Be a purposeful pioneer with JK McQuinn

Hi, I'm JK McQuinn of Where the Mind Grows and welcome to the Ordinary Extraordinary Leaders podcast. So let me tell you a little bit about myself. Here I am today as a nature based regenerative wellbeing coach, but go back a few years, almost a decade now, and I was also a leader in the third sector working across mental health and employability services.

So, one of the things that I really saw is how hard and dedicated and amazing and talented we all were working in the sector. But whilst we were helping people in the community in various different roles, we also had the challenge of our own mental health and wellbeing. And that also led to us spending a lot of time inside.

So now I help leaders and teams get out into nature to help themselves reconnect with each other. The wider world, and with themselves [00:01:00] as well. So, what got me to where I am today? I can remember a real pinnacle moment, actually. I was literally supposed to be in about five places at once, and that's no joke - and I'm sure any leader that's listening to that will be very familiar with that experience- and I was driving from one meeting to another. And I received a phone call, and it was an interim manager of mine. My manager was off sick with stress, and I was delighted to see this person calling, because we'd been trying to catch up with each other for a while.

When that person answered the phone, it was very clear that they weren't going to be able to help me with the things that I wanted to answer to. Because actually they were in their own crisis. And so I just paused at the side of the road, parked up, and listened to this person and gave them emotional support.

And as I was doing that, my eyes fell on my festering, beautifully [00:02:00] homemade lunch that was at the side of my seat. And I noticed the many garage sandwiches, the packets that were on the bottom of my car as well. And I sort of just was listening and feeling all of these things and thinking, ‘Whoa, we live really busy, separated lives.’

And actually, as I looked out, I saw nature and trees and I felt an instance of calm. And, I put down the phone, and I was about to drive off to my next meeting, and then I thought, do you know what, no, I'm going to go out and I'm going to walk into these woods. And I walked, I can remember it to this day actually, like walking into those woods and being hit by the release of stress that happened in that space.

And I knew there and then that, actually, it was my turn to kind of get out of the sector to help people and support them doing the wonderful things that they do. That, alongside my passion for the environment, and I can see how are we [00:03:00] actually going to be able to have the capacity to look after and care for our planet when we're working in such a normalised environment of stress and overwhelm within the sector. So that began Where the Mind Grows because I believe that that is where the mind grows - getting people out into nature to understand and learn from the natural world as well.

So you might be thinking, I know that wellbeing is really good for me. I know that mental health is an important part of leadership, but so often we forget to prioritise these things.

Now, one of the aspects of that is the fact that we're living in stress systems and overstretched systems and that's whether you look at the outside world or we look within our own workplace cultures as well. So one of the things is that we just fill time up, we don't create space, we think that things like managing our stress levels or taking a breather or regulating our body, that they're not things that we should be doing [00:04:00] or could be doing.

We don't create that space for them. So I think that feeling the pressure of all that stuff, taking up time and energy and the fact that we work in such dynamic projects and teams, you know, there's lots of different strands in which we have to take our focus. So quickly, it feels like ourselves perhaps might not be the priority.

And that, in turn, leads to just these habits of forgetting to make time and space for yourself. And a lot of leaders talk to me about the fact that they feel sort of guilty or embarrassed about being seen to take time for their wellbeing, prioritise things. And that could be a microsecond, you know, of breathing, actually, that would help to re regulate your body in a stressed or overwhelmed, busy, headed situation, right through to kind of actually saying, I'm gonna design a culture in which we can have things like wellbeing days, where we can prioritise our wellbeing if we really need to, to avoid that kind of [00:05:00] burnout and overwhelm. And that's where the capacity then grows to be able to do things more creatively and courageously as well.

If you are listening to this and you feel like Right, JK, you're talking some sort of fiction. This is absolutely impossible. How am I ever going to be able to do these things? This is one of the reasons why nature has been such a fascinating and amazing resource in a lot of ways for our wellbeing because it, you know, it only takes 20 minutes for our body to regulate itself back to a base rate of relaxation.

By just simply going out into nature can help to reduce the cortisol levels of your stress. It can help to regulate your body mind system. So you begin to feel these weird feelings that you can't quite place your finger on in terms of being able to relax, see more clearly, feel more focused. It helps to regulate your breathing and relax the tenseness in your bodies.

And that's [00:06:00] just by being that's before you've even done any of the eco psychology stuff I do where you actually would learn from nature and nature's kind of approach to resilience and community as well. When I think about what the greatest successes are that I've had in the natural world, alongside leaders and teams, I mean, you can't really put success into one pot because it's so unique to each individual.

You'll all be coming with your own stories and walks of life. But what I remind people is we've got a teacher, a facilitator alongside us with 3.8 billion years in resilience, communication skills, adaptation, change, complexity. So if you imagine that that's a teacher in the natural environment, you know, nature has been evolving and changing in complexity.

And one of the things that has been really helpful with that, it's not just that people feel more relaxed when they come into that space, but by learning from [00:07:00] nature, you begin to think about, whoa. What would nature actually do in this situation? You know, if it was faced with a limit of time or if it's faced with trying to do something in January when it's a high energy activity, what, what would it actually be doing in order to do that?

And when people begin to understand that nature can be a teacher for us, it could actually be a guide in the way that we create culture. If you think about the quality of your soil being like the culture, you know, have you got enough basic nutrients for yourself and your team, then we can begin to be really creative and dynamic about how we might evolve the things that we do.

And nature doesn't see self-care as selfish. It sees it as a really integral part of its community building. So it starts from the inside out. So it's not kind of going, well, what's everyone else doing? Let me see. And, oh, they all look really busy, so I won't bother. It's actually going, have I got enough light, water, [00:08:00] am I rooted, can I bear the weather that I'm going to kind of be faced with?

And that enables its capacity to be able to feed the rest of the woodland community, for example, as well. So when we begin to see, you might think of these as analogies. I think of them as actually direct strategies because we can see the way that nature does this, that actually we begin to think about, well, what bits can I bring in that have been really effective to something that's been evolving through time and space for a very long time.

When I think about other successes that have been really tangible ways of thinking both about the health of yourself, your team, your organisation, that wider community, and beyond that, like, even the biosphere, everything is interconnected, then a discovery I had a few years ago, came out of this curiosity of how do we create a healthy, thriving environment, which includes our workplaces, our [00:09:00] workplace cultures, and ourselves.

And you may or may not have heard of the Sustainable Development Goals. They were created by the UN, and they're guiding principles, really, for organizations right through to countries to adapt themselves and future proof. But that's just these big, practical, high level kind of frameworks. So beyond that, I discovered the Inner Development Goals.

And what I liked about that is about bringing it to life. Bringing principles in your culture that could create a healthy place, a healthy lifestyle, healthy patterns and culture. To give you the headlines of what they are, you might want to dive down deeper, or I've got a free resource on them if you sign up to my newsletter as well.

They talk about being, thinking, relating, collaborating, and then acting. And within each of those five areas, it delves down to understand everything from our relationship with ourselves, cognitive [00:10:00] thinking, how to take action, for example, and when you bring these principles to life in your own life or your organisation.

It actually helps us to achieve bigger outcomes that we might be wanting to do in terms of the health of our planet or the health of our organisations and teams as well. So definitely check out the Inner Development Goals. They're a really lovely way of kind of nurturing your own well being and thinking about, well, what could I do that would bring this to life as well?

There are a wealth of tools and resources that you can explore. So my first advice would be just go out into nature on your lunchtime. Like, this is a resource. It's not to be extracted from, but to reconnect with. You know, our modern day world has evolved into this place that's taken itself outside of nature, but we forget that we are actually part of nature and so our body will respond really naturally to being in and around the natural world, so [00:11:00] break your own rules, be a maverick of those rules about I can't do this or I shouldn't or I feel guilty.

Just think about how many endorphins you're going to create for yourself when you go for a wander in your garden or around the block or to a woodland, whatever you can do. Even just think about nature. And this is not some kind of woo woo, you know, science, non-evidenced science. There's research that shows that people in hospital beds where they have access to nature through their windows will heal faster than those that don't.

So I think we can kind of give it credit that it's going to help us in our busy roles and lives as well. So that would be my easy quick winners. Go out, just notice something or find some focus on your breath or just look around and notice some of the amazing patterns that nature creates for you.

Beyond that, I introduce everyone that comes and explores in the woods with me to something called natural principles. And these are just another way that we can bring [00:12:00] to life sort of purpose and meaning for leadership through a nature inspired way. Of being and doing. There is no destination with this, but it's about having the intentions and being able to regulate yourself and recognise that we can do so much more when we're in a state of being that feels calm and focused and creative as well, and nature helps us to access all of that.

So you don't see squares in nature, and we weren't meant to be inside boxes for too long. So, notice that next time you're out in nature, you probably won't see a load of squares. So why are us humans spending so much time here as well? Let's be honest. Our base rate of stuff is, and busyness, is so much higher these days than it has ever been.

You know we're consuming so much information and so many expectations, and when we're not looking after our mental health, and I don't mean the extremes, I just mean regular passing or [00:13:00] putting to the bottom of the list those opportunities that you could have, then that can have a significant impact over time.

And when I think about my own framework that I developed, this is the reason why, you know, you've got yourself, your inner self. Is it feeling purposeful, meaningful, and connected? How does that then impact you outside? So, once you feel connected inwards, and you're prioritising your mental health, and you've got more energy, and you feel like you've got more time and control, this enables you to do amazing things outside of that as well.

And that includes the benefit it has for your team, because if your team can see that this is a real core element of the soil of your culture, then they too can thrive in these conditions. They start changing their habits, they start getting curious about what you're talking about or what you're demonstrating.

And beyond that, that is then your organisation. That's the whole, the culture. You know, if you think about it, the way that we create our culture is a real vessel for the purpose and the meaning that we have in the [00:14:00] community. And so, once your organisation is purposeful and replenished and prioritises its health and wellbeing, your capacity to do good in your community just expands and excels.

We have more energy, we have more time, we feel like we've got more resources. I think this is a really brave thing that we can do for ourselves, is the moment we put the stake in the ground and we stop going, I'm going to be the martyr that exhausts themselves until the point of burnout. I'm going to be the person that, you know, tells everyone else how they should be doing it, but breaks those rules for myself, or feels guilty the first time I actually take a proper break in my calendar.

No, like, let's just cancel that as a way of, for the future, because that's not gonna last, is it? That's not going to allow us to create conditions conducive. So you have the opportunity to be a purposeful pioneer. You have the opportunity to use your edge, your influence as a leader in this sector. I really believe that it is this sector is why I work with [00:15:00] wonderful people in the sector.

I really believe that we have the capacity, the creativity and the courageousness to be able to make impactful changes in the world. But it starts with you going, do you know what? I'm actually really important in this interconnected web of everyone doing and being at their best. So just take that moment to pause, maybe as you're listening to the podcast today or a moment in your car or in your office, just look out. Take some breaths, and it all starts from there. Micromoments that, when they're all interconnected, they allow our cortisol to reduce, they allow you to create those endorphins that are helping you feel focused and innovative and pioneering as a leader.

So I'm J. K. from Where the Mind Grows. If you want to learn more about the things that we do in the woods, then you can explore www.wherethemindgrows.co.uk or you can also listen to my own [00:16:00] podcast, The Wilderness Mind. So go out into nature, reconnect with yourself, with others, and the natural world, because you're about to change the world when you do.

Thanks for listening to this podcast. Don't forget to listen to the next episode as well and find yourself a curious question, something that made you curious and want to inquire about the opportunities that you can find when you connect with yourself, with others and with nature too.