

National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2023: Sir Steve Lancashire's Keynote Speech

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Good morning, everyone. It is really great to see you all. I always wake up on the morning of this Forum Strategy CEO network conference with the same sense of excitement as when I have a big family event. This is because I know I'm going to spend the day with some really great people, I'm going to catch up on what's been happening in their lives, I'm going to be thoroughly entertained and engaged with those who are here to talk to us, I'm going to learn something and, as with family gatherings, I'm going to check in with people and strengthen the bonds that already exists between us and reinforce the sense of 'belonging' that I think is such a feature of our network. To me being part of this CEO network is akin to belonging to a tightly knit family. In both, there's an intrinsic bond of trust and support. Like family members, as fellow CEOs we understand the unique challenges and pressures we each face in our respective roles. We offer guidance, share experiences, and celebrate successes, just as families do.

As Chair of the CEO network, I want the network to be a sanctuary where we can candidly discuss concerns, seek advice, and find solace knowing we are not alone. But as well as a sanctuary I want it to be a thriving space where growth, mentorship, and a shared commitment to collective success flourish.

It's on the theme of thriving that I want to talk about today. With your indulgence, I'd like share some of my personal reflections on the concept of a 'thriving CEO' and why this is such an important idea. I'd like to offer my reflections on the characteristics of a thriving CEO and in doing this I'd like to share a couple of personal anecdotes about those occasions when it really felt like in my role as CEO I was thriving and my professional world seemed tickety boo, as it were, and those occasions, which I know we all experience, when just getting to the end of the day, week or term seems like a mountain to climb and all we want to do is just survive.

I've said before but I will say it again, we are currently undertaking this most senior of roles in a professional context that is continually evolving, where change is our only constant. We currently face challenges of unparalleled

complexity and magnitude. The pace of technological innovation in our sector is breathtaking, political turmoil and instability is a constant feature, economic hardship is most people's (and organisations) reality and societal expectations and the demands placed upon us by those we serve are ever increasing. Add on to this the sudden crises that emerge, school buildings going to RAAC and ruin (pun intended and stolen from schools week) for example and it would be easy for us to accept that surviving is what we should be about, because survival means we endure these challenges, we keep at least the status quo, and we weather the storms.

But is this truly the role of a CEO, the steward of an organisation's destiny? In a world that demands innovation, adaptability, and forward momentum, is survival enough? I offer you the response. Absolutely not.

For me there is a huge difference between surviving and thriving as a CEO. It is the difference between merely existing and leaving an indelible mark on the world. It is the difference between reacting to circumstances and shaping them to our advantage. It is the difference between maintaining the status quo and leading a relentless pursuit of excellence. Thriving is not a passive state of mere existence. It is an active pursuit, an unwavering commitment to growth and evolution. To thrive is to flourish in the face of adversity, to embrace change as an opportunity, and to inspire transformation in ourselves and others. Thriving is the dynamic interplay between resilience, vision, innovation, and leadership. It's not just about weathering storms; it's about harnessing their energy to propel forward.

So, why is it so important for us as CEOs to thrive rather than merely survive?

Quite simply, because of the profound impact that our leadership has, not only on the organisations we guide, but on the people we need to inspire, the sector we aim to shape, and the broader fabric of society that we are such a crucial part of.

In times of crisis, it is the thriving CEO who shines brightest. It is their resilience that becomes a source of inspiration, not just within their organisation but across the sector. They are the ones who transform adversity into opportunity, who lead their organisations out of the darkness and into the light.

Thriving CEOs take seriously their social and moral responsibility to contribute to broader societal well-being. They exemplify the potential of an organisation to be a force for good in addressing those challenges I talked about earlier. Thriving CEOs understand it is about leaving a positive legacy for future generations.

Thriving CEOs set standards for ethical behaviour that ripple through their organisations and inspire others to follow suit. They are the role model that others fail to live up to, they are the role models that we need so badly at this very moment.

Thriving CEOs drive innovation and creativity. They build strong, collaborative teams and foster cultures of continuous improvement. They are resilient, able to bounce back from setbacks, learn from failures, and forge ahead with newfound wisdom and determination. They push the boundaries of what's possible, introducing new ways of working and doing things that not only meet head on the current challenges but anticipate future needs and help us prepare for them.

I imagine that nobody in this room wants to maintain the status quo of our here and now and thriving CEOs don't settle for maintaining the status quo. They actively seek opportunities for growth, whether through organic expansion, mergers or strategic partnerships. Their visionary leadership propels their organizations to new heights. They evolve.

Thriving CEOs create value. They understand that business is not just about profit and results, it's about creating value for all stakeholders. They prioritise environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical business practices. Things that the world is crying out for right now.

Thriving CEOs are not just leaders within their organisations; they are influencers and thought leaders in their sector and beyond. They shape the trajectory of their sector and inspire others to follow their example.

Thriving CEOs are the answer to so many questions and have the opportunity to both make and be the difference that is needed.

So am I painting a picture of some mythical, unattainable, indestructible, unbeatable super CEO type figure? An Athena or Thor of the MAT world?

No. Someone far more human.

This room is full of CEOs who, in my book, (Pun intended) are the very definition of a thriving CEO. CEOs who have a dynamic blend of qualities, skills, and attributes that allow them to not only survive the multitude of challenges and barriers but to excel and succeed in spite of them.

I pondered how to go about describing these skills, qualities and attributes of a thriving CEO in a way that lifts them from what they really are, the musings of a former CEO who now has time and opportunity to reflect on his own leadership journey and draw some conclusions, in to something with a bit more gravitas, to try and fool you all into thinking I'm an academic.

In thinking about whether or not I could helpfully classify them, I thought about two such models of classification that have been prevalent in our education sector for so long. I'm thinking of Bloom's taxonomy and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But which to use? Well, you know how much I love words, so I got a bit nerdy and looked at the etymology of each. To start with Bloom, taxonomy, according to Briannica is 'the science of classification, but more strictly the classification of living and extinct organisms. Well, as I look around I see a group of very much alive CEOs and in a talk about thriving not surviving I'm not sure I want to go anywhere near something that is about extinction. (When I first typed this sentence organisms defaulted to orgasms and it would have been much more appropriate to discuss extinction). Nevertheless, there is merit in the notion of a taxonomy of skills, qualities and attributes of a thriving CEO. And as I thought about whether there is a hierarchy in any of these I came to the conclusion that there probably is. There are some things that we all need to be able to do, to know, to have, in order for us to both survive and thrive. Some things that are at the base of a pyramid that has self-actualisation as a thriving CEO at its apex. So with that in mind, I have come up with. 'A hierarchical taxonomy of skills, qualities, attributes for Thriving CEOs.'

Are you suitably fooled that I could be an academic? Anyway, however we classify them, what does a thriving CEO look like?

There are of course certain competencies that a CEO needs in order to just do their job effectively. Let's not spend too long on these, they are well documented. I think they are really well captured in McKinsey's work; '*The mindsets and practice of excellent CEO's*' from 2019. It's a formidable piece of research, based on a study of nearly 8000 CEOs across the globe, and it really

influenced my thinking about how to thrive as a CEO. I encourage you to read it. They list the main elements of our job as: setting the strategy, aligning the organisation, leading the top team, working with the board, being the face of the company to external stakeholders, and managing our own time and energy. I don't think we would argue with these, they sound like what we all do on daily and annual basis. How well we do each of them, of course, is the determiner of how good or effective as a CEO we are. But I'm certain that ensuring we are competent in these elements of our job is very much the base of the pyramid, the cornerstone of being a thriving CEO. I do choose my words carefully here because one of the things I came to realise as I matured as a CEO is that being competent in all these aspects and expert in some is enough. And I now believe that it's not only okay, but often preferable to be "expert enough" rather than the ultimate authority in CEO competencies. As CEOs we juggle multifaceted responsibilities, and expertise in every aspect can be unrealistic. Being expert enough means having a solid grasp of core competencies while relying on a capable team for specialised expertise. My experience is that this promotes collaboration, humility, and a focus on collective strategic leadership, allowing us as CEOs to leverage our teams' strengths and foster a well-rounded, high-performing organisation that thrives collectively. So thriving CEOs don't need to have superpowers like Thor or Athena, they simply need to be 'expert enough'.

Where I think the McKinsey research gets really interesting is in their focus on the mindsets and personal practices of these thriving CEOs in carrying out the 6 elements of the role. Let me share them with you. (slide)

This work certainly shaped my thinking and helped me develop my practices and I'm sure it was one of the catalysts in my shifting up a gear in the role as I started to really understand how to have maximum impact as CEO.

I won't be pedestrian in talking through each element, you can read it for yourself later, but those of you who been through the 'Being the CEO' programme, had coaching or mentoring for me, read the blogs, and when (hint hint) you read the book you will recognise that much of what you hear me talk about, or guide you towards or talk about in our sessions has the genesis in these ideas. Let me exemplify a couple.

Focus on the long term 'Why?' A CEO's unwavering focus on the long-term "why" of an organisation is vital I believe. It sets the foundation for a clear vision that inspires both those who work for us and those we serve in our

communities and organisations. By articulating a compelling purpose we can guide strategic decisions, nurture innovation, and build a resilient culture. Prioritising the long-term "why" fosters stability, sustainability, and enduring success, ensuring that the organisation not only survives but thrives. The first thing I always ask a CEO when I meet them (after a few pleasantries) is 'What's the answer to the legacy question?' What is the impact you want to have on your children and young adults, your schools, your communities. Because being clear at the start about where you want to end, is one way to help you thrive as a CEO.

Do what only you can do. Many of you will have heard me over emphasise the BE in 'Being the CEO' and continually ask 'and how are you spending your time, are you doing CEO type things? This is because I believe thriving CEOs concentrate on tasks that only they can undertake. This includes defining the organisation's vision, setting strategic priorities, and establishing a culture of excellence. As CEOs we should be engaging with stakeholders, making the most critical decisions, and providing direction during crises. By delegating operational matters to capable teams, we can focus on these high-impact responsibilities, ensuring the organisation's long-term success. Thriving CEOs stay on the balcony and keep out of the weeds.

I only have time and space to share a couple of these practices. But I know they sit at the heart of thriving as a CEO, so do take a look, but whether it's these mindsets and practices that inform you or other ones, an important principle is that thriving CEOs commit to continuous learning, especially from unrelated industries, and make it a strategic imperative, recognising that it broadens their perspective, offering fresh insights and innovative solutions to complex problems. It helps stay ahead of trends and ultimately, it enhances leadership, making us better equipped to lead their organizations in an ever-evolving landscape.

So, if a CEO needs to be 'expert enough' in the 6 main elements of the job to thrive, where does the taxonomy come in? what other characteristics do thriving CEOs have?

Well, I think there are quite a lot, and they are much more about the CEOs personal characteristics, their natural abilities, personality, attitudes and aptitudes. Much more about what they personally bring to the table.

And if they don't have them, of course, these are the characteristics that need to be developed over time, that a CEO really needs to acquire to thrive.

Let me share a few.

Visionary Leadership: At the heart of every thriving CEO is a compelling vision. They possess the ability to see beyond the horizon, to anticipate trends, and to imagine possibilities that others might overlook. Their vision becomes a guiding star, illuminating the path to success for their organisation.

Resilience: Thriving CEOs exhibit resilience in the face of challenges and setbacks. They remain determined and focused, learn from failures, and bounce back stronger. Their ability to navigate adversity inspires confidence in their team and stakeholders.

Adaptability: In a world where change is the only constant, thriving CEOs are masters of adaptation. They are not wedded to the status quo but are open to new ideas, technologies, and strategies. They embrace change as an opportunity for growth and evolution.

Strategic Agility: These leaders excel in strategic thinking. They can analyse complex situations, distil the essential elements, and make decisions that are aligned with their long-term goals. They are agile strategists who can pivot when circumstances demand it.

Effective Communication: Communication is the lifeblood of leadership, and thriving CEOs are skilled communicators. They can articulate their vision, values, and expectations with clarity and inspire their teams to action. They are active listeners who encourage open dialogue.

Decisiveness: In a world of complexity and ambiguity, the ability to make timely, informed decisions is crucial. Thriving CEOs can synthesize vast amounts of information, weigh the pros and cons, and make choices that propel their organisations forward.

Ethical Integrity: Ethical conduct is the cornerstone of thriving leadership. These CEOs operate with honesty, transparency, and a strong moral compass. They are committed to doing business with integrity, earning the trust and respect of their stakeholders.

Humility: Thriving CEOs exhibit humility and recognise that they don't have all the answers. They surround themselves with talented individuals, they

delegate effectively, and encourage collaboration. They value diverse perspectives and are willing to learn and grow themselves. They recognise that they are an expert in their organisation not THE expert.

Integrity and Ethical Conduct: Thriving CEOs prioritise ethics and integrity in their decision-making and actions. They lead with honesty, transparency, and a strong moral compass. They earn the trust and respect of their team and stakeholders through consistent ethical behaviour.

Perspective. A thriving CEO knows how to balance work and play. They understand the importance of taking breaks and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. And encouraging and facilitating this for those they lead. I always remember the words of Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo, who once said, "I'm a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend. First and foremost, I'm a person." Recognising that true success isn't just about climbing the corporate ladder or solely delivering the organisations mission but also about nurturing personal relationships and enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

But, having painted you a picture of what a thriving CEO looks like, it wouldn't be fair to leave you without offering some reflections on how to actually get there and sharing some of the strategies that worked for me in pursuit of this. And importantly acknowledging that, despite my best effort, there was a lot of highs in my career but still some significant lows and, thankfully, only a relatively few occasions, surviving was still all I could do. 90 percent of the time I felt I was thriving as a CEO, and I learnt to deal with the other 10 percent. I found this a workable and sustainable ratio.

In this, I relied on the concept of 'winning moves'. My own taxonomy of leadership behaviours, a self-guide as it were so that my leadership as a CEO had intentionality to help me become the type of leader I wanted to be and my chances of thriving were maximised. I'll share a few of them with you now in the hope that they will be helpful.

On the principle of 'Doing CEO type things' my winning move was to be disciplined in being strategic. To 'notice', the types of activities I spent most of my time on. I regularly asked myself the question; am I leading, managing or administrating? I actively reviewed what I'd been involved in each week and trained myself to keep out of operational processes. I also invited my senior colleagues to tell me to get out of the weeds when I was becoming too operational.

On ‘Doing what only you can do’ I took Jeff Bezos’s advice, to know the three things that are critical to the success of the trust, and make them my thing, focusing on them in what he calls a laser like way. Using my position as CEO to make sure they were on everyone’s agenda and thus signalling their importance. For me this was leadership development across the Trust so you would find me coaching and mentoring, running aspiring leaders’ programmes and developing leadership propositions for all people in the Trust so they understood the kind of leaders we needed. It was actively developing the trusts risk management process, with the help of a trustee because I knew that at our scale, we had to be rock solid in this area and it was central to keeping us safe and knowing our schools well. The third aspect was stakeholder engagement and building relationships. And in that self-reflection on how I was spending my time I was always aware that if these are most critical to the trust’s success this is what I needed to be spending my time on.

On focusing on the long term ‘why’, very early on I answered my own legacy question. Within a year of establishing the trust I had a clear idea of what I wanted it to look like in 3 years, 5 years, and 10 years. And what it needed to have achieved in that time both in terms of the children, families and staff but also the broader contribution we would make to society at large. I was intentional in committing to 10 years and no more which gave me absolute focus. And told me when to leave. This helped enormously with the short-term ups and downs because it helped keep them in the context of a much bigger picture.

In that ‘compelling vision’ part of the job of the CEO I took a lesson from Abraham Lincoln who said one of his strategies in uniting people behind the vision of a united states was to become a master storyteller. To have a compelling narrative and continually reinforce it both formally and informally. I did this by developing a narrative for different sets of stakeholders. Sometimes it was speech, sometimes a written think piece, sometimes a story at a social event, often just in conversations. Whatever the forum or context, giving out the same clear message about what the vision for the organisation is and inviting people to participate. I was much reassured when this particular aspect featured so highly in the key learning points from the Forum Strategy Being the CEO report last year.

And a question to ask, of course, is how as a thriving CEO do you sustain all this ‘intentional’ leadership behaviour? My most frequent conversation with CEOs

is about what a lonely position it is and how exhausting the job is. Add into this those (hopefully limited to 10%) occasions when it's more about survival and your world seems to be crashing in and thriving seems impossible. But to respond to this, there's a winning move for this too.

Let me briefly share one of my 10% occasions and how I turned surviving into thriving. Building a trust 10 years ago was a very different proposition to what it is now. Today has its challenges of course, but it doesn't, to the same degree have the political furore that existed then. Walking into rooms full of parents and staff wearing anti academy T shirts, having NUT meetings the reps would literally swear at me, having my car tyres slashed, this kind of thing was a regular feature and I, through necessity, faced it out. The event I found most brutal though was when I was summoned to the houses of parliament to meet with Margaret Hodge, MP for Barking and Dagenham and Chair of the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee. Dame Margaret objected to the forced academisation of one of the schools in her constituency, a school we had agreed to sponsor. We had a difficult meeting where she asked me to withdraw from sponsorship, I refused and there was no common ground. I thought that would be the end of the matter until my mobile started ringing several times later that night. I couldn't answer because I was presenting at another governing body meeting. On listening to the messages my heart almost froze. One was from the national School Commissioner, one was from the Chair of the Board, one from our Deputy CEO. All asked the same thing, have you seen the recording of the Public Accounts Committee meeting on the BBC. I hadn't. 'Prepare yourself' warned the Chair of the Board. I got home and watched 20 minutes of character assassination by Margaret Hodge who tore into my motives, my principles, my track record and most especially my character. She ended her tirade with 'I don't trust him, and neither should anyone else.' I was speechless and devastated. I thought my role as CEO was over, even though I knew in my heart that her outburst was politically motivated, and I could refute all of the assertions she made. If ever there was a moment when just surviving seemed impossible, this was it.

But I prevailed. Why? Three reasons. The unwavering support of the Chair of the Board who literally called me and said I believe none of this, I have your back and you are going nowhere. (He took it up with her and I eventually got a begrudging withdrawal of comments). The second was sessions with my coach and mentor who helped me see it for what it was and helped me frame my repose to the situation, to face all those who had seen and heard it and finally,

the solace and comfort of my ‘true north group’ – 3 CEOs who met regularly to offer mutual support.

It’s a good example I hope of what thriving CEOs do. Turn change and adversity around and come back stronger. As a CEO, I learned from it and I made sure that I gave proper consideration to the importance of finding the right professional and personal networks, of having that coach and confidante for support and that all important positive relationship with the Chair of the Board. Again, in terms of support, the Forum report showed that CEOs continue to gain most of their support from colleagues and facilitated leadership development networks which is very positive to see.

But let’s not end on a negative experience, even though it came out well in the end. Let’s end on the adrenaline rush of when you know you are thriving, you feel at the top of your game and some of your dreams come true. One of the characteristics in our taxonomy is strategic agility. Thriving leaders excel in strategic thinking, they also have bold ambitions and are not content with the status quo. They can analyse situations, distil the essential elements, and make decisions that are aligned with their long-term goals. My own example of this relates to our ambition to give our children and families the very best school buildings and premise in which to learn in because like many trusts our estate was a big headache. Our incremental approach to this was to bid in the free school waves to open a new school each year. We were successful each time and opened three schools in three years. I was frustrated by this; it would just take too long. I realised it needed a more strategic response. I also knew the ESFA and the DfE were wedded to this programme. So, I asked them to rethink their programme and shift their incremental thinking to beyond an annual cycle and process and allow us to bid for thirty new schools in 5 years. After the usual we don’t have a process for that, I’m not sure we can take that risk, we don’t have guaranteed funding for that period etc etc. I finally convinced them to let us bid. They didn’t give us 30, they gave us 22, but boy did it feel good when we started opening numerous new schools a year. I smiled to myself every time I cut the ribbon to open the school.

So, to conclude. In our role as CEO or trust leader survival may be the inevitable baseline, but thriving is most definitely the summit. It is the aspiration that transforms good into great and turns challenges into stepping stones toward a brighter future. May each of you find the thriving CEO within yourselves!