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Keynote Speech to the National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2024

Nottingham, 19th September 2024

Good morning, all.

It's a pleasure to be here with you today for our seventh National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference.

In the increasingly busy roles that you do and the ever-shifting context you all work within, I know how much you value spaces to connect; within which you feel safe, respected, included and professionally challenged.

I hope your presence here today indicates that you see our [Forum Strategy's National CEO Network](#) as that space. Because we hugely value each and every one of you, and the perspectives, ideas and diversity you bring to this network.

As a team at Forum Strategy, we look forward to continuing to work hard for you to ensure you derive the value, meaning and purpose you need from your membership.

Thank you for your commitment and thank you for all that you do for our children and communities across the country.

Now, onto our theme for today as I open up our conference together... **'Leading with Contextual Wisdom'**

A wise woman once said, **"We are not what we know, but what we are willing to learn."** (Mary Catherine Bateson, Writer and Anthropologist)

I think this is really pertinent when considering our focus for today - 'leading with contextual wisdom'. A theme which is increasingly

relevant in our rapidly changing educational landscape and society, and one which has listening, learning and humility at its very heart.

Things are not standing still. We have a new government who, for the most part, appear to be demonstrating a willingness to listen and respond - which is good to see. And in return, we too must listen and understand where the shifts are likely to occur from the government - not only for our sector, but beyond it too.

We have experienced over the Summer (and in many parts, continue to experience now) a fragmentation and disconnect across our communities rarely seen before in such overt ways.

And as a nation we continue to experience significant cost of living crises, growing poverty levels and heartbreakingly, some of the highest levels of children's poverty, mental health decline and dissatisfaction with life that we've seen for some time.

Understanding our context is crucial if we are to turn many of these things around. And I have complete belief that we can do it.

As CEOs, and particularly CEOs within education, you impact so many lives day to day, year to year. The lives of the children and young people you serve; the communities you belong to; and the staff who work with you. It's a role that is best described as incredibly high in responsibility but also incredibly high in reward.

With so many people to affect, if you're anything like me, you want to do it right and you want to do it well. And to do that, we need that often talked about special blend of experience, insight, skill, and wisdom.

Wisdom in its broadest sense, yes (that valuable combination of acquired experience and knowledge to inform our decisions and direction). But, I think we must go beyond this.

Our work increasingly requires another type of wisdom that is firmly rooted in understanding the people we serve, the communities we engage with and the colleagues we work alongside. And not only

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growing our understanding, but using it to respond in a way that our people need and deserve. This is contextual wisdom.

I must confess, when I joined Forum Strategy several years ago, I felt reasonably wise. Wise in the sense of having plenty of experience, some skills to offer and, I felt, a good amount of knowledge to bring to bear.

However, I was aware from the start, I would need to develop my understanding of and responsiveness to the sector, our members and my team, and I would need to do it fairly swiftly - but more importantly, in a meaningful way.

Particularly, if I was to build upon the quality and value built by Michael and the Forum team, and to continue to demonstrate our connectedness to the sector; something which Forum Strategy as an organisation had become synonymous.

So, I went about growing my contextual wisdom in many different ways – from spending time getting to know the team, our members, partners and associates; to spending time reading, watching and reflecting. From undertaking trust visits across the country; to receiving coaching and mentoring.

Bringing all of this information and experience together has been eye-opening and has truly impacted my leadership in a really positive, valuable way. I am a different leader now than I was in 2020, with the same values, attitudes and many of the same skills – but with new awareness and insights – based on hundreds and hundreds of conversations – that equip me to be the CEO of Forum Strategy in 2024.

But the work must be continuous. Because our contexts are constantly evolving and changing. So, as CEOs we must commit to carving out the time for ‘tuning in’, to sharing what we learn with others, and importantly, then responding through our leadership in a way that takes account of what we’ve learnt.

And this is what our day ahead is all about – listening, learning and responding. Our contributors each come with different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives to draw upon and offer up-to-date insights, intelligence and ideas to learn from.

This, alongside the opportunity to connect with one another and share your own experiences and ideas, offers us as CEOs, a unique opportunity to continue to grow and build our contextual wisdom so that we lead from a place of knowledge and understanding.

Another really important way in which can generate contextual wisdom, is through the partnerships that we form. Something we refer to regularly across our articles, thinkpieces and events at Forum.

We must recognise and accept that as CEOs, we can't possibly be expected to know everything ourselves but we can significantly expand our knowledge and wisdom through the relationships we develop with local and national organisations.

Through these relationships, we can grow our reach and we can learn from listening to the feedback, intelligence and expertise of those in fields linked to but sometimes working beyond, the education sector.

These partnerships have always been an integral part of our work at Forum Strategy too and we consider our partners to be an important part of how we provide the best support and offer to you as our members.

With this in mind, our partners were keen to offer some short reflections on the theme of contextual wisdom – a short video of which I want to share with you now...

Alice shares a video from Forum Strategy's Partners on 'Leading with contextual wisdom'

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So, you've heard from me and our partners about what we consider contextual wisdom to be, but how can you, as CEOs, develop and strengthen your contextual wisdom?

I believe there are three key principles:

Firstly, we must cultivate a deep understanding of those we serve.

This means going beyond surface-level observations to gain a deep insight into the cultural, socioeconomic, and emotional factors that influence your young people, staff and their communities.

Spend time in your communities listening and engaging (as so many of you already do). Undertake regular conversations with parents, teachers, and young people, and listen to their stories. Understand the challenges they are facing outside of school, the values they hold dear, and the hopes they have for the future.

It also means meeting and cultivating partnerships with other public sector leaders and workers, charities, local employers, and others to learn from their experiences and perspectives.

This deep understanding will inform your leadership and your decisions, and ensure that they are rooted in the realities of the people you serve.

There's a great quote from the leadership thinker, Stephen Denning on the importance that listening plays in bringing people with us

“We usually spend a great deal of time thinking what story we are going to tell. But the hard part of communication is often figuring out what story the audience is currently living. If we are to make the imaginative leap and get inside the listeners' stories, we need to have a very different relationship from the traditional hierarchical managers. Instead of talking down to people, we need to talk with people. We need to be conducting conversations with the people we hope to lead.”

Stephen Denning, The Secret Language of Leadership

Research by the Harvard Business Review also backs this up. They identified four key behaviours that set successful CEOs apart from the rest, and one of these was impactful engagement with stakeholders.

They found that “CEOs who deftly engaged stakeholders were 75% more successful in the role”. So it’s clear, the very best CEOs are the ones who take time to deeply engage with and understand the people they serve.

So, some questions for us to consider. Are we committed to listening and learning? Are we making it an integral and habitual part of our roles as CEOs? Indeed, is it becoming an integral part of our leadership culture? Are we protecting this part of our job when other operational pressures and demands come to bear – as they always inevitably do? And are we listening in a way that demonstrates authenticity and inclusivity, and genuinely informs our strategy and direction?

The second key principle relates to how we embrace flexibility and adaptability.

Contextual wisdom requires a willingness to be flexible and adaptable. As a CEO, this will mean developing a mindset that balances the need for stability and continuity, with being open to adjusting your plans and strategies based on the evolving needs of your communities.

This may mean rethinking traditional approaches or experimenting with innovative solutions that are better suited to your specific context.

For example, during the pandemic, leaders in education had to pivot rapidly to remote learning. Those who were able to adapt quickly and effectively were often those who recognised the unique challenges of their communities—such as access to technology, home learning environments, and mental health—and responded accordingly.

Another example of this is the cost-of-living crisis we continue to face up and down the country. On my visits to trusts, I've seen the way so many of you have had to adapt what you do in order to support children and communities in severe need. Everything from offering food and clothes banks, to forming business links to bring in further income or supplies.

This ability to pivot and adapt underpins organisational success. In a report by McKinsey, they found that organisations that embrace agility can improve financial performance, customer satisfaction, and employee engagement.

Their research shows that agile organisations are 1.5 times more likely to outperform their competitors on financial metrics and 2.7 times more likely to be top performers on non-financial measures like customer satisfaction and employee engagement.

It also underpins success in the CEO role too. CEOs surveyed by KPMG as part of their Global CEO Outlook report identified agility as one of the top capabilities necessary for future success.

When we are adaptable as leaders and as organisations, we remain ready to respond to changing needs and demands – something we all know has been a constant state for us in education, particularly over the last few years.

As before, there are some key questions here to ask ourselves. Does our leadership culture allow us to adapt and refine our plans as we go along, allowing us to question and evolve? Do our organisational structures and hierarchies encourage or dissuade adaptability and nimbleness in response to new challenges and opportunities that emerge? Can we ensure in being adaptable we also stay true to our values and long-term vision for the organisation, and avoid become too reactive or malleable? These are just some of the questions that, as CEOs in this evolving context, we need to ask ourselves regularly.

And thirdly, we must adopt a learner's mindset and build in regular reflection time.

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Reflective leadership with a learner's mindset at its heart, is about regularly assessing and reassessing your actions and decisions. It involves asking yourself, "Is this working? If not, why? What can I learn from this?" By cultivating a habit of reflection, you develop the ability to learn from both successes and failures, and to refine and adapt your approach over time.

Reflective leaders also seek feedback from others. They create a culture of open communication where teachers, young people, and parents feel empowered to share their perspectives and views. They create formal and less formal opportunities for this to happen, but every opportunity is intentional. And, this feedback loop is essential for developing the contextual wisdom needed to lead effectively in a complex and changing environment.

CEOs who seek to develop contextual wisdom, regularly carve out time for learning opportunities in a range of different settings.

Undertaking courses and training, networking and connecting with peers, reading reports, briefings and articles or listening to podcasts, attending conferences...the list goes on. This stuff is no longer a 'nice to do'; it is an essential element of the CEO role in 2024 and our diaries must reflect this.

As the 'learner in chief' within your organisation, you have the opportunity to develop your own wisdom, but also to model to your staff, how they can develop theirs too. Modelling reflective skills and a commitment to learning helps to create an organisational culture within which these things are understood as valued and encouraged from you as a leader. This galvanises staff across the trust to commit to reflecting and learning too. After all, isn't this our 'core business?'

When our organisations (as well as us individually as leaders) commit to continuous learning, we also help to develop organisational wisdom for you to draw upon as CEO.

So, again, some questions. How are we modelling the importance and support of, continuous learning and reflection? Are we protecting time every week to learn something new and generate contextual

wisdom? Which organisations are the ones that help us to continually learn, reflect and develop?

What is the impact of contextual wisdom?

When you, as CEOs, exercise contextual wisdom, the impact on your children, staff and communities can be profound. Decisions are more likely to resonate with those they affect, leading to greater support and engagement. This, in turn, fosters a more positive climate, where everyone feels heard, valued and understood.

Moreover, contextual wisdom allows for more equitable leadership. By taking into account the diverse needs of your community, you can ensure that your decisions seek to support inclusivity and belonging; creating an environment where all have the opportunity to succeed.

Challenges

Of course, developing and exercising contextual wisdom is not without its challenges. One of the biggest obstacles is time. As CEOs, you are often stretched thin, balancing multiple responsibilities and demands. Finding the time to engage deeply with your community, to read and to learn from others, to reflect on your decisions, and adapt your strategies can be difficult with so much to do.

And if you are nodding along to this, be reassured that this is the experience of others too. A study by Porter and Nohria tracked the time allocation of CEOs over a three-month period. It's key finding was that CEOs struggled to carve out alone time for thinking and reflection. Where they did find the time, it was often fragmented into blocks of one hour or less, with the research concluding that "CEOs need to cordon off meaningful amounts of alone time and avoid dissipating it by dealing with immediate matters, especially in their inboxes"

Yet if we can overcome this challenge, and protect the necessary time to look outwards and reflect strategically, as well as reacting to the operational, it can be a defining moment for us as CEOs and for our leadership.

Having a great team around you as CEO, will be one of the biggest enablers here. By having the right people, in the right roles, with the right skills, it allows you to keep your role as strategic as possible and within that, spend time developing the intelligence and wisdom needed to ensure everyone is working towards the right set of goals.

Linked to this, I think many of us often feel a sense of guilt or unease with carving out time to learn, reflect and listen. Particularly when times are busy and we are dealing with competing demands.

But this is exactly where as CEOs we need to be bold. We need to be the ones to reinforce the importance of this to the organisation and demonstrate our commitment to it by regular, protected, visible time in our diaries and the encouragement of all across the organisation to do the same (from Boards, to CEOs, to SLTs, to central teams, teachers, teaching assistants and more).

Another challenge is the pressure to conform to standardised and/or national practices and policies. While these are important, they can sometimes limit your ability to tailor your approach to the unique needs of your communities.

It takes courage to sometimes push back against a one-size-fits-all mentality and to advocate for solutions that may not fit neatly into established frameworks, but are ultimately right for your community.

This is where the numerous important discussions around accountability reform are really focusing in – how to enable national consistency and standards whilst balancing the need to take account of context within this.

Conclusion: Leading with Contextual Wisdom

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As I finish my input this morning, I must conclude on this. The generation of and subsequent application of, contextual wisdom is an essential part of leadership. Particularly so in public services, and particularly so in education.

It requires us to have a deep understanding of our communities, a commitment to flexibility and adaptability, and requires us to continually adopt a learner's mindset. While the challenges are real, the rewards are significant when we make time to (as we are today) develop this wisdom.

In developing contextual wisdom, we ensure our decisions are made with insight, empathy, and a true understanding of what will best serve our young people, staff and communities.

And this commitment to learning goes to very core of who we are, and our very purpose as leaders and as organisations

I encourage you to cultivate this wisdom as often as you can. Listen deeply, reflect often, and never be afraid to adapt your approach to meet the unique needs of your communities. In doing so, you will not only lead more effectively but also create a lasting positive impact on the lives of those you serve.

Thank you.