



Insights arising from our
24th Leadership Conversation

Creative Conflict

November 2018

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

Introduction

This Insights Report draws on the main themes of our 24th Leadership Conversation that took place on November 19-20, 2018 on the theme of “Managing Conflict to Maximise Creativity”.

Through our discussions we appreciated what powerful reactions many of us have towards the term “conflict” and why some of us are deeply conflict-averse.

We ended up with a strong sense of our responsibility as leaders to help reassure those who are fearful of conflict, for whatever reason, and to commit greater time and energy to thinking through how we might steer our leadership teams through processes of creative conflict.

To this end, this Insights report sets out 12 challenges to support Leadership Fellows in considering how best to develop this role.

Taken together, these challenges remind us that creative conflict requires a very high level of preparation and conscious engagement on the part of leaders.

So long as leaders are willing to make this commitment, the prize – both in terms of outcomes and the quality of working relationships - can be immense.

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Leading a process of creative conflict

12 challenges for myself as a leader

- 1** How prepared am I, psychologically?
- 2** How can I help to make conflict okay?
- 3** Should we agree some “team rules”?
- 4** How can I introduce some fun into the process?
- 5** What should I do if someone “pushes one of my buttons”?
- 6** Should I call people out on unhelpful behaviours?
- 7** What should I say if someone starts digging a trench?
- 8** Have I got a handle on my “inner peacemaker”?
- 9** How do I avoid getting ambushed by a “sniper”?
- 10** Am I okay about the “right ending” not always being a happy one?
- 11** How should I handle my internal “post-mortem”?
- 12** How aware am I of my “swings”?

I How prepared am I, psychologically?

You're leading a discussion with your Board, or your Executive team or a group of partners. How can you best prepare for this?

Some people say *"I'm sorted out, I've read the papers"*.

That's fine. And we take that for granted. What we mean is how prepared are you **psychologically**?

How much discussion have you had in **your head** about how you feel about conflict and how you're going to handle this with the group?



If you're not keen on conflict, as is true for many of us, the last thing you want to do is pretend that you're chilled about it.

If you appear to give the message *"bring it on"*, it won't convince anyone, least of all yourself.

Making a connection with everyone in the room

Some of us find it incredibly helpful just to have 3 or 4 minutes on our own shortly before the meeting, thinking of the faces of everyone who will be joining us.

In our minds, we need to make a connection with each of them before they walk into the room.

We know that those who are conflict-averse will almost certainly need some reassurance from us, once we begin to have some disagreement, that it is all fine and necessary.

During these few minutes, we have the space to get clearer in our minds about what we're going to say right at the beginning to **set the right tone and put everyone at their ease**.

2 How can I help to make conflict okay?

Before you start you need to be clear about the words you want to use right at the beginning to make clear that in your view:

- Conflict is often **necessary** to tackle key strategic challenges
- Whenever we disagree there needs to be mutual respect, so that everyone feels their voice is being heard
- There is a world of difference between creative conflict and unpleasant disagreement – and once unpleasantness enters in creativity is nearly always driven away.

To help make sure that there is no unpleasantness, we all need to try **not to take things personally**.

Once we do, it is easy to take offence that isn't intended – and if that happens, a meeting can quickly degenerate into name-calling.

A sign of your strength as a team

It can have quite an impact if you contrast how some people view conflict – as a sign of failure – with your view of it as a sign of your strength as a team.

It is then easy to reassure those who are hesitant about conflict. You are recognising that it triggers very different feelings in different people, so much so that:

- *One person's row is another person's enjoyable wrestle!*

You hope that during the discussion no-one will duck any difficult issues.



Your aim is to deal with them openly and honestly, on the basis that **any disagreement should be an agreeable disagreement**.

3 Should we agree some “team rules”?

To help navigate your way through a tricky discussion, team rules can be a huge asset, especially if you find that someone over-strikes a position.

Instead of putting yourself in a position where it's you against them, you can remind them that what they have just said is **inconsistent with the team rules** – and you hope that they and everyone else will make a point of getting behind the team rules once again.

It's best just to have a small number. Here are some possibilities:

- We value difference
- We consider **WHAT** is right and not **WHO** is right
- We support each other in solving problems
- We disagree without being disagreeable
- We always speak well of each other
- We don't take things personally
- We don't go along with “pocket vetoes”
- We put the mission of our organisation before our own interests.

Sometimes it helps to have a one-line summary of your mission at the top of the agenda for the meeting.

This makes it easier to press on with a tricky conversation when you hit a difficult patch and some people want to **pretend that you all agree when you know you don't**.

4 How can I introduce some fun into the process?

Conversations that involve a degree of conflict can be really hard work. As the person leading the conversation, your role is to keep it as light as you can, especially in those moments when you're encouraging people to be creative.

You want them to feel that they can think out loud and try out new ideas without any fear of being “shot down” if their idea doesn't quite land with the rest of the team.

For conflict to be creative, you need to be able to say that you hope people might actually **enjoy** that part of the conversation where you are trying to come up with some fresh ideas.

The group need to believe that you believe in their creativity.

As you are building up new ideas, it can be a really good idea to split the group into small groups of two or three to come up with specific propositions.

Using their imagination



Some teams use role-plays and improvisations, whilst others use artwork and sometimes Lego products to encourage small groups to come back with something visual to illustrate their overall idea.

The more you encourage them to use their imagination to bring their idea to life, the better – especially if you then make a point of thanking those who do.

Don't believe that you have to plan all of this on your own.

How about asking a member of your team some time beforehand to give you a few minutes to talk some ideas through?

You might share the leadership of the session with them, so that **together you create a process that feels different – and fun.**

5 What should I do if someone “pushes one of my buttons”?

One of the greatest risks that you will face is that someone says something that pushes one of your buttons – and having said how you want everyone to be open-minded you suddenly hear yourself putting someone down for something they’ve just said!

What should you do in that situation?

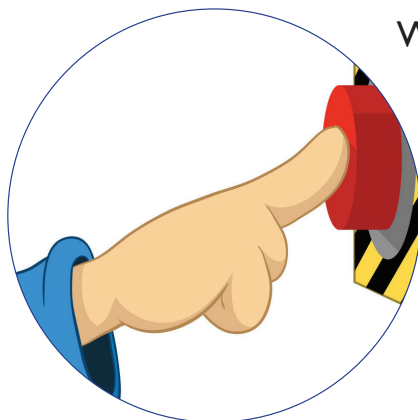
Apologise, very quickly – and say that something that was said just pushed one of your buttons and you shouldn’t have jumped in the way that you did.

You can draw some good lessons out of this moment of tension **and** take people with you, so long as you are quick to apologise and say that you took a comment personally, which made you more defensive than you should have been.

This makes it REAL!

If you are seen to give the benefit of the doubt to someone who has said something that clearly bugged you, this should be an advantage later on if someone else flares up at something that is said.

In that moment, you can say that someone clearly pushed one of **their** buttons, just as happened for you earlier on - and you are sure that no slight was intended.



What this shows, you can say, is that we are all vulnerable to someone saying something that triggers a deep reaction within us.

All we need to do in these moments is take a pause and focus again on the rules for the discussion that we all agreed at the outset - such as the rule that **we don’t take things personally**.

6 Should I call people out on unhelpful behaviours?

This is a tricky question and definitely one of those with no single answer to cover all situations! In general, most of us would say “yes”, so long as you can do so with a **light touch**.

There are inter-personal conflicts in just about all teams, and sometimes members of a team will sit there waiting for two people to resume the low-level antagonism that they slip into at just about every team meeting!

When one of these habits presents itself, it is important to try and call out this behaviour, generously.

Otherwise it becomes a diversion that makes it **more difficult** for the team to get into a frame of mind where they see themselves as more creative than they usually allow themselves to be.

Defusing moments that cause irritation

It is also important to try and defuse any moments that cause irritation and divert the group from your creative mission.

For example, imagine that you have a meeting coming up with some key partners and one of them has a habit of accusing others of not discussing “the elephant in the room”.

Why not try to find a stuffed elephant and put it in the middle of the circle?



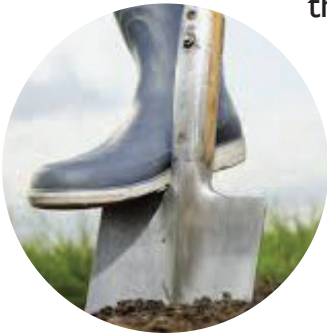
You can say that if anyone feels we’re ignoring the elephant in the room, can they pick up the elephant and describe what they see!

You can achieve so much by referring generously to behaviours that, if left unacknowledged, can easily **stifle the group’s creativity just when it is beginning to flow**.

7 What should I say if someone starts digging a trench?

This is a tough one, isn't it. Once a disagreement is underway, some people seem to have an inner programming that makes them reiterate time and again a position they have already argued for.

Whether the reason for this is their compulsive need to win an argument or their fear of losing, the fact remains that you are sitting there watching them dig their trench – and you're wondering what is the best way of intervening.



If you want to help someone **stop digging**, it is important to start off with some positive recognition of what they have already offered the team.

So you might say that they have brought out very well the force and clarity of the argument behind the position that they favour.

What is the number one argument **AGAINST**?

How about then asking them to capture what they see as the number one argument against what they are proposing? If they resist this ("there aren't any!") you are in a very strong position to press harder:

- *"We all know that whatever we agree on at the end of this discussion will have some strong upsides and also a number of significant downsides. James, you have argued a strong case for one option, and I'm sure we all respect this. May I ask what you see as the main case **against**?"*

Some Leadership Fellows make a point of insisting that every member of their Executive team advocating a specific proposal should also point out what they regard as the number one downside of their proposition, as part of their initial presentation.

It's a terrific way of **building in respect for difference from the beginning of a discussion!**

8 Have I got a handle on my “inner peacemaker”?

We might say that we’re just **great** at handling conflict and would never want to close down a difficult conversation before it has run its course.

Yet the fact is that a lot of Chairs of Boards and Chief Executives are regarded by their colleagues as having a tendency to do just that. They have a habit of closing down conversations when they think a natural solution to the conflict is presenting itself and others are being rather slow in not seeing this as clearly as they do!



A lot of us have an “inner peacemaker” that can quickly engage with a disagreement to point out what the obvious way would be of moving forward and keeping everyone happy at the same time.

Deployed sparingly, this inner peacemaker can be a tremendous asset. In the context of a discussion where you want some creative conflict, it can actually **get in the way**.

Inviting the team to challenge you

One of the best ways of keeping your inner peacemaker in check is to say to the team that if any of them feels you are closing down a difficult discussion too quickly, you want them to say so – and you undertake to **hold back** and let the discussion run for that bit longer.

Next time you can see a possible compromise solution, how about instead saying that you see **two or three main views** coming forward - and capturing each of them in one or two sentences?

You then ask whether anyone who hasn’t yet taken part in the conversation has any thoughts about how you might draw on the best elements of these views to create a fresh approach towards moving forward.

Sometimes it is a stronger act of leadership to ask the question of your team **rather than doing their thinking on their behalf!**

9 How do I avoid getting ambushed by a “sniper”?

So many of us dread chairing a meeting with a sniper, whose speciality is objecting from the sidelines. They start off with low-level criticism and ramp up their negativity and cynicism as the meeting goes on.

At first we smile and thank them for their comment and it's not long before we want to give them a piece of our mind. Tempting though this might be, it's the very worst thing that we could do.

Don't let the others switch off!

Just think, here you are trying to lead a discussion with some creative conflict, and you know you have a number of conflict-averse people who need to be handled with care as you move forward.

The moment they witness you getting into a shooting match with someone else, they will vacate the space, mentally, within seconds!

Once they have switched off it will be almost impossible to bring many of them back in on the conversation.

This is why it is best to use your light touch and inclusive style of leadership to focus not on the sniper but on the rest of the group:

- *“So, Sarah, you're clearly not a fan of any of the ideas that have come up so far. Let's give you a few minutes to come up with something positive of your own and let me bring in some of those who have been quiet in this conversation. Yvonne, can I draw **you** out and ask which of the different ideas so far you favour the most ...”*

What the sniper is really challenging you to do is to keep your powder dry, because once the shooting starts they have won!

Your No 1 one weapon against them is the engagement and positivity of other members of the group.



10 Am I okay about the “right ending” not always being a happy one?

This is an important question, isn't it. We throw ourselves into leading a meeting that we know will be difficult and we so want to be successful.

We give it everything we can and it's natural for us to want a “happy ending”.

Yet sometimes a happy ending simply isn't real, and we need to remind ourselves of this as we steer the discussion.

Think of the not uncommon experience for many leaders of working with a team to discuss the latest plan for “restructuring” and streamlining the top of the organisation.

You know there are lots of good things that will come out of it. Yet the fact is that some jobs will go and some of the people in the room expect to be polishing up their CV in the not too distant future.

Being real with you

In this situation, it's important to draw out as much creative thinking from this current team as is possible.

It's also important that they have the opportunity to share their sense of sadness and loss about the team being wound up, and experience this being honoured by **you**.

For them, a “good ending” to the meeting is **not** necessarily the happy ending that enables everyone to leave the room on a high. That simply wouldn't be real.

It's more important, surely, that they can be **authentic** with each other and with you.

The trust that this helps to engender between you and your new team should **make possible exceptional levels of creativity when the time is right**.



|| How should I handle my internal “post-mortem”?

After chairing a meeting in which we were hoping for some really creative conflict, quite a few of us have a habit of going home and “burning energy” worrying.

We worry about not having been good enough. We worry about how some might have felt about what others said. We worry also about what others might have felt about what **wasn't** said. We just worry.

Yep, it is good if we ask ourselves some tough questions, such as

- Did I do enough prepping for the meeting?
- If I had my time again, how could I have improved my intro – and the team rules?
- Was I quick enough to reassure those who looked a little panicky the moment the first disagreement started?
- Did I press people hard enough to keep going when some wanted to give up once the discussion got difficult?

Give yourself a break!

Let us assume that overall you offered compassion and reassurance, as well as continuing to push people hard to land the creative outputs that you came up with at the end.

Let's also assume that the team didn't quite climb the mountain in the way that you hoped - and you, no doubt, **could** have been better.

All that said, isn't it now time to give yourself a break?

Self-flagellation won't help with mountain climbing.

A little more self-compassion and self-reassurance should help rather a lot more.



12 How aware am I of my “swings”?

One of the insights that came out of this Leadership Conversation was the tendency of some conflict-averse leaders to swing from **avoidance** at one end of the spectrum to going **way over the top** at the other.

We so dislike conflict that we go to great lengths to avoid it.

We have lots of tactics and techniques for bypassing it and generally looking the other way.

Deep down, we know what we are doing and so we get more and more bugged with ourselves and the position that we have put ourselves in.

This all builds up and then one day someone says something that pushes one of our buttons rather too hard and we just **blow**.

We go seriously OTT and surprise not only everyone else but also ourselves.

After that, we tell ourselves to calm down and not be unreasonable.

So we edge back to avoidance and then more avoidance and the cycle starts all over again.

Time to cut out avoidance

We **know** that if we are to lead a process of creative conflict we need more modest swings.

That means much less avoidance – and **no** going over the top.

How wild is your personal swingometer? Honestly?

Time to cut out all that avoidance, don't you think?

Okay, we'll be realistic.

Let's go for as little avoidance as possible – for now!

How wild is
your personal
swingometer?

