



Insights from Leadership Fellows

From good to exceptional

May 2018

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

18

Introduction

This is the 18th 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 May 13-15 2018 on the theme of “Charting your path from good to exceptional”.

In the pages that follow we set out eleven of the qualities of exceptional leaders that we identified through our discussions. We hope that they are of use to Leadership Fellows in developing your capacity to be exceptional across more aspects of your leadership.

If there was one overriding theme emerging from this Conversation, it was that exceptional leadership qualities can be distinctly time-limited.

They should never be taken for granted, and we should work constantly at strengthening those that we wish to develop as characteristics of our leadership over time.

As always with our Leadership Conversations, I felt truly privileged to experience such exceptionally high levels of candour and trust among our group, within minutes of the Conversation getting underway. It is not long since we adopted our high trust guiding principles for all of our Conversations and yet they already seem to form such a natural part of our work together as a Society.

We look forward to developing our trust-connect-stretch approach further and drawing still greater inspiration from it in the many Leadership Conversations yet to come.

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

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Eleven qualities of exceptional leaders

On the pages that follow we set out 11 qualities of exceptional leaders.

In describing them as qualities, we should make clear that we do not regard them as in any way constant or fixed.

Rather, our sense is that as leaders we can all have moments when we demonstrate some of these qualities.

The challenge for us all is to develop them into new habits and constants that define our leadership over time.

Even then, if and when we achieve this in relation to some of these exceptional traits, we are bound to find that we slip back sometimes.

Constantly reviewing our own leadership behaviours

In these moments, we need to remind ourselves that exceptional leadership requires us constantly to review our own leadership behaviours, aware that none of us occupy fixed positions on the spectrum from not-so-good to good and then exceptional leadership.

Our position on this spectrum varies, not just every month or every week but often daily.

If some of our leadership behaviours are exceptional on a Monday afternoon, there is no reason to assume that we will continue to be exceptional on the Tuesday morning!

*Our position on this spectrum
varies - often daily*

Self-awareness

Indeed, we require exceptionally high levels of self-awareness, and ongoing self-assessment, if we are to have any chance of defining ourselves as a leader who is exceptional more often than we are good - or goodish!

This is said not in a spirit of pessimism. Rather, it is said from a standpoint of appreciating what a big step it is to go from good to exceptional – and then retain whatever these exceptional behaviours might be as a natural part of being a leader.

The precarious nature of exceptional leadership

If we are to have more than occasional glimpses of acting in a way that is exceptional, we have to become addicted to the process of constantly bettering ourselves as leaders.

This is why those leaders who are exceptional for rather a lot of the time are readier than anyone else to talk of those times when they have been other than exceptional.

It is their awareness of the precarious nature of exceptional leadership that spurs them on to keep on raising their game – and raising it ever higher, so that when they do slip back it is to a higher base line than it was last time they slipped back.

*We have to become addicted
to the process of constantly
bettering ourselves as leaders*

From good to exceptional:

a constant state of *movement*
rather than a *state of being*



Capturing the eleven exceptional qualities:

- Seeking out “the diamond in the rough”
- Seeking to capture the essence of every challenge
- Drawing out others’ truth and in the process fostering their courage
- Promoting a team ethos in which we support each other in becoming exceptional
- Trusting our intuition in moments when it tells us to declare ourselves
- Accepting that at times leadership requires us to hold back, without compromising our sense of authority
- Being prepared to be ruthless in how we prioritise the use of our time
- Regarding directive leadership as a last resort, because we expect those around us to respect our authority and influence
- Seeking to solve problems through our influence over others
- Challenging ourselves on whether we are compromising our offer as a leader, whenever we “tone ourselves down”
- Letting our insights into our own strengths and shortcomings heighten our awareness of others.

In our relationships with those around us, we seek out “the diamond in the rough”

Whenever we are asked to describe our strengths as leaders, so many of us speak in broad terms.

We also tend to do so when we describe the leadership strengths of those with whom we work most closely, using terms such as “confident”, “strategic”, “fair” and “passionate” that only tell us a limited amount about someone’s leadership skills.

It doesn’t have to be like this.

We can follow the lead of those who have developed the ability to identify the special gifts of their closest colleagues at work.

They play them back to them every now and again, as a way of encouraging them to appreciate these gifts as much as they do.

Those leaders who are the best talent-spotters have a real knack for capturing the particular gifts of individuals – and then helping others to see how they might deploy them most effectively.

If we can also work on our ability to see “the diamond in the rough”, we should find it much easier to support others in managing those aspects of their leadership that aren’t so strong.

2

In every challenging situation we seek to capture the essence of the challenge

Every day we are bombarded with stories of situations that offer potential opportunities – and dangers – for our organisation.

So often, those who share these stories with us offer too much commentary on the basis that it is up to us to draw out whatever lessons we want.

It doesn't have to be like this.

Some leaders have trained themselves to draw out the essence of a situation very quickly indeed.

They achieve this partly through the questions that they ask and partly through the feedback that they offer the person updating them on the situation that they face.

It is an exceptional knack to be able to distil the core truth of a story and then share this in a way that encourages others to see themselves as part of a shared endeavour to understand the dynamic that drives a given situation.

This enables us to convert what can so easily be a “dumping session” into a more analytical discussion, in which others know that they are expected to offer some judgement of their own.

It helps to make best use of our time and energy, by focusing on the core leadership challenge for our organisation – and avoiding the temptation to convert a story into a “soap opera”.

3

We draw out others' truth and in the process foster their courage

We all know that we tend not to ask enough questions. Whenever we do so, we're aware of some colleagues telling us what they think we want to hear.

We know that they will hold back from offering us "difficult news" unless they are under pressure to tell us the unvarnished truth.

If we change our behaviours, this can move on too.

It is up to us to make a point of reminding others that the truth matters above all else, and we would always rather hear some difficult truths than be "protected" from having to confront them.

The moment we feel that someone is "managing the truth" on our behalf, we need to be up-front in asking them to tell us exactly how they see that situation, without feeling a need to soften the message to make it easier for us to receive it.

As we experience them being more honest and direct with us, so do we need to show appreciation of this.

It is in these sorts of moments that we embolden them, and we experience their awareness of their own courage in sharing a message that they expected us to dislike.

As we build others' courage we build our own too, knowing that the courage to face hard truths is one shared by too few leaders.

4 We promote a team ethos in which we support each other in becoming exceptional

We all say how committed we are to building the team around us. Yet when it comes to it, so many of us keep our team at arm's length.

We tell them how important they are whilst being reluctant to let them believe that we are dependent upon them for our own success as a leader.

This needs to change if we are to become an exceptional team leader.

Those leaders who head up exceptional teams have developed their own way of enabling every member of the team to feel believed in, by them.

They are quite relaxed about making clear to the team how much they depend upon them for their own success.

It is this reciprocal dependency that is at the heart of exceptional team leadership.

Team members constantly step up in the face of challenge because they believe that the success of the team, and its leader, requires them to step up.

They have no difficulty in acknowledging the importance of what others offer them, because they experience the others, and the team leader in particular, acknowledging what they themselves make possible for the whole team.

It is the team leader's belief in the exceptionalness of the team that is the hallmark of the exceptional team leader.

5 We trust our intuition in those moments when it tells us to declare ourselves

Some of us like to describe ourselves as intuitive leaders, whilst others prefer to describe themselves more as reflectors.

Even among those of us who like to see ourselves as intuitive, we will often say how we need to try not to be rash by “jumping in” too quickly.

We all know that there is nothing exceptional about this line of thinking.

We might be sitting in a meeting and suddenly someone says something that triggers a voice in us saying that we need to come in straight away and question what we have just heard.

We know that we have a split second to decide, and if we let the moment pass it might never return.

In various Leadership Conversations we have referred to these as the moments when we need to be prepared to be a “disruptive leader”.

At these times, the disruptive leader listens to the “moral driver” that tells us something is wrong and requires us to engage there and then.

It is a moment of bravery for us when we act on that split second decision, and as we do so we need to focus on what we are putting out there, especially the generosity of our tone.

If whatever we say is said generously, there is every chance that the right tone plus the right content will together offer something exceptional.



We accept that at times leadership requires us to hold back, without compromising our sense of authority

However confident we might be as leaders, we can all experience a time when something happens to us that causes us a sense of inner outrage. We feel wronged, perhaps by someone very close to us, and experience a sense of loss of equilibrium.

Our emotions tell us that we need to do something “radical” that underlines how unacceptable is the behaviour of others and how they should never put us in this situation again.

These are the times when an exceptional act of leadership might be to hold back and do nothing – for a while at least.

Such a response is completely counter-intuitive for so many leaders.

Yet it is in some of these really upsetting moments that an exceptional leader will hold back and tell themselves that however awful the situation might be, there is something underway that needs to be allowed to play out.

What we are required to do as a leader is to appear to accept an unacceptable behaviour on the part of someone else.

We need to do so without letting ourselves become a “victim” or compromising our own authority as a leader.

Then, when the time is right, we will have a chance to present in a calm and authoritative way our own proposals for ensuring that whatever happened before will never happen again.

We keep our emotions under control – and choose the right time for righting the wrong.

7 We are prepared to be ruthless in how we prioritise the use of our time

We all tell ourselves that time is the great leveller, and we have to be incredibly careful with our use of time if we are to succeed.

Yet we find that too often our time is deployed in response to what others expect of us rather than how we ourselves think we should be spending our time.

We can all get a grip on this, at any time – so long as we are prepared to link our use of time to our higher purpose as a leader.

Leaders who are exceptionally good at planning their time are careful to ensure that anyone controlling their diary is fully up to speed with their priorities at any given moment.

They are also careful to protect a proportion of their time so that it can be used for thinking/ reflection/ creative time without having to have any formal purpose (“*Thinking committee of one*”) stamped on it.

When mistakes are made with time-planning the exceptional leader is prepared to be ruthless.

They have no difficulty in keeping control of their time because they are so focused on what they wish to achieve as a leader.

If something is not a priority, then it is dispensable.

These moments must be handled with sensitivity, of course. But the principle remains that exceptionalness is vitally dependent on us always reminding ourselves of our overriding mission and purpose.

Delivering our mission requires discipline and focus - and occasional ruthlessness, not least in how we deploy our time.

8

We regard directive leadership as a last resort, because we expect those around us to respect our authority and influence

There are still many leaders who will talk about what they have “instructed” their team to do and how frustrated they sometimes are by the failure of their staff to do what they were told. They often justify their behaviour as directive leaders on the basis that they are in too much of a hurry to wait for others to catch up.

The more a leader feels a need to instruct, the more they call into question their authority as a leader.

We all know that for any of us to become a good leader, we need to invest time in developing our relationships with those around us, in a way that builds mutual respect for our respective roles – and authority.

Some leaders have an exceptional ability to ensure that others do as they ask of them, without ever issuing an instruction.

It is a matter of pride that they would never need to **tell** their close colleagues what to do, because to do so would call into question the specialness of the bonds that they have developed together.

They just say what they would like to happen and that is more than sufficient.

It is no surprise that leaders who have an exceptional capacity for influencing others can regard it as an act of failure on their part if they need to issue any instructions to junior staff.

What is so special about some of these influential leaders is their ability to initiate change through substituting suggestion for instruction.

They then build pace on the same basis - through their capacity to attract exceptionally high levels of loyalty from those around them.



We seek to solve problems through our influence over others

The vast majority of leaders will talk about how they get their “kicks” out of doing things, and especially solving problems. The problem is that some leaders so like solving problems that they tend to keep the problem-solving to themselves.

This leaves colleagues feeling excluded and reinforces the image of these leaders as loners.

This is not difficult to change, so long as these leaders first accept that their own behaviours constitute the real problem.

There really is something exceptional about leaders who enjoy using their influence over others to encourage them to take ownership of problems that they would previously have wanted to sort out themselves.

Influencing others in this way is not only empowering for the others but also for the leader who is investing so much of their own self-esteem in their role as an influencer.

They also have the added bonus of freeing up some of their own time. So as well as influencing others they have also influenced their own diary for the better!

The only possible problem with this approach comes when the person you're influencing to solve a problem ends up saying that they can't solve it.

In these cases they have to become a different sort of problem-solver and take on the responsibility for finding someone else to solve the problem.

In the process, they might even get to enjoy the process of influencing through enlisting others to solve problems on their behalf.

10 Whenever we “tone ourselves down”, we challenge ourselves on whether we are compromising our offer as a leader

So many leaders tell the story of how they are sometimes in situations where they need to hold back from saying what they really want to say, in case they cause offence or upset. The phrase “Let me tell you what I nearly said ...” can slip off the tongue so very easily!

We know that sometimes this is necessary. At other times, this ranks as one of the most common self-limiting behaviours of so many leaders.

There IS an alternative.

Instead of justifying themselves, the exceptional leader in this particular case challenges themselves.

Before they decide that they're not going to say something on the grounds that it might make them unpopular with one or two people, they know that they will be holding themselves to account for their behaviour a little later on.

Of course, there are times when discretion is the better part of valour and it might well be the best thing to hold back.

The point is, however, that holding back can so easily become a way of life.

This is why so many exceptional leaders tend to make themselves go through a process of self-challenge, whenever they decide to tone down how they present themselves.

They know that if they don't do so they could easily find themselves slipping into a habit that is familiar to many 'okay' leaders and has very little to do with exceptionalness.

Our insights into our own strengths and shortcomings heighten our awareness of others

Some leaders are reluctant to analyse or discuss their strengths on the basis that they don't want to be "arrogant" or indulge in "navel-gazing". Absolutely - up to a point!

This is why it is so important that whenever leaders talk of their own strengths, they don't stop there. Instead, they keep going and talk about what they're not so good at, too!

They make clear that assessing our strengths as leaders is just the beginning of a process of reflection.

Once we have a clear sense in our head of our key strengths, and those areas where we want to work at becoming exceptional, it is then much easier to move on to the next stage.

This involves us asking ourselves where we are not so strong – and where we have shortcomings that result in us getting in our own way unless we learn to manage them better and ask others to support us in keeping them in check.

It is when leaders are seen to be relaxed about discussing our own shortcomings – as well as our strengths – that it becomes easier for them to ask members of their immediate team to reciprocate.

They might even remind them of the notion popularised by Brene Brown and others of leaders "belonging to themselves".

Whatever our strengths and weaknesses might be, we own them, because we belong to ourselves.

It is from this standpoint of ownership and 'self-belonging' that it is much easier to support others in seeing more clearly their own areas of exceptionalness as leaders, as well as managing their own shortcomings.

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