



Insights arising from our  
25th Leadership Conversation

# Raising our game as leaders in 2019

December 2018

**Society of Leadership Fellows**  

---

St George's House, Windsor Castle

# Introduction

---

This Insights Report draws on the main themes of our 25th Leadership Conversation that took place on December 12th 2018 on the topic of “Achieving your top priorities in 2019”.

Our overall conclusion was that for many of us our number one challenge is not to do with any specific leadership skills that we might lack.

Rather, it is to do with our **mindset** as leaders and in particular our readiness to be more generous-spirited in our judgements of **ourselves** as leaders.

Instead of leading to complacency, it is this generous-spiritedness that should enable us to be **tougher on ourselves** and **stretch those around us**, on the basis that we are committed to building on all of our key strengths as we move forward.

As 2018 draws to a close, may I say what a **privilege** it has been to work with Leadership Fellows in developing this series of Conversations.

We are excited by how we are planning on taking forward our work together through the 17 Leadership Conversations and four Breakthroughs + Dinners that we have planned for 2019.

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

December 18, 2018

## Ten game-changers for 2019

---

- 1** Recognising our self-limiting behaviours – **and** telling our inner critic to chill!
- 2** Being ourselves more – with skill
- 3** Asking more from those we trust the most
- 4** Shifting our focus from “exploit to explore”
- 5** Getting tougher on ourselves whenever we over-commit
- 6** Giving less time in meetings to tasks and more to colleagues’ concerns
- 7** Rethinking our view of duty
- 8** Becoming more measured, especially in drawing out points of learning
- 9** Picturing ourselves in the space we want to be in
- 10** Becoming more comfortable with our success as leaders.

# | Recognising our self-limiting behaviours – and telling our inner critic to chill!

---

At this Conversation, we started by asking what we see as our self-limiting behaviours as leaders.

It's incredibly important that we try to identify them, because they can so easily get in our way unless we develop personal strategies for leaving them behind.

At the same time, we need to be careful to keep our inner critic on a tight leash!

The more we let ourselves become frustrated by our self-limiting behaviours, the more they can end up holding us back.

Yes, we need to get a grip on them, but don't let's make this all such **hard work!**

If we can lighten up about them, we should find it easier to own them with colleagues and ask for their support with managing them.

## **Doing ourselves down**

If we picture a list of our top three self-limiting behaviours, quite a few of us will have one in common:

- “Doing ourselves down whenever we get a chance!”

Let's take **that one** off the list in 2019.

*That would be a great step forward.*



## 2 Being ourselves more – with skill

---

This was one of our favourite phrases at this Conversation. We need to “*be ourselves more – with skill*”.

Too often, we focus on what we are **not**.

Instead, we need to focus on what sort of leader we **are**, and then apply ourselves to becoming better and better at doing what we already do well.

This is bound to require some changes in our overall style of leadership.

But the crucial point is that we should approach this from the starting point of focusing on what we already do that is in any way special.

### **Valuing ourselves more**

For a good number of us, this means that we need to get a lot better at appreciating the sort of leader that we are, and our particular skills as a leader.

Then we can focus on how to use our leadership skills more effectively as we go through 2019.

The key principle here is that we each need to value ourselves more as a leader.

We can then apply ourselves to our strategy for self-improvement, building on our strengths and assets to enable us to **be ourselves more – with skill**.



## 3 Asking more from those we trust the most

---

We need to invest more in our key relationships with those whom we trust the most. We can do this by making a point of asking them for help when we need it.

2019 is the year we need to stop feeling that we have to pretend to everyone that everything is fine, at times when we know it isn't.

### **Cheerleaders**

We all need our cheerleaders.

They are the people who see the **specialness** that we bring to our role as a leader, as well as our vulnerabilities and anxieties.

Our top cheerleaders might include a close colleague at work. They might also include our life partner, or our best friend from school or university.

### **Brutally honest**

So often we tell ourselves that we need to protect them from the anxieties that are going round and round in our mind.

In actual fact, we are **honouring** their trust in us if we are brutally honest with them about what is causing us the greatest anxiety.

By letting them be there more for us, we are affirming the significance of all that we share with them.

This is so much more real than pretending all is fine at times when **we want to say** “I'm in a corner and need your help with getting out of it”.

***In 2019, let's just say it!***

## 4 Shifting our focus “from exploit to explore”

---

As leaders, we have trained ourselves to support our key people in exploiting their talents and gifts to the full.

The problem is that we can spend so long focused on talent-building in relation to our organisation as it is **now** that we leave ourselves little time for exploring how we would like our people to develop their roles into the future.

So many leaders tend to sub-contract this area of thinking to someone else, and are then slow to respond to their ideas because they rather resent the fact that they didn't play a bigger part in developing them themselves!

### **Our team's leading explorer**

In 2019 we need to see ourselves more as our team's leading explorer, dedicating more of our time to thinking through possible futures that the organisation could step into in 2020 and beyond.

Once we have a greater sense of ownership of these alternative futures, we should be able to offer so much more in helping our team to exploit their leadership skills – current and potential - to the full.

Like all successful explorers, we stick close to our key people and make sure they know that we are there for them if they ever trip or fall.

So long as this support is truly two-way, we should be in a position to spend more time charting the way ahead.

We can then exercise the prerogative of a leading explorer telling our team that the mountain summit is just about in sight, and how exciting it will be when we reach it!

## 5 Getting tougher on ourselves whenever we over-commit

---

Realistically, there probably aren't many of us who expect to get through 2019 without over-committing ourselves as leaders at least a few times.

### **Undervaluing ourselves**

We know **why** we have this tendency to over-commit, don't we?

Most of the time this is driven by our tendency to undervalue ourselves.

Our self-doubt drives us to want to do more to prove to ourselves - and others - that we are as good as some of them think we are.

To prove that they are right and our inner voice of self-doubt is wrong, we push ourselves harder to take on more than we should.

### **Ensuring that we get more things right**

Ironic, isn't it.

We get more things wrong because we're taking on too much due to our concern that we might not be as good as others think we are!

Time to pause and say to ourselves "*don't over-commit in 2019*".

Apart from anything else, it's our best way of ensuring that we get more things **right**.

In the process, we are more likely to prove right those who have a more generous view of our leadership skills than we do!



## 6 Giving less time in meetings to tasks and more to colleagues' concerns

---

Despite all that we know about how leaders should and shouldn't behave with their teams, many of us still spend far too much time in meetings discussing a battery of different tasks, wanting to agree who will do what, when and how.

We treat our top team like a group of managers, and then express surprise when they don't behave more like the leaders we want them to be!

So let's make 2019 the year when we tell our teams that we will sort out as many of the practical tasks as possible **outside** of team meetings.

### **Supporting each other more**

When the team meet together as one, we will then have more time to ask what we should all be doing to support each other more to become a more effective team.

As part of this process, team members will have the space – that never exists within task-based agendas - to ask others to support them with resolving specific concerns that are getting in their way.

So as we go into 2019, each member of the team will know that our overriding commitment is to enable them to become as good as they can possibly be.

Also, their experience of team meetings will be one where the process of agenda-setting is **shared**, and time is allocated not according to an action-based tick list but according to their needs as leaders.

## 7 Rethinking our view of duty

---

A number of Leadership Fellows talk about their current leadership role as a “duty”.

As they use this word, we can sometimes feel the energy levels in the Vicars’ Hall drop!

It sounds like such **hard work** and something that could never be in any way enjoyable.

Why not?

Why can’t we associate duty more with the idea that we’re in a position where we really are being guided by our “true North” and are in with a good chance of **fulfilling our mission** as a leader?

We know the answer, don’t we. We tend to see duty as something that is so often **imposed on us**.

It is not our choice and is instead something that we are **required** to take on.

### **Part of the package**

Yet as leaders we know that there are so many aspects of our role that we need to get on with, like it or not.

Unless we step up and take them on, we won’t be as good as we could be.

So we view them as part of the “package”.

How about some fresh thought leadership around this issue in 2019?

Let’s hear it for the duties of a leader.

Gosh, look at those smiles!



## 8 Becoming more measured, especially in drawing out points of learning

---

We know that many of us can be too frantic – frenetic, even.

We have discussed this at various Leadership Conversations and agreed that the “speed merchants” among us need to be ready to slow down at times, so that those who are feeling left behind have a chance to catch up.

The greater our speed, the more we tend to view anything going wrong as a bit of a car crash.

Instead of calmly drawing out any relevant lessons and learning points, we express anger at the fact that we have had to slow down - and can't wait to speed up again!

### **Avoiding yet another drama**

We all appreciate the importance of momentum and pace.

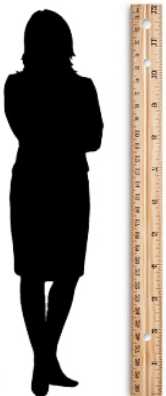
We do need more speed at times.

We also need the ability to pause in a measured way when necessary and ask what lessons need to be learnt, **before** we put our foot on the accelerator again.

### **The best lesson-learner**

More often than not, it is the measured leader who is the best lesson-learner.

It is this sense of measure that avoids yet another drama and converts an error into a learning opportunity.



## 9 Picturing ourselves in the space we want to be in

---

This Leadership Conversation was the third one in a row at which we tried a visualisation to picture a situation that we wanted to be in as leaders and imagine our experience of it.

This visualisation didn't work for all of us. But on each occasion it worked for a good number of us, and for some it had a really significant impact.

### **Creating bridges**

Overall, we were struck by the **potential** that this technique could have for enabling more of us to “dream in” the sort of leadership role that we would like to play in the future.

We generally don't use our imagination nearly enough to create bridges between the situations that we find ourselves in at the moment and the situations that we would like to be in, in the future.

### **Powerful**

Many of us could try this technique with our teams.

We might ask them to visualise themselves free from the self-limiting behaviours that hold us all back.

That could be powerful.

### **Breaking down barriers**

Or we might ask them to imagine themselves enjoying our time together as a team more and valuing more highly the distinctive contribution that each member brings.

That could break down a few more barriers between team members, and help everyone appreciate that much more the importance of **diversity** to the success of the team.

## 10 Becoming more comfortable with our success as leaders

---

One of the phrases that we used at this Leadership Conversation was that there was a “surfeit of humility” in the room.

The extent to which a number of Leadership Fellows seemed so committed to **putting themselves down** really was striking.

We’re all in favour of leaders having a capacity to be self-deprecatory, but one can take a good idea too far!

We quickly saw **why** this was the case.

Quite a few Fellows in the room were so keen to distance themselves from the egotistical behaviours they saw being exhibited by top leaders in public life that they were in danger of swinging too far the other way.

### **Becoming "moany"**

The motives behind this might be worthy, but the overall result can be other than helpful.

It can mean that instead of being compassionate and generous-spirited whenever we get something wrong, we become that much more self-critical and “moany” about our unworthiness.

### **Showing compassion**

Instead of turning our guns on ourselves, we actually need to show some compassion **towards ourselves** if we are to be quick in learning the lessons of mistakes and sharing them with others.

Even more important perhaps, we need to be feeling pretty confident about ourselves as leaders if we to be as compassionate as we need to be with **others** when they screw up!

*Continued overleaf*

*Continued*

### **Appreciating ourselves more**

To become more compassionate towards ourselves and others in 2019, some of us need to appreciate ourselves more and enjoy more what we're achieving.

We need to let ourselves become that little bit **more comfortable** with our success, without - Heaven forbid! - slipping into complacency or egotism.

### **Stretching others more**

Our comfort should then permit others to become that little bit more comfortable themselves.

In turn, this should enable us to stretch them more, on the basis that they know that we know how good they are.

They also know that we're sufficiently relaxed with ourselves as leaders for them to take it for granted that we have no "hidden agenda" when we ask them to join us in raising our game and **stepping up throughout 2019.**

