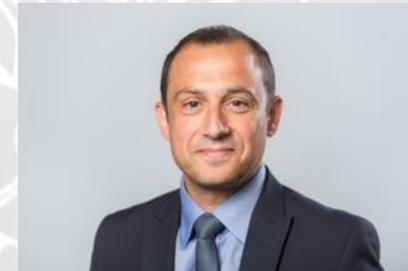


Distinctive Interviews with Distinctive People



Professor Paddy Gray

Professor Paddy Gray OBE
finds out what we want to know about
Victor da Cunha
Chief Executive – Curo Group



Victor da Cunha

Vic joined Curo Group in 2011, the Board of Curo Enterprise in June 2012 and the Combined Board in November 2016. His initial focus was on integrating three housing associations into one, bringing together their culture, governance and strategy. From these foundations, Curo was formed in 2013 as a re-energised commercially-savvy business with a strong social purpose.

Today Curo has more than doubled its turnover and has a pipeline of over 2,700 new homes in development. Curo has established itself as an ambitious business with a regional and national reputation for innovation. Under Vic's leadership, Curo has become an Investors In People 'Gold' employer, has been ranked 27th Best 100 Not for Profit Company to work for in the UK by the Sunday Times and has won many awards for their services, new homes and regeneration activities.

Paddy Gray OBE:

1. What distinctive traits do you admire most in the team that you currently lead?

Victor da Cunha:

I think what I am blessed with is a bunch of very different people. We are all made up from very different histories. Our paths have crossed in an environment where you may not expect them to, so for example I've got about half of the team that spent most of their formative years in commercial industry. If I look around the room, we have all had very different experiences, very different lives and it means that we have very robust, candid conversations. They are all people that are prepared to concede to the organisational good not personal interest – and they are all great people that love fun. We have a view in this organisation that the most important thing is to think about what the customer wants, make a commitment to do it, be very professional in that and always be authentic, down to earth and try and have some fun along the way. I am lucky and I am blessed as I have characters that are all incredibly different and diverse but have this fantastic way about them and we don't leave things unsaid and I think that is a really refreshing thing. I'm not sure I will give you an individual name, but as a collective analysis this is what makes the team so potent, so powerful and excellent.

2. What is distinctive about your office?

When we did our original strategy back in 2011, the first thing we did was to think about the organisational values that held us together, to support the Why... Why we exist. The values are overlaid by how we do things - how we represented ourselves in stories, structures and in physical form our offices. The first thing you see when you come into our office is this enormously beautiful welcoming reception, with free coffee and tea and water with an exhibition space for us to exhibit what we are doing and what customers have done. There is a television and a play area for kiddies, there is a bowl for your dog to have food and water. There are free iPads and a learning lab where you can come in and learn how to use the internet and our app. The entire front end defines what Curo are about, which is service and customer. Then when you go through the building, no managers have got offices, everyone has exactly the same workspace – me included. We all work in exactly the same way. There are no visual hierarchy symbols and throughout the building, it is connected by the brand, by our purpose statement and by expressions made by well-known people, that resonates with our why. So, we tried to make our offices very much aligned with the culture and the Why.

3. Would you say you are naturally self-confident, or do you have to work at it?

I think I am pretty much prepared to fail without embarrassment, so I am confident. I know that is not necessarily the case for everyone - and everyone has their moments, like my little ones now and again, but I actually enjoy being scared and I find the whole idea of doing something a little bit bigger than me enticing. So I am blessed that I have this complete naive view of failure. As long as no one dies, you can just learn. I think that's exactly the spirit that we as Leaders should be passing onto others - it's absolutely fine to have a go. I like to say that we should fail in style, fail lots and fail often. Some of my best work has been from failure, because in failure there is so much stuff you can learn from. Anyway, there is nothing more boring in the world than aiming low and achieving it, because what you want to be able to do is aim really high and not quite get it, but actually be able to say that you have achieved so much more than if you went for the comfortable.

4. Thanks again Vic. In a sliding doors world, what would you do?

[Laughter] What would I have loved to have done? Do you know what, if I could do anything, the thing I would love most to do would have been - and you are going to think this is crazy - I would have loved to have been a Global DJ. Going around the world, playing music to thousands of people, as I can't sing for toffee. If I could have sung, I probably would have said that. There is something about seeing the joy in people when they are dancing and having a good time - I absolutely get a tremendous buzz. I think the reason why I enjoy service industry, the job I do which is about serving customer, is because I get such joy seeing people happy at the end of something you have done that's made them happy and joyful and fulfilled. I did this when I was younger, I used to be a resident DJ in a nightclub in the West End of London and I absolutely used to get off on this adrenaline that you see in people, their faces full of joy in loving life.

5. Do you find being the Boss to be lonely?

When I became Chief Exec of Curo 9 years ago, I was told it was a really lonely place. So I went in there thinking that it was - and I am a natural extrovert. I've never really found it particularly lonely because I have always been able to have safe places to talk. So the art of being able to not feel lonely is having a safe place where you can share concerns, thoughts and ideas. So, I have always surrounded myself with senior teams where I have been able to share or my Board - my Board Chair is excellent, we can talk about all sorts of things. Even if the stuff I want to share is very intimate I have always found ways of being able to share. I am not an introvert, so some introverts can do this job on their own, but I do need to talk it out loud, to express verbally in a safe place. I have always tried to find environments where I don't feel that I am on my own. I think being on your own is almost a disruptive thing because it can cause - in my view anyway - needless anxiety, as you are not able to share or have a sympathetic ear where you can express those thoughts. And we all have those moments, don't we?

6. Professionally speaking, what keeps you up at night?

This may sound really blasé but I tend to sleep really well. My wife thinks I am still a teenager - and given half the chance I would sleep in quite late. The things that I would get most focussed on, is making sure that the customers are safe. The things that worry me most are making sure the customers are safe, the colleagues are safe - and the wellbeing of customers and colleagues at Curo is very important. So they are always things that will grab my attention. They are the things that we prioritise above everything else - and making sure as an organisation that we remain focussed on our why. Why we exist, not being distracted from that purpose, and even if it is really quite hard, we can do that. The most important thing is keeping our customers and colleagues safe and we have an environment where they can prosper and live fulfilled lives, in this whole culture piece. But in terms of things that happen along the way generally speaking, not a lot keeps me up at night.

7. Ok that's brilliant, Vic. What is the worst job you've ever done?

So, my mum and dad came from Portugal in early 1970 and I came in 1971. We weren't blessed with a great deal of money, so I spent most of my life having to work. My first job - I would have been, I don't know, 12. I was probably helping mum and dad clean offices at 12. Going out at 6 in the morning helping with the first job mum and dad would have. Then I would go to school, then mum and dad would have 4 or 5 jobs, then I would return, and I would help them with one of their evening cleaning jobs. That's how life was. If I were to say which one was the most boring, of all of those, and there were quite a few of them, I had one job, which was in an office block, and I had to go in the early evening and I had to rotate the vertical venetian blinds in every office. They were closed and obviously whoever's office it was, they would have them open during the day and I would go and close them every single night. My mum and dad would be hoovering and emptying the bins and the dusting - and I would be doing that, as that's part of the job. I was very blessed doing that one! At least I couldn't break anything!

8. What words or phrases do you most over use?

Mmm, probably 'culture alignment' - I probably use that quite a lot. And 'Fail fast'. Those are the ones that come to mind. In previous days it would have been touch base wouldn't it? I found myself saying touch base the other day and reminiscing - I haven't used that expression for ages.

9. What do you owe your parents?

Oh gosh, my dad passed away last year, so I was reflecting on some of this the other day. I think there are a few things that stick with me. My dad gave me an enormous work ethic, I know, I am literally not scared of work and I will work all day, every day. He instilled in us to do whatever it takes to bring food on the table. The other thing he did is that he ingrained in all of us this enormous thirst for family and family love and family togetherness. So family plays an enormous part of my life. The third one is that he was enormously proud of being Portuguese and because of that, you know I wasn't allowed to talk English at home. Whenever I spoke English to my sister, he would say, 'do you need to see your passport? Stop, don't talk English in this house!'. So, I am incredibly still connected to my Portuguese background and I am very proud of being Portuguese. I am very proud of being British as well. I often talk about work as a family and I talk about values in Curo as the moral backbone of the organisation - in the same way that at home there are rules about being in a family that are never quite expressed overtly. So I like to think in each of those 3 ways: being proud of who you are and where you come from; being very clear about your work ethic and doing the right thing at work; and this whole piece about family are all really strong to me. There is no other Victor.

10. What advice would you give someone starting their career now?

I think what has served me well is don't try to be anyone else other than yourself. When I was younger, I always thought that to be a leader or to be successful you had to read the academic interpretation of leadership and try and mould yourself to those defined attributes that people see as successful. The longer I have gone on, the more I have come to realise that of course there are skills that you learn along the way, the experiences that you have inform the way that you behave in certain environments. But the strongest advice I give to people is just always be you. Be authentically you. Be proud to be you. Never ever be ashamed of being weak or scared or vulnerable or saying you don't know. Learn as much as you can. Have a go and try something that scares you. Get constant coaching and feedback. Don't ever think that learning stops - it's a journey we are on and it is fine to say you are learning and always getting feedback. Ultimately, I would say to you, always try and have fun.

11. What is your guiltiest pleasure?

[Laughter] Gosh, probably golf. It doesn't sound particularly guilty, but I guess it is a guilty pleasure because I work Monday to Friday away from home. My home is in London and I work in Bath, the West Country. I have grown up children, and my wife who I have been married to for 30 years, so when I get in on a weekend I need a bit of a guilty pleasure and I'm gone for 4 hours playing golf with my brother in law and have a bit of me time. After 30 years my wife puts up with that!

12. What 4 people, dead or alive, would you invite to your dinner party?

I'd love to sit down with Jose Mourinho. I'd probably want to have someone like Winston Churchill - sorry someone old school, quite an inventor, quite a character. I'm sure he would have a few things to say that were interesting. I wouldn't mind the young woman who is doing all of the climate change - Greta Thunberg. I think she would have an interesting conversation. The last one would probably be my dad's dad. He was someone that died very young in my life, and everyone that knew him talked so well of him and I wish I'd have got to know him. Just known the man really, because I feel like I was cheated on that one.

13. What's an interesting fact that isn't on your CV?

Ok, so recently, well a couple of years ago, I was an Associate Producer in a film. It was a good film. Someone I know is a Film Producer and asked if I would help in terms of providing some advice, coaching advice, and that coaching ended up in me being far more involved with it than he or I anticipated! I ended up being an Executive Producer of Hurricane. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience actually and if you want to see it, it's on Sky movies. It's a war film and it got me really interested in film producing and storytelling. It is actually quite a complicated thing, making the film is complicated and is at the long end of a really complicated process and I found the whole learning exercise really interesting and I would love to do that again.

14. What would your super power be?

I'd like to go back and forward in time.

15. So, what do you consider your greatest achievement?

There are so many things I am really proud of. I'm really proud of the work we have done in regenerating Foxhill. That one I think is a legacy that this organisation and I will leave forever - and it has transformed so many lives in a positive way. That example is a very practical, very visual. I am also personally, very proud that Mum and Dad came here with nothing apart from a suitcase, they couldn't even speak the language and we've done alright. I've got a Masters Degree, I have a good job, I have a lovely family. On a personal level, I am very proud. The World isn't an easy place for many people that don't get everything handed to them. You can end up in far different places than I have ended up - I have been blessed and I am very proud of managing to get to a position where I almost feel that I've been able to fulfil the potential within me - and not a lot of people can say that, you know. Not because of what they have done, but because life has not dealt them the hand and given them the path. But I have been very lucky because of the way mum and dad were and the sacrifices they made to get me out of Portugal and the dictatorship. Mum and Dad did that so that my sister and I could go to school, have a career and speak freely in public. You know, stuff they didn't have the opportunity to do.

16. Now this is related to a previous answer you gave - if you could go back in time, where would you go?

That's a really good question. I would love to have been in one of those times when people were discovering the World and were in boats going all over the World. It must have been a tremendously amazing experience to go somewhere completely different, not fall off the edge of a cliff and discover that the World was round, that there were other cultures and just learn exponentially about the place we were living in. That would have been an amazing time. There would have been lots of other moments in history that I would love to go to. But just imagine discovering there is a completely different World out there and it's around the corner.

17. If you could bring something extinct back to life, what would you choose?

This is not extinct, but one thing I'd love to see in the world that I've never seen is the Baobab tree. It's one of these really weird trees that lives for three thousand years and it's one of those things that I have on my Bucket List. I think they are mainly in Madagascar but they might be in other parts. Sabre toothed tigers and panthers – they are extinct now. Big cats with massive teeth – they look so cool. My wife said she had a dream, a few years ago, where I was walking down the street, smiling and I had two black panthers walking in and out of my legs. Now that's a good dream to have because panthers are supposed to be protectors.

18. How do you relax?

I do a lot of golf, and I do a lot of socialising.

19. What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

I think the lesson that I use the most now is to know that not everything needs a decision right now. When I was younger, if something presented in front of you that needed a decision, I would make it. But as I have matured, I've come to realise that there are some decisions that need to be made, and others that don't need to be made - and knowing which ones do and which ones don't, is really quite an important lesson in life. Sometimes not making decisions allows other people to make decisions - and as a leader, the art of not making decisions, and knowing which ones need to be made is quite important. The other thing I would say to you is that life comes with sadness and setbacks but never let anyone know that's the case. Always, always suck up setbacks and sadness with good grace - because things always tend to work out and the yin and yang of life means that at some point there will be positives, and those little tough moments they get covered up by the positives.

20. What makes you distinctive?

I knew you were going to ask me that! The truth is, we are all distinctive, aren't we? What makes Victor, Victor, is I am like a massive Tigger. I am full of energy, bouncing around, full of ideas, constantly seeking to increase the energy levels. I want to make things happen; I want to inspire things to happen. I never, ever, pretend to be someone else. What you get with Victor is Victor. If you like it, brilliant, if you don't, sorry. I like to say authentic, in every way. The good and the bad bits, are just what you see. Yes, I think those are the two things that come to mind. Lots of energy and down to earth and always want to improve things, get things done better. A thirst for being better.

