



Empowering others more as leaders

Insights from Leadership Fellows

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Society of Leadership Fellows

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Introduction

This is the tenth in our series of “Insights from Leadership Fellows”, drawing on the Leadership Conversations organised by St. George’s House, Windsor Castle through our Society of Leadership Fellows. It took place on 5th September 2017.

The first nine Insights are combined as Volume One of “Nurturing Wisdom”, available on the Leadership Insights page on the St George’s House website.

A key insight drawn from this Conversation was that Chief Executives and Executive Directors who seek to empower members of their top team by enhancing their leadership authority are often not disciplined enough in the ways in which they go about this. As a result, there are far too many situations where they end up undermining the very people they had been seeking to empower through their tendency to “meddle” and “tinker”.

This is why leaders committed to empowering members of their team need to be careful to step outside of these “comfort zone behaviours” so that they really can create the space for their high performing deputies to step up with confidence.

As with previous Insights from Leadership Fellows, this one has been written primarily for Fellows unable to join the Conversation. Its purpose is to share the insights that emerged through our discussions as widely as possible among our leadership community.

Six Insights

1 **To empower someone else as a leader, we first need to establish an emotional connection with them.**

Unless a leader has an emotional connection with the person they are seeking to empower, they will not be able to achieve the trust and openness that are so essential to the process of empowerment. Without this understanding, the person who is meant to be feeling empowered can easily feel that this is little more than an excuse to offload additional work onto them.

2 **Empowerment involves risk, since it involves a transfer of authority that cannot easily be withdrawn.**

There is risk on both sides. On the one hand, the person being empowered needs to believe that their Chief Executive or Director has their back and won't undermine their authority by overruling their judgement. On the other hand, the person doing the empowering needs to feel confident that they won't be exposed to ill-considered judgements being made by a subordinate overly keen to demonstrate their newly acquired authority.

3 **Successful empowerment requires discipline, especially the discipline to avoid tinkering.**

Many of those leaders keen to empower those around them often have a tendency to enjoy “interfering” whenever they feel like it. Successful strategies for empowering others require leaders to be disciplined in avoiding tinkering, whilst being careful to ensure that the empowerment is achieving its aim of helping to drive up performance and standards.

Insights

4 **Strategies for empowering other leaders need to be tailored to their individual needs, recognising that some like to dive in at the deep end whilst others need to stay in the shallow end for a little longer.**

Empowerment is not an entitlement to be offered to all who ask for it. We need to see it as a personal act of recognition, because the process of transferring authority to someone has to be geared in to that individual's own leadership style to ensure that they can ramp up their leadership at a pace that works for them, whilst feeling "seen" and supported every step of the way.

5 **Leaders always need to be alert to the dangers of unintentionally disempowering others, as can happen in the case of high-octane leaders setting a pace that few can sustain.**

It can be truly intimidating working for a leader who appears able to juggle countless priorities and do everything they want at an awesome pace. Such leaders need to reassure those they seek to empower that they don't necessarily need to move at the same frenetic pace. Otherwise the benefits of agile leadership can so easily be eclipsed by a culture that is unduly competitive – and disempowering.

6 **For many leaders, empowering others will take them out of their comfort zones.**

A wide range of leaders have behaviours that are inherently disempowering of others, for example through their highly controlling style of leadership or their need to move at such a speed that others are left rushing to keep up. Strategies for empowering others more as leaders challenge many of the empowerers to step outside their comfort zone and develop new leadership behaviours more geared up to coaching and mentoring those they seek to empower.

Three key questions to help empower others more as leaders

Drawing on these six insights, we propose three killer questions as the framework for any discussion to empower others more as leaders.

Direct questions and an ongoing conversation are at the heart of the empowerment process.

Key Question I

Do we know how to get the best out of each other?



We need to make sure that we're both on the same page, so that we don't get any wires crossed.

I hope we will each be up-front about what might worry us as we move forward, and make sure that we are discussing what sorts of assurances we each need from the other to keep any worries down to a minimum.

We know that we're having this conversation because we trust each other and I hope we see ourselves as at a stage where we will be able to build greater trust and openness between us as we move forward.

So let's identify pinch points and share where misunderstandings could occur. Let me start by asking you how you think I can get the best out of you – and then I will tell you how I think you should be able to get the best out of me.



Key Question 2

What do we need to agree up-front to ensure that we handle this process well together?

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Moving on, it would be good to talk a little more about what you most need from me, and I'll then share with you what I would like from you to make sure that I'm kept up to speed.

I also want us to agree that if ever you feel I'm in danger of breaking this agreement and taking back from you decision-making powers and other authorities that I have passed on to you, you will challenge me on this as soon as you feel something is going wrong.

Similarly, I undertake to tell you the moment I begin to worry about something, so that we can sort it out before anything comes between us.

I want you to feel confident that I am here to protect your new authority and build your leadership role.

I also want you to consider my needs too, and make sure that you consult me before any tricky decisions are taken when you think I might have a view that needs to be taken on board.

My undertaking is that I will do all in my power to affirm your new authority because I am 100% in favour of empowering you more as a leader.

At the same time, I need to know from you that if you think I might disagree with you about something, you will want to consult me first and talk the issues through.

So, if I find myself in a position where I'm witnessing something being decided that I should have been consulted about, I will expect to be able to make some comment that is NOT undermining of your authority but creates the space for you to suggest that you would like to take a little more time before taking a firm decision.

This is all about us working in a closer partnership with each other, on the basis that you know how committed I am to building your authority and I know that you are on the look-out for any signals from me, so that if for some reason I have been left out of the loop I can take it for granted that you will listen hard and act quickly if I show some sign of discomfort.



Key Question 3

Do you feel able to empower those who report to you and in whom you trust?

“ I see this process of empowering you more as a leader as part of a shift to empowering more and more of our higher performing staff as leaders throughout the organisation.

I see myself as leading this shift through you and other members of the team who are stepping up more – and I expect that you will want to do the same with members of your team who you trust. Are you up for this? ”



From player-manager to coach

This outline of three key elements in an empowerment process shows how important is the engagement between the empowering leader and the individual they are seeking to empower.

Engagement and connection – they are at the heart of this empowerment process.

They only become possible when there are already fairly high levels of trust and openness. These make possible significantly higher levels of trust and openness as the empowering leader supports the empoweree in building their own authority as a leader.

In the process, the empowering leader becomes closer to the person they are empowering and transforms their relationship from that of “player-manager” more into that of coach and mentor.

This transformation underlines the truth known by all top performers across every sport, that the best coaches are very close to those they champion and support.

Working more closely together

What is SO important to the success of this empowerment process is that empowerer and empoweree start off accepting that it is neither automatic nor easy. It is genuinely difficult and challenging and the only way to be confident that it will succeed is through working more closely together.

Those who have failed most spectacularly as empowering leaders are those who think that empowerment means “**There you are, this is what you’re leading on - go and get on with it**”.

Those who have succeeded the most – often learning lots through not always getting it right, as is always the case for successors – know that the reality is very different. Empowerment is really about leaders saying to those they seek to empower:

"I have faith in you to step up now and want you to know that you are NOT on your own. Whenever you get stuck or need support, I am here for you. If we stick close, we can't go wrong, and as we stick close, this process of empowering you will be ongoing. I hope that this business will benefit from your leadership for so long as we can offer you ongoing opportunities to keep on developing and stretching yourself, so that you really can associate us with realising your true potential as a leader."

Empowering others – how very self-empowering

For leaders who seek to empower those they believe in, and find themselves moving into a role of team coach, the experience can be truly self-empowering.

In the process of becoming closer to their best people, they find themselves able to exercise greater influence over those they value the most as co-leaders of their business.

They gain all of the benefits – and excitement – that come to those who experience their own actions both improving business performance AND enhancing the job satisfaction of those they look to as the up-and-coming leaders of their business.

For any leader who believes in their people...

