Any organization should always look outside at the way the world is changing. Every company must adapt to meet the needs of the future, so be sure to balance the requirement to deliver today with being receptive to external messages about changing trends in the future.

It’s very important in any organization to balance the need to deliver today with looking outwards and making sure that you understand the changes that there are in the environment so that you can shape up the organization for the future. If you don’t, you could find yourself being completely irrelevant in the future, if you’re not careful. So, I really think it’s important to look out. Sometimes that requires analysis; sometimes that just requires talking to your own people. But make sure you’re getting the messages about the way the world’s changing and spend some time really making sure you’re looking at your own organization and how it’s going to have to adapt.

In my early career, I was Director of a thing called The Kings Fund Center for Health Services Development. And it was an independent charity - an independent charity - and it was trying to really help develop the NHS. So, there was a big focus in the Kings Fund on looking at the outside world, looking at European health systems, American health systems, and looking for new ideas.

Now, when I went into the NHS as a Manager, I was really quite taken aback at how closed the system seemed to be. Perhaps that’s because with a million people in the NHS, there’s quite enough people to talk to and think ideas through with within the NHS to think that you need to look outside. But from my previous career in the Kings Fund, I’d really realized just how important it was, because the ideas that can come in from outside are really rather different. And they really may be where we’re going in the future. So, while I was in the health service, I tried to continue to look outside and encouraged my own team to keep looking outside for different ideas.

One particular area that we brought in, which is now a massive piece of work in the NHS, is building up healthcare collaboratives. They’re just ways, particular ways of building good practice and getting it spread throughout the health system. So, it’s not the importance of the particular thing itself that’s important, but it was the fact that we looked around and we saw that in America that some really interesting, innovative ideas were taking place, and that that was really important to bring back into the NHS.

Of course, in Oxfam it’s entirely different, because we’re a worldwide organization. You’d think that we had already lots of new ideas coming in, but when I joined Oxfam, I joined it at a time when it had gone through a massive structural change in the late 1980s. They had put in regional management centers across the world. They had changed the setting out of the key aims of the organization. So, for a long time, people were really looking inside about the structures, the ways of working. I arrived and, once again, I thought: “This is a dangerous place to be.” Because if we don’t look outside, we’ll find that we carry on doing the work that we’re doing day to day, but that it will become irrelevant. And Oxfam itself will ultimately become irrelevant.

So, I started some work on looking at trends, not just trends in terms of actual numbers, though that was important - you know, the numbers of people living in poverty, maternal mortality, all the statistics that you might look at, so looking at those sorts of trends - but also looking about trends in what was happening in the world, looking at trends in communication technology, looking in trends in the way terrorism was changing in the world, all of which are very relevant to the way Oxfam operates in the world.

That was very well accepted by people in Oxfam, who themselves felt that they had been looking too much inside the organization. We now have that built in as part of our planning process. At least once annually, we try to bring everything together, both the qualitative measures and the quantitative measures. But we’re also trying to use our staff for that. We now use our Internet connections for doing a thing called Global Talk, where we make it possible for all our staff to say on a particular issue the way they think it’s affecting their work. For example, how is the whole, if you like, the war on terrorism been affecting people’s work in all sorts of different countries? Now, they can tell us that because it affects
the work in Indonesia just as much as it affects the work in Afghanistan. And we can get much more information by using our staff right around the world to tell us how world situations are affecting them.

So, overall I think it’s incredibly important that people are always looking outside, getting as much information about the way the world is changing so that you can shape up your own organization to meet the needs of the future.