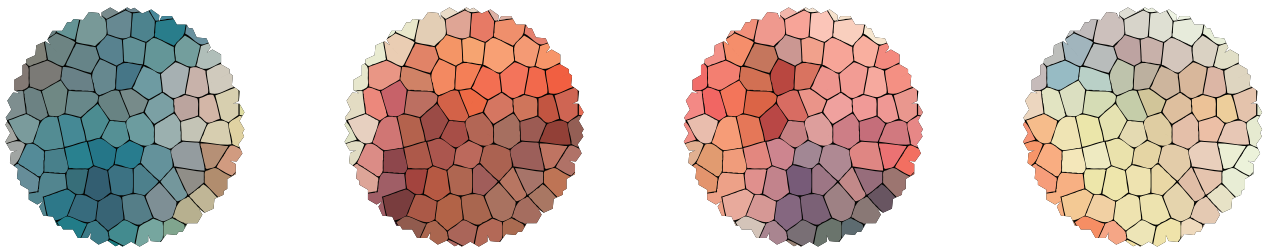
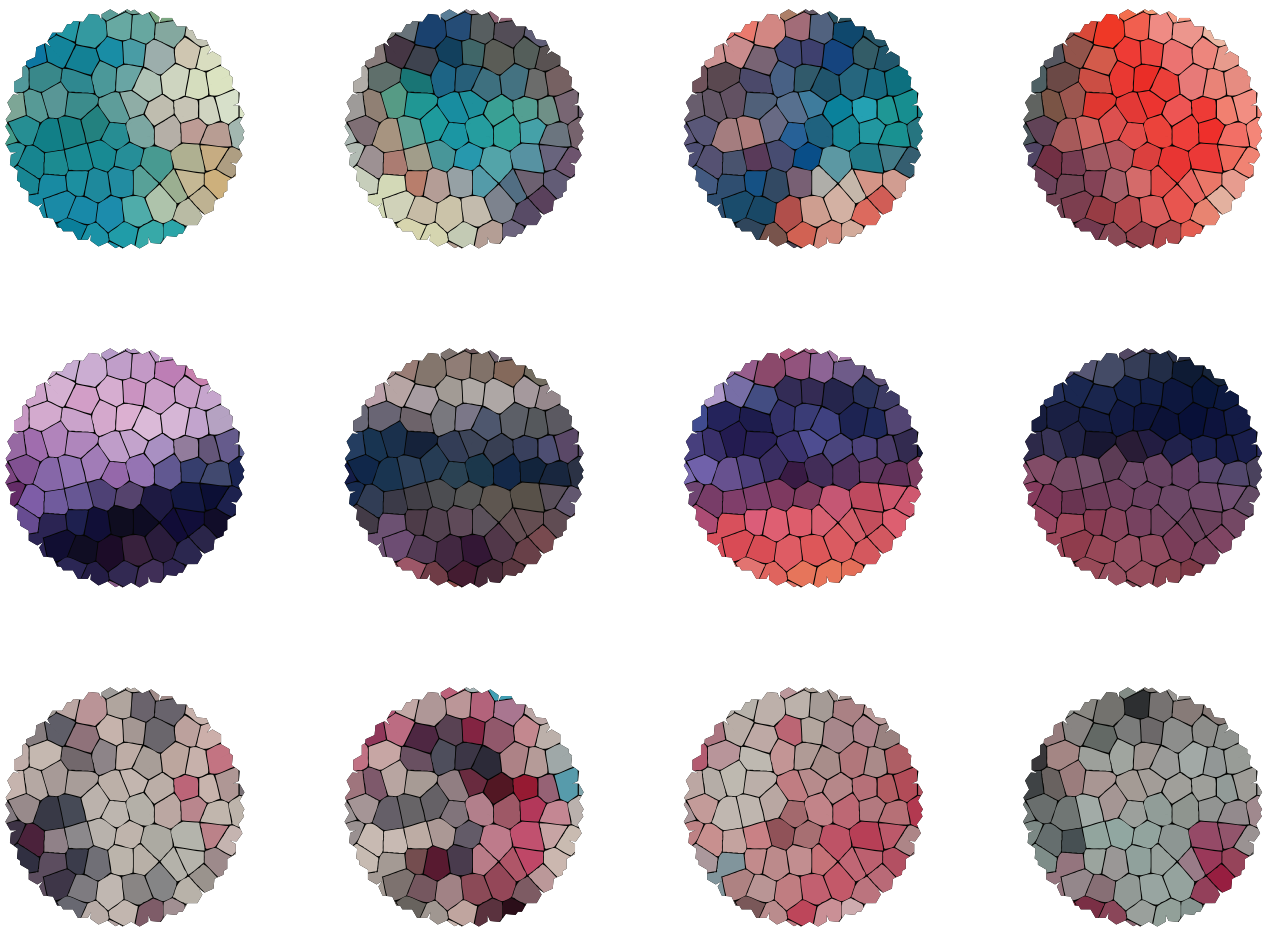
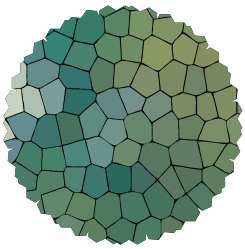
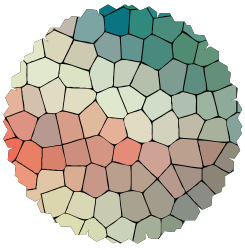
David Grayson talks to the author of *The Mosaic Principle* and a key speaker at EFMD's Conference for Deans & Directors General, Munich, January 2018

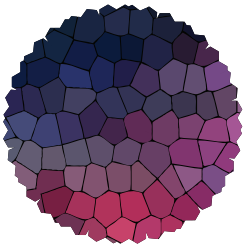


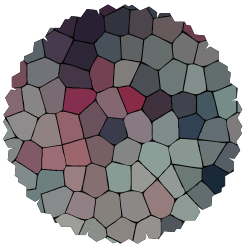
A conversation with Nick Lovegrove

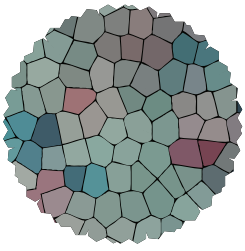












Nick Lovegrove is an author, educator and executive coach. He spent more than 30 years at McKinsey & Company, where he became a senior partner in the London office and then managing partner of the Washington, DC, office. He has since served as senior director of the Albright Stonebridge Group, and as US managing partner of the Brunswick Group.

Lovegrove has worked extensively across the business, government and non-profit sectors. In government, he was a strategic advisor to British prime minister Tony Blair; and in the non-profit sector his board roles have included the Royal Shakespeare Company and Teach First. He currently chairs the board of the Chatham House Foundation.

He is currently a senior fellow and adjunct professor at Georgetown University – having previously served as a senior fellow at Harvard University's John F Kennedy School of Government; a senior fellow in the Global Economy Program of the Brookings Institution; and a visiting lecturer at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government. He is a graduate of Oxford and Harvard universities, and has an MBA from INSEAD in France.

Lovegrove is the author of *The Mosaic Principle: The Six Dimensions of a Remarkable Life and Career*, which is published by Public Affairs in the US, and by Profile Books in the UK.

David Grayson: You are overwhelmingly associated with the idea that leaders and managers must evidence "tri-sector" skills – confidence and fluency in the business, non-profit and government sectors. Just as triathlon athletes must excel in swimming, running and cycling. But if we only operate in one area do we still need to acknowledge empathy and understanding of other sectors? In other words, do we all need to be "tri-athletes" now?

Nick Lovegrove: I suppose the fundamental point I really tried to focus on is the capabilities and aspirations of individual people rather than institutions, although I appreciate there is an institutional agenda that emerges from that.

But I was really trying to relate this to people at whatever stage of life who were thinking about what they want to do and how are they going to achieve it. And particularly about how can they contribute beyond the narrowly defined constraints of a particular profession or cultural remit.

DG: There have been similar ideas and efforts in other countries. In the UK we have a new social enterprise initiative, "The Forward Institute", running some tri-sector programmes with a number of key government departments, various big employers and one or two third-sector partner organisations. Basically it is a leadership development programme for high-flyers from participating organisations consciously creating the kind of network opportunities that you are talking about.

NL: There have been similar initiatives in the US, including the White House Innovation Fellowships and the Presidio Institute Fellowships. These afford potential tri-sector athletes the opportunity to cross sector boundaries and make an early impact.

But if I just step back from this for a minute and think about what I have learned from talking to people about the book and listening to people about their reaction to the book, I think it confirms the hypothesis that I had that there is a paucity

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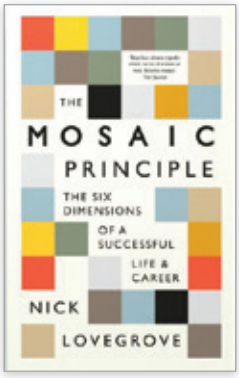
of opportunity in business schools and public policy schools and in management education generally to think about career aspirations, purpose and meaning and how to develop (as I talk about in the book) a "prepared mind". There are really very few formal opportunities to do that and I think that would also apply to undergraduate education.

At the Kennedy School at Harvard there is an age-old debate – an angst-ridden debate really – as to why so many of their graduates do not go into government immediately or in some cases ever; I think over half their graduates do not go into government and they are very anguished about it and blame all sorts of things.

But if you trace it back to where I first got into this whole discussion when I moved to the US, Dominic Barton at McKinsey started talking about tri-sector athletes. I said where did you get that from and he said he'd borrowed the expression from Joseph Nye [University Distinguished Service Professor at Harvard]; so I went to see Nye.



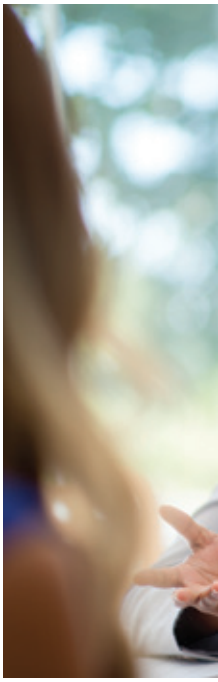
He told me he had started talking about it because of this exact issue; getting grief from alumni and funders and so on that too many of their grad students were going into business rather than government/public sector and he said it shouldn't matter because as long as they have the tri-sector mindset– that's going to be OK and what CEOs need to be successful CEOs today is to be a tri-sector athlete.

DG: I have found myself trying to explain the term, particularly with MBA audiences. So I ask them who is a tri-athlete and what is the hardest part of doing a triathlon? They will invariably say it is the transition points of getting off the bike to do the swimming or getting out of the water to do the running. So the transition points are the parts that are really difficult. Do you think that is partly what gave Joseph Nye the analogy of the tri-sector athletes?

NL: I think what he was thinking of was so many of the problems and issues we ask government to deal with and assume they are government problems are really societal problems and they require approaches from business and non-profits as well as government. So you need people at senior levels of business who have not only that mindset but also the capability to think about policy, to think about social impact, to think about change above and beyond the narrow definitions of what a business is for.

DG: And it is crucially linked to this idea that the purpose of the business, as Charles Handy would say, is something that each business has to work out for itself rather than to take the lazy notion that the purpose of business is to maximise shareholder value.

NL: Yes and I talk about this in the book. In each era that issue is discussed differently by businesses at the cutting edge. Silicon Valley has probably



done more thinking about this in the last 10-15 years than almost any other group of businesses. For example, Mark Zuckerberg, who wrote about how Facebook was really there to solve a problem in society and if it could make money on the side all the better.

DG: I don't know if you saw it but George Serafeim, a young professor at Harvard Business School, has done an HBR blog on Zuckerberg's essay on what is the purpose of Facebook. He is one of a number of business school academics involved in these discussions around business purpose and he is actually very positive about this Zuckerberg essay as an example of meeting many of the criteria for what constitutes a good societal purpose.

I think the blog is good in terms of describing a number of critical elements of business purpose but I am not as convinced by his optimism that the Facebook example is illustrative of this being absolutely right.

NL: I think it is clearly a journey that Zuckerburg is on and it could lead in all sorts of directions... changing some of the main paradigms of life. I also look at the example set by Jeff Bezos' leadership of Amazon, principally for two reasons:

First because his own story, even in a relatively short time, is someone who crossed over a number of divides and, second, because he has clearly said that he likes to hire natural "athletes" who were not experts in a particular arena but who can straddle a number of transitions.

I think you make a very important point about the importance of transitions – it is sort of what I am talking about when I talk about contextual intelligence as a crucial characteristic of success because I think it is the ability to adapt quickly and acutely to a change of environment, a change of context and to respond to that change.

That was rooted very much in two pieces of management research – one was the Ronald Heifetz work on adaptive leadership at the Kennedy School, which I found fascinating, and the second was by HBS which did this massive project on who were the great leaders for the 21st century and their conclusion was it was less about inherently great people and more about matching people with clear aptitude to the particular context, because context matters.

DG: That probably goes back to your "T" analogy and having the running thread of the right expertise in leaders and in teams.
NL: Exactly. I think the reason this work is timely and important is because there has been such a swing in the pendulum from celebrating the broadminded and broadly experienced person to celebrating the specialist. I always think of consulting firms as being weather vanes as they can pretty much pick up the weather and which way the wind is blowing and that has happened in my generation. When I first started with McKinsey, we were all generalists; there were a handful of specialists and they were looked down upon a little to be honest – we certainly spent a lot of our time thinking what are we supposed to do with them because we obviously could not promote them because they are just specialists.

But by the time I left it was the other way around and that's a big change in one generation. People who pretended like me to know quite a number of things are viewed as somewhere between dinosaurs and amateurs.

DG: If you had a magic wand and could speak to the deans of management and business schools about what you have learned and have written about in the *Mosaic Principle* what would be your wish list for aims business schools should have?
NL: I suppose one of the ways of approaching it would be to say the role of professional management education is not exclusively or even primarily to train people for a specific profession but more to train people for a professional life of leadership and impact.

And preparing people is not just about developing a set of skills and capabilities but is also about a well-thought-through sense of what they want to do and how they want to do it and the choices they are likely to make and the challenges they are likely to face – in a very full sense you are essentially preparing them for life and if that is the case you would want business schools at the very minimum to build into their programmes opportunities to do that. That would involve a certain amount of introspection but also exposure to a range of different success models and clear identification of the principal dimensions and challenges.

That would include confronting and explicitly recognising that there is a whole swimming pool and you don't want to restrict students to

one lane. There is a whole arena that you need to be aware of and exposed to and you need to think about how you are going to do that.

There are two other things I would want to address – the first is life is long and the second is that life is also hard and you are likely to have setbacks along the way and moments when you may have to put yourself in harm's way or at least put yourself at risk and you may run foul of that.

DG: In the book you have put a clear moral compass as the first of your six pillars. For me it was quite significant that you started with that.
NL: I didn't have any clear order to be honest and in my own mind I still don't. I just happened to have an editor who is very experienced and astute – or maybe it just comes down to the experiences I had at McKinsey and elsewhere where morality had become the central issue with the realisation that there is an existential risk when you confront what I call areas of morality complexity. If you are not prepared for that you can face many pitfalls – a small mistake can become a very big mistake.

DG: I personally thought that made absolute sense; that it is the bedrock because if that isn't right – that effects everything. I do think having that wider sense of the societies in which we operate is very important in management education. I don't think there is enough of that.
NL: That is the way I tend to think as well. It is a long time since I was a student but all of my teachers were focused around the technical side of things and how to solve technical problems. They acknowledged that that required an understanding of the political environment but certainly did not really push me to think about what I wanted to do and how a range of interests might be relevant and what inspiration or insight to draw from that.

I suspect that education has, if anything, become narrower in scope and more focused on nailing these areas of special focus. I think we have to acknowledge that there are probably fewer organisations now who take a life-time career management approach – it may have been plausible once to start working somewhere and maybe expect to spend your entire career there with a benign management leadership that said "I think you should go here now and do this". There is very little of that now

DG: It's all about being responsible for recharging and refreshing periodically on your own account. In Silicon Valley the concept of a "tour of duty" is much more prevalent and it puts much more emphasis on you as an individual to be thinking about this and how am I going to invest in some programmes that are going to do me some good.
NL: I think you make a very important point in that the irony is that we have this industry that is focused on the technological approach and yet is the most substantively thoughtful in approach about people and employees and is building an awareness of life in this technology-enabled but also technology-challenged world.

First of all they think a lot about the physical environment (clearly thinking about the environment as being important to the life that people lead). They worry about silos so they develop silo-busting techniques. They try to create open space.

They are pushing to reinvent the nature of work but at the same time reverting to some of the old norms such as it matters if people turn up to work. Personally I find it rather curious and admirable that some of these businesses that are rich in technology say you must turn up to work. But what they are saying is that you get inspiration from your colleagues; you can't phone it in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
David Grayson is Director, Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Cranfield University, UK, following a 30-year career as a social entrepreneur and campaigner for responsible business, diversity and small business development