

Conversations on Leadership: Ian Bancroft

Molly

Thank you for joining us. I'm your host, Molly Dacey. And this episode, I'd like to welcome Ian Bancroft. Ian took up his post as chief executive of Wrexham Council in August 2018 and for the previous 14 years worked at senior leadership level within large public service organisations in Greater Manchester, Merseyside and North East Wales. Most recently within Flintshire Council as the Chief Officer successfully leading the development and implementation of a number of major strategic programmes.

Thank you so much for joining us, Ian. I'm sure you've asked this all the time, but I don't feel like I can continue without addressing the Welcome to Wrexham documentary. I saw you in one of the scenes and I just needed to ask our Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds as nice as they seem?

Ian

Just to say first, yeah, it's great to be here and to be part of this podcast series.

Absolutely. They are just like they seem, and it has been phenomenal in terms of having a relationship with Rob and Ryan. We've obviously met them a few times personally. They rang us before they took over the purchase of the club and set out their vision for their first 100 days of what they wanted it to feel like. And it was all about Wrexham, as it says in the programme.

It's not welcome to Wrexham Football Club, it's welcome to Wrexham. And they delivered on that vision. I think something that helps and may lead into some of the other things we'll discuss this afternoon is that in Wrexham we created a common vision amongst all our leaders in Wrexham about what we wanted to see in terms of the town and city grow.

So that was our public, private and voluntary sector leaders, so that if you like, when Rob and Ryan landed, we could make the most of their input, their investments, and we've got a very close, strong relationship with them based on values. But we also commercially negotiated with them very hard because clearly they're sitting on a lot of money that if they are using that in Wrexham can make such a significant impact.

Molly

Yeah. Yeah that's amazing. To begin, if it's okay, I'd like to ask you some quickfire questions just for our listeners to know you a bit better. So what was the last book that you read?

Ian

Now I'm a huge book reader because and I've normally got 3 or 4 on the go. So the last book I read that I really loved was a book called The Ferryman by Justin Cronin. Do you want me to give you a short synopsis?

Molly

Yes please, yeah.

Ian

So it's based on an island called Prospera, and there are three bits of the island. There's a bit where all the affluent people live. There's the second bit of the island where all the people who are providing the services for those affluent people live. And there's a third bit of the island, which is where people go to be reincarnated. So they come back as a new person and you just know that something's not right about this reality.

And the Ferryman is the character that takes people off to be rebirthed, reincarnated. And he figures that there's something quite not right about this reality. So Justin Cronin's an amazing writer. He wrote a series called The Passage, which is also brilliant. So just a very literary writer. It's a bit of fantasy and science fiction, but also a great read.

Molly

It's great to have all the recommendations. What is the last thing that you learned?

Ian

The last thing that I learned is no matter how well you're doing or think you're doing collectively as a group of people, there's always something just around the corner that's going to test you and surprise you.

And it's it's not, therefore, what we plan to do. It's the way we react to the things that come upon us that's absolutely critical.

Molly

What's your greatest strength?

Ian

My greatest strength. I think it's about being co-operative. So a huge belief in empowering others to do well. My background, as well as being an English an arty book reader, is also a sportsperson and I'm very much a team player and the coach and it's getting the best out of the people around you and empowering them to achieve their full potential, whether that's people you work with or actually whether it's the residents that we serve.

Molly

I feel like we've already touched on this, but what motivates you?

Ian

I think what motivates me is my belief in public service. So I was brought up in a family where my other two twin sisters, one's a nurse, one was a teacher, and very much my mum and dad instilled those values into us in terms of wanting to make a difference that benefits people without and without treading on people's toes.

So hence the cooperation bit is about trying to do something, but doing in a way that people feel part of. So I think public service is something that means a lot to me and for those that work with me, they also know the importance and the value that we need to place on that as well.

Molly

And last of this type of question, what profession other than your own would you like to attempt?

Ian

Well, I suppose being a sportsperson and being a fanatical cricket fan, then probably a professional cricketer. I used to keep wicket and bats, so it would be lovely at the moment as we've got an Ashes Test match going on to be able to be playing professional cricket. But also what's really brilliant about professional cricket now is to see how well the women are doing.

And you know, the push with the report being released actually this week about an independent report really calling out the misogyny and also the fact that it's very class based. So, you know, that needs changing within the game of cricket. But if I could have done something else, it would be professional cricket.

Molly

It's a good one. Thank you for answering those. It's interesting to know more about you personally. I do have a couple more, but I'll come back to those at the end. Our theme for this episode is vision in leadership. When you took up the post of Chief Executive of Wrexham Council, taking on such a role must require vision and innovation. So in your opinion, how can leaders develop and communicate a compelling vision that inspires and motivates their team and organisation?

Ian

I think the first thing probably for me is that vision comes through listening and then helping create a vision that people are part of and believe in. So I think, you know, that co-operative approach to creating vision is really critical. And I think the second thing would be it has to be a vision that relates to the context that you're working in.

So for us, one of the first things we did, having listened and before Rob and Ryan came along the football club, given we sit on the oldest international football ground in the world in Wrexham and given the Football Association for Wales was founded 150 years ago in Wrexham, we did a hashtag Spiritual Home of Welsh Football and the one thing people in Wrexham all agree on, because they disagree on quite a bit, is football.

So very early on we have the hashtag spread home of Welsh football, which we created with others. We built up that a framework for what we would do in terms of delivering that, which was about supporting the football club and the racecourse ground at an international and club level. But also it was about improving sports pitches at the very grassroots for everybody to be involved with.

So I think a vision where you've listened that is contextual and therefore compelling to people to be part of and something that's inspiring is really critical. And another example I'll give, we did some early work in Wrexham with a group of civic leaders across public, private and social sectors, and that was about, you know, everybody contributing to what we wanted Wrexham to be like for the next 5, 10, 15 years.

And you know, it's just amazing when you do that sort of work and you see the ingredients come together and it's not what you anticipated. I think the worst thing you can try and do is control things like that. But the other thing I think with vision is there has to be clear vision statements about what a vision will achieve.

So what will things look like if we do this? If we do hashtag spiritual home of Welsh football, there'll be an international match for every international tournament played in North Wales in the future by Wales there will be access to 3G pitches for all people at the community level. So I think clearly being able to show not just, you

know, here's a broad wooly vision, but actually what that vision will deliver is also critical.

Molly

Not long after taking up this role, you, like everyone else, would have been shaken by the effects of COVID-19. And I can only imagine how significant this must have affected your organisational development. So based on your experience, what strategies can leaders use to ensure that their vision remains relevant and adaptable in an ever changing business landscape?

Ian

I think going with the days of writing long strategy documents that start with the vision statements, objectives priorities and detailed actions for the next 5 years because that's out of date by the time that we've written it. So I think, you know, is strategic frameworks that talk about where it is we want to head, what things will look like and some ideas of the things that we initially do. But then what we need to do is we need to learn from the actions that we undertake. So for example, let's have a think about what we're doing at the moment in relation to social care in Wrexham.

We're doing demand work about saying if we look at creating our own children's homes again, which is quite a risk in Wrexham, because contextually the 1970s and eighties there were a lot of, you know, very difficult issues that came out through children's homes, provisions in councils in North Wales. Then we think we can massively improve the ability for local children who are struggling to stay local, stay close to their families, stay close to their foster carers and actually receive that within Wrexham that support, and also that it's lower cost.

So what our intention is that we build those, we staff those. But clearly then as we're going through that journey, we've got to figure out is it having the impact that we intended? Are those people having better experiences? Are they staying more local? Is it reducing the costs of the social care provision? And if it's not, we have to adopt those actions as we go along to say what we might need to do something different.

We might need a mix provision with some out of county, some in-county. So I think having that flexibility and it's where things like Academi Wales come in isn't it? It's evaluating what we're doing, but also learning as you go along and making sure that we're open to that at all stages and that we're listening to lots of people's feedback.

It might be the child's feedback, the parents' feedback, the foster carers' feedback, it might be other people feeding back. So I think you've got to make sure that you're intelligently using feedback loops and, you know, using digital social media and also, you know, I.T and technology in terms of giving us some of that macro data that tells us what's happening.

So yeah, flexible strategic frameworks, learning as we go and evolving and changing, I suppose they will change adaptability, you know, both being somebody who stands back from an issue and can say, right, I can see how that social care works progressing, but also when it's going wrong, it's prepared to get in there on the ground and actually sort it out. And we have to have leaders who are flexible enough to be able to be on the balcony and, you know, be on the dance floor.

Molly

Yeah. You spoke earlier about collaboration and working with a wide range of stakeholders. So how can you effectively communicate your vision to different stakeholders, like employees, customers, investors that might all have a different perspective on the vision that you're bringing.

Ian

So I think visions, if they're good talk to as many different people is as possible. So let's talk about Wrexham as a place then, because that's how we started with Rob and Ryan. Football talks to everybody so we can pretty much talk about that message in the same way. Although some people want to go and see Wrexham, some people want to go and see Wales, some people want to play for their local team.

So our delivery of that vision needs to be multi-faceted in terms of relating to everybody in the way they want to get involved with football. We did two other things that which I think help illuminate this point. City status for Wrexham we achieved last year. City status is very contested. Some people as a vision for a city are really anti a city.

Wrexham is a town. 'Up the town' they shout on the terraces at the football club. And the last thing we need is city status. So a number of ways is we have to describe the benefits of that to people that actually we're likely to get more investment. It will help with the university, it will help businesses grow. But we also know we're not going to get everybody on board, even with those benefits that come with city status.

So as we've done our strategy around Wrexham as a place, a flexible strategy that's adaptable, we've also looked at designating areas like the old town, a bit like Edinburgh has an old town, so we've got a city, but it still has an old town at its heart. So I think you know that pluralism around the vision that it can be different things to different people.

We're a city, but we've got an old town, we've got heritage, we've got a football ground that's been regenerated, a modern university. It can relate to different people in different ways. And then the third example probably uses we did a big piece of

work around City of Culture last year, which we were runner up with to Bradford and the bit like football.

I've never seen so many people actually engage with something in Wrexham that everybody wants to be part of that and want to be part of it positively, but a bit like we need to have a different face for something. Cultures means different things to different people, so it's allowing people to define what culture in Wrexham means for them.

Some people would define Wrexham's culture as being edgy, funky, not refined, that we people are very entrepreneurial. They create things. So Comic-Con was founded in Wrexham, a big Comic-Con and Focus Wales, a big music festival, so we've got lots of people who are prepared to do things. Other people would see culture as being high art in terms of, you know, having some orchestral music and theatre.

Other people would define culture as being what their communities like and actually allowing all of those things to be part of our city of culture is really important. So I think those examples and, you know, plurality and difference and recognizing we can have difference with innovation and health by everybody and how can leaders measure the progress and successful implementation of their vision.

I think if we set a vision now with some vision statements at the start, that's really critical. That's why those statements are really clear that, you know, if by hashtag spiritual home of Welsh football, we want to see international football return to the oldest international football ground in the world, then that's quite easy, isn't it? So I think those vision statements help. I think evaluating and learning as we go because we're not leaving it too long.

We're almost doing it as part of the process. So it's actually the evaluation is telling us whether the first step on the journey is right actually helps us determine the second step, but also figures out if we're progressing in the right direction. So I think that's really critical. I think using a range of evaluation techniques and talking to people, listening, you know, that's frontline staff, it's middle managers, it's senior managers, it's residents, it's stakeholders.

So making sure that we've got a feedback and listening loops and then, you know, doing both quantitative and qualitative analysis. So it's about particularly something big like vision and having all of those tools to use to figure out if we're heading there. But ultimately seeing is believing is that yeah, and vision is actually that whole word is about that vision, something we can see. So we should be able to see it ultimately if we've achieved it or not.

Molly

Yeah. Do you have any final thoughts or advice for leaders who aspire to develop and lead organisations?

Ian

Be yourself. Stay true to yourself. Be strong with your values, the you know, your values of who you are and be open and show a little bit of your personality to people.

Because how do people know that you care about others unless you show that you do that or you give some examples, you know, you can say you like that, but unless you show a bit of yourself. So I can talk about public service, but let me show what my family's like, who I grew up with. They don't understand where that comes from.

So actually you don't overdo the personal, but being personal actually is really important. And I think we never have enough time. That's something I've learned recently losing my father. And, you know, that idea that we don't, we never have enough time to complete the jobs we're doing or to complete relationships, therefore just make the most of every day and always try and leave things in a way that whoever's coming after us actually they're not picking up a mess, they're picking up something they will be proud of whatever stage we finish doing it.

Molly

Thank you so much for all the stories, ideas and advice. And just before we end, I'd like to ask you a few more quickfire questions if that's okay?

Ian

Of course it is.

Molly

Do you or have you ever played an instrument?

Ian

I have, but very badly. I used to play a violin and it was quite screechy, I would guess. So I think my parents used to drive it and also if I got really annoyed as a teenage child, I probably screech it on purpose just to irritate the people that it upset me. So yes, but my daughters play instruments much better than I do, so it's lovely to see them play well tuned instruments.

Molly

What is your favourite type of food?

Ian

Favourite type of food? I love a real breadth of food, but probably Thai food I would go for because I love something in a sauce and I love something that's spicy. So you've got that combination, I think of Chinese and Indian with Thai. Where you get the sauce and you get the spices.

Molly

Brilliant. What is your favourite noise?

Ian

Oh that's a really good question. My favourite noise. I meditate, which is one of the things that, I do transcendental meditation, which is where you use a mantra, something that you repeat in your head. And then once you repeat that mantra, you just let any thoughts that are in your head happen and then disappear. So I think the noise that I really love and it's something I learned doing sports is the noise of nothing.

When your head is totally clear and actually you're really clear minded and very calm. So I think that is a state of being that the that has almost no noise to. It's because you've created clearness in terms of your own mind. Because I think for me, I know what I'm not in my best. It's generally the noise in my head who's stopping me performing?

Molly

Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Ian

I'm both, but I'm not an afternoon person, so I would love to live probably in the Mediterranean way. You're up early, you sleep in the afternoon and then you're up till late in the evening.

Molly

Yeah. It seems like you might need to move!

Ian

Well, given the way the climate's going, we may be there quicker than we anticipate.

Molly

Yeah. Last question is, if you could have one superpower, what would it be?

Ian

If I could have one superpower? Then it'd probably be, it's going to sound really trite isn't it, love. I think for everybody to genuinely have that ability to love others and feel loved because I think with we can talk about kindness and being kindness is great, but it's not always genuine.

And I think you know that love that we give people. And I think two things that underpin that I'm sorry, so my superpower is to have love, but I think two things that underpin that are: to love people you've got to understand them or try and understand people, and you've got to be able to forgive. So I think superpower love, but underpinned by understanding and forgiveness.

Molly

I think we'll allow it to be the one.

Ian

Thank you. That's very kind of you.

Molly

Thank you so much for joining us. I hope you enjoyed the experience as much as I have.

Ian

Oh it's been great. Thank you very much.

Molly

Mae ein podlediaid Sgwrsiau ar Arweinyddiaeth ar gael trwy ein gwefan. Mae'r hawlfraint y podlediad yma yn cael ei gadw gan Llywodraeth Cymru.

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