur then!) and a particular favourite story was of Prometheus stealing (my!) fire.

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For those of you who have forgotten the legend, Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were Titans but pledged their loyalty to Zeus and the Olympians. Zeus rewarded them for their loyalty and gave them the job of creating the first creatures to live on Earth. Epimetheus formed the animals and gave each a special skill and form of protection. Prometheus took his time moulding man, and was left with no forms of protection since Epimetheus had already given them all away. He knew man needed some form of protection and asked Zeus if he could let man have fire. Zeus refused. Fire was only for the gods. Prometheus ignored Zeus and gave man fire anyway.

For this, Prometheus was punished. Zeus tied him with chains to a rock far away in the Caucasus Mountains where nobody would find him. Every day Zeus sent an eagle to feast upon Prometheus' liver, which grew back every day so that Prometheus would have to endure this torture daily until Heracles found Prometheus and killed the eagle and let Prometheus go. This torture wasn't enough of a punishment for Zeus who also believed that humans should be punished for accepting the gift of fire from Prometheus. To punish man, Zeus created a woman named Pandora. She was moulded to look like the beautiful goddess Aphrodite. She received the gifts of wisdom, beauty, kindness, peace, generosity, and health from the gods.

Zeus brought her to Earth to be Epimetheus' wife. Even though Epimetheus' brother, Prometheus, had warned him of Zeus' trickery and told him not to accept gifts from the gods, Epimetheus was too taken with her beauty and wanted to marry her anyway.

As a wedding present, Zeus gave Pandora a box but warned her never to open it. Pandora, who was created to be curious, couldn't stay away from the box and the urge to open it became too strong. Horrible things flew out of the box including greed, envy, hatred, pain, disease, hunger, poverty, war, and death. All of life's miseries had been let out into the world.

Pandora slammed the lid of the box back down.

The last thing remaining inside of the box was hope.

Ever since, according to the legend, humans have been able to hold onto this hope in order to survive the wickedness that Pandora had let out. Now I'm not suggesting of course that

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the acute challenges I talked about earlier are on the same scale as some of the nasties that came out of the box, but I love the way this story exemplifies that it is Hope that is the antidote and, if you like, defence or weapon against feeling overwhelmed by all the difficult, bad stuff.

In a rather more clinical, less literary way, dictionaries call it something like 'a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen' or a variation of this. So, more emphasis on it looking toward the future, and usually, a more desirable future. Many people have used this idea. Barack Obama:

'Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it.'

It is this latter description I think that gets more to the heart of where we need to be because it acknowledges that hope needs to be accompanied by action, by deeds, by hard work, and even by (metaphorically) fighting, and we don't passively wait for this better future to happen. And it is this final definition of hope I'm going to share which leads me to the belief that as Trust Leaders, you will lead us to this better future:

'Hope is to want something to happen and have a good reason to think that it will'

I have a good reason to think all of you in this room can deliver this better future, why?

Because:

'You've just done it, you're still doing it, and you'll carry on doing it'

The way in which as a sector, as a network, as individual leaders you have all come together and have tackled some of the most complex, most challenging, most heart-breaking problems facing our schools and their communities over the last few years leaves me in no doubt that my hope is well founded.

Let's explore a bit more.

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The pandemic and our ongoing challenges have facilitated some fairly seismic shifts. I want to explore three and in doing so note some remarkable achievements that are at the heart of why I say our hope is well founded.

Firstly, we have started to break down the artificial barriers, the legal constructs, the insular mindsets that have been a feature of our educational landscape for too long. We have begun to collaborate, network, co-operate more than ever and now understand that we are all stronger and better as a result of sharing our knowledge, our expertise, our resources and, even, at times, ourselves as leaders. We have 'open sourced' ourselves to each other, put aside personal (and Trust) agendas and egos and committed ourselves to the common good.

The results have been, and will continue to be, phenomenal. We have collectively survived (not without hurt and loss, of course) a pandemic, we are now working hard to find solutions to the challenges of austerity, political turmoil, financial hardship, all the things I listed earlier.

And despite all of this, we are here together today talking about the future, about what more we can do to serve our school communities. Past challenges are exactly that and we are ready to take what we have collectively learned and apply it to solving our next set of challenges. This is hopeful leadership.

The next seismic shift has been in our ability to innovate, to change our ways of working, to be creative and solve problems we didn't even know existed. We can now believe much more in the art of the possible.

The challenges we have faced and overcome have pushed us in a direction we perhaps knew we should be going, just much quicker, and it has shown us our true potential. Let's just take a moment to reflect on just two of these accomplishments.

Pretty much a digital transformation has taken place where, challenged by necessity, we rethought traditional models of teaching and learning, moved to a hybrid model of blended

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online and classroom learning with astonishing speed. We upskilled ourselves to meet this new way of working, we rewrote curriculums to make sure we were meeting the changing needs of our children and young people, and we solved the logistical problems of multi-site schooling. Of course, this was supported by central government putting their hands in the public pocket to give us some of the tech we needed but the essential problem of how to school pupils in extraordinary circumstances was solved by the sector working together and finding collective solutions.

And now that a degree of normality has returned to our schools, look how well we have all put provision in place to support those pupils who have had their learning disrupted or who perhaps fared less well. Look how well we have put support in place to support the most vulnerable, to help them continue to thrive and learn. This is a sector who are experts in what they do.

Let's look at the way in which our working practices changed and our realisation that we could do things differently if we challenged traditional norms. And the realisation that this could really have an impact on some of those complex issues we are struggling with such as environmental sustainability and organisational efficiency. Through our teams and staff working differently across the organisation, in my last year as Chief Executive at Reach2, we knocked a million pounds off our travel budget alone. Money that can be spent on addressing other challenges and what a reduction in our environmental footprint.

It is because of this proven ability to innovate, to adapt, to be creative in finding solutions that I once again can say how confident I am in a hopeful future.

I think the final seismic shift which I'll touch on briefly because I could write a book on it (but won't) and have covered it in a couple of blogs is probably less a seismic shift and more a forceful reminder that schools are the centre of their school communities, and we are civic leaders. In the communities that we serve we are a mainstay for our families, they turn to us in times of need, they look to us to help solve their problems.

In my blog about the masterclass of leadership Her Majesty the Queen gave us, I talk about her being a constant in peoples' lives, well we are that constant for our school communities and in these most challenging of times we need to be at our very best and it is imperative,
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as I said in last week's blog, that what matters most to our families, matters most to us.

At the start of this speech, I talked about being invigorated and excited about the future. I hope, through what I have been describing, and our collective belief in the power of connection and community that you are too.

Christopher Reeve, AKA Superman, who many know went through a horrific accident that changed his life, once said ***'hope is a choice and once you choose hope anything is feasible'***.

He also developed what he called 'habits of hope' a concept later developed by others.

It's an idea that really resonated with me and includes behaviours I consciously tried to adopt both as a CEO and as a person. Let me conclude by sharing three of them and at the same time ask you to reflect on how important they might be in your roles as the most senior people in your organisations, as the standard bearers of hope.

1. Focusing on the opportunities, not just the restrictions of any situation.

I was heartened when I saw that a third of respondents to the Cost-of-Living Survey had highlighted the positive outcomes, even be they unintended consequences, of the challenging times we have been through, with innovation, increased efficiency and sustainability all being positively impacted. The innovations I listed earlier. Again, last week at the round table, the excellent examples of Trust leaders being creative in how to do more with less. If we have more thinking like this, more seizing of these opportunities then that 'belief, wish combined with action' will mean that hopeful leadership will have a much better chance of delivering that better future.

2. Cultivating optimism.

The old glass half full or half empty scenario. I love that analogy of either being a mood hoover or a radiator. Trying to light up the room with warmth and positivity rather than being like a Harry Potter dementor sucking all hope and joy out of the world. There's quite a lot of

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research out there that shows that if you're optimistic you have a better quality of life and even a better psychological state. If you're a leader asking people to go the extra mile through tough times, my belief is that by focusing on the positive, celebrating the gains is the best way to give them hope and motivate them to action.

3. Doing random acts of kindness.

I think kindness gives hope to others especially if it's unexpected because it reinforces that people are essentially good and this is such a positive thing. I feel great when someone does something kind for me and I hope they feel the same. Throughout the pandemic one of my mantras was 'be kind' and I tried to act on this as much as I could. Given how influential we are in our role as Trust leaders, the smallest things can make a big difference.

So, in summary.

It's often been quoted to me that 'Hope is not a strategy'. Well, I don't hold with that, and to my mind, 'hopeful leadership' based on the understanding we have of it being a wish, a desire, an expectation of a better future delivered through our actions, is exactly where we should be right now, and exactly what is going to see us through these next few years, and I ask that you all be 'hopeful leaders'. I'll leave you with Charles Dickens:

'It's always something to know you've done the most you could, but don't leave off hoping or it's no use doing anything. Hope, hope to the last!'

Thank you.