

National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2023: Alice Gregson's Keynote Speech

21st September 2023

Good morning colleagues.

A really warm welcome to you all for our sixth annual CEO conference. As I always do, I want to start with acknowledging and thanking you for, the incredible work that you all do.

Recognising once again, the multitude of challenges we continue to face as a sector, but how your relentless commitment and deeply meaningful work continues. At Forum Strategy, we want you to know that we see it, we appreciate it, and we will continue to do what we can to support you, as and when we can.

The theme of today's conference is 'Thriving Together' and it such an important focal point, particularly during these continually challenging times. In fact, I'd go a step further and say, never has it been more important for us to stop and think about what thriving means. Because when times are tough, it can be easy (and understandable) to adopt a survival mindset of 'If I can just get through this' or 'If I can just reach this point in time'.

But living in perpetual survival mode eventually holds us back. It holds us back from our goals, our vision and our purpose and ultimately from personal growth and fulfilment. In simple terms, survival is about 'getting by' and 'just about being okay', and thriving is about feeling good; it's about growth and fulfilment. Something we are all ultimately striving for. It is the difference between accepting things as they are, feeling flat and defeated by obstacles we see as insurmountable, and standing up to steadfastly push back against the things we don't agree with, the things we want to change, using our influence to shape the system within which we operate.

I saw this difference in action at our recent National #TrustLeaders Symposium and I see it today. This is not a room full of CEOs who want to just accept the way things are. This is a room of CEOs highly ambitious for the young people and communities we serve; determined to use their agency, hope and

resilience to ensure the best possible opportunities and outcomes for those they work for and with. Seeing our education system (and the people within it) just about survive, is not enough for you. You want more – and we will come onto this very shortly.

I think, coming back to the theme of thriving, we can all agree that thriving for us as leaders in education, is not only about ourselves individually (although this is, of course, a vital part of the picture, as Steve will touch on very shortly). It is about something bigger. Fundamentally, thriving for us, is about seeing the children and young people we serve, the communities we work so closely with, and the workforce who work tirelessly alongside us, thrive too. The belief that we cannot thrive as leaders, as organisations and as a system, unless everyone is thriving within it, together.

And so, today is about a shared acknowledgement and understanding that for the idea of ‘thriving’ to be truly lived, breathed and enacted, all of the lives touched by the work of a trust, needs to be considered as part of this. *“Nobody wins unless everybody wins”* is a philosophy I was taught from a really young age and I think nicely summarises the concept here.

We are set to hear from a range of incredible speakers for the day and really explore together, through different lenses, what thriving means for different parts of the trust community and the vital role you, as CEOs, have in enabling thriving to take root.

But, before we do this, for my input this morning I want to start us off by thinking about the system we work within and I think needs to be a theme we keep in mind across the whole day.

Because how can we really, truly thrive as trusts and as trust leaders if we are not considering how we contribute to and help to build a wider system that thrives too? If today is about delving into the specific areas of trust life and service, let’s first start with taking a step back to look at the bigger picture within which we operate.

At Forum, most of you will be aware of the work we’ve been leading since the early part of this year, focused on how system leadership has evolved as the trust sector, and indeed the role of CEO, has evolved over the last decade, considering what this means for the future of system leadership ahead.

Now let's be clear, when we are talking about system leadership, we are not talking about some highly convoluted, complex definition. We are talking about the leadership acts of people within a system that contribute to its betterment and improvement.

Now, of course we know that system leadership is not a new concept. Those of you who have been in education for some time, will be familiar with work undertaken over a decade ago, around system leadership in education. But this was a long time ago. Particularly when we consider how the education system has changed and evolved in that time, not least the growth of multi-academy trusts and within that, the role of CEO.

System leadership as we are talking about it now, is built upon the successful foundations of many years ago but the thinking needs to be moved on, recognising that the context and system itself has shifted and changed. Therefore, what is needed now, is not the exactly the same as what was needed over a decade ago. There is a need to learn from and build on the work that has gone before this but to look at this through a new lens – a lens focused in on the role of trusts and their CEOs, as this work has not been (and is not being) done elsewhere.

But why is now the right time for this?

In a context where so much can feel out of our control (particularly many things government related), we need to be able 'tune out the noise' and zero in on what *is* within our control; the leadership we can enact and model every day by identifying where the common challenges and opportunities exist for education, taking the actions needed to address them and bringing others with us as we do so. In doing this, we can contribute to a system that starts to thrive, even in the face of adversity.

But what does a thriving education system look like? I'm going to put this really concisely, but for me it is this. A thriving education system is one in which ALL children and young people, ALL those who work within and for it, and ALL the communities and stakeholders who interact with it, feel they have a place, have a voice and feel they are learning, developing and growing within it.

Your definition may be (and probably is!) quite different. The point is, we need to agree and articulate what this means and in order to do this, we need system led collaboration and vision.

But regardless, for now, of how we each define system thriving, I think we can all agree that if our education system is not only to survive but go on to thrive, effective system leadership is mission critical. Because let's be honest, we cannot let this be a government led mission.

As CEOs, you hold one of the most influential roles in the system; you have the opportunity to determine how your trusts engage and involve themselves with wider systemic matters and partnerships. No-one is going to prioritise, provide direction for, or sufficiently generate, system leadership of the scale and nature we envisage here, if you, as Chief Executives are not involved and engaged from the outset. This is why zeroing in on what system leadership looks like for CEOs, is key.

In almost all of the examples of system leadership we have seen so far, the role of the CEO has been crucial to igniting and sustaining external system leadership efforts across and beyond trusts. Many of which we referred to in our first system leadership thinkpiece, shared earlier this year, and even more examples have become apparent as I've talked to you on my trust visits and at the symposium held this year.

From setting up open practice sharing platforms to tackle our recruitment and retention challenges; to stepping in to take on the leadership of another trust in need.

From sharing regular reflective blogs and social media contributions; to serving on local, regional and national advisory boards.

From working informally with other trusts on setting bold ambitions; to forging local partnerships within and beyond education to support employability and skills development.

Pressing ahead with environmental sustainability work and sharing this with others across the system, setting up local outreach services to support the community... I could go on!

What we can see is common across these examples is the central role played by the CEO in identifying the issue, in bringing people together from education and in many cases, beyond it (recognising that many of the issues we face are not limited to the confines of education), and in igniting a sense of collective effort.

And so, we know great practice is happening in pockets but, the question then becomes, how to build on this so that system leadership becomes a regular practice and habit for CEOs? So much so, that we start to see a system creaking at its edges right now, start to thrive and flourish?

How, as CEOs, you are able to work together trust-to-trust; how you connect with and lead in your local areas, developing partnerships within but crucially, also beyond the education sector; and how you leverage your influence to inform direction and policy nationally, can all significantly contribute to how the system develops and 'self-improves'. How you model the positive behaviours of system leaders and galvanise others to collaborate with you to do system level good, is so vital right now.

All of this we talk about in detail within our recently published second thinkpiece, produced in great collaboration with our CEO professional learning communities over the Summer and covered last weekend in Schools Week. We cannot underestimate the criticality of effective CEO system leadership and its huge potential in contributing to the creation of a thriving system within which all thrive and grow. This is why, at Forum Strategy, we are doing all that we can to support emerging thinking in this area and alongside this, offer development and opportunities that support you as system leaders.

But bringing this back, as I finish, to our theme for today 'Thriving Together'. For me, I can't help but wonder whether any of us (as leaders, as children, as workforces and as communities) can fully thrive if we are operating in a system that is in survival mode. For the continuum of 'thriving' to be complete, we need to know that our system and all those it touches and impacts, are thriving together.

Whilst we must all continue to make it clear to government, what is needed from them, we must also turn our attention inwards. We must each ask two questions of ourselves, 'How, in the role that I do, am I contributing to the development of a thriving education system?' and 'How am I enabling others to play their part too?'

Because as CEOs, the people around you look to you for encouragement, support and inspiration. When you say something is important, when you take action towards a cause, and when you model the behaviours, you wish to see across the system, people take note. Your staff, your peers and perhaps most importantly, children and young people are watching you. When you show that

contributing to the development of a thriving education system is important, others will follow suit and we begin a movement towards focused, collective endeavour. We, as CEOs of influential organisations, have the opportunity to inspire, to encourage and to come together in shaping a better future. Let's take that opportunity with both hands.

As one of our professional learning community group members so articulately puts it **“No child is an island; no MAT is an island; no Chief Executive can be.”** And this is the case now, more than ever.