

## **Julia Unwin – Lifetime achievement award speech – President’s dinner, CMI**

Receiving a lifetime achievement award induces a mix of emotions.

There’s the horror of the passing of time. Lifetime awards by definition mark the passage of time, and that’s a bit of a worry for someone like me who has often found myself wondering what I’ll do when I finally grow up. I guess this award is a great reminder that I can’t wait much longer for that glorious moment!

There’s obviously shock at the acknowledgement of a career that has, as for so many of us, felt like a combination of opportunity and good luck, with more than the usual input of apparently random decisions, fresh starts and reversals. If the typical modern manager is someone who starts working life with a clear plan, milestones and goals and then methodically works through it, then clearly, I am no modern manager.

But there’s also pride that a lifetime of learning, paying attention to how others do things, learning from them or trying to do things differently and exploring new approaches to that goal we call leadership - is recognised with this wonderful award.

Because leadership is a skill, and learning how to do it is never over - it changes daily, and brings new challenges and also new opportunities every day.

And I have indeed learned in the course of my career.

I’ve learned that good leaders don’t stride ahead to put a flag on the hill, and that even if that once worked in decades gone by, now you probably end up with the flag halfway up the hill and nobody behind you. Good leaders are often walking at the pace of the slowest, bringing up the rear, encouraging and supporting others as they head for the summit.

I’ve learned that storytelling is a skill without parallel. Being able to tell and tell again the story of where we came from and where we’re going is as important as knowing your way round the bottom line, whether it be KPIs or profit margins.

I’ve learned that paying attention, really paying attention, matters most. Knowing that change is often what’s happening at the margins, the outstations, the far-flung branches, not around the boardroom table. That leadership means being aware that people working in the most surprising places in your organisation know what’s really going on. It about knowing that the attitudes and behaviours we seek to encourage are rarely only to be found within our organisations. They’re also developed in communities, in networks, the media that’s all around us.

Leadership is knowing that the disasters, crises and upheavals that beset management life could always be predicted by listening really carefully and paying attention. Was our global financial crisis really such a surprise? Is the collapsing high street something we didn’t see coming? Is the upsurge in populist politics really so unexpected? Was the Brexit vote a genuine, bonafide 24-carat shock?

Having had roles in commercial organisations, in government and in charities, I’ve learned that leadership is never easy anywhere, but leading organisations that can’t hide behind a P and L, that have to report on so much more than the bottom line, that have stakeholders of almost infinite complexity, and missions and purpose that are genuinely challenging and stretching - requires massively different, and valuable skills and ability.

I’ve learned that diversity is business critical. That the worst decisions ever made are made by people who all have the same life experience. That people who have too much in common will

never see the unusual trend, and will miss the challenge that comes from outside. Creativity and ingenuity comes from difference.

And that people who bring their whole selves to work bring so much more than those of us who - perhaps even now in our so much more enlightened times - have to distort ourselves and our abilities to fit the preconceived views of what a leader should look like and how she should behave.

And of course we all know that what gets designed depends upon who is in the room. And that if only a particular set of people is in the room, what gets designed may not be met with universal acclaim.

Right now, the country and the economy is experiencing what can happen when the people who were perhaps too rarely in the room when decisions were being made, are now demanding entry.

I've learned that organisations are always, and at all times, about emotions. There is a rather comedic view that work is somehow clinical and tidy. There is no-one here who doesn't know that the mess of emotions and passions - love, envy, fury, grief - is not tidily confined to the domestic sphere but affects everything we do in the workplace too. And as at home, when it is ignored it doesn't just go away.

Although I stand here with considerable humility and not a little amazement at this recognition, I also know that while we focus on the achievements of some women - and we talk about the numbers of women in senior roles, and the numbers of women in our pipeline, and the percentage of women on our boards, - there are millions of other women, making our organisations work, making our communities thrive. But they are too often trapped in poverty and prevented from making a contribution.

The answer to that issue lies not with them but with all of us here in this room. We know - or we should know, that a thriving economy, a resilient community, needs the talents of all - and that trapping women in desperate poverty diminishes us all, and means that we will never thrive as a society.

Paying the women who work in our shops and our cafes, our hospitals and our schools, the women who care for us all as we age or care for our children make the most extraordinary contribution. They already know the things I've spent a lifetime learning, and as we celebrate the achievements of leaders everywhere, we need to celebrate - and reward - the work of women who make all this possible.

HRH, ladies and gentlemen, I'm honoured and humbled by this award. I'm immensely grateful to the CMI for this huge honour, thank you very much indeed.