



REDEFINING LEADERSHIP FOR A NEW LANDSCAPE

AS THE GROUP DIRECTOR FOR CITYSCAPE, A PORTFOLIO OF REAL ESTATE AND INVESTMENT EVENTS, CONTENT AND DATA INTELLIGENCE PRODUCTS FOR EMERGING MARKETS IN THE REGION, **CHRIS SPELLER** HEADS THE INFORMA MARKETS TEAM IN MULTIPLE MARKETS, INCLUDING THE UAE, KSA AND EGYPT.

WITH A BACKGROUND IN EVENTS MANAGEMENT, SPELLER IS NOW FULLY ENTRENCHED IN THE REAL ESTATE SECTOR AND STEERS THE CITYSCAPE BRAND'S VISION OF LINKING DECISION MAKERS FOR GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS AND DEVELOPERS WITH INVESTORS AND END USERS.

WHAT IN YOUR PAST EXPERIENCE PARTICULARLY ARE YOU DRAWING ON AT THIS TIME OF CRISIS?

I don't think the world has witnessed anything like this for many decades and to pull on past experiences is not something we can do. We need all our managements skills to navigate these difficult times.

What do you think are the most important traits for leadership during this time?

Communication and transparency would be the first two words that come to mind. This is a mutual support from myself and from my peers and team. It is so important to show as much transparency and knowledge, to discuss the direction we are taking openly. There is also a lot of value in talking about the critical aspects that are impacting us as individuals and our business.

Our ability to review our relationship with our partners has become more important than ever. With the ability to redefine what we can offer in support and how we can continue to give them the ability to conduct business. Additionally, being another pair of ears has helped our understanding in how exactly we can help in their recovery.

What has been the biggest challenge recently and how are you navigating it?

The biggest challenge is the uncertainty.

We've been closely watching government response and back-to-work initiatives worldwide to understand when we can go back into the exhibition world. We must navigate this and define ourselves - not just as an events business - by reaching out through digital means to allow our partners to conduct business with our network.

Being agile and nimble in a digital age is paramount - now it seems even more crucial - what changes have you had to make to your business and what are you observing in the industry generally in terms of rapid changes?

The pandemic has proven that the world can cope with different factors. Since lockdown our business has transformed from a sit-at-home situation to one where we are able to operate, bring clients together and act as a voice on behalf of our real estate players. We have been able to combine that virtual and real world, and we've only touched the surface on some of the technology that we are looking to introduce.

We will continue to host webinars with key players across all our markets and we have also recently introduced Cityscape Intelligence, an aggregator of real estate information and a single source of new information for the industry. We are

continually growing the platform's partners, both from government and the private sector, giving a 360-degree perspective on what is going on in our market. People are looking for knowledge and information and now more than ever, it is coming from a digital direction.

How do you encourage creative thinking within your organisation?

We have used any additional time that we have, to focus on the existing products within our Cityscape brand and also to diversify from the exhibition space into the digital realm. We've analysed feedback from our partners over the past three to four years and used that information to build strategies.

The entire Cityscape family has been involved in reviewing information, data and current roles in weekly or fortnightly meetings where we bounce information off each other to ensure a clear strategy when we do come out of this. That way we can continue to offer a better service and support, and increase our value proposition to our clients.

We are also looking at how the industry and the world may change. The pandemic will have a huge impact on the global real estate industry. Working from home is having a huge impact on how people shop and behave - this will be felt across all

sectors in real estate, not just residential. So it is key for Cityscape in future events to understand how we can best support more B2B and all sectors of real estate. We have seen some amazing stories such as Mubadala and Honeywell starting their own PPE production lines. Manufacturing, especially in the Middle East, will be hugely impactful and very beneficial for the industry.

What's your decision-making process?

We work as a team and openly discuss any major decisions that need to be made. There are times where I need to make that final decision but nine times out of 10 those decisions are made within a team. At the moment it is all about looking forward - towards 2022-23, when we believe the market will be back on its feet. The right decisions and sustainable practices need to be implemented now for business longevity.

What advice would you give to someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

Always listen. Listen to all voices within the team and discuss before making any decisions. Stress test plans and speak with stakeholders and partners before any major changes. You need to keep an open mind. At the moment, we are all learning and going through this process for the first time.

What were the biggest challenges facing your industry before Covid, how have these changed?

The real estate market has certainly witnessed its share of ups and downs in 2019; we have seen a lack of demand coupled with an oversupply in the market and falling real estate prices.

But the outbreak of COVID-19 remains the biggest disruptor to the market in 2020. We have seen governments, businesses and communities globally facing up to this reality and while the short-term impacts on economic growth, business activity and individual behaviour are undeniable, the consensus is for

a rebound in the second half of 2020, although the exact trajectory is unknowable.

We are seeing interesting trends though, not all real estate asset classes are performing the same during the crisis. Yes, we know that tourism, hospitality and retail have taken a hit, but self-storage facilities, industrial facilities, pharmaceuticals, and data centres have faced less-significant declines.

Experts seem undivided in their stance that the industry needs to look beyond the pandemic, by looking at adapting to new operational models around a new normal in order to maintain longevity. We will begin to see the real estate industry adapt to these new models. For example, the logistics' space is already being driven by a rise in demand from the e-commerce sector, and as more consumers shift to online retail, it may also further boost already high demands for industrial space.

Looking at the commercial office sector; we will see innovative trends emerge here and it will give the industry a chance to reinvent themselves, moving away from open-plan layouts and densification trends - which have dominated the office sector over the last few years.

What motivates you as a leader?

My team are probably my greatest motivator. Working with like-minded people who continually think outside the box, talk new ideas and gain valuable insight are all great motivators for me.

How do you ensure your own personal development?

I'm lucky to be part of a fantastic organisation that continually supports on personal development, on a one-to-one basis with peers or through online learning platforms such as the superb LinkedIn learning, and many courses on our own internal portals which allow us to refresh and implement our different skill sets.

What's one thing most people don't know about you?

I used to teach volleyball in Sao Paulo, Brazil

and for a brief stint worked on a cattle farm in Argentina.

What's one productivity tip you wish everyone else knew?

When you are working from home and you are on MS Teams or another platform, every so often turn the camera off and jog on the spot whilst you're having the conversation. I do this on a regular basis and it really helps you focus and concentrate. Our business is in events so when we talk to people, we're talking and walking and when you're online you don't get the same effect.

What is your most prized possession?

My family. It sounds wrong using the word possession, but my family are everything - I'm a family man.

What is the biggest luxury in your life?

My biggest luxury right now would be my garden, we're blessed with where we live. Having the ability to spend some time outside and experience a little bit of normality has made a massive difference.

What makes you get out of bed each day?

I love working and I have a passion for learning, listening, understanding, and developing my team. I don't see myself necessarily as a pure events person, I see myself more rooted in the real estate industry. The thought of being able to get up and do something positive that will support the industry and learn from every conversation I have is more than enough motivation.

Can you name a person who has had an impact on you as a leader?

A gentleman named Gavin Brown. He was my mentor within the exhibition business when I used to work at Haymarket Exhibitions. He taught me a lot and always used to say: "from the events world, one person has never run a good show," because it is all about a team and bringing all the different elements and skills sets together. **CEO**