



Embracing the challenge of disruptive leadership

From 6.00pm on Monday, February 25th 2019
until 3.30pm on Tuesday, February 26th

Background Note and Agenda for our 28th Leadership Conversation

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



When people ask me,
'Are you happy?'
I respond with,
'You've asked the wrong question'.
There is a deep kind of satisfaction
you get from building a company.
This kind of satisfaction transcends
happy, sad, hard or easy.
I seek satisfaction.
I want to be positively disruptive.

David Ulevitch

Senior Vice-President at Cisco
Founder/CEO at OpenDNS



Our challenge

Using disruptive leadership to kickstart internal change

At this Conversation we want to ask ourselves how we can best draw on the positive view of disruption shared by entrepreneurial leaders such as David Ulevitch.

- ❓ **How much do you see yourselves, as leaders, prepared to display disruptive behaviours sometimes as a means of disrupting the status quo and thereby kickstarting necessary cultural change within your organisation or among your peer network?**
- ❓ **How much do you encourage your Board and senior team to question fundamentally what sort of organisation you want to be in the future and what markets you want to trade in?**
- ❓ **And how much do you embolden staff to challenge any internal practices that they see as having outlived their usefulness?**

Not all leaders see disruption as positive

Before moving forward we should acknowledge that David Ulevitch's positive view of disruption is not universally shared among leaders.

Many have a more mixed view of disruption. Their experience of disruptive behaviours, whether on the part of Non-Executive Board Directors or individual Managers or trade union representatives, is often very different. They tend to see disruption as coming from individuals who use disruptive behaviours as a blocking technique.

The more they experience disruption as a negative tool used by minorities to stop them achieving what they want as a leadership team, the more resistant they are to seeing **themselves** as disruptors!

Please note that we've kept off the “Disruptor-in-Chief” – so far!

Those of you who have been involved in previous Leadership Conversations know that we always say at the outset that we are coming together to deal with our own “stuff” as leaders. We try – and sometimes have to try **really hard!** – to resist the temptation to talk about the leadership styles of others not in the room.

It is so easy to become commentators telling each other what everyone else is doing wrong without facing up to our own responsibilities for improving our particular styles and ways of leading.

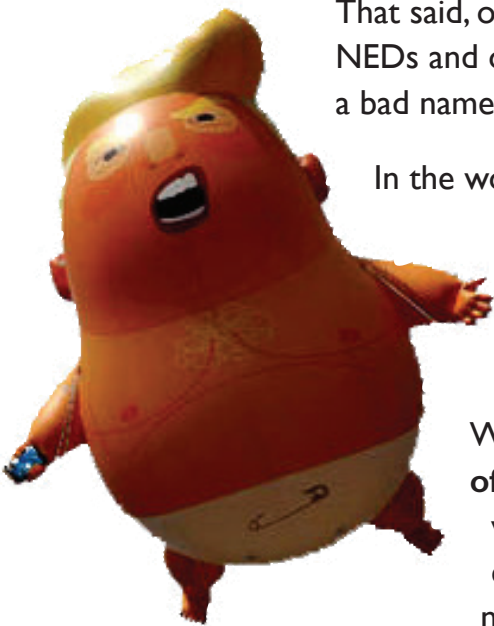
That said, one has to acknowledge that it's not only a few badly behaved NEDs and oppositional trade union leaders who have done a lot to give a bad name to the term disruption.

In the world we now have one Disruptor-in-Chief without equal, and the way Donald Trump deploys his disruptive leadership techniques as part of his own particular version of narcissistic leadership is somehow riveting and scary at the same time.

We mention this now because we are keen to keep him **out of this discussion** as much as possible! We hope that we will agree to discuss disruptive leadership very much in the context of **our own development as leaders**, and if we need to bring D Trump into this maybe we will find a five-minute slot on the Tuesday to let off on the subject of him.

Focusing on our potential as disruptive leaders

We can then get back to the rather more difficult and stretching challenge of how we are each going to maximise our own disruptive leadership potential in ways that are simultaneously positive, creative and impactful.



Part I **Building Trust**

TRUST

In the first part of a Leadership Conversation, we are always conscious of the importance of building trust among ourselves as a group. It is key to all that we can achieve later on.

Gearing in to our opening challenge for small groups

Once we have agreed the Guiding Principles for this Conversation (set out separately on our [Guiding Principles page](#)) we break into small (standing) groups for 15 minutes. In this first round we want to find out how many of you see yourselves as disruptive leaders at the moment.

Where you are comfortable with describing yourself in this way, we want to gain a better understanding of **how** you have acted in a disruptive way as a leader and what sort of **impact** you think that disruption had.

PLEASE be completely honest

One of the reasons we are so keen to ask you to embrace a high trust model is because we want to encourage you to be completely honest.

It is especially important that this Conversation is **real** from the very outset, because disruption is an inherently risky tactic and there are bound to be times when it does not achieve the intended result.

We will all take away stronger outcomes at the end if from the very beginning we are able to discuss openly the dangers and risks associated with disruptive leadership as well as the potential benefits and pay-offs.

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STRETCH

Part I Building Trust

continued

Our opening questions for small groups

On this basis, we want to ask you to engage with the following challenge in our first round of small groups:

- ❓ Can you think of a time in the not too distant past when you would say that you acted as a disruptive leader?
- ❓ What exactly did you DO, what did you WANT TO ACHIEVE – and how much IMPACT do you think you actually had?
- ❓ If you can't think of a time when you acted as a disruptive leader, can you think of a moment over the past year when you wish you had done? Please bring that to life for your group and tell them what you would LIKE TO HAVE DONE, with the benefit of hindsight.

Grounding our discussions

When you rejoin the main circle we hope there will be time for most of you to share your personal answers to these questions. We see this session as important for **grounding our Conversation** so that by the end we all have a better shared sense of where we are starting from.

We want to find out how disruptive we think we already are as a group of leaders, on the basis that there is no right or wrong – we just want to know our starting position before we let ourselves “dream” about how disruptive we would like to become!

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Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS**

We put this second Part under the banner of our guiding principle that we all seek a strong connection with each other at Leadership Conversations.

One of the great benefits of an overnight Conversation is that by the time we are back together in the Vicars' Hall at 8.45 on the Tuesday morning, we should feel conscious of how much we have built trust among ourselves as a group. This makes it possible for us to connect so much more powerfully with each other's stories and take away more shared learning.

What would you like to ACHIEVE as a disruptive leader over the next year?

We will fine-tune the questions for groups in light of our discussions over dinner the previous evening and of course the flow of the Conversation this morning.

With this proviso, we are thinking that we should take the following question into a new round of small groups:

Imagine that it is now February 26th 2020 and we have all returned to St George's House for a reunion. You are excited by all that you have achieved as a disruptive leader over the past year.

- ❓ **What are the two things that you have achieved as a disruptive leader that had the GREATEST IMPACT - and how did you manage to pull them off?**
- ❓ **Also, can you tell us whether you acted alone, or whether you achieved this with colleagues – and if so, how you involved them in planning the disruption?**

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Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS** *continued*

Letting yourself be more ambitious in the story that you tell

What we like about this sort of approach is that it enables you to tell a story of what you would **most LIKE** to achieve.

In enabling you to be that bit more ambitious in the story that you tell, this approach usually means that we end up gaining better and sharper ideas that we can then work up during the rest of the morning and convert into some powerful outcomes by early afternoon.

So please let your story-teller off the leash and let the stories be ambitious and about disruptive leadership behaviours on your part that really would **make a difference**.

The more you let yourself raise your sights, the more we will gain from each other – and the better placed we will then be to evaluate the sort of impact we might be able to have through disruptive leadership.

Capturing the most useful insight from another Fellow's story

We then have the option, after this round of groups, to ask some of you to capture the **most useful insight** that you gained from one of the stories told by another member of your group.

So often in our Leadership Conversations, we find that the key to our collective creativity is our capacity to connect with the stories that other Leadership Fellows share - and draw out the insights that have struck us most powerfully.

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Gearing in to the most powerful Part of this Conversation

Following our discussions in the morning, we then use our time in small groups over lunch to move into the third Part of the Conversation, when we support each other in “going for the stretch”.

This is only possible once we have built really high levels of trust and connection across the group.

In many ways, this third Part is the most powerful part of the Conversation. Everything up to now has been about enabling us to become that much braver in our thinking when we reach this stage, so that we are all prepared to take risks in trying out ideas on each other in ways that most of us would never dream of doing in a traditional conference.

Please rest assured that if you try an idea out on us and subsequently feel that you went a little over the top, it will be **easy** to tone it down and make it that much safer.

It's more creative working this way than trying to “risk up” an idea that started off as a safe proposition!

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Great Leaders are disciplined at listening to emerging futures and bringing those ideas to the present.

Great disruptive leaders recognize trends that will impact their business and then ask themselves, “How can we leverage this opportunity to support the future success of our business?”

Uber, Airbnb and Netflix have shown how to successfully leverage new possibilities and effectively disrupt industries that were not recognizing the emerging future.



Awesome Journey

<https://www.awesomejourney.ca>

Part 3

GOING FOR THE STRETCH

STRETCH

A few minutes before we break for lunch in the Vicars' Hall, we will agree on the question that we want to consider in small working groups over lunch. Our thinking at present is that in our lunchtime groups we should challenge ourselves along the following lines:

- ❓ **How might you leverage the opportunities created by your developing role as a disruptive leader to challenge your organisation in relation to its strategic ambitions and how much it is “recognising the emerging future”?**

Leveraging your moments of disruptive leadership

With the transformational impact of Uber, Airbnb and Netflix in our minds, we now want to ask what it would entail if we really were to step up and leverage the opportunities that disruptive leadership can create to ask some challenging questions about the future, and perhaps sketch out some iconoclastic options too. We know that:

- It's one thing taking part in some sort of disruptive incident to highlight an aspect of our own organisation's culture that we would like to see changed. Whilst this can be very positive and necessary, it can also be quite **limited** in impact.
- It is entirely **another matter** being able to build on this to ask searching questions about the future of our own organisation and whether we should be operating in different markets from the ones that we are in at the moment, and perhaps developing new offers way beyond the current thinking and expectations of the Board.

That really does show what a challenge the word **leverage** offers us – and why we need to be in a frame of mind where we are “going for the stretch” if we are to do it justice!

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Part 3 **GOING FOR THE STRETCH**

continued

STRETCH

Aiming for breakthroughs in our thinking

After lunch we join the circle again, at 1.15pm. As we share the ideas that we have each come up with, we hope that we will be ready to respond to other Leadership Fellows by building on their ideas and suggesting any possible variations that come to mind in the moment.

This is the stage in previous Conversations when some Fellows have achieved real breakthroughs in their thinking as a result of others diving in with their ideas and advice.

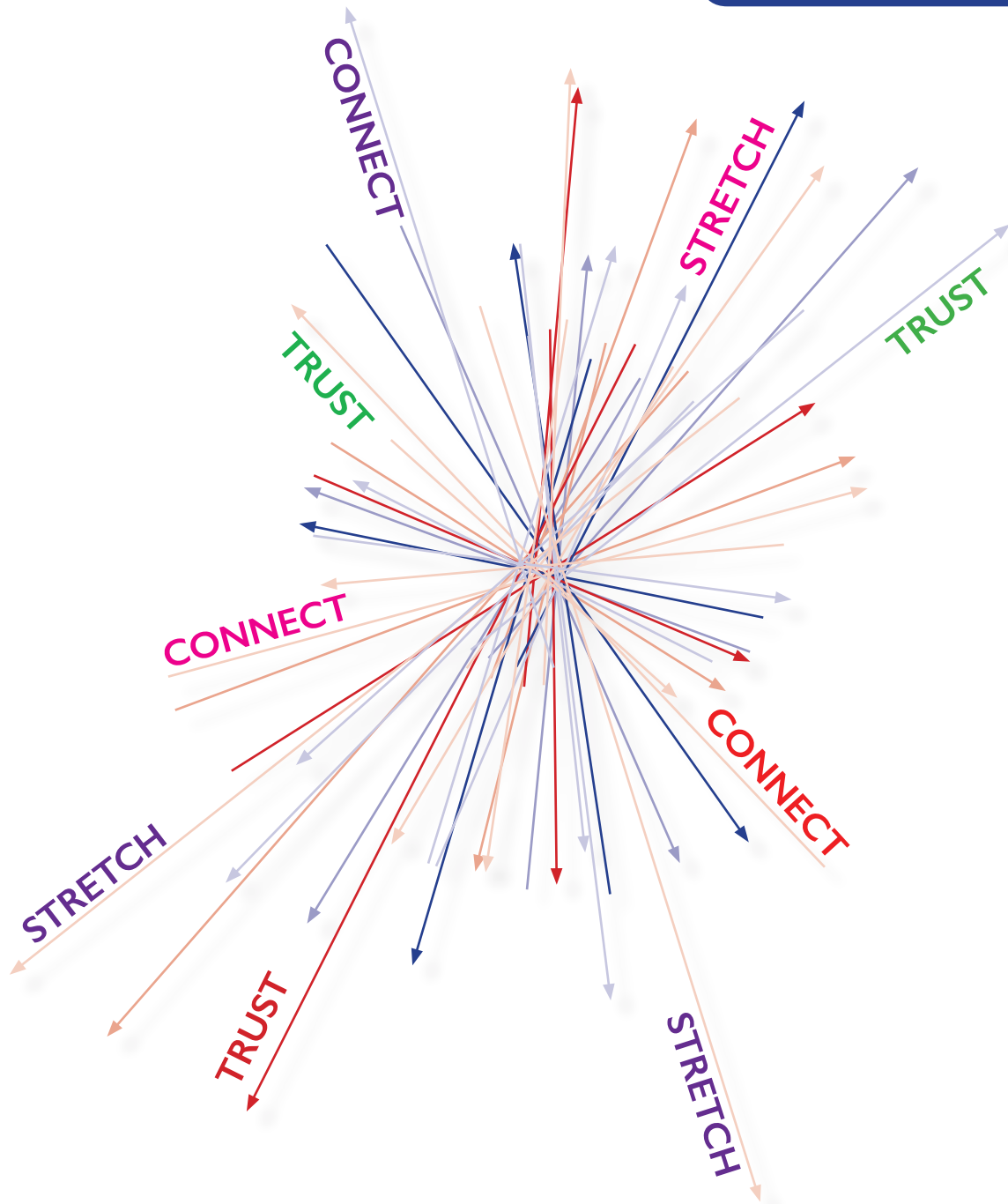
Then in our final round of small groups at 2.05pm we will break you into groups of two or three to support each other in coming up with three stretching resolves to bring back to the final session and share with the rest of us.

Maximising our take-aways from the final hour

It is remarkable how much we can all gain from this final hour together, not least because our “no recycling” ground rule means that it’s not an option for anyone to repeat anything that they have already shared with the group.

To gain as much as possible from this final session, we want to be careful **not** to make life too easy for ourselves. And we hope we might experience some disruptive leadership behaviours as well – in an entirely positive sense, of course!

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Video link-up: May 21st, 2019

In the final minutes of the Conversation we will also arrange a time for a follow-up video link-up in May to swap notes. This will give us all a chance to hear how much progress we have all made in taking forward our resolves.

For previous video link-ups we have found that we can cover a tremendous amount of ground in one hour. Usually Fellows share a very brief email beforehand updating the rest of us on how you have acted on your resolves, and especially which ones you found the most challenging – and we take it from there.

Suggested time for Video Link-up: 10.00 to 11.00am on Tuesday May 21st, 2019

“If you’re doing anything disruptive, and if you know it to be good and true and progressive, let the naysayers fuel you to work harder and go faster and sleep less.”

Whitney Wolfe Herd

Founder and CEO of Bumble
and a co-founder of Tinder



Agenda

Monday, February 25th 2019

2.30pm+	You are welcome to check into your room in St George's House
4.30pm	Tea in the House for those joining Evensong in the Chapel
5.05pm	Evensong (optional)
6.00pm <i>in the Vicars' Hall</i>	Refreshments, then start of the Conversation. After agreeing our guiding principles for the Conversation, we break into small (standing) groups to consider our opening question (page 6)
7.30pm	After feedback and debate, we agree on key issues to explore over dinner
7.40pm	Free time/drinks until dinner is served promptly at 8.15pm
9.45pm	Private floodlit tour of St George's Chapel (optional)

Tuesday, February 26th

7.45am	Breakfast is served in St George's House
8.45am <i>in the Vicars' Hall</i>	We hear any overnight reflections before we connect more deeply with some of the issues that have been raised. We then agree on the key question for our next round of small groups (page 7). Back in the circle we hear what insights you take from the stories of others in your group and what they tell you about the sorts of disruptive leadership behaviours that can make the greatest difference in achieving the cultural impact that you want. At around 12.15 we move on to prepare for our lunchtime groups when we want to stretch ourselves that much more as we ask how we can each gain maximum leverage as leaders through the opportunities created by disruptive leadership for challenging our top team in relation to our organisation's strategic ambitions for the future (page 11)
12.30pm	A hot buffet lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall and we work together in our groups
1.15pm	We hear your feedback from your lunchtime discussions and seek to stretch ourselves in drawing out any challenges that we feel we are not confronting head-on. We aim to sharpen up any personal choices that we need to make to determine what we most want to achieve as a disruptive leader
2.05pm	Last round of small groups in which you each sharpen up your top three personal resolves to share with us in the "final lap". Tea, coffee and cake available
2.25pm	In this final session, we ask you to adopt a ground rule of 'no recycling', under which we all agree not to repeat views that we have already shared in the Vicars' Hall. As we share our resolves there is time for positive challenge across the group before we draw together our key outcomes and conclude this Leadership Conversation on the dot of 3.30pm .

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