What is social leadership and why is it important?
Social Leadership is a type of authority granted to us by the community: it's based upon a reputation earned over time. It's contextual and consensual: whilst the formal organisation can give you formal power, it's only the community around you that can give you social authority. Why is it important? Because we live in the Social Age, a time of constant change, where the democratisation of technology and emergence of new forms of power, socially modified and amplified, have meant that communities sit at the heart of our success. They help us make sense of things and be more effective. Social Leadership is authority given to us by the community: it's important because it enables us to be highly effective.

What are the origins of Social Leadership?
I guess the origins of Social Leadership lie in the roots of our own interpersonal psychology and development as a species: we collectivised into communities because together we could: achieve more, be safer, and be more effective. We are now connected by new and emerging technologies, those fundamental precepts remain. If we earn the right to be within a community, then that community will keep us safe and make us stronger.

In many ways I would say that the notion of formal leadership is the artificial one: a recent construction allowing for the concentration of power and control to a small number of individuals. Historically it was the community which was prime, and in the Social Age once more this is true.

How did you get involved in Social Leadership?
I am an explorer of the Social Age: my writing and research cover many aspects of the world we live in today, from new models of knowledge and learning, to the ways that culture is formed and eroded, types of leadership and power, emergence and impact of new technologies, the role of trust, and so on. Understanding Social Leadership is a key part of this work.

The origins of my own writing about Social Leadership come from a large piece of work I was writing and have not yet published, on music and learning. It is based on interviews with 40 musicians about the creative and performance processes. The book looks at the psychology and neurology of music and at co-creation and performance. In writing this book I became fascinated by the internal dynamics of creative partnerships. This led me to write more about co-creation and performance. From there, the model of Social Leadership pretty much landed fully formed in my mind. Indeed, you will see that co-creation still sits as one of the nine components in my work, although probably few people realise that it has an origin in my research on music.

What are the elements of Social Leadership?
In my own work I focus on nine components of Social Leadership: we curate a space and choose what will be known for, we strive to become effective storytellers, shaping and sharing magnetic narratives, and we learn to
share those stories wisely, adding to the signal not simply the noise.

Social leaders understand communities: they inhabit many but take fluid roles in each. They work to support those communities, acting with humility and generosity to support others and enable them to be successful. Through those actions they earn reputation. It is the reputation which leads to social authority, the authority granted to us by the community.

Social leaders co-create within those communities: they have high social capital themselves, and ability to survive and thrive in this new world, and they build high social capital in others, ensuring that nobody is left behind, disempowered or disenfranchised by lack of equality. Social leaders are able to collaborate widely because they rely on their social authority, not simply the formal.

How is working out loud linked to Social Leadership?
Social leaders work out loud because they are not presenting a fully formed version of reality to the world, but rather working with humility within and alongside their communities to make sense of the world, to be successful, and help others succeed. It is a sign of a healthy organisation that is able to hear both stories of success and failure. Working out loud is central to Social Leadership.

Is there an assumed level of social-media savvy for Social Leadership?
I don’t focus on specific technology skills, or indeed social media specifically, but rather with the notion of social capital: that social leaders can survive and thrive in the space. Certainly a strong capability with social media is important, but more important than the technology skills are the social ones. Hence my focus tends to be on storytelling, kindness, fairness, equality, and acting with humility.

So I would not say there is an assumed level of social media savvy in social leaders, but rather that Social Leadership is far, far more than simply understanding these media. Social Leadership is about communities, connected by technology, but facilitated through the actions of individuals, the ways we treat each other.

Can you give examples of people or organisations that do Social Leadership well?
There are many individuals within many organisations that do this well, and all organisations react with a response that varies from overwhelming fear and control, through to active empowerment and enablement.

Because Social Leadership exists within communities, organisations cannot demand or control it, rather they can create spaces and award the permissions for it to be earned. However if they deny the spaces, and remove permission, Social Leadership will still exist, it will just be out of sight and in opposition to the organisation.

Social leaders are the nodes within the network: if you can think of one, it’s because they are visible. A visibility that they have earned. The key thing to remember is this: the organisation can give you formal leadership, and formal leaders may be social leaders too, if they earn it. But anybody can be a social leader, those who have no formal authority or power. And Social Leadership can always fully subvert formal. If you are interested in the conditions under which we can build high levels of Social Leadership, my more recent work on the Socially Dynamic Organisation covers just this.

Do you have any strategies for introducing Social Leadership into a business culture that’s resistant?
This is a big question: I’m just in the process of completing my next book on organisational change, so far I have 65,000 words written on just this! I talk about three types of culture: resistant organisations that actively deny and try to kill off Social Leadership and change,
The foundation of Social Leadership is helping others to succeed, so a good place to start is to turn to somebody and ask how you can help.