Conference: Women of Influence in Education, Hong Kong

Date: October 2019

Keynote speech: Authentic Leadership: Three Key Learnings as a woman in diplomacy (and beyond)

We heard yesterday that to know yourself is a fundamental skill for a good leader.

I am planning to explore in a little more detail how to embrace what it means to be an authentic leader - in particular drawing on my experience of working in an environment traditionally dominated by men, at least in the UK, and where expectations are of a different style of leadership. I hope this may also help you identify how you find your authentic leadership style, and voice.

The context I am talking about is my previous career as a diplomat.

I was myself a third culture kid, but came from quite a humble background, and despite living abroad until 15 had never had exposure to diplomatic life in the many countries we lived in.

I left home at 17 to pursue my dream of studying Chinese, which was quite unusual in 1980s but which I had wanted to do since the age of 6, after seeing a movie which you can tell made a big impression on me. My connection to China has shaped my life since: I have spent most of my adult life in China, and have two adopted Chinese daughters.

I then joined the British Foreign Office (or State Dept) straight from university. I worked as a diplomat for 25 years, largely in China, but also in Saudi Arabia and a number of EU countries. I had the privilege not only to work in many countries, across cultures and religions, but also meet some amazing people. I did trade and investment work, protocol work (meeting many royal families and celebrities), political work, conflict resolution, sustainability, and gradually worked my way up through the ranks and finding myself in leadership in often quite febrile situations.

In order to set the context, a brief guide to diplomacy then. It was only a few years before I joined that women diplomats who got married had had to resign on marriage (ie you couldn't marry AND pursue a diplomatic career) - so a somewhat conservative, traditional, male dominated organisation, especially at leadership level. Not inclusive, proudly exclusive and elite, and its ranks drawn from some of the most privileged in UK society - everybody else when I joined seemed to have gone to Oxford and Cambridge or be a lord or a lady. Social class rather than social equity were frequent topics of conversation. I was by definition not your typical diplomat.

And yet - I knew instinctively this was where I belonged, and that I could be just as good a diplomat as the others, with good intellect, and some wider skills I was yet to fully realise.

Over this time, and picking up some of the other themes from yesterday, I was lucky enough to have a sponsor in the organisation, my immediate boss, who had surrounded himself with good people (another theme from yesterday) and was never afraid to "promote" them. He was one of the few people I met in the early years who believed I would progress beyond a junior clerical role - I was painfully shy and introverted.

Yet, I went on to be his boss, and he has just taken on my last role in the FCO, which I left 10 years ago.

He remains a key person in my life, and he is genuinely proud of where I have progressed, with his support, insight and love (that was also mentioned yesterday, and not a word much mentioned in diplomacy). I look up to him immensely - regardless of the reversal of our positions - my first job was in then the future of HK Department, and Chris my boss resigned from the FCO for a few years, as he could not reconcile the nationality deal offered to China with his conscience. A man of integrity - I will come back to that later.

We had also taken on a bit of reverse mentoring in recent years, as he came to the end of his career, and wanted to go out with a bang. He asked me how to do that!

I would encourage you too to think about people who inspire you whatever their age or title to provide mentorship to you in the areas you need.

So underlining the importance of a sponsor, and of mentoring up and down.

My life has taken several twists and turns in recent years: I took a sabbatical when I hit 46, having reached the grade of Ambassador but not clear what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. At that stage I was burned out and exhausted by a very stressful but fantastic role in Shanghai, and felt I needed to kick back for a while and reflect.

But true to myself I joined Half the Sky and took on a huge project to transform the operation from China's largest single international NGO, to a Chinese fundraising foundation. And to upskill the care workers in China's orphanages to help them care for the 1 million largely disabled children in institutions.

Then back to 6 years in diplomacy at the British Council - connecting the UK and China through soft power engagement.

Yesterday, I described in one of the mentoring sessions that my choices of career options had been fateful, that I had been lucky. I genuinely did not feel that these changes had been intentional.

And yet as I made each professional change, and in writing down what I thought were my transferable skills which might be of interest to a new employer, I had captured what defined me as different from a more traditional diplomat, my soft skills, my intercultural skills - you would be surprised how many diplomats do not have these.

So - I am new to UWCSEA, having just joined in August, and as I have just said, I am not an educator. But have spent most of my professional life providing opportunities for young people and bringing people, nations, governments together to find shared solutions to common challenges. Much like the ideal of education we heard about right at the start of this conference, from Lela.

Leyla told us about her crowdsourcing approach to gathering content for her words. I take a similar approach: I used to have a great fear of public speaking when I first started in work. A room like this might have brought me out in hives, and the stress levels became so bad that I started to have an attack of shingles before every major public platform. I have worked hard to overcome that fear - largely through asking for inputs into speech content and seeking open and frank feedback from audiences, what I did well, what did not land as well.

Having just exposed one of my vulnerabilities, again not something you traditionally see in diplomacy, I hope you will continue to be an understanding and gentle audience. Making yourself vulnerable is definitely not a traditional skill in diplomacy, but a leadership skill which is valued when compared to the ego and impact of many in leadership.

What has driven my working life so far has been a strong belief in the power of internationalism, a keen awareness of the consequences when governments and institutions bring down barriers and isolate. It is a privilege, then, to be at UWCSEA and to be part of a mission built over 50 years that is more relevant today than ever before.

UWC South East Asia and all 18 UWC schools were set up to unite people, nations and cultures for a more peaceful and sustainable future. While this mission does not talk about academic success or reaching potential, as a school we of course support our students in both of these, and to be aspirational. Our mission is focused on the positive impact students will have on the world, through how they choose to live their own lives; specifically that they will make it more peaceful and more sustainable. Let me explain why this, in my view, is so important.

Working as a diplomat, and to have been many hours in rooms with world leaders of all kinds, and most recently leaders in the field of education and culture as Country Director for the British Council in China - an amazing organisation of 800 people, working together to create opportunities for young people, for mutual benefit.

One thing I saw clearly in those rooms was that building understanding of others needs to begin at an early age, if we are to have the ability to build trusting relationships which also play out at a higher level in future. I was party in my previous life to too many discussions where it was too late - positions were fixed, leaders did not listen any more to "other", or want to seek compromise or consensus (that sense increasingly in international relations, that countries have to take sides, that somebody has to win, so somebody by definition has to lose),

There was no space in those rooms for professional curiosity, to seek wisdom and truth from others, certainly not to expose or resort to making yourself vulnerable. By the time leaders entered the room, they were often already locked into a position from which they could not budge - regardless. Professional pride, big ego was writ large in the room, and in their leadership styles and practice.

If it is too late to change once governments get round the negotiating table, or executives enter into the board room, what options are there to bring about lasting, meaningful change.

Leila also talked about being a servant, teachers as servants in nurturing students - I agree with her, and that is even more important in your context in international schools, that bringing young people from different backgrounds and cultures together early in life will in time

contribute to a more peaceful and sustainable world, as those young people themselves move into positions to lead, and impact others. At UWCSEA, we believe in the power of young people, those who are rich in the cultural and intra cultural intelligence I saw missing in diplomacy , those who are grounded in collaboration over conflict, to change the world. The world has never needed students like all of ours more. At UWCSEA, even after just a few short weeks, I can see that our programme is built around developing these skills and qualities in young people, who will lead the way in future. It is about building mutual understanding, and thus over time building trust.

So I am clear what was missing in my previous life as a diplomat. The ability or inability of those in power to see things from the perspective of "other", to disagree yet commit to work together to find a solution. Perspectives of the other were often too entrenched to change.

I did a bit of additional crowdsourcing for this session, asking a group of 100 middle school students to picture in their minds a diplomat - and tell me what they saw. 92% pictured a man, of a certain age, in a suit, and only 12% saw that man as a person of colour, or youth.

That is a problem for us all - if our young people who are open to so many wonderful inter-cultural experiences - cannot see themselves in a career which they are ideally suited for; and that so many, including the girls, saw only men in this role.

That was in fact the world of work I joined in 1987, as a junior diplomat. Pale, male and stale - but I didn't know that when I joined of course. I had been lured in by a couple of inspiring individual diplomats who were in consular services who I met when I was studying in Shanghai, a married couple who had literally saved the life of my friend Ruth while we were studying at university (she had anorexia, and was slowly dying in front of us) and I thought - I could do that!

In reality, the world I joined was one of tradition and of recruiting in the image of those already in the organisation - there was not much place

for other. I joined in the junior ranks through the most competitive process in terms of graduate recruitment in the UK, and didn't realise how much that world was part of the establishment in the UK until my induction week, when a member of the Royal family and a Lord was on the same induction. The difference was he had not been through the process, it was more that some places were held open for "the right people".

In the early days, as I struggled to fit in, I often wondered what had the interview panel seen in me, given my profile was so different to the others. Each panel it turned out had a psychologist on it, and I tracked her down after a few years and asked her that very question.

She said : **I liked your humility** - we do not see enough of that in the FCO. We are only now learning to value that. Humility builds relationships.

As CS Lewis said: humility is not about thinking less of yourself, it is about thinking of yourself less.

There is a lot of discussion in business journals that - when hiring for a leadership role - one of the most important traits of top performers: humility.

Humility is not typically the first trait that comes to mind when you think about great business leaders like Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, or Bill Gates.

Visionary, courageous, charismatic – these are the qualities most of us associate with great leaders. The idea of a humble, self-effacing leader often doesn't resonate.

But a number of research studies have concluded that humble leaders listen more effectively, increase collaboration and cooperation and flexibility in developing strategies, inspire great teamwork and focus everyone (including themselves) on organizational goals better than leaders who don't score high on humility.

They also have been found to have an indomitable will to advance the cause of the organization.

So, what makes humility such an important quality?

Humble leaders understand that they are not the smartest person in every room. Nor do they need to be. They encourage people to speak up, respect differences of opinion and champion the best ideas, regardless of whether they originate from a top executive or a production-line employee.

When a leader works to harness input from everyone, it carries through the organization. As other executives and line managers emulate the leader's approach, a culture of getting the best from every team and every individual takes root.

In short, leaders know how to get the most from people.

When things go wrong, humble leaders admit to their mistakes and take responsibility. When things go right, they shine the spotlight on others.

I suspect that humility gets a bad rap because it is sometimes linked with subservience or weakness or introversion.

Psychological research actually indicates the opposite. Humility is most closely associated with a cluster of highly positive qualities including sincerity, modesty, fairness, truthfulness, unpretentiousness and authenticity.

And there's nothing about humility that makes it incompatible with strength and courage.

Regardless of their approach, at the end of the day, leaders must inspire trust, cooperation and commitment among the workforce.

The bottom line: we tend to be impressed by charismatic candidates with powerful personalities and a commanding presence. My advice: dig deeper. Your gut reaction is often wrong.

Search for quiet confidence, humility and a focus on others.

That's where great leadership begins.A few people have asked me if I miss my diplomatic life: one where I was recognised at the highest level as a success. Where I was able to be honest, open, even courageous.

I don't miss some things: others often characterise diplomacy as not being clear, avoiding hard messages, getting a deal at all costs. Worse, some see diplomats as evasive, slippery, cowardly, masters of ambiguity.

In my experience, while this can sometimes be true, I have seen the benefits in action of a different type of diplomat, a different type of diplomacy.

The best diplomats are clear about what they want to achieve, but they will often use subtle methods to get there, Diplomacy depends on the values set of a country's leaders, and this has become more complex in recent years.

In my view, personal integrity is the key to successful diplomacy, and to successful leadership in any professional context as it makes taking difficult decisions easier. Integrity was writ large across diplomacy until recently but with challenges to liberal democracy in recent years, not so much.

I have always believed being authentic to others is how we work best within any organisation, especially in how we lead and manage each other. The best leaders and managers in my experience were those who were authentic. They actually do what they say others should do. They model behaviours and lead by example. They are honest about their objectives and do not shrink from delivering clear messages. They put themselves on the line, are clear on their accountabilities but not afraid to assign responsibilities to others. They are also not afraid to recruit and retain those who are better than them, for the good of the whole.

This does not always feel comfortable in practice. But leadership in particular is about going beyond your comfort zone. Comfy organisations with cosy cultures tend to stagnate.

I have had challenges to how authentic I feel I can be at work. One simple example is to do with health.

Anything to do with your health is a private matter. But when it affects how you work (your hours, your desk, your mood) you are faced with the prospect of giving up some of that privacy to be fair to your colleagues and to be true to yourself.

I've found this a challenge, as I have got older and been faced with potentially life threatening illness.

In the end I concluded that I could not do my job properly without being open about my circumstances. How could I be authentic if I did not tell those I worked with about something that was part of me, and which I could not leave at home every morning?

As well as forcing me to confront the importance of authenticity, that experience helped me in other ways. The need to actively manage the challenge to my health has sharpened my awareness of my own behaviour (and its impact on others).

The importance of properly planning my own work rhythm has, I think, made me more sensitive to signs of stress and overload in others. I think I better understand my own unconscious bias about health, energy and commitment, and spot it more readily around me.

It has also prompted me to revisit some of my own attitudes, and I've found myself challenging, and changing, some of my own assumptions about the perspectives of others. I'm sure that has developed me, personally and professionally.

The opportunity to be authentic, to be supported to be so, and to have your authenticity valued is the hallmark of a strong organisation; conversely an organisation that does not try to create an inclusive environment – where all can succeed – is actually simply stating that it does not want the best people.

In my early career, the Foreign Office was not a perfect employer, but it did give me space to be different, and the value of my skills was gradually recognised. Such problems as I encountered sat more with the attitudes of individuals rather than the systems in the organisation. Culture change in traditional organisations can be slow but should in time help change the minds that need changing.

I am lucky that as I have moved careers I have been able to move forward as what I am.

So I put a value on my softer skills, and had them valued by others by moving out of diplomacy. I have stayed true to myself, and have developed an authentic leadership style and skills which others increasingly valued. I have also found an increasingly acknowledgement of the role gender diversity women can play in international relations, now in peacekeeping

Sharing my experience is part of that process of being authentic. If hearing this interests, or even helps someone else, that will be great. Sharing it has certainly helped me advance in my leadership journey.