MANIFESTO FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE

From Surviving to Thriving

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Manifesto for Making a Difference: From Surviving to Thriving

A strong theme throughout my 40+ year career has been the importance of making a positive difference, helping people to tackle problems, improve their quality of life and learn and grow. It is what has motivated me in my writings, my educational work and my role as an adviser.

I have tried to capture the idea in terms of the 'Three Ps': People, Problems, Potential. Where there are people, there will be problems, but there will also be potential. So, it can truly be said that my work has revolved around helping people address the problems and realize the potential.

I have put this 'manifesto' together to clarify the core principles, 24 in total, that I regard as an essential foundation for making a difference – that is, for playing a positive part in tackling those problems and realizing that potential.

The subtitle, *From Surviving to Thriving*, is very significant. Tackling problems and realizing potential are generally very demanding enterprises, often in a context of underfunding and underappreciation, and so it is not surprising that morale can be low, with people focusing on just getting through the day – on surviving. But, a major feature of my work has been an emphasis on not just surviving, but actually thriving. Instead of allowing difficult circumstances to drag us down and mire us in defeatism and cynicism, we need to focus on pulling together and doing the best we can in difficult circumstances. The irony is that, if we settle for just surviving, we make our difficult jobs even more difficult by limiting our horizons and allowing negativity to hold us back.

I offer this manifesto as part of my contribution to education and training, part of my own commitment to making a difference. It should be of value to, as I have often put it, anyone who works in a setting where success depends on how effectively we work with people, how successful we can be in influencing them – and their circumstances – in a positive direction (what I like to call the 'people professions').

I hope you will find it of interest and benefit.

Best wishes

Neil

Dr Neil Thompson

Authenticity

The term 'authentic' is used in different ways in different contexts. Here I am using it in the sense of taking ownership of our choices and their consequences. Drawn from existentialist philosophy, the idea of being authentic means recognizing that: (i) there are always choices and choices have consequences; and (ii) we therefore have to avoid the common tendency to deny responsibility for our actions and the choices on which they are built. We severely limit our scope for making a positive difference if we are not taking ownership of the things that are within our control or sphere of influence or colluding with others who are doing so in relation to their own actions and choices. We are likely to get much better results if we are more open and honest about our own role in the situations we find ourselves in. This is not about blame or guilt, it is about recognizing that the more aware we are of the choices we make and their consequences, the stronger a position we will be in to make wise choices and produce more positive outcomes.

Communication

'We cannot not communicate' is a very important point to take on board. We are constantly sending 'messages' (through our body language, for example) whether we intend to or not, and so it is important to be tuned in to what those messages are to make sure that we are conveying the *right* messages, the helpful ones. This is part of a wider picture where we are so used to communication that we tend to take it for granted. There is therefore much to be gained from being more alert to what we are communicating and what is being communicated to us. The most effective people when it comes to making a positive difference are generally the ones who, amongst other things, are able to make the most of what communication offers. They are very effective in getting their message across successfully and, just as importantly, very effective in genuinely listening to what others are communicating to them (verbally and nonverbally). Developing 'communicative sensitivity' is therefore a key part of achieving the best results.

Compassion

Concern for others and a desire to be helpful and supportive are essential elements of being an effective people professional. Caring just because you are paid to will hamper progress in whatever challenges you are dealing with. However, in the day-to-day pressures of work, especially at times when we are tired, frustrated, angry, or otherwise distracted, it is easy to lose sight of compassion (and our values more broadly) and act in ways that are not consistent with it. In some cases, it can reach the point of 'burnout', an emotional state where we struggle not only to get our work done, but also to care about what we are doing or why. This is one of the main reasons why we

need to focus on thriving, not just surviving, as we can get drawn into a vicious circle: work pressures lead to low morale; low morale feeds burnout; burnout bypasses compassion; practising without compassion makes work harder and more demanding; increased work pressures contribute to low morale. We therefore need to keep reaffirming compassion.

Creativity
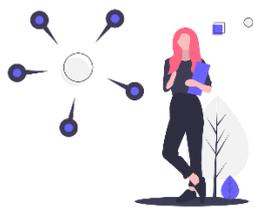
Getting stuck in the rut of unthinking routines is one of the dangers we face in our working lives. It leads to negativity and, significantly, such negativity encourages unthinking routines (by offering a degree of comfort and apparent safety). I say *apparent* safety, because relying on such routines is dangerous. It dulls our senses and closes doors to more creative solutions. Making sure that we are thinking creatively is fundamental to achieving the best results – exploring a wide range of problem-solving options and not limiting ourselves to a narrow range of responses. Some people find it easy to be creative by using their imagination to good effect, while others struggle to do so. However, creativity is not a quality you either have or do not have; it is a set of skills that can be learned and there is much to be gained by working alongside creative people and seeing what can be learned from how they manage to do it). If we really want to make a positive difference, then we need to make sure that we are not seeing creativity as an optional extra.

Critical thinking

Taking things at face value leaves us open to manipulation, other people's efforts to impose their way of thinking. Critical thinking is therefore essential. We should be prepared to look beneath the surface (what is referred to as 'critical depth') to get a better picture of what is going on and the assumptions that are being relied upon plus to look more broadly at the wider context to see what influences are operating – power relations, for example ('critical breadth'). Not engaging with critical thinking leaves us vulnerable to trying to address complex issues without a proper holistic understanding of the circumstances we are involved in. We should be careful not to confuse the term 'critical', in the sense we are using it here, with critical in the sense of criticizing or finding fault with. Critical thinking, then, is about adopting a *questioning* approach. It is about using our intelligence to develop a fuller understanding of the situation and the influences on it, rather than naively rely on what can be misleading appearances.

Dignity

Not treating people with dignity is directly antithetical to making a positive difference. Similarly, allowing others to treat us in undignified ways will not provide the basis of trust and credibility that is needed to influence people

and circumstances in a positive direction. But, as with compassion, there is a risk that pressures – and the negativity and low morale they create – can lead to practices that are not consistent with dignity. For example, someone who is in a hurry can lose sight of the need for dignity and speak to someone in a disrespectful way that leads to their losing face. There is also the danger that someone who is not treated with dignity becomes affronted and therefore begins to treat others in an undignified way, potentially setting up a vicious circle. We therefore need at all times to ensure that we are: (i) treating others with dignity (even when they are not treating us with dignity); and (ii) ensuring that we safeguard our own dignity. This will often involve a degree of assertiveness, being able to stand up for ourselves in constructive ways.

Empowerment

By empowerment I mean the process of helping people take greater control of their lives. This involves identifying obstacles to self-realization (both internal and external) and helping to remove, bypass or minimize them. There are many aspects of the wider social context that have the effect of contributing to disempowerment (discrimination, for example), and this reinforces the point I made earlier about the need for critical thinking. Unfortunately, the notion of empowerment has been oversimplified in many quarters, distracting attention from the positive role it can play. From helping people to help themselves to playing a part in challenging discrimination and oppression, empowerment is a core element of making a positive difference. It is especially important when it comes to moving from surviving to thriving. Negativity and defensiveness will act as major obstacles to empowerment (and, indeed, are likely to be significant in contributing to processes of self-disempowerment).

Environmental protection

Humanity has achieved some incredible things and, collectively, we have much to be proud of. However, on the debit side, what is not so positive is that, as a species, we have wrought enormous damage to our habitat. Our wasteful industrialized ways and massive population increases have combined to put the environment we rely on at risk. Although there is growing awareness of the need to address these problems, we are far removed from a solution (consider how easy it is to come across lights left on unnecessarily in public buildings, how so many major corporations continue to prioritize profit over survival and how many people who should know better continue to dismiss global warming). What we need to bear in mind is that it is extremely unwise to focus our efforts on tackling problems and realizing potential and moving from surviving to thriving while at the same time doing little or nothing about the existential threat to the very basis of our lives. Environmental protection therefore needs to be integrated into all our work.

Hope

Hope is, of course, central to making a positive difference. How can we expect to have an impact if we have no hope and the people we are seeking to help have no hope that things can get better? Indeed, often one of the first things we need to do to bring about change is to instil a degree of hope (our very involvement as a helper or supporter will often be sufficient to get us started with this). One of the ironies of hope is that the negativity and cynicism so often found in pressurized workplaces can tend to undermine hope or even eliminate it altogether. We can then find ourselves in situations where we are trying to challenge other people's defeatism rooted in their lack of hope, while operating in a context of our own low morale and consequent relatively low level of hope. But, we should not confuse hope with faith. Faith is the *expectation* that all will work out well, whereas hope is the recognition of the possibility that progress can be made and therefore the basis for making a commitment to trying to achieve that progress.

Integrity

Everyone has values of one kind or another, but not everyone acts in accordance with them. For example, very many people will profess commitment to fairness, but will not necessarily treat people fairly. Values are incredibly important because they can be understood as what motivates us and what sustains us through difficult times. However, their positive impact applies only if there is a consistency between what we believe in and how we behave. For example, if someone pays lip service to, say equality, but actually operates on the basis of discriminatory assumptions, the power of that value is lost. Integrity therefore needs to be understood as congruence between professed values and actual behaviour. This takes us back to authenticity and the need to take ownership of our choices and their consequences. It boils down to recognizing the key role of values and making sure that we are not losing sight of them, however busy we may be or however much negativity we may encounter in others.

Internationalism

Nationalism can be highly problematic because it can encourage a narrow, insular attitude and promote xenophobia and racism due to the inbuilt sense of superiority. Internationalism, by contrast is outward looking and welcoming of engagement and learning from contact with other nations and other peoples. It is about having a strong sense of national identity, with all the benefits that brings, but without the baggage of assumed superiority and all the problems that brings. Internationalism, then, can be understood as part of the wider idea of valuing diversity and the enrichment that differences in language, culture, history and beliefs bring. Being proud to belong, to be part

of a community is no bad thing, unless it is accompanied by negative assumptions about people who are not part of that community or who wish to become part of that community. Internationalism recognizes the importance of having a sense of shared heritage and connection, but within a context of inclusive diversity, not discriminatory exclusion.

Language rights

Language is not only the primary mechanism for communication in both our personal and working lives, but also an important part of our identity. Languages also reflect power differences, with some languages being given high status and others seen as of a lower order (even though there is no linguistic basis to such assumptions). This means that speakers of minority languages can face stigma, discrimination and exclusion. Speakers of dominant languages, such as English, can easily take for granted their right to speak their own language. Speakers of minority languages, by contrast, will often not be in such a strong position and will have to struggle to get their voice heard or will give up on doing so. Despite growing awareness of the problems of discrimination and a strong emphasis on rights and inclusion, it is not uncommon for language rights not to be considered as part of this broader picture of equality and diversity. We therefore need to make sure that we do not lose sight of the key role of language in people's rights.

Loss and grief

A common misunderstanding is that grief is our reaction to death or bereavement. In reality, it is much broader than this: grief is our reaction to any major loss. One of the consequences of this misunderstanding is that grief is often missed. Loss and grief can be very important issues in many situations, but where no death has occurred it will often be the case that little or no attention is paid to the significance of grief. Dealing with grief is difficult enough, but if no support is being offered because it has not been recognized that grief is a key factor, it can be exceptionally difficult. If the griever does not realize that they are experiencing grief, they can feel confused and disorientated, unable to understand why they feel the way they do. If we want to achieve the best results when trying to make a positive difference, then we need to be 'tuned in' to the prevalence of grief and be prepared to be supportive in whatever ways we can. Failing to acknowledge the impact of loss and grief can make a bad situation much worse.

Peace

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, but whenever we encounter it, we have a choice: we can work towards resolving it or we can escalate it, depending on the attitude we adopt at the time. For example, if someone is aggressive towards you, you can try and calm the situation down or you can respond

with equal or even greater aggression. Handling such situations is highly skilled work, but it is well worth developing such conflict managements skills. This is because peace is such a fragile thing; it can so easily be lost by a conflict situation being mishandled. Despite this, many members of the people professions will have had little or no training in dealing with the challenges involved, and will therefore be ill-equipped to produce positive outcomes from situations involving conflict. Being able to maintain peace is never guaranteed, but, without a proper understanding of the issues involved and effort invested in developing the necessary skills, the chances of success are significantly reduced.

People not pathology

Human behaviour is complex and multidimensional, and so the common tendency for pathologizing labels to be attached to people represents a gross oversimplification – and one that is dangerous and disempowering. People do things for different reasons, but putting their behaviour down to their being mad, bad, sick, depraved, inadequate or deviant tells us more about the person doing the labelling than the person being labelled. This is not to say that 'anything goes' or that there is no such thing as unacceptable behaviour. But, what it does mean is that, if we want to do something about behaviour that proves to be harmful or problematic, simply attaching a label does not help (and will often hinder). What is much wiser (and much more effective) is to try and understand the reasons (including feelings) behind the behaviour. If we are able to develop that understanding we are in a much stronger position to respond to the problematic behaviour in the present moment and to prevent such behaviour in future.

Personal growth

There is absolutely no compunction for people to learn, grow, develop or improve. It is entirely optional – unless, of course, you are involved in the people professions, in which case a commitment to what is known as a 'growth mindset' is absolutely essential. People, problems and potential are all very complex issues, and so we need to keep learning, building up our knowledge, developing our skills and honing our values. One of the main dangers of a low-morale, defeatist workplace is that it acts as a significant obstacle to growth and learning. It encourages that stifling emphasis on just surviving, rather than the empowering and energizing focus on thriving. One of the keys to personal growth is taking responsibility for your own learning. Self-directed learning is far more effective than the traditional model of allowing others (teachers, tutors, trainers and so on) to make the decisions about what needs to be learned and how it will be learned. It is much wiser (and more fruitful) to make sure you are in the driving seat for your learning.

Professionalism

Working in a bureaucratic context does not make you a bureaucrat. All professionals have to wrestle with bureaucracy (for example, legal professionals have to wrestle with the legal system bureaucracy), but that does not make them bureaucrats. Consequently, we have to pay attention to what it means to be a professional in terms of professional knowledge, skills, values, accountability, development and so on. It means taking ownership of our actions (authenticity again). It is not about privileges, elitism or 'we know best', it is about taking seriously our role as people who help to tackle problems and realize potential. It is about trying to achieve the best results we can, not just enough to get by. When it comes to making a difference, we do not want to be half hearted or insincere – people will soon pick up on it if we are and that will act as an obstacle to our effectiveness. It will also act as an obstacle to getting job satisfaction, learning and development and potential career progression in due course.

Realism

Being optimistic and expecting everything to work out well has its benefits, but it also has its limitations. Similarly, being pessimistic is a very reasonable approach to adopt in many circumstances, but it can be unduly restrictive in circumstances where such an outlook is not called for. Adopting an uncritically optimistic approach can leave us very vulnerable in situations where the reality is that things are not going to work out well, just as adopting a pessimistic approach when there is the potential to achieve a positive outcome can be self-defeating. This is where realism comes into the picture. Being realistic is about not adopting a blanket optimistic or pessimistic approach to all situations, but, rather, weighing up each one carefully and assessing how much hope of progress there is and acting accordingly. Sadly, I have met many people who have got themselves into considerable difficulty because they rigidly and routinely adopted one extreme or the other without considering which approach fitted the circumstances best.

Resilience

Being able to 'bounce back' from adversity is a very worthwhile and valuable set of skills. Life will knock us down sometimes, but it is important that we do not stay down, that we pick ourselves up and press on. Ideally, when we get up, we are stronger, we have learned and benefited from the experience. The idea that 'what does not kill you makes you stronger' is almost right. What does not kill you *has the potential* to make you stronger, but whether it does or not will depend on resilience. Unfortunately, the dominant approach to resilience is to portray it as a characteristic that some people have and others don't. This is wrong on two counts: (i) it is a set of skills that can be learned; and (ii) much will depend on the social circumstances

(for example, the extent and quality of support people receive). In our efforts to tackle problems and realize potential it is very important that we not only develop our own resilience skills, but also learn how to be effective in helping others develop their own resilience in whatever reasonable ways we can.

Self-care and work-life balance

One of the main dangers when working in the people professions is that we are so focused on helping, supporting and empowering others that we lose sight of our own needs, leaving us vulnerable to stress and burnout. This is once again where low-morale negative cultures are dangerous, as they discourage self-care and create an environment in which stress and burnout come to be seen as the norm, as an inevitable feature of that workplace or that type of work. But, regardless of whether or not you work in a low-morale culture, the challenge of self-care is a highly significant one, as the price we pay for not getting it right can be very high indeed (our health, our relationships, our effectiveness, our career progression and so on). Work-life balance is a strange term, as it seems to suggest that work is not part of life. But semantics aside, the concept is an important one. Sadly, far too many people have allowed their working lives to put them under so much pressure that it has an adverse effect on the other aspects of their lives.

Self-leadership

A leader is someone who has clarity about where they are trying to get to and is able to get others on board in terms of how to get there. Self-leadership is therefore about being clear where you are trying to get to, how you are going to get there, how you will deal with any obstacles en route and who you need to have on board to help you get there. Many people allow their lives to drift and pay the price for doing so. Self-leaders, by contrast, are able to sustain a high level of well-being and achieve much greater fulfilment. It is not about going overboard on mapping every detail of your life or having an inflexible plan, but it is about having a plan and making it a meaningful part of your life. What it boils down to is the old idea encapsulated in the question: Are you living your life or is your life living you? In other words, are you controlling what you can control, influencing what you have influence over and accepting what you can neither control nor influence? Are you in the driving seat or a passenger in your own life?

Social justice

Society is not a level playing field. Some people are born with distinct advantages in life, while others can face distinct disadvantages right from the moment of birth (in terms, for example, of where they fit into social hierarchies of wealth, privilege and opportunity). There are powerful forces in society that serve to reinforce these hierarchies (the media, for example)

and, in doing so, contribute to discrimination, oppression, exclusion and injustice. In our efforts to address problems and realize potential, we therefore need to be tuned in to the role that these issues play in creating and /or exacerbating problems for many people. If we are not careful, we can easily make matters worse – for example, by relying on racial stereotypes and/or making sexist assumptions, mistaking disability for inability or jumping to conclusions about people because of their age, religion, language or any other aspect of their identity. Being committed to social justice means not only avoiding discrimination, but also actively challenging it.

Solidarity

'Hang together or be hanged alone' is a saying I came across quite some time ago and straight away realized how significant it is as a piece of advice. It is a truism that we can achieve so much more if we support one another and work together, rather than press on ploughing our own furrow. Yet, despite this, so much of the practice that goes on in the people professions is individualistic in its focus. Teamwork can make such a positive difference, and yet, in my experience, it is often absent or very limited in its scope. But, it isn't just about teamwork in particular, it is about thinking more collectively in general – thinking about solidarity within and across professions, for example. It also includes the role of trade unions and professional organizations – thinking about the big picture of our efforts to make a difference, rather than focusing on the 'bubble' we can get stuck in by just focusing on our own workload, our own deadlines and so on. Trying to do the best we can in difficult circumstances becomes much easier when we work together.

Spirituality

While religion is no doubt a major spiritual pathway followed by large numbers of people, it Is not the only one. Spirituality can be understood as the search for meaning, purpose and direction and an understanding of who we are and how we fit into the wider world. Religious or not, we all have spiritual needs and face spiritual challenges – for example, in terms of how we live within our values. When people are struggling in their lives, there will often be a spiritual dimension to the situation. Consequently, if we want to produce the best results in terms of making a positive difference, then we clearly need to be tuned in to the spiritual issues involved in any given situation. Helping people explore, make sense of and address the spiritual dimensions of their circumstances will generally prove to be immensely helpful. We should also not forget our own spirituality. Isn't keeping negativity at bay, avoiding defeatism and cynicism and remaining positive and constructive in very demanding circumstances a spiritual challenge? Spirituality is such a central feature of our lives, and yet it can so easily be left out of the picture, at considerable cost.

DR NEIL THOMPSON

WRITER | EDUCATOR | ADVISER

Very many people have come to rely on Neil Thompson as a guide and mentor, not only on their learning journey, but also on their whole outlook on life, people, problems and potential. With an impeccable academic pedigree, an outstanding publications record and a wealth of direct experience of making a positive difference in a number of ways, he stands out as an invaluable source of wisdom and guidance.

Neil has earned the well-deserved reputation for being a powerful source of motivation and morale and an inspiring guide on what he likes to call the journey from surviving to thriving.

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