

Pivot from Leisure to Well-being: John Oxley

I had the fortune to attend the ukactive national conference last week.

I anticipated that I would hear an acknowledgement of the learning of the last 18 months or so; that the health of the nation and the nation's resilience to disease can be improved by sport and physical activity. But, that both the opportunities to be physically active and the things that inhibited those opportunities were complex, and that the solutions were:

1. in a broader appreciation and understanding of those inhibitors and
2. a commitment to resolve those challenges in an increasingly collaborative way.

I feared that what I might hear was that gyms and leisure centres would resolve much of the challenges that face us.

I suppose I was grateful and disappointed that I actually heard both!

Certainly, I get a sense from some of the conversations that I am involved in, that there are some parts of our system that are grasping the initiative. They are thinking about where they've been, where they are now and what they might need to do in the future.

I spoke to one CEO of a Trust who has developed some interesting partnership work with local health agencies that are improving the lives of people in his communities. He has also recognised that his facility model is broken – he knows that his charity has been sustainable because of its reliance upon the sale of fitness memberships that have given access to his gyms and group exercise classes, and he knows that can't be relied upon in the future – so he will have to change what he is doing. And he will have to take his commissioners on that journey with him so that the service can be re-defined in a collaborative and appreciative way.

What is clear in that case is that change is necessary. And, by the way, I think change is good!

In this case, we're talking about a shift in terminology – this workshop talks about a pivot from sport and leisure to well-being.

My view is that language is important. I think if we are truly to inspire more people to move about a little more then taking some time to hold the mirror up to ourselves is helpful. Consequently, I do believe we should talk less about fitness and more about health, and we should talk less about markets and more about communities.

I think that those of us who's work is in the arena of sport and physical activity would do well to grab a fuller appreciation of the depth and breadth of that eco-system – it's rich of opportunity but in the true sense of the word, isn't really a system. It isn't really a system because largely everything operates independently of each other – you could take a part away (for instance, a swimming pool) and the rest of the 'parts' would broadly still work. What would simply be lost is a choice or an opportunity. I guess we could have a discussion about whether it's a system or not but maybe later!

What clearly would be denied is a means by which communities could take part in aquatic activity that can contribute to their physical, mental and social good health.

So back to language – the notion of leisure, I would contend suggests that it is optional or privileged, whereas wellness or wellbeing infers that it is purposeful and necessary.

And I use the word necessary, advisedly. If anyone has read the book by Daniel Liebermann – Exercised – he argues that anthropologically, we never developed to take exercise voluntarily and for exercises sake. And this is important - those in the ukactive conference who were advocating – almost in the same sentence – that the ‘sector’ (don’t like that word anymore!) could acquire 5 million more members, and in the same breath spoke about the sectors ability to address health inequality, I think lack some appreciation of the real challenges both behaviourally and societally that we face. This thing is not easy and it requires us to aggregate our skills to make things better.

So, I think, in the future there would be three things that are necessary for us all to think about, wherever we are:

1. **Be Relevant** – that means being really clear what we stand for and what our purpose is. Remember, we’re being commissioned by others to deliver services on their behalf so our purpose, our identity, our vision and our mission must be congruent with their expectations. Simply, there is no point believing we’re one thing if our commissioners want us to be something else! So being ‘Relevant’ will require us to be at one with our partners. And it will then also mean being utterly relevant to our communities. Our communities will need to understand what we stand for, what we do, why we do it and how we add value to their lives. Being ‘Relevant’ in our part of the eco-system will increasingly mean ‘enhancing the wellness’ of our communities and doing it in a way that is fun, enjoyable and meaningful.
2. **Understand and Be Understood** – this means working hard to really understand the issues that prevail for our partners, others in our ‘system’ and our communities. This will require us to listen so that we understand, and assume nothing. It will require us to match our proposition, our activities and our programmes to their needs. It will also require us to take our partners on a journey with us. We will need to be able to articulate our rationale and our thinking, so they have an appreciation of our own perspective so that they can understand us too.
3. **Provide Value** – this means having complete rigour around evidence. It means obsessing about demonstrating that what we do delivers results. It means gathering insight and data that is both quantitative and qualitative. It means founding our relevance in science – in physical science, behavioural science, and social science. Simply, does what we do really make a difference? Measure it and prove it. But measure what is going to give you great insight. Gather the insight that enables you to make smart decisions for the good of your organisation – and if you’re aligned with your partners, then that insight will be good for them too! And of course we have to think about value in commercial, social and other terms.