

Reject the professional, embrace the human

I took over as CEO at a mental health charity in 2010 and soon after starting I visited one of the drop in groups. There, one of the clients told me,

‘Mental health services are rubbish these days. In the good old days you’d get taken into hospital and looked after. They’d bring you your food and give you your pills. Now I’m expected to do stuff’.

This got me thinking.

My professional background is as a youth and community worker where your job is to get people to ‘do stuff’. I wondered how I could apply these skills to running a mental health charity. At first, I felt a bit in deficit that I wasn’t a mental health specialist but after time I realised that my preferred approach was a strength. Our approach to the work was seen as exciting and innovative, it helped the organisation grow and develop its own niche; that of promoting wellbeing and prevention, recovery and resilience, rather than being a provider of ‘care’.

Health and social care charities can get fixated on the idea of ‘caring’ for people rather than helping them live the most rewarding and fulfilling lives they can. I believe that care and social sector organisations sometimes create a culture of dependency in order to validate their work. Our social care system is just that – set up to care for people, often defining them by their diagnosis or condition and subsequently limiting their aspirations. This is not good enough. An effective social leader should foster an environment where the people with whom they work nurture hope, aspirations and a belief for the future - the very act of ‘caring’ for people is inherently limiting.

Of course, any sort of disability, health condition or disorder, is going to have impact on how a person interacts with the world but this is often exacerbated by the world and by other people. Specific conditions have specific needs but it is the nature of the world and expectations of day to day lives that creates needless negative impact, not necessarily the condition.

The role of a courageous social leader is to gently prod people to step outside of their comfort zone in order to defy their condition whilst making sure they know you are always there to catch them if they stumble. Some days are going to be hard. Some things will not be possible but to define and limit people because of their challenges is lazy and panders to the professional ego of managers and leaders. I have seen first-hand the results of people engaging in supported challenge; very little in life is easily achieved. As social leaders we should empower the teams we lead to adopt an approach of ‘being able’ not ‘disabled’ in order to make the most significant impact on the lives of those with whom we work.

The important thing in this is that the person with the specific needs must define what success in life looks like for them, they set the agenda. When professionals and/or society at large set the parameters that define a life fulfilled, the power is taken from the individual involved.

Another factor that prohibits social leaders from enabling those with whom they work to live a full life is professional selfishness and jealousy. Organisations sometimes like to ‘own’ clients, hanging on to them whether they are providing the best support for them or not, and this prohibits those people from growing and moving on. For someone to overcome their challenges means that they are no longer defined by them and that they can negate the need for that charity for that particular individual. If we are doing our jobs right we should strive to make our services redundant, not create

dependency on ourselves as professionals. This will never (or rarely) happen but a true leader should express a vision of the world where people can live fulfilling and independent lives and strive to achieve this vision.

This *is* an issue of social leadership. Society has been polarised and virtuosity has become an overbearing virtue. TV talent show culture has debased the inherent value of certain activities. Unless one is an expert, this then creates expectations that unless one is world class at something you are hopelessly in deficit and therefore the only option left is to be 'cared for'. This is patronising and condescending and as social leaders we can challenge this paradigm. Alternatively, social media drives people to portray a perfect life at all times and values exposure and fame over achievement. These are two sides of the same coin and social leaders should challenge this: sometimes it's OK not to be OK, or to be 'just' OK and not excelling.

When we look at the world in terms of 'haves and have nots', 'can and can't do' we limit aspiration and hope. People need to have the chance to live a successful life by defining their own success. This is apparent in the pernicious myth of social mobility, as John Harris wrote in the Guardian,

"The fingers-down-a-blackboard trope of 'social mobility', with its suggestion that the only thing Westminster can offer working-class people is a specious chance of not being working class anymore."

To me, the notion of social mobility suggests that it is shameful to be different or 'less', and that we all must aspire to be some sort of successful middle class professional, otherwise we have failed. This culture drives professionals to offer care rather than create ambition, provide respite rather than hope and it leads to a defeatist approach where life is a game with only one way to win. If someone can't succeed under the politically constructed terms of social mobility then what options are there left for them but to be cared for?

So, what can social leaders do to challenge this?

First, we can ***be human beings first and professionals second***, avoid Ivan Illich's accusation that we are involved in 'disabling professions' with an exclusive and excluding vocabulary that protects our lofty position as experts on making people's lives better.

Secondly, we have to ensure that we ***put the needs of the people with whom we work at the centre of everything we do*** and – this is the crucial bit – ask people what their needs are, ***don't assume***.

Thirdly ***social leaders must let the people whom they lead do their jobs***. Dr Toby Lowe of Newcastle University Business School writes,

"Those working in this sector tend to be intrinsically motivated to do the right thing and so aren't necessarily inspired by hitting targets that don't reflect the complexity of the lives of the people they are trying to help. They are more likely to respond to help and support to improve their judgement and practice."

Which leads me on to my fourth suggestion – ***do not be seduced by a target driven culture***. Strong social leaders should be able to justify the impact their work is having on people's lives without pandering to arbitrary targets: a tick box never saved anyone.

Five, ***learn to lead people outside of their comfort zone whilst still providing a safety net***. A gentle prod in the back but with a reassuring hand of support can work wonders in helping people overcome their specific challenges.

The sixth thing social leaders need to do to transform lives is **resist the urge to collude with people's problems**. Yes, some lives are horrible and challenging and tough and hard work, but to paraphrase RD Laing, 'why talk about what makes you sad, why not talk about what makes you happy?' Don't confuse sympathy with empathy, don't collude with the people with whom you work about how awful their lives are; help them find a way to outgrow their existing conditions.

My seventh suggestion is **don't believe you are single handedly saving the world – you're not**. Limit yourself to bringing about change in a small part of your world but don't harbour lofty ideas. Yes, social leaders can do good, yes we can bring about change but we are not superhero saviours who hold all the answers to the world's problems. I found it interesting that JK Rowling and her charity Lumos have taken a stand against Voluntourism – volunteering in developing countries to boost your CV but exacerbating local problems in the process. This is an example of saving the world as a career move and it should be avoided.

Eight is **don't conform to extraneous ideas of what a life fulfilled is**. I used to work with young people excluded from mainstream school and school non-attenders and some of them felt that their lives would be over if they didn't get a C in GCSE Maths and English aged 16. They were astonished when I told them that I had never really used my GCSEs to get where I was – I returned to study as a mature student. Don't promote the ideals that we all have to be doctors, solicitors or accountants. We need cleaners, shop workers and factory workers and there is nothing to be ashamed of in doing these jobs. Indeed, if one's impairments are of a nature where work is impossible this is also nothing to be ashamed of – society can still do more than 'care' for you.

Point nine is **fight injustice wherever you encounter it**. Help people to use their voice and make sure those with power hear it. Enable the people with whom you work to tell their stories.

And finally, number 10 – **have fun**. Staff, volunteers and the people with whom you work will thank you for it. Take your work seriously but don't take yourself too seriously.

An effective social leader removes barriers rather than builds them, and this approach should permeate every aspect of our work. This takes courage as deviation from the norm and the expectation of others can be a scary thing, but once we can be an authentic leader, true to ourselves, we can promote far greater change in the world. We should challenge the accepted orthodoxy of what a life worth living is. We should help the people with whom we work to have the confidence to define their own terms for a life fulfilled.

During my career I've been constantly amazed that some of the (to me at least) seemingly straightforward points above can be seen as radical and subversive or, at least, innovative and ground-breaking. Rejecting the professional and embracing the human has enabled me to have an impact as a social leader and I'm astonished that behaving as a human being can still sometimes be seen as radical and subversive in the social sector.

This is leadership: to make lives better rather than 'making the best of a bad lot' and this is the purpose of a courageous social leader. Be a human leader and change lives. Whilst I always care about the people with whom I work, I strive to do so much more than just care for them – I want to play a part in them overcoming whatever challenges they face to live the best possible lives they can in a way that is defined by them. Let all social leaders embrace this subversion of the notion of what it is to care, and put the empowerment of our clients first and foremost in our thoughts and actions.

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