



LEAD WITH WE

SEASON 2: EPISODE 002

Sally Uren– CEO, Forum for the Future

Simon Mainwaring: From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We, a podcasts where top business leaders and founders reveal how they build their companies to be high impact and high growth by putting We first. I'm Simon Mainwaring, and today I'm speaking with Sally Uren, the CEO of Forum for the Future, which is a highly respected international nonprofit working with business, government, and organizations to create truly meaningful shift towards a sustainable future. Sally, my friend, welcome to Lead With We.

Sally Uren: Thank you very much. Glad to be here.

Simon Mainwaring: So here you are. Since 2013, you've been the CEO of Forum for the Future, which is a lofty name, but help us understand what it does in a meat and potatoes sense. What does an organization like that do?

Sally Uren: We really try and sketch out what a positive future that is really allowing people in the planet to thrive, we try and sketch out what that looks like as a way of then really encouraging business philanthropy, government, civil society, whoever will listen really to create the future that we want. On the face of it, lots of what we do at Forum is pretty impossible. Trying to mainstream entire value chain so that commodity X become sustainable, trying to persuade really senior decision makers in business in particular that actually the current economic construct is really flawed, and trying to persuade brands who are driven by new growth metrics, the metrics of pure economic growth to really embrace different routes to value creation. It's not easy.

Simon Mainwaring: It's not easy. Before we dive into those challenges, I want to ask, it's one thing to want to make the world a better place or to help build a sustainable future. We all want that to some extent, because we all want to survive and we all want a future we can be excited about, but actually to make that commitment, and build your career around, it is a different thing. What was that thing where you said, this is my path, my purpose?

Sally Uren: It started a long time ago. I am an ecologist by training and that really cemented in me and understanding that things can regenerate. We can reverse environmental damage. I disliked it that the world did not need any more scientific papers written by me in particular, and that I really wanted to use everything I've learned through all of my research and apply it. At that point, this was several millennia ago, my options were quite limited. So I set up the first sustainability consultancy department in the UK, again, several millennia ago. I realized I was a shocking consultant, absolutely shocking in that people would say, "We need you to do this." And I said, "Well, really? I'm not sure

that's going to create the change that we need to see." And then was rescued by Jonathan Parrott to go and work in the worlds of nonprofits where you can be a little bit more overt and challenging about what you think. So it's something that has been with me, all of my professional career, in other words.

Simon Mainwaring: As you say, that must have been so sort of ahead of its time, way back then. Thinking this way and the role of business, how were you received at that time? Did people pat you on the back and say, "Isn't it nice that there were people out there that would think this way?"

Sally Uren: No, that was a good day. Ordinarily, it ranged from being ignored, being patronized. There was a memorable occasion where I was being threatened with prison because a lot of what we do is really bringing brands together, getting to focus on shared challenges, and competition law hasn't really caught up with the need for pre-competitive collaboration. In this particular project in particular instance, the normal, this is rubbish, don't listen, it's really terrible, wasn't working. So the tactic of, well, this is against your competition, or do you know, Simon, you could end up in prison. So that was a good day. So yes, being ignored and pressed on the back is actually up there.

Simon Mainwaring: That's a good day. Actually, I have to say in hindsight, as all of us run the miles committed to what we care about, the more obstruction or the more kind of obstacles you get upfront, it's actually an indication that you're on the right track.

Sally Uren: Totally, Simon. I don't know who coined this phrase. I wish it was me, but it really wasn't. But the closer you get to shift in the system, the harder it pushes back at you. So actually someone yelling at me that they think I should be in prison is like, brilliant. I've gotten to them. They really see that I'm serious.

Simon Mainwaring: So what everyone should take away already is that if you're not being yelled at or threatened with prison, you're not trying hard enough. We can understand that we've got to make things better in the abstract, but why is this so serious now, Sally? Why do we need to show up in a way that we never have before? What are we facing that's so serious that it's got to demand our attention?

Sally Uren: Yeah. So at the moment, if we carry on emitting carbon and the way that we are today, we will see on average, the temperature rise at the end of the century of between three and four degrees Celsius. That is catastrophic for the systems that we'll rely upon. It will mean the melting of the ice caps, the conversion of the Amazon into Savannah, the loss of the boreal forest, all of the feedback mechanisms that keep our climate stable will just fall away.

What's really interesting given the size of the government response to the COVID emergency and the scale of all of these fiscal stimulus packages, we probably have got less than a decade now to really put in place pathways for rapid de-carbonization. So that's our very survival. And then lead into that is the fact that as a society, as a global economy, as citizens, we have failed to deal

with structural inequalities. So you've got a really profound environmental challenge and a really profound societal challenge coming to bear at the same time. This is what our recent report really tries to explore is, how do we respond to these big challenges? There are many in a way that secure a pathway to a sustainable future. Don't actually lock us in to a hothouse earth, to an increasingly polarized, and unequal earth.

Simon Mainwaring: This report you mentioned, it is fascinating. You talk about these different scenarios, these different futures that we can face. The report from system shock to system change kind of walks us through what we can do to address that. So just touch on the four different kind of alternative outcomes we have and maybe pushing on the one you may hope we might choose.

Sally Uren: Yeah. In the report, we talk about four different trajectories, which are essentially broad pathways that we see emerging right now coming out of this intense moments of discontinuity that to many respects, we're still living through. One pathway we call unsettled is actually where things do not settle down. And so we just continue to learn from one crisis to another. Think about what's happened in your wonderful country, the unrest in Minneapolis at the heart of the pandemic.

So the unsettle trajectory is, there is no new normal, and we're just going to have to continue to adapt to these crises and respond to them. That's probably the darkest of the trajectories because essentially, the institutions that we've established to manage through the 21st century, they don't work in that level of discontinuity and uncertainty. There is a light side in that trajectory, those organizations, individuals that can be flexible, and adaptive, and highly created may well be able to make sense of what's happening around them, and they might be the businesses of the brands that do well, but that will be the minority.

Simon Mainwaring: Right.

Sally Uren: This will be just kind of constant dealing with huge uncertainty. We then have discipline, which is a trajectory where the mindset that predominates is efficiency is the actually public health outcomes come first. We're not really worried about privacy, individual data rights. This is the world where everywhere we see track and trace for controlling the pandemic. It's a world where we do see a return to the economic model that we knew before COVID, which is an economic model based on some form of globalization, but based on a very economically driven set of success metrics. So in discipline, features of sustainability, like the circular economy, do really well, because that makes sense. The circular economy is super efficient. It's not a very democratic model because in this trajectory, it's big government, big tech, they're making decisions for us. That means that some of the sort of social dimensions are not really part of the mix.

Simon Mainwaring: Right. So that's a little bit better in some ways, but still at a cost. What other choices do we have?

Sally Uren: Well, then there is a lively trajectory of competing retreat. This is a trajectory where we see the continued rise of populist dynamics. So it's every nation state for themselves. This is the US pulling onto the world health organization. It is India stopping exporting paracetamol to keep the stocks for their own population. In this trajectory, multi-lateralism, so international attempts to deal with climate, to deal with really looking out for the poorest of the poor, that just don't work.

Simon Mainwaring: Right. Give us the preferred scenario.

Sally Uren: The trajectory that we need to pay the most attention to is called transform. This is the trajectory where we really have a mindset that says planetary health, equals human health, equals economic health. We can't disentangle our own health as humans from our planetary health, from our economic health, and we've seen this in COVID. If we're sick, the economy is sick. If the planet is sick, we can't see a functioning economy. COVID started with illegal deforestation leading to the rise of what schools do not take, organism entering into the food chain. What happened in a wet market and wound ham has crippled the global economy.

So transform recognizes the interdependency of all of these systems and says, okay, instead of going back to what we had before, which was where we were really blind to all of these connections. Let's use this moment of extreme disruption to reset, to build back better, and to broaden out the goals of the global economy to include creating environmental value, to include creating societal value. Now that sounds really pie in the sky on the face of it, but it isn't, Simon, because-

Simon Mainwaring: Yeah. Now, I was wondering, is it top-down from corporations and government, is it bottom up from people?

Sally Uren: It's all of those things. We see proof points that this transform trajectory is a movie. As we see proof points that the other three are too, and I'll come back to how we navigate through the fact that four are unfolding simultaneously, but the proof points that transformed could be real. Look at the scaling of regenerative agriculture practices in the US and other big economies, understanding that actually we're going to secure actual access to calories than an extractive food system. This isn't going to work. We've got to really rebuild the value of that food.

Simon Mainwaring: We can't just keep taking from the environment through agriculture and more. We've got to be giving back to the soil. Right.

Sally Uren: Absolutely. Because if nature was a bank, it would have been unveiled a long time ago.

Simon Mainwaring: Right.

Sally Uren: So assets of nature are running really low. Look at what's happening in the investment community, the amount of money flowing to ESG funds, I think it was in June, July, and August, in that three-month period was the same as the previous five years. So the investment community is waking up to the value of risk posed by the climate emergency, posed by those brands that aren't looking out for communities. So lots of proof points that transform could emerge.

Now, the rub is that you will know this in a 24 hour period, you can experience all four directories, because all four across the world are playing out. That's the beauty of future sinking in that we know-

Simon Mainwaring: Future sinking, which is what? To align around a certain future?

Sally Uren: Yeah. So the more you can take actions consistent with the future that you want, the greater the chance of that version of the future emerging because self-fulfilling, and self-defeating promises are real. If you believe that something can happen, if you can believe things can be better, then the chances are that they will be. But if you think, that's not going to happen, then you will not be creating the future that you want.

Simon Mainwaring: So what does this mean for me tangibly listening? If I put my consumer hat on for a second where I'm buying stuff I need, or I'm an employee working inside a company, or I'm the founder of a startup, or I'm the CEO of a large corporation, with this sort of big picture thinking in place, because clearly we want the best future for all of us, because that's in our own interest in a sense, where do you start? What actions do you take?

Sally Uren: Well, let's take those in turn. So as an employee of an organization, big or small, have you asked, what is the purpose of the brand, the business? It isn't just about turning over a dollar. It's not about market share. It's actually, what is the contribution of the business of the brand to create that sustainable? There's a generation coming through for whom that question is absolutely first and second nature. So ask, what is your organization doing about both its direct environmental and social impact, but it's indirect social environmental impacts?

Simon Mainwaring: Right.

Sally Uren: Does it have science-based targets? Is it looking at scope three carbon emissions? What's it doing in terms of where it's sourcing? There are questions you can ask that will allow you to understand where your organization stands on this agenda. So find out, ask. Similarly, if you're buying a product, just take the time to understand where and how is this product be mean? If I'm buying apparel, how do I know that the t-shirt I'm buying hasn't been manufactured in a sweatshop in Bangladesh where people are not even on a living wage and not on any way? They're in bonded labor. So find out where and how your product has been made.

Then if you are in work and you're earning a salary, where's your pension going? So that contribution you make to your pension, what are your pension fund managers investing in? Are they investing in fossil fuel industries or have they seen the light and investing in interests of future? So that bit of your pension and any of the savings you have, where are your savings going? Find out.

Over the next decade, the pathways to value creation, financial value creation are going to broaden. It won't just be short term profit maximization because of the simple reality to create a successful business or a successful brand. You need a successful ecosystem, you need prosperous people, you need engaged employees, you need people that want to buy your product. We don't live in a vacuum. COVID has really shown a light on that.

Simon Mainwaring: It has. I mean, business brands can survive in societies that fail. You've got to protect the whole system on which your very business depends. That said, again, one of the obstacles in people's minds is, listen, I know how important that is. I want to do the work, but I'm really busy and I've got to homeschool my kids, and I'm just trying to pay the bills, I'm trying to keep the doors open on my business, are there tools emerging that kind of make this transparency or that knowledge easier to find?

Sally Uren: There are lots of tools. As a consumer, you can just look at whether or not a product, be it a food product or a piece of clothing, has it got any kind of certification scheme attached to it? If it's food, is it fair trade organic? What are the labels there? I mean, certification has got its limits, but there's a quick and easy way of understanding how to compare banana A with banana B, then banana A that's been fairly traded. It's going to be better for the small holder.

Simon Mainwaring: So look for those certifications.

Sally Uren: Look for the certifications in the first instance. I feel this tension at the moment between surviving and thriving. I guess what I'm trying to do through my work and the worker forum more broadly is to try and help us all understand that these are false dichotomies. We need to understand that it isn't either or is, and.

Simon Mainwaring: Yeah, this false separation, as you say, between making money and doing good, buying what you want and protecting the environment, they all go hand in hand now because we're at that point where the systems are breaking down. So if you were an entrepreneur out there, and you're in your first year or two, or you're just thinking about having an idea to start a company, give us one or two, maybe three things that that entrepreneur can do to start building the company the right way.

Sally Uren: So whatever business you're in, have a vision about what success looks like, how are you going to create money and also do good at the same time? That has never ever been easier, because we know that protecting the environment, it saves us money. We know that using renewable energy and money across the

world now is actually cheaper. We also know that if, as a brand, we do the right thing by our employees, we do the right thing by the communities that we interact with. If we delight our customers with making them feel really brilliant about their purchase, we will do well. And so really think about what is your contribution to these big challenges in a way that will underpin your future success. I guess probably the first thing I should have said, though, is understand what the future holds. The future holds huge uncertainty, huge disruption, huge turbulence, but actually having a really, really super clear and crisp purpose will allow you to navigate that turbulence if that purpose is grounded in the good you want to deliver.

Simon Mainwaring: Absolutely. I mean, everyone, whether you're an employee, an investor, a customer out there, you're always looking at brands now saying, are you part of the problem or are you part of the solution?

Sally Uren: Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring: You've got to be on the right side of history in that sense. If you go to the other end of the spectrum, these established or larger companies, they might say, their excuse might be, you know, we're just trying to survive during COVID. So we don't really have the bandwidth, the resources, the time to prioritize these issues, or you mentioned something called pre competitive collaboration. How and why should companies that are larger care about these things and what can they do about it?

Sally Uren: So many reasons, one of them is a large companies are dependent usually on global supply chains that they do not have full control over. In order to really ensure resilience and access to supply in their chains, UTC collaborate, you're not going to be able to do on your own many, many brands across all sectors. They share these supply chains and they're all at risk at the moment. They're very, very brittle supply chains. So if you want to ensure continued access of security of supply, you're going to have to work often with your competitors, particularly in fields like apparel, where you're sharing the manufacturing base. So to think you're going to influence that on your own, I think it was kind of kidding yourself in a way.

Simon Mainwaring: Is there an example that jumps out at you? What's an example where you go, wow, this is really showing the way forward in terms of how companies of all sizes can work together.

Sally Uren: Yeah. I love what organizations like Interface are doing. So they've launched a carbon positive carpet. So they've got a carpet now that actually will absorb and sequester carbon. And so will be playing a contribution to really reducing carbon in our atmosphere. So I think that that's wonderful.

And then equally, I love what Patagonia is doing in terms of its partnerships with small holder cotton farmers, really enabling them to convert from conventional to organic cotton production in a way that they don't lose money. There are so

many examples of brands and businesses now putting more back than they take out, really thinking about, how do they get their product to market in a way that drives the maximum positive good? And that's where also there are so exciting to see what's happening around this whole nature based solution space. So Unilever have launched a 1 billion nature environment fund just to really understand how can it work with their suppliers to get rapid de-carbonization of supply chains. Amazon's got a 2 billion climate pledge. This is all money that's becoming available to both restore ecosystem, but to tackle climate change and to drive livelihood prosperity.

Simon Mainwaring: Obviously, that's a huge task and it can be overwhelming, daunting and so on. But if you look at these big platforms out there, how well are they going? For example, the sustainable development goals, which are these 17 goals that were established in 2015 that set targets for how to address these big issues out there in the world, or all these big sort of, multi-stakeholder efforts by Unilever or marks and Spencer with their plan A because there is no plan B? How are these things? Are they getting there fast enough?

Sally Uren: No, nothing is happening fast enough at the moment until we reframe the goals of the systems that we're relying on. So go back to food. So people say the food system is broken. It's not broken. It's working really well to the current goals of the system, which is cheap food delivered in large volumes in a way that doesn't really look out for farmer livelihoods, and doesn't pay any attention to quality issues, and doesn't really think about biodiversity right. So the food system looking pretty well to the current goals of the system. People then say, the economy's broken. The economy isn't broken, it's working really well to the current goals of the economy, which is short-term profit maximization.

What we've seen over the last decade, and the reason why we haven't made enough progress is that we focused more on incremental change because it's easier, and we have been locking in existing unsustainable practices.

Simon Mainwaring: So how do you get this? How do you shift consumer thinking and behavior? Because companies have to be rewarded for it and business needs to work for others with other sectors on the strength of those rewards. How do you shift this story about the role of humanity, the role of business?

Sally Uren: I think that it's shifting norms and shifting narratives from, there's nothing we can do, whatever I do won't make a difference, I've got no power, and everything's already complicated to, actually, I have extraordinary power, I have extraordinary agency as an individual. Every choice I make will contribute to the delivery of something better. I believe in better. I believe things can be better. That belief in better, that optimism, that does create change. I've seen it time and time again.

Simon Mainwaring: You've been leading this effort for a long time based in the UK and working with a lot of very powerful European and global brands. What would you say to young women entrepreneurs or business leaders out there? Because there's

such momentum behind women's leadership all around the world right now for very good reason. What would you say?

Sally Uren: First of all, I'd say, believe in yourself and have a vision of what it is you're trying to do. Don't worry if it doesn't go quite to plan, because I think the most important thing I've learned along the way is, be kind to yourself because if you're not kind to yourself, other people will struggle to be kind to you. Like we said right at the beginning, if in your efforts to change things, people end up shouting at you and you're experiencing all sorts of negative energy, funk it, because it means you're actually close to doing something quite special.

Simon Mainwaring: Sally, thank you so much for your time today. We look forward to seeing what we can all do together.

Sally Uren: Thank you, Simon. I think if I could say one last thing, as humans, we want practical insights, and we also love certainty, we love knowing what's going to happen next, we're at a point in history where we don't know what's going to happen next. It is really uncertain. With that comes the potential to create enormous positive change. So hold that, hold the potential, not the uncertainty.

Simon Mainwaring: Fantastic. Thank you so much, Sally. Really appreciate you.

Sally Uren: No worries. My pleasure.

Simon Mainwaring: Thanks for joining us on this week's episode of Lead With We, where I spoke with Sally Uren, the CEO of Forum for the Future, who shared with us what that future for business in our lives can actually look like in these very uncertain times, and how entrepreneurs and corporations can work together to rebuild society and the planet, and how each of us can take very simple steps each day that will make a truly meaningful difference to tomorrow.

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