



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

Insights from Leadership Fellows

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Society of Leadership Fellows
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Introduction

This is the 15th in our series of “Insights from Leadership Fellows”. It draws on the outcomes of a Leadership Conversation organised by the Society of Leadership Fellows on the theme of “Think today, reflect tonight, act tomorrow” on February 8-9 2018.

The Conversation was inspired by Leadership Fellows’ reactions at our first Annual Gathering last September, when Em Wilkinson-Brice, one of our opening speakers, used these words to describe her “take home message” from a Leadership Conversation that she had joined a few months previously.

Em’s phrase easily topped the poll on feedback cards afterwards, which is why we decided to hold this Conversation to unpack these six words and sharpen up the different challenges that they pose for each of us as individual leaders.

In the process of our discussions, we came to recognise how addicted some of us are to the third part of Em’s mantra about “acting tomorrow”. We get our kicks out of doing, and have become “speed junkies” who give too little time to thinking and reflection. This is why we need to apply ourselves to developing more reflective cultures within our organisations, and should start by creating more time for reflection within our own lives as leaders.

The six practical ideas set out in the second part of these Leadership Insights are intended to support Leadership Fellows with doing just that, and we hope that they will be especially useful for those who are trying to step away from a state of frenetic “busyness”.

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Five Insights

I 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 “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!

5 *continued*

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.

I Creating special time for “colleagues”

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:

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

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!

3 Linking reflection time to Board discussions about strategy

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.

4 Asking your front-line teams what **THEY** think

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”.

5 A note every other Friday, with some personal reflections

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.

6 “What is it like to be on the receiving end of me?”

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?

