



# 21st Century Leadership Webinar Interview Series

## Responsible Lens Panel Summary



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## Responsible LENS

The University of Lincoln's - Lincoln International Business School (LIBS) continues to lead an impact agenda orientated towards actively contributing to a global world. Championed by the Pro-Vice Chancellor and Director Prof. Craig Marsh, the 'Resilient Lincolnshire – Global' initiative framed a series of 4 lenses 'for seeing more and seeing differently'. This initiative provided a solid foundation for cementing the work of the Centre of Organisational Resilience, Chaired by Prof. Dean Fathers. With the leadership and support of the Business Development team, Mrs Ruchi Aggarwal, Head of Business Development at LIBS, this next phase of work with 4 panel sessions was launched in November 2020. These panel sessions were designed to foster a global dialogue between industry practitioners, policy makers and academics, exploring tactical ways for navigating the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) times we are all experiencing.

The third of four panel events was held on the 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and focused on the 'Responsible Lens' of leadership, to explore the fabric of a responsible leader on the backdrop of raised consciousness levels globally given the pandemic has exposed one of humanity's biggest challenges, the need to serve the common good through concerted and collective action.

The panel was chaired by Prof Craig Marsh, Pro Vice Chancellor and Director of LIBS and the panel members were:

- Professor Matthijs Bal, Professor of Responsible Management, LIBS (UK – based in the Netherlands)
- Dr Shashi Balain, MD and CEO of Shubhram Hospital Solutions (India)
- Mr Neil Muller, a senior industry practitioner (South Africa)
- Dr Harsh Suri, Associate Professor in Learning Futures, Deakin University (Australia) and
- Professor Sebastian Vaduva, Entrepreneur and Business Technology Executive, Author, Academic (Romania).

Prof Craig Marsh opened the discussion by reaffirming the educational focus at LIBS to support individual and collective growth, by aligning industry, policy and research perspectives to identify tangible ways for responsible living. In this effort, the responsible lens is embedded into the DNA of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, executive and professional training at Lincoln, a civic university in the heart of the UK. This responsible lens extends beyond embedding the UN Sustainable Development Goals and principles of responsible management into the educational activities. It is repurposing of the future University and the role of Business Schools (such as LIBS) which have an international, interdisciplinary orientation to be places where humanity's flourishing through advancing human potential takes shape.

With this backdrop the discussion covered concepts such as the leader's moral compass, value system, sustainability (SDG), Governance, ethical and responsible management and inclusive leadership, organised in this summary into four key themes:

1. The cutting edge of Responsible Management thinking
2. Sustainability and Inclusiveness in organisational practices
3. Educating for sustainability and inclusiveness, and
4. Responsible leadership as an Entrepreneurial endeavour.

## **1. The Cutting Edge in Responsible Management Thinking**

To frame the context for responsible management, Prof Matthijs Bal set the scene on the concept of sustainability, as introduced in corporations three decades ago in the late 1980s, comprising a variety of issues, such as: climate change and how organisations contribute to the problem, inequalities, inclusion and diversity - all of this in the spirit of integrating corporate concerns for profitability with environmental concerns. Today, the consensus is that this attempt has failed, given that global emissions, pollution and income inequalities are still increasing globally. This current deadlock is explained by a state of denial at organisational level about dutifully doing all that is possible to be the responsible organisations they aspire to be in addressing climate change. Then underneath this denial is the idea that we actually need more radical changes in the way organisations function ethically in society and the way our economic system works, still based on shareholder values and profitability.

The hope lies in the next generation of students open to more radical ideas of shifting the balance and designing organisations entirely around principles of sustainability, democracy and inclusion. However, since the issue is giving away control, this remains a hurdle for organisations to overcome and redesign themselves based on these principles. Very few companies allow a bottom-up approach, concerned with democratic individual development and self-organising – i.e. the exact social transformation that is needed, lest climate will affect us fatally.

Some of the problems constitutive of this hurdle stem from:

- a lack of readiness to take action responsibly and the way in which political leadership is in denial about the scale of the challenge we are faced with;
- an inadequate response to meet these challenges, in turn caused by some systemic issues around the structure and control of economies and businesses;
- responsibilities for the current status quo cannot be individualised;
- the systemic features that demand collective accountability and commitment to find solutions to the causes and not the symptoms of such ecological problems.

## **2. Sustainability and inclusiveness in Organisational Practices**

From an experienced practitioner's perspective, Mr Neil Muller compared the tendencies of two types of business:

1. local businesses react positively to global challenges by reducing plastic consumption, using solar panels and recycling rain water in the process of product development;

2. in multinational corporations, where the sustainable, responsible and ethical lens starts at the top, this problem is addressed through greater care in the selection of partners and suppliers and ways of trading so as both sides maintain a sustainable track record.

At the local affiliate, the principle of ‘what gets measured gets done’, has transformed sustainability principles into KPIs for removing plastic, reducing CO2 and water consumption by recycling water for plant operations and reducing waste to reach zero landfill. Applying responsible leadership from the top and cascading this approach to leading throughout the organisation is possible through young managers who are ‘switched on’ – able to recognise the urgency the global challenges of sustainable, ethical workstyles and also outspoken in effecting change.

As an example of the level of internalisation of responsible leadership, aiming to reduce measuring and supervision, Mr Muller accounted for initiatives such as: ethics day, which is driven top down in a pervasive involvement through a series of live events designed to be as transparent as possible both locally and globally through the open Q&A discussion. Such organisation-wide initiatives mark the commitment to democratise the workforce and engage everybody in the conversation in a genuine spirit. Additionally, a yearly initiative within the organisation involves collecting anonymous feedback at the grassroots level tangibly demonstrating the organisation’s commitment to take action in embedding equality and justice.

Given that the days of top down management are gone, Mr Muller emphasised that leaders are now responsible to their teams, accountable to the MD, leaving no space for autocratic control and disgruntled employees. For example, to avoid a possible disconnect between an organisation’s new vision and the experience of new recruits, the focus shifts beyond a list of skills presented in a CV, but rather on the fit between the values of new employees and those of the organisation, which can be measured through ethical tests of culture sensitivity. This is a mark of the new human resource management practices that are called for in the education and not only development of responsible management practices.

### **3. Educating for sustainability and inclusiveness**

Associate Professor Harsh Suri framed powerfully the educational challenge as one of impasse from teaching what we know, to teaching what we don’t know, given the unprecedented VUCA conditions we are facing globally that call for education to support:

- remaining critically reflexive in continuously questioning our own assumptions;
- designing constant feedback loops between academics and students, genuine reciprocal learning experiences to engage with the lived reality of learners and a sincere engagement with the challenges faced by the learners;
- strengthen the nexus between graduate employability and the global sustainability agenda to produce employable graduates who capable of catalysing change;
- paying more attention to and questioning what we are turning a blind eye to, from the ethical perspective, e.g. the modern slavery victimhood within the international student

mass. Although solutions are hard to find, cases need to be discussed and brought to the classroom as important issues

- challenging the status quo on some assumptions held by prestigious accreditation international agencies on global mobility and service learning being the gold standards. We should find ways of valuing and tapping into rich lived experiences of students from diverse equity groups to build empathy and develop innovative solutions.

Drawing on a work-integrated learning experience at Deakin University, Dr Suri gave a student-driven example of how some systemic weaknesses were addressed when an MBA alumnus found out about short-funding for meals in a kids' orphanage in Cambodia and designed and implemented a sustainable business model to achieve 3 meals for the children, raising initial funds through a crowdfunding campaign.

An example of academic activism in the direction of education supporting ethical work practices was also given. Noting the employability challenges that international students face, was tackled by designing an assessment aimed at increasing students' profile in the local SME community and revealing their problem-solving capabilities – i.e. a form of academic activism through becoming more empathic with the lived reality of the students.

#### **4. Responsible Leadership as an Entrepreneurial Endeavour**

Starting from an example where the employees and various suppliers were present at work despite health risks during the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr Shashi Balain ascertained that responsible leadership, sustainability and inclusiveness call for integrity. Initiatives for embedding sustainability and inclusiveness in the Organisations DNA can be planned tactically, but the effectiveness of such initiatives and the chance for followers to depends on the genuine and consistent evidence of leaders becoming the role models that 'walk the talk'.

An example of the Shubhram Hospital Solutions' successful sustainability strategy (related to air pollution) illustrated where employees saw the company to be ethical beyond the "employee perspective", from an environmental perspective that usually has no voice! For example, when Covid 19 crisis hit India, though there was a complete lockdown on people movement, the employees went an extra mile to ensure that the plant worked as usual despite huge hardships they had to face for traveling to work. The company reinforced their faith by providing free transportation, free on-premises food and lodging along with taking complete ownership of not only employees' health but also their families.

Viewing this as a truly ethical symbiotic relationship strengthened and validated by every ethical action the company took, Dr Balain encourages inward investing companies from the developed world to do the same when targeting India as a workplace, i.e. to be committed to work ethically and sustainably *right upfront*, so that everybody can enjoy the payoff in the longer term.

Prof. Craig Marsh also commented how the Covid-19 pandemic enforced a kind of stress testing on the organisation which, thanks to a responsible-enabled DNA, was able to not

only survive but even thrive through this massive crisis. This may provide evidence of entrepreneurial action, which he invited Professor Sebastian Vaduva to elaborate.

With his double-edged experience as an academic and an entrepreneur, Prof Sebastian Vaduva took a *micropreneurial approach* which calls for creativity and proactivity from within, and the quality of being forward-looking in solving problems. Since one of the root causes of the existing corruption in the world is personal greed, he advocates for *making a voluntary 'personal stop loss' on earnings*, e.g. to stop at \$10K per month and use the rest for social projects and humane problem-solving investments. With this approach, we can at least neutralise at a micro level some of the greedy drives that can generate macro problems in the future, such as opportunities for corruption, which would be even greater in the future, should technological advantage be used with an unethical purpose. In this sense, he observed that ethical management starts at the personal level of commitment and thus it can provide a lot more sustainable and humane solutions to the problems that we are faced with and also moving forward into others unknown ones in the future.

The chair, Dr Marsh noted that it is the transformation from personal responsibility defined by collectivism rather than individualism that will translate into the way we educate the future generations and equip them to contribute to society right there, in the workplace.

### **Key Lessons**

The panel sessions were designed to show how the co-creation of actionable knowledge by connecting the voices and perspectives of multiple stakeholders can provide practical support. From this discussion, we distil the following key lessons:

1. A revolution in discerning ways to bring about world transformation can only stem from the individual's conscious responsibility through:
  - reflexivity – individually and collectively;
  - genuine reciprocal learning from our collective experiences as we come to know what the emerging realities propel us to respond to; and
  - sincere engagement in the purposeful pursuit of sustainability and inclusiveness driven by individual and collective accountability.
2. Much work in partnership is required to raise individual and organisation readiness to take action for strengthening the alignment between the development of the individual, organizational goals and the needs of the ecology and not only economy.
3. Recognising that responsibility needs to transcend across individual and organisational levels, providing scope for entrepreneurial endeavours founded on collective consciousness.

We are delighted that at LIBS this learning agenda is now informing the launch of a series of Masterclasses to support Responsible Leadership development. We invite you to explore this new program of work and join us and be part of delivering the impact of Responsible Leadership through strong partnerships, renewed organisational purpose capitalising on the promise to raise collective consciousness as a global priority to foster humanity's sustainability and flourishing.

