

## **Sir Steve Lancashire, Chair of the National #TrustLeaders CEO Network**

### **Keynote Speech to the National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2024**

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Good morning. As always, it's a real joy to be here as Chair of this network, which has become the bedrock of what I do since stepping down as CEO. I genuinely believe that there isn't a network in the country like it. They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and as I see other groups and other organisations moving into the space, I've never felt more strongly that sometimes, the original is the best and this is one of those occasions. This Forum CEO network is one of the longest-standing, and yet, still remains, so relevant. Why is this? Well firstly, we care. We care very deeply about education and therefore very deeply about the impact our work has on those who work in the sector and those who engage with us in such vital work. When I stepped down, I wanted to do something meaningful that makes a difference, through chairing this network and through ongoing coaching and mentoring of network members, I hope and believe that this is the case. But secondly, I think it is because Forum do brilliantly what we are all going to think about today. Using contextual wisdom to say relevant, timely and on point.

Most of you know I have a literary leaning, and so Shakespeare's line, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety," (From the brilliant Antony and Cleopatra) perfectly captures the enduring relevance of a strong CEO network. Just as Cleopatra's allure remained fresh and captivating, a vibrant CEO network thrives on continuous learning, diverse perspectives, and evolving insights. It doesn't age or grow stale because it's constantly infused with new ideas, experiences, and challenges from its members -you!

This dynamic exchange I believe, keeps our network interesting and valuable, hopefully providing you as CEOs the contextual wisdom you need to adapt, innovate, and lead effectively in our ever-changing world.

And guess what? Yes, more change since we last met. The education landscape has shifted significantly once more. Politically, the new government has adopted a noticeably reserved stance on Multi-Academy Trusts, perhaps creating a sense of ambiguity about future direction.

Secondly, the way in which we are to be inspected and reported on is to finally change, though what this means in reality is still vague and we don't yet know if the changes will be profound. And those other factors we have been discussing for quite a while such as recruitment, retention, trust finances, the SEND crises etc. are all still with us.

It is precisely because of this context though, that today's theme is so relevant and timely. I'm going to make a bold statement.

**The power of contextual wisdom is pivotal to the success of our Trusts and to our success as CEOs.**

We stand at the helm of complex organisations, shaping the futures of thousands of students, staff, and communities and in such a dynamic role, traditional management skills, data-driven insights, and strategic planning are essential, of course, and these things have always stood us in good stead, but they are no longer, I believe, sufficient on their own.

The true differentiator in our leadership lies in our ability to leverage contextual wisdom – the nuanced, real-world understanding that informs actions, decisions, and strategies. To me contextual wisdom is not just about knowing what works; it's about understanding why it works, when it works, and for whom it works.

It is the bridge between raw data and meaningful action, between theory and practice. This contextual wisdom enables us to make decisions that are not just effective in theory but are finely tuned to the specific needs and circumstances of our schools, our students, and our communities.

But, before I get into the nitty gritty of sharing a few ways in which I gathered my own contextual wisdom, (In the hope that this will be useful) it wouldn't be me if I didn't do one of my favourite things. Look closely at the meaning of words. But there is an important reason for doing this.

That word today, of course, is 'wisdom.' In the context of "contextual wisdom," my own interpretation is that 'wisdom' refers to the ability to make sound decisions and judgments that are deeply informed by an understanding of the specific circumstances, nuances, and complexities of a particular situation.

Michael Pain gives a much more detailed and more thorough explanation of it in 'Being the CEO'. This form of wisdom goes beyond theoretical expertise or rigid rules; it incorporates experience, intuition, empathy, and a nuanced grasp of how various factors—cultural, social, economic, and emotional—interact. In essence, contextual wisdom is the capacity to interpret and respond to the unique dynamics of a situation, enabling us to adapt strategies and decisions that are not only informed but also relevant, practical, and sensitive to the specific environment we operate within.

But wisdom has other interpretations too. And the ones I find most interesting are about how we acquire, develop and receive wisdom. Because I think there are implications for us in the strategies we adopt as CEOs when we try to gather and use contextual wisdom to guide us.

Let me share 3 quotes to illustrate my point.

## **Socrates would say 'The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing'**

This reminds us as CEOs to approach leadership with humility and openness and that when using contextual wisdom, it is crucial to challenge our preconceptions, biases, and assumptions. Recognising that our understanding is always incomplete allows us to remain curious, question established beliefs and seek diverse perspectives. This mindset prevents complacency and encourages continuous learning, ensuring that our decisions are grounded not in preconceived notions but in the nuanced realities of the situation. By embracing the unknown, we create space for deeper insights and more adaptable, effective leadership.

Marilyn Vos Savant (Who, as an interesting aside has the highest IQ in the world) says that:

## **"To acquire knowledge, one must study; but to acquire wisdom, one must observe"**

This highlights the difference and importance between merely accumulating information and developing true understanding. For us as CEOs, this means that while studying data, reports, and theories and policies is essential for gaining knowledge, wisdom comes from careful observation of the real-world context in which this all operates. To act with wisdom in this context we must look beyond the surface, paying attention to the subtle dynamics within our organisations, the behaviours of our stakeholders, and the broader environment.

And finally, to Einstein.

## **"In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity. The wise ignore the distractions and focus on the essence." – Albert Einstein**

To me this says, when seeking contextual wisdom as CEOs we must avoid being distracted by 'white noise,' such as fleeting trends, shifting politics, or superficial data. It reminds us that true wisdom involves focusing on the core issues amidst the chaos. By ignoring irrelevant distractions and concentrating on the fundamental, underlying factors, we can uncover real opportunities and make decisions that are grounded in genuine understanding. This approach ensures that strategies and actions are based on meaningful insights rather than being swayed by transient or inconsequential influences.

It would be very cheeky of me to talk about a new government after a sentence that includes transient inconsequential influences and in a section that's about white noise, but I feel it incumbent on me as a CEO who has been here before to just urge patience and caution. We know government changes often bring new regulations, funding structures, and accountability measures, which can influence how we operate.

Yes, we must stay informed, engage in dialogue with policymakers but we must avoid making hasty decisions based on early announcements. By closely monitoring developments and adapting our strategies as the government's vision becomes clearer, we can ensure that we respond effectively, maintaining stability and focusing on long-term success rather than reacting prematurely to potential changes.

But, let me not go down the rabbit hole of quoting the good and great on wisdom, oh go on then one more – my dad, at the start of my career:

'You want to be a wise leader, Steve? Stop talking and just listen! More on this later.'

So, let me share a few ways that we might can gather contextual wisdom to inform our actions, decisions, and

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strategies. (There are many more, these are just the ones I found most useful.)

First, meaningfully engaging with our stakeholders to gain ground-level Insights

The first, and to my mind the best, way to gather contextual wisdom is through direct engagement with our stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, staff, and the wider community. After all, these are the individuals who live the realities of our decisions every day, and their insights are, of course, invaluable. Sometimes, decisions made at an executive level can be disconnected from the lived experiences of those on the ground. Engaging, meaningfully, and I use this phrase advisedly, with all our stakeholders helps bridge this gap, ensuring that our decisions are not just well-intentioned but also practically viable.

We are of course all well versed in this and it can take many forms:

**School Visits and Listening Sessions:** Making regular visits to schools within our trusts, not just for inspections or formal reviews but for informal listening sessions. Sitting down with people to hear about their experiences, meeting with teachers to understand their challenges, and talking to parents, being on the gate, (Remembering we are not too important or our trust too big, to do this) to hear about their expectations and concerns.

**Feedback Mechanisms:** Establishing formal and informal feedback mechanisms such as surveys, suggestion boxes, and open forums. But remembering that collecting feedback is only half the job – actively responding and adapting based on this feedback is what builds trust and refines our decision-making.

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Focus Groups: Creating focus groups consisting of diverse stakeholders to discuss specific issues or upcoming strategic changes. This gives us a more nuanced understanding of potential impacts before our decisions are finalised.

There are numerous great examples of this within this very room: One of our CEOs frequently holds “tea and talk” sessions with different groups within the schools – from student councils to parent-teacher associations. These sessions are not about presenting solutions but about understanding issues from multiple perspectives. I imagine the insights gained from these conversations highlight blind spots that might not be visible from an office.

My own two favourite strategies for this was, firstly, to have ‘litmus people’ in the trust. These were trusted individuals who had a deep understanding of our organisation’s dynamics and provided honest, insightful feedback to me. Their perspectives helped reveal underlying issues and emerging trends that wouldn’t necessarily have been evident in any other way. By regularly engaging with these key team members, I gained a clearer view of the true impact of my decisions. Their input served as a valuable gauge, filtering out superficial noise and ensuring that my strategic choices were grounded in practical, real-world understanding.

My second strategy was stolen from Abraham Lincoln. He’s a leadership guru for me as many of you know. His idea of taking a “public opinion shower” is all about getting out there and really listening to what people think. Lincoln would walk out into the towns and streets of America to gather diverse viewpoints to understand the pulse of the nation and use that insight to guide his decisions.

For us as CEOs, this means actively seeking feedback from all corners of our trusts but in an informal and unthreatening way. For me it took the form of just walking into staff rooms, walking

into playgrounds, walking into team meetings and letting all the comments and talk 'rain on me like a shower' and then sitting back and thinking about the implications of what I'd heard and using it to guide my actions. Many of you will have heard me say 'the quality of your leadership will be directly proportionate to the quality of your thinking and reflection about it'. This is one of those occasions to indulge yourself in the reflection and thinking.

A second essential approach for me in acquiring contextual wisdom was (and still is) tapping into networks and specialised bodies within the education sector. No MAT and no CEO operates in a vacuum, and the value of connecting with others who share similar challenges and goals cannot be overstated. By actively engaging with networks and specialist groups, we can gain access to a rich reservoir of collective knowledge and experience. (Just like we saw in the summer when some great trusts shared their best practice, knowledge and learned wisdom) This allows for the exchange of real-world solutions to common issues, helping to pre-empt potential problems before they arise. I do believe that this collaborative environment fosters a deeper understanding of best practices and innovative approaches that just isn't as apparent when working in isolation.

A strategy often overlooked is meaningful engagement with specialised bodies and think tanks like the National Governance Association, the Education Policy Institute, and Education Endowment Foundation etc. All of these provide invaluable contextual wisdom and critical insights. These organizations are at the forefront of educational research, governance, and policy development, bringing together experts who deeply understand the sector's complexities. By participating in their events, accessing their reports, and engaging in discussions, as MAT leaders we can gain a deeper understanding of emerging trends, policy shifts, and innovative practices.



As CEOs we must be selective about engaging with specialised bodies though; otherwise, it's easy to fall into the "opening of an envelope" trap—attending every event without clear purpose. Choosing relevant, high-impact organisations ensures our time is spent wisely, gaining contextual wisdom that genuinely informs decisions rather than engaging in activities that are just for show.

And you're going to smile when I say the next thing, but it's not about keeping people like me in a job, it's a truth I believe. Engaging with mentors who have navigated similar challenges is a powerful way for us to gain contextual wisdom. A mentor's guidance, shaped by years of experience and a deep understanding of the sector, offers invaluable insights that go beyond textbook knowledge. Philosopher Aristotle famously said, "Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you would rather have talked." This underscores the importance of listening to those who have walked the path before. To tap into lived wisdom. I personally get the greatest satisfaction helping CEOs navigate complex situations, avoid common pitfalls, and see issues from a broader perspective. I had a mentor to the very last day of my tenure.

Having a 'True North Group' of fellow MAT CEOs is incredibly valuable for gaining contextual wisdom. My group consists of trusted peers who share similar responsibilities and challenges, providing a sounding board for ideas and decisions. By regularly meeting and discussing experiences, strategies, and insights, we benefit from diverse perspectives and shared expertise. This 'collective wisdom' helps us see beyond your own organisational bubble, offering fresh viewpoints and solutions that I might not have considered. It also provides a support network for navigating complex issues and adapting to changing contexts. Essentially, a True North Group acts as a mirror, reflecting valuable insights and guiding you toward more informed and relevant decision-making.

Perhaps the most obvious way for us to gather contextual wisdom, of course, is through data. Oh, how we love data. I have the words of the American business theorist W. Edwards Deming ringing in my ears: 'In God we trust, everyone else must bring data' But folks, if I hear one more CEO tell me about the results of their organisational surveys I may well scream. I'm more minded to listen to fellow American theorist Carly Fiorina who says:

"The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insight'.

So yes, we must effectively leverage trust level, local level and national level data, interpreting it not just as raw statistics but as narratives that uncover underlying trends, challenges, and opportunities. But data alone is not enough; its value lies in how it is contextualised. To make the most of this data, we should, of course, start with local metrics such as student performance scores, attendance rates, behavioural data, socioeconomic indicators, health and well-being statistics and parental involvement data etc These provide insights specific to our own schools and communities. We must also complement this with national data, including educational benchmarks, comparative performance metrics, demographic trends, economic indicators, technological advancements and public opinion surveys etc.

Comparative analysis of this data sets helps identify whether issues are widespread or specific to our own context, allowing for more tailored responses. I always give a health warning with this though, data should be used cautiously when seeking contextual wisdom, as it can easily mislead if not interpreted carefully. Numbers and statistics offer valuable insights, but without understanding the broader context, they risk oversimplifying complex issues. Data should be seen as a starting point—a tool to ask deeper questions rather than provide definitive answers.

Finally, I think there is something that underpins these approaches to gathering contextual wisdom and I am going to reinforce what Alice has to say about the importance of fostering a culture of reflective practice and continuous learning within our organisations. This ensures that wisdom is not collected sporadically but becomes an integral part of our daily operations. A culture of reflection encourages our teams to consistently evaluate and refine their actions based on insights gained from experience, shifting the organisation from a reactive to a proactive approach where learning from each decision is the norm.

An example of this would be to conduct what I called After-Action Reviews (AARs) after significant decisions or initiatives. AARs involve examining what was intended, what occurred, the reasons behind any differences, and the lessons that could be learned. This creates a valuable feedback loop that improves future decision-making.

Similarly creating an environment of open dialogue is equally important. When staff feel safe to discuss what's working and what's not without fear of blame, it fosters an atmosphere where valuable insights can surface. One of the trusts in this network has introduced reflective learning sessions at the end of each term, allowing staff to share both successes and challenges. This practice cultivates a strong sense of shared learning and helps bring to light key contextual insights that might otherwise have been overlooked. I call this cultural wisdom.

To conclude folks, let me reinforce my message from earlier: gathering and using contextual wisdom to guide our decisions, actions and strategies is not just an optional extra for us as CEOs – it is a strategic necessity. In a landscape as complex and dynamic as we find ourselves currently, relying solely on

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conventional wisdom, data, or top-down strategies is insufficient.

By engaging with all our stakeholders in a meaningful way, by leveraging data in an intelligent way and in its broadest format, through learning and being guided by our peers, by harnessing the potential of rapidly evolving technology, and by fostering a culture of deeply reflective practice, we can ensure that our decisions are rooted in real-world understanding and have wisdom in its purest sense. This approach will not only enhance the effectiveness of our leadership but also create a more resilient and responsive trust, capable of adapting to the evolving needs of our young people and the communities we serve.

Thank you, as ever, for your indulgence and for your time, and I look forward to seeing how each of you harnesses the power of contextual wisdom to drive your trusts forward.