



Think, reflect, act - Getting the balance right

From 6.00pm on Thursday, January 24th 2019
until 3.30pm on Friday, January 25th

Background Note and Agenda for our 26th Leadership Conversation

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



“In your actions,
don’t procrastinate.
In your conversations,
don’t confuse.
In your thoughts,
don’t wander.
In your soul,
don’t be passive
or aggressive.”

Marcus Aurelius

Introduction

The challenge of becoming a leader who is “consciously more considered”

The starting point for this Leadership Conversation is the Leadership Insights report arising from the Conversation that we held last February on “Think Today, Reflect Tonight, Act Tomorrow”.

This is Chapter 6 of Nurturing Wisdom, Volume 2. So if you go to our Leadership Insights page, you will see that Volume 2 is the third publication up from the bottom. If you open that and go to the Executive Summary, you will [see the heading for Chapter Six](#) on page 3. Please click on that and it will take you straight to the report.

You will see that the phrase “consciously considered” really had an impact on us as a group.

We returned to it when we had an online follow-up at the beginning of May. Our challenge to ourselves was that there is so much that we have all found ourselves doing as leaders that isn’t consciously considered enough.

Hence the aim of this Leadership Conversation:

- To consider how we might achieve a better balance between thinking, reflection and action in order to become that much more effective – and “consciously considered” - as leaders.

Consciously
more considered

Part I **BUILDING 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.

Our opening challenge for small (standing) 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 to ask ourselves the following question:

Thinking about yourself as a leader, and achieving a better balance between the time that you spend thinking, reflecting and doing –

- ❓ **If the balance is BROADLY OKAY at the moment, HOW would you like to improve it?**
- ❓ **If the balance really ISN'T RIGHT, where are things MOST OUT OF BALANCE and what is THE MOST IMPORTANT THING that you need to do as a leader to change this balance for the better?**

When you rejoin the main circle we hope there will be time for most of you to share your personal answers to these two questions. We will ask you to share them with us on the basis that they are your “starters for ten”, and we all want to let our thinking *evolve* during the course of this Conversation.

At around 7.30 we will then agree on one or two key themes for our discussions in groups over dinner, drawing on your responses to this opening question.

TRUST
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STRETCH
STRETCH

Part 2

Achieving Stronger Connections

CONNECTING

We put this second Part under the banner of our guiding principle that we all seek to “connect” with each other at Leadership Conversations.

One of the great benefits of an overnight Conversation is that we should really feel conscious of how much we have built trust among ourselves as a group, when we reconvene in the Vicars' Hall to start our morning session at 8.45am.

This makes it possible for us to connect so much more powerfully with each other's stories and take away more shared learning.

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.

After the first round of groups, we will ask some of you to capture the **most useful insight** that you took 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 can often be sharper for someone hearing the story for the first time.**

On the next two pages we give four examples of the sorts of issues that we hope to explore in greater depth during this part of the Conversation.

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Four possible questions for us to explore in Part 2

1 **How can we change our view of team reflections, so that we see them as SAVING TIME rather than using up precious time that we haven't got?**

Current practice: Time that is seen as not essential to decision-taking is often viewed as “wasted”. This is how reflections can be characterised, as being about raking over the past and looking backwards when we need to be looking forwards

The truth can be so very different: When teams don't give themselves time to reflect on what lessons they need to learn from past practice, or **why** they are just about to embark upon a new venture, they can so easily end up valuing speed over quality.

They get caught in a syndrome in which they do everything in a rush and then find themselves rushing even more to do the things they didn't do because they were in such a rush!

Those leaders in the “speed junkie” mode can easily equate quality and reflection with lack of pace, whereas the truth so often is that quality is seriously compromised by rushing without time for reflection.

2 **How could we engage better with senior staff in reflecting together?**

Current standard practice: CEO/ Directors go to a staff team meeting, make a presentation and invite questions. Amount of time for reflection: zero.

If you reflect together: tell the staff team beforehand what you want to discuss with them, ask if they have any initial views to share with you and then build on them as you share the Leadership Team's thinking about moving the organisation forward.

You are asking them explicitly to reflect on their experiences to inform future actions.

Possible questions for us to explore in Part 2 *(continued)*

3 **How might we develop our role in leading through listening?**

Current practice: Staff expect their CEO and Directors to do most of the talking. So when they speak they are half expecting to be interrupted – as they often are!

If you lead through listening: You listen hard because YOU expect to be the one asking the most questions. And the staff who are sharing their views with you expect that any interruption on your part will be to ask them a question about something they've just said, before the moment passes.

4 **What does it mean for us personally when we talk about taking more time to be “consciously considered”?**

Current practice: We tend to associate this with our non-work time, maybe reflecting very briefly on some committee papers once we have scanned them the night before a meeting. We reflect to absorb, rather than to think through our own response as a leader.

Think how we could increase our impact by integrating this more with our working time: For example, by sitting at our desk for 15 minutes 100% focused on writing up our own speaking note for the contribution we want to make at the Executive Team meeting, in response to the paper that we read the night before.

Reflection time with the whole team is especially valuable. One of the most important roles of the CEO/ lead Director here is to slow down the discussion at times to ensure that there is space for people to reflect on key papers that come before the team and debate is more about “*Is this right?*” rather than “*Who should do what next?*”.

Gearing in to the most powerful Part of this Conversation

Following our discussions in the morning, we then take the insights that they have given us 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 once 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”.

Testing out ideas

The whole point about the process that we go through together is that we want to make it as **easy as possible** for each of us to test out ideas on the rest of us that are all about us changing the balance between thinking/ reflecting and doing in a way that makes us a better leader.

Please rest assured that if you try out an idea 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.

More creative

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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STRETCH



“We need to
do a better
job of putting
ourselves
higher on our
own ‘to do’ list.”

Michelle Obama

Part 3 **GOING FOR THE STRETCH**

STRETCHING OURSELVES

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.

We want this to flow naturally out of our morning discussions, which is why we are resisting the temptation to suggest it in advance.

These group discussions over lunch should help us create a really strong menu of ideas and options once we are together again as one single group.

Aiming for breakthroughs in our thinking

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 2.10pm 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.

Three
stretching
resolves

Part 3

GOING FOR THE STRETCH

continued

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.

We hope to be inside some really tough challenges such as how we can best vary the pace when a team reflect together.

A challenge from Steve Jobs

When you reach the final page, you will see that we include a quote from Steve Jobs about how we should always want to improve what we have **without dwelling on things for too long**.

Those of us who favour more time being made available for team and personal reflections need to engage with this challenge of ensuring that we don’t find ourselves making too many concessions to the “postponers” whose instinct always is to avoid a difficult decision for as long as possible.

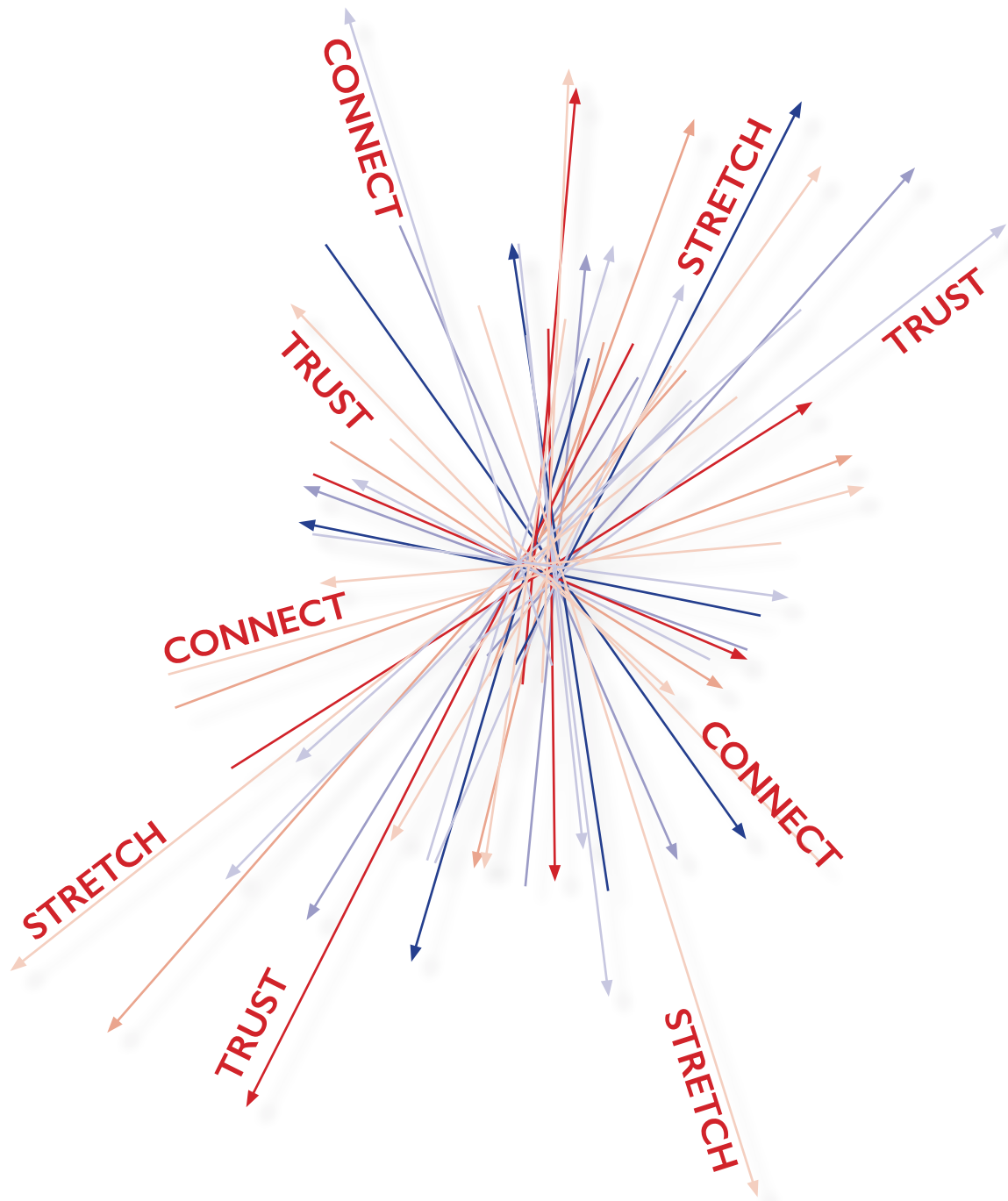
Varying the pace of team reflections

Knowing when to slow down a discussion to include time for thoughtful questioning and reflection, and when to speed up the debate so that you **reflect at pace** and then take a clear decision, is one of the issues that we each need to manage in our own particular way.

The key surely is that we acknowledge the importance of varying the pace of the debate and each have our own personal strategy for achieving this.

STRETCHING OURSELVES

TRUST
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STRETCH



Video link-up: April 11 2019

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

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

Suggested time for Video Link-up: 10.00 to 11.00am on Thursday April 11th, 2019

Agenda

Thursday, January 24th 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 4)
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)

Friday, January 25th

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 and progress to Part 2 of this Conversation. We agree on the key challenge that we want to engage with in our next round of small groups. Back in the circle we hear what insights you take from the experiences of others in your group, and go on to draw on these insights as well as the questions on pages 6 and 7 to ask how you might best change the balance between the time that you give as a leader to thinking, reflecting and acting
12.30pm	A hot buffet lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall and we work together in our groups engaging with a stretching question that takes us on to Part 3
1.15pm	We hear your feedback from your lunchtime discussions, and really stretch ourselves in drawing out challenges that we feel we are not confronting head-on. We each seek to sharpen up any personal choices that we need to make to determine our best strategy in getting the balance right between thinking, reflecting and acting as leaders
2.10pm	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.



“I think if you do something and it turns out pretty good, then you should go do something else wonderful, not dwell on it for too long. Just figure out what’s next.”

Steve Jobs