



Insights from Leadership Fellows

# For facilitative leaders

*Rethinking our approach  
towards challenging conversations*

May 2018

**Society of Leadership Fellows**

St George's House, Windsor Castle

# 17

## Introduction

This is the 17th 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 April 24/25 on the theme of “Leaders as Facilitators”.

As our discussions opened up, we quickly focused on the main concern of those Leadership Fellows joining us. This was with how, as facilitative leaders, we engage with conversations that we need to open up with small groups of close colleagues, and sometimes individuals, where we have a difficult message to convey.

We know that we can so easily put off these conversations because we fear that our message could be interpreted as negative and undermining.

We ended up with each member of the group making a mock pitch to the rest of us in which they chose a challenging conversation that they thought they should have over the next month or so. The experience confirmed how **quickly** we can dive into the most difficult part of our pitch in order to get it over and done with!

As we went through this Leadership Conversation, we appreciated the extent to which the principles that we were using for our discussions – trust, connect and stretch – could help with framing these challenging conversations.

As a result, the theme of this Insights report is how Leadership Fellows might apply this approach to a conversation that you know you need to have and should put off no longer!

Pete Ashby  
Director, Society of Leadership Fellows  
St George's House, Windsor Castle  
May 1, 2018

# Challenging conversations

## *Rethinking our approach as facilitative leaders*

Nearly all of us dread the idea of having a “difficult conversation”. It’s why many of us tend to put them off for as long as we can – and then when the moment comes we want to say our piece and put it behind us as quickly as possible.

So we dive in and blurt out what we have been worried about saying, and then when others are thrown by this tend to find ourselves reassuring them that what they heard wasn’t quite what we meant!

Sometimes we put the difficult conversation off for so long that the moment it happens is actually a moment of **anger** for us. A concern or resentment that we have held on to for too long comes bursting out and we surprise ourselves by the ferocity with which we deliver our message!

Then we find ourselves almost certainly having to spend a lot of time afterwards in “damage limitation” mode, trying to pick up the pieces whilst telling ourselves that we made things so much worse by putting the conversation off to a point where our anger took over!



At other times, when we think we have a really positive and upbeat message to convey, we don't give it more than a few seconds thought before we open our mouth – only to surprise ourselves by the degree of confusion and anxiety that we have generated among some of our very best people.

So – yet again – we have to think about how best to convey our message in a different way, knowing that some are now bound to interpret this as us wanting to calm troubled waters.

This is why one of the major insights for us at this Leadership Conversation was that when we see ourselves acting as facilitative leaders, we should first ask what we want to **achieve** through a conversation with a key work colleague, or a team or group of staff, that we know will in some ways be difficult and challenging.

It's incredibly important that we create time beforehand to think through how we want to convey our key messages.

### **Applying our principles of *trust/connect/stretch***

In the main body of this report, we follow through the logic of facilitating a difficult conversation, using the framework of trust/ connect/ stretch that we use for all of our Leadership Conversations.

Overleaf are the key elements of this approach in a one page summary.

TRUST  
TRUST  
CONNECT  
CONNECT  
STRETCH  
STRETCH

# Facilitating a challenging conversation

## Re-establishing your bedrock of trust

---

- Start with affirmation
- Then show some vulnerability
- Stress that you're about to share an idea and not a decision
- Say that you see this conversation as off-the-record and completely open

## Developing a stronger connection

---

- Explain what you hope to ACHIEVE through your idea
- Express the hope that they will want to achieve this too
- Explain what you are ASKING of them and what you yourself want to OFFER if they agree to this ask

## Going for the stretch

---

- Before ending the conversation, capture in a few words what your ask makes possible over time
- Make sure that within the next 24 hours you have a date agreed for your follow-up conversation to come to a shared decision.

## STAGE I

---

### Re-establishing your bedrock of *trust*

When you start a difficult conversation with Board members and/or senior Executives in your organisation, it is really important to say something right at the beginning to acknowledge the level of trust that you have already achieved with them.

Remind them of all that you feel you **take for granted** in your working relationship with them and how much it means to you, as well as what it has made possible for you to achieve together.

#### **Start with affirmation**

So many leaders under-estimate the importance of affirming other people, face-to-face. Please don't be one of them, especially in this moment. Look them in the eyes and say how important they are to you and all that your organisation is about.

There is no better way of starting a challenging or difficult conversation than by offering some affirmation.

#### **Then show some vulnerability**

After this, you need to say something that reminds them – in a fairly light way – that you know you are far from perfect and in your work with them you've had to struggle at times to play the role that you wanted to play.

However you say it, you need to offer something that shows some vulnerability on your part.

**STAGE I***continued*

Whenever we are on the receiving end of a leader saying something difficult to us, it is so easy to go away thinking to ourselves that “it’s all right for them, they seem to find everything easy”.

Something from you that involves you showing your humanity and imperfection, without making a big deal of it, would help to ensure that this conversation feels personal – and you are not seen as sitting on some sort of pedestal offering your judgement from on high.

**An idea and not a decision**

This is now the stage when you can say that you have an idea that you want to share with them. Whilst you’re not looking for a firm decision today, you want to explore this idea with them because you’ve been thinking about it recently and want them to have a chance to think about it too, **before** you come to a decision - hopefully shared with them.

**Off-the-record and completely open**

You can also say that you see this conversation as completely off-the-record and one where you hope that they will be completely open with you, just as you intend to be with them.

You think that the trust you already have means you can have this conversation without any need to try and paper over any cracks or dance around any difficult issue.

## STAGE 2

---

### Developing a stronger connection

Now you are ready to establish a stronger connection before coming to the key words that you know you want to say but could well cause the wrong impression if you blurt them out now.

#### Give the key reason **WHY**

The key to achieving a stronger connection now is that you say something to explain why the idea that you're about to share is important to you. As simply and positively as you can, say what you are trying to achieve.

If you achieve a connection with this, and are right about your idea being able to bring this about, you will have done what so many leaders fail to do in difficult conversations, and actually conveyed the case for your proposal **before** its consideration is clouded by any defensive reactions.

If you can, make a point of giving one or two figures to capture what you hope to achieve. They can do so much to help **ground** the conversation.

#### One more step

Then there's one more step before you say the difficult part of what you have to say. Make clear that you genuinely hope that they share the ambition that you have just outlined.

We know that the ends don't always justify the means, but if the ends are clear and agreed it is much easier to achieve sign up to your proposed means!



**STAGE 2***continued***Express your ASK linked to your OFFER**

Then with no further delay say clearly what you are asking of them.

Once that is out there, make clear what you want to offer by way of ongoing support if they decide, after some reflection, that they agree with your ask and commit to making it succeed.

The key to keeping a strong connection here is that your ask and your offer are seen as much as possible as a “single package”.

In this sort of situation, it is so easy for people to think it's unfair that they should be expected to change, whilst the person calling the shots doesn't intend to do anything different themselves!

It might well be that you won't have to change anything whatsoever, in which case it's important not to pretend otherwise.

If you **are** going to have to change what you do it is useful to flag this up, at the same time as making clear that your support for them and what they are doing is unaffected.

Also, if you are able to argue that what you are asking demonstrates your commitment to their career development within your organisation, this is the time to flag that up, too.

Your tone needs to make clear that you hope your support for them is something that they **take for granted**.

**Suggest when you can next talk**

In principle, it is much better to have this sort of conversation if you can say that they will have time to reflect on what you have suggested before you talk again in a few days' time.

Our desire to get a difficult conversation over and done with can so often leave the other person feeling “bounced”.

## STAGE 3

---

### Going for the stretch

#### **DON'T just end the conversation now!**

Once you have said something difficult or challenging, there is every temptation to close down the conversation and move on, with a sense of relief that the deed has been done.

Whilst you might be feeling that you got off fairly lightly, the fact is that this way you run a high risk of leaving the impression that you were happy just to throw in a “hand grenade” and leave them to deal with the fall-out.

That’s the hallmark of a stropky leader rather than a facilitative leader!

Part of the case for linking an offer to an ask is that an ask on its own can easily be received as a sign of you “offloading” and changing the rules of the game to make life easier for you.

This is why you don’t want to end the conversation on this note. Instead, it is nearly always best to go back to the **higher purpose** that your ask is all about.

#### **Explaining what your ask makes possible**

This a great opportunity for you to raise the bar, very deliberately, and talk about what you see as becoming possible if on reflection they agree with the proposal that you have just made.

One of the reasons they trust you as a leader is because they see you as having a capacity to stretch them.

**STAGE 3***continued*

So make a point of going for the stretch and letting yourself share some **enthusiasm** about what could now become possible, with some change in your respective roles that you will have already outlined.

This will make it easier to ensure that when you come back together to talk again, you can start that conversation by asking whether or not they feel that the **ambition** that you have shared with them now is right for the business, and right for you as individuals.

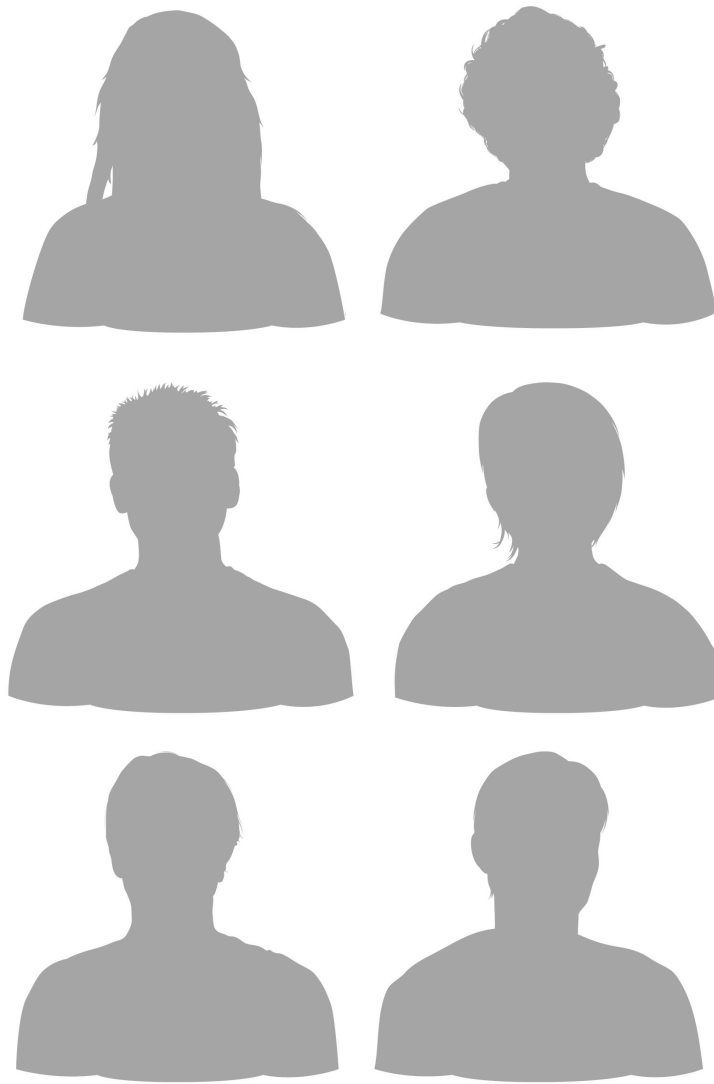
As you conclude this conversation, it is important to give every indication of taking it for granted that if they agree with you, you will do whatever is necessary to carry through what would then be a joint approach, even though it might cause a few ripples in the short term.

**Agreeing a time**

Before the conversation finishes, it is important to agree a time when you might talk again.

You're of course keen to hear any first reactions that they have, and just as you want them to have a chance to reflect on what you have said, so do you want to have a chance to reflect on their first reactions, too.

TRUST  
TRUST  
CONNECT  
CONNECT  
STRETCH  
STRETCH



## Capturing six moments in challenging conversations

## Capturing six moments

---

# Trust

## I Showing some vulnerability

---

**Strong CEO to Executive team, trying to end the habit of over-dependency on the part of his Executives:**

*“As the founder of this business, I’ve got involved in everything – and I’m now struggling to let go. I know that now is the time for you and others to step forward more and I need your help for me to step back.”*

## 2 Asking for a conversation that is completely open

---

**Chair of Board to Non-Executive Directors, asking for advice as to whether she should stand for a second term:**

*“We know that in our Board meetings we’re always very polite, and I would say sometimes too cautious. I want us to spend the next 45 minutes having a discussion in which anything can be said, and we take it for granted that we can assume the best of each other. I’m genuinely unsure as to whether I should stand for a second term, and I want your advice on the basis that all that matters is what’s right for our organisation. Any outcome is fine for me, so long as I believe I’m doing the right thing.”*

## Capturing six moments

---

# Connection

### 3 Explaining what you hope to ACHIEVE through your idea

---

**Sales Director to a team of senior Managers from across the business, trying to build their confidence after a period of declining performance:**

*“We’re still 5% down on our sales target and only have 8 weeks to go to the end of the year. I’ve looked at our performance over the last 5 years and think we can still meet our target. But it will require a big push from all of us. If we can achieve this, we will have **outperformed our three main rivals again** and all of our staff will be in line for the additional bonus that the unions negotiated last year. So I think it's worth giving this all we’ve got, don’t you?”*

### 4 Explaining what you are asking in terms that build up the other person

---

**CEO to Chief Operating Officer, who has lost faith in himself due to under-performance and has one last chance of demonstrating stronger leadership before they have a very different sort of conversation:**

*“I’ve said that I want this to be an off-the-record discussion just between the two of us, because I know that your confidence has taken a real hit these last few months because of our under-performance. I can tell you that I’ve had times in my career when I’ve felt that everything was against me and I’ve made myself get back in the saddle and tell my team that we were going to conquer all that was in our way – and we did, largely because I insisted that we would. It’s these moments that define the sort of leader we are and I’m completely confident that if you **step forward** and show the confidence and passion that we now need, you will be stronger than ever for these setbacks. And you will have no bigger cheerleader in this organisation than me.”*

## Capturing six moments

---

# Connection

## 5 Expressing the hope that they also want to achieve the same as you

---

**Incoming CEO to a meeting of Senior Managers, trying to raise their ambitions and convey the message that she intends to lead an outstanding business in which “good” is no longer good enough:**

*“Since I became CEO just over two months ago, I’ve been on my mission to ‘listen and learn’, and I’ve really valued my time with some of you in this room. It’s been important to me that you could tell me to my face how unsettled you have been by the criticisms that I’ve made of this company’s previous performance.*

*So I want to use this chance to share with you one of the most important lessons that I take from just over 8 weeks of learning. I am convinced that a lot of the people working in our business - and I include most of you in this room when I say this - are a lot better than you seem to think you are. I think you have had a culture that goes back a fair few years of talking yourselves out of things and at times putting yourselves down. Well, my job as CEO will be to support you in leaving that behind. My intention is that we will become one of the market-leaders in our sector and every one of us here will be as proud as punch of what we’ve achieved. We can achieve whatever we want, so long as we first believe this simple truth.*

*I said earlier on that I want you to feel that you can be completely open with me. If you think I’m in any way wrong in my belief that we can all aim to be outstanding, and among the very best, please say so now and I will absolutely respect you for speaking your truth. I’m a great believer in diversity, especially diversity of thought. So, please tell me what you think about what I’ve just said?”*

## Capturing six moments

---

# Stretch

## 6 Capturing what your ask makes possible over time

---

**Co-founder of new start-up to business partner, at a stage when he knows that he now needs to back off and wants the other one to take over more without feeling in any way unsupported:**

*"As I've said, from the moment we first had our idea for this new start-up, I feel that we've grown it – and parented it – together. It has been an incredibly special and powerful experience. I've explained why I think it's now time for you to step forward as our CEO, with me always alongside you and backing you every step of the way, and in more of a support role. I think this will give our small staff team greater clarity and actually greater confidence that we intend to be here for years to come as a successful business.*

*I think some of them do wonder if we might tire of this, as we apply ourselves to the sheer graft of establishing our niche in the market and building our client base. From what they have said to me, I know how inspirational they find you and so I am very clear in my mind that if we now put your name over the door as our new CEO, we will be making one of the most positive and optimistic statements about the future of our start-up that we could ever make."*



TRUST  
CONNECT  
STRETCH

