



# **Being decisive *and* fair:** *managing the challenge*

from 6.00pm on Thursday, June 20th 2019  
until 3.30pm on Friday, June 21st

**Background Note and Agenda for our 34th Leadership Conversation**

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

**Before you start reading this Background Paper, we should say that we have a different way in to this agenda.**

We want to tell you more than usual up-front about our thinking behind this Conversation, through the story of a mythical Chief Executive that we expect will chime with the experiences of a good number of Leadership Fellows.

We think this is the best way of drawing out the fact that managing the challenge of being decisive **and** fair is one of the greatest challenges facing many leaders today.

One of the reasons it is so tricky is because many of us pride ourselves on the fact that we are **both** decisive and fair.

When we first look at these two words alongside each other, we tend to think *“That’s do-able – what’s the problem?”*

Hence the story that follows.

We hope that it helps to sharpen up some of the key issues that we are keen to explore with Fellows joining us for this Leadership Conversation.

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**Pete Ashby**, Society of Leadership Fellows. October 2018

# The tale behind this conversation

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## One CEO's story ...

“ Fairness! That's a big deal to me. It really matters to me that my key people see me as a leader who's fair.

I'm sure it goes back to my childhood years when my parents instilled the virtue of fairness into me as a key family value.

Ever since then, I've always viewed fairness as a **moral obligation** on my part.

### **I'll bend over backwards to demonstrate fairness**

And since I first saw myself as a leader, rather than just a manager, I've assumed that I should be prepared to bend over backwards to demonstrate my sense of fairness.

So if I see a situation where a senior colleague under-performs, my first instinct is to hold back from challenging them in case there's some good reason for this that I don't know about.

### **I say nothing and hope for the best**

I tend to say nothing and hope for the best. Sometimes it works out – and sometimes it doesn't.

I can think of one case, just a few months ago, when one particular Executive Director of mine made two really serious mistakes, pretty close to each other.

The second time things went wrong, I got seriously worried.

I'd just appointed Jim a few months beforehand as my new Chief Operating Officer and remember thinking, *“I hope I haven't made an awful mistake!”*.

# The tale behind this conversation

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## One CEO's story... *Continued*

I thought it over for a day or two and told myself that these might just be two unlucky breaks and I had a responsibility not to over-interpret what had gone wrong.

### **Don't say anything quite yet**

I told myself not to say anything quite yet, and hope that everything with Jim would still work out fine.

If he got something else really wrong, then I would have to take action.

### **I had to be seen to be giving him every chance**

Looking back at that moment, I can't pretend that I was being decisive.

I was so motivated by a desire not to be over-hasty in judging my new COO too harshly.

After all, he had only been with us for a few weeks – and he'd come with glowing testimonials.

In my mind, I just **had** to be seen to be fair and to be giving him every chance to succeed.

### **I demonstrated indecisiveness**

Telling this story now, I must put my hand up and say that what I really demonstrated then was indecisiveness in the face of under-performance on the part of one of my top people.

As it was, my wishful thinking didn't last for long. Barely 10 days later he made another mistake. This one cost us rather a lot of money.

I knew then that I had to act.

Decisiveness was now called for – and in my mind, this was **more than fair!**

# The tale behind this conversation

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## One CEO's story... *Continued*

### **So I called him in**

So I called Jim in and told him that I felt really let down by what had happened and needed an explanation. I didn't mention the previous two mistakes – well, not at first, anyway.

Rather than taking responsibility for the mistake he said it was all down to his team. They weren't good enough and had let him down and he would go and have words with them.

That was the moment when I said *“Hang on, you can't just blame this all on them. You're the Chief Operating Officer, and this is the third significant mistake you've made in 11 weeks”*.

### **I had misread Jim**

Yet again, I seem to have misread Jim. I thought he would say that it had been a tough period and let's talk about how he could turn things round.

Instead, he accused me of being unfair on him and having had it in for him from day one!

### **He said he couldn't trust me**

Without hardly pausing for breath, he said he'd had a feeling that I had been watching him and noting down anything that had gone wrong so that I could come at him with a list of accusations.

He said he couldn't trust me because I hadn't been straight with him, even though at the interview I had gone on about us all being one team! ” ”

# The consequences of fearing unfairness

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This story is bound to be all-too-familiar to a good number of you – and if you haven't experienced it yourself, you might well know another leader who has.

## **Rather more comes out of the 'store cupboard'**

You hold back from offering any criticism of one of your key people, and when you do finally come clean rather more comes out of your 'store cupboard' than you expected.

At that moment the other person then rather "flips" and their defensiveness turns into aggression – towards you.

As they start to dig their trench, you don't quite know how you can avoid digging yours.

## **Your near obsession with being fair**

You hear them accusing you of unfairness towards them whilst you know that it's your near obsession with being seen to be fair that helped get you into this mess in the first place!

Also, the very time when you're accused of being so unfair is the time when you're trying so hard to be decisive!

## **Imagine what it's like with a longstanding employee**

Our particular tale of a newly appointed Exec Director under-performing need not worry a CEO too much, because you know that you can move quickly to terminate their appointment during their probationary period.

In this case, Jim might bluster and protest but he also knows that he's in a very weak bargaining position.

A much bigger problem can present itself when leaders see a longstanding member of staff under-performing.

What happens then in the balance between fairness and decisiveness?

# The consequences of fearing unfairness

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*Continued*

## **“Difficult conversations” are hard to get right**

If we are decisive and “call the behaviour” straight away, we run the risk of an otherwise high performing member of staff feeling a legitimate sense of grievance about one mistake being picked on unfairly and triggering a “difficult conversation”.

However good we might think we are at handling difficult conversations, we know that they can easily go wrong. It is difficult for any of us not to be thrown if the other person responds in a way that we hadn't anticipated.

## **Just suppose ...**

So, suppose we're the CEO and do what this mythical CEO did with Jim, except that the person concerned is a long-serving member of staff.

We see them take a decision that goes badly wrong and look the other way, once and then twice – and maybe a third time. On, say, the fourth time, we say something.

Suppose their initial response is to put up a wall of indignant bluster in the same sort of way that Jim did with his CEO.

That really bugs us and so we mention their previous “misdemeanours”, and our senior colleague ups the stakes in the way that Jim did and resorts to outrage. What could be facing us then?

## **A possible grievance claim**

Some of you will have known the answer to this question before you saw it. This isn't just theoretical; you've lived it.

Said staff member takes out a grievance against you for unfairness, perhaps using that emotive term bullying to describe your behaviour, and then goes off on extended sick leave because their GP signs a sick note saying that they are suffering from work-induced stress.

# The consequences of fearing unfairness

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*Continued*

## **The Board must be "open to the possibility ..."**

Your Board then have to arrange for the grievance to be heard. They tell you that of course they're on your side - but it is unfortunate, isn't it, that a longstanding member of staff should have taken out a grievance against you for bullying.

Whilst of course they expect you to be exonerated, you must understand that their sense of fairness means that they must be open to the possibility of the grievance against you being upheld.

Even as they stress the word possibility, you think that this is monstrously unfair – and this unfairness is all about you having bent over backwards for too long to be as fair as any human being possibly could be to a member of your team.

## **A rite of passage**

Some CEOs who have experienced this – with bells on – have been known to describe it as a rite of passage.

It's all part of the process of having to manage the incredibly difficult balance between fairness and decisiveness as a leader.

Sometimes a tendency towards over-fairness towards others can end up becoming distinctly unfair to you as a leader.

## **No single right way**

However you decide to manage this challenge, there is no single right way.

Whichever way you settle on might work brilliantly for a whole number of people and then fail spectacularly for someone else.

There are, however, some **general principles** that we hope to draw out as we explore the questions that we want to ask ourselves at this Conversation.



# Our key questions and challenges

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For our one-night Leadership Conversations, we structure the agenda around four main questions. The precise nature of questions 2 to 4 depends on how you answer question 1, so we offer below an outline for how we **expect** the Conversation to develop.

We always consider the questions in small groups and vary the composition of groups in advance, so that in considering each question you are working with a different group of Fellows.

## Building exceptionally high levels of trust

Our opening question is intentionally personal to each of you as leaders, because as you know we try to move very quickly to build exceptionally high levels of trust among ourselves.

This is our first Guiding Principle and for a topic such as this one it is incredibly important that we are all prepared to open up with each other from the very beginning.

In the agenda on pages 15 and 16 we show how we build on your answers to these questions as the Conversation develops.

## Question One

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### Understanding what matters most to you as a leader: fairness or decisiveness

Please think about the two terms “fair” and “decisive” as you would like them to apply to how others view you as a leader.

Accepting that you are likely to regard them both as important, please regard yourself as **having to choose one of them** as more important than the other in describing yourself as a leader.

**?** Which one do you choose and why?

Fair

Decisive



# Our key questions and challenges

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*Continued*

## Question Two

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### Engaging with the fear of being seen to be unfair

We expect that this question will focus on the fear of being seen to be unfair. It is this that drives so many leaders to let themselves become almost trapped in by their commitment to being seen to be fair at all times.

Exploring this question with some Leadership Fellows in one-to-ones, what has come across has been their fear of being seen to make **unfair accusations** towards a senior colleague.

- ❓ **What might we each do, as leaders, to develop more of a non-accusatory culture across our organisation, so that we all feel able to “call” unhelpful behaviours in an open way whilst reassuring our team that if they own the behaviour and grow from the experience we will regard that not as a “blot on their copybook” but as a step forward?**

Of course, **how** we call unhelpful behaviours is key to how others respond.

There's little doubt that the longer we wait before we call someone out on something the more we run the risk of our conversation with them being taken over by the charge that we **withheld** how we really felt - and acted in a way that was ultimately dishonest.

developing more of a  
*non-accusatory* culture

# Our key questions and challenges

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Continued

## Question 3

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### Asking how you can best act as a decisive leader in driving up the performance of your team

- ❓ **What sort of decisiveness would best serve you as a high performing leader seeking to transform everyone around you into top performers?**

One issue that we would like to explore at this stage is whether those Fellows joining us for this Conversation think that you could be doing more to set out what you see as the **standards of performance** that you would like members of your top team to achieve, and the minimum threshold that you **expect** them to cross?

In this part of the Conversation, we are keen to explore whether you differentiate between

- individuals who are **tough in assessing their own performance**, and
- those who **hold back from being self-critical** and respond defensively when under challenge.

In recent years, there has been a growing consensus that one of the keys to driving up performance is to encourage team members to feel free to **own** their under-performance, to such an extent that they would expect to slip back in the eyes of the rest of their team if anyone else were to “call” their under-performance before they themselves had volunteered this.

This makes it **so much easier** to tackle under-performance first time round.

tackling under-performance  
*first time round*

# Our key questions and challenges

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## Continued

This culture of open and critical self-assessment requires a particular type of leadership if it is to flourish, and an ability on the part of the CEO/ team leader to act quickly and decisively the moment a member of the team reverts to more traditional defensive behaviours.

We are keen to discuss:

- How much you seek this sort of culture at the moment
- If it is quite some way removed from your current culture, whether you would want to move in this direction – or would regard it as a step too far
- If you do want to move in this direction, **how** you would expect to handle the charge that you are being “unfair” in tackling under-performance the first time that you witness it without waiting to see whether or not you can associate an individual with a more general pattern of under-performance.

## Question 4

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### Creating your own personal strategy for rebalancing fairness and decisiveness as a leader

At the end of a Leadership Conversation we are always careful to say that we want every Leadership Fellow to take away your own personal strategy that is entirely customised to supporting you in becoming a more effective leader.

Our approach is that the more we support each other in sharpening up insights and ideas that are tailored to our own requirements as leaders, the better.

focusing on your key  
take-aways as a leader

# Our key questions and challenges

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Continued

## Triggering breakthroughs in your thinking

In this final stage we always stress how much we want everyone in the group to try and “stretch” all that you feel you have already taken from the Conversation, to see if this might trigger some further breakthroughs in your personal thinking.

### Two key themes

The two key themes that we will be seeking to probe in the questions that we set ourselves for this final lap are:

- ❓ **How might we best tackle our own fears of being unfair, so that our commitment to fairness can not be used against us by others who see our fear as a weakness?**
- ❓ **How might we step forward as more decisive leaders in relation to standard-setting and tackling under-performance, creating a culture in which we all expect to share with others the learning that we take away from those occasions where we get something wrong - and act quickly to get ourselves back on track?**

### Shared pride

To achieve this openness about failure we almost certainly need a sense of shared pride in an organisational culture that is about **setting ever higher standards**.

We hope that by this stage in our discussions a small number of Fellows might have achieved personal breakthroughs that we can all draw on in sharpening up our own thinking about this challenge.



Going for the stretch

# Our key questions and challenges

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*Continued*

## **No ‘recycling’**

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!

One of the insights that we often share with each other after a Leadership Conversation is that at so many conferences people **stop pushing themselves** in their thinking long before the end.

We tend to see ourselves at the other end of this spectrum! We work on the basis that the more progress we make during a Conversation, the harder we should push ourselves right through to the final few minutes.

As you will see, this is why some of the best insights come in literally the closing minutes of a Conversation.

They draw on the **powerful energy** that we have created among ourselves as a group by then.

## **Managing the challenge**

This makes so much possible in thinking through how we can best manage the challenge to be fair and decisive in how we perform as leaders.

the more we stretch  
ourselves, the more  
we take away

# Agenda

## Thursday, June 20th 2019

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<b>2.30pm+</b>	You are welcome to check into your room in St George's House
<b>4.30pm</b>	Tea in the House for those joining Evensong in the Chapel
<b>5.05pm</b>	Evensong (optional)
<b>6.00pm</b> <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 9)
<b>7.30pm</b>	After feedback and debate, we agree on one or two key issues to explore over dinner
<b>7.40pm</b>	Free time/ drinks until dinner is served promptly at 8.15pm
<b>9.45pm</b>	Private floodlit tour of St George's Chapel (optional)

## Friday, June 21st

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<b>7.45am</b>	Breakfast is served in the House
<b>8.45am</b>	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 (pl. see page 10). Back in the circle we hear what insights you take from your small group discussions and build up from there, being careful to concentrate on those key issues that are most important to your personal strategies for tackling any fears you have of being seen to be unfair
<b>12.15pm</b>	We prepare for our lunchtime groups when we want to shift our focus to how you might each become more decisive as a leader, especially in driving up standards of performance and encouraging a culture in which senior colleagues are more open in owning any under-performance on their part. (Please see commentary on pages 11 and 12)
<b>12.30pm</b>	A hot buffet lunch is served. We work together in our groups

# Agenda

## Friday, June 21st *continued*

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### 1.15pm

We hear your feedback from your lunchtime discussions and seek to stretch ourselves in drawing out any challenges that we are not confronting head-on. We aim to sharpen up any personal choices that we need to make if we are each to maximise our impact as decisive leaders who value our own sense of fairness whilst working to create a more open and decisive leadership culture. This is one in which team members can take more risks in what they say to each other, knowing that there is a shared commitment to supporting each other in driving up performance

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### 2.00pm

Last round of small groups in which you sharpen up your top personal resolves to share with us in the “final lap” (please see commentary on pages 12 to 14). Tea, coffee and cake available

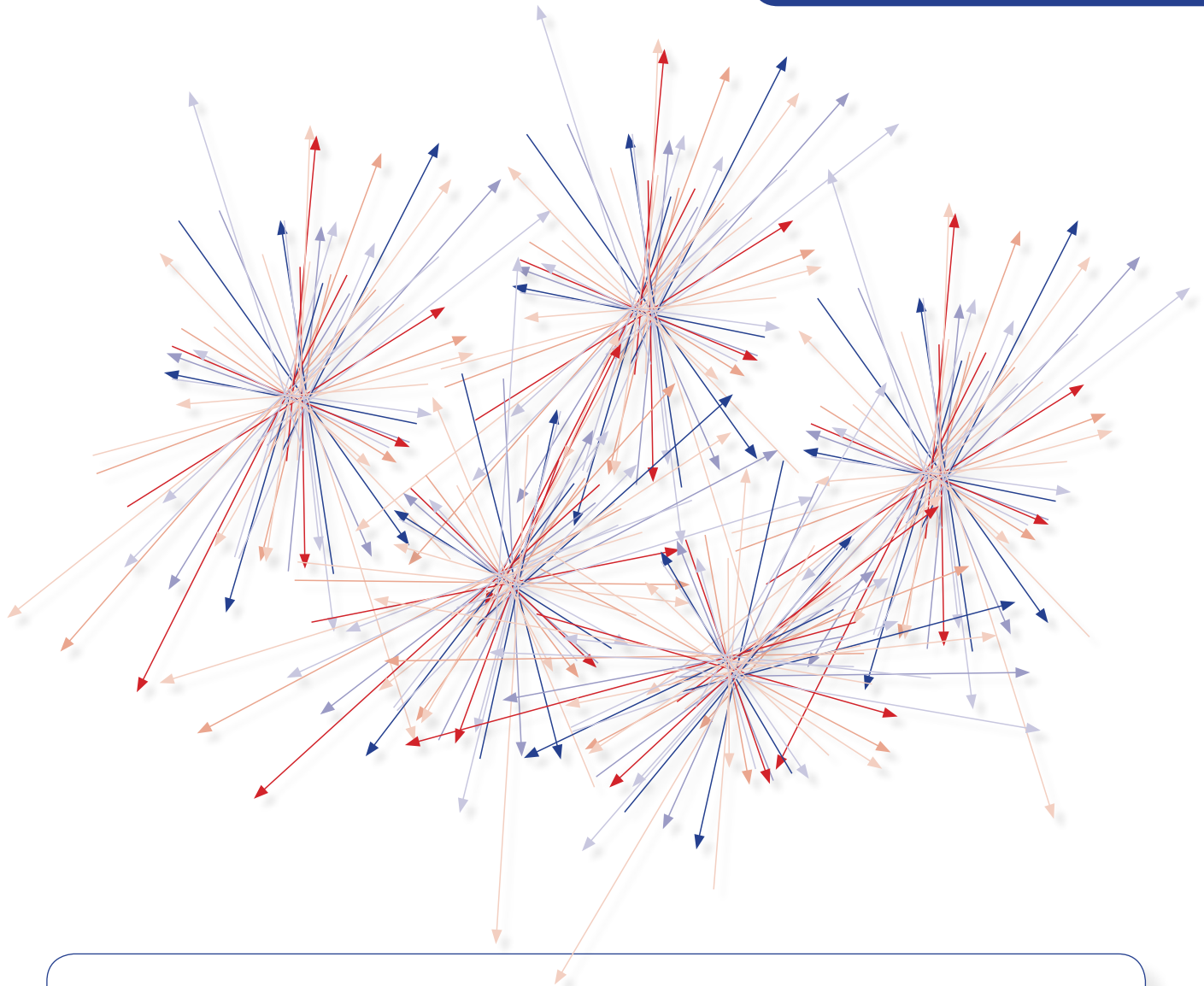
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### 2.20pm

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. As we share our resolves there is time for positive feedback and 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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## **Video link-up: Friday, 20th September 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 each made in taking forward our resolves.

For previous video link-ups we have found that it is best to allocate an hour and a quarter so that we all have this time reserved in our diaries, on the basis that we will finish after one hour if we find that is all the time that we really need.

The key to us making the best possible use of our time is for Fellows to 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 then take it from there!

**Suggested time for Video Link-up:  
10.00 to 11.15am on Friday, 20 September 2019**

# *“Decide.*

Take one of the most unsettling things you feel exist in your life and decide.

**Decide** to meet it with a proactive spirit that believes that a solution, an ease, a peaceful resolve rests in the meeting.

Prepare your heart for what it feels like to be joyous over the result. Give life to this solution with your breath.

Let any fear be a helpmate, let it actually support and lift you to an awareness that your next opportunity for growth is revisiting you through this present unsettling because you are now more than capable and authentically ready to meet it.”

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**David Ault**, Thought leader & author