



# Dialogue

Chris Roebuck is a British economist, advisor, award-winning thought-leader, international speaker and Visiting Professor of Transformational Leadership at Cass Business School in London. He has held senior roles at UBS, HSBC, KPMG and London Underground and has advised major global organisations at Board Level on leadership and improving performance. As Global Head of Leadership at UBS, his work helped the bank to win Best Company for Leaders in Europe 2005 and several Excellence Awards, as well as boosting performance and profits.

Among his clients and references from the past are: Bank of England, UK National Health Service, UAE Prime Ministers Office, UK Defense Academy, Chinese Space Programme, Red Cross, and about 70 more from various fields and industries.

Prof. Roebuck has authored many books including 'Effective Leadership', 'Lead to Succeed' and 'Strategic Leadership Development'. He is regularly on the HR Most Influential Thinkers list.

His articles and interviews can be viewed online at:  
<http://www.chrisroebuck.co>

For our interview we met in London and spoke on the important role of transformational leadership.



*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*My first question is: what lessons do you draw from your own personal leadership journey that may help others?*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

As I travel and meet people who have different perspectives I learn more every day. That is the first lesson; no one should ever stop listening to others and learning, having an open mind to different perspectives and ideas. That is the key to being an effective leader because true leadership is about constant adaptation via new knowledge and wider perspectives. You also need to have other people who want to go on the journey with you. You can't be a leader on your own. Today perhaps more "co-travellers" you guide than "followers".

This leads on to the principle that leadership is about actions, not position. One of the things I've often seen is people in senior corporate roles thinking of themselves as 'leaders' when many of them don't behave as such. As a result their people don't think of them as "leaders" either and often also don't totally believe what they say.

One day to day test of leadership is simply whether people want to join you on the journey. Not just because they are getting paid but because they are genuinely inspired to go where you want to go and achieve success. This is because they see not only a rational reason but it's also because it resonates with them emotionally and will enable them to unleash their own potential. So the lesson that I have learnt over my career is successful leaders have the ability to combine the rational and emotional in a powerful way. An inspiring idea and a great plan to make it happen that benefits all involved, not just the leader.

People instantly spot self-interest in leaders and draw the conclusion the leader doesn't care about them. That breaks the basic trust bond and kills motivation. Above all leadership is about trust and the ability build it is a common factor in the great leaders that we've all seen over the years.

*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*It's leading oneself to be able to lead others.*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

Absolutely. At its most basic we must all accept that to achieve things we cannot do everything by ourselves. We often have to work together with others. That is the key leadership lesson of human civilization.

*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*That's fascinating. My next question is about those who can lead by example. Who are your favorite three giants from the past? They can be from high art, from academia, from literature, business or science...*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

First of all, I think, Alexander the Great. Let's be honest he had a very good start in life and had Aristotle as a mentor, which clearly helped.

His achievements are many and varied. The way he built one of the biggest empires in the ancient world; his innovative use of military tactics to beat significantly larger armies; the genuine inspiration, if not love, that his people had for him to follow him past the edge of the known world; the fact that his spreading of Greek principles and culture has had an impact on not just the places he went but has also had a fundamental impact on the way we think about many things even today...

Most people might not even realise that many concepts they use day to day and the general tenets of society that we observe are, in some cases, descended from Alexander the Great!

The reason I find him fascinating is because of the breadth of his achievements - a respected military leader and innovator but also a thinker who made significant contribution to wider society and humanity. Yes, he also had his character flaws, but I think that reflects upon his greatness in that, despite those flaws, he created an inspirational vision to motivate people to willingly join him on a challenging journey past the edge of their known world.

My second favorite giant is from the scientific world – Sir Isaac Newton. He is fascinating because he was so much of a thinker that he had difficulty relating to people around him. It's interesting that when developed his ideas it was a world where you could be a general visionary. His work on mathematics, on gravitation, on optics, and his role in society ... all meant that the breadth of his impact was significant. The fact that some of his concepts were not confirmed as correct for some three hundred years by modern science shows how ahead of his times he was. He has to be one of the greats.

This shows that even if you are not good at emotional rapport but your rational thinking totally transcends current ideas you have the ability to be seen as a truly inspirational thought leader and thus great.

The third favourite giant of mine is Nelson Mandela. It's because if you look at many of the leaders of modern times and may be, to some degree, Gandhi was the same, few have created

a truly inspirational vision, based on justice and equality for all, that then built a social movement which people not only believed in on an individual level but which made them work as "one" cohesive group with a common vision. He was somebody who was prepared to sacrifice himself for the common good and to enable the achievement of the vision. He demonstrated humility as a leader and an ability to relate to others and empathise with them. He admitted that he wasn't perfect, human, like everybody else and sometimes got things wrong. This built trust and inspiration based on his innate humanity. That, I think, marked him out as someone who built a legacy that the world should be proud of in terms of an exemplary leader for generations to come. A true example of "we not me".

*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*Your interdisciplinary career from serving in British Army to heading up leadership for UBS, working with UK National Health Service and being Visiting Professor of Transformational Leadership at Cass Business School must give you different viewpoints. It's a unique combination. What is the challenge of being so interdisciplinary? How does it help you better understand how leaders and organisations can be successful?*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

There is often an assumption that if you have not exercised leadership in a specific area previously people in that area think you are not able to do so as you can't understand the world they are in. The art of leadership is getting the best out of people and then focusing that what delivers success. That principle applies to anywhere where people want to achieve things.

That's a consistent theme from all of the evidence, no matter what sector, what culture, what location... good leadership is transferable as it's about delivering success through people.

What the experiences in all the various areas I worked taught me was that there are just a few simple actions that deliver effective leadership. These have to be present to deliver success. Interestingly, all build on each other to create a holistic environment where people genuinely care about success and so give their best.

Before I joined the military, I was training to be an accountant and I felt the job wasn't particularly inspiring so I wanted a change. Perhaps joining the army was an overreaction but certainly the selection and training to be a British Army Officer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and subsequent responsibility for the lives of soldiers and their families was challenging and certainly transformative. I probably learned more about myself and leadership under pressure during that period than any other time in my life. I learnt that true leadership is based on trust plus the ability to successfully complete tasks in the toughest environment through excellent planning and teamwork. That a 'we, not me' ethos is vital. The goal of any leader is encapsulated by the motto of Royal Military Academy Sandhurst – 'Serve to Lead'. The leaders focus being on enabling the team to succeed rather than benefitting themselves and advancing their own agenda.

That period also taught me that to be a successful leader you need to delegate decision-making down to the lowest possible level. This is something few people associate with the military

but it enables them to rapidly react. This period formed my views on what I now say leaders need; core task skills, trust based inspiration, "we not me" ethos focused on a clear common objective.

Moving into the corporate world was a shock because I was suddenly in a world where often the principle of 'we and not me' that I had used in the military was replaced with, in many cases, a 'me and not we' attitude where personal agendas could take precedence over the wider common good or organizational goal. There was also the challenge of multiple and often conflicting agendas and objectives in contrast to the clarity of single or, at least, aligned objectives in the military. Thus the corporate world taught me the need to focus effort on actions that delivered key objectives, to create consensus on these with stakeholders, use effective task skills to deliver and inspiration to engage people in that. It was an adaption of my military experience into the more unfocused "we but mainly me" environment of the corporate world.

What I found that really interesting was how well core military task management skills worked in the corporate world to ensure effective delivery. However the lack of such skills amongst my non-military colleagues had a massive negative impact on timing and quality of day to day delivery. It is still a major issue in most organisations today.

The governmental world and involvement with politics taught me that despite good plans and teamwork these could be derailed by politics. At least, in the corporate world a well-structured and logical plan to deliver an objective successfully would be accepted and then be implemented.







interviewing Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever

In the governmental world, I found that sometimes the best solutions would be dismissed for what appeared to be illogical reasons that would then, subsequently, be revealed as a political agenda. Thus the long-term common good was being sacrificed to meet short-term political expediency. That was particularly annoying where a few with their own agenda negatively impacted upon many others or indeed wider society. The experience showed me that the Governmental world, whilst branded as 'public service' is, in some cases, the benefitting of the few by the many. That made me ask how long this could continue before people worked out what was going on, essentially planned unfairness, and reacted to it. This has recently happened with the rise of populism and the rejection of incumbent political and business elites that we've seen.

My involvement with the academic world has been inspiring as it enabled me to dig deeper into the evidence of what enables successful leadership and discover that it confirmed many of my own observations from experience.

Many key factors in enabling successful leadership and delivering organizational success are also supported by evidence from sources I did not expect, e.g. neuroscience, psychology, sports science and consumer behavior. For example employees are potential consumers of plans that leaders try to "sell" them to get them involved in. But there has to be some incentive for the employee to engage. Thus some science around consumers behavior also applies to employees. This multidimensional approach added to my evidence base and inspired my recent book *Lead to Succeed*. This then helped create my "I CARE" leadership approach which melds the 'we not me' trust based team ethos with excellent task delivery skills and holistic perspective to achieve the organisations vision whilst unleashing individuals' potential.

This was my most recent lesson, that simple and consistent actions for success from all of these experiences came together to build my list of critical "I CARE" actions to truly meet the needs of all involved and deliver success everywhere.



*Tofig Husein-zadeh:*

*Why do you think particularly Transformational Leadership is so important as opposed to other kinds of leadership?*

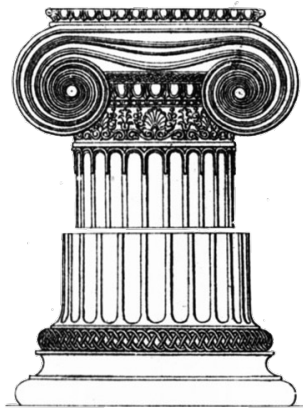
Prof. Chris Roebuck:

I think that good leadership should always be transformational. That's inherently its purpose. Leadership implies taking people from one place to another and the intent is obviously that it's a better place because no one wants to go to a worse one.

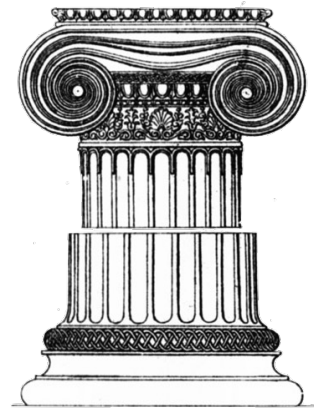
Prof. Chris Roebuck:

The difference between the rest and the best is quite simple. The best effectively use both rational and emotional elements so people care and give their best, then focus that best onto what delivers success via understanding the big picture .

Too many organizations are trapped in silo structures and the just-do-your-job mindset. That stops you reaching full potential both in terms of people and performance. One organisation should work as one big team, few do. "We not me" again.



*Leadership implies taking people from one place to another and the intent obviously should be that it's a better place because no one wants to go to a worse place.*



So the question is not why transformational leadership is important. It's more how could people describe themselves as leaders or delivering leadership if they are not delivering transformation for the better at the same time.

That's the question leaders should be asking themselves: If I am a leader how am I transforming what is happening for my organization and my people in a positive way and how can I take them to a better place than we are in now ? Unless I can identify this destination and transformation then am I really a leader...?

*Tofig Husein-zadeh:*

*As you advise many organizations, mentor executives and judge awards, what are the key areas that distinguish the best from the rest?*

The evidence suggests that breaking down silos and creating a one-team ethos can add up to 50% to profitability. This is the transformation we achieved in UBS so I know it works. It was an environment where every employee wanted to be involved, where they cared about their colleagues and wanted the organization to succeed. It's not just about doing your job, it's about being willing to do more than your job to enable success for all.

You can quickly see where an organization is working like this, where it is effectively one team with an agreed vision, values and objectives, which everyone knows about, and everyone is trying to deliver. Critically, to achieve this you need good leaders at all levels who are leading by example, building trust and showing they care about their people. It's very easy to identify these actions, or lack of them, in organizations and the impact.





*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*You have spoken about Aston Martin, the iconic UK brand, being one of the most interesting organizations there is. Could you elaborate on why you think so?*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

Yes, I think, Aston Martin is one of the best examples of the rational science of engineering blended perfectly with the art of design in an inspirational way. It's interesting that it has a history of over a 100 years of building some of the most beautiful cars in the world but actually it hasn't yet ever made sustainable profits and it has consistently moved from one owner to another. That is testament to the fact that the brand has a special place in the hearts and minds of people everywhere who believe that this example of perfection should not be sacrificed on a purely commercial altar. I think, in its own way, is inspiring that despite the commercial logic this organization and its beautiful cars are still here and still inspiring people around the world.

The other thing that is interesting is that as a small player in a significantly consolidated automotive world and, despite the support of James Bond, Aston Martin had to rethink its purpose and place in the market. The new CEO Dr. Andy Palmer, who came from Nissan, is now starting to implement his second century plan which not only introduces new car models every nine months or so but also builds on the iconic brand. This fluxes the organization into becoming a broader luxury company rather than just a car company. I think this is a great example of a true transformation in progress as we speak. It's not just about doing what you've always done better, it's also about finding a new market niche that is both business rational and emotionally valid that aligns to leverage what went before.

This allows you to provide a sustainable foundation for future success doing something new that's as inspirational as what went before.

*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*What do you think will be the personal qualities in a leader of the future?*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

It's interesting. Whenever I talk to leaders around the world everybody says that leadership has changed and people have changed. I don't think that that's true. I think that what leaders have to do day to day, from all I've seen of different organisations and cultures, is constant. In the end it's about knowing how to inspire and unleashing the potential of people to want to deliver success.

Interestingly, Aristotle said 2,500 years ago "pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work". I suggest that that's still true today, that actually human beings have always wanted the same things from their leaders: to be recognized, to be praised, to be asked what you think, to be treated with respect, to be able to grow and develop their potential. I think that is still the same. All the evidence I have seen, all the conversations I had with people, confirm that. How that may be delivered may vary with times and with cultures but the core day to day leadership actions that deliver success are constant.

In some cultures there's more of a focus on the team and less on the individual and in other it's the other way. People always want to be praised and recognized but that might be done in slightly ways with different cultures and people. What is also interesting is that recent research confirms that there are no generational differences in the motivating factors and thus what leaders should do is consistent, eg praise when due. But how leaders should deliver it may vary generationally.



*The leaders of the future are really going to have to do the same things that Leaders have always done. It is to get the best from their people and enable them to focus that on what delivers success in a way that meets their needs and the current situation. It's the same.*

**Prof. Chris Roebuck**

So the leaders of the future just to have to do the same things that the best leaders have always done. That is to get the best from their people and enable them to focus that on what delivers success in a way that meets their needs, the needs of the organisation and the situation. It's always been the same and always will be as we are all human.



*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*  
*How do you think leadership is developing in the context of wider society not just business?*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:  
There have always been questions if those in leadership roles are demonstrating true leadership behavior, be they corporate or political leaders. What breaks the bond between leaders and people is perceived lack of integrity, equity or trust. It instantly destroys cohesion of a team, organization or society. This may lead to dissent or revolt, be that overt or covert. It repeatedly manifests itself in many employees only doing the minimum to do the job but never more, even though they could, if they wanted, give up to 30% more effort.

I think it is also interesting how in the wider context strategic leadership is becoming more complicated. We seem to be entering a post-rational world where some think that their ability

to express an opinion confers validity rather than the rational evidence in support of the opinion conferring that validity. Climate denial is a good example. So this is a challenge that the leader needs to address by presenting their case in a way that effectively shows how strong it is. Easy access to social media means that it's easy to express an



opinion even if totally unsupported by any evidence. Once repeated that opinion can be perceived as credible when it's not. This is the "alternative fact" challenge that leaders now have to wrestle with.

This links to the rise of populism; telling people what they want to hear when it is neither based on evidence nor is feasible isn't leadership. Being honest and giving people the truth even if it's not what they want to hear is leadership. But the problem is populism works well as it is driven by emotion. In the final analysis emotion will often trump rational thought as we have seen. The only answer for the responsible leader in this environment is to use rational evidence and honesty to build trust to then inspire emotionally.



In the end, populism, which isn't leadership, will discredit itself. It will be unable to deliver on its promises or, to deliver them, break fundamental principles of free societies. But until then leaders who are trying to advance our organizations and our societies face a challenge from unrealistic and emotive populism.

*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*What advice would you give to the younger generation to become transformational both as individuals and when they become leaders?*

Prof. Chris Roebuck:

Do what really inspires you, what uses your potential and gives you a sense of achievement. Make sure you have the critical knowledge and skills you need. Always have a good rational plan based on evidence and analysis and execute it effectively. Listen to other perspectives, seek feedback and constantly learn. Work on that 'we, not me' basis for common good to build trust with others. When you become a leader, just do more of this and never forget the 'Serve to Lead' principle to inspire your people so they want to give their best for you. You'll get much further that way long term than you will via focusing on your own self-interest which others will see through.

I suppose, above all treat others with respect and for those who you work and live with, keep showing that you care. That will help you use the positive and powerful potential of human nature.

*Tofiq Husein-zadeh:*

*I would like to thank you for participating in this interview. Your words were full of transformational wisdom.*

