WCF Talk – 17th September

Introduction

Good afternoon and thank you very much Julian for such an introduction, here’s hoping I won’t let you down. Thank you also for inviting me to speak and I would just like to start by saying what a treat it is to speak to such a varied and esteemed audience.

As Julian said, my name is Alice, I work for LEAF which stands for Linking Environment And Farming and was lucky enough to take part and be sponsored by the Worshipful Company of Farmers for the 2 week Challenge of Rural Leadership Course last year.

I am hoping over the next few minutes to explain to you, why I work in agriculture, why I love it, why its really hard and how the course and educational activities of the worshipful company is helping me tackle it.

Why I work in Agriculture

Don’t really know. It wasn’t planned, I grew up in south west London and have come from my parents house this morning. I went to school in Hammersmith and wasn’t aware a career in ag was a thing until I was in it.

That said however, I studied science and have always enjoyed being in the countryside and that is essentially what agriculture is. As well as this, my job gives me a practical application for the biology and environmental science I studies at university. The focus on science and development combined with the passion and characters within the industry have meant I have thoroughly enjoyed my job from the start.

One such character is my boss Caroline Drummond who set up LEAF 27 years ago. As an organisation, we promote sustainable and environmentally friendly farming by developing and spreading best practice amongst farmers and industry – that’s my job. Running a certification scheme to prove it and engaging public and education in food and farming.

We cover all bases and we have a plan. Of resilient, adaptable farming businesses across the UK producing food, benefitting the environment and fulfilling rural community needs. We have this plan because we work with an increasing proportion of people who are already doing it. And that is why I love my job.

Why I love it

I manage a network of LEAF Demonstration Farms that are running fantastic business, producing food, managing habitats and working with local community efforts. Better than that they are constantly improving, monitoring and tweaking their systems to improve them and then sharing what they do with others.

And that passion is everywhere in this industry.

The second reason why it is easy to love my job is that I work within that body of passionate people on something that matters. Everybody will always need food. Fact. Whilst agriculture makes up 0.7% of UK GDP, the food and drinks industry is 20% of the UK manufacturing sector. Farmers also manage 70% of UK land. So despite increasing urbanisation and dropping food prices, farming will always matter.

That is reflected by the fact that we work with farmers, supermarkets, researchers and a whole range of others across the supply chain.

Thirdly, its complex. I would urge you to never believe any single-issue media headline you read about a farmer or agriculture. It is just never that simple. GM, the badger cull and glyphosate being just three recent examples of this.

The food system and each individual farm within it is a complex web of environmental and social factors built into a business relying on multiple factors out of their control, such as weather, markets and Brexit.

This means that there is always new stuff to learn and that is addictive, and why, I imagine, there are so many people still in the game, and so many keen to contribute back to their sector such as through the Worshipful Company.

Why it is hard.

That is also what makes it really hard.

Nothing is simple

It matters what happens

And you’ve got a lot of passionate people, with opinions.

Overlay a drought, spring snowfall or Brexit on top of that and you can find yourself in some quite challenging scenarios.

The Brexit bit is particularly hard. We had the agricultural bill launched last week and the Health and Harmony paper. The ethos of both is a move away from direct payments towards payment for public good.

We support these principles but like with everything with Brexit, the challenge is in the detail and until there is any, we are struggling.

But that is another big role for LEAF, being right at the heart of those discussions and if you find yourself reading Health and Harmony as a book at bedtime, you will see reference to our current work as well as what the government think we could help deliver to agricultural systems in future.

Those challenges and specifically now, is why good leadership in so important in this sector.

I got a good introduction to leadership from my boss Caroline who is a true visionary in agriculture and has led and driven an organization and way of thinking for 27 years.

CRL course

The Challenge of Rural Leadership course helped me better understand that this wasn’t just luck. That there are many constitutes to leadership and no one can do them all, but we can all be better at some.

This is especially true in agriculture where there are so many complex of “wicked” problems that we don’t have easy answers and we need people to get off the dancefloor, onto the balcony and have a look at what needs done.

The course also taught me more about myself that I really cared to know, challenged me more than I like to admit and changed me more that I can say.

The people I met where also an absolute riot and spending two weeks in the “cult” as my family came to refer to it as taught me never to underestimate people, what they’ve been through, what they can so and what they can teach you.

As a leadership course, we were also encouraged to delve a bit deeper into other leaders we admire.

For me, this was one of my two wonderful grandfathers and I would just like to tell you a bit about him. His name was Sir William Barlow and he was actually a founding liveryman and one time master of the Worshipful Company of Engineers.

He was a leader in his field, he was a leader in his time and he was my leader of choice when asked to describe someone we admired respected and learnt from, all of which I did in spades.

When he died, the FT described him as a “staunch industrialist” and whilst I never really knew what this meant, I do know it did not go hand in hand with a love for the environment.

He was a man of his time and industry, and green credentials were not all that high on the agenda. He as also a climate change sceptic and one Christmas he bought us all a copy of the Climate Caper. He actually bought so many copies that he slipped a disk when he was lifting the box that they came in…which at 80 was no inconsiderable injury….but at least it proved that he was wrong.

I didn’t agree with him then and I certainly don’t agree with him now, but that did not and does not stop me learning from him. From how he did things, how he galvanised and empowered people, how he got things done and how he never strayed from doing what he thought was right.

Through encouraging us to think about leaders, case studies, group activities, a wide range of fantastic speakers and a few beers, the course was invaluable and I think it has equipped me with tools such as managing people, lateral thinking and group dynamics. As well as fundamentally changing my outlook on how to manage myself, get the best out of people and what my role in this sector could be if a play to my strengths and work on my weaknesses.

So I would urge you as worshipful companies to fully embrace that role that you can have as educators and the power you can have to encourage people at all stages of their career, to look outside the dreaded box and understand people better.