**Insights arising from our
2018 Gathering for Leadership Fellows
and our 22nd Leadership Conversation**

Integrity
in Leadership

September 2018

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

22 Introduction

This Insights Report draws on the main themes of our Leadership Conversation on Integrity in Leadership that took place on September 12th, following a Gathering for Leadership Fellows in the Chapel on the same theme on the previous evening.

The Gathering fell on the 17th Anniversary of 9/11, which is why we chose this theme as a way of reflecting on some of the enduring challenges that leaders face all these years after that awful day that changed the world for ever.

We start this report with extracts from inputs by two Leadership Fellows that opened up the hour-long "mini Conversation" that took place in the Quire. During the subsequent discussion a number of Fellows shared some powerful personal stories about the challenges that they have faced over the years to their integrity as leaders.

One of the key messages that we took away from our discussions on both days was that it can require immense **personal courage** to take one's stand on an issue of integrity.

Following the Gathering in the Quire, a number of Leadership Fellows commented on the very high levels of openness and mutual trust that we have developed with each other as a Fellowship over the past year.

This really means the world to us. It has helped to make possible some of the personal breakthroughs in thinking that a wide range of Fellows have experienced across different Leadership Conversations over the past year.

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

September 19, 2018

"*Aside from the flesh that clothes your bones, integrity is all you have.* "

"*Without integrity, who are you? What are you for? It is actually all you have. So don't trade it, don't sell it cheap, don't push down your conscience when it's telling you an inconvenient truth. Act from your integrity. Because if you lose your integrity, you lose yourself.*"

Steve Drummond

Leadership Fellow and former Chief Executive of CO2e.com, a joint venture with Cantor Fitzgerald that ran the world's first online carbon trading platform.

Steve's team worked on the 101st floor of One World Trade Centre. His joint CEO and all but one of the team died on 9/11.

"Building integrity is our best defence against future darkness."

" 9/11 mirrored back to us our vulnerabilities as a society. We forever lost a sense of collective invulnerability that day. But rather than attempting to treat our vulnerabilities as deadly weaknesses, we need to own them collectively at every level, as building integrity is our best defence against future darkness.

Our very vulnerability is the path to authentic connection – and that connection lead us to higher integrity in our decisions, our behaviours and our ability to see and experience others' perspectives. It's in those messy places that we as leaders can hone our empathy, our ethics and our moral compasses, and thus allow others to see and experience who we truly are."

Sarah Kling

International Leadership Fellow

"If you lose your integrity, you lose yourself"

This was a powerful phrase of Steve's, wasn't it.

As we discussed in the Conversation in the Quire, there are moments when we might have to pay a heavy price for not "losing ourselves".

We might find that we keep our integrity and lose our job instead.

In these moments, we need to draw on courage deep within our being to be able to act according to what our integrity tells us to do.

It's not ALWAYS "all or nothing"

At the same time, we need to be careful not to view integrity in terms of these "all or nothing" moments.

For many of us, the main times when our integrity is challenged can not be described as life-changing moments.

Rather, we tend to compromise our integrity in one of those many **"grey zones"** in life, when we don't really see ourselves as facing a fundamental decision that will determine the sort of person that we are.

So we let ourselves come up with an argument in our head (such as not wanting to upset someone else, or create an unnecessary "drama") to justify why we are not doing what we know to be the right thing.

"An inconvenient truth"

This is why, for so many of us, the threat to our integrity comes through lots of small compromises, when - to use another powerful phrase of Steve's - we **"push down our conscience"** because it's telling us "an inconvenient truth".

In these grey zones, vulnerability can help a lot

This is the real challenge that we need to engage with if we are to lead with high integrity.

Part of the answer as to **how** we might best engage with it comes in the quote from Sarah's speech.

Her argument was about how our vulnerability enables us to achieve a real **connection** with others that makes possible a dialogue about upholding our integrity in those many areas of our lives shaded grey.

Creating a "bridge"

Through making ourselves vulnerable, it becomes possible to create a "bridge" from which it is easier to challenge others in a non-confrontational way about the choices that they face, in what Sarah described as a "messy place".

We do so by sharing **why** we empathise with the option that would involve a certain compromise to their – and our – integrity.

From this starting point of empathy, we can then explain why we think this would be wrong.

Vulnerability builds trust

Instead of confronting them with the wrongness of their proposed action, we manage to **engage** with their line of thinking and explain why we are nevertheless drawn to a different conclusion.

It is this vulnerability that builds trust.

This trust then makes it so much easier for others to back off from a position that could have resulted in them losing another "small bit" of their integrity.

The quest for wholeness

How consistent are we?

At our June Conversation on Leading with Integrity (written up in [Chapter One of Volume 3 of Nurturing Wisdom)](#) we spent some time discussing the various meanings of integrity, one of which is "the state of being whole and undivided".

Reminding ourselves of this some three months later, we asked how much we seek to live our integrity as leaders in a way that is "whole" and **consistent** across our personal and professional lives as leaders.

Our instinct was to **want** to be consistent.

Yet as we opened up this discussion, we realised that there are fundamental differences in the ways in which we engage with our own integrity in our personal and professional lives.

Personal support and challenge groups

A number of us have personal support and challenge groups comprising close friends we have known well for years.

Sometimes we bring them together for a meal every few months or so, and at other times we ask for their advice on a one-to-one basis.

Many of us working in this way have invited and encouraged these close friends to be **tough** in the feedback that they give us.

They have a good instinct for how much radical candour we can take before we become defensive, and we know how tough we can expect each of them to be with us.

Most important, perhaps, we all know that any criticism of us compromising our integrity as leaders is coming from close friends who we **invited** to be critical.

A key insight

In work situations it is very different, and it is this difference that gave rise to one of the key insights that came out of this Conversation.

In a work setting, we are bound to feel much more **threatened** if a colleague dares to challenge our integrity.

If such a challenge comes uninvited, it immediately raises the concern that they might have shared this with others before raising it with us.

Should such a challenge be allowed to stand, and become the "word on the street", then we know that it could potentially be career-limiting.

One of the greatest barriers in the way of our progression as a leader would be the idea that we have questionable integrity.

"Are WE doing the right thing?"

Hence our insight that whenever we want to challenge others at work about their integrity, **integrity is one of the last words that we should use!**

Instead, any challenges about integrity in relationships at work should be set more in the context of *"Are WE doing the right thing?"*

This is sufficiently unthreatening to make it possible for us to say some tough things without others feeling pushed into a hyper defensive position.

If they still choose to interpret this as an attack on them personally, it is much easier to say, *"But my challenge was to **all of us**, myself included".*

Integrity is one of the last words that we should use!

Initiating difficult conversations

To lead with integrity, we need to be able to initiate difficult conversations with colleagues at work in which we ask tough questions, such as:

- Are we too defensive - or self-aggrandising - in the ways in which we present ourselves to others?

- Are we sometimes too "economical with the truth", in the ways in which we present disappointing results and poor performance to our Board/ senior colleagues/ shareholders and customers?

- Do we really acknowledge a higher loyalty to the truth, in our dealings with each other and the outside world?

- What are those lasting values that we see as being at the heart of our working practices, and how do we engage with others when we see them breaching these values in some way?

Not putting ourselves on a pedestal

However courageous we might be, we can all have only so many difficult conversations.

Moreover, if we appear to appoint ourselves as the moral conscience of our team or organisation we are likely to create resentment.

We could so easily be seen as putting ourselves on a pedestal and appearing to regard ourselves as better than others, as we deem their behaviours to fall short in some way.

How can we avoid being seen as self-righteous and yet still manage to keep focused on promoting and modelling high integrity behaviours?

Time for the big idea!

In trying to answer this question we came up with our "big idea"!

As so often happens with big ideas, we used some familiar language from another part of our lives and moved it across to this part.

A good number of us were distinctly excited about the idea of taking this forward.

As you will see, it is capable of being adapted and customised in all sorts of ways.

Create a Mastermind group

The group's mission

- To mastermind a new strategy for us to behave and perform at our very best, through

    - **Asking** what behaviours we need to adopt towards each other to achieve higher levels of truthfulness and transparency to enable us to become a truly outstanding organisation

    - **Stress testing** our vision of this high integrity, high transparency culture in relation to our current culture and ways of working, asking what we would need to change to move significantly closer to this vision.

A protected zone for free thinking

The experience of being a part of this Mastermind group would need to feel **very different** from the experience of being part of one of those formal committees and planning groups that can make many leaders roll their eyes when the very phrase is mentioned.

The Mastermind group would be seen as non-bureaucratic and creative, and **fearless** in drawing out any "inconvenient truths".

Everyone invited to join the group would regard it – genuinely – as a zone for free thinking where just about anything can be said in the knowledge that it will be received positively.

Like all good Mastermind groups, the emphasis would be on peer-to-peer support and mentoring.

Everyone involved would feel a sense of shared purpose, as well as a common commitment to **being themselves.**

Six possible ground rules
for your Mastermind group

❶

In this space, we are all equal

❷

We leave our egos outside the door

❸

Who said what is never shared with others

❹

We speak our truth to each other

❺

**We never seek to impose our
views on anyone else**

❻

**Whenever we are critical, we
talk of "we" - not you or they**

A catalyst for culture change

Stress testing your vision for tomorrow

A Mastermind group working along these lines could become a powerful catalyst for culture change, stress testing your vision for the future against the realities of today, as an organisation always committed to "doing the right thing".

Reaching out across the organisation

Such a group should be careful to reach out across the organisation and draw in the ideas of staff at all levels:

● Putting to them your vision for how you would like to behave towards each other in an organisation that always seeks to do the right thing, and

● Drawing out their candid views about what they regard as genuinely achievable.

Longer-term culture change

By the end of this stress-testing exercise, you should have:

● A shared understanding of how much stress your current culture can accommodate as you seek to move towards your shared vision

● Some powerful insights into the longer-term culture change that you need to promote to underpin your wider ambitions as a high integrity, high performing organisation.

A high integrity, high performing organisation

The best brains of the organisation
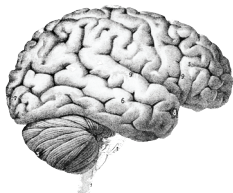
The Chief Executive must be seen to be personally committed to the success of the Mastermind group.

Before its first meeting, there needs to be an expectation that it will include the best brains of the organisation.

An informal think tank

For the Mastermind group to be truly radical and challenging, it needs to see itself as an **informal** think tank.

A Mastermind group should never be seen as a rival to formal decision-making processes.

This is why, after the group has done its work and disbanded, it should be the Chair who takes away the outcomes and shares their recommendations with the Board and top team.

Once they have decided which ones they wish to make their own, they need to take them forward with a sense of purpose and pace.

Raising the bar

If they truly lead a top performing organisation, they will be ready at some stage in the future to "raise the bar" that bit higher as an organisation that regards the integrity of its people as one of the keys to its success.

Time for another Mastermind group

Then it might well be time for another Mastermind group to stress test the organisation's latest ambitions against its established culture and working practices.

Knowing when to take our stand

A Mastermind group could do much to support an organisation in opening up difficult debates, in a relatively unthreatening way, about those behaviours that are compromising the integrity of individuals and detracting from the core values of the organisation.

At the same time, Mastermind groups won't spare us from our own responsibility as leaders for deciding whether to speak up in response to something happening that we believe to be wrong.

- Do we risk upsetting others by saying *"I think we might be about to do the wrong thing here"?*

- **Or** do we let the moment pass on the basis that it's not such a big deal, and life is too short to kick up a fuss every time we find ourselves in a situation where the standards of integrity being applied aren't quite as high as we would like them to be?

Asking the "pokey questions"

One Leadership Fellow said that we all have our own **"internal GPS tracker"** and if we paid more attention to that we would be in a better position to ask the "pokey questions" that are so important to flushing out questionable practices as soon as they present themselves.

This is why, in so many ways, the struggle for higher integrity organisations takes place in the "shades of grey".
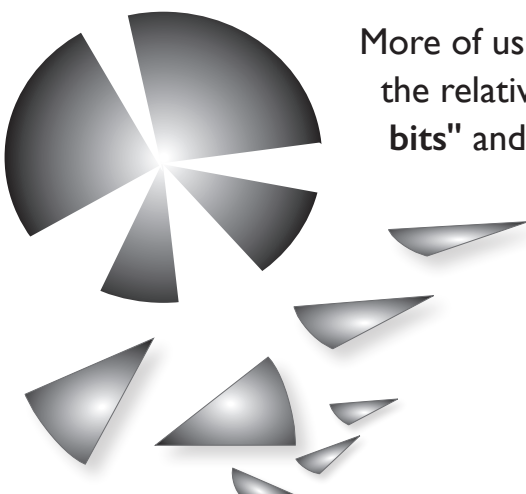
More of us need to take a stand more often in relation to the relatively small things that could well cost us "**small bits"** and **"crumbs"** of our integrity.

Courage mixed in with anger

Otherwise, if we say nothing and subsequently find ourselves confronted by some "big decision" that we have to oppose, it is no surprise that our courage will be mixed in with a large dose of anger.

Part of this anger might well stem from the fact that we failed to challenge at any time building up to that decision.

We are now unable to challenge from a clear position of principle, because we are already heavily compromised as a result of our own inaction on all those occasions when we said to ourselves,

- *"We'll let it go, it's not such a big deal".*

Postponing the day of reckoning

In these moments when we let something go, we might have been postponing the day of reckoning.

If and when that day comes, we could well find that the anger we are projecting onto others is anger also meant for **ourselves**.

For we know that we are now in a corner and feeling distinctly disempowered as a leader, because of the previous times when we failed to speak out.

No single right way

These issues are **hard** and there is no single right way of leading with integrity.

At the same time, this challenge of **knowing when to take our stand** seems to be the right one on which to end this note.

It is one that we all need to grapple with as part of our commitment to integrity in leadership.