

Cambridge Judge Business School

Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation No 2, August 2024

BREAKING BARRIERS: LESSONS FROM CAMBRIDGE ON EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND INNOVATION

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MSt Social Innovation, 2020

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Introduction

In today's world, people often stick to their own groups, whether in work, social circles, or online. However, stepping out of these comfort zones and embracing moments of awkwardness with those different from us can lead to a brighter future. Doing the same things in the same way isn't enough anymore; we need to try something new. There's pressure on all of us to explore new opportunities and create our own paths. New ideas and partnerships can drive innovation and make the world better. In this article, I'll share my journey to Cambridge and how I discovered that those I thought were different from me were actually allies.

Feeling out of place

As I cycled to the bus station to begin my journey to Cambridge, I was filled with anxiety. The weight of imposter syndrome pressed down on me, making me feel like I didn't belong among the accomplished individuals at the university.

As I stepped onto Parker's Piece, I could hardly believe that I'd been accepted into an 800-year-old university that I'd always thought was out of my reach. Determined to make the most of the opportunity, I'd decided to attend the optional 'Matriculation' at my college a few weeks before the start of my course.

At 37, I was accepted into a part-time master's course in Social Innovation. By this age, I had spent about 15 years working with homeless people and had become the CEO of a growing non-profit. In that role, I'd found something I was good at. Thanks to a few new services, our organization had become a national leader in homeless and refugee support. The charity's success, along with my 'less privileged' background (as the scholarship put it), made me eligible for the course and provided the funding to pay for it.

Matriculation anxiety

I arrived for Matriculation 2 hours early and found a coffee shop to wait in for it to start. That's when I first noticed everyone in suits. I assumed it was just eager Cambridge types trying to impress at what I thought was a freshers' week event. As I approached the college, I realized that everyone was in a suit - except me.

I stood outside the gates as people walked past. I pretended to be on my phone and walked away, feeling embarrassed. Determined, I turned around, convincing myself I could explain that I didn't know I had to wear a suit because I had never needed one before. But my anxiety got the better of

me, and I called my wife for advice. She told me to 'own it,' to walk in and be proud of being different. 'You deserve to be there,' she said.

At that moment, I didn't feel like a CEO. I didn't feel the confidence I had in my sector - where I spoke my mind and made my voice heard. I felt like the boy who had labelled himself a failure; a history of failed tests and being on the wrong end of academic and social standing. I walked away from the gate, down the lane, back to Parker's Piece, and got on the next bus home.

Challenging prejudice

By the time the first residential came around, I had cemented the stereotypes in my mind. I felt like the token 'have-not' in a room full of privileged people. I thought they'd had everything handed to them, while I was struggling to carve out a career in spite of my circumstances. I felt like I had to fight the social system and cope with the study.

But I was almost completely wrong.

I walked into the business school for the first time and saw fellow students, none in suits, most of whom looked about my age. The best part was how one group turned from a closed circle to an open semi-circle and smiled at me. I introduced myself - and eventually discovered that within that group were people who would become some of the best friends I could ever ask for.

Finding acceptance

Most of my cohort weren't like me. They were incredibly successful in fields far removed from social impact. They'd made money in consultancy, finance, fashion... The list was long and, in many ways, foreign to me. But instead of being dismissive, they were genuinely interested and impressed by my background. They asked questions and laughed at my jokes. Contrary to my initial fears, I wasn't an outsider.

As the course and our friendships developed, I realized I had been working in a social silo, assuming other social classes were against me. In Cambridge, I found people united by a common goal, not past experiences. Our diverse histories gave us different strengths and backgrounds to share, leading to a broader perspective and access to wider resources to achieve our goals. The deeper I dug, the more I realised I wasn't alone in my self-doubt. Many of my new friends were hiding it like I was; but after a few knowing looks, some of my classmates revealed backgrounds and insecurities similar to my own.

The staff team, far from being aloof, were grounded and engaged. Even when nerves got the better of me, making it hard to say much in class, I felt noticed and picked out. I know their interactions with me were intentional. With some students, they were more direct in telling them their efforts should improve: 'This is Cambridge, after all.' But with me, I already had the fear I was

going to fail. Their encouragement and directness attacked my doubting voice: 'Of course you can do it; here is all the support you need.'

The lectures were only part of the staff engagement, with debates flowing naturally into coffee breaks and increasingly impassioned (but always good-natured) pub visits. It felt as though the faculty knew how I was feeling. They never spoke directly to me about it, but talked around it near me, saying things like: 'We know people find this building difficult to come into because of its reputation,' and 'We know that people who don't speak out in class often come from backgrounds that make it hard, and it doesn't mean anything.'

They also talked about their backgrounds which, if anything, felt more connected to my own experience than the life of privilege I'd imagined.

The experience and research path I was encouraged and supported into continues to fuel my passion and career. The ongoing relationships with the faculty and student community serve as both an incredible resource and make me feel like I'm not on my own. I have a community of people that would help me in any way they could in my career or life more broadly.

Awkward social moments

Still, there were many awkward moments—pretending I had other plans when classmates invited me to restaurants I couldn't afford, sitting on a bench with a meal deal while waiting for them to finish dinner so I could join them for drinks, and calling my wife to see if we could afford the class photo. I had to google 'cocktail attire' for formal events, and eventually, I bought the first suit I'd purchased since my wedding with Christmas money.

Breaking out of comfort zones

I had become comfortable in my own social settings and sector successes. But innovation doesn't happen by doing the same things with the same people. Putting yourself somewhere different is both awkward and uncomfortable; I felt like I didn't belong, but those voices were lies society had told me. Lies I would have believed if I hadn't put myself in an environment where I met people I'd always thought were different than me on some foundational level.

In a world where we stick to our own groups, it's important to remember that there are good people in different social circles, with varying views. For a better world, non-profits, private, and government sectors need to collaborate. Cross-sector partnerships don't happen by accident; it takes stepping into unfamiliar environments. Don't believe the lie that everyone outside your bubble is bad, stupid or both.

Call to action

I challenge you to step out of your comfort zone. Engage with people from different backgrounds, industries, and social spheres. Break down the barriers of prejudice and preconceived notions. You might be surprised by the allies you find and the strength you gain. Together, we can address the great challenges we all face, starting by opening our circles and inviting in someone new.

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