

Leading London: Sean Quigley Shares His Secret to Making Progressive Change  
By Alexandra Folkes

---

---

As I walk into the Emerging Leaders offices on a windy Monday afternoon, Sean Quigley smiles and greets me as if we are old friends. He happily shows me to a conference room, sits down and confidently says, “so, you're here to interview me, eh?” I immediately have the sense that Sean Quigley is someone that I want to know: he is someone that I want to impress.

Quigley is currently working as the Executive Director for a small, non-profit, London-based company called “Emerging Leaders.” The mission of the organization is to retain, develop, and engage the emerging talent, or the emerging leaders, within the London community. The programs that Sean and Emerging Leaders work to orchestrate address a number of issues that are extremely prevalent in modern society. Their primary means of attempting to solve London's societal problems is the encouragement of community connection and community involvement. For example, the program *15 coffees in 15 days* allows someone like myself, a young adult, to sign up, sit down, and have a casual half hour coffee date with a social, business or cultural leader from the London community. This program, according to Sean, is “important because it creates a connection, and by creating a connection there is more chance that you will get more involved; if you are to get more involved, there's more chance that you will remain within the city”. *On Board*, another program geared toward young leaders, places young adults onto boards of directors for non-profit organizations. The young leader will gain vital experience and, at the same time, contribute to the well being of the London community. Emerging Leaders works in “direct ways,” says Quigley, who is obviously very passionate about the numerous social connection programs that Emerging Leaders offers. “We [Emerging Leaders] are connecting people to the city and to other people in the city, which will make them more likely to stay in the city,” Sean tells me energetically.

Sean indicates that it is a delicate combination of his educational background and his personal experiences that have shaped him as a cultural leader. Sean's story starts at Grant MacEwan Community College in Edmonton, Alberta, where he studied theatre and musical theatre. Sean spent time working as a

professional artistic director, actor and director across Canada before settling in London in 1999.

Arguably, it was at this time that Sean made the jump from being a cultural artist to becoming a cultural leader. “I created the outline for an academic theatre training program, then I took the program to Fanshawe College and I said to them ‘I want to do this, you should jump on’, and they did. I created the theatre program, designed curriculum with a theatre partner whom I formed my first theatre company with, hired staff, all of that.” Quigley's background in theatre and the performing arts is a clear driving force in his life. He nods and smiles as he mentions his old acting teacher, playwright, and personal mentor, Ken Brown, probably recalling a fond memory from the past.

The memory fades and Sean becomes more serious as he moves on with his history. Quigley tells me that he worked on the Fanshawe acting program for a while, until his daughter became very ill. “She has extreme bi-polar disorder, so I had to focus on that and that was three years of my life,” he says somberly. During that time Sean spent a lot of time in Queens Park advocating at the provincial level for child mental health. As Sean's daughter began to manage and deal with her own mental illness, she became the first child who was a national face of mental health. Sean proudly tells me that as they travelled with her across the country, “she spent time with Ministers, The head of Canada Post, and Senator Kirby, the head of commission on mental health in Canada.”

Quigley recounts that his time spent advocating for change with and on behalf of his daughter led him to a job as a community developer for a community resource centre. He explains to me that “the role of a community developer is similar to the role of an Executive Director in a lot of ways,” and he feels that it directly led him to his current position as Executive Director at Emerging Leaders.

When I ask Sean to clarify and explain the role of Executive Director he pauses as he looks me right in the eye and states, “that is a very smart question.” I am hardly surprised when Sean explains that a large part of his job is to connect and build relationships with people: “I'm the guy in the community doing stuff, talking to people, connecting with people. Since I started last January I've probably had about 500 meetings.” However, his role is much more than socializing. “I come up with a way to move forward,” he

replies, “I take that to the board, we create a strategic plan, and then I operationalize it, that’s the basics, but its also being the guy who is really paying attention to stuff, and reacting to stuff going on in the community.” Quigley’s job requires him to be smart, logistical, creative, innovative, organized, and sociable. Arguably, these are all skills that every true leader should possess. These skills, Sean insists, were acquired from his acting training:

The thing about arts & culture is that if you want to be an actor, you have to be able to read really well, you have to be able to research really well, you have to be able to communicate really well. If you want to be a director, you have to be able to take all of that and apply the idea of creating a concept, to host the work of the writer in. So all of those skills are directly transferable to business, and non-profit, and leadership, as well as other arts sectors.

It is clear that Sean is making great use of these skills to better our growing community. London is, according to Quigley, filled with many large institutions and many individuals who all have goals and ideas for progress. However, Sean feels that these individuals and institutions need to come together if they are going to make noticeable change.

The concept of separate entities coming together is essentially the core of Sean’s concept of leadership. Sean possesses what he calls a “collaborative or corporative” leadership style. He passionately explains to me that telling people what to do will not allow them to succeed; instead it is about “having the flexibility to look at the broad picture and find the most direct path.” Then it is about having the ability to strategically guide and lead people in the right direction. Helping various “particles,” as Quigley calls them, come together in the name of a greater goal is what community and cultural leaders need to be doing if London is going to progress and grow successfully.

The neatly summed up version of this concept can be found in the “about me” section of Quigley’s personal twitter account. It simply states, “I believe conversations lead to relationships leads to actions.” I think this is a beautifully logical mantra to live by. Realistically, it is virtually impossible to change the

world alone; however, if many individuals are to connect, their outreach is limitless, as is their potential. It is this potential for change that fuels the fire for Sean. "I am addicted to the potential of what could happen," he says as he claps his hand down onto the conference room table, as if to express just how exciting potential is to him. This potential can only be achieved, according to Quigley, if the right person is rallying the separate individuals with common goals together. He makes sure to note that being a good leader is also about knowing when to step away from a leadership role: "I am a big believer that if someone else can do something better than you, they should do it." Possessing power does not ensure success; rather, it is positive relationships that foster positive and productive environments.

In the short hour that Sean and I spent chatting together, I honestly felt that we were developing an authentic relationship, which is, in Sean's opinion, the whole point of building connections. Quigley says that he prefers to promote genuine human interaction, both in his personal and professional life. He explains that "maintaining relationships takes a lot of time and effort," and that he occasionally becomes frustrated about the slow pace of change and the excessive amount energy that needs to be expended on a daily basis. However, it is worth it when we see change taking place.

In addition to his work with Emerging Leaders, Sean has a private twitter and a private blog which he uses to express his opinions on popular social issues. His private writing has caused some controversy, as he is a man with many strong opinions. However, Quigley feels that no matter what his public persona is, he has the right to express his private ideas within his own forum. "There are certain things that I am not willing to compromise, just because I receive public funding as a director of an organization, does not mean that I can not speak as a private citizen." The opinions that Sean expresses on his personal social networking outlets have become quite popular. As Sean bluntly puts it "my posts are generally paid attention to." Therefore, these outlets have become resourceful tools for him, but they are not the be all end all for Quigley. Nothing can replace real personal and cultural connections.

As our time runs out Sean asks me about my involvement with the London cultural community. I am embarrassed to admit that my leadership and artistic involvement is unfortunately limited to the

confines of the “Western bubble.” Much to my surprise, he smiles and tells me that it's not my fault. Excitedly Sean informs me about a project he is working on with the Arts & Heritage Council of London. “They are called culture passes,” he tells me, “so you pay a relatively inexpensive lump sum and you as a student will have unlimited access to all the arts & culture related projects for the entirety of the year.” As I wave goodbye to Sean Quigley through the glass front door of his office, I silently hope that I don't graduate before he is able to turn those culture passes into a reality.