

Breaking up baked-in systems

Living Well Together – People and Planet

Andrew Wallis, Founder and CEO of Unseen, an organisation working towards the eradication of modern slavery, talks to **Elaine Herdman-Barker**, Chair of Global Leadership Associates and Partner for Mutual Growth and the search for the Common Good about how to disrupt a system of human exploitation, the scale of which the world has not seen before. With minimum estimates of 50 million held in slavery, it took a long time for things to get this far. How can it be brought to a stop? What can leaders, from all walks of life do, to alter the progress of any system, well fixed in commercial gain?

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I'm here today with Andrew Wallis, who is the Founder and CEO of Unseen, an organisation working towards the eradication of modern slavery. His bio is attached, but the phrase 'the loveliest disruptor you could ever meet' is perhaps all that needs saying for now. Not only is it memorable, it suggests more than a fighting spirit is required to stop the exploitation of people. **Andrew, you're dedicated to helping the injured: people who are treated simply as lucrative commodities, hidden away in a illicit global trade. What's the scale of the problem you're tackling? I imagine it's going to surprise people.**

Globally, current estimates are about 50 million individuals are held in situations of modern slavery. That could be forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced criminality, forced marriage and organ trafficking. It's a trade that's probably worth half a trillion dollars profit per annum.

But if I was to ask three questions of people, namely, are you wearing clothes?, do you eat food? and do you have consumer electronics?, then we are all probably connected to at least 40 or 60 slaves in the world supply chains. So it's a big problem, but it's a problem that touches all of our lives.



That is indeed shocking. How do you go about disrupting that?



That's a great question. It often feels like you're pushing water up a hill because what you're trying to disrupt are baked-in systems that lead to situations of modern slavery. So the push factors are: economic, climate, persecution, wars; and the pull factors are a demand for cheap services, cheap goods and cheap labour. So we've got this global system that is perfectly designed to deliver the results that we're getting. So the reason I enjoyed receiving the title of 'the loveliest disruptor you will ever meet' is that in order to tackle this, you have to think at a systems level in terms of what are the big things that we need to do. But in order to do that, you simultaneously have to deal with individuals. So my organisation works into everything, our frontline expertise of working with individuals who have been victims of modern slavery, working with the police and with businesses. And, here in the UK, with the Modern Slavery Helpline. We

use all of that frontline information to really think hard about the systemic problems that are at play here.

Systemic matters such as what it means to safely migrate, or whether our model for procurement, entirely incentivised on profit, is creating the environment for exploitation to take place, or indeed society's attitude to these two questions.

And this is particularly pertinent to the UK at the moment: what's our attitude to "others"? Whether it's the migrant, or the refugee or the asylum seeker, who are all potentially vulnerable to exploitation. And then we work to gather evidence-based facts – to prove that if we all do things differently, we'll get different outcomes; we'll disrupt modern slavery.





It feels a massive problem that you're facing. How can you think strategically to disrupt this scale of problem? We all imagine we're capable of thinking strategically, planning for the long term. But from what you're saying, there's so much more to it. Real disruption, I imagine, comes when we change what we're thinking strategically about?

We're not taught in society to think either long term, or to think strategically. Let's take long-term first. We're taught to deal with the problems that are immediately in front of us. Yes, we might have a three-year plan or a five-year plan, but when talking with other business leaders, I ask, what's your strategy for the next 20, 30, 40 years? Because, for me, to tackle modern slavery, I have to think in those time lines because I'm not going to achieve our mission statement, which is to put ourselves out of business in the next 5, 10, or 20 years. I think I can do it in a generation, so 40 or 50 years. So I have to ask, what do we need to do now that will affect this issue over long term? The

second thing is, there seems to be only a limited number of people who can think strategically. That's not me blowing my own trumpet, it's just borne out by the evidence. I remember in 2011, sitting in the Home Office and them saying to me, you're not going to get an independent anti-slavery commission, and you're certainly not going to get a modern slavery act. You're out of your head if you think you're going to get better care for victims. You're certainly not going to get a helpline, and this thing about transparency in the supply chain, especially bringing businesses into the equation, absolutely not. We were in the middle of a red tape challenge.

I love it when people say to me, you can't do those things, because I probably haven't grown up. I go, well, why not? And it's partly driven by my social justice bent, but why do we have to accept the way things are? But, any idiot can do that, you then have to come forward with a workable solution. And that's a lot of work. I achieved these things, not on my own, but with the help of lots of other people because we went and did the hard nine yards, and we found the evidence. We did the hard thinking around the alternatives and built a compelling argument. But even that's not enough, we also needed a good headwind. We needed political nouse to make it happen, politically. It took five or six years just to get to that. Did we eradicate modern slavery with the advent of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015? No. And it's about coming back to that long-term aim the whole time. Course correct and keep coming back to it and keep reminding yourself that this is what we're trying to do. It will be disruption, because I think things had settled to almost the lowest common denominator, especially in the field of social justice, and saying, actually we want things to be better than just as they are. This often means completely upending things.



There's a number of elements I'd like to continue with, if I may. You touched on working with businesses and governments, and other stakeholders. It sounds as if you're bringing into your strategy, collective endeavour and collaboration, rather than being alone while fighting your corner. It sounds as though that's a central piece of your strategic intent. Is it?

I think it's both and the starting point is the lone wolf. I think this is why charities exist. They exist because somebody looked at something, at some point and said this isn't right, we need to change this. I think where things go wrong is often not long before it becomes about preserving things and you need to be able to look at that tendency and recognise it. It's then about that ability to say, I can't do this on my own. And it's the humility of recognising I haven't got all the smarts here. So, it's the old adage,

surround yourself with people that are smarter than you, so you look reasonably competent. Then, because this is a societal issue, because it's a structural systemic issue, you can't just do one bit, you've got to, or try to, do all of the bits simultaneously. It's about building coalitions. We talk about creating CoWs, Coalitions of the Willing, so to really stretch this analogy, you've got to have a herding instinct as well.

If you don't do it structurally, and you don't do it across the whole of society, then things can get out of kilter pretty quickly. You have to deal with the internal frustration that you can't always go at the pace you want to go at, you've got to wait. It becomes a constant battle and because it's a constant battle you can end up upsetting people. Sometimes they say, we can do this, but it'll take us 20 years. And you think, we don't have 20 years; I need you to do it in three. So that's a constant tension we have to live with. But it's the right thing to do and its beneficial to do it.



Leaders in lots of different sectors talk about zooming in and zooming out, looking for long-term and acting now. That's an ordinary part of their daily lives. But what strikes me is you're in an extraordinary environment, with millions being trafficked every year, there's urgency to it; the need to act now, as we see the pain and the horror that's occurring worldwide. And yet you also need to find time to pause, to look up and out, and reflect on what you've been describing. How do you manage that?

For me there's an internal compass and an internal motivation. And I would defy anybody to meet a victim of trafficking and not get some of that as well, because that is somebody's child, somebody's father, mother, uncle, daughter, son, niece, nephew. And modern slavery is agnostic, in terms of who it's going to victimise in the whole process. I've met victims with an MBA, and I've met victims that don't know what a mobile phone is, and all points in between. The motivation that this is not right, and this is not how a human being should be treated is internally set within me. My primary role in dealing with it is about vision setting, and leading the organisation forward because what we're dealing with is a structural societal problem. My role is 80/90 per cent outward

facing, and a lot of that outward facing is about putting my organisation out of business, because we're trying to tackle these structural issues so that modern slavery can't exist.

As for pausing, I can pause when I'm pushing up the daisies, because life is too short. But there are times when I just need to reflect and think. And, for me, it's simple things like taking the dog for a walk, and just allowing at a subconscious level, things to percolate and trickle through, or just stepping away. Because if I don't disengage and decouple, it's very easy to get ground down, and becoming ineffective. I'm also an external processor, I also just need to kick these things around and that helps with formulation of ideas and next steps.

And disengaging, decoupling, pausing, these speak to a relationship to time, and being conscious of how we work through time, which is probably very unfashionable in today's world where we're pretty squeezed and pinched for time. I'm thinking about leaders in other sectors who may have an interest, feel a sense of commitment to dealing with modern slavery, but don't find the time to engage. If we've got our noses, as you say, to the grindstone, how do we disengage and find a different relationship to time so we can act?

It's difficult, because it means you've got to make a conscious decision to swim against not only the tide but the shoal that's going in the other direction. But, there's a lot of research about how effective we can actually be in an hour. The research suggests that it's only for about a maximum of 40 minutes in every hour. After that we should disengage, and should step away. I've just taken my senior management team through this. I said, I only want you to work 40 minutes in every hour. And you could see the initial shock of how does that work? All the evidence seems to suggest that it does. So the first step is how can we be productive? And the point of pausing, and the point of thinking, and the point of boredom is allowing our brains to reset, so that they can cope.

Part of the pausing, reflecting, and stepping away is building in time for recreation, for rest, for boredom, so that when we do work, it's effective. A lot of my role, and for many in senior roles, is about thinking, mulling, contemplating, and less about doing. So that when we act, it's effective, but also it's about the long term. When is it time to shut the laptop, or turn the phone off? And when is it time to act? Often we think we're far more important than we actually are. And then we discover that the world functions quite happily, and our organisation functions quite happily without us. So that should bring a little bit of humility to the whole process. It's finding that balance.



And what do we get as individuals from engaging with something beyond ourselves?

You mentioned earlier about your inner world, and what's motivating you, so what might individuals get out of contributing to the lives of people they are never going to meet?

Let me bring it back to the long term. So when you're lying on your deathbed, what do you want to be written in your obituary? You worked all hours that you possibly could, and at the end of all that, all you can think of is, so what?

Or, this is what I contributed to society, this is how I tried to make better where I am, and of the situation that I'm in. In fact, do you even need that recognition by helping someone that you may never meet? If you do, then actually, there's a question around your value system there as well. So for me it's about how can I contribute to improving the world where it currently is. So that obituary talks about the value that you've given back, how you've contributed, not what you've amassed or acquired. And great, we had thousands of stock options. Well, guess what? They don't come with you. And so the ultimate long-term question is, how do you want your life to be assessed at its end? And then work back from that to wherever you are and say, okay, what does that direction of travel now look like, from where I am to then?

That's a great question, and could that be applied to businesses?

Yes absolutely.

I wonder whether some businesses are getting lost in the woods of success, and that your notion of success could be broadened significantly?

Absolutely. Why do businesses exist? If you're a CEO or a senior leader you need to ask, what is the purpose of what we're doing? What kind of organisation are we? Are we just about maximising the return to shareholders and investors, and generating profits and getting bigger salaries and doing more, more, more? Or, actually, is there a social purpose to business? And, if you go back a few centuries, the purpose of business was for social good, and I think we've lost that. We've lost it through things like quarterly reporting, and the way that investments are structured, and how we assess what a good business is. We should be saying, business is part of our social construct. So what is the purpose of that business, and what social good can it bring? Because, otherwise, it's lost, it's just a money-making machine. And, unfortunately, this ties all the way back to modern slavery. The business environment has led to procurement only being incentivised on profit which puts enormous strain on a business. Quarterly reporting does exactly the same. And once you put those pressures into the system, they work their way down the system, and then you create an environment that is ripe for exploitation and corner cutting as we regularly read in the press.

So, if that's true, it follows that the purpose of business is to bring exploitation, and is that really what we're about? And there aren't many people who would answer yes to that, but it's the inconvenient truth. So if we want to change the system, then we need to change the business model. Businesses are full of good people who want it to be significant and bring change, but sometimes it's a bit like the Matrix: you get plugged into it and then you can't really see the wood for the trees. We need to ask, what's my individual purpose, and what are my values? Does that align with this business, or do I need to realign this business, so that there are values and there is purpose.



I've got one final question. It's about human dignity. It's an old-fashioned term, but do you think there's ample room for us to bring the notion of paying attention to human dignity, and the flesh and blood in organisations, rather than just the language of currency?

Yes, and I think we pay lip service to it, because I've never yet met a business which doesn't say, oh, our most valuable asset is our people. And then I say, well prove it. What does it mean, and how does it work? But it's more than that, it's how do we want to be treated by others, and how do we treat others? And having come through the pandemic, living in the midst of the current economic crisis and the uncertainty around the globe, and all of these massive issues that are coming towards us, there are things

that are within our control and things that are outside of our control. But one thing that is within our control, is how we treat others. That's always within our control, and that's always a choice. How do we see others, the minorities, the oppressed and the exploited? If we see them and recognise that how we treat them is absolutely critical to how we are perceived and treated as well, then I think lots of things change.

It's a wonderful thought to end on...we have a choice in how we treat others. Thanks, Andrew.

