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## **Keynote Listening: turning the tables on the sage on the stage**

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### **Abstract**

This article outlines an approach that can be used at conferences and other events to generate debate around leadership for social and environmental change. The paper focuses on two main practices - 'crowd sourcing' and 'keynote listening' – that were recently trialled at a major international leadership conference.

It is well recognised that in order to make the transition to a sustainable, green economy we need to bring about wide scale organisational, social, political and cultural change. We need to find ways of engaging as citizens – recognising both our rights and responsibilities to developing a more inclusive and sustainable society. We need to foster emergent and collective action that draws upon diversity of expertise and knowledge rather than depending on a few nominated, or self-elected, 'leaders' to find the solutions and lead the way. To move forward with integrity, humility and courage we must hone our ability to listen – to truly embrace the wisdom of others – and to facilitate action through dialogue and collaborative enquiry.

In this article we describe an approach that can be used at conferences and other events to generate debate around issues of social and environmental significance. The paper focuses on two main practices - 'crowd sourcing' and 'keynote listening' – that were recently trialled at a major international leadership conference.

### **About the Event**

The International Leadership Association (ILA) is a global network of people who practice, study, and teach leadership, which 'promotes a deeper understanding of leadership knowledge and practices for the greater good of individuals and communities worldwide'<sup>1</sup>. Each year it hosts an annual conference that draws together a wide range of leadership scholars, educators, students, consultants and practitioners from around the world.

In October 2011, the 13<sup>th</sup> global conference was hosted in London and chaired by Professor Jonathan Gosling of the University of Exeter Business School. The theme was 'One Planet, Many Worlds: Remapping the Purposes of Leadership', thereby directly addressing the

challenges of making the transition to a green economy. The event was attended by more than 800 people from over 50 countries.

With so many people gathered in one place to discuss questions such as 'What do we think leadership is for? How does this vary across places, classes and sectors? How do we mediate differences and conflicts of purpose?' and 'What is the relation between the ends to which leaders direct us, and the means they employ – especially in the light of the environmental, social and economic challenges that we face?'<sup>ii</sup>, it offered an ideal opportunity to consider the contribution that a community such as this could offer to the sustainability challenge and to act as a platform for future influence.

In particular, it was recognised that in order to bring about long-term change those gathered at this conference would need to find ways of engaging with a wider community outside, and to find ways of influencing policy and practice.

In addition, the London organising team were determined that the conference should have impact beyond the 3-day event itself; that it should connect and feed into on-going political and collective agendas as well as the individual intellectual and career concerns of participants. This is a perennial concern of conference organisers, especially those that are not simply the annual gathering of a well-defined academic discipline.

The conference organising committee therefore sought ways to exploit the opportunity afforded by the ILA conference, and came up with a number of ideas, including a 'fringe' conference, an on-site comedian (to lampoon the self-obsessed and pretentious), a Twitter campaign (to extend the boundaries of participation), a 'discount day' to encourage participation by local community leaders, and a 24-hour video diary facility and a parallel youth conference. Most of these were defeated by the organisational effort and normal resistance. The Twitter campaign proved very dynamic and took on a life of its own once the conference started, and the youth conference was brilliantly organised by a group of undergraduates at University of Central Lancashire, led by Samantha Broxton. A further two initiatives, reported here, took off: to invite Keynote Listeners (in contrast to Keynote Speakers); and crowd-sourcing on the theme of the conference.

Thus it was that Professor Gosling, together with the local organising committee and colleagues from the University of Exeter Business School and partners from the New Zealand Leadership Institute at the University of Auckland, convened a 'keynote listening' reception with the explicit aim of reporting towards the Rio+20 UN conference on sustainable development<sup>iii</sup> in 2012.

The reception was preceded by a process of member participation and consultation (crowd sourcing), the outcomes of which were presented through a series of short edited films to a number of invited 'keynote listeners' with some direct involvement in the Rio+20 process. Another article in this Special Issue summarises the outcomes of the crowd-sourcing activity<sup>iv</sup> – in the current article we will focus on the process of facilitating engagement from a broad community.

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## Keynote Speakers and Listeners

Keynote *speakers* are invited to deliver a particularly important message, to inform and inspire a large audience, to focus a comforting sense of being a crowd, and to reinforce collective identity counter to the centrifugal forces of parallel streams, special interest groups and city tours. They are generally famous, and talk about achievements that have made them thus; and they generally have a polished presentation and a reassuring confidence. Intriguingly, apparently the keynote speakers have a significant impact on registrations – potential participants are persuaded to ‘buy’ if the headline acts are impressive. The audience at Keynote Speeches may take ideas and insights away for later use, but at the time they are supposed to be relatively passive.

The idea for Keynote *Listeners* is quite different<sup>v</sup>. The aim is to pick up the key notes arising from the conference, and to work them into on-going political and collective agendas. As this ILA conference was taking place just prior to the deadline for ‘zero drafts’ for the Rio+20 Earth Summit, the London organising committee decided to invite Keynote Listeners who were intimately involved in this process. The idea was that they should be able to listen and respond to ideas arising from the gathering of leadership experts and scholars, to relate these to the emerging foci for the Rio+20 summit, and perhaps work these ideas into the ‘zero draft’ documents. Keynote listeners were: Peter Young, Chair of the Aldersgate Group ([www.aldersgategroup.org.uk](http://www.aldersgategroup.org.uk)), Oliver Greenfield, Coordinator of the Green Economy Coalition ([www.greenecomonycoalition.org](http://www.greenecomonycoalition.org)) and Caroline van Leenders, Environmental Affairs Co-ordinator, Government of the Netherlands.

So unlike the traditional ‘keynote speaker’ at conferences, they were not asked to give a prepared presentation, but to respond to the discussion, and agree to play a role in the on-going sharing and dissemination of the discussion.

But how to actually conduct this kind of listening?

## Crowd Sourcing

The crowd sourcing process aimed to capture thoughts and opinions from the diverse range of participants at the ILA Annual Conference, eliciting and expressing ‘key notes’ of the event. There were a number of elements, and several important lessons learnt. Briefly stated, the aim was to elicit perspectives, ideas and commitments from as many participants as we could, by short video interviews with handheld cameras; to edit and compose these according to themes that arose in the process, and to replay these at a Key Note Listening event, all within the schedule of the conference, and incorporating material from a one-day conference for young people held the day before the ILA event in Bolton, Lancashire.

Core to the process was to re-express the theme of the conference as a question that could be addressed to ‘the crowd’, allowing for diverse responses, but all ‘in key’, to suggest a musical metaphor. The Conference theme title was ‘One Planet, Many Worlds: remapping the purposes of leadership’, with a paragraph referring to a one-planet perspective on current

political, economic and environmental challenges (as described earlier). The crowd-sourcing questions accelerated directly towards implications for action:

- Who is it that we have to convince to take action?
- How can we persuade them to act?
- What will you do?

In practice, the first question required a preamble, usually accomplished by asking the interviewee to talk about the domains in which they were active and the issues they see as most challenging. But the aim was to move quickly beyond definition and scene setting. A team of students were trained to use 'flip' cameras (simple hand-held video devices) and on the first two days of the conference worked alone and in pairs to interview participants, mainly during breaks in the formal schedule. Each shot was about three minutes long (some much less, some up to five minutes). The files were uploaded onto a laptop for a second team, located in a room of the hotel, to view and edit. This team – between four and six experienced researchers – annotated the clips and organised them into themes. At one point they asked for more direct comments on current affairs, less moderated by scholarly caution, so a set of interviews were conducted with members of the public in the vicinity of the conference hotel, in Westminster, London. In total, 183 interviews were uploaded, totalling nearly ten hours of material. The vast majority of this was made, viewed and edited between 10am and 6pm on one day of the conference. The immediate output was three short videos (three-five minutes) on the following themes:

- Youth ('Talking about our generation')
- Education ('Talking out of school'), and
- The ILA community ('It's us talking').

These three compilations were completed minutes before the start of the 'Key Note Listening Event'. The interviews were later cleaned up (editing extraneous content, poor sound, fluffed responses and so forth); analysed, coded and catalogued<sup>vi</sup>. Some have been used in subsequent research, including a paper on 'Responsibilities of leadership scholars'<sup>vii</sup>.

The crowd sourcing process was not only a practical way of gathering a large amount of material: it was a very dynamic, immediate way to address the sub-title of the conference: re-mapping the purposes of leadership. The question is often posed as "Leadership for what?" The crowd-sourcing process assumed there will always be diverse, contested and competing answers rooted in different sectors and interests, and provides a means to collate and express them. The Keynote Listening event, described next, is the means to direct these expressions towards political action.

### **Keynote Listening Event**

Whilst crowd sourcing was a powerful means for collecting video-based material and identifying key themes, just capturing and summarising the information was not enough. The Keynote Listening Event was the means to influence policy and practice, in particular, leaving



Keynote Listeners came to match the title quite well – they listened to the key notes at the conference, and left any implications for later.

### **Follow-up Activities**

The Keynote Listening Event took place on the evening of the second day of the conference. Subsequent activities included a 'reprise' organised by PhD students at the University of Exeter Business School (most of whom had participated as film crew). At an open-invitation event (doubling as a charity fundraising cake sale) they screened the videos on laptops, engaging participants in conversation about the themes. The same group have written a paper on both events; and all the video interviews have been cleaned, coded and catalogued.

Further impact is hard to enumerate. The Twitter hash tags remain live; and another conference is planned for May 2012, which will include 'Keynote Listening' in a similar format.

One of the authors of this article will present findings at the UN Global Compact Forum immediately prior to Rio+20, and we presume others will be making use of their insights from the event.

### **Lessons and Insights**

The lessons from the event are manifold, organised here in three sections.

#### Working as a team

The event required a good deal of coordination amongst a number of players:

- The London organising committee working with the ILA Office to arrange communications and slots in the already crowded conference schedule.
- Training and organising the camera crews, especially in waylaying people for on-the-spot interviews, delivering concise questions in a friendly assertive manner, and keeping the responses to the point.
- Editing the films in real time required several computers so that two or three cameras could be downloading their content at once. At least one person should manage this process, and then be able to hand over to the editing team.
- The film and editorial teams need to be communicating well, so the film crews can highlight particularly interesting episodes, and the editors can ask the film crew for more input from specific sectors or to explore emerging themes.
- Chairing the Keynote Listening Event was rather like hosting a live TV show – very little could be scripted. Keeping the Chair updated on developing themes during the day helped.

#### Working with the material

- This benefits from very experienced researchers, well versed in the subject area, and with a clear editorial direction provided by the overall conference theme and the questions. However, unexpected debates emerged from the material, and the

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editorial team had the authority and expertise to pursue these (even at the expense of the original intentions).

- The Editing team was working with a lot of material, scanning it for ideas and common themes, for visual impact, for particularly articulate expressions. The editors were all familiar with qualitative research methods, and thus with the interpretative approach required here. They were also used to working together (most were colleagues at the University of Auckland) but there were others able to take a fresh view – for example, to go out on the street to gather some more prosaic perspectives.
- The editorial work is very intense, and at one point those involved in the initial selection handed over to another group to compile the final films. Ideally the whole process could be spread over two or three days, and allow for more time for reflection.
- Focusing a strong message in the three short films helped in the selection. However many profound and thoughtful comments were excluded because they could not fit the ‘strong message’ of any of the three films. More time in the conference schedule could have given the opportunity to screen these, perhaps with debate.
- Other excluded voices were noted at the Keynote Listening event; specifically, a disproportionately large number of white Anglo-Saxon people featured in the 3 final compilations, a bias that had escaped the notice of the editorial team until all three films were seen together for the first time – in the event itself. This raises questions about bias and selectivity more generally, and could be addressed by consciously checking during the process. The total collection of interviews is not biased in this way (although of course only a very select group of people could possibly get to an ILA conference in London in the first place!).

#### Working with stakeholders

- Working with keynote listeners was very different to inviting keynote speakers. Some familiarity with their on-going agendas – rather than their past work or speaking style – is helpful, and in fact two of the Keynote Listeners contributed significantly to the way we framed the questions for crowd-sourcing. They were intrigued to be invited in this role, genuinely interested to engage in the debate. But it is not for everyone: one invitee failed to appreciate the significance of being keynote listener and cancelled at late notice, something she might not have done if publicly billed as a *speaker* (though we can’t be sure!).
- Communicating and sharing outcomes requires considerable energy and some resources. Cleaning and coding the videos is a significant task, and their usefulness is still puzzling. The coding allows them to be mined for some purposes, such as the paper on ‘responsibilities of leadership scholars’, but they are best suited for their original purposes – to collect ideas for the specific event. The graphic recording speaks volumes to those who were there, and was helpful in communicating the content of the event at a later ‘reprise’; it also serves as a concrete product from the Key Note Listening event itself. A more active presence on Facebook (or similar) might be a way to continue the discussions and to keep up to date with any continuing impact.

- Securing action through the Keynote Listeners requires them to find a link to the issues they are dealing with; in some cases this has happened through modifications to agendas and manifestos, though where it occurs, it is adventitious – the event was not designed as a consultation on a particular policy proposal. However it has proved inspirational to some students and a forthcoming conference in Holland will employ the Keynote Listening approach as its central organising framework.

### Summary and Conclusions

The Keynote Listening and Crowd-Sourcing approach described in this article was designed and run for a specific conference, in the context of specific events, but the concept and method is, we believe, relevant and reproducible. It is particularly suited to:

- Reversing the flow: engaging people as listeners rather than speakers, and exemplifying an assumption that relevant knowledge is inherently diverse and found throughout a multiplicity of people.
- Building commitment and momentum within a conference, by engaging a large number of people in creating an event and concrete outputs during the conference itself. This sense of participation extends beyond the film crews and editors, to the discussions at the event itself, reinforced by the 'Graphic record'.
- Celebrating success of this collective enterprise served also to express common ideals and values amongst the ILA conference participants.

The lessons and insights reported here are to encourage others to try something similar, whether to enhance or subvert existing conference structures<sup>x</sup>. It is particularly fitting, perhaps, for those interested in questioning hierarchical assumptions about leadership and authority, and representing such critiques in their own organisational processes.<sup>x</sup>

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## References

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- <sup>ii</sup> <http://www.ila-net.org/Conferences/2011/cfptheme.htm>, accessed 10/12/2011
- <sup>iii</sup> <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/>
- <sup>iv</sup> Dai, W. et al. (2012). 'Responding to Complex Global Challenges: A simple matter of education?'. *Business Leadership Review* 9:1. Association of MBAs: January
- <sup>v</sup> The term was suggested to one of the present authors by Peter Redstone.
- <sup>vi</sup> Supported by funds from the teaching innovation fund, University of Exeter Business School, gratefully acknowledged. An example of the video material can be seen at <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/16835829/Leadership%20Scholars%20Medley%20dv>
- <sup>vii</sup> By Jonathan Gosling and Suzanne Gagnon (2011).
- <sup>viii</sup> The atmosphere can be sensed from the photos of the event at [http://www.flickr.com/photos/university\\_of\\_exeter\\_business\\_school/sets/72157628081590118/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/university_of_exeter_business_school/sets/72157628081590118/)
- <sup>ix</sup> A more detailed specification for running a Key Note Listening may be obtained from [jonathan.gosling@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.gosling@exeter.ac.uk)
- <sup>x</sup> We would like to acknowledge the contribution and input of Brad Jackson, Patricia Munro, Caroline Van Leenders, Ted Baartmans, Elena Oyon, Brigid Carrol, Steve Gibson, Oliver Greenfield, Joan Keevill, Jean-Anne Stewart, Lynne Thurlaway, Sara Bowman, Joline Francoer and Eva Oyon. Jonathan, Jackie and Richard are all members of academic faculty at the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter. Anne Murphy is an Individual and organisational development consultant based in Lancaster, UK.