Speech by

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Good evening. I'm honoured and privileged to have been asked to speak to you this evening. I'm now well and truly retired from the film industry, most of my work since 1997 having been in the world of education. I'm the very proud Chancellor of the University of Sunderland and for the past six and a half years I've fulfilled a variety of roles working essentially for the Department of Education and Skills.

When I was first asked to speak this evening the suggested subject was "My University and my career." Well, let me own up at the outset – I didn't go to university, although I think it's reasonable to claim that, by its very nature, my early career served as a thorough-going equivalent of going to university.

It's certainly where I learned most of the principles, which have guided me throughout my entire professional career.
So it's that career, and in particular its early years, that for the next twenty minutes or so I'll take the liberty of focusing on – in the hope that a canter through it might allow me to illustrate one or two of the lessons I've learned along the way.

In every respect my life is now thoroughly embedded in the 'Public Sector' – after four decades of working in the Private Sector, first in advertising, then briefly in photography, and finally for 30 years as a film producer.
And it's my sincere hope that, both my recent experience in the public sector, and those various other "careers" I've had over the years, will allow me to offer some kind of insight into the challenges raised by the whole concept of opportunity, adaptation and the ever hastening rate of change.

My equivalent of university was the five years I spent working at an advertising agency called Collett Dickenson Pearce, more popularly known in the industry as CDP.

That was where I got my first real break.

I was 21, recently married, and working in a somewhat 'down-at-heel' agency called Greenly's, when I saw my first CDP ad. It was the through the keyhole, 'What the Duchess saw' advertisement for Whitbread Pale Ale. Somewhat at odds with current beer ads, and on a different planet from most of the work around in the very early sixties! It was both classy and arresting. Of course I didn't initially know who was responsible for it, but I made it my business to find out and wrote to them seeking a job. All in all I think I wrote about three times before I got an interview. Then another interview, then another until, to my surprise and delight I was hired as their very first Assistant Account Executive! (detail – "salary negotiation") At risk of boring you I'll set out a bit of 'semi-biographical detail' of the next few years, in the hope that it serves to support the principle point I'll be trying to make later on.
Two years after arriving at the agency I was holding down a job I had absolutely no right to in terms of responsibility, and was also earning over three thousand pounds a year, a lot of money in 1964. You see, during that time Beatlemania had altered the nation's cultural landscape and suddenly, instead of being seen as a hardworking but essentially long-haired tearaway, I became "intriguingly acceptable". Despite, or (maybe even because of) wearing a white Carnaby Street suit from time to time!

When I'd first arrived at the agency, if they were showing new clients around they'd tend to hurry them past my office. But a couple of years later John Pearce, our legendary Chairman, would bring them in, mumbling something like, 'this is one of our bright young men.' Almost overnight, wearing a white suit and having long hair had become more of an asset than a liability!

So I became a fully-fledged account executive and things began to go very well. I was handling accounts that were growing like Topsy to a point at which I was delivering a new ad every day. It was the most extraordinarily pressurised job and it had me racing around London like a lunatic from morning 'til night. I made more mistakes in the first year than I care to remember, but just about managed to avoid anything totally cataclysmic. And it's always been true that the really valuable lessons I've learned have come from an honest, and sometimes painful assessment, of my own mistakes.

Most importantly I came to understand that, in life – "mistakes happen". The important thing was not to get trapped by them. To learn what you can from them, and then move on – and never to trust anyone who claims never to have made any!

After a while, it became apparent that the rate of error had decreased to an acceptable level and that all in all I was doing the job quite well. We were working with a new breed of talented British photographers, art directors and writers, some of whom were to form the foundations of much of my creative output over the next thirty-odd years.

CDP was a relatively small agency and I was allowed to feel very much like the favoured son. I worked extremely long hours, and in the evening John Pearce would from time to time come padding down the corridor, in his stockinged feet, looking for someone to have a drink with. On any number of evenings he would sit in my tiny office talking about his extraordinary life in publishing and advertising. It was a wonderful period of my life. I was on a steep learning curve, and here's the point – despite my age, I was encouraged to take an enormous amount of responsibility and, as a result, I felt really valued.

With good reason I believed I was working for the best agency in the world. Most of the work we were doing was both different and good; and we were winning awards and gaining recognition left, right and centre.

Prior to arriving at Colletts I'd done three years at night school doing my City and Guilds in nine core subjects, all related to advertising, but it was CDP that essentially served as my university.

In addition to John Pearce, I worked with any number of other extraordinary people, most of them in the creative department. In particular I had this tyrant of a taskmaster, the Creative Director, Colin Millward. Without doubt he taught me more than anyone I ever came across, and he did it in a very unusual way.

Most days I'd take a piece of work into his office for approval and he'd sit nibbling his nails for a while and then, in his broad Yorkshire accent he'd say 'It's not very good, is it?' And I'd say 'Isn't it?' and he'd say 'No, it's not very good at all.' And I'd ask 'What don't you like about it?' 'You work it out. Take it away. Do it again. See you tomorrow'!!

For what felt like years, I was terrified of him. I'd leave his office and just stare at the bloody ad. Then I'd go and talk it over with a copywriter, or one of the art directors, and we'd sit and curse Colin. But 99 times out of 100 he was right, and we would come back the next day, usually with something far better.

Years later I said to him, 'You know, you were a real bastard. You were always hyper-critical, and I never remember you steering us in particularly useful direction.'

'No', he said 'I did something much more valuable, I taught you to bloody think for yourself.' And he had!

At the same time he'd taught me another incredibly important lesson; one that I have never forgotten; and that is, that what's 'competent', or even what's 'good', can only ever be is a point of departure, never a satisfying point of arrival.

One day John Pearce announced that he had agreed with Roy Thomson to 'second me' to the Sunday Times for six months. It proved to be both an exhilarating and ghastly experience.

For the first time I came into contact with serious politics (of the organisational or 'office' variety) and I suddenly realised how amazingly collegial and supportive Colletts had been in those early days. It was a salutary lesson.

I did my six months and returned, very grateful to be back. But strangely and somewhat sadly, those six months away cut some form of umbilical cord, and somehow I was never able to feel the same way about the agency again.

In my last year and a half at CDP I was lucky enough to work with Charles Saatchi and Alan Parker (both in their very early twenties) who'd just joined the agency.

Among other tasks we were asked to relaunch Selfridges! It turned out to be a fabulous challenge. John Pearce had said, 'everyone will tell you retail advertising is a nightmare, don't believe it, you're going to change the entire image of Selfridges. You're going to do the best and most visible campaign that will appear in the whole of next year. I've talked them into running a different whole page in the Evening Standard, every week!'

And we did come up with some fabulous ads. We'd spend all day Monday at the store looking for an idea to run on the Wednesday. At least, Charles Saatchi spent all day there. He would always end up swanning off with some girl from the perfume counter. The rest of us would go back and do the actual ad! Invariably based on an idea Charles had at lunch – immediately before swanning off!

It was an amazing period, typified by the fact that everything and anything seemed possible; there was no sense that any problem could possibly defeat us.

When, in 1967, I told John Pearce that I'd decided to leave the agency and start on my own, he immediately offered to invest £3000 of CDP's money in my new business. I'm happy to say it was sufficiently successful that within two years I was able to buy them out.

In truth, the few years spent in photography were always something of a means to an end.

My real passion lay in the cinema, and I'd developed enough confidence to believe I could make a success of it. In hindsight, most of that confidence was based on a spellbinding level of ignorance. But that wasn't at all unusual in the 60s!

Film proved in some respects to be very different from advertising – for the most part the agency business is based on a very quick turnaround. But there are a great number of similarities, most particularly in the management of the overall creative process.

To make a film, you start with the sometimes lengthy process of development. That usually begins with a "treatment" of a few pages, outlining the concept, the characters and the broad narrative. That's followed by a draft screenplay and eventually, sometimes many drafts later, the final or 'shooting script'.

It's this final script which forms the basis of all the detailed planning that goes on during pre-production; that's to say everything that takes place before the cameras actually grind out even a foot of film.

The producer will have hired, in addition to the screenwriter and the director, all the heads of department for the film; the head of the art department, the head of costume design and so on and so forth.

The producer then devolves budgetary control to the heads of each department and leaves them, for the most part, to hire their own team. These will be people that they in turn trust, people who as "freelancers" live and die by their ability to deliver. This is a world in which there's no need for "performance indicators" - if as a film freelancer you don't deliver, then quite simply you might as well leave the business before the business leaves you!

In other words, there's no room or, more importantly, no time, for micro-management.

In filmmaking, as in many other creative spheres, power is devolved, responsibility and success shared. Once you have that shooting script, everyone on the movie, from the designer to the electrician, will be studying it from their own perspective. Working out if they've got the resources, and the time, to deliver what they've been asked for– and if they haven't, they'd better quickly come back to the producer and find another way forward.

Making a film is a peculiarly pressured business in that the actual shooting time you have is a very small part of the overall process. There's a huge sense of pressure - every day of the actual filming as it's all but impossible to regain ground that's been lost.

That's why that "pre-production" period is so absolutely critical. It's at that early stage, when cashflow is tight and an actor can suddenly drop out, or a crucial technician become unavailable, that flexibility and speed of response are vital. And it can be a pretty unforgiving experience. A mistake can cost - quite literally – millions – with the possibility your career will vanish out of the window along with it!

The only way to ensure that each new project has the best possible chance of success - with all the challenges of changes in personnel, locations, weather conditions, in fact the whole new ways of working required by each new script – is if the "producer" can bind the cast and technicians together, quickly, into a very tight and efficient unit – a "team". And it is the team that delivers, invariably as a result of sometimes quite extraordinary efforts on the part of its individual members.

And should the result of those efforts win, for example, an Oscar, say for costume design, every member of that costume team will have that Oscar on their CV, and it does miracles for their career prospects. The head of the costume department may have the moment of individual glory, but the whole team reaps the long-term reward.

Common sense tells me that under normal circumstances, to get the most out of any team, the best way is to coax, encourage - on a good day, maybe even inspire them. Most of all, it's the producer or 'team leaders' role to tell everyone what a fine job they are doing, because encouraging the best out of them will build rather than destroy confidence, and as we all know confidence breeds confidence and frequently, tangible success.

But I have to confess that when somebody really screwed up - the film has been loaded wrongly, so the shot has to be done again; or the focus puller had misjudged his distance, and the picture ended up being ever so slightly 'soft' - at those times, it's easy to forget that "mistakes happen"; in fact it was often more tempting to scream blue murder, and seek to apportion blame, rather than determine to solve the problem calmly and constructively, as a team.

Which I hope brings me to the point of what must have begun to feel like a rather long drawn out 'shaggy dog' story!

The increasing prevalence of this "blame culture" most particularly as whipped up in the media, has only served as a massive distraction from our overwhelming need to develop the type of skills which focus on problem-solving, rather than 'mud-slinging' and 'back-covering'; responses which can never produce an environment that allows anyone to reflect, learn and develop.

To take reasonable risks implies that things can go wrong. This need not entail blame, only an acceptance of the fact that despite the best efforts of all concerned, things may not turn out precisely as planned.

A ‘pragmatic imagination’ has historically been one of the great strengths of this country, and I believe that the proper exercise of pragmatic imagination should free organisations up to take risks and to innovate. Instead of which we find ourselves succumbing to a culture that seems to prefer to sacrifice imagination and creativity on the altar of so-called “accountability”.

It doesn’t require any great genius to understand that, in this era of rapid globalisation, it is only through the development of talent, originality, maybe even daring, that we as a nation have any possibility of emerging as a successful competitor in what will undoubtedly prove to be a very bruising and difficult century. Should we fail to re-discover the confidence and the imagination that typified those early years of which I was most certainly a direct beneficiary, then, as I see it, we are simply increasing the likelihood that we’ll become marginalized, and eventually bypassed, by other, braver, more single-minded post-industrial societies. Including some from what we now, rather complacently refer to as, the ‘developing world’.

For all sorts of reasons, only some of them defensible, we seem to be living through an era in which many of even the most successful people I talk to seem oddly reluctant to really step-up and delegate responsibility. This is most certainly true in business and politics, and for all I know may well extend into the academic sphere. And yet, as I hope I’ve indicated, delegation and trust are at the heart of all the businesses in which I’ve ever been involved.

Indeed, having responsibility should, as I see it, carry in turn an obligation to share ones learning; so that those around you, be they starting out, in the middle or even at the end of their careers, have the opportunity to make the very most of their talents.
It’s about encouraging them to find out what they are capable of, in an environment (very much like the one I enjoyed at ‘my university’, CDP) within which you are **actively** encouraged to be fearless!

Whether I like it or not I remain principally known as a filmmaker. As I've explained, I didn't start there. But I was nurtured early on to really have a go, to take responsibility, to chance my arm, to trust my instincts – and as a result I'm left only too aware of how important that 'freedom to fail' can be.

Interestingly, working in the creative industries, I've found that people either come to believe they can achieve anything, or quite early on they come to believe they can achieve remarkably little.

Which brings me neatly to the principal conclusion I've draw from reflecting on my early career.

Share your learning, your experiences and your mistakes at every possible opportunity.

You'll end up discovering at least as much from sharing and discussing them as any audience will!

Thank you very much for listening to me.

Ends.

(3148 words, 23 minutes)