



# Nurturing Wisdom

## 38 Insights from Leadership Fellows

Volume Two

March 2018

**Society of Leadership Fellows**

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St George's House, Windsor Castle

# 2

## Introduction

Volume 2 of Nurturing Wisdom brings together in a single document the 38 Insights from Leadership Fellows that we captured at the end of six Conversations (numbers 10 to 15 in our series) at St George's House, Windsor Castle between September 2017 and February 2018.

We are immensely grateful to those Leadership Fellows who joined us for these Conversations.

As in Volume 1 of Nurturing Wisdom, the Chapter headings on the next two pages are hyperlinked, so that you can dip into any part of this Volume and quickly scan it for insights and tips that could support you in your ongoing development as a leader.

We hope that Leadership Fellows will feel free to share these 38 Insights with your immediate teams and close colleagues as you think best.

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March 2018

# Executive Summary

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Each of the six Chapters below starts by capturing the key insights that Leadership Fellows gained through that particular Conversation.

Please just click on the heading to take you straight to the Chapter of your choice.

## **I Empowering others more as leaders**

Insights 1-6

Argues that engagement and connection are at the heart of the empowerment process and proposes three killer questions as the framework for any discussion to empower others more as leaders. Leaders committed to empowering members of their team are urged to show the discipline necessary to “avoid meddling and tinkering”, if they really want to create the space for them to step up with confidence.

## **2 Improving our performance as leaders**

Insights 7-16

Suggests that the motivations driving many high performing leaders – such as their fear of failure – bring with them not only obvious benefits but also potential challenges and downsides. We then offer a four-stage process for leadership teams to assess your own performance, based on the questions that we asked ourselves during this Conversation.

## **3 Leading culture change**

Insights 17-21

Sets out eleven steps to support Leadership Fellows in changing the culture of your organisation for the better. They focus on the key roles that leaders can easily miss, such as engaging directly with the cynics and would-be saboteurs among your staff, being prepared to act as an occasional “disruptor” in challenging bad practice and introducing a “behavioural threshold” that staff need to cross to become eligible for bonuses.

# Executive Summary

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## **4 Defining your brand as a leader**

Insights 22-27

Sets out a series of 10 questions to support leaders in defining your own brand as a leader. Argues that the most effective brand for a leader enables you to model your key strengths in a way that brings out the best in others. When a leader achieves this it should support you in challenging your capacity for self-doubt, that can undermine a leader's own brand more than anything else.

## **5 Becoming more trustworthy as a leader**

Insights 28-33

After drawing out a number of insights from this Conversation, we include a series of coaching tips linked to each one. Perhaps the most important reflection to emerge 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.

## **6 Think today, reflect tonight, act tomorrow**

Insights 34-38

Inspired by one of the talks at our first Annual Gathering for Leadership Fellows in September 2017. Tells the story of how we recognised that most of us are addicted to the third part of this mantra about "acting tomorrow". We give too little time to thinking and reflection, which is why we worked up six practical ideas for supporting Fellows with developing a more reflective culture in your own organisation.

## CHAPTER I



# Empowering others more as leaders

Insights from Leadership Fellows

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

## Six Insights

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**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

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**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

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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

**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

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



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

**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

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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

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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 succeeders – 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

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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...**



## CHAPTER 2



# Improving our Performance as Leaders

Insights from Leadership Fellows

**Society of Leadership Fellows**

St George's House, Windsor Castle

## Ten Insights

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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.

### **7 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.

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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...*

## 8 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.

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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*



## 9 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”.

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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?*

## 10 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.

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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?*

## II 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.

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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...*

## 12 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.

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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!*

### **13 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.**

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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*

## **I4 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.

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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*

## 15 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.

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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*

## **16 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.**

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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:



**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:

D

**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?

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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.

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*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!*

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## CHAPTER 3



# Leading Culture Change

Insights from Leadership Fellows

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

## 5 Insights

### 17 Culture change starts in the moment

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Successful culture change is achieved – and sustained – through a series of moments.

Sometimes a moment presents itself, and if we seize that moment we have an opportunity to signal a shift in culture that will be remembered for years to come.

**At other times we have to create a moment through acting in a way that is intentionally counter-cultural and enables us to draw attention to some aspect of our culture that we are resolved to change.**

### 18 Culture change is about “how” as well as “why”

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Successful culture change requires a strong overriding narrative.

Whilst this is vital, on its own it isn't enough.

Change that is just about "why" can end up lacking depth and follow-through.

We also need to focus on how we behave towards each other and how the identity of our organisation is influenced by the habits that we develop together.

Without a clear sense of higher purpose, change that is just about "how" can end up becoming rather fragmented.

**Successful change requires the how and why together, with each strand of the wider strategy acknowledging the importance of the other.**



## **19 The impact of purpose-driven culture change is often time-limited**

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A strong sense of purpose can do so much to help drive culture change in the short-term.

Over time, the rather highfalutin language associated with higher purpose can easily lose its energy and meaning.

To sustain purpose-driven change, we need to refresh our mission every now and again, with opportunities for staff to question priorities and challenge points of tension, so that this process of renewal is open and real.

## **20 If we want an empowered culture, this needs to be reflected in the process of change**

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The way we lead culture change is often as important as the specifics of the change itself.

This means that if we say we want a more empowered culture, we need to be careful not to be prescriptive in our approach towards culture change.

Whilst we might set the overall direction of travel, we hold back from seeking to control the detailed outcomes.

## **2I In leading culture change, we need to acknowledge our own vulnerabilities**

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There are different views among us about the extent to which we should acknowledge our vulnerabilities as leaders.

Those who favour this view argue that it should make it easier for those around us to connect with us as leaders because they know “who we are”.

The key proposition here is that if we don’t acknowledge our own vulnerabilities, they will find a way of “leaking out” anyway and then sabotage the culture that we are trying to create.

For example:

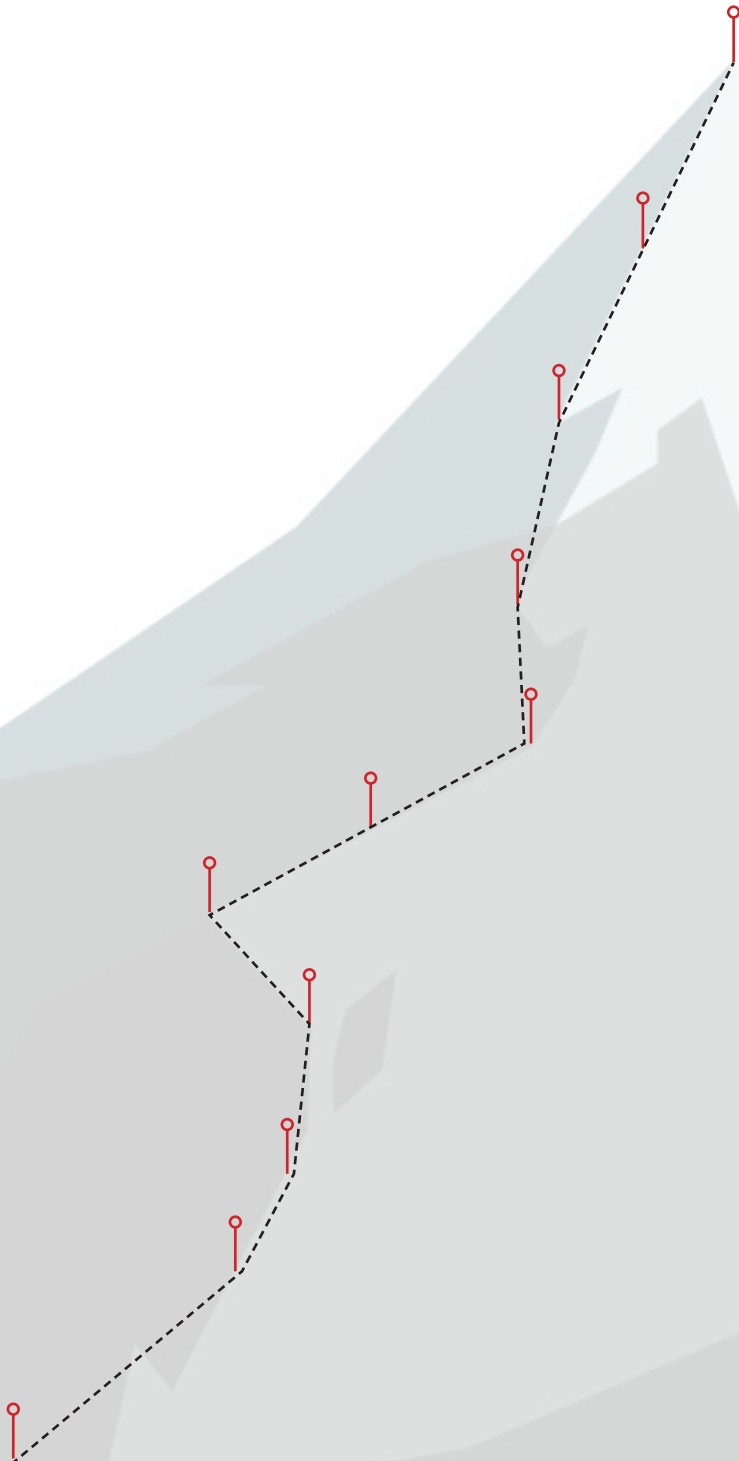
- If we say that we want a more empowered culture, and then have a habit of closing down lines of argument that we disagree with, without acknowledging this behaviour of ours, we invite cynicism because the way we are behaving is so evidently disempowering of others
- If, on the other hand, we invite others to challenge us if we revert to close down behaviours in a moment of challenge, this act of owning our behaviours can make us both more authentic as leaders and more empowering of others.

**In leading culture change, we are not required to be perfect as leaders.**

**If we want a culture of candour, we are required to be as honest as we can possibly be - and that includes honesty about our own behaviours as leaders as well as how we would like everyone else to behave.**

# Changing Culture for the Better

## Eleven steps



## STEP I

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# The bedrock: We need to offer passion *and* vision

These are two essential requirements for lasting culture change.

One can't work without the other:

- passionless vision will fall flat
- visionless passion will be a flash in the pan.

We need both:

- passion that feels personal and REAL, expressed in language that people expect us to use as leaders and as far as possible from that of management textbooks
- vision captured through a core message expressed in plain English, using short phrases and words of few syllables that people can take on and make their own.

## STEP 2

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# The reality check: Passion and vision are not enough

Vision provides the context for culture change and passion provides the energy and drive.

They get us started – and do no more than that!

- Clarity of vision can never deny the reality of the many unknowns that all businesses face.
- Passion that feels personal and REAL, expressed in language that is personal to us as leaders and as far removed as possible from that of management textbooks

We need more, a lot more.

- This is where our persistence and tenacity as leaders come into play.

### STEP 3

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## Constructive conversation

We need to hold the space for constructive conversation.

In all discussions about culture, it's important that we start by explaining the case for change.

We can then ask people to say whether they feel in any way threatened by what we have just said.

- Everyone needs to believe that we genuinely want them to speak their truth and that whatever they say will be listened to and respected.
- In this way, we should be able to “surface the difficult stuff” as well as reassuring people that the process for developing a new shared culture is truly open and consultative.

We are then in a position to challenge our teams to think ahead and join up the dots:

- *“Let’s rethink our plans for future working and ask how they need to change to reflect the new culture that we are going to create together”.*

## STEP 4

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# Contradictions and tensions

We need to challenge the contradictions and tensions within our current culture.

So often there is a culture of denial about the real barriers in the way of positive change. This is why it is important that we identify the contradictions and tensions within our current culture that are holding us back.

The very act of naming them, without anger or aggression, makes it easier to bring them out of the “shadows” where their capacity to do damage is at its greatest.

For example, many commercial organisations imply that the quest for profitability is completely in line with their higher purpose. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't.

In these situations, choices need to be made.

- It is the refusal to acknowledge these choices that can do so much to weaken the integrity of a culture.
- The more generous we can be in the way we refer to contradictions and tensions within our current culture, the easier it will be for staff to “own” them and share our ambition to leave them behind.

## STEP 5

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# Cynics and saboteurs

We need to engage with the cynics and would-be saboteurs.

We all have an inner voice that has the capacity to be cynical, and so it's never too difficult to know what the cynics are thinking.

- Our role needs to be to draw them out and encourage them to share their cynicism, so that they might be asked to let it go – and at least become sceptics.

One way to draw people out is through asking *“how could we make this fail?”*

- In the process, we will find out who has genuine concerns and might yet be won over to supporting the new culture, and who intends to act as a blocker and saboteur.

We need to weed out the blockers and would-be saboteurs sooner rather than later, and do so in a way that is visible and decisive.

Once we have shown that we won't tolerate behaviours designed to block change, we are in a stronger position to convert some of the cynics into powerful ambassadors for culture change:

- *“At first, I didn't get the case for change, but I can now see how these proposals really will improve things ....”*



## STEP 6

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# We're all disruptors now

Culture change involves disruption - and that means us acting as disruptors.

A vital dimension of culture change is about how we behave in the moment, when we experience teams acting in ways that reinforce poor patterns of behaviour.

- In these moments a leader needs to be ready to act as a disruptor, knowing that sometimes others will get the point we are trying to make, and learn from it, and at other times they won't.

Whenever we behave as a disruptor, we are taking a risk that others will understand why we're behaving in the way that we are.

If they don't understand what we're getting at, we're bound to feel awkward.

- Being prepared occasionally to feel awkward is part of what's required of us as disruptive leaders.

***No awkwardness, no risk.***

***No risk, no culture change.***

## STEP 7

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# Less doing

The challenge for so many of us is that more coaching and culture changing require less doing on our part.

Culture change involves leaders spending more time creating an environment in which more people can succeed to a greater degree than they have ever done before.

- This requires us to invest more time in our roles coaching, supporting, cajoling, affirming and stretching.
- To do this, we need to rethink the balance between the time we spend doing and the time we spend coaching.

So often, there is also a need to increase the pace of work. Some resist this on the grounds that more speed equals less quality.

Yet the truth is that greater speed and higher quality tend to go together as one, so long as we have good feedback systems in place.

- Pace can drive higher quality because it shortens feedback loops.

With less doing and more coaching on our part, the result can be more doing - and higher quality doing - all round.

## STEP 8

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# No more workarounds

To succeed in sub-optimal cultures, we've all got used to creating workarounds.

This is something we're all now pretty good at.

If, say, we think that our approvals process is too slow, despite various decisions by various bodies to speed it up, it is bound to be tempting to short-cut this bureaucracy when we want something approved urgently.

If we really want to change culture, we need to do this less – and challenge poor practices more.

We can't create a healthier workplace culture if we look the other way when others don't do what they say they're going to do.

- Workarounds are so often our way of avoiding culture change.
- They reinforce silo mentalities because they're about us creating our own little "bubble" in which we make our own rules.

The moment we say "no more workarounds" is the moment we know we really are serious about culture change.

## STEP 9

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# Words matter

So often the language that we use gets in the way of what we're trying to achieve.

Healthy cultures are those in which there is a practice of “plain speaking”, so that we all feel free to “say it as it is”, whilst assuming the best of each other and never seeking to be ungenerous.

Yet the language that we use is sometimes so abstract and jargonistic that it creates barriers that prevent others from identifying with the message we're seeking to share.

- We should be prepared to stop using terms such as “strategy”, “resilience”, “collaboration” and “market segmentation” that have lost their meaning through over-use and misuse.

If we say that we want to cut out acronyms and jargon and “tech talk”, that will be quite a challenge for some. Bring it on!

## STEP 10

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# Rewarding behaviours

It is time for us to look more closely at how we can reward behaviours that help to foster the culture that we are seeking for our organisations.

One idea is that there should be a “behavioural threshold” that staff need to cross before they can benefit from the bonus system.

- If we were to pick just two behaviours that are key to building the new culture, and all staff had to exhibit to be eligible for a bonus, this could make a big difference.

The knack is to focus on a small number of behaviours and express what we expect of staff in very simple language. (Perhaps one of them could be linked to a contradiction or tension that we have been naming, in line with step 4.)

Assuming that these behaviours become the norm in, say, two years, another consultative exercise could be undertaken at that stage to identify the “bad habits” that are undermining the organisation’s culture.

And so the process could be repeated, with everyone knowing that they have to break these “new” bad habits to be eligible for bonuses.

## STEP II

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# Contemplating our own departure

To be successful in leading culture change, we need to envisage the culture thriving without us.

In so many ways, culture change is personal. People look to their leaders to model the behaviours they ask others to adopt, and are quick to condemn those leaders who say one thing and do another.

Whilst our role in modelling behaviours is important, we also need to be careful to do all that we can to share “ownership” of key cultural behaviours as widely as possible.

- The more widely the new culture is shared, the stronger it will be if and when one of its primary advocates moves elsewhere.
- This is why it can be very helpful for us all to challenge ourselves about how important we ourselves are to the culture that we are seeking to promote.

If we tell ourselves that our aim is to make ourselves redundant, we might find that we work harder as agents of culture change.

Think you're  
at the top?



Don't forget

***"The top of one mountain is  
always the bottom of another"***

(Marianne Williamson)

## CHAPTER 4



# Defining your brand as a leader

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle



## Six Insights

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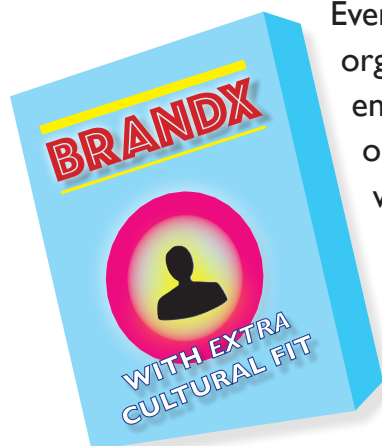
### **22** To a large extent, the nature of our brand as a leader will be influenced by the stage we are at on our leadership journey

For younger leaders, their brand will largely be about their ambitions for the future. Through their current leadership role, they will seek to model what they would like to become.

As we all become more established as leaders, it becomes more difficult to disconnect our brand from our current role and the track record that we bring.

### **23** Our brand as a leader is dependent upon whether we work in an organisation with a strong internal culture of its own

The stronger the culture of our organisation, the more our brand as a leader needs to achieve a high degree of cultural fit.



Even if we take over as Chief Executive of an organisation with a strong culture, we still need to ensure that our brand reflects that culture – unless our aim is to lead a process of culture change within which our brand symbolises the new culture that we wish to develop.

**24** Our brand as a leader tends to be strongest when we see it as rooted in our greatest strengths

Those who are most confident in their brand as a leader tend to see it as rooted in their greatest strengths.

The brand is then about how they apply these strengths with such flair that colleagues naturally see their strengths as exceptional, enabling them to be seen as a leader in transition from good to great.

**25** Where leaders fail to define a brand of their own, they still tend to have one – based on what those around them regard as their particular style as a leader

Whether or not we choose to develop our own distinctive brand as a leader, the simple truth is that we have one. If we don't seek to define it ourselves, others will define it for us.



This is why it is so important that we engage directly with the challenge of how we would like others to view our brand. If we duck the challenge, others will still have a view of us that might or might not serve our interests as a leader.

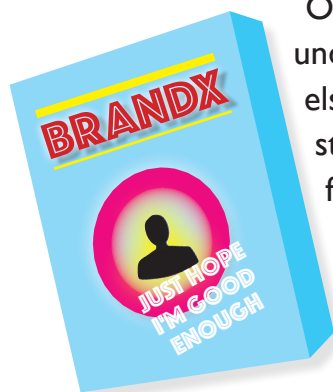
**26** Our brand as a leader must be truly owned by ourselves. It is not a mask that we can choose to put on, and take off, at will

We know that a commercial organisation might change the words written on a tin, to redefine the brand of this product. However easy – or difficult – it might be to rebrand a product, it is nearly always more difficult for an individual to rebrand themselves.

Personal rebranding takes time, especial in an age when a leader's authenticity is seen as so important to their personal brand.

**27** One thing undermines our brand as a leader more than anything else

Most of us face one 'common enemy' when it comes to our confidence in our brand. That is our fear of being shown to be inadequate and exposed as an "imposter".



Our shared capacity for self-doubt as leaders undermines our leadership brand more than anything else. So many of us are fearful of highlighting our strengths, lest we over-expose ourselves and are found not to be as good as we would like to be.

## 10 questions to support you in defining your brand as a leader

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We have worked up the 10 questions that follow, to support you in thinking through how you would like to define your brand as a leader. If you wish to take part in the questionnaire, you might wish to print off a hard copy first.

i

### How would you expect others to describe you as a leader?

Imagine that those who work most closely with you as a leader are discussing you, without you being around. Please jot down in the space below the 5 or 6 adjectives that you would expect them to use to describe how they see you as a leader.

Please don't spend long thinking about this. What matters are the first few words that come to mind, on the basis that they are trying hard to capture YOU as a leader, without in any way being ungenerous – or overly kind!

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ii

### How would you LIKE them to describe you?

Now please think of the adjectives that you would like these work colleagues of yours to use when describing you.

As before, please don't spend too long on this. You're simply trying to bring to mind the words that you WANT them to use when describing their experience of you as a leader.

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iii

### How big is the gap between your answers to Q1 and 2?

Question 2 wasn't easy, was it. It shows how little time we each spend thinking about our brand as a leader.

Please compare your answers to 1 and 2, and ask yourself how big is the gap.

The bigger the gap, the more you probably need to do to reposition yourself as a leader, if others' views of you are to be closer to what you want them to be.



iv

### **In what ways are you exceptional as a leader?**

If you want the option to try and change your brand, the best place to start is to ask yourself in what ways you are exceptional – or not far off from being exceptional - as a leader.

Without letting yourself be held back by false modesty, what are the areas where you're already strong and where you would like to be stronger still? If the words don't readily come to mind, can you think of some 'leadership moments' these past few months that highlight strengths of yours of which you are proud?

If you can think of two or three different strengths that you showed in these moments, please jot them down below. They are key to defining a strong brand identity.

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V

### How do these strengths fit in with the culture of your organisation?

If you run your own small business, or work for yourself, you might feel that you can give this question a miss and go straight on to the next one.

If you work in an organisation that prides itself on having a strong culture, it's important to think through how your strengths fit in with that culture.

Please imagine that you show the strengths listed in answer to question 4 to a senior colleague of yours. Would they look at them and say what a great cultural fit you are with your organisation?

If they wouldn't, are there one or two aspects of your leadership where you would like your key strengths to become more closely aligned with the culture of your organisation?

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vi

**Which leadership behaviours of yours prevent these strengths from defining your brand as strongly as they might?**

Now that you have these strengths in your mind, please ask yourself whether there are one or two leadership behaviours of yours that prevent these strengths from having the impact that you would like.

We all get in our own way at times, and the strongest leaders have their own strategies for managing their shortcomings.

Please jot these behaviours down in the box below. In so many top teams, it isn't these behaviours that are the No 1 problem. It is people's reluctance to own them that causes the greatest problems.

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vii

**So, what do you propose to DO to minimise these bad habits that get in the way of you defining your brand more clearly through your distinctive strengths?**

This is the stage when it's really important to keep focused on the importance of "brand differentiation". The most successful brands always convey the message that there is something distinctive about the product that sits behind the brand.

So, one of the key reasons for you engaging with your bad habits as a leader is to ensure that nothing gets in the way of your brand projecting your distinctiveness as a leader in ways that you would want.

Can you focus on how a small number of close colleagues at work might support you in leaving behind these bad habits?

Do you want to ask them to "call the behaviour" when they feel you're slipping back into one of these habits?

How else could they help you to step out of a routine that plays to your weaknesses rather than your strengths?

It will be easier to talk this through with trusted colleagues, once you have one or two ideas to try out on them. Remember, the key is inviting their support.

With their support, it won't be long before you come up with some very practical ideas for moving forward.

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viii

**Can we make sure that you have the RIGHT WORDS to describe the distinctive elements of your brand?**

So, you're now fairly clear how large is the gap between how others see you as a leader, and how you would like them to see you; you have defined what you see as the distinctive elements of your brand, and also how close colleagues at work can support you in managing those leadership behaviours of yours that can sometimes compromise your brand.

Before you go any further, can you pause and check that you have chosen the best words that you can to define the distinctiveness of your brand.

Please tell yourself that you are not allowed to use the words that you've already used in answer to question 4.

You must now try to find a small number of different words to capture your distinctive strengths in a way that defines your brand as a leader.

What might they be?

Please try to limit yourself to the same number of words that you used to answer question 4.

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ix

**Now that you have used different words to describe your key strengths, which ones best capture the distinctive brand that you want to have as a leader?**

Comparing the words that you have just used with those that you wrote under question 4, what does this make you think? Was it really hard this time, because you think you got it right before? If so, how great to know you got it right first time!

If the words that you used this time round feel as if they capture your brand rather better, that's also great, isn't it? So many leaders don't challenge themselves enough on how they would like to define their brand.

They also don't think hard enough about how they want to draw on these strengths to model certain key behaviours for those around them.

What this means is that we sometimes go "over the top" in living certain brands. For example, the leader who regards themselves as an empowerer of others can sometimes be so reluctant to use the term "I" that they actually make it difficult for those they are seeking to empower to talk about their own needs as well, because their empowering leader never seems to acknowledge his/ her own needs.

It's incredibly important that your brand as a leader enables to you to model your key strengths in a way that brings out the best in others.

Looking again at your answers to questions 4 and 8, can you now capture your best way of defining your brand as a leader? We won't ask you this question again!

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**Are you tough enough on yourself in applying your own authenticity test to yourself as a leader?**

**There is nothing to write down here**, since this is just a question to take with you. It comes from a challenge that came up powerfully during the Conversation.

Sometimes we all have to manage something of a mess in our life outside work, whilst trying to persuade ourselves that we can continue with “business as usual” in our work life - and no-one will know any better.

This might work for some people, for a while, but more often than not others quickly see through any disconnect between our professional persona and our personal identity.

It can so easily compromise our leadership if we try to pretend that life overall is hunky dory, whilst in reality the truth is very different.

If and when people see through this, they can be quite harsh in their judgement of us for “living a lie”.

This is why it is important for each of us to apply our own authenticity test to the way we present ourselves as a leader.

Whatever the brand might be that we want for ourselves as a leader, we have to make sure that we are real and don't spend so long trying to define the ideal image of ourselves that we misrepresent who we really are.

If we want to sustain high trust relationships with those around us, people at work need to feel that they know who we really are.

## Making sure there is no disconnect

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Of course, there are bound to be some parts of our lives that we wish to keep private. This point is not about what we disclose. It's about us being true to ourselves and not pretending – with close colleagues - that some things are fine if and when they're not.

Whatever sort of brand we wish to define for ourselves as a leader, it is important that we should try to live the “no pretence” maxim as fully as possible.

It is the idea that leadership success can require us to pretend to be what we are not that can make us so vulnerable to being undermined by the imposter syndrome.

This is why we need to be careful to ask ourselves whether there is any sort of significant disconnect between how we are at work and how we are in the rest of our lives.

If we leave ourselves in any way vulnerable to the charge that we are “living a lie”, that can be used to undermine our brand as a leader.

However we might define our brand, we need to be comfortable with it as our brand.

### **Capturing something powerful about us**

We need to be seen to be living it and working hard to make it stronger and more effective, because that brand captures something powerful about us, not just as leaders but as human beings in the broadest sense.

## Increasing connection

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During this Conversation, one of our Leadership Fellows quoted the words that Brené Brown uses in her latest book “Braving the Wilderness”, when she writes that

*‘True belonging doesn't require us to change who we are. It requires us to be who we are.’*

Being who we are doesn't mean that we can't change a whole host of our behaviours to become more effective as leaders. What it does mean is that we should (as BB says:)

*“show up as our true selves and brave the wilderness of uncertainty and criticism” rather than just trying to “fit in”.*

It means that our brand is all about connection, and increasing connection.

It is not a front or an opportunistic device to get on. It's a way of being ourselves that enables us to give that much more to others, through the role that we are developing for ourselves as leaders.

### **Achieving true belonging**

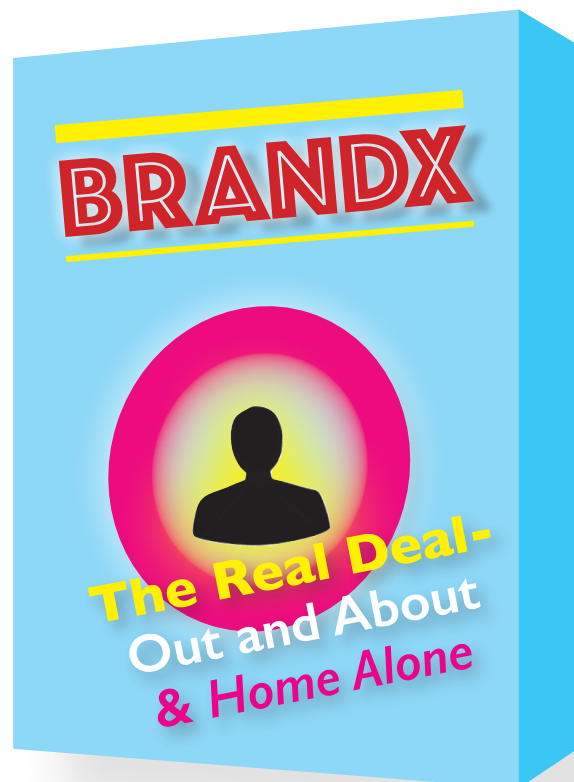
As Brené Brown writes, *“True belonging requires us to believe in and belong to ourselves so fully that we can find sacredness both in being a part of something, and in standing alone when necessary.”*

In this context, our brand is a means of increasing belonging and defining to ourselves more clearly who we are in those moments when, as leaders, we find ourselves standing alone.

**Does your brand enable you to achieve greater connection with others, as well as enabling you to feel more secure about who you are, as a leader, in those moments when you find yourself standing alone?**

That's a powerful question, isn't it?

Every time we feel satisfied with the answer that we give, it's still a good idea to tell ourselves not to leave it too long before we return to the question again.



## CHAPTER 5



# Becoming more trustworthy as a leader

Insights from Leadership Fellows

**Society of Leadership Fellows**

St George's House, Windsor Castle



## 6 Insights

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### **28 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.

### **29 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.

### **30 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.

### **31 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.

### **32 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.

### **33 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?

## 28 Trust and championing others

### **Danger**

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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**

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- 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.

## 29 Trust and keeping others happy

### **Danger**

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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**

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- 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.

## 30 Trust and risk-taking

### **Danger**

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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**

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- ➔ 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.

## 3 | Trust and managing disagreement

### **Danger**

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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**

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- 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.

## 32 Trust and setting the standard

### **Danger**

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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**

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- ➔ 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!”

## 33 Trust and our top challenge: trusting ourselves

### **Danger**

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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**

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- 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

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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 so-and-so, how do you think others would react?"*

## Learning to trust ourselves more

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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.



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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.

## CHAPTER 6



**Think today,  
reflect tonight,  
act tomorrow**

Insights from Leadership Fellows

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

# Five Insights

## **34** As leaders, too many of us become “speed junkies!”

We can all look at the phrase “Think today, reflect tonight, act tomorrow” and think how wise and helpful it is. And yet, for many of us, the most exciting words are about acting tomorrow!

One of the main reasons we enjoy being leaders is because we enjoy doing things and making things happen. The more we can make happen in as short a period of time as possible, the better.

This is why we tend to regard thinking and reflecting as a means to an end, which is to get on and do things, and do them fairly smartly too, so that we can speed up and become that bit busier.

Welcome to the world of the leadership speed junkies! If someone tells us that we’re belting along at 100 miles an hour, what will our first reaction be?

Will it be that we know we should slow down – or that we would like to speed up a little more?

For those of us hooked on living in a state of almost permanent “busyness”, we know the answer.

Like all addicts, we might say that we want to break our addiction to freneticism.

In our next breath, we tell ourselves that in our positions we have no choice.

Just like junkies, the world over.

## **35** Too often we validate our significance through what we **DO** rather than how we use our thinking time

In organisations where the leaders are seen to be hooked on doing, and the speed of doing, those who work for them are bound to think that if they are to find their own route to the top they need to become speed junkies too.

And so the circle of people at the top getting their “fix” from driving change and “kicking arse” gradually increases. When they pause briefly to catch their breath there’s just enough time to say how everyone needs to speed up a little more, before racing off again.

The only way this will change is if the leading speed merchant says to those around them that they now realise they have devalued their own thinking time.

It is time for less rushing and racing and chasing, and more prepping and thinking and reflecting instead.

At this sort of moment, a phrase such as “*What are we trying to prove?*” is a very effective way to signal that it is time to become less manic and slow down.

For the top speed-lover to admit to this heresy can lead to a collective sigh of relief, as others feel that they too have permission to take their foot off the accelerator.

## **36 Reflecting more isn't just about a style of leadership. It's part of a wider value system that requires us to work at becoming "consciously more considered"**

When we talk of "Think today, reflect tonight" we're not talking of creating precise time zones during which we stop what we're doing and have 15 or 20 minutes for some thinking time and reflection.

The reflective leader is "consciously more considered", and works at ensuring that this mindset influences every aspect of their role as a leader.

In the way they ask questions of others, reflective leaders are open to pausing and taking stock and then asking further questions if the answer is in any way unexpected.

The "consciously more considered" leader appreciates the importance of giving time to considering and evaluating options carefully, and then sharing their thinking with others before assuming that they know what is the best thing to do next.

They know that they might still end up doing what they would have done anyway, without carving out the time for some thoughtful reflection. But the point is that they have a value system that tells them that to rush into doing something without considering the possible implications first is to take a risk, and unless there is an imperative for taking such a risk they shouldn't do so.

This value system imposes a sense of discipline on the leader who is "consciously more considered". It is this discipline that gives them extra authority and cutting edge.

## **37 Too many leaders who see themselves as “reflectors” tend to reflect on their own. When this happens, reflection can easily become a dysfunctional control behaviour that lessens the bonds between a leader and their team**

We all know leaders who will announce that they don't want to come to a decision about something yet on the grounds that they are a “reflector” and need some more thinking time first.

The problem is that they nearly always prefer to go off and reflect solo, and then come back and deliver their verdict about what the decision should be once they have made up their mind.

It's no surprise that reflectors tend to be seen as rather individualistic leaders, who might talk of the virtues of collaboration but often find it difficult to explore problems in an open way with other members of their team.

This is why it is so important to think of a reflective process as something that a team can share together. It can be truly creative and developmental for the whole team, with everyone feeling that they are learning more about how their peers think and what matters to them the most.

For major decisions there can always be an opportunity for members of the team to take away a tentative decision and “sleep on it” before coming back together again to take a final decision.

This individual reflection time can then feed into the team having time for further reflection and exchange before their decision.

## **38 “Your people deserve it!” This should clinch it for a leader wondering about becoming more reflective**

As we think about the sorts of behaviours of a leader who is “consciously more considered”, it is very striking how different is their engagement with their people around them.

Instead of rushing through conversations to move on to the next mountain to be conquered, they approach every conversation on the basis that they want to draw something extra from it, that will make them better informed and more insightful than they were before they started the conversation.

How they engage with their people really matters to them.

Of course, they are still hungry for results and are looking to ensure that business performance improves, year on year. But they also want to ensure that if the person they are talking to comes up with some fresh angle on their business they are in a position to put this to good use, by one means or another.

They are not just after confirmation of the decision that they have already taken. They want more from their people than this.

This is why the insight seems so significant.

The simple truth is that far too many “speed merchant leaders” take their people too much for granted.

Even while they are talking to them and pretending to listen to what they have to say they’re almost certainly thinking about two or three other things at the same time!

## 38 continued

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Consciously more considered leaders, on the other hand, make a point of listening hard to their people. Sometimes they will miss a key message, because like all leaders they have large parts of the day when they can't clear their mind as much as they would like to be able to do to focus on the situation that they're in.

Nevertheless, their aim is to glean as much as they can from the person they're talking to.

They are hungry not just for loyalty but also for extra intelligence and feedback. In the process, they make their staff feel special.

Hence this proposition that staff deserve leaders who are consciously more considered than those who just want to get from A to Z as quickly as possible.

After all, it's the consciously considered leader who is most likely to say:

*"I'm not sure we need to go all the way to Z. If we just travel to T next time, that could well be good enough. What do you think?"*





## Creating a more reflective culture

For those of us who need to “do”, there’s lots that we can do to create a more reflective culture.

Here are six ideas that together should have a real impact.

You might be acting on some of them already, in which case we hope that the ones you haven’t taken up yet will be even more useful.

## **A Creating special time for “colleagues”**

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A growing number of organisations have this practice and use different language to describe it.

Some simply use the word “colleagues” to describe the meeting. Nothing else.

This is a slot of usually one or one and a half hours when the team come together for some quality time, without an agenda.

There are no papers and you are careful not to let anyone use the slot for an “information dump”.

You ask how you can use this time for colleagues to support each other more, seek advice and share anything that they’re worried about.

- This is perfect time for reflecting on how you are working together as a team - and, as team leader, sharing where you feel you are really strong as a team and where you would like to become stronger still.

If there are tensions among the group, you can acknowledge them and say that they need to be sorted out and left behind.

*This leads on to the second idea:*

## B Putting “on the table” what needs to be left behind

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This idea is that every now and again you start off one of your agenda-free colleagues’ meetings inviting members of the team to “put on the table” any “baggage” that they think is getting in your way as a team, and should now be left behind.

For this to succeed, you need to agree two key groundrules up-front:

- 1** Any member of the team can name any behaviour or habit of another member of the team, that triggered an unhelpful situation that still rather rankles with them, so long as they do so in a spirit of generosity. They need to be reminded that if they speak up they need to be ready to **let this moment go now**
- 2** If a member of the team finds that a behaviour of theirs is identified in this way, they are not allowed to justify it. You ask whether or not they intended to cause the upset/ disagreement that took place, and so long as they **didn’t** they should – in the spirit of this exercise – be willing to let go of their part of the “baggage”.

If either party isn’t yet in a position to agree this, maybe you or another member of the team need to facilitate a private 3-way discussion.

- Things go wrong in all teams in all work settings. The teams that are the strongest are the ones that are able to acknowledge that something has gone wrong – and then get on with leaving it behind them, without having to engage in some sort of introspective post mortem.

The purpose of the reflection here is to agree that for some issues it is best to be able to draw the line and move on!

## C Linking reflection time to Board discussions about strategy

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So often any reflective discussions among a Board tend to come when a major project has reached a natural conclusion. By then, there is little that the Board expect to do with the reflections and the brief discussion tends to be little more than a superficial appreciation of what was achieved.

Suppose you took reflection out of this context and instead made it an integral part of the **early stages** of Board discussions about your plans and ambitions for the future?

You ask the question:

- *"What lessons do we need to take from what we have done before to ensure that we really can chart out a strategy that is both ambitious and achievable, because we are playing to our strengths?"*

This sort of reflection enables you to honour past achievements and also share some “home truths” if necessary to ensure that as a Board you learn – thoughtfully - from past mistakes.

You ground your future thinking as a Board so much more in your shared assessment of the greatest – and not so great – moments in your past.

- The very openness of this question offers the Board a symbol not only of your trust in them but also your confidence in yourself, as a leader.

## D Asking your front-line teams what THEY think

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When did you last ask your front-line teams what they think you should all be doing to improve your performance – and impact – as an organisation?

We don't mean when did you last issue a staff survey, or despatch a member of your top team to give some speeches and then answer questions.

Instead, the idea here is that you say to your front-line teams:

- *“Take an hour or so out for a team conversation, and ask yourselves what you would like to see us all doing differently to ensure that our clients and customers get a better deal out of all of us. Then please let us have any ideas that you come up with.”*

This sort of reflective discussion could be incredibly valuable.

It could be a good idea to talk to your team leaders about whether they would wish to facilitate this themselves, or whether some of them would prefer another member of their team to take the lead.

You might then offer a preparatory session for team leaders and facilitators to think through the best ways of drawing out team members and encouraging reflective thinking.

- Across your teams, you should be able to draw out **so many creative ideas** that remain buried in work cultures that are “busy, busy, busy”.

## **E A note every other Friday, with some personal reflections**

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There are some Chief Executives who have sent a “Friday note” round their Board members and staff teams for years, and gained enormous benefits from this – for themselves and their whole organisation.

If you’re not already doing something like this, how about trying out this idea every other Friday?

In this note you would share some of your latest reflections as a leader, offering the good and the not so good, so that what people read from you is **real** – unlike the sort of thing they would expect to see from a “happy-clappy” PR person.

This act of leading by example really can change culture across your organisation.

Your staff experience you taking them that much more seriously.

As they appreciate that sharing your thinking with them really matters to you, so will they – in response - feel able to take their own reflections that much more seriously and want to share them with team colleagues, and with you.

## **F “What is it like to be on the receiving end of me?”**

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Isn't this a fabulous question for every CEO to ask your direct reports every now and again, and Executive Directors to ask members of your teams.

You could be walking down the corridor with a key member of your team, or driving them to a meeting, and just lob in this question in as natural a way as possible.

If you have been highly stressed and almost impossible to work for, they might just say something like “rather hard work”.

Whatever they say, the door is now open:

- *“Haha, that’s a bit of an understatement – and thank you for being so generous! I reckon I’ve been a nightmare these past few weeks and am truly grateful for the way you have just got on with things. I think there are one or two people I’ve wound up - and I need to start building bridges with them. Tell me, who do you think I’ve wound up the most?”*

Through a dialogue like this, that is intentionally informal and really quite personal, you can learn so much that could otherwise be “stored” for months.

Key is that your opening question, “*What is it like to be on the receiving end of me?*”, comes across as pretty off-the-cuff.

It needs to be a bit of a “bounce”, because the quicker the answer, the more useful it will be.

There's less time for any code and weasel words to creep in!



# Time for colleagues

*Anything  
we  
need  
to  
put  
on  
the  
table,  
to  
leave  
behind?*

*How long have we got?*





Want to go back?

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