

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the *Student Hub Live*. OK. In this next session, I'm joined by James Reese. Hello, James. We're going to be talking about the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership which is part of the Open University's business school.

Now, you have had a very varied career, haven't you? You've been teaching geography, politics, and social policy. And you're interested in the third, or voluntary sector, in its wildest sense, you say. But you also specialise on the research side of things.

And we have a widget out there that we'd like you to feed into. So we'd like to know what are the three most important characteristics of a leader in the voluntary sector? If you can only think of one or two, that's fine, just put the one in and put an X in the other spaces so that you can submit your answers, and then we can add those and draw those into the conversation as we're going along.

I hope you're all OK out here. We're doing well. Karen, you're doing very, very well. The other Karen, in New York. You've been here since this morning. And in fact, for a lot of this week, so well done you, but don't forget to have regular breaks as well.

James, tell us about this CVSL as well as we abbreviate it, the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership. What is it all about, and how is it part of the business school?

JAMES REESE: No problem. So CVSL has been going since the spring, I guess, not very long. We're in quite early stages. It's being created due to a very generous gifts from an alumnus of the Open University, so it's a philanthropic gift, which funds the centre and keeps it going for the next three years.

So we're doing a number of things. The main thing we're doing is making courses available, freely available, to people who are interested in the voluntary sector. So that's part of the gift. And a key aim is to develop and improve leadership skills in the voluntary sector.

But we're also doing original research as part of the research agenda. But we're also, I guess, a key principle for the centre is to be as open and engaging as possible, to work with people in the sector, to work with different stakeholders, and to really advance the debate around leadership in the voluntary sector through our work.

KAREN FOLEY: So this is an academic, I guess, grouping together of people within the Open University Business School. And they're doing all sorts of things, making research available. But you're also trying to have an impact on the public. So you're doing public engagement work as well, trying to make a difference and affect lives. Can you tell us about that?

JAMES REESE: Yeah. So impact is a very complicated, quite a complex process. It works in all sorts of different ways. So typically, as an academic, you might think about the traditional academic ways of getting your message across, through teaching and through publications, through journal publications, books, and so on. Obviously, that's a very long term route to influence.

And I think the way we think about it is through lots of different routes. So one of those is working with bodies in the voluntary sector. There are, for example, representative bodies like trade associations for the voluntary sector. We work quite closely with them, both in terms of framing the research that we do, deciding what are the important issues, going away and doing research on that. Then working with them to disseminate that research, to publicise the research.

But it's also through working through all sorts of different routes, I guess. So making publications accessible, publishing things on our website, short reports, blogs, social media, the whole range of activities that can get the message out there, even speaking through the media just occasionally.

But obviously, one of the interesting issues about the voluntary sector is, it's seen in many ways as quite a niche topic. People have quite a bit of hesitancy and confusion about things like the definition of the voluntary sector, definitions of volunteering. So sometimes, it's just explaining quite basic topics and getting better information about the voluntary sector out there. It's a whole range of things.

KAREN FOLEY: So why is the voluntary sector so important to you?

JAMES REESE: That's a really interesting question. I think it's really interesting that, as I mentioned just now, that there's quite a lot of misconception about the voluntary sector and all sorts of different terms that people throw around. So we talk about the third sector sometimes, because that's a particular definition of the kind of space. It's both nonpublic sector and nonprivate sector. So it's potentially a vast space of organisations.

Other people think about charities. But charities are just quite a small subset of the wider third sector. Other people use the term voluntary sector. But that can be a little bit confusing, because people sometimes confuse that with volunteering, whereas of course, volunteering can occur in all different sectors. People volunteer in the public sector and indeed in the private sector.

So I find it really fascinating to just dig into the kind of complexities of the voluntary sector. It's something that is a huge space but is often misunderstood. So there's a lot of research still to be done to improve understandings of that space.

KAREN FOLEY: But you also welcome input from a lot of different people. So you say that you're encouraging anyone assisting with research and teaching, especially those who can benefit from work. So it seems to be that this is all about collaboration, all about impact, all about adding to things.

In the centre then, how do you manage all of that? Because it must feel like a very busy space with so much going on. How can people get involved and do you prioritise some of the projects you're working with? How do you run it?

JAMES REESE: Yeah, absolutely. It is potentially quite a lot of balls to be juggling, and I'm not very good at juggling, actually.

KAREN FOLEY: Makes accounting look easy, quite frankly.

JAMES REESE: I think it's a good question. I think we need to prioritise. So one of the things we do, one part of our engagement is working with voluntary organisations locally. So we work with Milton Keynes bodies. For example, it's called Community Action in Milton Keynes, it's the local body that helps the voluntary sector. We work directly with them.

It's a two stage engagement, in a sense. We're working with them, hoping to help them in their own thinking and their own work, but we're also researching them at the same time through an ongoing kind of tracking process, if you like. So it's a kind of dialogue but it's also a research process. That's just one example.

We pick up projects, for example, as well. So projects come out of different places, from national funding bodies, from academic funding bodies, from local voluntary sectors, from foundations. And every single little project that we do adds to the stock of work that we're doing and hopefully adds to the wider programme of work we do that is, like I say, hopefully helping to advance understanding of the voluntary sector and advance the debate.

But yeah, you're right. We do have to prioritise what we can do. And it does feel, sometimes, as an academic working in this kind of environment, that you're always been pulled in different directions. There are always different priorities. But hopefully, we get the balance right. And I think we've got a strong team working within the voluntary sector and the Center for Voluntary Sector Leadership, all of whom have different priorities and interests and all contribute to that process in different ways.

KAREN FOLEY: We asked our audience what the three most important characteristics of a leader are in the voluntary sector.

JAMES REESE: I'm really keen to hear.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Let's have a look. Charisma, passion, honesty, tenacious, persuasive, dedication, arty, love. A lot of emotional words here and very integral words. Integral's not really the right word is it? You've got to have integrity to be working. And I think that's probably the key thing that sort of come through with some of these things. A passion for the area that you're doing something for.

Is this because it's about giving something back, do you think?

JAMES REESE: It's very interesting to see the mixture of words there. Some I was not surprised to see, things like charisma. Obviously, that's an ingredient of leadership that you might expect to see in all sectors. But some of the others are more related, as you say, to things like passion and connection and I guess a sense of authenticity and connection to values, which seems to be something that comes across a lot specifically in relationship to leadership in the voluntary sector. So yeah really interesting to see those.

I think it is particularly important for leaders in the voluntary sector to show that they can really connect to the values base of their organisations. So in the voluntary sector, we talk a lot about mission. There's this sense that the organisation has a mission. And I think it will be very important for a leader of those organisations to show that they can connect directly to that mission.

KAREN FOLEY: I'd like to ask you something, because Danny came in earlier today, and we were talking about being an entrepreneur. And he was telling us about company Black Sheep and some of the work that he's doing in a very entrepreneurial, innovative way. And a lot of these words strike

me as being very similar in terms of some of the things that were driving him in business and some of the things that were driving our students.

So what I wonder is, do you see a link between this idea of setting things up and volunteering? Is it the similar sort of people who might be interested in both sides of that spectrum and volunteering as a different route, I guess, to getting into those sectors? Or do you think they're quite distinct types of people who might be having different priorities?

JAMES REESE: That's quite a difficult one to answer. One reason it's quite difficult is, I think there's a bit of a lack of research that really looks into those underlying drives and the underlying motive motivations and, if you like, the characteristics of the sorts of people that are involved in these kinds of initiatives.

I think there is though, a connection between the sorts of people who are driving forwards with innovative and entrepreneurial approaches across all sectors and perhaps your kind of typical leader in the voluntary sector, who is really driven by a desire to achieve something and a sense that something needs to be done. So I think there is a connection.

One of the things we look for a lot in voluntary sector research in a more academic sense is this question of distinctiveness. Is there something distinctive about the voluntary sector that sets it apart from other sectors? And we might expect to do the same search in terms of the characteristics around leaders as well, and that's the question, is there a distinctive voluntary sector leadership?

We haven't done that research yet, but I think what we might find is actually, it's not so distinctive. There are exactly those similarities between the kinds of driven leaders in a more entrepreneurial setting and those in the voluntary sector.

And I think the other thing is that increasingly, in society, we see this kind of blurring of characteristics as well. We call it hybridity in the academic debate. There's a hybrid organisations and hybrid people who share characteristics traditionally associated with the voluntary sector, charity and caringness but also entrepreneurialism and a relationship with innovation, because they really want to do something different.

And that blurring suggests that actually, people are setting aside some of the traditional sector boundaries and saying, we don't want to be identified, necessarily, as purely as a volunteer organisation or as a charity. We're not so focused on the type of organisation. We just want to

achieve something. And the organisational characteristics take a secondary-- take a background role in that.

KAREN FOLEY: Ah. James Reese, thank you so much for coming in for us. And that's all we've got time for, unfortunately. But it's been really, really interesting. And as you say, very not quite so clear cut. And there are lots of interesting links.

I'm hoping you'll come back at some point and tell us what you find as you're developing some of these ideas.

JAMES REESE: I'd love to, yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you also for sharing your stories. I'm really pleased that you're all talking about your journeys, because that's what we're going to be talking about next. I'm going to be welcoming some alumni to the studio. And while we have a short break, we're going to take a look at Louise Roundings' story. So grab a cup of tea if you haven't already, enjoy this video. And I'll be back in five minutes for some more.

[MUSIC PLAYING]