

## **Leadership Podcast – Leading the Way**

### **Transcript of podcast – Episode 5**

#### **Jonathan Darling and Arnab Seal**

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##### **Jonathan Darling**

Hello, I'm Jonathan Darling, I'm vice President for education and professional development at the RCPCH and welcome to Leading the Way, our Leadership podcast series. This podcast comes out of our belief that leadership is for all of us, and that we can all benefit from hearing and sharing stories about our leadership journeys. It's my pleasure today to introduce Arnab Seal, who's a neurodevelopmental Paediatrician. He's going to tell us more about himself as we go along, but it's great to have you here today, Arnab.

##### **Arnab Seal**

Hello and thank you for having me, It's a real pleasure to be here talking to you, Jonathan.

##### **Jonathan Darling**

So maybe to start us off on Arnab, can you just sum up your leadership journey so far, just in a minute or so?

##### **Arnab Seal**

So, I'm a Paediatrician who started my career in paediatrics in India. I grew up in Calcutta, my undergraduate degree was from Calcutta and then I did my postgraduate MD from the Mumbai University and then I came to the UK when I was just under shy of 30. And then started right from the bottom and over seven years, went through training here and obtained my CCT in General Paediatrics, but I had a great interest in neurodevelopmental Paediatrics.

And at that time, I went back to India for about 3 years with a project of setting up a hospital based on a DGH model like we have here, which didn't exist in my part of the world. Then came back after three years and then for the rest of a good couple of decades spent within the NHS, initially both as a general paediatrician and a community paediatrician, but my focus and my interest has been both in neurodevelopmental Paediatrics and in medical education.

##### **Jonathan Darling**

Fantastic. Now our paths crossed when we were both senior registrars in Leeds.

**Arnab Seal**

Indeed, that's right. That goes back a little way, doesn't it?

**Jonathan Darling**

It does, and then we've been in touch for many years as we've both been working in Leeds. And so thinking about leadership, what got you involved in leadership, would you say?

**Arnab Seal**

So, I think looking back, my main sort of leadership journey started at the time when we started thinking about setting up a service back in Calcutta. So, when we were here working within the NHS, it became very clear to us the advantages of a system which was well integrated with all the different things available. And at that time, a group of us got together. There were seven of us who started the project, and all of us took on that role of going back and then working through both clinically, but also very heavily within the management system of building something right from scratch and that was really exciting.

**Jonathan Darling**

So you were building a new hospital from the beginning, you didn't have anything there to start off with?

**Arnab Seal**

We didn't have anything at all. It started from trying to get loans too and trying to get land where we could actually build something.

**Jonathan Darling**

And it was a not just a new hospital, but a brand-new model of care?

**Arnab Seal**

Absolutely. So, we wanted to change the existent system to something which was more like an institution where people could come not based on who their clinician was, but more as a brand of an institution where they would get good quality care.

**Jonathan Darling**

And as you look back on that, so you had three very intense years by the sound of it. What do you learn and take away that maybe has been part of your career subsequent to that?

**Arnab Seal**

I think you're very right, it were really a very intense 3 years. We learned a lot of things. One of the major things we learned about hospital management was that if you were actually in charge and you were negotiating whatever it was, whether it's with construction, whether it is with medical equipment or with drugs, you could get a much better deal than you could otherwise. We also were looking at hospital designs and when clinicians are actually involved in the hospital design, things work much better. The downside of

course, of doing something like this in a setting where it is a private healthcare model is that once you're starting to service your loans, that's the time either you have to keep expanding and we didn't really have money. We had taken loans based on personal guarantee, and that's the time you kind of start losing control and you start compromising and you realise that what you dreamt of quite naively and when it hits the realities, there are lots and lots of compromises to make and sometimes those compromises might be one too many.

### **Jonathan Darling**

And you were kind of following your dream in a way of this vision of how things could be and should be, and maybe it was hard to get it through to functioning in quite the way you'd hoped. But would it put you off following your dream in the future?

### **Arnab Seal**

No, absolutely not. I think even though there were compromises to make, we really did manage to change a lot of things in the system, both in terms of clinical systems but also academic systems. And we individually, I mean the group of us who were there, we learned a lot about ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses, what made us tick. And even today, which is nearly 30 years on, people still talk about what was achieved by those, because most of the health systems in that part of the country still follow things like consultant lead care, things like, you know, we were the first neonatal unit and doing retrievals which is commonplace now. And a lot of things did change, and we were a, you know, multidisciplinary setup. It's still going, not in the same way as we had thought it would, but it is a huge setting in eastern India with over 650 beds.

### **Jonathan Darling**

Wow. Maybe turning to your work with a textbook you've written a textbook I believe on children with neurodevelopmental disabilities, and I think it came out 2013 with Mac Keith Press. So, can you tell me a bit about how that came about and what you learned on that journey?

### **Arnab Seal**

Well, I was one of the editors, I was the chief editor. And there were four of us, and we all contributed and we had invited authors across the UK into the different chapters. So roundabout starting, you know, around mid 2000's, we realised that there wasn't really a good textbook or a go-to source of information and finding information on the net wasn't that easy at that time. The last textbook by David Hall was more than 10 years old and it was out of print. A few of us, mainly me and another colleague, Jill Robinson, we were very interested in pursuing this and we got together a format, we wrote up and we went to different publishers at the time, got nowhere.

But so, for about six, seven years, it kept appearing in my PDP of something that I really wanted to do and kept pursuing. And then we were doing it the wrong way. It was when we had contact with one of the chairs of the British Academy of Childhood Disability, who

learned about the project, became very interested, became a co-editor, then things started to flow. So sometimes it's about getting the right contacts to give you the right breaks to make things happen.

### **Jonathan Darling**

I guess also being determined to keep going with the vision, even though it's challenging to get off the ground.

### **Arnab Seal**

Absolutely. I think you need to be tenacious if you believe in something, you've got to be tenacious and pursue it.

### **Jonathan Darling**

And leadership is often seen in areas like management or leading organisations or services. But what about in education? Do you think writing a book is a form of leadership? How does it fit in with your journey?

### **Arnab Seal**

I think it is certainly a form of leadership because being a part of an editorial team and then subsequently we've gone on to create an E-course which was an even larger undertaking. You need huge leadership qualities because not only are you negotiating with your co-authors and co-editors, you're also dealing with a whole range of other professionals who know their bit, but you're the person who has to bring it all together. I, of course, had some advantage in that because I was also part of co-organiser of the PGDip and Master's course for Leeds University. So that gave me some edge in terms of knowing some of those alliances that you need to make in that field.

### **Jonathan Darling**

Thanks. Let's turn to the involvement you've had in the European and international work around childhood disability. Can you just tell us about that journey and how you got involved?

### **Arnab Seal**

It's been an interesting journey. So, I became, you know, increasingly interested in Neurodevelopmental Paediatrics, towards the end of my training. But I always wanted to do both General Paediatrics and Community Paediatrics and I continued doing that right through, you know, till about 2013. But then, with the consultant on call, being resident and all those came in, and that made it very difficult. But what that did then, was push me more into Community Paediatrics and pursue Neurodevelopmental Paediatrics much more avidly.

And this was about the time when we were finishing the book, and the chair of the British Academy, Jane Williams at the time, she was also on the nominating committee of the European Academy of Childhood Disability, which is now called European Academy of Childhood Onset Disability. So, she asked me what I was going to do after, now that all this

huge amount of work had finished. She said, "Arnab, how are you gonna fill your time?" Usually when Jane said that, there was some agenda. And I asked, "What do you have in mind?" And she said, "Well, the secretary post is coming up, and I think you would be really good at it. Why don't you apply?" And that was the start of the journey and in life sometimes opportunities just come your way.

### **Jonathan Darling**

When she suggested that to you, did you immediately think I could do that or what was your reaction?

### **Arnab Seal**

Yeah, I think I'm that kind of a person when an opportunity knocks, I usually am more on the side of yes, I would like to do this. I will find out more, but I will not let an opportunity pass me by. We had a chat about what it involved and even though I wasn't heavily involved in the EACD at the time, I put myself forward and it has been an absolutely wonderful experience through that whole journey. I'm still involved with the European Academy on their board level.

### **Jonathan Darling**

So you were secretary and then you were President of the European Academy?

### **Arnab Seal**

So yes, I was secretary for six years and then I was the Chair of the European Academy for a further three years. And during that time we were also in the process of setting up an international alliance of Academies of Childhood Onset Disability and Hans Forsberg from the Karolinska, who was one of the major people pushing this and he had been a preceding chair of the European Academy. He knew of my interest in developing capacity in low middle income countries and he wanted me to take on the education and training programme of the alliance, which I did for a large number of years, even through my chair role as the EACD. And then I took on the secretary role of that organisation, was elected into that and then I was elected into the President role of that organisation. So, as we speak, I am currently the President and leading that organisation, which includes the Academies of Childhood Onset Disability of the Americas, of India, China, the Australasia, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa. We are setting up or developing these academies in other world areas and it's been a wonderful experience of connecting different global areas and developing capacity.

### **Jonathan Darling**

So you've got a key leadership role there in this worldwide organisation trying to make a difference around childhood disability. Can you tell me a bit about how you've approached that? How do you make it work?

### **Arnab Seal**

Yeah. So different people have different styles, I guess. And my way and what I have found works is that by actually connecting with people on a one-to-one basis or within small groups, you actually make personal connections. You find out what that person or if we are talking about a particular country or a region, what are their priorities? How does it work for them? And once you understand that, and once you walk in their shoes for a little bit, then you are able to come up with a plan which jointly together you come up with and you make it work. Otherwise, it doesn't really work, so I'm a strong believer in these personal connections. So you make time to listen and then you reflect on it and then you come up with something which you do jointly.

### **Jonathan Darling**

And how does that work when you've got leaders of the different organisations for childhood disability across the world? That's a lot of people you might want to connect with. How do you do it?

### **Arnab Seal**

That's a very, very good question actually. So we are all different in our perspectives to some extent, but there is a commonality. I guess within these organisations, which are volunteer based, these are people who are heavily passionate and committed to this work and therefore they come wanting to contribute, they might come with different perspectives. And once we provide that space in which we can share those perspectives and come up with the commonality, we are able to put aside our differences and make progress.

### **Jonathan Darling**

And let me guess, there's a lot of Teams calls?

### **Arnab Seal**

There is indeed a lot of Teams calls which are from early morning to late night, given the different world's regions.

### **Jonathan Darling**

Yeah. So maybe let's think about one aspect of leadership, which is often encountered, which is how we deal with challenge or adversity or difficult things that crop up. Can you talk about your approach or anything you've exemplified along the way that you could refer to?

### **Arnab Seal**

So, I guess it is fair to say that as paediatricians and also increasingly, within the current context of the challenges that we face on a daily basis within the NHS, all of us will face significant challenges, whether it is within the workplace or even outside the workplace. Overall in terms of approach, I think what I have found personally is that the first response when there is a very significant challenge is that you want to run away from it. And one of

the things I taught myself to do is to not run away. You kind of stand there, you face up to exactly what the problem is and study it carefully in depth to understand what exactly it is, what is the challenge and then come up with the plan. So, it's like I have a favourite phrase which is 'you lean into that discomfort and once you lean into it, then you find the solutions and you then prepare'. Because if you then prepare and the preparation sometimes has to be repetitive, but the more you prepare, the more you are able to face up to the challenge confidently and that is what I find works extremely well.

### **Jonathan Darling**

Perhaps going back to when you first came to the UK, you said that's the challenge shared by many. Was it a challenge for you and did you find ways to surmount it?

### **Arnab Seal**

Yeah, I think it is a significant challenge. And as you've heard in the story that I have done this journey a few times, back and forth the first time you do that and for me, it was actually moving from Calcutta to Mumbai. It is a huge change even, you know, we think of India as one country, actually there is a massive difference between the different states. In terms of language, in terms of culture, and it is the same when you are moving countries. There are challenges, but there are also things which support you, certainly within the UK and within the context of the NHS.

What we found was that within the NHS, there was enormous support from colleagues, from Co- SHO's, registrars, people who were bending over backwards. There was the challenge of, and we are talking early 90's, there was a challenge of, you know, racial discrimination. There were families or patients where they did not want us to touch their child or get involved in the care, and I think we are happily long past those; There is some journey still to be travelled. You deal with that by understanding what the other person's perspective is and then relying on your colleagues to support you and certainly that hasn't been ever a situation where I felt let down.

### **Jonathan Darling**

You found that the NHS has a supportive environment from that point of view. Do you think there's more that we, particularly think of anyone with leadership roles, but if we think that's all of us basically, what ways can we challenge and make sure that there isn't any racist or issues that that make it uncomfortable for people in any way really?

### **Arnab Seal**

I think currently the overt racial issues are rare. What is there are more subtle issues, and I think some of that needs to be around training and people understanding the issues. Whether it is access to jobs, access to opportunities, but also when we are doing our work, say within research, we find that when there are data sets predominantly they exclude people who do not speak the same language or who do not have similar kind of cultural values.

And we need to guard against that. We need to proactively go and look at how can we be more inclusive, how can we address these kind of differences within our system and that will help us actually manage and provide a far better quality of care to our populations.

### **Jonathan Darling**

Thanks Arnab. Are there resources or things that you found useful? Just thinking more broadly about leadership and how we can do it better, can you point us to anything that's been helpful for you?

### **Arnab Seal**

I think for me it's a few things. First thing is that, knowing my own strengths and weaknesses, which doesn't come easily. I think it came to me best when I went back to India and we went through this process, you really understand exactly which are the things you can do well. And also, you understand the things where you need to make progress and you realise what you need to do to make yourself better. So that's one, you need to understand yourself.

I think also that it is very important for us to be able to seize opportunities. There never is a good time, opportunities don't come at good times necessarily. You have to be able to try and look at those opportunities and try and see whether you can make time if they are meaningful for you.

A few general comments about leadership. I think for me personally, if something is important, you make time for it. I have a good saying which not necessarily everybody agrees with, which is time is elastic. So, you make time even though it doesn't look like there is time within there and you make time to listen. You make time to plan and then at the same time you make personal connections and with those personal connections, you build teams and you then are able to take things forward.

It's important to broaden your horizons. Whether you do that by being just in the UK, but also exposing yourself to different cultures, different perspectives, different languages, whichever way, but understand that different people have different journeys. And once you understand that, you are far better able to adapt your own style of how you lead different teams, particularly diverse teams.

And of course, one of the last things which we talked about, which was around how you manage challenge, which is by not running away, by understanding the challenge, studying it carefully and then preparing how you're gonna meet that challenge. One last thing if I may?

### **Jonathan Darling**

Go for it.

### **Arnab Seal**

Which is family first. Whatever you do and you may be extremely busy whatever, you put your family first. Do not compromise that, because that is what will give you the strength

to be able to do all these different things and juggle all those different balls that you do to serve within the NHS or any other roles that you might find yourself in.

**Jonathan Darling**

That's a great place to finish. Well, thanks very much, Arnab and it's been fantastic talking to you, we'll finish there.

**Arnab Seal**

Thank you, Jonathan. That was a real pleasure talking to you.

**Jonathan Darling**

Thanks.

(Music fades in)

**Kirsten Olson**

Thank you for listening to this Leading the way episode from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. The thoughts and opinions expressed in this podcast relate solely to the speakers and not necessarily to their employer, organisation, RCPCH or any other groups or individuals. You can find the transcript to this episode and more from the Leading the way podcast on our website, RCPCH Learning – go to [learning dot RCPCH dot ac dot uk](https://learning.rcpch.ac.uk).

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