

Closing Note Speaker

Blog by Sam Jordison

There's a lot of discussion in the auditorium at the moment, following on from the previous [Dragon's Den](#) session...

... But Professor John Potter is about to take the floor and talk on: "The Leadership Challenge," so quiet is falling.

As he's introduced, we're told that John is frequently called into hostage negotiations as well as all manner of professional consultancy. Interesting man!

He starts by telling us he's always been close to Higher Education in his career - and tells us he knows it's hard to keep attention at this time in the afternoon - so will try to pull a few rabbits out of the hat to keep us going.

Looks like there could be a few jokes here.

But we're starting with the serious business of the changing world of Higher Education, the drive towards digital Britain and the need to understand leadership at all levels in our institutions.

John tells us that when he started everyone assumed all the questions about leadership had been answered --- which proved to be as wrong as the man in the 1890s who thought the patent office should be closed because everything had already been invented...

There are many new things to talk about, he says. And that there's a real need for Higher Education itself to show leadership - to engage with local and regional communities, and break down the wall around the ivory tower.

In that regard, he says, that digital information is definitely the way ahead.

We're now looking at a diagram of the three levels of leadership: strategic, operational and front line. These three levels have blurred in the past 20-years. People at the top need to learn how to work together as teams.

We also have to look at the impact that culture has on unlocking the potential within organisations, says John.

John suggests there are a couple of rules in the speaker business:

- 1) Never work with children or animals
- 2) Audience participation

He says we've already nailed the first, but let's tackle the second and asks us to write down our personal definition of leadership "as it effects your job."

He's asking delegates now.

Answers include:

- Unlocking potential and personal aspiration
- Giving a clear direction
- Subversion - looking at new strategies and co.

John is interested in the last point and breaks into an anecdote about Sandhursts "which was pretty militaristic, as you might imagine." The army top brass couldn't stand the idea of *laissez faire* leadership - even though the SAS operated in 4-man cells. The real reason they disliked it was they thought it was "French" he says - we renamed it and they rolled with it.

Anyway, John tells us not to worry if we can't come up with good definitions of leadership. There are hundreds out there (often gathered together in the same book).

It's really about understanding the context in which you operate, engaging hearts and minds and monitoring results.

John is now guiding us through the concept of the Swat analysis: Strengths and Weaknesses and how to apply it to the HE sector:

A strength we have is brain power and our reputation "We undervalue ourselves and underrate our significance on the world scene." We also have diversity.

A problem we've got is, of course, the funding crisis. Where will the money come from? Well, we have to be more creative. Which perhaps means partnerships we might not have thought of before. We also need to think about how to put on value added events.

He says there are five attributes we need:

- A focus on added value
- Striving for excellence
- Agility and avoiding the 'treacle trap'

- Creating impact
- Financial viability

(By the way, he adds, when I talk about viability, I'm never talking about my university. I don't want to get the sack!)

The other downside, is "the politics issue". Internal politics can sabotage our abilities to get those five key drivers above actually working. There is a law called "Sayer's law" that says in any dispute that the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the subjects at stake.... "Academic politics are vicious because the stakes are so low," according to Henry Kissinger. We need to iron out inter-faculty warfare. We need to cut out the politics and get people flowing on the same mission.

There have been plenty of laughs at these comments from the audience - some perhaps a little rueful!

Now John says we need to enhance the attraction of STEM subjects - and get students interested in Maths and co.

He now quotes figures from James Dyson:

4% of girls wanted to be engineers.

14% want to be scientists.

42% want to be models.

Wow. Figures to give anyone pause.

We need to get people excited about technology, says John.

Now we're moving on to the need to collaborate, especially in large scale projects.

This country has an incredible invention history - but we've failed to capitalise and other people make the money out of it.

We also need to create the right environment for research, he says.

Here's a stat:

If you're one in a million in China, there are 1,300 people just like you.

The top 5% of IQs in China is greater than the population of the UK...

So how can we create a compelling future for our work in HEIs?

We need to display leadership.

If you're going to be a leader, you need to build up expertise over the years with experience. Some people are born to it, but there aren't enough of them...

The key thing is "emotional intelligence". John says: "Gone are the days when we will tolerate toxic leaders."

John also highlights the ideas of sustainable and global leadership.

We have to be good at a long list of things:

- Clear vision
- Strong values and courage
- Empathy
- Accessibility
- High level negotiating and interpersonal skills
- A passion for teamwork
- Humility
- Commitment to future leaders

John also says a key question is to how to get leaders to sustain their performance.

If we can understand the culture and context in which we are working, link ourselves to other people, and be clear about commitments, we have a chance of being a sustainable leader.

John tells us you can't just motivate people. (That's to say, you can't force them to be interested), but you can set the environment to unlock intrinsic motivation within people.

How to do that?

Help people feel significant, connected, have a sense that someone knows where things are heading, and feel

that they are growing as an individual and are making a valued contribution to something worthwhile.

He says the number one thing that motivates people is "a sense of mission."

John has brought up a slide saying: "The floggings will continue until morale improves."

John says that when he shows that to the Royal Navy, people don't laugh. Luckily, people did here!

That slide represents the old way of doing things, says John.

Now it's about involving team members in setting strategy, acting as a good role model, communicating well and building relationships, creating emotional alignment, bringing out the best in people (concentrating on their strengths rather than weaknesses), develop self-awareness, enable and promote innovation and deliver results in appropriate timescales.

John also says we should act calmly in times of crisis and create structure in times of uncertainty.

John has now pulled up a quote from the Tao Te Ching, saying that leaders are best when people don't know they exist...

He concludes by saying that leadership is not about ego, it's about facilitation and producing results.

And, naturally, there's warm applause.

And that's it for #jif10! It's been a stimulating couple of days...