

Emergent impact: a new route to change?

Matthew Taylor (www.theRSA.org)

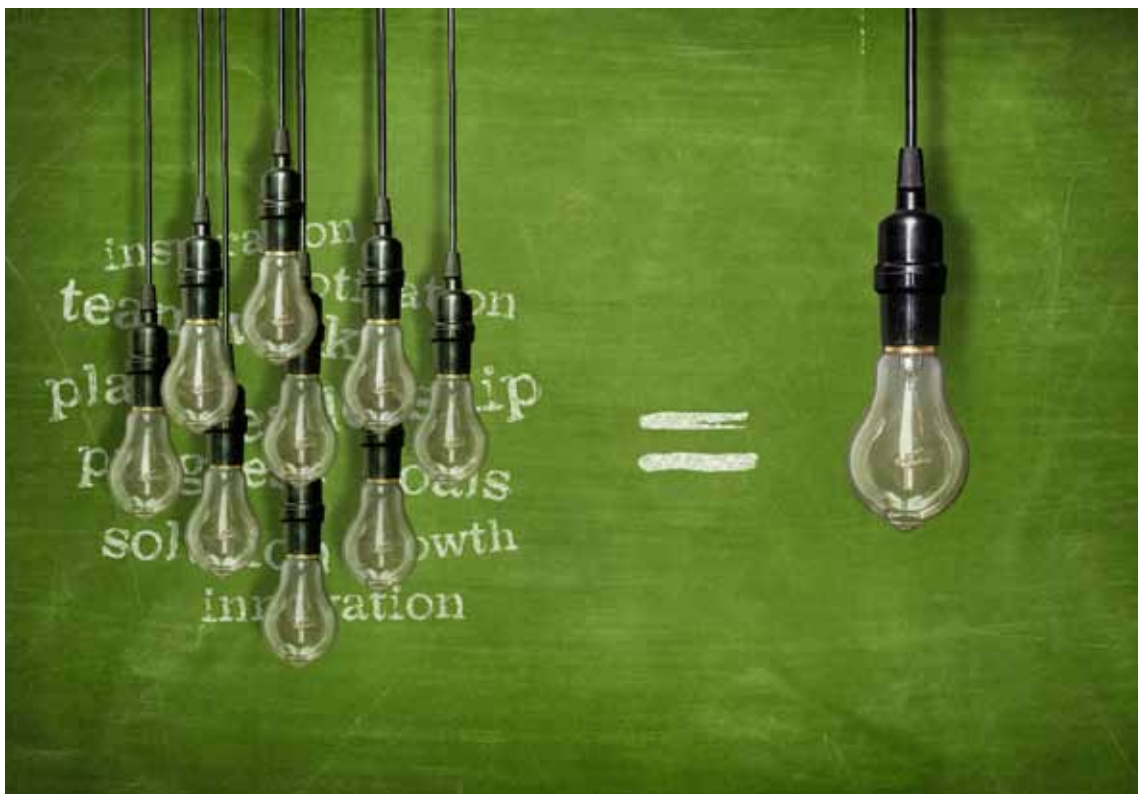
Maximising impact means looking not only at *what we do* but at *what we are* as organisations, exploring whether we are fit for purpose. The organisational change that such introspection can provoke is often painful and can be risky, but without asking the hard questions we are destined to achieve less than we could.

The deep structure of all organisations carries with it strengths and opportunities on the one hand, and weaknesses and threats on the other. Long-standing charities – and the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) has been around for 260 years – will have been created and then evolved under circumstances now past and on the basis of what may be outdated assumptions. Our histories can create expectations and path dependencies which are hard to shift.

Coming out of the hothouse of Downing Street nine years ago, I was attracted to the RSA instead of more conventional think tanks, because of its unusual characteristics, and especially its Fellowship. My predecessor had done an impressive job bringing stability



Matthew Taylor



and greater focus to the Society. But despite her efforts, and possibly reflecting weaknesses in governance, a number of big issues had been left unresolved. Whilst the Society did from time to time pursue worthwhile initiatives, overall its impact was limited.

From the outset my ambition has been to develop a new model of change, one which mobilised all the Society's resources. But I found my early years taken up working with colleagues to improve individual functions. Areas of change included recasting the expectations of Fellowship from a reward for past achievements to an invitation to future engagement (something which led initially to a decline in numbers); upgrading our events and digital offer so we could compete in the expanding and innovative world of online content; and weaning our research team off central funding and on to winning external income for cogent proposals.

.....
From the outset my ambition has been to develop a new model of change, one which mobilised all the Society's resources.

This work contributed to a higher profile for the RSA and a number of successful innovations ranging from our Animate lectures (watched by tens of millions of people worldwide) and headline-grabbing research projects, through to establishing a small grant fund to back Fellows' initiatives and underline our commitment to enable them to be change makers.

Two years ago we had reached the stage where the functions of the Society felt much stronger. A growing international operation and our sponsorship of a family of Academy schools offered greater reach and depth. But our successes, while welcome, revealed more starkly that the whole didn't always match the sum of the parts.

So we embarked on a strategic review. The first goal was greater clarity. Engaging trustees, staff and Fellows we agreed to focus on three areas: public services and communities; education and learning; and economy and enterprise. More importantly, we developed an underlying world view which we call 'The Power to Create'. The RSA sees an unprecedented opportunity in the modern world to expand the scope for human agency and creativity, but big barriers stand in the way. Our modern mission is to help pull down those barriers.

The next step was to reimagine the organisation, moving away from a system based primarily on

functional departments. What is emerging is a model which combines departments, with their focus on expertise, performance management and career progress, cross-cutting collaboratives which enable staff from across the organisation to stand back and look at the overall quality and impact of our portfolio in our three areas of work, but, at the forefront, agile project teams which come together to deliver an outcome and dissolve once the project is deemed to be completed.

Behind these organisational shifts is a big ambition. Taking their prompt from organisations like New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) and publications like the one you are now reading, charities feel an ever greater pressure to demonstrate impact. As NPC argues, to have the best chance of succeeding, organisations need a model of change. This is an account of the world, of what needs to change in the world and of how the charity intends to contribute to that change.

Developing a model of change helps diagnose vulnerabilities and opportunities. The breadth of the RSA's interests and mission can make us hard to describe and risks a lack of focus. But being able to look at problems from many angles and to combine different areas of expertise can also be a major advantage. Our new method of whole organisation mobilisation is enabling us to add a variety of forms of intervention to that breadth of expertise. Whether we think that the problem to address is one of policy, research, practical innovation, public discourse or civic mobilisation, we have the tools ready to act.

For example, a current project with the Heritage Lottery Fund began with the question; why is heritage only occasionally seen as a strategic asset when local political leaders think about the future of their place? An initial inquiry, which benefited from the input of Fellows who are local leaders and heritage enthusiasts, suggested that the problem lay in an ambivalence about the very idea of distinctive local identity.

Seeing the need to widen the debate we then mashed together nearly 100 datasets to develop a national heritage assets and participation index. Not only did the index provoke national media coverage but it generated many local debates – we were even the subject of a motion of censure from one particularly aggrieved northern council! On the back of this interest we hosted well attended heritage question time events in major cities. Most encouragingly, we are now seeing local groups developing – often with Fellows at their heart – wanting to strengthen the role and voice of

heritage in place shaping. We hope to run the index again informed by what we now know about its value as a tool for engagement and activism.

What emerged almost accidentally in this project is now becoming the Society's modus operandi. 'Emergent impact' involves setting out with a clear mission and set of goals in mind but then being able to shift focus and method as the project develops. If a research report generates interest we can develop online content to deepen that engagement. If an idea mobilises people in one place we can push it out into other places through our network of Fellows. If we feel close to persuading a minister or official of the need for a shift in policy, we can swiftly scan our networks and pull together an expert round-table to refine the idea and cement support. If an idea needs to be proven practically we can develop collaborations to test on-the-ground innovations.

Emergent impact isn't easy. It requires continuous inquiry and an ability to shift focus and method quickly. It keeps RSA staff on their toes encouraging them to appreciate all the skills and tools at our disposal and to keep the focus always on what we are trying to achieve. Our existing and potential funding partners share our commitment to change but emergent impact challenges them to work in a more flexible and adaptive way.

The world is changing faster and becoming ever more complex. In such a world impact is a moving target. Combining ambitious long-term goals with diverse and flexible methods seems the right way to go but it's a demanding approach. Whether the RSA can prove the value of emergent impact remains to be seen but right now it feels like we are on to something.

***Matthew Taylor** has been Chief Executive of the RSA since November 2006. During this time the Society has substantially increased its output of research and innovation, has provided new routes to support charitable initiatives of its 26,000 Fellows – including crowd funding – and has developed a global profile as a platform for ideas.*

Prior to this appointment, Matthew was Chief Adviser on Political Strategy to the Prime Minister. Previous roles include Labour Party Director of Policy and Deputy General Secretary and Chief Executive of the Institute for Public Policy Research, the UK's leading left-of-centre think tank.

Matthew is a regular media performer having appeared several times on the Today Programme, The Daily Politics and Newsnight. He has written and presented several Radio Four documentaries and is a panellist on the programme Moral Maze. He writes a regular column for the Local Government Chronicle and the Inside Housing website. He has posted over 1,000 times on his RSA blog site and tweets as RSAMatthew.