

Transcript - In Conversation with Lord Chris Holmes - Overcoming the odds to achieve our goals

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Host 00:03

Welcome to Future Talent Learning's In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learning's Mary Appleton.

Mary 00:18

Today, I'm joined by Lord Chris Holmes, whose Great Britain's most successful Paralympic swimmer, winning a total of nine golds, five silvers and a bronze. And he's the only British Paralympic swimmer to win six gold medals at a single Games.

Mary 00:34

Chris was also director of Paralympic Integration, responsible for the organisation of the 2012 Paralympic Games in London. In Parliament, Chris is a member of the Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence and has been a member of committees on digital skills, social mobility and financial exclusion.

Mary 00:53

At 14 years of age, Chris lost his sight overnight. In this podcast, he tells me how this life-changing moment helped him identify his own purpose. We also discuss self-determination, self-belief and what it takes to achieve your dreams.

Mary 01:12

We talk about the fourth industrial revolution too, and why it has the potential to unleash huge potential across society, but also why we must ensure it is inclusive to enable opportunity for all. So Chris, lovely to have you with us here today.

Mary 01:30

Thanks so much for joining us.

Chris 01:31

Pleasure.

Mary 01:32

Can you just tell us a little bit about where you grew up and the events that happened to you during your life, in your early years?

Chris 01:40

Certainly, I grew up in the West Midlands, very working class town, went to the local comprehensive school, very regular sort of upbringing really, the same curriculum that had been taught since the 1960s, very practical woodwork, metalwork, technical drawing, and I could never imagine that when I was 14, I went to bed one night and when I woke up, I couldn't see, completely out of the blue and I had to relearn everything at that point.

Chris 02:16

It was really beginning again, having to learn how to read, how to write, how to get about and in many ways there could have been no more profound change in my life and in many ways, many incredibly positive ways, that shaped what I learnt in that moment, in that sharp, stark moment, that shaped so much of what's happened since.

Mary 02:45

And you had some very distinct ambitions, didn't you?

Chris 02:48

For sure, from being very small I wanted to try and do A levels, wanted to try and get to Cambridge University, again no mean feat from a working class town, a comprehensive school where people didn't really go to university, and I wanted to see if I could represent Great Britain at sport.

Chris 03:08

I remember when I was eight the Moscow Olympics were on TV, Duncan Goodhue won the gold medal in the 100m breaststroke and I thought that looks pretty cool, I wonder how far I could get in my sport. So I had those three dreams,

three goals if you will, from being very young and when I lost my sight everything changed and yet nothing changed in terms of those dreams, I'd lost my sight unexpectedly, but those dreams still felt the same, so it very much became a mission of can I still achieve any, never mind all of them, what will I have to do differently, who will I have to get around me, how will I have to lead on this, what team will I have to build around me to just get back on my feet, never mind back in the swimming pool, are any of them possible, are all of them possible.

Mary 04:06

Yeah, because it could have been very easy to say, do you know what, I've lost my sight, there's no way I could achieve those ambitions.

Chris 04:12

Very easy and in many ways when I look back I look upon that 14 year old and think it's definitely somebody else it can't be it can't be me but being 14 it's such an extraordinary time of change anyway so it's a terrible time for something like this to happen but by the same token you're so teenagery that you just carry on and I just had this belief from deep inside that it must still be possible to certainly not to know that I could achieve any of them but it must still be possible to do everything to at least try to achieve one two maybe all three of them

Mary 05:01

and you did.

Chris 05:04

I did, in short yeah, clearly Cambridge University admissions were having an off day when I managed to slip under the radar

Mary 05:16

they let me in as well

Chris 05:17

Well just to show that even the most well-oiled machine can have a creaky day but no the things I learned post losing my sight the things I learned through sport that sense of self-determination, self-belief, self-worth, hard work, all these things, grit, everything which can enable you to achieve stuff to do A levels to get to Cambridge and to get on to the Great Britain swimming team none of it easy but the fact of it being not easy is a positive in itself as well because nothing of any value can just be easily grasped.

Mary 06:09

And how did you feel when you suddenly realised you know, I've managed to get my A-level feels, I've managed to go to Cambridge and I've managed to become Britain's most successful Paralympic swimmer?

Chris 06:24

Bemused and I certainly go through the whole of my life so far and feel it regularly a sense that at any moment someone is going to tap me on the shoulder and say the social experiment is over now get back to the factory and I'll take that when it happens it'll be fair enough.

Chris 06:46

I have a complete sense of surprise, delight, wonderment, bemusement that I've been so, not lucky, I've been so incredibly fortunate to achieve what I've done, great Britain's swimming team, becoming a lawyer, now being in the House of Lords and it's so much down to all the people I've been lucky enough to work alongside, who've helped, who've supported, who've enabled, who've empowered.

Chris 07:33

No such thing as individual achievement, there's only shared success.

Mary 07:39

And you've talked about, you know, a lot of your life seems to have been characterised by kind of overcoming hurdles. After you retired from sport, you then went on to be part of the team to win the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympic Games, which in itself had some challenges.

Chris 07:59

For sure. When we started the bid in 2002, nobody gave us a chance. It was Paris. Paris were going to have the games in

2012. We had a completely negative British press. We had a largely sceptical, understandably perhaps, but a largely sceptical British public.

Chris 08:23

People were thinking, why would we waste time and money on putting together a bid? But a small team of us believed that maybe, just maybe, with the right vision, mission, strategy and plan, sticking to it, making it truly British, not trying to copy a previous games, not trying to do something which isn't authentically British and deliverable.

Chris 08:49

If we stuck to that we could win that bid in 2005. Again, no guarantees, no certainties at all, but maybe, just maybe, and it was worth very much at that stage committing to and getting after that possibility.

Mary 09:11

Absolutely and we ended up with it and it was a fantastic, fantastic Games.

Chris 09:17

Extraordinary and seven we won the bid but then a seven-year planning journey to build from a team of 50 through to a team of 8,000 full-time 70,000 volunteers over 100,000 contractors to deliver the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games in 2012 the hardest work I've ever done in my life not just in terms of the hours and the work but in terms of quite rightly feeling that emotional pressure on our shoulders the weight of the nation's expectations one moment in time we couldn't say what a great Games London 2012 was one of the times the most immovable of deadlines just after eight o'clock in the evening on the 27th of July 2012 the Olympic Games opening ceremony would begin the most immovable of deadlines what a fabulous journey to be on and all down to the people who we hired the people who we developed the people who we led the people that put on one of the greatest Olympic Games and Paralympic Games the world have ever witnessed

Mary 10:45

Absolutely. And interesting that you say, you know, it was down to that big group of people and 70,000 of them, of course, volunteers were exactly that, volunteers. So not being paid for their time or their work.

Mary 10:58

How did you kind of get them to come on that journey with you and really buy into the spirit of the games to be true, you know, as they were called games makers?

Chris 11:09

Completely, and I remember the meeting that we had when we came up with the title of Games Makers because we fundamentally understood these people were going to be the people that made the Games in 2012.

Chris 11:23

The smiling face, the beating heart of London 2012. Because you'd be more likely to meet a volunteer than a full-time member of staff. So our attraction, our induction, our training had to be absolutely spot-on.

Chris 11:43

Because, as you rightly say, we were having people giving of their time for zero pounds and zero pence. How do you attract, how do you motivate, how do you lead, how do you manage 70,000 people when you're paying them not a penny?

Chris 12:01

Through having a really clear Games Maker strategy and basing it around four T's. The first three T's give you the operational control that you need. The fourth T gives the autonomy within that operational control to enable the bright brilliance to come through.

Chris 12:23

Teach, train, test. That gives you the operational control. The fourth T trust within that operational control, enabling people to give of themselves, to give their character, to be not prescriptive in that fourth T.

Chris 12:39

And that's why it worked because you were not, these people were in key safety roles.

Mary 12:44

Mmm

Chris 12:46

in no sense compromising that need for operational control but within that enabling their personality to come through and that's what people felt that's what people talked about at the time that's what people still talk about now the games makers smiling faces the beating heart of London 2012

Mary 13:10

Absolutely. It's fantastic. So how do you move on from that then? I mean, obviously, that's an amazing time and I guess a once in a lifetime opportunity. So once the games had finished, how do you move on from that?

Mary 13:27

Where did you go next?

Chris 13:29

It's very interesting because it had the same feel finishing London 2012 as it did every time I finished Paralympic Games as a competitor. You go into the autumn and you realise there will be a cold, damp November Tuesday morning.

Chris 13:48

World keeps turning. What's next? What's part of the plan? And not to do something necessarily aligned, but to do something where you take all of your learnings and your experience of what you've previously done and take that into the next role.

Chris 14:09

I was open minded about what the next step could be, there were a whole series of things I was interested in and then completely out of the blue I got a call on my mobile phone in the June after 2012 and it was the Prime Minister asking me if I'd like to come and join the team here in the House of Lords.

Chris 14:32

I could never have imagined that that would be the case, I certainly thought it was one of my friends having a joke, luckily I didn't make that point on the phone call. But incredible, another extraordinarily fortunate opportunity to carry on so many of the themes and the threads that I've run through all of my life and certainly so many of the themes and threads that we brought to life in the summer of 2012 to carry them on as part of the legislature in Parliament.

Chris 15:04

An extraordinary opportunity for a working class kid from the Midlands. It's why I come every day, it's why I really want to get stuck in, it's the most welcoming place I've ever been, people from all parties welcome you, they want you to be here, get stuck in, get involved, work hard, try and make a difference and have some fun.

Chris 15:26

If you do that you're so welcome, if you don't come very much the reverse is the case, that's exactly how it should be. So to have got involved with a whole series of themes, select committees on digital inclusion, social mobility, financial exclusion, currently I'm on the select committee on artificial intelligence, got involved in parliamentary groups on the fourth industrial revolution, I vice chair of the FinTech, assistive tech, parliamentary groups.

Chris 16:01

So so much of what I'm trying to achieve in Parliament is threaded around this sense of unleashing, empowering, enabling talent through those two most golden threads of innovation and inclusion.

Mary 16:23

Okay. And you mentioned you're part of the select committee on artificial intelligence at the moment. So what's your opinion on making sure that, you know, we have technology, our digital at our fingertips.

Mary 16:38

It can be used for a force for good. It's really powerful. How do we as a society make sure that everybody comes on that journey and we don't end up with excluded areas of society?

Chris 16:51

I think you make exactly the critical point that of itself all of the elements of the fourth industrial revolution, be it artificial

intelligence, machine learning, internet of things, blockchain, distributive ledger, 3D printing, robotics, on and on, all of the elements of 4IR have nothing whatsoever of themselves to say about inclusion, empowerment, enablement, opportunity.

Chris 17:28

They are neutral on that. In the hands of the human, there is such unbelievable potential to enable, to empower, to really cut through the pernicious forces of exclusion in so many areas which have gone on for decades.

Chris 17:55

But that's the possibility. It is not the inevitability. So it's a mission for all of us to consider, how do we ensure that everybody is empowered, included, enabled in this 4IR? Because that's a possibility.

Chris 18:15

And imagine that sense of unleashing talent which has been dormant for decades, what that could mean for our communities, for our cities, for our country, a phenomenal opportunity. But flip that, if that isn't thoroughly understood and engaged with, then there's just as much a likelihood that the fourth industrial revolution could exacerbate existing structures and patterns of exclusion.

Chris 18:49

And if you look at those who are currently digitally excluded, it's hardly surprising that they fit into the lower socioeconomic groups, older people, disabled people, massively overrepresented. That's the mission.

Chris 19:12

But it's those groups, because of decades of exclusion, it's those groups which could experience such a phenomenal bounce from the opportunity.

Mary 19:23

And from a leadership perspective then, what kind of leadership do you think is needed to make that happen?

Chris 19:31

Leadership in a sense doesn't change. It needs to be what it always should have been and perhaps all too often wasn't. So leadership needs to feel uncertain, uncomfortable, lonely, sound good so far?

Mary 19:56

I'm not sure

Chris 19:58

Otherwise it's not leadership. Do leaders need to understand every element of what's inside the black box? No they don't. What we need to understand is what we've always needed to understand about this stuff. Is it reliable? Is it safe? Is it consistent? Does it do what we believe it will do in a timely replicable manner? All of that and more and that's always been the case with anything when it comes on stream. It's certainly true that technology is too important to leave to the technologists 4IR is not a matter for the IT department it's a matter for the business it's a matter for the board.

Mary 20:50

And so what would be your message to our listeners? What would be your call out to them regarding this?

Chris 20:56

Be positive, engage with all of the elements of 4IR, assess, analyse, be prepared to move forward without full information and have the comfort and confidence to do that. This is not about making predictions or needing to have predictions, this is about analysing what's out there and making some bold, courageous but considered choices.

Chris 21:30

The narrative goes something like this, in terms of our people. The bots are coming, our jobs are going and we're all off to hell and we don't even know if there's a handcart. I don't buy into that at all, nothing of what I read, nothing of what I've heard from our witnesses coming every week to the select committee, none of it causes me to be anything other than rationally positive.

Chris 22:04

Is this going to be transformational? Absolutely. Is it coming at pace? Yes it is. Is it multi-dimensional? Of course, but the

human will always be prime. We are just getting fabulously new tools. We can choose, we can decide, we can determine how we deploy them for better jobs, better employment, better experiences and a better society.

Mary 22:42

And do you feel, through the work that you're doing at the moment and what you've observed among business, is the appetite there for that?

Chris 22:51

I think there's an incredible amount of interest, an incredible amount of research, you're seeing a lot more people being brought on to senior roles with technology or digital in their titles.

Mary 23:03

Yes, yeah.

Chris 23:04

That has to be a good thing, but again to underscore the point, this will fail if it's put into the hands of the IT director, not because he or she is in any sense a malevolent actor, it's just that this is too important and it's not an IT issue, that's just the kit.

Chris 23:31

This is an issue for the business, for the board, for XCO, to understand and to understand how this can be used and deployed in the business to really drive forward. All businesses need to understand that they're data businesses now and what that means, but all the old truths still remain.

Chris 24:00

If your data is fragmented, if it's in poor conditions, you're not likely to be able to do very much particularly with it, garbage in, garbage out still applies. What data have you got? What would you like to do with it?

Chris 24:13

How do you want to structure this stuff? What ultimately 4IR offers is the potential to enable organisations and the very thing of work to be what it always could have been, what it always should have been, but all too often hasn't been and that is that collaborative, creative, imaginative, connected endeavour when we look at a number of roles together, a number of people together, teams, all of that and more.

Chris 24:58

What's not to be rationally positive about that?

Mary 25:02

Absolutely, yes. Exciting times ahead. So what's next on your agenda then?

Chris 25:08

Carrying on very much around all of the themes of social mobility, both in the work I do inside Parliament and beyond. I'm really looking to drive all these themes of innovation and inclusion and what this means for individuals, how we look harder, how we look farther for the talent and how we enable people to, in many ways, massively reimagine what talent is and where they can go and find it because that is what will be required for any organisation and for any society if we're going to prosper and really move forward in a transformative way and there's so much talent out there which has just been untapped, unenabled, disempowered for far too long.

Chris 26:10

So for everybody, get involved and think what can we all do to turn that around.

Mary 26:16

Yeah. And you've come from a kind of unusual background, you know, to be sitting here in the House of Lords today. And if I may say, probably quite unusual as a comprehensively educated individual. Do you think we're moving towards a more inclusive society where social mobility is much more prevalent?

Mary 26:38

Or do you still think there's a lot of work to do around that?

Chris 26:42

I think we are, unquestionably, but I think there's still a huge amount of work to do and one thing to tie these themes together, so much of social mobility came from the traditional white collar jobs, 4IR is going to drive through so many of those white collar jobs.

Chris 27:06

So, if that's the case, it's no bad thing necessarily of itself, but we need to be really thoughtful as to what does that mean for social mobility if those opportunities are going to certainly, I don't think they'll disappear, I don't think that's the case, but certainly they'll be massively reduced because so much of it can be effectively done through particularly machine learning, so what does that mean for people in terms of social mobility?

Chris 27:34

We have to really be thoughtful of that. But again, no reason not to think with these tools at our hands, no reason to think that we can't enable such tremendous opportunities and why, if we get it right, this shouldn't be unremittingly emancipatory.

Mary 27:55

And how do you personally keep yourself motivated and excited about changes that are happening both in work and personal life? How do you keep kind of your energy?

Chris 28:08

Always from all the people I meet and the stories they tell, and the different experiences they've had, and how that all threads together. The energy that people have is just incredibly exhilarating and alongside that the stories that you hear of exclusion, of lack of possibility should be the greatest driver for all of us to think how do we in everything that we do in every interaction, how do we determine that we are putting a pebble on the beach rather than taking one off in everything.

Chris 28:57

It's right there, it costs nothing, it's no more effort but you can just determine how am I going to conduct myself, how am I going to do today, how am I going to do my journey into work and start at that level and ripple that through everything.

Chris 29:13

It costs nothing and the impact that we can all have individually and then as a collective is nothing short of extraordinary and you see it on a daily basis and that is always incredibly energising and incredibly worth getting up for because the human head and the human heart are unbelievably extraordinary every day.

Mary 29:49

Fantastic. And final question, if I could ask you to sum up your hopes or ambitions for the future in a word or a sentence, what would that be?

Chris 30:00

Included.

Mary 30:04

Fantastic. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Host 30:11

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