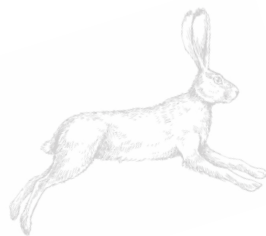




Insights arising from our
26th Leadership Conversation

Pre-mortems, night brains & running hares

January/February 2019



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

Introduction

At our Breakthroughs + dinner earlier on this month, one of our newly appointed Leadership Fellows said, *“I’ve scanned some of your Insights Reports but I must admit that I haven’t yet got to the end of one”*.

“Okay”, I said, “we’ll make the next one shorter. Just a few ‘nuggets’ from the Leadership Conversation without having to wrap them into one overall commentary.”

“Good!” said the Fellow. “That sounds easier to take in.”

So, here is the report of our January 24/25 Leadership Conversation on the theme of “Think, Reflect, Act – getting the balance right”.

It follows on from an earlier Conversation on this theme and captured in Chapter 6 of Nurturing Wisdom, Volume Two.

It is shorter than ever and written in a style that we hope will work for the skimmers among you who regard yourselves as having one minute and 20 seconds max to spare before you switch off.

As you will have seen from the front cover, we have also changed the title to stir your curiosity that much more!

We hope that you make it to the final page, and if you don’t, please let me know. We are committed to experimenting with the format of these Insights reports for so long as is necessary until we create a model that works as well as it can for as many Leadership Fellows as possible.

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| Shifting the pendulum – from post-mortems to pre-mortems

So often our reflections in teams take the form of a post mortem. We look backwards and ask what we should have done differently.

Imagine that instead we look forwards. Rather than undertaking yet another post-mortem we ask our team to engage in a pre-mortem.

We create an ambitious target for what we would like to achieve as an organisation in, say, two years' time.

We explain why it excites us.

We then ask the team to imagine that we have gone all out to achieve it – and not quite made it.

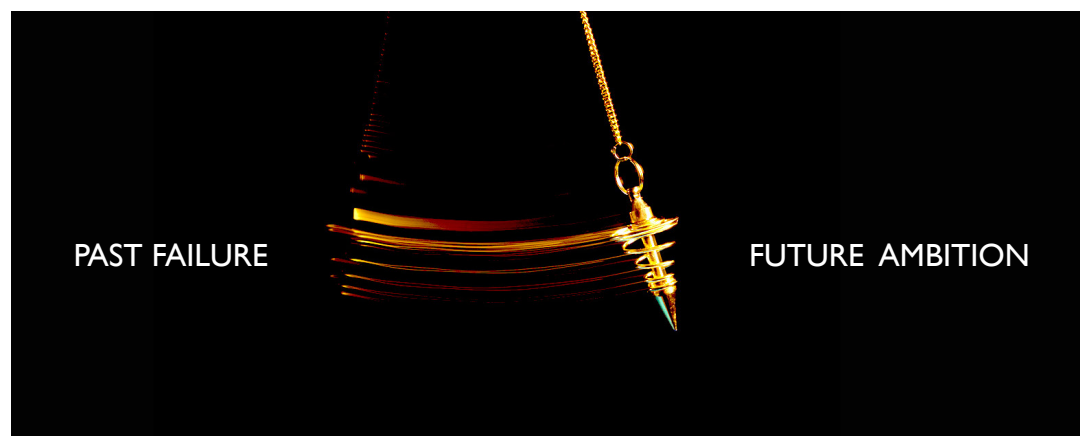
What is it about us as a team that will have **got in our way**?

This makes it much easier to be tough on ourselves, because our topic is all about achieving ambition in the future rather than who is to be blamed for what we failed to get right in the past.

Stepping into each other's shoes

At the same time, imagine asking members of the team to step into each other's shoes for this exercise. The Operations Director imagines themselves taking on the responsibilities of the Sales Director, the Sales Director makes a mental switch to becoming the Director of People, and so on.

This can be a great way of ensuring that team members view shared challenges from the standpoint of others round the table.





“Okay, brain, here’s your starter for ten ...”

2 Getting our night brain on the case ...

*“Sometimes when I’m standing in front of the mirror at night, brushing my hair and getting ready for bed, I will put into words a question that is really worrying me as a leader. I find that **just by putting it into words**, as one of the last things that I do before I go to sleep, that’s enough. More often than not, the next morning I wake up with an answer.*

I make sure I have a pad on my bedside table, because if I don’t write it down quickly I’ll almost certainly forget it!

I feel a bit embarrassed mentioning this, because I know it might sound strange ...”

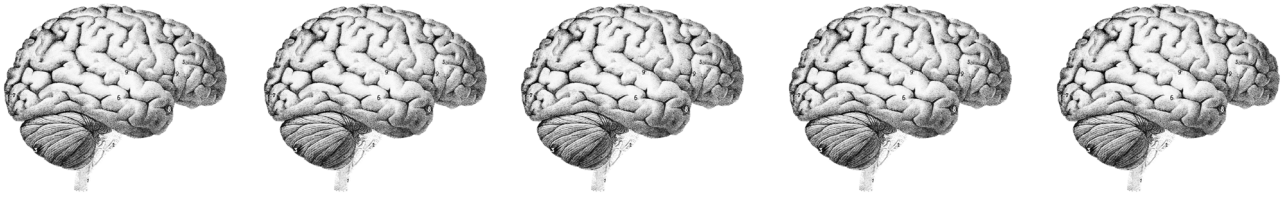
It doesn’t sound strange, does it? A number of us have notepads spread around in strategic places at home, to capture any early morning inspiration that comes to us as we move from the dream-world back into the realities of a new day.

Getting the killer question right!

What really struck the rest of us was how this Leadership Fellow worked at capturing the question that she wanted to try and answer by the next morning.

So, next time you’re in front of the mirror late at night, how about capturing in a few words the question that **you** want your night brain to work on?

Don’t forget to have a notepad at the ready.



"Can I pick your brains for a few minutes"

3 Asking open questions – for a whole day!

Back to the day brain. What don't most of us do enough of with our brain?

We don't listen enough.

We know that active listening should be one of the most important dimensions to our leadership.

How do we help ourselves to make this step change in the ways we engage with listening to others?

One idea from one Leadership Fellow was that for one whole day he should commit to only asking open questions of colleagues.

In many cases he will want to **focus** the question, so that colleagues are clear about the aspect of their business that he wants to explore with them.

The point about the openness of the question is that they know that whatever they say, he will want to understand more.

His aim is to get inside their heads and see the world through their eyes.

Our response was: *"One whole day of active listening? What a commitment would that be!"*

Just half a day would be a seriously big deal.

Some of us might work up to this – and start with an hour!

If this includes you, how about starting on Monday?

4 Asking for feedback when others aren't expecting it

It's been a fairly long meeting with the team. You're looking down at the table as you put all of your papers together in their folder.

With a casual tone, you half look up and say,

"By the way, I meant to ask ... Is there anything I've done in the past week or so that's bugged anyone? If there is, please just say. I'm always open to the idea that I've got things wrong and I really like to sort out problems as we go."

Someone says something about Vincent and Saeeda in the sales team having had their noses put out of joint because you had missed something out that you had promised to say in a speech to the sales team last week.

"Thanks so much for saying that", you say. "I'm terribly sorry. I remember that - and I'll go and see if Vincent and Saeeda are in after lunch. Anything else?"

No rehearsing – and no justifying, either

We ask this question when people aren't expecting us to ask it. They haven't got time to rehearse what they say.

We make a point of being very relaxed and always thanking people for what they say, whatever that might be.

There is no justification, just appreciation.

Members of the team gradually get used to the idea that they can say difficult things to each other and all will be fine.

They also come to feel that whenever the rest of us say difficult things to them, they too are freed from having to justify themselves.

It is so much easier to leave behind "old baggage" when no-one has to justify why they did what they did!



Meeting room

No baggage

5 Avoiding shared reflections that set hares running



This conclusion rather surprised us! We went into this Conversation assuming that it's a good thing to share more of our reflections with those with whom we work most closely.

We ended up appreciating that just as we can socialise ideas too late, so can we **socialise them too early**.

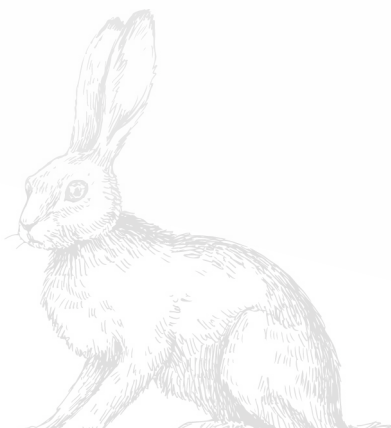
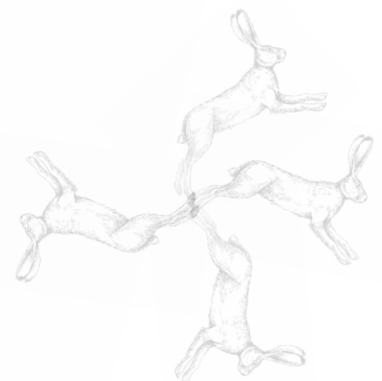
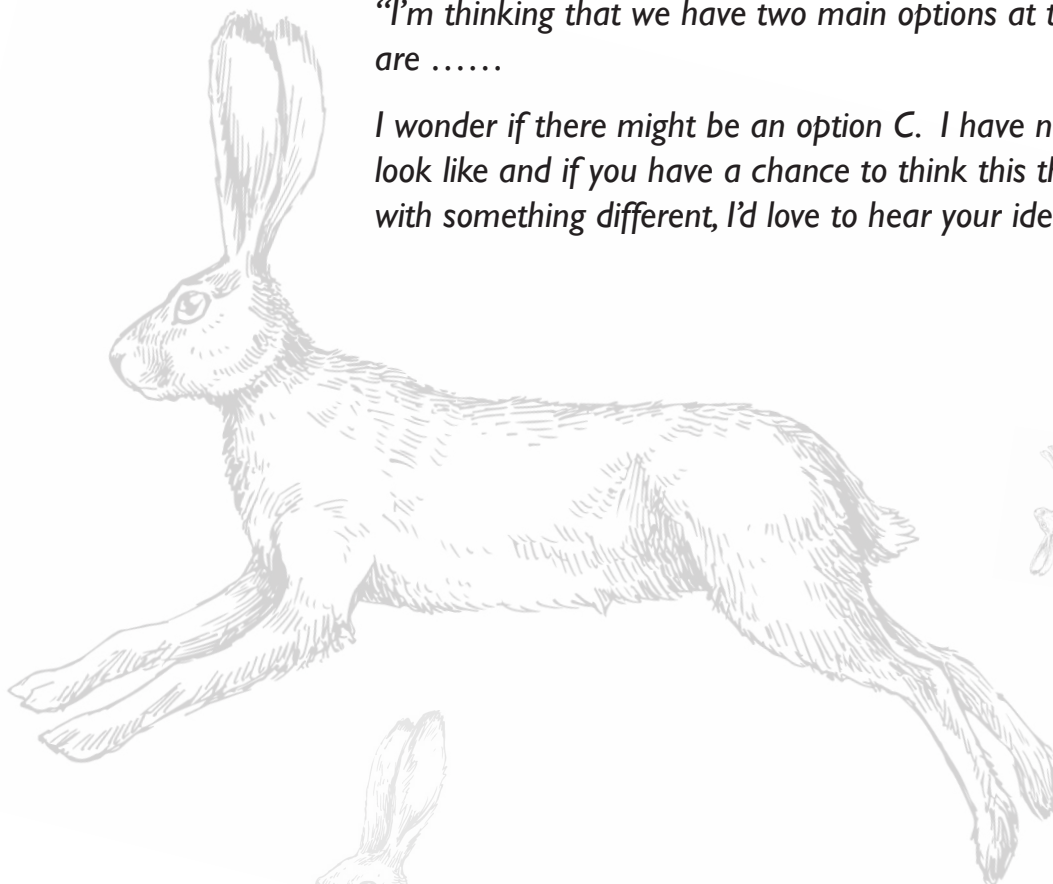
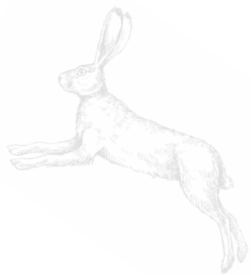
Sometimes some of us can think out loud and then find that we have set a number of hares running **in ways we didn't intend**.

Hence our conclusion that at times we need to keep our thoughts to ourselves for a little longer, until we are clearer about **WHAT** we want to socialise and **WHY**.

At this stage, it can be a really a good idea to "think out loud" about some options that you and your team now face - as one.

"I'm thinking that we have two main options at the moment. These are

I wonder if there might be an option C. I have no idea what it would look like and if you have a chance to think this through and come up with something different, I'd love to hear your ideas!"



6 Thirty minutes personal reflection time at the end of the day?

In the final minutes of this Leadership Conversation, one of our Fellows said that from now on she plans to set aside 30 minutes at the end of each day *“for deep reflection on how I have done”*.

She would make a point of focusing on the learning that she should take away from the day, and not let herself get distracted by her internal perfectionist who could turn almost any situation less than 100% successful into a near disaster!

The first reaction from quite a number of us was that 30 minutes a day for this exercise is a **long time**!

Couldn't you get the job done in 15 minutes? Or 10?

Five, maybe, if you really get a move on and push yourself hard!

Quality time for ourselves

We can all be so reluctant to set aside quality time for ourselves to go through an internal process of asking where we feel we have discharged our leadership role in ways that make us proud, and where we have clearly fallen foul of an old habit of ours that we now need to leave behind.

What is so important about this process of internal reflection is that it should be as regular as possible.

Maybe this will help us identify the right question to submit to our night brain later on!

It can be a really good discipline to say to ourselves:



*“I’m **only allowed one question**, so let’s put to one side all those thoughts that end up being diversions and instead cut to the chase!”*



7 “Don’t just stand there – DO NOTHING!”

This made us laugh and we hope it amuses you too!

So many of us are in the “action, action, action” mode.

To us, leadership is about **doing things** and making things **happen**.

Give us a crisis, and it’s so easy for our first question to be “*What should we do?*” rather than “*Why did this happen?*”

Deep within our beings, we know that sometimes the best act of leadership involves us doing nothing.

Whatever “doing” we get up to, that should involve us asking lots of questions to understand as much as we can about the position that we find ourselves in.

Sometimes, what we dub as a near disaster will actually right itself without any intervention on our part.

How hateful can that sound! We do nothing and yet everything is all right once again.

Hence the line at the top of this page. At a certain level of leadership, we need to beware the tendency to dive in with a 20 point action plan.

The best response might well be “*let’s think, reflect - and WAIT!*”