

Transcript - In Conversation with Dr Alan Watkins - The future of leadership in an age of technology

🕒 Thu, 04/04 17:24PM · 26mins

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 Learnings CEO Jim Carrick-Birtwell.

Jim 00:20

Today, I'm joined by Dr. Alan Watkins, founder and CEO of Leadership Consultancy Complete Coherence. Recognised as an international expert in leadership and human performance, Alan has worked, consulted and lectured with businesses of all sizes and has coached many senior executives in the FTSE 100.

Jim 00:37

Originally training as a physician and holding a degree in psychology and a PhD in immunology, Alan draws on a broad mix of academic and scientific abilities to underpin his work. In this podcast, I ask Alan about how his clients are responding to the rapid change being brought by digital transformation and why leaders are becoming aware of the importance of wellbeing in the workplace, as well as how he controls his own mental and emotional health.

Jim 01:04

Alan, thanks for taking some time out to do a Future Talent Podcast. You're involved in coaching all sorts of people and working with leaders. Do you mind if I start by asking what sort of impact are you seeing amongst leaders that you're working with of the changes in technology, AI, digital in the world of work?

Alan 01:29

Fear and uncertainty, to put it simply, a lot of them just are not sure what's happening and how it's going to impact them and so they're not quite sure what they need to do about it. So a lot of them are sort of thinking in this area but they just can't predict, this is a different world, things are changing so fast that just when they start to think they've got a handle on it, it's changing again.

Alan 01:58

So we have quite a lot of conversations with the CEOs and C-suites that we work with, trying to help them feel their way into the future, so in their bricks and mortar business, what do they need to do in this completely new paradigm?

Alan 02:15

So partly managing their fear and partly helping them to think through some of the implications of AI of a completely disrupted world.

Jim 02:27

And what are some of those implications of AI that are affecting them as individuals, as leaders?

Alan 02:34

Well, I think there's an increasing acceptance that a lot of jobs will disappear. So depending on who you ask, some people will give you a figure of between 20 to 70% of all jobs will disappear. So if you're at the 70% of all jobs disappearing, then people are now talking about a living wage, you know, there simply won't be enough jobs for the people that exist.

Alan 02:56

So we'll have to just pay everybody to do nothing. So society may change if we're at that end of the market, may change radically and we'll have to rethink what it means to be working. Now, some people are scared by that.

Alan 03:10

Oh my goodness, I'm not going to have a job. Other people are saying, oh, fantastic. I wanted to retire anyway. So there's a kind of massive range of responses.

Jim 03:19

What's your view on that? We're on that 20% to 70% of jobs disappearing as we currently know them.

Alan 03:27

I think we're human beings are endlessly creative, so we'll create different things to do. So I'm probably in the middle ground somewhere. I mean, I think there's gonna be a massive change. And one of the most interesting things is we've kind of lived in a world of the cult of the expert where our schools and our universities train people to know an awful lot about a very narrow field.

Alan 03:50

AI will wipe that away. So, and we're already seeing it in my own area, trained as a physician, where AI doctors can diagnose better than your average GP, because it's algorithmic, like how you come to a conclusion of what's wrong with this patient in front of you is basically an algorithm you've been trained in your medical training to go through and come up with a diagnosis.

Alan 04:14

AI can do that faster and more accurately and make less mistakes than your average GP. So that's game over already. It's just not widely on the uptake yet. So those technical expertise, whether it's a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant, a lot of that technical expertise will be absorbed by AI.

Alan 04:36

So the thing that we'll be having to invent will be the bit in the gaps between jobs, the ability to integrate multiple things. That's where the new jobs will be. And that's how we need to set up our kids and university students and on the job training to start to look very, very differently at what we're delivering.

Jim 04:57

So just to explore that in a little bit more detail, if we can kind of probe into those skills that are required in this changing world, and you just mentioned there a kind of an integrated skill set, a kind of a way, I guess, does that mean being more generalist than specialist?

Alan 05:18

Neither, I think, so the metaphor we often use is think of a comb to comb your hair. An expert is one tooth of a comb, and a generalist is the spine of the comb. Now society currently recognises both experts and generalists, and we kind of highly prize the experts.

Alan 05:39

So when there's a problem with the economy, we go to an expert economist. The professor of economics comes on and tells us why there's a problem. When there's a health problem, we bring a consultant neurologist in, another expert, or a consultant surgeon in, or whatever.

Alan 05:53

So we've had many years privileging the experts, and then we've got some gatekeepers, the generalists, who are the filtration mechanism down to the experts. But in the new world, we need a third type of person.

Alan 06:07

We need people who are integrationists, if you like, a polymath who can do expertise and generalism, who can do both, who are not a single tooth of the comb, and they're not the spine of the comb, they're actually both.

Alan 06:20

They may not have the depth of an individual expert, but they'll have enough to comb your hair. So there's a third type of person emerging. I mean, frankly, they've always been there, but they've just not been recognised by society.

Alan 06:33

So this sort of polymath integrator is what we're going to see more of, and what we frankly need more of as the world becomes more complicated.

Jim 06:41

And is that, in your opinion, a kind of core skill set that may well develop for leaders?

Alan 06:47

It's absolutely what leaders need and in fact in a lot of our client base the leaders who are beginning to succeed or be more

successful are those who are already leaning into that type of capability.

Alan 07:02

So they're realising a sort of general managerial capability is not enough and a sort of technical expert whether it's marketing or finance or operations is not enough either. There's something else, there's something missing in this new complicated world.

Alan 07:19

So the best leaders have already clocked that and they're beginning to have conversations with us about what is that missing piece.

Jim 07:27

And what are the leaders doing to develop those capabilities? I mean, is this something that is, you mentioned fear, is this because they just simply don't know there isn't a model of what good looks like, or are there kind of paradigms that you can kind of teach, or role models that people seem to be gravitating towards?

Alan 07:51

Well, there is a model. It's just not widespread. So there is an understanding of what's required. It's just that not many people know about it. So, you know, as I said, uh, polymath integrators that the idea of that type of individual has been around, you know, I mean, Da Vinci is probably the most well-known polymath, the Renaissance man.

Alan 08:09

Exactly. Um, and so that idea has been around for a very long time. It's just that it's not widespread and there's not a deep understanding of the increasing importance of that type of human being in a modern organisation.

Alan 08:25

Modern organisations still largely operate on general managers and experts, which is one of the reasons why most organisations are still struggling with their silos. Pretty much every business, and we work across about 90 different businesses, pretty much every business we see, uh, is beginning to realise that the siloed nature of their business is holding them back.

Alan 08:45

So as it's, the business is very siloed, but the world is very complicated, uh, and the world doesn't recognise these silos. Businesses are struggling to deliver in a complex, unsiloed world when their own business is very siloed.

Alan 08:59

So we've got to change the model. So people understand, some people understand how to change the model and what's required. It's just not widespread, that understanding. So the next phase is to get that understanding widespread and for people to sort of wake up to the realisation that there's a third type, uh, beyond the generalist and beyond the specialist is we need these integrators.

Jim 09:22

Well, we were talking before we started this podcast about a large multinational that you're working with. And if you're not able to talk about it, we can edit this out afterwards. But you were talking about having a kind of almost a delayed organisational structure.

Alan 09:40

So, again, in the simple world, so back 30, 40 years ago, when things were relatively simple and straightforward, you know, commander control power hierarchies, the sort of triangle model of an organisation where you had six to eight layers of management, that worked.

Alan 10:00

You know, there were lines of accountability. We all know who to shoot if something went wrong kind of stuff. But in the complex world we're in now, it's failing. It's clearly failing. And most people are recognising that in most organisations.

Alan 10:15

We've currently got a kind of halfway house in an ability to try and adapt that commander control system to a modern world. Most organisations went from matrix structure, which sort of added a whole layer of bureaucracy and complexity with hard

lines and dotted lines of reporting.

Alan 10:32

So I don't quite know who my boss is now. But some of the clients we're talking to have begun to realise that is not going to work. And they're moving to a much simpler, much more fluid model, a three layered model.

Alan 10:48

And the three layers are really a leadership layer for, you know, setting strategic frames and big picture thinking and guiding the overall direction, a front line layer of experts who are doing the work.

Alan 11:03

And then the middle is an integrating layer, people who can connect with the leaders but also connect with the front line who aren't constrained by geography or category of whatever they're selling. But they're actually these sort of integrated polymaths who can do multiple.

Alan 11:19

So that's the skill set that's going to be required. And also it makes for a much leaner system. But it's going to create two things. It's going to create in the short term a profound well-being resilience problem.

Alan 11:36

And it's also going to require much greater levels of development of the leaders and the integrating layer to be able to cope with this new world.

Jim 11:46

Well, you touched on kind of, you know, people's and leaders resilience, well-being, mental health is going to be one of the other big themes within the conference, and we're approaching it very much as one of the skill sets that you need to nurture as a professional, as a leader, and be proactive in that rather than just, you know, providing remedies.

Jim 12:11

In your experience, how open are leaders to looking at their own well-being, their own mental health, and those of the organisations at large that they're running in terms of putting in kind of proactive systems to develop that resilience?

Alan 12:32

Much more open than they used to be, not least because the Royal Family is promoting the whole notion of well-being and particularly mental well-being and mental health. Although I'd like to just say it should be mental and emotional health, not just mental.

Alan 12:50

Because most of the problem is not to do with mentation or cognition or thinking. Most of the problems that people are encountering are emotional rather than mental.

Jim 13:00

Can you give a couple examples of that?

Alan 13:01

Yeah, so if you're anxious, there's nothing wrong with your thinking. I mean, you might be thinking negative thoughts, but thinking as a phenomena still works. So mental illness is where the thinking process itself is disordered.

Alan 13:16

So schizophrenia would be a classic example where you have a, you know, hallucination. You think you're seeing something that's not actually there. That's a mental process that's gone wrong. So that's mental illness.

Alan 13:29

Whereas anxiety is an emotional disturbance. So we really should get away from calling everything mental health and mental well-being. It's mental and emotional. So we have to have a slightly wider picture.

Alan 13:43

But leaders generally are waking up. So, you know, Alastair Campbell is speaking very openly about, you know, his, you know, problems in this area, as is Geoff McDonald. So people, not only the Royal Family, but a number of people are being

increasingly vocal.

Alan 13:59

And as a result, leaders are more prepared to talk about this stuff, which is a great thing. So that's the awareness of it is much higher than it used to be. And it's on the increase generally. And part of the reason mental and emotional issues are on the increase is because the world's changing so quickly and people are struggling to cope.

Alan 14:23

Now, I anticipate that's actually going to get worse before it gets better, not least because of the AI roboticisation of the workforce and the loss of all these jobs. So people, you know, will wonder even more about what's their role in the world and how do they show up and, you know, what are they going to do all day?

Alan 14:42

So things may get worse. So it's natural and right that we need to lean into this issue very heavily and get away many organisations are still in the tick box. You know, oh, we've ticked the box. We've got a mental well-being programme.

Alan 14:56

Tick. We're not really solving it. And so the next phase is what do we need to do? Great that we raised awareness, but if you raise awareness without solving the problem, you're actually possibly making it worse.

Alan 15:11

I'm now aware that I'm anxious or fearful or depressed, but I can't fix it. So we've really got to move the agenda once the awareness is there. And it's much higher than it used to be on to what is the solution for this?

Jim 15:25

And what are those solutions? So going back to, we started this conversation talking about the changes happening in the world of work, the digital revolution is causing a lot of fear amongst leaders.

Jim 15:37

When you're working with leaders and they are anxious and they might be struggling with the sheer volume of challenges that are coming at them, what do you recommend? What are sort of coping mechanisms in those scenarios?

Alan 15:53

I mean there's some fantastic news here is that it's about skills not pills. So pills are very useful if you've got a crisis to buffer you over the crisis but you can't take pills for the rest of your life even though many doctors and pharmaceutical companies might want you to.

Alan 16:10

Really we need to train people to get much better able at controlling their emotional states and the good news is that's pretty easy to do if you know how to do that is we've got to empower people that they're not helpless victims in the face of the circumstances of life the changing nature of the world is people can learn to control their emotional state.

Jim 16:35

Again, can you give me some examples of that? Sort of some people that you've maybe worked with that are feeling those kind of volatile emotional states. What practically do you help them to do to overcome that?

Alan 16:50

So the first step in transforming anything is you've got to become aware. So if you want to transform your factory in Newcastle, you've got to become aware of what's going on in the factory. The same thing is true is if you want to transform yourself, you've got to become aware of what's going on in your own system.

Alan 17:06

So am I even aware of the difference between fear and anxiety? Now, if I can't tell the difference, then I can't really solve the problem, because I don't even know who the enemy is. So there's an awareness raising, which emotional state am I actually in right now?

Alan 17:21

Is it fear, or is it anxiety? They're two different things. So that's the start point, is an awareness of my emotional, effectively,

which planet am I on? Now, once I realise I'm on anxiety, not fear, then the solution to anxiety is the ability to get off that planet, as it were, to get out of that emotional state of anxiety into something that's more helpful.

Alan 17:44

So learning to change your emotional state is really where the game is. And the good news about that is we change our emotional states as human beings all the time, is we just don't do it under conscious control.

Alan 17:57

So you can see that if the sun suddenly comes out, we all feel a lot better. So that's a shift in our emotional state, but it's not happening deliberately. It's happening as a consequence of something outside of ourselves.

Alan 18:10

So what you can do is teach people to deliberately change their emotional state. It requires a bit of practice, so you have to practice doing this to get really good at it. But when you get good at this emotional state shifting, you can start to show up in your life in any emotional state that you like, whatever's most appropriate for this circumstance.

Alan 18:29

And that's what we teach people, is how do you, first of all, become aware of which emotion you're currently experiencing, and how do you change to something more productive? So those two really important skills to learn as a human, for all human beings, not just business leaders, for myself, for anybody listening to this, which emotion am I in right now?

Alan 18:49

And by the way, if you don't know which one you're in, you're lost.

Jim 18:52

Can you think of any examples spring to mind of paragons of this, so leaders, whether you've met them or worked with them or just aware of them, that are very aware of their emotional state or aware of which planet they're on, as you put it?

Alan 19:12

Yes, so you'll see that some of the best leaders, I mean Obama comes to mind first of all, he's very measured, he's very self-regulated. So you kind of get the impression when you see him interviewed that he's almost aware of how he's coming across as he's coming across.

Alan 19:27

So there's that sort of sense of mindfulness about him. So he would be a very well-known example of really good quality self-regulation. So even when somebody's saying something outrageous to him, he doesn't seem to flap or panic, or he's often very easy going, he's got an easy humor and so on.

Alan 19:50

So you see it in sports people who have to perform under intense pressure as opposed to choke and miss the shot or not get the medal. So sports people have to train themselves to do this. So you can sometimes see the difference between a great sports person who chokes and a great sports person who chokes less.

Alan 20:15

So the ones who can perform under pressure have learned that ability. But the good news again is it's possible for us all to be able to do that. And also it's legal.

Jim 20:27

And in terms of in your own, in your own kind of life, in terms of your own evolution and finding this kind of equilibrium, what do you do to kind of help yourself? Are there any sort of personal things you can share when things happen in your life that you find really work for you?

Alan 20:48

Well, it's kind of like what I've been telling you is that the journey starts with the awareness of where am I? So I'll often sit and think well, how do I feel right now? And I was sitting in the office of the day and I thought well Actually, I feel quite buoyant.

Alan 21:01

I feel quite buoyant today. And then I started wondering well, what is buoyant? What is that? And so you can actually just write down What is buoyant not as an intellectual concept, but what is buoyant as an experience?

Alan 21:15

So you can write the features of buoyancy down on a piece of paper and as you write them down It's a pretty interesting... It's like a weird thing to do but it's pretty interesting because when you write down what buoyant is as an experience, you can see that those features are different from in another emotion of excited. So for example, you know buoyant might be a bubbly energy, whereas excited is a kind of frothy energy.

Alan 21:42

So they're different you can describe them the experience of those things in your own system differently. That's really helpful to make a distinction between one emotion and another. The reason people can't shift emotions is they don't know what they're shifting to. So they don't know what they're trying to experience. So the ability to write down the features of one emotion versus the features of another emotion is a very useful skill to develop. So we can know what emotion we're in right now and we can know what emotion we're trying to move to because we've got it written down.

Alan 22:14

It's like having a picture of what you're trying to achieve So objectifying an emotion is an unbelievably useful skill to develop

Jim 22:24

That's very interesting. I'm reading a book at the minute, which I find absolutely fascinating. It's called Why We Sleep by Matthew Walker. I'm sure it's in all sorts of bestseller lists, but one of the things he talks about is how absolutely critical REM sleep is, amongst other things, because it's the part of your sleep that helps you regulate your emotional balance and develop your emotional intelligence.

Jim 22:51

And put bluntly, he said, if you don't get enough sleep, you will know where near is good at those emotional interactions, which I found really, really interesting.

Alan 23:02

There's some great stuff about sleep. So there's REM sleep, and then there's four stages of depth of sleep, stage one, two, three, four. And the REM is the sort of gap between deep sleep when you're unconscious effectively and when you're awake.

Alan 23:17

So it's the sort of gray zone between consciously awake and completely unconscious, where we do do a lot of processing. So we all go through REM sleep. So sleep cycles about 90 minutes, and it's topped and tailed by a bit of REM.

Alan 23:32

Now, a lot of people say, oh, I don't dream. I think you'll find you do dream. You just don't wake up during the dream. And if you don't wake up during the dream, you don't realise you've dreamt. So we go through those REM cycles every 90 minutes through the night.

Alan 23:44

If you wake up during the REM cycle, you'll be aware that you've been dreaming. But we all go through it. But the really rejuvenating stuff is stage four, deep sleep. And the emotional processing may be happening during REM sleep, but the rejuvenating, in my view, is that deep stage four sleep.

Alan 24:01

So this is why some people, and you see this in monks, who can train themselves to get into the rejuvenating deep stage four sleep in about 15 minutes as opposed to 45 minutes. So you can exist on two hours a night if you can get into deep sleep really fast.

Jim 24:16

Interesting. Well, we could talk and talk about sleep, but final question, anything that you're reading at the minute that you'd particularly recommend, or what sort of things do you generally read? I know you write, you must read if you write.

Jim 24:30

What sort of thing's interest you?

Alan 24:31

Well, currently, I'm reading Ken Wilber's book on Trump and the post-truth world, which is an unbelievably beautiful description of how we've got a crisis in leadership and why we've got lost. And in this sort of post-truth world where nobody believes anybody anymore and everything's fake news, what are we going to do?

Alan 24:51

I mean, if the world wasn't difficult and complicated enough, nobody believes anything. And we're all getting our news from social media, and half of that's not even true. So it's a really good description of how did we get into this mess, and more importantly, how do we get out of it without imploding into depression and anxiety, fear, panic, and all of those negative states?

Alan 25:18

What can we really do about it? So that's really provoking a lot of thoughts in me right now.

Jim 25:24

Very good. Alan Watkins, thank you very much.

Host 25:30

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