



# Becoming more trustworthy as a leader

**Insights from Leadership Fellows**

December 2017

**Society of Leadership Fellows**  
St George's House, Windsor Castle

# 13

## Introduction

This is the 13th in our series of “Insights from Leadership Fellows”. It draws on a one-day Leadership Conversation organised by the Society of Leadership Fellows on December 5 2017.

We draw out six insights that emerged through the Conversation, and under each heading capture in a few words the danger that gave rise to the insight. We then offer a small number of coaching tips that we hope will be helpful for those Leadership Fellows who read the insight and think “that rings a few bells”!

Perhaps the most important reflection to emerge from this Conversation was that our trustworthiness as a leader, in the eyes of others, depends to a large degree on how much we are ready and willing to trust ourselves as leaders.

Whilst it is valuable to ask ourselves to what extent our colleagues regard us as trustworthy, it is also very important to challenge ourselves on how much we trust ourselves to achieve the goals that we set ourselves as a leader.

The trust of others can never compensate for a lack of self-trust on the part of a leader.

Pete Ashby  
Director, Society of Leadership Fellows  
St George’s House, Windsor Castle

December 12, 2017

# 6 Insights

---

## 1 Trust and championing others

Sometimes our keenness to demonstrate our trust in colleagues we value highly can lead to us giving our trust too freely – and in a way that means we’re not there for them when they most need us.

## 2 Trust and keeping others happy

Our desire to be seen as trustworthy by others in our own team can mean that we become over-concerned with meeting their expectations towards us – at the expense of our expectations towards them.

## 3 Trust and risk-taking

Our concern not to jeopardise the trust of a risk-averse colleague – or boss – can lead to us copping out of taking risks with them.

## 4 Trust and managing disagreement

Our concern not to jeopardise others’ trust in us can make us question our own judgement about what is the right thing to do, in situations where others disagree.

## 5 Trust and setting the standard

We are so keen to keep control over the standards of working in our business that we insist on “owning” them ourselves, without thinking about the impact on staff attitudes - and the danger of them regarding our controlling behaviours as a sign of our lack of trust in them.

## 6 Trust and our top challenge: trusting ourselves

The challenge of becoming more trustworthy as a leader can easily result in us spending most of our time thinking about how others view us. In the process, we can fail to ask ourselves the killer question that will determine our success more than anything else: how much do we trust our own judgements as a leader?

# I Trust and championing others

## Danger

---

We place our trust in a colleague to take responsibility for a major new assignment and then leave them to it.

The burden of our belief in them means that they are unable to turn to us for help when they encounter a serious problem. When the problem becomes so serious that we are called in, we take back their responsibility and withdraw our trust.

## Coaching tips

---

- Great that you want to develop someone you clearly believe in. But how is it that you gave them a major new responsibility without asking them to take it for granted that you would be there for them the moment they run into a difficulty and want your help and advice?
- If you simply tell someone who's taking on a fresh and challenging task that you trust them and don't also say that you're there to help them get out of any holes they land themselves in, it's no wonder that they don't tell you as much as they should. By over-investing trust in them, you helped to make them fearful of letting you down. This meant that they couldn't trust you enough to respond the right way at the time when they needed you the most.
- Instead of being quick to punish them for their failure, you should have been quicker to take responsibility for your own failure in not offering them any sort of life raft after you threw them in the deep end.

## 2 Trust and keeping others happy

### Danger

---

We are given responsibility for leading a new team and want to demonstrate what an inclusive team player we are.

We are careful to ask what they expect of us and do all that we can to fit in with the current team culture. We quickly realise that we are so busy trying to fit in with others that they lose sight of our expectations of them – and when we say that we want to put in place some major changes in how the team works, they are surprised and tell each other that they're not sure where they stand with us and so can't really trust us.

### Coaching tips

---

- For members of your team to feel able to trust you as their new leader, they need to feel that early on they are developing a good sense of the sort of leader that you are. If you intend to introduce some changes that they are likely to regard as radical, give them the signal that you want to behave in a way that some might well be uneasy with. This way, you are less likely to take them by surprise later on. Surprises can do a lot to undermine trust, since people can easily persuade themselves that a new leader deliberately kept them in the dark because of a “hidden agenda”.
- We are often tempted to want to keep people happy, and can justify this to ourselves as a way of retaining their trust. The problem with this is that it ignores the truth that trust is to a large degree conditional on us behaving as the sort of leader we purport to be. Leaders whose main concern is to keep their people happy are “trusted” as relatively weak and reactive leaders. If you want to be trusted as a strong and purposeful leader, you need to demonstrate this in your behaviours.
- At the same time, you should make a point of inviting feedback about how members of your team are experiencing you as their leader. If they see you as receptive to their ideas, they are likely to trust you more as a leader who is purposeful and also responsive to them.

## 3 Trust and risk-taking

### Danger

---

We have an idea that brings with it some risks that we believe to be worth taking for the sake of the business benefits that it would bring.

Our enthusiasm for the prize isn't shared by some of those we need to convince. Their focus is mainly on the risks and because of this we tell ourselves to back off and give up on the idea lest our colleagues see us as a compulsive risk-taker.

### Coaching tips

---

- Instead of being deterred by your risk-averse colleagues, why not factor this in to the advice that you give? Tell them that you had an idea you wanted to raise with them and rejected on the grounds that it's too risky. Having thought about it some more, you have come up with a way of de-risking it to a considerable degree, so now you have a proposal that could be made to work.
- By acknowledging up-front their dislike of risk-taking you give yourself your best chance of disarming them and persuading them to follow the course that you want. In the process, you build their trust in you as someone who respects their wariness of risk-taking and is ready to reshape an idea to ensure that it fits in with their approach towards the business.
- There are bound to be times when you can't de-risk a good idea in this way. In these cases, it is important to introduce some rigour into the process of assessing what the risk really is. Risk-averse leaders tend to withdraw from a line of thinking fairly quickly once they sense danger. When they see a "red light", it is important to ask them to engage in some thoughtful risk assessment, on the basis that the light would only turn to green if they are reassured as a result of this assessment. Sometimes our response to them bottling out too quickly can be to do the same, and it is this that we need to avoid.

# 4 Trust and managing disagreement

## Danger

---

We hold back from offering our personal judgement because we feel that it's more important to retain the "trust" of those with whom we disagree.

Afterwards others feel that we haven't been open in arguing for what we believed to be the best course of action. They interpret our behaviour as showing us to be unreliable, because we have been willing to go along with something even though we're clearly not happy about it.

## Coaching tips

---

- In this sort of situation, be transparent with others about why you feel as you do, making clear that there might well be a difference in approach – and if so, you would like to discuss it in an open way.
- Even if you end up disagreeing about the best way of moving forward, the others are likely to value your honesty – and feel they can trust the fact that they know where they stand with you. It is such a falsehood to believe that they have to agree with you to trust you.
- The key to high trust relationships is that we all feel a certain obligation to explain why we think as we do and be ready to shift in our thinking if others persuade us that they have a better idea. It is the transparency of our argument and our readiness to move on in our thinking that enable others to trust us a lot. Sometimes the fact that we can disagree on an issue we feel passionately about, and understand where we are each coming from, brings us closer together and helps us to trust each other more.

## 5 Trust and setting the standard

### Danger

---

We are proud of the fact that we co-founded our business and are now developing a global profile. We see ourselves and our co-founder as “owning” the vision of our business and also the standards of performance that we expect of our teams and can’t imagine how this might have a negative impact on their attitudes towards us.

After all, if we hadn’t set up the business none of them would be in their present jobs. So what’s the problem with us owning the standards that we expect them all to meet?

### Coaching tips

---

- Rather than focusing on what might be your entitlements as the founder and business leader, why not start by focusing on the needs of your people? You know that your best people constantly need to feel stretched, if they are to keep on giving of their best. So why treat your standards as off limits?
- Instead, wouldn’t it be better to say that you and your co-founder have set a series of minimum standards? You could explain these in vivid detail and then say that where any team members can beat these standards, and/ or come up with smarter ways of working, you want to hear about this and to learn from them.
- By trusting your people in this way, it doesn’t give away control. On the contrary, it encourages your best people to come to you with ideas and suggestions that enable you, together, to set higher standards. This way, they can trust you as someone who wants them to help you raise the bar rather than being wary of you as someone who is saying “back off, this is all mine!”

## 6 Trust and our top challenge: trusting ourselves

### Danger

---

Trust really matters to us. So we are careful to ask how much others trust us as a leader. In the process we realise not only that people have wildly different expectations towards us, but also that they all have different sorts of “triggers” that can cause them to trust us more – or less.

We can spend so long seeking to win others’ trust that we fail to invest the time we should be giving to thinking through how we should behave as a leader. This is rather strange, really, since we are the ones responsible for our own performance as a leader – not anyone else.

### Coaching tips

---

- Be very clear with yourself about whose trust matters to you the most. Who are the people with whom you most share your higher purpose in your professional life? So much can be gained from working at developing exceptionally high levels of mutual trust with them.
- Beyond this core group, perhaps the knack is to expect more modest levels of trust among these people you do business with occasionally. After all, they have different notions of their higher purpose and are bound to attach quite a few conditions to the level of trust they can invest in their relationship with you.
- However much trust you might achieve in your relationships with others, please don’t diminish the fundamental importance of your trust in yourself as a leader. The best leaders need to feel able to be in a situation where you might be the only person holding one particular view. If others are to line up behind you, they need occasionally to witness you trusting in your own judgement as a leader and standing your ground.

# We each need our honest challengers

---

There is much to be said for inviting two or three people that we trust a lot to act as our honest challengers. We ask them to agree that we will occasionally have a few minutes together and discuss whether there is anything particular about our leadership style that might be creating barriers in the way of others trusting us more.

It is important that we encourage them to 'say it as it is' and hold back from diluting any difficult messages to make them more palatable.

We can also use this time with our challengers to bounce ideas off them in a way that we can only do with a trusted confidante. It can be so useful to say to a trusted challenger,

*“If I were to do such-and-such, how do you think others would react?”*

## Learning to trust ourselves more

---

Our aim is that through our behaviours as a leader we demonstrate our capacity to step up to the challenges that we face – and, through the way that we do so, inspire others to follow suit.

Two or three trusted personal challengers can support us so much with this by enabling us to sharpen up our own instincts and judgements as a leader, and learn to trust ourselves more.

---

It is this interplay between our self-trust and the trust of others that is so key to our development as a high trust, high performing leader.