

Understanding the Role of the Professional in Sustaining Change

3U Partnership Symposium on Leadership for Sustainable Communities

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Knowing in the making, not the end

Good morning and welcome to you all. I am delighted to be here for the third year in a row, for what is one of the highlights of my professional learning. I am learning more and more from you – from teachers and medical professionals who are exploring your own sense of leadership. Last year, I sat in on the workshops which were given by teachers and doctors, and I was struck by how much the professionals in both groups identified issues of common interest between them. There was a real sense of a cross-professional community of practice emerging.

There are some key themes in this trip down memory lane that will appear throughout my presentation to you this morning –

learning from diverse sources, especially those outside your comfort zone;
making the time to reflect on that learning; connecting with other people to

share that learning, including fellow professionals and making a determined effort to nurture those connections in a sustainable way.

This in turn means that we must value learning and that we should make the space and choose the time for it in our lives.

This may sound like the most inane common sense. But I have attended many conferences over the last three years. The lack of effective, sustainable, systemic connections that I have observed is alarming.

As I have learned recently from Chris Hadfield's book "An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth", we can pull the greatest scientific minds together in the most rigorous and disciplined way to put human beings in space stations or on the moon, and to land a probe on a comet.

Yet we do not seem willing or capable of bringing the same strategic focus to bear on collaborating effectively for the teaching and learning of our population, nor perhaps for their physical and mental well-being.

Great people are doing great things, but we are not joining the dots. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, it's probably because lots of good people are doing lots of good things all on their own.

The road of sustainability, of sustainable change, is known in its making, not its end – if we wait until the end to know if we have cracked it or not, it will be too late. We need to think, talk, make, learn and reflect, together.

As I speak to you now, over 4,000 people are running together in the Phoenix Park to begin to make these kind of practical changes for the better. This is the my1000hours campaign run by Bressie. And I have observed on twitter how many communities of people have come together in preparation for that run.

So we know that this wider community collaboration can happen, when, like Chris Hadfield and his colleagues, we have a clear common goal to aim for that we all care passionately about.

So today I would like to talk to you about how sustaining change must start with yourself. I would like to reflect what many of you told me in pictures about leadership. I would like to explore how sustaining change has to be about how we work and live, more than what we think we are trying to achieve. I'd like to talk about how leadership in our lives rests on the strength of our connections with each other. Being human, this strength of connecting will depend on how we feel about and care for each other, and therefore is linked very much to wellbeing – care of self to care for others. I'll be acknowledging that this does not relate well to the modern understanding of accountability, and discussing how we might explore those tensions.

The difference between fantasy and reality

Of course, the path to that depth of collaboration can only start with one person – yourself.

Two years ago, I spoke about the essential humanity that lies at the heart of what it means to be a professional. I asked those in the audience, and I would ask you here today, to reflect on why you became a professional in the first place? What drove you to enter a profession that is focused on the well-being, both present and future, of others?

This year, we are challenged to take our thoughts to the next step - to what end are we doing all this? And how might we best strive towards that end?

These are challenging questions, because the very title itself is challenging - understanding the role of the professional in **sustaining** change. There are

many, including some of your colleagues, who would question the assumptions underpinning the title - *why should we always be changing?* We hear a lot about the problem of initiative overload. And then on the other hand we see on some random poster on a student union noticeboard - *We live in an era where the only constant is change.* – cue Star Trek music!

The problem we face as leaders is that both extremes mentioned here are true and real. Many people really believe there is too much change going on and we need to dial it down. And equally many of us know that the pace of change has been accelerating rapidly over the last 100 years in particular.

How do you feel about this gap between where we want to be and where we are? I put out a call to you to send in pictures of what sustainable leadership should look or feel like, and what it's like now.

In summary, my sense of what you told me is that sustainable leadership should be:

- complex
- mediated simplicity - in other words, it's a bit like the Dime bar of old - smooth on the outside, crunchy on the inside. Simple to the naked eye, but quite complex under the surface.
- distributed
- resourceful
- diverse
- both rooted and inspirational
- aware

- reflective
- realistic
- clear
- connected, collaborative
- cyclical - ebbs and flows
- decisive
- open to learning

You gave me a much shorter list for what it is in the here and now:

- hard
- competitive, lonely, hierarchical, heroic, theoretical

So if we have a sense that there is a gap between the way things are, and the way they should be, the challenge par excellence of sustainable leadership, we also have a gap in the here and now, between how our fellow citizens view the reality we all share.

Dr. Who's joke about the difference between fantasy and reality never seemed more appropriate -

Do you know what's great about telling the difference between fantasy and reality? They're both ridiculous.

Sustainable leadership...

So if we're confused about tomorrow, and confused about today, what hope do we have of leading change in a sustainable way? Our hope lies in two concepts - sustainable leadership, and sustainable leaders.

Leadership speaks to the how - how people collaborate through the leadership we model. *Leaders* speaks to the leader, us - leading can be a lonely, tiring job. It can be rewarding, uplifting, joyful - there are days when there is a real flow, a real buzz.

But equally there are days when Mike Tyson's view on strategy seems to be closer to reality –

Everyone has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth.

If we fixate ourselves on the "what", on targets, we will delude ourselves into thinking that we are charting a way forward in the true heroic tradition of leadership, as if to say: *I have put down the marker, you must follow me there, regardless of the obstacles we encounter on the way.* There was a strong thread through most of the pictures you sent me that this approach is not sustainable. I believe that precisely because the future is unknowable, the only way to sustain ourselves as a community is to focus our thoughts on the "how" - how do we want to talk to each other? How do we want to make decisions? Business gurus talk about "WOWs" - ways of working. Ways of working is another way of talking about how we want to connect with, and relate to, each other. If we are clear on those, we will have a much better chance of dealing with the unknown challenges of the future.

As Paul Ormerod, author of *Positive Linking on network theory*, has said (*Positive Linking: How Networks Can Revolutionise the World: P97; 2012, Faber and Faber*):

The trick for successful policy, for positive linking, is not which interest rate to try to manipulate, not whether to increase taxes or cut spending. It is the subtle but elusive goal of enabling the right frame of mind to spread across the networks which connect the relevant decision makers.

As communities of professionals in the 21st century, we want to sustain change in the pursuit of ongoing improvement. It's about progression, not perfection.

Dylan Wiliam notes that:

If we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

A more modern understanding of professionalism is not fixed on pedestal-like status. It's about rigorous pursuit of ongoing improvement, of asking - *yes, this is fine, but can we do it better?* This can be tiring and tiresome - we all need time to power down and think. Sustaining change requires a delicate balance between rigorous pursuit and calm reflection, between being alone and connecting with others. It's not one or the other.

...for sustainable leaders.

But this can seem all so terribly nuanced, and flowery. You, or those you lead, may well be saying: *I want results, I want to feel better, I want to be healed.* In the absence of anything more attractive or reassuring, people tend to follow dogmatic certainty, because it gives them a sense of stability in a world that seems so chaotic and unpredictable. As I read recently in an edition of Harvard Business Review (January 2015: *A Second Chance to Make the Right Impression*),

Human beings have a deep and fundamental desire for control.

This is probably true. But deeper down, what they really want is to feel good. Educational neuroscience tells us that our brains work far more on the strength of their internal connections and emotion than they do on logic and reason. So if feeling good is essential to our human nature, I think it is safe to say that people will actually follow those who they feel care about them.

Maya Angelou, the American author and poet, described her own insight on this matter as follows:

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

And that is why a highly regarded professional culture is so important. Because others less scrupulous than us will **pretend** that they care, it behoves us as professions, as communities of practice, to ensure that our practice is truly deserving of the public trust, that those we serve know that we care about them in an authentic way.

The corollary of this is that in order to be sustainable leaders, we all need to know that someone cares about us, as professionals. For that, you need professional conversations with fellow professionals. And we also need to know that society cares about us and our sustainability. In the case of teaching, principals have said to us that they feel that teachers' learning is not valued to the extent that it should be. Student teachers cannot be given exam classes, they cannot say they are student teachers, for fear that parents will be concerned.

I am not sure what it's like in the medical profession, but as a teaching profession, we need to be more forthright in making the space and time for our learning to be valued, and to happen.

That is reflected in *Droichead*, our new proposed model for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers. This is about moving away from a model that has been driven by external agents (Inspectorate) and fixated on evaluating a particular point in time, to a model grounded in professional collegiality leading to even higher standards of teaching and learning; a model where experienced fellow professionals guide, advise and support their newly qualified colleagues, and also learn from them, as they approach full registration with their professional standards body.

Caring for professionals, caring by professionals

This caring for professionals, to sustain caring by professionals, goes deeper, into the area of well-being.

As Conor Cusack has said, speaking of himself and Bressie,

We both recognise the vital role our teachers have to fulfil in supporting our students to be true and real to themselves. For that to happen though, we need to support through opportunities for self-reflection and growth for our teachers to be real and true to themselves. A teacher can only ever bring a student to the same level of maturity they have attained themselves. Reflection is the sine qua non for maturity and true inner progress.

Paula Kinnarney has said to me before, and Conor himself is hinting here, that the dismantling of the taboo around mental health and well-being has been great to witness, the national conversation has changed for the better. But we need to work out fairly quickly where we go next that will be meaningful and helpful to people.

Some of us talk about our “happy place” from time to time – especially in moments of acute stress and pressure. Freddie Wood, President of the Medical Council, has said that if you’re not going there at least once a week, there is something wrong. I would go so far as to say that you should be going there every day – even if it’s only 30 seconds, or two minutes – you need to make the space and time every day to step back, but not out, of the rush of day, and recharge your batteries. I have had principals say to me that they don’t have time to eat a lunch, or if they do, they do so while they are working on something else. I have heard of teachers who are racked with guilt at the end of the day because they only got 10 boxes ticked out of 100.

This madness has got to stop. It’s not always clear to me if people are stating their lunch habits as a mark of pride – *I am so busy and important that I can’t afford to stop and eat*. Or it could be that they are working out of some sense of fear or guilt – *if I don’t say and do this, people will think that I am not working hard enough as the leader of the school* – or is it a warning sign that they are not coping. I am sure we have all met each of these situations in our careers to date. We have a strong tendency as a race to accept the world and our ways of working as they are, as if they have always been that way. They have not. We know that the future is unpredictable, but we also know from our history that we can shape and change that future for ourselves.

So if you are that principal or consultant who does not make time for themselves as people every day, or if you are the teacher who lives in fear of the inspector, or is racked with guilt over only ticking so many boxes, I would plead with you to stop, think about your ways of working, and make one small, practical change next Monday that will give you that time, that head space to build your own professional confidence in collaboration with others.

And if you already have created that headspace for yourself, please look out for those who have not yet, and find some appropriate way of guiding them to where they can be their best. For if we don't care for ourselves as communities of professionals, how can we expect those whom we serve to care?

It's all in the ether

All this talk about balance and stepping back but not out sounds quite nebulous doesn't it? Some will argue that we cannot afford to wallow in such ambiguities when we live in a culture where accountability is everywhere. *We need clear and transparent structures to describe exactly how to interact with, and relate to each other.*

In response, we must acknowledge that we are public servants – we serve the public and are therefore answerable to them for what we do. But we do need to interrogate the concept of “accountability” a little bit more. What exactly do we mean by it? What should it mean? Daniel Kahneman, author of “Thinking Fast and Slow”, describes how accountability cultures which have gone to extremes in other countries have created the epitome of tick box cultures. He believes that this has led to a situation, somewhat ironically, where professionals are very well protected but that there is little evidence of enhanced experiences or services for the public. This comes back to the

importance of reflecting on, and articulating, our ways of working, our ways of living. Collective confidence and shared responsibility is not, to challenge Bernard Shaw's view of the professions, a conspiracy against the laity.

If we are here today about sustainable communities, in the widest sense, we will have to acknowledge that that sharing and collegiality must embrace all members of those communities. The world will not fall apart if we keep working the way we are working. But it will be a much poorer place compared to what it could be if we would only open the doors.

John O'Donohue points out that all the things we cherish most in life - love, excitement, the buzz of success, wellbeing, mindfulness - are invisible, intangible. Yet we burn ourselves out in the pursuit of things that are more tangible but perhaps less important - growth, wealth.

Conclusion

So, you may be asking, is that it? Are you seriously telling us that the secret to sustainable leadership is to be found in the ether? That's it all about this inexact, unknowable, delicate balancing of human relationships.

In many respects, I am – one of the 3 R's of professionalism that the Council has identified is relationships. But harking back to my earlier comments, for those relationships to work, we must be clear as to why we are connecting.

Why do you teach every day? Why do parents send their children to school? How often do we talk to each other about these things?

If you are going to sustain change as a professional, you must start by sustaining yourself; then you can think about the conversations with fellow professionals, parents, patients, other professions. With those answers to “why”, we can then prioritise and clarify how we want to connect – to work, to live, to learn. Then we will be able to work out the best way to know that we are making progress.

At the core of that, we need to acknowledge that as Monty Python reminded us in the Life of Brian, *we're all individuals* – we're all people at the end of the day, who have feelings, and need to feel well in order to relate well. Humanity may be complex, but we're not complicated!

Some of you, or your colleagues, may be very sceptical of what appears to be a very touchy feely approach to our challenges. That scepticism is very natural and perfectly understandable. At the end of the day, if it's all human nature, what confidence do we have that we can somehow improve upon what our ancestors have done?

I am reminded of what Gandalf said in response to Frodo, who complained about his sense of despair at the problems facing Middle-earth, and wishing that he wasn't there to witness them:

So wish all who live to see such times. But that is not for us to decide. All we can decide is what to do with the time that has been allotted to us.

That's Dr. Who's "fantasy"! In terms of his reality, my father has an interesting insight on this. He told me for years that "*I was once young but you were never old!*" But in more recent years, having tired of winding me up, he had this to say:

"I say follow your heart in the goals you set in life. There is no point in my telling you what I did when I was your age; I was never your age in 2012 [nor 2015] so your response must be your own..."

Our response to the challenges facing our society must be our own. But it must include the people of my father's generation as much it should include those of our children's, and those who have yet to come.

In its living, life is not about handing on the torch or the flame - in its living, life is about keeping the fire lighting, together.

It always has been. Eventually, those who have come before us will step quietly away into the dark. But we always know in a given moment who is standing beside us at the fire, be they older or younger than us. We work together for as long as we are together.

Ultimately, sustaining change means that we must lead in a sustainable way; it means clarity as to why we are leading; we need to connect better – connect, connect again, connect better; and through such connection, to be able to support and challenge each other; this will enable learning from diversity, and it will enable us to share that learning with each other. The fact that we do so

in a maelstrom of uncertainty, we must accept as a given. That highlights how, as John O'Donohue has shown us, and Joseph O'Connor points out in this piece here, the only certainties we have in life are the most intangible things of all – our relationships with each other:

We may, or may not, have to face a maker one day, clothed only in our weaknesses and betrayals and self-exculpations, but in the meantime we might rediscover the more immediate magistracy of conscience: the affinities we owe to one another, as citizens of this still beautiful place, in all our diversity of doubt.

Thank you for listening.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

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