

Convene Podcast Transcript

Convene Series: Paul Dickinson on Sustainable Change

**Note: the transcript is AI generated, excuse typos and inaccuracies*

[00:04] **Paul Dickinson:** So I'm very excited about the industry's ability to change the rules of the game so companies can get the frameworks they need to get this job done profitably and successfully.

[00:20] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Welcome to another Season four episode brought to you by Madrid Convention Bureau. This season was recorded during the inaugural PCMA event Convene 4 Climate. And in this conversation hosted by Convene Editor in Chief Michelle Russell, sustainability leader Paul Dickinson dives into the events industry's potential to drive climate action, highlights the evolving corporate response to climate change, and shares insights on innovative event formats that foster meaningful connections. Join us to explore how events can inspire impactful environmental change. Enjoy the episode.

[01:06] **Michelle Russell:** Thank you for joining us. Paul, you've been a pioneer in sustainability for more than two decades. What originally inspired your passion for creating a global economic system that operates within sustainable environmental boundaries?

[01:23] **Paul Dickinson:** Well, I guess I first came across the problem of climate change as a very serious problem in 1997. I was doing a master's degree and I met scientists who worked with James Lovelock, who developed kind of Gaia theory. But I think it was only. It was a couple of years later, in probably 1999, when I got seriously concerned about climate change. I saw a. I did some research and I saw a paper from the Clinton White House called the Kyoto Protocol and the President's policies to address climate change. But at the heart of it, I saw a graph of CO2 and temperature over 650,000 years. And you see the CO2 and the temperature are very closely linked and then the CO2 goes way up. And so you think, well, of course the temperature is going to go up. So long answer. But the, but the essence is I got involved in climate change because I can read a graph and, you know, business people can read graphs. It's not very complicated.

[02:24] **Michelle Russell:** Yeah, that's not where you got your start, though. Where did, where did you start?

[02:28] **Paul Dickinson:** Well, so then, having decided to work on climate change, I had the opportunity to work with a lady called Tessa Tennant, very brilliant, the kind of mother of the sustainable investment movement in Europe. She actually died in 2018, but I had known about her since, I think something like 1992 when she, she bought the first sustainable investment funds to Europe. And I was working with her and we began to discuss the idea that investors could take action on climate change through the companies they owned. And we had some kind of ambitious ideas at first. But in 2001, early 2001, we made two decisions. One is we would start as a global organization and secondarily that we would use or work with investors to get data from companies rather than demanding action. We were just going to kind of get information and see where that went. And so that's how we began in 2001. And we actually sent our first information request to corporations from investors in 2002.

[03:45] **Michelle Russell:** And what was the initial response? Was it difficult to convince people that this was important?

[03:51] **Paul Dickinson:** Well, I think if you think about what was difficult as a new organization, and we were set up as a not for profit organization, we weren't very well known. So we spent about the first two years persuading a group of about 35 investors. It was to allow us to use their names in request for information. So there were some great investors like Allianz Group from Germany or that's a global company, legal in General, from the UK, from the USA, the Connecticut State treasury from also from the USA, essentially Merrill Lynch Investment Management. So these different 35 companies, we represented them. So when we began, we wrote to the 500 largest companies in the world. And the first line of the letter we wrote them said, as investors with \$4 trillion, we would like you to provide information. And that answers your question. The companies were not really responding to our organization that at that time was called Carbon Disclosure Project. They were responding to their investors through our organization. A bit like a company will issue its financial report to its government. So we provide a kind of global place to report on your greenhouse gas emissions and your strategy on climate change. So the response was pretty good. It was about 45% in the first year and it's risen now to about 80% in most large stock markets. Although, you know, we're in our 22nd year of reporting.

[05:24] **Michelle Russell:** Amazing. And how has the reporting changed in that?

[05:28] **Paul Dickinson:** Well, I think the short story is greatly increased sophistication. And I think this goes back to a comment I made in a talk just a little bit earlier today, which is that corporations are large. Corporations really are perhaps the most efficient and well organized organizations the world has ever seen. So there's a kind of genius inside the organization I founded, and that is the corporations that report through it. If you think of the economies of the world in terms of government income, of the 100 largest economies in the world, only 30 are nations. The other 70 are corporations. Corporations like Walmart and Exxon have annual income much larger than most governments. Right. So what I would say we've seen is an evolution in the sophistication of the corporate response to climate change. And you remember you asked me why I got into climate change. I said I could read a Graph? Well, it turns out the boards of directors of directors of corporations, the upper senior management, they can read graphs too. So we've gone through a real evolutionary process where disclosure of information to shareholders has turned into setting things like science based targets and net zero commitments. And now we're moving into a very exciting new area of transition plans. And there's much more I could say about this, but I would say that the key answer to your question is increasing sophistication and a growing awareness of the need to work with governments to solve this problem.

[07:13] **Michelle Russell:** Wonderful. You're talking about large corporations. So we're in the events industry, which as one of the other speakers said today, kind of flies under the radar, but it is a very large industry. And I loved what you said about us being kind of a big thinking machine and we are the thinkers behind the big thinking machine of convening people. So I'd love for you to kind of switch gears a little bit and talk about how you see our industry in terms of our role in gathering thought leaders to really tackle this problem and also what we can do to mitigate our carbon footprint. Because as we also talked about earlier today, much of the way that people convene is through air travel. That's the kind of the big elephant. And then there are other things that happen when you bring thousands of people together. Food waste and carbon footprint. So I'd love to hear your thoughts about that.

[08:13] **Paul Dickinson:** I mean, they're two connected subjects, but they're really, really different subjects. And I think maybe it's easier for me to start with what I'm going to call system level change. You know, we as a society, societies around the world have kind of failed to take action for decades at the level we need to. You know, scientists will tell you that we need to reduce emissions at 5% a year. And we've only ever done that once. And we did that in COVID 19 and it was kind of because we stopped air travel and a whole bunch of commuting hosed on. Exactly. But to really change emissions at 5% a year, to reduce emissions at 5% a year, we're going to need to change the rules of the game. Now that's already happening in many different places. I'm going to give you just a couple of examples. The government of China have really, really invested in climate change. So last year, China's investment in electric vehicles and renewable energy was about equal to the rest of the world combined. So that's huge. In the USA, we've seen the Biden administration introduce the Inflation Reduction act, which provides about 370 billion for accelerating low carbon technologies. And in Europe, we see the Green New Deal and the ban on internal combustion engine vehicles being sold from 2035. So all of this is combining to accelerate changes and I'm going to zero in on air travel. We had a speaker from the company Lufthansa here earlier today and he was talking about how electrification of airplanes is extremely hard. And that's probably true. He did talk a lot about sustainable aviation fuel that offers alternatives. And people are beginning to talk about redesign of airplanes, perhaps to increase the use of hydrogen as a fuel. That's probably going to take a decade or two. But it's quite possible to imagine that the whole air fleet is powered by hydrogen, which is created by renewable energy from water. And for those of you who don't have the simple physics, you burn hydrogen, chemistry, I should say, you burn hydrogen and you get water out the tailpipe. So there's no problem if hydrogen is made from water with renewable energy. So those are the system level changes we're going to have. And I think that the essence of my message to this industry was to fix this. We're going to need to get investors in the room with corporations, with NGOs and with governments, politicians, civil servants. And we're going to have to say, look, there's no point us some. We have a rather rude phrase in English polishing the turd, where there's no point us saying how terrible this problem is. Right. Over and over again. We're going to have to fix it. And the events industry has an absolutely critical role in Convening for climate, which is the name of the conference we're at today. So I'm very excited about the industry's ability to change the rules of the game so companies can get the frameworks they need to get this job done profitably and successfully. Now let's leap to the other half of the question, which is about, you know, the, so to say, greenhouse gas footprint or the, you know, the emissions from the, from the industry. Yeah, it's mostly travel for sure. So reference everything I said earlier. I think I've actually been a fan for 28 years of video communication. And I used to go and give talks about video communication and the potential. I

stopped in June 2020 because the entire world got sent on a video communication course courtesy of COVID 19. So we're now seeing McKinsey have talked about the value of commercial offices falling by about 800 billion as a result of the increased Use of video communication. But interestingly, talking to people in this industry yesterday, seems the industry is doing pretty well. So there probably is as, as you know, commuting might be falling. There's actually a potentially a healthy demand for people to meet at events like this. So, yeah, it's also true that industries should pioneer solutions. I noticed, for example, there was, you know, kind of vegetarian menu yesterday. This kind of thing can be significant. Although as a kind of meat eater, I also love some of the meat substitute products that are coming along that are really good. And I suppose the secret for me would be to encourage a spirit of adventure and experimentation in the industry and to find the fun in solving these problems and to be honest with you, to think about ways to make money out of it. Because we are going to solve these problems. This industry is going to have a critical role. And however it can, for example, combine events, I've heard about combining them with sports events. Lots of ideas about making more of a journey around conferences and events. There's an opportunity for great creativity. But the core problem, greenhouse gas emissions, is not so difficult to understand. So recognize we've got a level playing field, we know what needs to be done and get on and do it right.

[13:25] **Michelle Russell:** I think that some people think the check the box solution is carbon offset. So I know that a number of events have offered that where their registrants can contribute to some carbon offset program. What are your thoughts about that?

[13:41] **Paul Dickinson:** Okay, so I'm going to have to put this major warning to the, to the listener that this is a personal opinion I'm going to offer. And because this is a very controversial area and I don't seek to represent any organization when I give you my personal views, my personal views are that we are for sure going to have to build nature back up. Okay, there's been that. We now have conferences on biodiversity, the biodiversity Cops, they're called. And we had an agreement, the 30 by 30, which is protecting 30% of land and marine ecosystems by 2030. So that's encouraging progress. It's a bit like the kind of Paris agreement for biodiversity. It's going to require money and therefore there are potential for people to pay to essentially support the sequestration of greenhouse gas emissions. And for sure, one thing I would say is we're experts in measuring greenhouse gas emissions. Going up chimneys, we would call them, or tailpipes. But we're very new. Measuring greenhouse gas emissions, coming down into nature and being secured in essentially plants and trees. So there's a lot of work still to be Done. But broadly speaking, I think everyone will support actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But there are risks with unregulated markets that people may not be buying what they think they're buying. And so that's, that's the only kind of caveat or caution I would have. But I mean, I think, look, fundamentally, if you gave me a list of a hundred different things we could do on climate change, my answer would be yes. You know what I mean? We're gonna, we need to press every button, pull every lever, right?

[15:29] **Michelle Russell:** But we can't carbon offset our way to zero, net zero.

[15:34] **Paul Dickinson:** We're going to need to do everything. But you know, I mean, for example, you know, when we were getting rid of cigarettes, you know, we were banning the advertising, we were increasing taxes on cigarettes, we were making it, you know, kind of, I just. On the, on the beach here in Barcelona, you're not allowed to smoke on the beach anymore. So these kinds of regulations will push the reduction in fossil fuels. And funding the build back of nature is going to be a part of that, but it's not going to be the whole thing.

[16:02] **Magdalena Atanassova:** A word from our sponsor.

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[16:25] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Now back to the program.

[16:28] **Michelle Russell:** So you are our co-host of a podcast called Outrage and Optimism. I love those two words next to each other. And I can just sense from our conversation now that yes, there is this outrage that has taken so long for us to get to this point. Point, but we have to be optimistic or we just throw up our hands and wring our hands and say we can't move forward. So talk a little bit about your podcast, if you would.

[16:54] **Paul Dickinson:** Well, I mean, I have the great privilege to do the podcast with Cristiano Figueres, who was the executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at the time of the Paris agreement. So she managed to bring together every single country in the world

in an agreement on climate change, which is a pretty unprecedented goal. So she's the most brilliant diplomat that I've ever known and it's such a pleasure and an honor to do the podcast with her and also with Tom Rivet Carnack who was her political advisor through Paris. And, and certainly I've known Tom for a long time. So what we very much enjoy is being together because we're friends and we can kind of hang out each week on a podcast, which is a lot of fun, have some great guests as well. But I think also communicate the outrage. Yeah, you know, millions of people are going to be killed by climate change. Probably have been already. That's not funny. Millions of people being killed. So that's the outrage. The optimism is that we can fix this. It's going to be, you know, relatively speaking, quite easy. You know, we talked about air travel in very kind of serious terms. I traveled here on an airplane and I went through an airport and it was completely full of luxury goods shops selling handbags and watches, jewelry. You know, we're not short of money, we're short of focus. Right. So all we've got to do is focus on this problem, tax luxury goods, use the money to fund decarbonization, and all our kids are safe. How easy is that? So, you know, that's what makes me optimistic.

[18:24] **Michelle Russell:** But how do we lack the will to do that? What's stopping us?

[18:27] **Paul Dickinson:** Well, I'm going to get a bit philosophical. There's lots of people have talked about this, but Hobbes, I think, said in 1651 that the state was a kind of leviathan. That was the phrase that he used to protect us. And he said the citizens loyalty to the state lasts as long and only as long as the state protects them. The state is not protecting us from climate change for reasons that are quite complicated, some to do with pretty malignant action, negative action by fossil fuel industries. Fossil fuel states have retarded progress on climate change. But I think the state right now is at a moment where it recognizes it has to protect us. I think probably the biggest challenge has been that governments haven't told the public how much danger we're in. That's the heart of the matter. People walking down the street kind of think, well, if it was as bad as we think it is, the government would have told us. What they didn't really realize is that the government is frightened of us, is frightened of quite aggressive industries punching them in the face. And so people have been sitting on their hands for a long time. But I'll tell you something, there's a video on YouTube you might want to see. It's called A Climate of Concern. And it's by Shell, the oil company. It's from 1991. That's 33 years ago. And it predicts climate change pretty much exactly. And it warns us of floods and droughts and refugees. So let's not go thinking we didn't know about all of this and you're right. The tragedy is we haven't focused on it until now, but I think extreme weather is politicizing billions of people, and they are going to demand action from their governments right now. And the political mood is changing very, very fast. And that's exciting.

[20:14] **Michelle Russell:** That is exciting. So there is a foundation that you are part of, Findhorn Foundation. Thank you. And I understand that you have organized or worked with an organizer for retreats.

[20:27] **Paul Dickinson:** Yeah.

[20:27] **Michelle Russell:** So just to get a little more logistical here, because this is what our people do, is organize events, everything from small retreats to conferences of thousands and thousands of people. What did you do in terms of the way you gathered people? Maybe the format, the conversation, how the conversation took place, the environment, and then what did you do specifically to reduce your footprint?

[20:52] **Paul Dickinson:** Yeah, so the place that I've been convening people for meetings for about 10, 12 years is it's called the Findhorn foundation, and it's in Scotland, in the UK. It's about 30, 40 minutes drive east of Inverness. Quite far north, actually. The Findhorn foundation is changing structure, so it's winding down as a foundation and there are new groups growing up, but behind it is what I would call an intentional community, which is thriving. I think it's 62 years old, and there's about 500 people live in this beautiful environment, extraordinary gardens, and it's just an amazing place. And I began convening there because I felt that it would be easier for people to imagine a different future if they were in an environment that was certainly different. I've described Findhorn before as like a research and development department for the future of the world. Doesn't mean the whole world's going to look like Findhorn, but it's great to be somewhere different. I had learned quite a lot from this community about how to convene people and how to facilitate conversations. So a couple of things that I did was invite experts and kind of, you know, share with other people who was coming. So almost people were kind of inviting each other. And then the key for me was to actually not have presentations. So we didn't have any presenters. We called it a presenter only conference. People would sit in a circle, typically maybe there would be a candle in the middle, and we would have facilitated conversations. And the facilitator, her or himself, was not necessarily an expert in the subject, but rather wanted to support conversations on a theme. And over about three or four days, people would, I think, do two things. First of all, be able to advance subjects in quite interesting ways,

using things like Open space technology, where you kind of convene your own event around your own agenda, which emerges. But I think critically, people also formed relationships and built community. And so I've certainly found, it's my experience that after these events, if I kind of contact somebody, you know, they want to talk, they want to help. And so, yeah, it's another take on the events that this industry organizes. But I think it was, was very much focused on almost like a softer way of supporting an agenda to emerge naturally. Because I think we sort of come with our preconceived ideas, but, you know, nobody wants to go to a conference where people kind of read out their websites, you know, so what we want to do is we want to kind of merge and meld and find and create new knowledge and then move into collaboration on action.

[23:39] **Michelle Russell:** So was that structured in some way or how did that take place?

[23:44] **Paul Dickinson:** I mean, I think I mentioned these, this sort of facilitated discussion.

[23:47] **Michelle Russell:** Right.

[23:47] **Paul Dickinson:** One of the things about sitting in a circle is you can, you know, a friend of mine's the chair of an enormous pension fund and he'll be sat opposite someone who's, you know, 25 years old, working in an NGO or, you know, in the beginning of their career, and everyone's kind of equal. Right. Which is, which is really helpful. It's so nice for both parties to lose the formality and to be able to just like, you know, just ask each other and share. But then from discussion, we might work through topics in a group discussion. And then I'm going to mention again this idea of a kind of open space technology where people will convene, say, well, you know, like this afternoon or tomorrow morning I'm going to be in the community center or wherever and I'm going to convene, you know, a meeting about, you know, how, for example, how business can best collaborate with government to get the policies that we need. And then the saying goes is the people who come are the right people, you know, and whatever the outcome is, is the right outcome. And I think this kind of creative convening process has been extremely effective in helping new forms of collaboration emerge. And I've seen some significant results.

[24:58] **Michelle Russell:** I love that. I think that is one of the takeaways of COVID for our industry was that we were forced to have digital events when we could not meet in person. And then to your point, our industry is doing very well. We are now, it's now mostly face to face, very few hybrid, very few digital events, which I think is a shame also because I feel like we have lost something in that. But recognizing, I think during COVID people recognized they could get education online very easily. They could not necessarily make those connections online. So that is where I think the focus now for event organizers is making those opportunities more intentional so that there are more ways to not just throw people into a room and have them network, but to do other things so that they can meet with the right people and to create more space for that in an event. It used to be you'd get a 10 minute coffee break and then you'd have to scurry to your next session. So I do see progress there and more like what you were talking about. And I think that's a good sign for our industry.

[26:06] **Paul Dickinson:** I think that the person who developed this open space technology said that they discovered the best part of conferences was the coffee break. So how would you construct a conference around the coffee breaks?

[26:16] **Michelle Russell:** I love that. And that's what people now are looking for. They will get on an airplane and travel if they think they're going to have these meaningful conversations, whether it's for personal or professional progress.

[26:27] **Paul Dickinson:** I mean, I could tell you, you know, having spent 25 years more studying video communication, the one thing that we haven't done with video, and maybe we never will, is introduce the randomness or not the randomness. Should we say the sort of the guided emergence. So as I said in a talk earlier today, I have two pretty good friends here that I met. One new friend, one old friend, but moving around the conference and them introducing me, oh, Paul, you should talk to this person. And then, oh, you should talk to that person. They're listening to our conversation and that's making them think of the next person that I should meet or should meet me, you know, and that's a, that's a beautiful kind of slightly mysterious but incredibly creative process and that only this industry kind of owns that. And that is why it's such an important industry.

[27:17] **Michelle Russell:** Well, I think that's a great way to end. Unless there's anything that we haven't covered that you would love to just to.

[27:22] **Paul Dickinson:** Say, I wish everyone listening to this please do convene for climate. Let's get everyone together in the room. Let's work out how to fix this and get it done. Thank you.

[27:33] **Michelle Russell:** Wonderful. Thank you.

[27:38] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Remember to subscribe to the Convening podcast on your favorite listening platform to stay updated with our latest episodes. We want to thank our sponsor, Madrid Convention Bureau. Learn more about how to make your next meeting Madrileño at

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