

Building Mind Muscle: Why We Must “Throw Out the Old Playbook”

Guest Speaker **KRISTIAN TELEKI**

"But what would the new playbook say? Is there a playbook or, I mean, one of the things we said thinking the unthinkable, you can't talk about "out of the box"—there's no box anymore. In other words, you really got to think in a very unorthodox way.."

Nik Gowing

Welcome to the Thinking the Unthinkable podcast, our latest leadership conversation. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. So many fundamentals in nature, biodiversity and climate are really moving fast in the wrong direction, but there are also a lot of positives from being nimble, flexible, imaginative, to address and overcome what is really happening. Let's hear about the big change in mindset which is needed to achieve that.

And I'm joined by Kristian Teleki, Chief Executive of Fauna and Flora International. I heard him tell fellow activist organizations, quote, "Find your playbook and throw it out. We must rethink, we need a very different mindset". A very different mindset. So how to do that and why?

Well, before Kristian shares his radical thinking for others to adopt, let me tell you about FFI. It's an international wildlife conservation charity. It works with conservation partners in 48 countries to protect and restore habitats, save species from extinction and develop sustainable livelihoods. Sir David Attenborough is FFI's, Vice President. The Prince of Wales, Prince William is its royal patron. So Kristian a very warm welcome. Let me remind you — find your playbook and throw it out. Why did you say that?

Kristian Teleki

Well, thanks so much, Nik, and delighted to be here. Let me just start from the outset that this couldn't be more timely to be thinking the unthinkable. This is a moment where we need that radical thinking, but also practical thinking.

And the reason why I said that was that I find ourselves in a world that is increasingly geopolitically turbulent, we're facing serious headwinds, and I think that we need a complete reset of the way that we've been going about addressing nature and climate.

Nik Gowing

But you shocked those present by saying, throw out your playbook, think again. What was the reaction? What did you mean by that?

Kristian Teleki

What I meant by that is that that, you know, if you think about the what's being thrown at us at the moment, you know, what I if I'd asked you 10 years ago that in a matter of weeks, the world's largest donor, USAID, would disappear, would effectively stop working—you would probably look at me with as though I was some crazed individual. You know, we're facing unprecedented changes in the political system. We're facing unprecedented changes in how the money is flowing around the world, and the only way to meet that is to change what we're doing political systems are changing. Things that we thought would never happen are happening.

And so I really felt as though that we can't just sit around and have conversations amongst each other where, you know, the converted are sitting in a room in this echo chamber and feeling good about the things that we do, when actually what we should be out there is that we should be challenging others. We should be getting into those places and spaces where, you know, the climate and nature are not being talked about.

So I felt as though I needed to shake things up a little bit and get people think differently.

Nik Gowing

What do existing playbooks say and define which has to be thrown out now?

Kristian Teleki

You know, for example, I think that—take, for example—I think fortress conservation is over, you know. Excluding people from places and spaces around the world, you know, are just is not going to work if you want to have them there for long periods of time. And we, as an organization, are people-and-nature organization. We use people as the entry point.

So I think this idea of "let's fund the guardians, not the gatekeepers" when it comes to when it comes to nature. So moving away from that traditional approach of when it comes to Conservation of Nature.

Nik Gowing

You had about 250 people in the audience when you said this, and I could feel a degree of free of shock. What do you think the reaction was? What did they say to you afterwards? Quietly.

Kristian Teleki

Quietly, people would think that, thank goodness you said that. You know, I've been thinking this in my head. I've been scared to say it. But it was, you know, sometimes it takes one person to, you know, to say out loud that unthinkable—that thing that is sitting in the back of people's heads that are kind of saying, I wish someone would say this.

You know, this is such an important, you know, moment, and that we need, we need different relationships. We need different partnerships. You know, I'm certainly in the organizationally, I'm strongly advocating that, that we go out and talk to those, those organizations, or those, you know,

areas of business that we wouldn't historically. But in talking to and trying to find some connectivity—find connections, find areas of commonality—in order to in order to move ahead.

But what would the new playbook say? Is there a playbook or, I mean, one of the things we said thinking the unthinkable, you can't talk about "out of the box"—there's no box anymore. In other words, you really got to think in a very unorthodox way.

Nik Gowing

Is that something that you think is possible, doable and achieves a lot?

Kristian Teleki

Of course, of course. You know, I often say to our staff here is that that all ideas are good ideas until we test them. You know, we need to have that entrepreneurialism, encourage that spirit of coming at problems differently.

You know, I look at some of the big things that we're tackling at the moment, and you know, one of those unthinkables is, for example, should we be investing billions of dollars into saving one species? You know, as much as we love that species, what about the other myriad of other species that we are potentially losing that are incredibly important to our existence?

So I think that, you know, there are approaches that need to be taken that are going to disrupt the disrupt the system as much as possible.

Nik Gowing

Our existing mindsets adaptable, in your view, or does it require a radical recalibration and kind of shed everything? Let's start from scratch.

Kristian Teleki

You know, I often go into meetings when I say, look, all your pre existing notions, all your ideas—leave them at the door. Let's come in with some fresh perspectives and come at it from new views. Stand in someone else's shoes. Start where they are, as opposed to where we want them to be. Think about that distance between ideas and action and how you can engender that.

Look, you know, again, if I'd asked you 10 years ago if, or more, that we would be, you know, not having smoking in pubs in Dublin or cafes in Paris, again, you would have looked at me as being crazy. Or, you know, we came together to solve the, you know, the ozone crisis.

You know, my point is, is that that often we get stuck, that it's just impossible, but we know that, the impossible is possible. And it does require a bravery—when it comes to politicians and when it comes bravery, when it comes to decision-making. And when I said that earlier this year in terms of throwing out The Playbook, it just you just step away from those norms of approaching the nature and climate that we have had in the past and just really thinking differently.

Nik Gowing

Now Kristian, you talk about leaving your thoughts at the door when you've been in meetings with people. You know very well. How many actually are prepared to do that? How many feel even that's a bit of a risk, because they've brought been brought up, they've developed their career on the basis of a degree of orthodoxy.

Kristian Teleki

Yeah, I think it's a deeply, deeply uncomfortable. You know, I've been to some meetings recently where it's a three-day meeting. The first day of the meeting is, you know, is that is sort of the same-same. It's the second day where people start, maybe shedding some of those norms and ideals. And that's the third day. What actually becomes really interesting—where people start, you know, having a little bit more freedom. They've, had an opportunity to shed some of their, you know, some of their pre existing ideas, and are now able to think much more, you know, more freely.

So that, but look, there's a degree of discomfort in this and, and I think that is a good thing to do that. You know, sometimes, you know, we, as an organization, we've got, you know, with some of our partners—they think about, well, how do we operate with 90-95% certainty on making a decision? But we need to take risks. Those that we are working with on the ground have degrees of certainty of maybe 60%. It's almost, "let's suck it and see" and see what happens. They don't have the luxury of time, because these issues are changing so quickly.

And that's, I think another thing that is deeply uncomfortable—is that I think we need to take a much greater risk. You know, some of these things are not going to work out, but that's a lesson in itself. You know, we draw from those failures in order to advance. If we spend two years, three years, workshop, workshoping, having meetings, trying to get it perfect. We are not going to get there, and we are potentially going to lose ground where we should be gaining ground.

Nik Gowing

Now, two of the words you used are, you've got to be cunning, you've got to be nimble as well. Is that's something that you think comes easily? Because we would say, thinking the unthinkable very clearly—this is a process. You can't be do it in an hour or two. It's a process, like your three days, that starts, and then you've got to keep going back at it.

In other words, so people don't just drift back to what they were thinking beforehand—you've got to embed it, and you've got to make sure that there is no reverse.

Kristian Teleki

Yeah. Look, I mean, you know, I often say to people that this is, you know, this is like training a new muscle, right? If you're going out to, you know, to win a race, and you haven't been sprinting before, well, you need to, you know, you need to train that muscle group, you need to stretch, you need to do some training. But that doesn't have to happen over a long period of time. You know, you can do that in a relatively short. Period of time with the right with the right coaches, the right equipment, the right funding in order to get there.

So I I don't think that we should be worried about the ability to, you know, to be nimble, to be agile. Often we get caught up in—again, this is going back to some of the noise—"well, this is the way we have always done things." Well, that's not the case, you know, if you look around you in the world and if you applied the same sort of approach of, you know, well, "this is the way the world has always been, and this is the way economic systems, this is the way trade has worked. "This is the way political systems have worked. Look what's happened in the last six months. You know, we have seen a radical shift on that. And in fact, we've seen a radical shift in many behaviors coming out of COVID in the last the last five years.

So the fact of the matter is, is that, you know, we should be applying those same sorts of principles and norms to saving nature.

Nik Gowing

We talk about it as creating new mind muscle. You're using very similar language to what we say. Feel you can actually stretch your brain and do it safely, even if you fail. Don't use the word failure. It's about experimenting safely.

Let me move on to another issue, Kristian, which is about collaboration and cooperation. You know, you are a well-funded organization, but you still have to struggle to get funding each year and so on. Given the enormity of what is happening, I was very struck by another speaker at the conference we were both at, "we're in an exponential horse race with the sources of evil, and we are losing."

In other words, there are people out there who are thinking in determined ways to make it more difficult, to fight on biodiversity, to fight on nature, to fight on climate change.

What about the issue of cooperation and collaboration among groups like yours? In other words, to get more heist, to get more weight, to get more influence?

Kristian Teleki

Yeah. I mean, absolutely. And that is something that that certainly my peers and I have another organizations are actively thinking about, you know, looking at where we can bring complementary skill sets into, you know, into geographies, into issues. Can we put our shoulder to the wheel against a particular issue in order to get it over the line and support each other in doing that?

But that goes beyond our sector as well. You know, I want to see, and I'm actively pursuing collaborations between, you know, other, you know other sectors as well. You know, how do we, how do we bring into, you know, the health sector, much more closely into our work. How do we bring in the energy sector into that?

And you know, often, many the communities that we deal with—and 95% of what we do is at the local, community-based level—what do they want? They want more food on the table. They want

more money in their pocket, and they want a safe place to raise their children. Why wouldn't we—and why wouldn't they want that? And why shouldn't we be able to help with that in some way?

Many of those things are not necessarily in our in our skill sets, but the other organizations know how to do that. And if you start, you know, putting that together in a more coherent fashion, I would argue that you would get to, you know, that sort of the permanency of what's required in order to save nature. You know, on the ground, you know that the argument that, you know people are being more sort of evil and destructive and cunning—that's always, existed, and that's always going to exist, and there's no doubt about that, but you know, that's how we have to, you know, we have to play in that space.

We have to play in the same manner with the same sort of, you know, cunningness and ingenuity that is going to it's going to be acquired. But equally, you know, someone who's a, you know, who's an optimist and always, ever the diplomat and trying to build relationships and bridges between organizations and people.

You know, I'm all for having a conversation with those that you know may be the polar opposite, because if you can find a little bit of common ground, you can start opening windows, those cracks. And it was a Leonard Cohen song that says that, you know, that the little cracks that let the light in. You know, I am all for that. And it may not be the changes overnight, but you've seen so many times around the world. And Nik you, I'm sure you've seen this experiences in political systems where a little bit of light starts to put that in, and suddenly, through time, that light then is expanded and democracy then, you know, is shining upon the lands. And I feel the same way about the work that we're doing.

Nik Gowing

Let me just check—are you seeing that already, or is that an aspiration? Are you seeing clear evidence that when you go to the health sector or the energy sector, they do want to open their minds, even if they...

Kristian Teleki

Oh totally. Yeah, absolutely. And you know, there are organizations that we are working with, so one of the largest health care providers, indeed, private health care. Providers in this country are already rethinking about how the role of nature is going to play, you know, in their business model going forward, because they know nature is good for better mental health. It's better for respiratory conditions, it's better for, you know, one's overall well-being.

And if you can invest in that, what does that then mean? It means healthier people and less drawing upon the premiums that are going to be required in order to support, you know, a less healthy population. So we're absolutely seeing that, and I think it's that that interest is growing, for sure.

Nik Gowing

So what you're saying is, this is beyond FFI. This is beyond the playbook for organizations like yours, it's got to be much broader. It's got to be much quicker. It's got to be more radical. It's got to be more determined, more nimble and more cunning. Am I summarizing correctly?

Kristian Teleki

Absolutely. That is exactly it. And I think that is, those are the, in fact, maybe part of the chapters of the playbook itself.

Nik Gowing

Well, let me— we've got three minutes left. Let me ask you to just leave a final message, a very takeoff message of encouragement in this. It's a difficult world, but I said right at the beginning, there are so many positives at the moment, and that's why we're talking to you—because you are talking in a very positive way about how to emerge from this, not in 10 years, but in 10 months, or even 10 weeks. Be dramatic.

Kristian Teleki

Yeah. I mean, look, I mean the problems that we are facing are not new problems—they're old problems that have gotten worse. Okay, so these are not something that magically have appeared, but now we have greater attention and greater tools to shine a light on, on those. I think there's greater impetus to, you know, to address those. And I would say that the final chapter of this story has not been written. And, you know, often we look for, you know, or we're being using these negative tipping points. I'd love us to move to more positive tipping points. What are those tipping points that will then, you know, that we can get to, that actually will start getting us to a much more positive space.

I think I wouldn't be in this business if I was a pessimist. You have to be an optimist. You have to have hope, and you have to inspire others in order to take action. Because it's, you know, it's time for doing that. It's time for thinking radically. It's time for thinking that unthinkable, as you say, and sometimes that does mean taking a step back and actually challenge people.

And I encourage—one, I encourage people that are that are watching this to actually be brave enough to say, you know, what we've done, that we have tried that in the past, that hasn't worked. So don't give me that solution. We need a different solution.

And the second point, I would say is stop going to the echo chambers. If you can go to those places where you may be the lone voice on around nature and in climate, but that lone voice—I guarantee you—will open up a series of conversations and actions that will really make a difference.

Nik Gowing

Are you therefore, Kristian, almost saying, "We've got to create a new movement here—a new movement in a different direction, which is going much faster, but brings us all together to create the weight and the mass which will influence change"?

Kristian Teleki

Yeah, look, I mean, this is not just a nature issue, you know, this is a food issue, this is a health issue, this is an economic issue, this is an employment issue, you know, we can't think of these in, you know, in isolation, and I think we do a circle that great disservice if we didn't do so.

So I think the movement is already there, like we just haven't, I would say, qualified it or, you know, given it a name, and I think it's ripe for the taking. And I think there's a huge interest in, I would say, in that platform, and that desire to be on that platform.

Nik Gowing

Well, Kristian, I look forward to coming back and talking to you in a few months to find out what kind of progress you've made, and thanks so very much. You can reference every detail that Kristian has given us. A transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for us and for Kristian at Fauna and Flora International.

Do please join us when we have our next conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable. But remember what Kristian said, be radical. Be cunning, be nimble. And you can subscribe to our YouTube channel, where you'll find all our podcasts, very much in the same vein of frankness and positive movement forward until the next time from me, Nik Gowing, keep thinking unthinkables more than ever, it's both possible and necessary from Kristian and me, bye, bye.