



What I Have Learnt

Professor David Grayson

Kennedy School of Government Professor Joseph Nye describes a '[tri-sector athlete](#)' as someone who can, "engage and collaborate across the private, public, and social sectors." David Grayson - currently [Director](#) of the Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility at Cranfield School of Management - has a career that has spanned all of these sectors, and more. This is what he has learnt from working in government, business, academia, social enterprise and charities.

Being a tri-sector athlete is about moving comfortably between sectors and feeling empathy for each - its a combination of mindset and skills that help. For sustainability many of the leading companies are emphasising the importance of collaboration, both with other sectors as well as international agencies, so it is a concept that is more important than ever.

When I try and explain the term tri-sector athlete to audiences, I ask if anyone does triathlons.

What's the hardest part? They always say it is the transitions. One of the really important things is the switch points between different disciplines.

The skills that characterise a tri-sector athlete are both an understanding and some experience and critically an understanding of different sectors. There are similarities and crucial distinctions. It's not necessarily about comfort but more about not feeling discomfort about being able to operate across three sectors.

We're dealing with big issues - water, climate, global inequality - in a globally connected society, with increasingly mobile people. By choice or by economic necessity or due to life threatening crises – its harder to deal with issues on your own.

Tri-sector athletes are used to having networks of diverse contacts that we keep in good order. We're good at engaging with different stakeholders. When I started as chair of the National Disability Council I got advice on working out key messages and then customising them for different CEOs. The secretariat was horrified when I started personalising communications. Stakeholder engagement is critical – the best NGOs, public officials and businesspeople know this.

From the private sector, training in P&G in brand management gave me an instinctive feel about the importance of customer focus. This was my first job after university addressing wants and needs and using language of target audience.

I learnt from the public sector a sense of due process in acting for the best long-term interests of society. When I was on the Strategic Rail Authority Board, dealing with multi-billion pound budgets and rail franchises, most of us non-executives didn't have prior railway experience. I always thought our job was to take decisions as an informed citizen, using the criteria of what is in the long-term interest of UK plc.

My involvement in a number of charities taught me to ask: what is the purpose that we are here to serve and how do we do that in the most effective way? Academia gave me a degree of rigour about interrogating data and the argument and the research process, getting deeper into the evidence for things.

You can never learn too much. I remember discovering years ago on holiday a quote from Gandhi, "Learn as though you will live forever and live as if you will die tomorrow." The assumption that there is too much learning is silly. I'm just a little less ignorant than I was!

Tri-sector athletes can be the people that keep the beating heart of collaborations.

As the public-private-civil society lines blur and organisations work more in partnership, tri-sector athletes are going to become much more important and so it is important to work to increase their number.

David was talking to...



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