



Improving our Performance as Leaders

Insights from Leadership Fellows

November 2017

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

12 Introduction

This is the twelfth in our series of “Insights from Leadership Fellows”. It draws on a Leadership Conversation organised by the Society of Leadership Fellows on November 22-23 2017.

As usual, we start off with a series of insights that emerged from our discussions during this Conversation. We then set out a four-stage process for leadership teams to assess your own performance, based on the questions that we asked ourselves during this Conversation.

By reproducing the questions here, we hope that those of you who have joined us recently as Leadership Fellows and not yet been able to join one of our Conversations will have a greater understanding of the process that we use.

We are genuinely excited by the extent to which it is becoming possible for individual Fellows to use this time together to achieve significant breakthroughs in your thinking about your own development as leaders.

This is a result of the exceptionally high levels of trust that we are able to achieve within minutes of a Conversation getting underway. This feels truly special and is something that we will never take for granted.

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St George’s House, Windsor Castle

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Ten Insights

Our experience of working with our Leadership Fellows is that most Fellows are high performers - in some cases, to an exceptional degree.

Given that we offer these insights as seen through the eyes of Fellows, we often refer to high performers in the first person plural.

I Acknowledging different cycles of leadership

High performing leaders need to go through different cycles of leadership. Unless we acknowledge the different challenges of different cycles, we will not be in a position to devote the time and energy that we need to give to the specific leadership challenges that we face in any one cycle.

One of the key characteristics of high performers is that we can so easily become frustrated by all that we haven't got time to do.

When we are in the cycle of acting as driver leaders, we want to create space for thinking more strategically.

Similarly, when we are working through our strategic vision to present to the Board, we can so easily feel that we would rather be spending our time driving change within our organisation.

We find it very easy to wish for every day to have at least 30 hours, rather than the spartan 24 granted to us!

One of the best ways of managing our tendency to become overly impatient and frustrated is to recognise that different cycles of leadership require us to prioritise our time in different ways.

During one cycle we might be acting as drivers of change whilst in another we are setters of strategic direction, whilst in another we are champions of product innovation and in another we are empowering people developers.

Different leadership roles need to come to the fore at different times, and during each particular cycle we need to honour the additional requirements that they place on our energies as leaders.

Only 24 hours in a day...

2 Zooming in and out

As leaders, we need occasionally to “zoom in and out” if we are to support others in managing their own performance. The skill of juggling this process of selective interventions sits at the heart of being a successful high performing leader.

We know that as leaders we mustn't spend too long immersed in the inner workings of our business. At the same time, we know that we mustn't become too detached from the business, either.

We need occasionally to zoom in, and look in depth at challenges of under-performance, supporting those involved in putting in place a strategy for recovery, as well as establishing ongoing mechanisms for challenging and monitoring, before zooming out again.

Juggling these two states of leading, that involve us in leading from close up in one minute and then backing off so that others can step forward and take our place in another minute, is one of the most important challenges of leadership.

*We need occasionally to zoom in
... and out again*

3 **Owning our ‘inner controller’**

A common trait of high performing leaders is to become rather ambivalent when others come up with an idea. We find ourselves thinking “I’m the one round here who’s meant to have the ideas”.

When someone comes to you and proposes that something should be done differently, and asks whether that’s okay or would you rather think about the idea before deciding, what do you say?

You might be tempted to say that your answer is “yes, go ahead”.

Really? Are you sure?

For those of us who might be in denial about how controlling we really are, it can be good to challenge ourselves on how much we say yes to others’ ideas – and how often we say we’ll get back to them.

Time to control our inner controller a little more, perhaps?

*We say we're not controlling...
really?*

4

Getting riskier

We love talking about empowering others. The challenge to ourselves is how far are we prepared to go in modelling the behaviours that we want newly empowered members of our top team to adopt.

It is always important to try to look at ourselves through the eyes of others.

When we talk about wanting them to feel more empowered, what do they think?

Some might love the sound of this. They want to become more empowered and so they love the fact that we're talking the same language.

But for others this can sound rather scary. Suppose something goes wrong and they're then left to take responsibility for that mistake. How will we react then?

If and when they feel this, it is natural for them to look more closely at how we are leading and what sorts of risks we are taking.

Whenever we take a risk, do we own it? And are we okay – really okay – if the risk doesn't pay off?

We need to think very carefully about our own behaviours as risk-takers, if we tell senior colleagues that we want them to become a little riskier and chill out about the inevitability of occasional failure.

If we ourselves hate to fail, we shouldn't be surprised if others are fearful of failure too.

*Are we okay about risking
and failing?*

5 Transparency before ‘clarity’

High performing leaders tend to talk of the importance of “providing clarity”, and “presenting things the right way”. They don’t often acknowledge that this can easily have the effect of closing down real debate and implying that the future of our particular business is more predictable than we know it to be.

In the ways we define our roles, leaders can come across as very protective towards our senior staff, keen to offer them clarity and security even when we regard the future as unclear and far from certain. In these moments, it is important to challenge ourselves about why we insist on offering a false certainty.

Some of us believe that true higher performance requires truly high levels of transparency and disclosure.

We would rather say it as it is, even when “it” is messy and uncertain.

We would also rather share the options in our head and involve our senior staff in the process of deciding which one – if any – is the best one for our organisation.

High performers tend to be very highly motivated individuals. What can be more motivating than their CEO saying to them, “*We have some choices to make, and I want to share with you how I see them. I’m unsure as to which one is the best one for us, and I want to ask for your advice before deciding what to recommend to the Board*”.

Some might worry about lack of clarity in this statement, because they regard clarity as somehow synonymous with offering greater certainty.

Others of us would say that transparency – and empowerment – trump this version of clarity any day.

We aspire for the clarity involved in being open and honest about uncertainty – and the need to make imperfect choices in circumstances where there is no single right thing to do.

We have choices...

6 Beware “over-thinking” problems

Whenever we look at areas of under-performance, we should beware over-thinking the problem. We don't have to understand every aspect of what brought about the under-performance, or our personal response to it, before we take direct action to address it.

So often, under-performance in one part of an organisation will require the Chief Executive or Executive Director concerned to have a “difficult conversation” with one or more people responsible for that under-performance.

Some hold back from having these difficult conversations for months – and years! – and every time they are challenged on this they come up with some reason for why now is not the right time to have this conversation.

Increasingly, they might focus on why it is that they're avoiding the conversation. It might be their “baggage” from a previous job, or the particular vulnerability of the individual concerned, or a corporate culture of avoiding difficult conversations - or their fear of failure as a leader.

The more these reasons – and justifications - come to the fore, the more daunted they are by the idea of having the difficult conversation, that is postponed time and again.

The simple truth is that we don't need to engage in an in-depth psychoanalysis of ourselves or the corporate memory of our organisation to be able to sit down with someone responsible for significant levels of under-performance and say,

“*This isn't working, is it*”

Just get on and say it!

7 Beware over-reach

High performing leaders have a tendency to over-reach themselves, and take on too much with too little capacity to deliver as fully as they would wish to do.

Sometimes, this can be sustained over quite a long period of time. But it is almost impossible for it to be sustained indefinitely.

We know that this process of over-committing and over-reaching ourselves can easily become habitual.

It is indeed a habit of many high performing leaders. And it is possible to break this habit and still be a high performing leader.

There are all sorts of ways in which we can challenge ourselves when we feel that we are about to over-reach ourselves.

We can also invite those around us to challenge us, too.

Those high performing leaders who consistently over-reach themselves tend to have a sense of their own indestructibility. As a result, they can become careless in how they manage their own energies.

Consistent over-reach is one of the main triggers of burnout in high performing leaders.

This is why we all need to learn how to pace ourselves better and become more ruthless in deciding how we spend our time.

Too often, the time when many high performing leaders worry about burnout is when it's too late.

Next stop is burnout

8 **Not getting sucked into negative “dramas”**

Even among high performers who manage to avoid over-reaching themselves, there is a sense of constantly being fully stretched.

It is at times when we are most stretched that we are prone to getting sucked into negative “dramas” that are being played out among our Board or senior leadership team or key partners.

We need to be wary of the danger of these dramas draining our energies further, when we already have little spare capacity left.

If we let ourselves get drawn into a negative drama, it can play havoc with our performance.

This is because we find ourselves over-reacting to other challenges – not because they’re especially difficult, but because we have let ourselves become overly distracted by the fall-out from the negative drama.

*Playing havoc with
our performance*

9 Beware over-dependency

High performers can spend so long fixed on their organisational mission(s) of the moment that they spend too long in one particular organisation or sector. Where this happens, they can become fearful of applying for any sort of external position because their “comfort zone” as a leader is too dependent upon their current position and organisation.

This is an insight that applies to some high performing leaders, and definitely not all. It comes through individuals becoming so tied up with a sense of mission that is so inextricably linked to their particular organisation that they lose sight of what they have to offer as a leader, uncoupled from their current role.

As they lose their sense of mobility in relation to the wider labour market, this can make them feel over-dependent on their current position and organisation, and quite disempowered as leaders.

We each need to develop our own strategy for avoiding this. The key is that we occasionally ask ourselves how much we see our leadership authority as organisation-dependent.

It is so important that we regard at least some of our authority as deriving from our personal experiences and insights that go with us wherever we might work.

We need not to let our authority as leaders – that is so crucial to our wider impact and influence – be seen as too narrowly dependent on our current role.

Over time, this would be bound to become unhealthy not only for ourselves but also for the organisation that we help to lead.

Our organisation doesn't own us

10 **Beware making too many assumptions about high performers**

As we reflect on the challenges facing high performing leaders, we should be careful to avoid making too many assumptions about the sorts of leaders who are high performers.

For example, our superficial definition of a high performer is that they have some significant performance successes under their belt. It is the fact of these successes that makes them a high performer and so we might assume that they are confident in their successes.

On the contrary, it is not uncommon for high performing leaders, regarded by the rest of us as a huge success, to regard themselves as a failure.

In some cases, this is because they set themselves such ambitious targets that they are destined to fail in their own eyes, however successful they might be.

In other cases, it is because they are so driven by a fear of failure that this failure script dominates their view of themselves to the point where they continue to sabotage their own success, come what may.

Fear of failure is simultaneously a great strength and a potential weakness.

On the one hand, it is a great motivator that spurs on so many leaders to work harder and harder – and perform to an ever-higher standard.

On the other hand, it can mean that once they have achieved a certain level of performance they become overly cautious lest future failures compromise their achievements to date.

Fear of failure - both a strength and a weakness

Questions for your team to assess how best to improve your overall performance

Before you come together for this informal team discussion, ask every member of the team to consider their personal answer to the following question:

A

In order to become a higher performing member of this team, what would I like to be MORE OF and LESS OF – in no more than 10 words in total?

This question really helps everyone focus on their own performance, and how they would like to change in order to perform more highly.

It's quite a tough question, as well, which is why people need a little time to think about it beforehand.

Once you have all offered your personal answers, and had some cross-team discussion about what you've each come up with, the next question is intended to help you focus on what you could each do to achieve a significant improvement in your performance as a leader.

B

If you could do ONE RADICAL THING to improve your performance now, what would it be?

Even if you are a team of four, it would be a good idea to split into two groups of two to consider your answer to this question.

In each small group, make sure that you facilitate each other and narrow down your options to one specific thing that you could do that really would be a “game changer”.

What is the one thing that others almost certainly wouldn't be expecting you to do and would enable you to improve your performance significantly in a really short period of time?

It's a question that is worth considering carefully. And it's worth pushing each other to come up with something risky to bounce off the rest of the team.

The best game-changers are nearly always those that in one way or another represent unpredictable leadership behaviours.

Even if you say something and then feel that it's a step too far, it might well be that this idea is the one that helps you land on what becomes the winning idea for you.

It is so important that you each press yourselves to come up with something significant, because once you are all in this thinking space it should make you more receptive to the next question, that is in many ways the most important so far:



What is it about YOU that is standing in the way of you doing this radical thing, and how might you best overcome it?

This is the stage when you are challenged on the levels of trust among you as a team. You need to have a pretty high level of trust to be able to engage with this question, and indeed this is the time when it is important to build the team's sense of self-confidence by saying that the fact that you're asking this question is itself a recognition of the high level of trust that you have already achieved as a team.

It is also worth stressing that when people share with each other the leadership behaviours of theirs that can get in their own way, this very fact helps to dilute massively any negative fall-out from them.

We all have 'bad habits' that detract from our performance as leaders, and the very worst habits are the ones that we refuse to own.

So long as we declare a habit and are ready to ask others to support us in managing it, we have in one fell swoop taken away a huge element of the capacity of that habit to disrupt our key relationships with colleagues.

Depending upon the amount of time that you have set aside for your team to have this discussion, you could finish once you have all had a chance to respond to question 3 and then share any thoughts that are triggered by the responses of others.

If you are still keen to take the discussion further, our advice would be that you go straight on and ask:



Imagine yourself undertaking a role in this team that most excites you. Give yourself permission to think of ANY role. What is that role and why does it excite you?

In all sorts of situations, one of the most important responsibilities of the Chief Executive is to give permission to others to say things that they don't quite feel able to say.

This sort of question gives permission to members of your team to say out loud if they want to be doing a different sort of job from the one they're doing at the moment.

The simple fact that it is so open, and trusts others to say what they think is right, can increase levels of trust among a team to a significant degree.

In some teams, people can feel trapped in the wrong role and unable to say anything about this – for years! – because no one in a leadership position has asked them what they want in a way that has made it possible for them to give a really honest answer.

Whatever others might say, there is nothing that you need to “fix” straight away. You can easily say that you want to think about your team members' answers and then discuss them in one-to-ones before coming back and having another discussion with the team about future portfolios in one or two weeks' time.

High performing AND contented?

Could you ever see yourself as a contented high performing leader?

High performing **and** contented? These words don't seem to come together naturally, do they?

When we think of some high performing leaders, we think of people who give the impression that whatever others might do, and however much they might drive up their performance, they will never be satisfied.

They take the phrase “continuous improvement” and seem to interpret it to mean “continuous dissatisfaction with the performance of others”!

This is why it is important to end with this challenge to all of us who seek to become higher performing leaders.

The drive to perform to ever higher standards might well be a permanent obsession of ours.

It might well mean that when anyone uses a phrase like “If it ain't broke, don't fix it”, we can't help pulling a face and groaning.

At the same time, it would be good, wouldn't it, if a few more high performing leaders gave themselves permission to be a little more contented – and to own this contentment in their relationships with those they urge on to higher levels of performance.

Contentment is **not** synonymous with complacency!

It can, indeed, provide a good basis for ongoing self-improvement, in that it enables us to say that we know we perform to a level high enough to meet the standards that we expect of ourselves – and we now want to become that much better because performing to a still higher standard is desirable and worthwhile in its own right.

How exciting is that. And how rounded is the notion of the contented high performing leader.

Not **too** contented, of course.

*Our inner
restlessness
and impatience
can just
about embrace
the notion
of contentment
so long as
we don't
have to
shout about
it too
loudly!*
