



Society of Leadership Fellows

Our first Gathering, September 6th 2017



Leadership in a VUCA World
Volatility Uncertainty Complexity Ambiguity



Here we are in the wonderful quire of St George's Chapel. We have been welcomed by the Right Reverend David Conner, Dean of Windsor and Chairman of the Board of St George's House. We are now going to hear four of our Leadership Fellows share with us their thinking about leading in a VUCA world and taking on the multiple challenges of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

The four Fellows who have agreed to speak tonight have all contributed to our Leadership Conversations at St George's House in recent months. We have asked them to share with us some of the insights that they took away from these Conversations as well as some of their personal stories as leaders.

Whenever we come together as Leadership Fellows our commitment is to nurture each other's wisdom. We are truly grateful for the insights that Em, Sharon, Zitah and Jonathan will be sharing tonight to help nurture our wisdom in relation to the challenges of leading in a VUCA world ...



Volatility



Uncertainty



Complexity



Ambiguity

Leadership in a volatile world

Em Wilkinson-Brice Deputy Chief Executive/Chief Nurse, Royal Devon & Exeter NHS Foundation Trust



"A reaction to volatility can be to knee-jerk in the moment and become reckless."

Hello, my name is Em Wilkinson-Brice. I work in the National Health Service in Devon as Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Nurse for an acute and community services Foundation Trust.

Life in Devon is by the coast and when I was asked to speak about leadership in volatile times I kept returning to an analogy of the maritime. Therefore I invite you to release your inner Sailor.

The NHS is a much loved, publicly funded vessel – the Mother Ship or the Tanker.

The fleet has ships of different shapes and sizes, accountable to the Mother Ship and also to the people it serves.

Command from the bridge of the Mother Ship is strong and loud, and in 2014 it signalled a major new voyage, uncharted to date: transformation of the NHS.

Not tinkering around the edges but a fundamental transformation of the model of care – a different service offer – with new organisational forms and most importantly a new bow wave of change coming from the Tanker, massively affecting the fleet.

From the bridge came the edict to deliver the triple aim of:

- Improve the patient experience of care
- Improve the health of populations
- Reduce the per capita cost of healthcare.

Over the past 2 years the waters have been pretty choppy! As a leader in the fleet what have I learnt?

I would like to share two insights, the second of which was influenced by the St George's House Leadership Conversation I attended and captured in Chapter 1 of Nurturing Wisdom.

*“Rock the boat
AND stay in it.”*

1st Thought: Volatility, in the water, means currents and tides with plenty of swell!

Single organisations are working hard to serve local people in increasingly difficult financial times.

In these times, we recognise that we need more ‘person’ in the ‘patient’.

To create systems of care means developing new ships or boats with new crews. We need partnerships that integrate - not partnerships that disaggregate.

There is a great quote from Helen Bevan from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement on leading large-scale change: “Rock the boat AND stay in it”.

Working with new sectors, partners and organisations has meant creating a common purpose: improving the outcomes for people.

I have seen the human reaction to change. Some love it, some fear it and some just simply hate it.

The leadership lesson for me has been to REALLY get to know the new crew:

- Walk on their decks
- Ask the stupid questions – it is OK to seek to learn
- Humility – it’s OK not to know
- Find commonality
- Think really hard about when to lead and when to follow.

I have learnt that in trying to lead large scale change in volatile times, relationships are key. They take time to grow and trust is a vital ingredient.

A mantra that I use a lot is ‘Assume Best Intent’. It encourages forgiveness when I have inevitably got it wrong, have unwittingly offended or used clumsy language.

I believe that the scale of transformation or change needed can only go at the pace at which we build trust.

*"This space
doesn't need
heroic leaders but
inclusive leaders
who will engage,
listen and learn."*

2nd Thought: Volatility elicits an emotional reaction.

I have been described as high energy and high drive, with positivity and passion. I am also a lifelong works-in-progress of how to temper it and package it well!

A key question for me in these volatile, turbulent times is: How and when can I maximise my impact as a leader?

This space doesn't need heroic leaders but inclusive leaders who will engage, listen and learn. We also need to be resilient and have the courage to hold that tiller firm.

There have been numerous times when we could have been blown off course. Our role has been, and continues to be, to balance the need to maintain today, sustain performance expected by the Tanker and create the tomorrow.

We also have to provide safe care and dare to get it wrong in the pursuit of transformation.

I need to feel the fire in my belly and feel the urgency of change. But I also need to bring people with me.

I have learnt the power of courage, asking for help from other partners and knowing who my critical friends are, as well as having the courage to take risks.

There may not yet be an evidence base for much of what we are doing. We are creating the evidence base and that's so exciting!

Finally, I have learnt to be more thoughtful. A reaction to volatility can be to knee-jerk in the moment and become reckless.

A down side of passion can be a lack of thought, carelessness, damage to relationships and non-achievement due to a loss of focus.

I remember a take home message from the Leadership Conversation that I joined last October on From Good to Exceptional. It has stayed with me and I often recall it –

- Think Today
- Reflect Tonight
- Act Tomorrow

Have I made it to exceptional? Not yet.

But I will stay the distance, and take the helm with leadership self-awareness and confidence to navigate the waters - harnessing the volatility to good effect AND hopefully staying in the boat!

Leadership in an uncertain world

Sharon Amesu Director, Life in Colour, personal development consultancy, and Society facilitator



*"Haven't we
always lived
in uncertain
times?"*

Good evening to you all. It's a huge honour and privilege to be invited to share some reflections with you this evening.

I'd like to start by inviting you to join me on a journey back to the continent of Africa, specifically to the Volta region of Ghana, West Africa and into a little known, remote agricultural village, known as Taviepe.

As we arrive you'll immediately be struck by the deep red earthy colour of the ground beneath your feet, you'll hear the sounds of bleating goats and children playing on stony paths, the wind rustling through the leaves. And as you enter the centre of the village you hear muffled voices in the distance. Conversations taking place in a local tongue.

As you approach, you discover that those conversations are actually between local and neighbouring village elders, who are about to embark on an ancient ceremony. It's the investiture of a new Chief.

They exchange ideas, share wisdom, offer insights and instruction to lead the people through the changing times ahead. They are NURTURING WISDOM.

This was the wonderful, unexpected scene that I was met with on a family trip to the region, but two weeks ago. As I watched these events unfold, I began to experience a strange sense of familiarity. I was transported back to the Leadership Conversations I had attended here at St George's House, where figurative elders from different professions, backgrounds and businesses have gathered together, eaten together and sat together to reflect on how we can become better leaders in our own metaphorical villages.

In both of these contexts the leaders were facing new, unprecedented challenges. And in both of these contexts the leaders recognised that by sharing the problem, they halved the problem.

"Life and leadership at the criminal Bar serve as a daily reminder of just how unpredictable life and leadership can be."

Both of these settings have served to remind me of this fundamental truth about uncertainty: that throughout the history of humanity, change has always existed and uncertainty has always formed part of the universal human experience.

History also teaches us that whether we are in the remote, rural agricultural villages of the African continent or in the high tech, modern offices of Canary Wharf, the wisdom of the elders, the leaders, is essential for the real or metaphorical village to cross uncertain terrain.

In view of this the question might be asked, why then are we now placing such a focus on leading in an uncertain world? Haven't we always lived in uncertain times? Hasn't it always been part of the course for leaders to be able to lead through change and the unpredictable?

Yes, this is true, but we can all attest to the fact that the main difference, the main feature of the modern challenge is the scale and pace of change. We all see how rapidly our systems, processes and approaches can become irrelevant and no longer fit for purpose.

I learned this lesson as a young barrister. When I started out on my career, I felt a sense of assuredness about the law and the courtroom. I had assumed that I would be an able advocate because I had studied the texts, rehearsed the statutes and revised the legal precedents. What I discovered was that the courtroom was a hotbed of uncertainty.

Whether it was an absent witness, an unexpected decision by the jury or a client providing, shall we say, 'interesting instructions', life and leadership at the criminal Bar serve as a daily reminder of just how unpredictable life and leadership can be.

Yet those experiences at the Bar have taught me many valuable lessons on leading in an uncertain world. Today I share five with you. It's poignant that I share them here within these walls that represent that which endures and remains steadfast, for these are lessons which have, for me, stood the test of time.

*"We must be
decisive, even
when we're not
entirely sure
that the decision
is the right one."*

I describe them as the 5 V's. I would like to aver that there is some deep, erudite and meaningful reason for choosing 5 V's. But alas there isn't, so I can't, it just makes them easier to remember.

The first of the V's is values. I encourage each of us leaders to be clear on our values. What you stand on and what you stand for. Know what you believe, what is important to you and why you lead the way that you lead. Knowing our values enables us better to trust our intuition. Values such as love, fairness, justice, equality, truthfulness and trust.

The second V is vision. Being clear on where you're going. Setting your compass and staying on course. The wind will blow the ship at times, the seas will often be rocky, but the leader with clear direction and commitment to the destination will prevail.

The third V is vulnerability. Becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable. Admitting, owning and learning from our mistakes. Sometimes we need to ask for help, guidance and support. Sometimes the answers were not to be found in the statute, they were to be found in my support networks.

The fourth of the V's is Vestigate. Ok, some artistic license taken... 'In vestigate' for the word police in the room. Remain inquisitive. Continue to ask questions. Professional curiosity enables us to see uncertainty through a lens of opportunity.

And finally, valour. What is valour? Valour is courage. During one of our Leadership Conversations we reflected on what it means to have courage in leadership. Eloquently summarised in Chapter 3 of Volume I of the Leadership Insights, we concluded that courage in leadership requires us to accept that ultimately, as leaders, the buck stops with us. Our role as leaders can not be negated. We must be decisive, even when we're not entirely sure that the decision is the right one.

None of us have crystal balls. None of us are able to predict precisely what the future holds. But history teaches us that where leaders have held onto their enduring values, and had a clear vision and the courage to pursue it, the village will be safe whether at home or abroad.

Leadership in a complex world

Zitah McMillan Chief Executive Officer & Executive Vice-President Rest of the World, Dollar Financial Group



*"Find your
True North,
take a step
back and
listen."*

Following on from my fellow speakers, it is clear that there are overlaps and consistent ideas that form once you accept the VUCA way of thinking. My part of this, in explaining complexity, is to try and help give some reassurance and some tips on how to handle complexity.

What's interesting to me is that none of this is new. As leaders, you know that. You know, and most likely accept, that complexity is just part of the day job. Often you will be trying to work out why people, and it's always the people, are trying to make your life more complex. That's life. You already know that and you also know that those same people look to you to help reduce, or even remove, the complexity that they have created. That's the fun of being a leader.

In thinking about complexity, I naturally did a little research on what the thought leader types are saying now to see if there's any new thinking. You may have read the Forbes article from February of this year. They have reinterpreted VUCA, clearly the US Army's version didn't tie to today's more positive vibes. So the Forbes version makes Volatility – Vision; Uncertainty – Understanding; Complexity – Courage and Ambiguity – Adaptability. I think there's a lot of merit in that but personally, I'm not afraid of the negativity and the honesty of the original.

When I first became a leader, I'm not sure I realised that's what I was by the way. I inherited another multi-market business with lots of conflict and people on different paths. My instinct is to always do my homework, so I read up on complexity in particular. It's usually defined as follows:

- 1 Too many variables
- 2 Too much or not enough information
- 3 Too many forces at play
- 4 Organisational confusion
- 5 Confounding of issues
- 6 Lack of obvious cause and effect chain

"What's your True North? It's not about what you CAN do, it's about what you SHOULD do."

There's probably more. You probably recognise if not all of them, some of them as being issues that you have to deal with daily. That's our world as leaders. That's the gift our companies and our people give us.

Sticking with the text books then, what would they say the solution is? Well, nothing earth-shattering but here you go:

- 1 Restructure
- 2 Remove layers
- 3 Simplify decision making
- 4 Build up the right resources
- 5 Bring in specialists

I think the book I read came from one of the Big Four and they would naturally be the specialists in question.

All of these ideas are great, if you're a robot. Where's the humanity? As leaders you deal in people, yes, and process and P&L accountability usually, but people are our main job. You can do all of these things and you would still find that you will have complexity throughout your organisation before you even put the text book back on the shelf.

The way I survive, and hopefully could help you thrive, is in thinking about it in three ways. Find your True North, take a step back and listen and finally stop looking for straight lines.

What's your True North? Some call this Vision (like Forbes) but True North works for me. 20 or so years ago, Toyota 'invented' the concept of a True North as part of their now legendary Lean programme. However, that was all about change and transformation to get to a new destination. It was process. Not much understanding of humanity.

I prefer the Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, version. He has committed Unilever to sustainability as their True North. In the face of serious pressure he holds onto that and ensures that the company does too. It's not about what you CAN do, it's about what you SHOULD do. That's the difference. A Vision statement can't really give you that.

"I'm a firm believer in there being opportunities in complexity that we wouldn't find if everything was easy."

Now I'd like you to **Take a Step Back**. As the person in charge, everyone looks to you for solutions. But that's crazy. You don't have all the answers just because someone put you in this role. You just happen to be at the top of the shop.

I'm a firm believer in there being opportunities that exist in complexity that we wouldn't find if everything was easy.

I'd encourage you to ask questions of people outside your usual circle (we all have a usual circle even if we don't know it). Ask different types of questions. Then listen, actively listen. Don't listen just to the answer. Listen hard. Absorb and ask more questions. Be humble. You need to not be the know-it-all in this. Humility will help you.

Strip away the emotion from what people are saying, understand their personal motivations, get beneath the surface. There's always a reason why people create complexity, it protects them usually, at a basic level it may be the thing that they believe keeps them in a job. Get beneath all of that and listen. Then you can find the opportunities that exist in complexity.

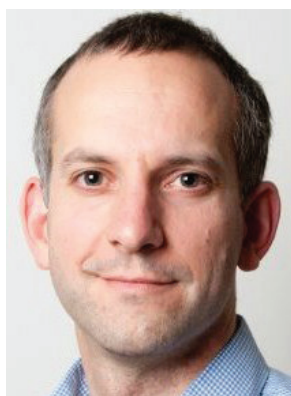
Finally, **No Straight Lines**. Really, there aren't any. Some would say no silver bullet but the concept of straight lines works for me. We don't live in a linear world. Non-linear is where you'll find small pieces of progress. Things, people and issues are interconnected; you can't expect to leap to a solution in one simple line.

You can be simplifying decision-making, you can be bringing people together who ordinarily avoid each other, you can be getting the right people in the right places, you can be changing your structure and you can be working it all out at the same time. No straight lines. Sorry. Just a lot of work. Which is great, that's what you signed up for.

Enjoy the complexity.

Leadership in an ambiguous world

Jonathan Heawood Chief Executive Officer, IMPRESS (The Independent Monitor for the Press)



"Of course, for those of you who don't like ambiguity, there is Tinder."

Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity. Not very nice words. A bit frightening. A bit grown-up.

But ambiguity...!

Ambiguity can be great. Ambiguity can keep you guessing. Keep you on your toes. Keep you alive.

Ambiguity is rather like flirting. Does he? Doesn't he? Will she? Won't she? You just don't know, and that's what keeps you interested.

Of course, for those of you who don't like ambiguity, there is Tinder.

But for the rest of us, there is the constant guesswork of life. And if life didn't already provide enough in the way of ambiguity, then our culture is full of mysteries to inspire and animate us.

Look around you. The Church of England. Does God enter the sacrament at communion? Well, sort of. What exactly is the Trinity? Well, it's a bit of this, a bit of that and a bit of the other. All wrapped up in an intriguing, ambiguous package.

Think of great art.

The Mona Lisa. Is she looking at us with love, lust or regret? Somehow, we're not sure. And because we're not sure, we want to keep trying to find out.

The temple carvings at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Sexual imagery mixed with wartime exploits mixed with mythological figures. What does it all mean? We don't know. But we would like to see it again.

Shakespeare. The Merchant of Venice. Anti-Semitic diatribe or sensitive exploration of the role of the outsider in a modern nation state?

*"As leaders,
we stand in the
space where
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be resolved."*

You have your opinion, but there are other opinions, and it's in that difference of opinions that the play continues to live, to dance before our eyes, four hundred years after it was first performed.

As Keats said, Shakespeare leaves us 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

One aspect of leadership is this capacity to accept ambiguity. To live with the uncertainties, the mysteries and the doubts.

Last time I was here at St George's House, we agreed that leadership means having the courage to accept that things are messy (Chapter 3 of Nurturing Wisdom).

And I think that's right. I think that leadership does mean accepting ambiguity.

At the same time, I think that's wrong.

I think that leadership means renouncing ambiguity.

Yes, many things in life are ambiguous. They always have been and they always will be. We don't know what things mean. We don't know why they happened. And we certainly don't know what will happen next.

But, as leaders, we stand in the space where ambiguity must be resolved. Where uncertainty, mystery and doubt must be distilled, if only for a moment, into a sense of purpose that leads to real actions, in the real world.

The meaning of Shakespeare's plays may be uncertain, but that uncertainty didn't stop him writing them. His purpose was to be a playwright and producer and he pursued that purpose relentlessly.

The Mona Lisa's smile may be mysterious, but she continues to smile at us. Da Vinci wasn't crippled by ambiguity. He was inspired by it to put paint to canvas.

The Church of England may be a theological compromise on an historic scale. But it exists. Over the centuries, men and women have taken decisions in order to keep this Church, and its congregation, alive.

Because, whilst many things in our lives may be both one thing and the other, both X and Y, leadership asks us to choose. We can't do both X and Y. We can only do X or Y.

*"The world is
ambiguous ...
We can not be
ambiguous."*

We have to make decisions. To be clear about our intentions. To set out a vision of the future and encourage others to work towards that vision.

We can't do that by pretending that the world is simple and unambiguous. But nor can we do it by blaming ambiguity for our failures.

If you say that the world is divided into good guys and bad guys, you are lying.

If you encourage people to think that, by voting to leave the EU, they will get an extra £350m per week to spend on the NHS, you can't blame 'ambiguity' when they believe you.

So we have to both accept ambiguity and renounce ambiguity.

We have to accept that we are not in control and that we don't have all the answers. The world is ambiguous.

At the same time, we have to take responsibility for what we say and do. We can't do two things at once, and we can't say one thing and mean another. We cannot be ambiguous.

When he was a young man, in 1958, Harold Pinter said that *'there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.'*

Fifty years later, accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, Pinter looked back on his younger self with some hard-won wisdom. He said, *'I believe that these assertions still make sense and so still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?'*

I think Pinter was right. And I think that, as leaders, we must not only ask: What is true? And what is false? But also: *What are we going to do about it?*

Our answer to that question can never be ambiguous.
