



Maintaining the courage to reach for the stars

from 6.00pm on Sunday, May 12th 2019
until 11.15am on Tuesday, May 14th

Background Note and Agenda for our 32nd Leadership Conversation

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



*"All our
dreams can
come true
if we have
the courage
to pursue
them."*

Walt Disney

Reaching for the stars

This is our third Leadership Conversation on the theme of “from good to exceptional”. We have intentionally changed the language somewhat so that we can focus on reaching for the stars and “maintaining courage” without feeling trapped by past thinking around the journey from good to exceptional.

We also like the language of reaching for stars, because we want to start off with a little time travel, as you will see.

We want to ask what you think your future might look like if you were to reach for the stars – and actually land there!

Travelling forward in time

After asking you to travel forward in time, we will then bring you back to earth again and ask what that brief trip felt like. What did you see that you really liked? And what did you see that you weren’t so sure about?

We then build up from there, asking how you might want to redesign your spaceship or plot a different path to outer space so that next time you are back on the launchpad you are that much more confident in the mission that you are on!

In the process, we want to be pretty tough in challenging ourselves, so that we can draw out some of those self-limiting leadership behaviours that can so easily keep us on the launchpad for longer than necessary – or even persuade us to keep well away!

Attaching our courage to our higher purpose

Once we have prepared ourselves for the “space mission” that we really want to go on, we will press ourselves on what is the higher purpose that we each want to achieve as a leader, so that we can attach our courage to that – and follow through Walt Disney’s proposition that all dreams can become true if we have the courage to pursue them!



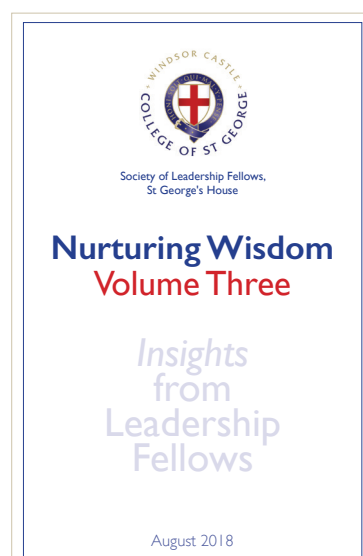
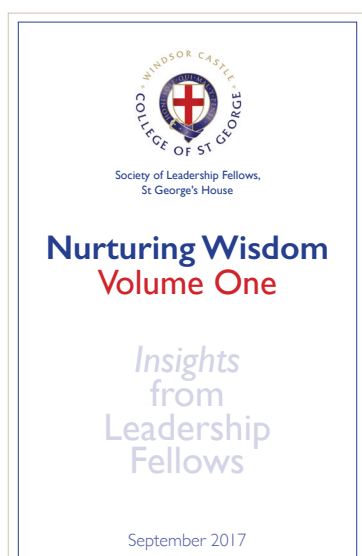
Drawing on previous Conversations

This Conversation follows on from three previous Conversations that we hope will offer you a wide range of insights that we can draw on throughout this Conversation. They are:

- Our first Conversation on From Good to Exceptional, written up as **Chapter One in Volume One of Nurturing Wisdom**
- Our second Conversation on From Good to Exceptional, written up as **Chapter Three in Volume Three of Nurturing Wisdom**
- Our Conversation in July 2018 on “Rebalancing our Lives as Leaders”. This is written up as **the final Chapter in Volume Three** and is really important for setting the context for the opening question in our first round of small groups. Some of us involved in this Conversation literally found it life-changing - and when you have a chance to read “Rebalancing our lives as leaders” you will know why!

(Hyperlinks to these Chapters are on the final page.)

We will also draw on the insights arising from our March 24-27 Conversation on “Outstanding Leadership: five key elements”, that will be available on the Insights page of the House website from early April.



Guiding Principles

At the beginning of the Conversation we will introduce our [Guiding Principles](#) that have become more and more important to the success of our Conversations during our first two years as a Society.

We see these principles as essential not only to enabling us all to view the Vicars' Hall as "safe space", but also to helping us use this space in a way that makes it possible for us to feel okay about being "unsafe" as we explore challenging ideas, knowing that as a group of Fellows we are there for each other.

Challenging and nurturing each other at the same time

It is this sense of commitment to challenging and nurturing each other at the same time that has become one of the most important characteristics of the Society.

In feedback after recent Conversations a wide range of Fellows have talked of how the sense of fellowship among us is now more important to them than they expected it to be.

One of the really positive outcomes of this is that communication among groups by email and WhatsApp goes on for weeks – and sometimes months – after we have shared time together in the House and the Vicars' Hall.

It really is as if, the moment a Conversation ends, a whole new follow-up process gets underway.

Strong bonds

Given the strength of the bonds that have developed across a group by then, this is the time when we can draw on this goodwill and trust to encourage each other to act on the resolves that we took away at the end of the Conversation – and if we encounter an obstacle, as many of us often do, to keep going and try again!

Part I Building Trust

On the launch-pad

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.

Once we have agreed the Guiding Principles we break into small (standing) groups for 15 minutes.

Before the Conversation Pete Ashby will try to talk on the phone to everyone joining us in Windsor to ask what you most want out of this Conversation.

Sometimes we fine-tune the opening question in light of Pete's telephone calls with Fellows.

Our first round of groups

Our current thinking is that we should ask you to engage with the following questions during our first round of groups:

“Please picture yourself having the ability to transport yourself forward in the future by 3 years to a leadership role of your choosing – one that you tell yourself could well be within your reach, and excites you in some way, but could also easily elude you if you are unlucky.

So, it is NOW May 12th 2022 and you're in this job that you have chosen for yourself.

How does it feel?

- ❓ **Do you feel a sense of greater fulfilment - and liberation?**
- ❓ **Or do you fear that you might easily become overstretched?**
- ❓ **Or doesn't it feel much different from how you feel in your current leadership role?**

There is no right or wrong answer.

All that matters, please, is that you try to capture how you feel and let the other members of your group draw you out on WHY you feel like that and whether the feeling is better – or maybe worse – than you expected it to be when you first read these questions.

Part I **Building Trust**

continued

PLEASE be completely honest

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 work hard at resisting 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 confronting what we ourselves need to do to become more effective leaders.

This is why we make a point in this first round of asking you to go forward in your mind by long enough so that you really feel you can give your imagination permission to “paint a picture” of you that it quite likes painting, and then ask how this makes you feel.

We hope that we will all want to start off feeling relaxed about sharing our feelings with each other, and asking other Fellows (who you might have met less than two hours previously!) why they feel the way that they do.

If so, we should all find that we have gone straight into a way of working with each other that is very high trust, and will mean that there is a natural openness among us when we rejoin the circle and share our personal answers to these questions.

“Rebalancing our lives as leaders”

We’re hoping that you will all have had a chance to read the final Chapter of Volume Three of Nurturing Wisdom before the start of this Conversation.

It sets a broader context for our leadership ambitions, in terms of how we balance them with the other responsibilities and ambitions in our lives. This should introduce a richness into our discussions – and a measure of reality-checking – from the very beginning.

TRUST
CONNECT
STRETCH

**“Sometimes
the right path
is not the
easiest one.”**

Grandmother Willow, Pocahontas



Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS**

Back from the future

One of the great benefits of overnight Conversations is that by the time we are back together in the Vicars' Hall at 8.45 on our first morning together, 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, as well as taking away more shared learning.

Reflecting on our image of ourselves in 2022

Once we have shared any insights arising from discussions over dinner, we want to ask you to reflect on the image that you offered up yesterday of yourself as a leader in three years time.

Having had a chance to reflect on this and experience the reactions of others, do you think that you were perhaps:

- Rather **over-ambitious** in the image that you sketched out for yourself
- Or perhaps **not ambitious enough**
- Or maybe **spot on** in capturing an image of yourself in three years time that you regard as stretching and yet achievable – and still very attractive as viewed from the standpoint of the morning after the night before?

We have some open discussion about this as a single group and then break for a new round of small groups.

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Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS**

continued

Our first round of small groups

In our first round of small groups on the Monday morning, we want to drill down a little more as we each try to answer two key questions:

- ❓ **What do we see as the one or two key leadership strengths of ours that helped to provide the “rocket fuel” to take us to the role that we sketched out for ourselves yesterday?**
- ❓ **What do we see as the one or two “bad leadership habits” of ours that could result in our rocket not achieving its target destination, unless we can find a way of managing them better - and ideally jettisoning them sooner rather than later?**

Understanding our key strengths – AND weaknesses

As we move in and out of small groups during the morning, we hope to gain a better understanding of three things:

- Whether our three-year ambition for ourselves last night was broadly on the right lines, or whether our instinct is to want to scrap it and start again!
- Whether the key leadership strengths that we see as providing our “rocket fuel” really do capture something special about us, or perhaps need to be rethought in a pretty fundamental way
- Whether the way we describe our bad habits as leaders actually resonates with others in our small group, or perhaps needs to be worked through some more so that we get closer to the **real issues** that cause our self-limiting behaviours and compromise the standard of leadership that we can offer others.

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Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS**

continued

Keeping in our sights our ambitions in relation to the rest of our lives too

Within this discussion there will hopefully be some ongoing self-challenge in relation to how we see our ambitions for ourselves as leaders in our working lives integrating with the rest of our lives.

For some of us, one of our bad habits as leaders has been to focus so much on our lives as leaders at work that our partners and families have just been left with the **residue** that has been inadequate on so many levels.

So we hope that as we reflect on the best target destination for ourselves in our career development as leaders, we will make a point of reflecting on whether we are happy with the implications for the rest of our lives.

If we say that we are not, then it will be important – sooner rather than later – to give ourselves the space to rethink some of our ambitions as leaders to enable us also to achieve our ambitions in relation to our partners, families and closest friends.

Owning our “bad habits”

In previous sessions of this kind, we have found that our small group discussions assessing our bad habits and weaknesses as leaders have opened the door to some powerful insights for individual Fellows.

In some cases, they have realised that once they own their weaknesses they will not be nearly as significant as they fear – and so they have become more ambitious for what they hope to achieve as leaders.

One of our most common insights has been that for so many of us, the weaknesses and bad habits that most get in the way of us achieving our full potential as leaders are the ones that we **don’t own**.

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Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS**

continued

Minimising the impact of our “bad habits”

By the end of the morning, we hope that we will all have a clearer idea of what we see as our key strengths that we want to build on even more.

We also hope to be developing our own ideas about how can best draw on the support of those around us to ensure that we minimise the impact of our bad habits whilst developing our own personal strategies for leaving them behind us as much as possible.

Finding the right path

We know that Grandmother Willow had a good point in Pocahontas when she said that sometimes the right path is not the easiest one.

Our aim is not to support each other in trying to find paradise on earth (tempting though that might be!) Rather, it is to help each other find a way of following what we each regard as the “right path” as we reach for the stars.

To find the right path, we need a pretty keen sense of what we’re **best at** and also which behaviours of ours **hold us back the most** as leaders, so that we really can own the two in our dealings with those with whom we work most closely.

Above all else, we need a sense of two other things as well:

- 1** How important the notion of **serving a higher purpose** is to us in the shaping of our ambitions as a leader
- 2** How we might go about **replenishing and sharing our personal courage** in those moments when we begin to falter and lose confidence in ourselves, and need to demonstrate the courage to put ourselves on the front foot again and move towards the leadership role that we believe we are meant to be playing.

Part 2 **ACHIEVING STRONGER CONNECTIONS**

continued

Question for our working groups over lunch

This is why we are currently thinking that when we break for our working lunch in the Vicars' Hall at 12.45, we will take the following two questions into small groups:

- ❓ **How important is *your sense of a higher purpose* in helping you put yourself on the right path as a leader?**
- ❓ **If you were to become *more courageous* as a leader, can you describe in a few words what this means to you, especially in terms of the behaviours you would envisage yourself adopting?**

We then come together again as a single group at 1.30 and have an hour together to hear the outcomes of these small group discussions and draw out the key conclusions and insights.

We then have a half-hour break at 2.30 and return at 3.00pm to continue stretching ourselves by heading back to the launchpad and our personal space rockets.



Part 3 GOING FOR THE STRETCH

And back in the space rocket

Please imagine that you are back in your space rocket, with all options open.

If you want to head for a different part of the outer galaxy, that call is yours to make!

You have complete freedom to decide where to go without in any way being held back by the space travel that you went on on Sunday. That is now a lifetime ago

So, you have LANDED and it is now May 13th 2022! You are out of your spaceship and wandering around.

Please tell us what sort of leadership role you are now in and what key strength of yours is really coming to the fore to enable you to be that much more effective as a leader.

Looking now at your role as a leader and the rest of your life, how do you see the overall balance between the work and non-work parts? Better or worse?

The stage when cross-group coaching comes into its own

We come together again as a single group at 4.00pm and this is the stage when cross-group coaching really should come into its own and provide some powerful moments and insights for us all.

By this stage we will trust ourselves to know how to make the best possible use of our time without having to decide in advance.

There is, however, one decision that's been taken! You will be offered something alcoholic at 6.00pm to make our final hour or so in the Vicars' Hall slip past as effortlessly as possible before we break on the dot of 7.15.

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Part 3 **GOING FOR THE STRETCH**

continued

Our final session on the Tuesday morning

As we go through this third Part of the Conversation, we will be aiming for breakthroughs in our thinking.

We will press ourselves to engage with any really tough issues that we have perhaps “danced around” up to now and where some of us have managed to remain sitting on the fence, for one reason or another!

Three stretching resolves

In our final round of small groups on the Tuesday morning, 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.

It is remarkable how much we can all gain when we each share our resolves at this stage, not least because our “**no recycling**” rule means that it’s not an option for anyone to repeat anything that they have already said!

We usually find that it is in the final hour and a half of a Conversation when we have our most powerful breakthroughs.

This is why we want to press ourselves hardest in the 9.45-11.15 am slot on the Tuesday in asking what are the key moments during this Conversation when we had a glimpse of some aspect of our leadership where we have tended to sell ourselves short in the past and now feel that we can step forward with a new level of confidence.

Giving each other a “nudge”

The level of trust that we will have achieved among ourselves as a group should enable us to give each other a nudge in those moments when it is called for.

The impact on individual Fellows can be profound, as we will see.

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STRETCH

Part 3 GOING FOR THE STRETCH

continued

Please be ambitious for what you will take away

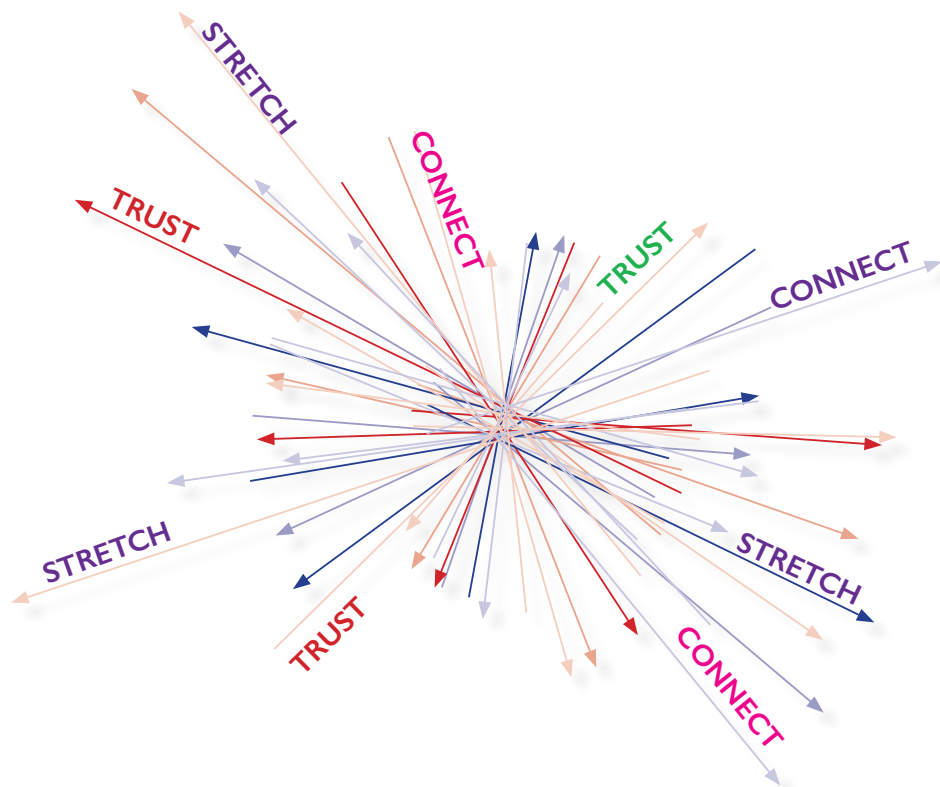
At our first two-night Conversation on From Good to Exceptional, we started off saying that we hoped that by the end everyone would achieve a really significant personal breakthrough.

By the time we finished dinner on the Monday night we thought that half the group would. Yet by 11.15am on the Tuesday **every member** of the group said that they had achieved a major breakthrough in their own thinking about their development as a leader.

At a two-night event such as this one it is achievable, and **that** is what we will be hoping for on May 12-14.

Aiming for at least one breakthrough

So if you are considering joining us then, please do so on the basis that you are seeking at least one breakthrough in your thinking about how you might best maintain your personal courage as a leader to reach for the stars.



Agenda

Sunday, May 12th 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)
5.55pm <i>in the Vicars' Hall</i>	Refreshments, then start of the Conversation. After agreeing our guiding principles, we break into small groups to consider our opening question (p 6)
7.30pm	After feedback and debate, we agree on the one or two emerging themes that we want to address over dinner in St George's House
7.40pm	Free time/drinks until dinner is served promptly at 8.15pm
9.45pm	Private floodlit tour of St George's Chapel (optional)

Monday, May 13th

7.45am	Breakfast is served in the House
9.00am	Part Two. We ask who has shifted in your thinking as a result of your discussions over dinner, and if so, how. We reflect on the ambitions that we set for ourselves in small groups yesterday evening and when we are ready, move into small groups (question set out on page 10). Light refreshments in groups
10.15am	Coming together again as a single group, we hear the outcomes of your discussions in small groups and sharpen up the key insights and challenges that will provide a basis for continuing discussion this morning. Moving in and out of small groups as necessary, we keep focused on helping each other maximise our greatest strengths and deal with any bad habits that get in our way. Shortly before lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall, we agree the questions that we will explore in groups over lunch (suggested questions on page 13)
12.45pm	A hot buffet lunch is served. We work together in small groups over lunch to develop our personal answers to the questions
1.30pm	Back in the main group we share insights and move on in our thinking

Agenda

Monday, May 13th *Continued*

2.30pm	Time out for half an hour (tea and coffee available). Please use at least some of this time to reflect on where you have got to in your thinking by this stage in the Conversation. Are you being tough enough in challenging some perhaps longstanding assumptions of yours about the sort of leader you are meant to be? Are you really open to other ideas landing, that you might not have expected? Weather permitting, it would be good to get some fresh air!
3.00pm	Back in the main circle, we move onto the third Part of our Conversation, during which we want to stretch ourselves to take as much as we can from the Conversation so far and put ourselves each in a position of being truly open to breakthroughs in our thinking. We break into small groups and go back in our “space rockets” as we engage with the questions on page 14
3.10-3.45pm	Work in small groups
3.45pm	Tea will be served (and cake, of course!)
4.00-6.00pm	During this time our aim will be to hear how we are each moving on in our thinking. This is the key stage for cross-group coaching and advice. We can achieve so much through supporting each other in “going for the stretch” to help us each move onto new ground in our thinking about our own leadership development
6.00-6.15pm	DRINKS! We seek a burst of fresh energy for the final lap today
6.15-7.15pm	We draw together the main points of learning from the afternoon and ask if there are any members of the group who haven’t made quite the progress that you wanted this afternoon and are keen to be supported with developing your thinking further. We then arrange group discussions over dinner to support you, on the basis that focused support for a small number of individuals always generates additional insights for us all
7.15pm	Free time
7.45pm	Drinks in the Sitting Room in the House
8.15pm	Dinner in St George’s House followed by a social evening in No 25 the Cloisters

Agenda

Tuesday, May 14th

7.45am	Breakfast is served in St George's House. Please clear your luggage from your bedroom and either leave it in the Sitting Room or bring it down to the Vicars' Hall with you
8.45am (prompt, please)	Final plenary session. We hear your opening comments, having had a chance to reflect on whether – and how – your thinking moved on yesterday evening. We then agree our final challenge for groups. Our expectation is that we will ask each of you to set two 90 day “stretch targets” for yourself and then capture the essence of what you would like to have achieved in your journey of reaching for the stars if we were to reconvene here in a year's time!
9.15-9.40am	Final round of small groups
9.45-11.15am	For this final session we ask you to adopt a groundrule of 'no recycling', under which we all agree not to repeat views that we have already shared in the Vicars' Hall. We each share our conclusions after our time in groups, capturing our 90 day stretch targets and our May 2020 ambition, and conclude this Leadership Conversation by 11.15am at the latest.

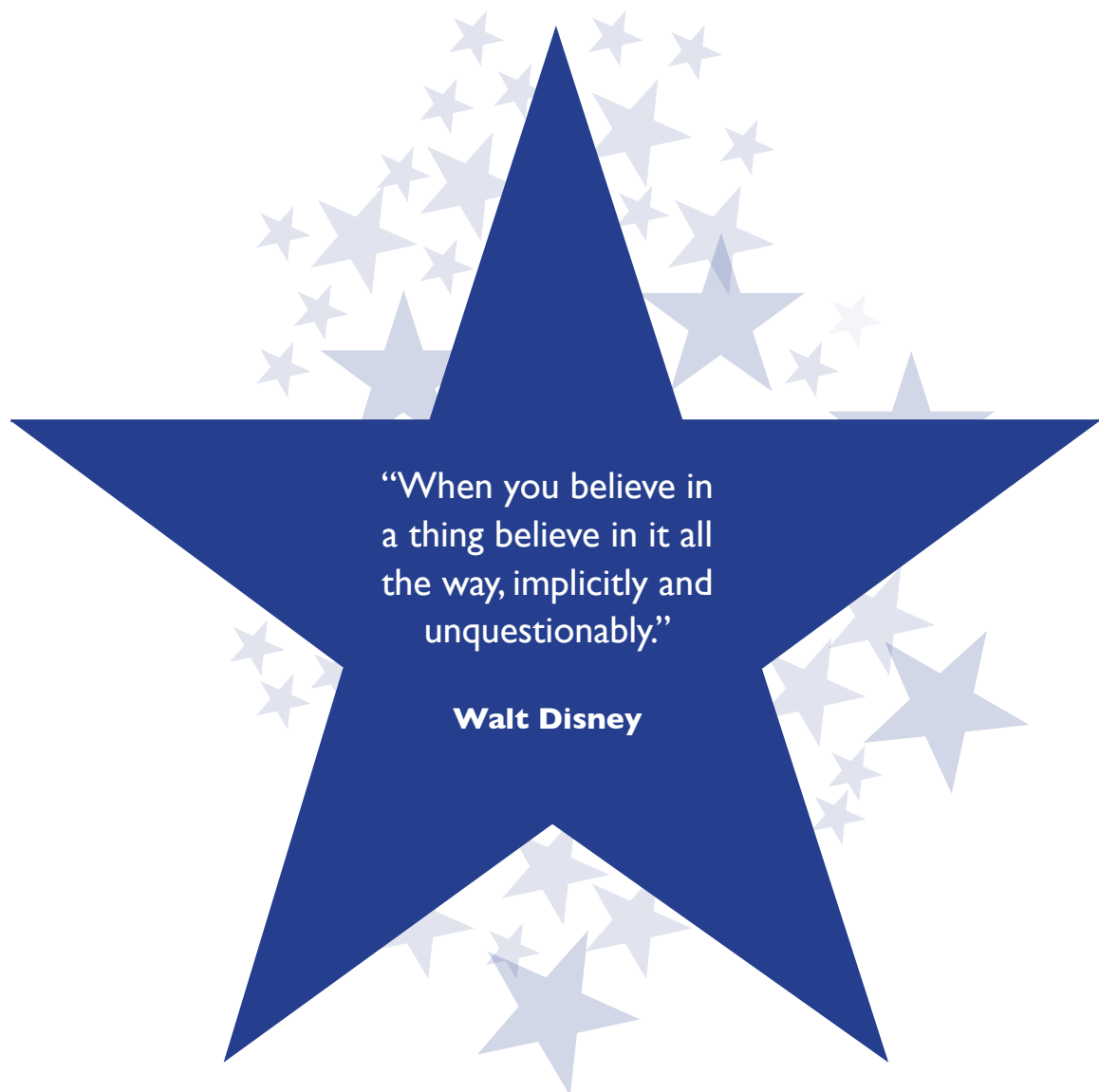
Video link-up: Thursday, September 5th 2019

In the final minutes of the Conversation we will also arrange a time for a follow-up video link-up in September 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 September 5th 2019





Key background references (hyperlinked) for this Conversation

Our first Conversation on From Good to Exceptional, written up as:
[Chapter One in Volume One of Nurturing Wisdom](#)

Our second Conversation on From Good to Exceptional, written up as:
[Chapter Three in Volume Three of Nurturing Wisdom](#)

Our Conversation in July 2018 on
“Rebalancing our Lives as Leaders”, written up as the:
[Final Chapter in Volume Three of Nurturing Wisdom](#)
