

CHANGING THE WORLD ONE PERSON AT A TIME

CUSTOMER-LED PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO SOCIAL CHALLENGES

THE FOUNDATION FORUM

WEDNESDAY 20TH OCTOBER,
WRITTEN UP WITH THE HELP OF
SIMON CAULKIN

Available to view via a [video of the 75 minute discussion here](#).

Our third Forum of 2021 was a cosy online affair with world-changing speakers two of whom wouldn't have been able to join us if we'd been live and in person. Small Covid silver lining right there.

And we were privileged. We had three pioneers, people going first to find ways of improving the functioning of society at serious scale. Their style is one we love and admire at The Foundation.

We're here to help organisations and their leaders pioneer on behalf of customers, but by customers we really mean the people those organisations serve, a broader idea than just those connected by a transaction. The style of customer pioneering is outside-in – you start outside with the people you're for, you understand what matters to them, then you look to make things better in ways they'll appreciate. In so doing, you can achieve your own objectives as well.

This is how our world-changers work, and we wanted to learn more about



how they'd applied these principles in a social rather than commercial context.

We chose our teachers well.



We had Suzanne Bull MBE, founder of Attitude is Everything, the result of a 21 year journey that saw the creation of a charity with the original mission of getting live music to be equally accessible for all, something that deaf and disabled people found very difficult back when she started. Website, Twitter.



We had Lauren Currie, an entrepreneur who accidentally set up an organisation, UPFRONT, to right the wrong of seeing fewer women than men speaking at conferences. Her solution has become a global community dedicated to changing the way society views confidence and aiming to change confidence, power and visibility for 1 million women by the end of 2023. You can email lauren@laurencurrie.co, find her on LinkedIn, Twitter or her favourite, Instagram,



And we had Owain Service who studied behavioural science then brought it into government in the UK, becoming central to the set-up of what became the Nudge Unit, influencing the way politicians thought about the behavioural changes that would be in people's own interests as well as in the state's. More recently he co-founded a new commercial organisation, CogCo, to take the approach to a much wider audience. owain.service@cogco.co. Website.

So how do social pioneers do their work in ways that we'd call outside-in, starting with empathetic insight into people at the heart of a problem and working with them to make things better?

Here's the evening's discussion, summed up by Simon Caulkin.

Management is the human technology for getting things done through people. And by any objective reckoning it's currently making a terrible fist of it. The go-to-model is still top-down command and control, any gains from which are increasingly undermined, or sometimes completely wiped out, by the unintended consequences of the incentives, sanctions and manipulations needed to enforce it. Look no further than the financial crash of 2008; inequality, growing social frictions and the mother of all existential crises, planetary climate warming for confirmation.

But suppose there was a simpler, more intuitive way than 'workforce optimisation', as it is euphemistically called, not only to do things better but at the same time encourage people to do the right thing. Suppose the key to social change was to adopt the business mantra of being customer-led – that is, going with the grain of what humans want and do, rather than against it?

This was the thought experiment behind The Foundation's online forum on 20th October 2021 on the theme 'Changing the world one person at a time', defined as 'customer-led principles applied to social challenges'.

At the back of many people's minds, of course, was Covid and its textbook example of how not to do it – of which more later. Yet through the lens of three very different micro-stories told by compelling speakers, an enlightening and heartening experiment it turned out to be.

Listen first to Suzanne Bull, a music fan with attitude and a disabled person. She loved gigs, despite the difficulties in attending them way back when, but at one, she suffered a 'spectacular' painful, dramatic and troubling accident. It led to her deciding to improve disabled people's access to live music and started her on a path that involved establishing a charity to do it then broadening its scope to grow access to all kinds of music and live events.

The first obstacle to overcome was ubiquitous industry disbelief at the idea that a disabled person should even want to gig. Shouldn't they be tucked up safely at home?

Bull set about finding like-minded disabled music fans who shared her frustration (the charity is called Attitude is Everything), writing articles and, with funding from Arts Council England, recruiting disabled volunteers to report on their gig experiences.

'Quite simply, we got disabled audiences and venues to talk to each other and resolve issues by working together, so we were customer-led from the start', she says. The lived experience of volunteers (now 800 strong) was crucial in convincing venues and organisers that fans with a disability were just as ardent gig-goers as non-disabled people if only they were given the chance. The tribulations of the industry over the last two years means that 'we are needed more than ever', she says,

by organisers and venues as much as by disabled fans, performers and employees who Attitude also represents and assists.

'It felt like we were having to start all over again,' she says ruefully, 'but we took the opportunity of encouraging venues and festivals to build back better' as a way to encourage fans to return when the music struck up again. Not only could she show from surveys that disabled people were champing at the bit to return to live events; they also – another surprise – had considerable value as customers.

Disabled music-goers contributed £3.4m to venue coffers in 2013, rising to £9.7m in 2019. The charity is now vigorously campaigning to make 2022 'the best year yet' for the live music business – on condition that it's seen like that by her cohort of attendees too. A large majority of the disabled audience want to return, but on their terms. 'So it's actually now or never that the industry ditches its old ways and embraces the brave new world of making every live event accessible', Bull sums up.

Lauren Currie's story also starts with an attitude. And then a sofa. As an entrepreneur and designer with a bent for organisational psychology, Currie was struck by how often she was finding herself on a speaking platform or panel that was all white and, apart from her, all male, all accent-free and all privately schooled. There were plenty of brilliant women, Black, Asian, ethnic minority and disabled people out there, she reasoned. So why weren't they on stage among the speakers?

Investigating, she came to the conclusion that one part of the issue and maybe the solution was in the hands of the people excluded – there was no way to practice being on stage! This led to the idea of a sofa on stage on which public-speaking-phobic people could sit and absorb, at one step removed, the atmosphere of facing a live audience. It put them up front, or UPFRONT as the name of the organisation became.

The first time she tried it, 65 people applied to squeeze on to a three-seat sofa. The audience loved it and for the sitters it was 'transformational'. As with Attitude is Everything, the lived experience was and is critical.

Thus began a three-year journey starting with the setting up of the UPFRONT organisation and a package for other conferences and speakers to use, then a sell-out workshop and finally, to reach a wider audience, a six-week online course that launched this summer with 200 participants.

There have been four more cohorts, or 'Bonds' which is Currie's expressive collective noun for the group of women with a specific course in common, and her mission has swollen to imbuing a million women 'with visibility, power and confidence' by the end of 2023.



The experience is a life changer, Currie believes. 'The data we're getting says that there is a direct link between confidence, self-efficacy and work performance. We know that the pandemic has hit women hardest and we know that there is a childcare crisis. Women are crying out for safe spaces, communities where this key message is, "We are in this together. We do not need to be fixed..." This isn't another beauty industry that's capitalising off women's insecurities. It's about changing the system, while enabling individuals to thrive in a system that wasn't built for them to thrive.'

The third perspective was brought by Owain Service, a behavioural scientist who helped establish the government's Behavioural Insights (or 'Nudge') Team, using nudge theory to guide people into making decisions – paying their tax on time is an example – that benefit both themselves and the wider community.

quote

Now CEO of CogCo, a company that aims to bring the same insights to commercial settings, Service notes that time and again politicians and others assume that the way to get people to do things is with rational arguments and a ton of factual information. Unfortunately, that's to reckon without the dual-track 'thinking slow, thinking fast' cognitive modes described by Daniel Kahneman. In practice, most people reach decisions in the fast-thinking, reactive mode that is more susceptible to emotions and catchy slogans than logical argument – which is why it sometimes seems to observers that they, that we, make choices against our own better interests. We can all think of examples...

The biases that people in fast-thought mode bring to bear are well-known. Social influence means that we are likely to do things we may be hesitating about if we see others doing them – as Bull understood, the more disabled people go to gigs, the more others will do so too.

The Nudge Unit found that telling people how many of their fellows paid their tax on time influenced others to do the same. And 'present bias', or the urge for instant gratification, makes it easier to convince people to commit to and set in train virtuous behaviour in a week's time than this minute, today. Summing up, Service says: 'The core message is this notion of really understanding how we actually take decisions in practice, and then building that into how we design products and services. If we do that, we can design better systems and processes that go more with the grain of human decision-making'.

In fact, there are several messages that ring out from The Foundation's stories. One is that 'going with the grain', aka 'pull rather than push', aka being customer-led, is a better way than coercion (including the disguised coercion of crude incentives) to make change decisions stick. Conversely, forcing decisions against the grain is a good indicator that they won't. And that goes for a business or any other setting.

The second, also cheering, is about agency. One person at a time, people can learn how to give themselves the best chance of making good decisions (Service). Using their lived experience, they can show others that good decisions sometimes look very different from what they originally thought (Bull). And just as important, it's all too easy as an individual to despair at your impotence to make a dent in the world's giant, complex, messy problems. 'But the stories tonight show that it just takes one person using their voice and then that voice multiplies and suddenly there's hope' (Currie). 'That's what keeps me going these days, remembering that we all have much more power than we think'.

Finally, using the outside-in lens to view recent events ruthlessly exposes where decisions went wrong or right and why. In all the stories, the disruption of Covid has operated as a wake-up call, although not always heeded as such.

For Bull, it agonisingly resurrected the disabled stereotype of helplessness and vulnerability, causing her to double-down on efforts to shift music industry attitudes once and for all. Pregnant Then Screwed, a campaigning organisation chaired by Currie, is currently suing the government for its discriminatory exclusion of women from furlough provisions on grounds that maternity leave was 'equivalent to a holiday'. How could this happen? 'Because no one in the room where the conversations were had, had ever been pregnant'.

This encapsulates a problem that has arguably plagued the course of the entire pandemic. A Cabinet composed predominantly of white, upper-class, privately-educated English men is so unrepresentative of the British population as a whole that its decisions 'were always going to cause crisis to many people in groups not represented in the decisions', Currie says. Also conspicuous is the failure of a government that has cleverly exploited the value of the telling slogan for political ends to apply the same techniques to reinforcing desired social behaviours. We will never know if a strategic nudge or two would have made a difference to vaccine take-up or disease transmission, but it was a situation that was crying out for a try.

Going with the grain, lived experience, Moments of Belief (an idea from [The Customer Copernicus](#)) – these form a compelling basis for achieving social change. Perhaps ministers should take a lesson or two from Suzanne Bull, Lauren Currie and Owain Service in how to do it.



THE FOUNDATION'S VIEW

The way we heard the conversation was through our customer-led lens, and the big points that landed with us were four in number.

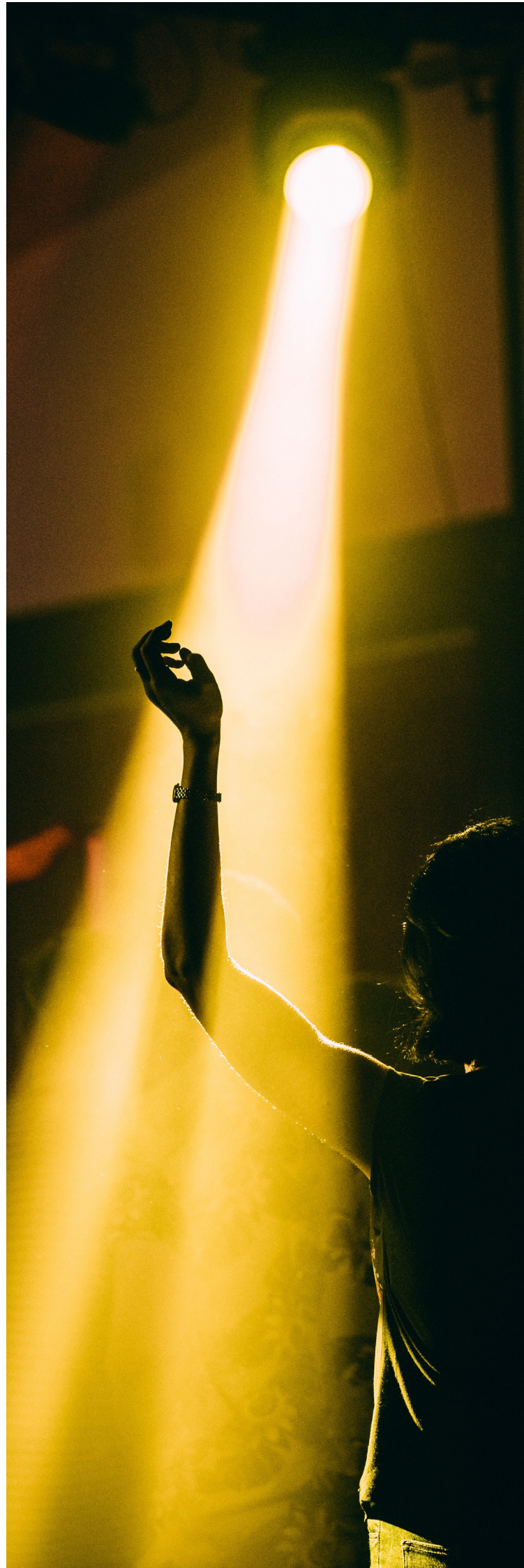
- 1. All three examples are special because they go with the grain of humanity. They work with people not against them.** Somehow when we want to get things done and we're looking from the inside outwards we see things not people. And when you want to move some things from one place to another, you think in mechanical, rational terms. You want to make the things move so maybe you use instructions or rules, you tell or coerce. Because the people are distant, they cease to be people, abstracted into numbers instead.

When you feel the world isn't right somehow it's likely to be emotional. The urge to make it better is strong and the desire to take a fast, direct route is high. Perhaps the natural way, the inside-out approach, would be aggressive, channeling frustration into stridency. Our three speakers all felt strongly or worked with others who did in Owain's case in government, but they all saw a better way to achieve their aims. They started with people, individuals directly affected and the gatekeepers or stakeholders around them. They saw ways to make change attractive, they earned people's choices and commitment, they pulled they didn't push.

- 2. Owain's behavioural science approach had to convince multiple ministers and civil servants of the subtleties of a human customer-led approach. The great achievement was finding a way to make it respected, establishing it as legitimate and effective.** In the melee of a meeting where the tone is impatient and time is short, explaining that an objective might best be achieved with nuance not bombast is tough. By using the growing profile of people like Daniel Kahneman and his accessible explanation of the irrationality of the human brain, with fast and slow thinking, system 1 and system 2, there was something with credibility to build on.

Like all such customer-led challenges, and as we found in writing *The Customer Copernicus* book, the only thing that changes an existing, unhelpful belief system is a succession of Moments of Belief, real things happening and working in ways that go against what people originally believed to be true. For Owain this took the form of examples where it turned out people really did pay tax more quickly, keep more doctor's appointments or choose to insulate their homes in greater numbers. The Nudge Unit was born and what's followed has been the establishment of a whole respected outside-in approach to changing our behaviour in ways we find natural.

- 3. Suzanne set out to change the way an industry thinks. As a music lover she had already been deterred from music journalism by reactions to her disability, so getting organisers of gigs and festivals to make costly changes to accommodate and welcome her and those she spoke for was a big ask.** The mindset she chose was to help, both the community of deaf and disabled people wanting better access and, crucially, the organisers. She helped the people with power see music fans who were every bit as committed but who just had different needs to be able to listen and see and join in safely and comfortably. They were shown an opportunity and then they were helped to understand what to do to add these fans to their events, and their spending to their bottom line. As she got the first movers into action, always guided by a community of supporters giving her real-world lived experience feedback, she developed the Attitude is Everything Charter of Best Practice, establishing an approach that was easy to follow. Momentum built and now this template became the norm, with laggards feeling left behind not in a resistant majority. She has continued to broaden and grow her influence, embodied in the charity Attitude is Everything, very smartly. As they've scaled they've kept their outside-in beliefs strong, with real world connections to a small army of disabled gig-goers keeping feet on the ground and reality visible. This is a huge achievement and one that many originally customer-led commercial organisations fail to match as they grow.
- 4. Lauren has a vast challenge, changing not one industry but all of them. Conferences and the make-up of their speaking line-ups are gender-skewed across the board. So when you can't change the gatekeepers, what do you do?** In her case, Lauren started on a path to support the protagonists themselves. If she could help women feel confident that their place was on the stage, then given they have plenty they want to say, lots more will make their own way from there. She started with what sounds like a small idea – a sofa on a stage that people could sit on while the conference ran, getting used to the position and the view and the lights, and starting to feel comfortable that this was OK. It was hugely popular as an idea and a symbol, and it led to a next step, workshops. In these, women could spend time learning and practicing, becoming confident in ways the world demands, acknowledging the conditions shouldn't be there but also that they are. The mutual support was clearly powerful and so another layer of Lauren's systemic solution emerged – 'Bonds'. These are the groups who have completed workshops as a cohort and so who have shared experiences, interests and desire to offer support. Like Suzanne's journey, what has emerged is multi-layered, and the spirit is wholly outside-in.



ABOUT THE FOUNDATION

We believe we are the original customer-led growth company, since 1999 on a journey to promote customer-led success.

Our aim is to create more customer pioneers – organisations and brands that lead their sectors, innovating on behalf of customers in ways that make things better for them and end up working well for the organisation too.

We do it in two ways:

- Working directly with all kinds of entities, making things better for their customers while making the organisations healthier
- And championing the benefits of a customer-led approach more widely.

We have published a first book on the subject, *The Customer Copernicus*, co-written by Charlie Dawson and Professor Sean Meehan of IMD, the Swiss business school. It starts with the observation that some companies are great for customers – not only do they care but they change whole markets to work better for the customers they serve. Think of Amazon, easyJet and Sky. They make things easier and improve what really matters to customers, even when they didn't know to ask. Obvious, surely? They have also enjoyed huge business success, growing and making plenty of money.

So we answer the question that follows – if it's obvious and attractive why is it so rare? And then we answer a second question, because Tesco, O2 and Wells Fargo were like this once. Why, having mastered it, would you ever stop? Because all three did, and two ended up in court.

In the book we explain how to become and how to stay customer-led, making things better for customers by going first, into uncharted territory. More about it is here at thecustomercopernicus.com.

Then practically, we help our clients succeed by working with them on projects across four areas:

- Tackling customer-led innovation of different kinds
- Developing customer-led strategies

- Growing customer-led capabilities
- And building whole customer-led organisations

We do this by challenging the natural self-centred view of the world, working closely with client teams, immersing them and us in outside-in perspectives. Naturally enough we call it Immersion – meeting people with different perspectives in person. Customer Immersion connects managers with customers and what really matters to them, Creative Immersion introduces them to leaders from other sectors who have tackled challenges with similarities, helping them develop ideas and belief around new and better ways to solve their customers' problems.

The outcomes are better organisations, brands and businesses – more successful and better for customers, colleagues and everyone else involved.

Our clients include HSBC, the John Lewis Partnership, Sky, The National Trust, Jaguar Land Rover and AstraZeneca, with achievements including helping create Plan A at M&S, adding £100m of value to a Travelex travel money proposition, and giving Morrisons a competitive direction contributing to their return to growth.

This link will take you to more information about us and our Forum events: <http://www.the-foundation.com>

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