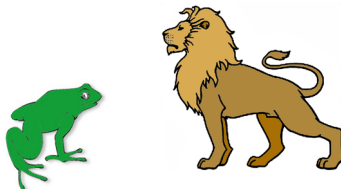




Insights arising from our
27th Leadership Conversation

Priorities, frogs, marathons and lions

February 2019



Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This Insights report draws on the main themes of our 27th Leadership Conversation that took place on February 5th 2019 on the topic of “*Achieving your top priorities in 2019–5 weeks in*”.

It followed on from a one-day session on this theme in December of last year and written up in “*Raising our game as leaders in 2019*”.

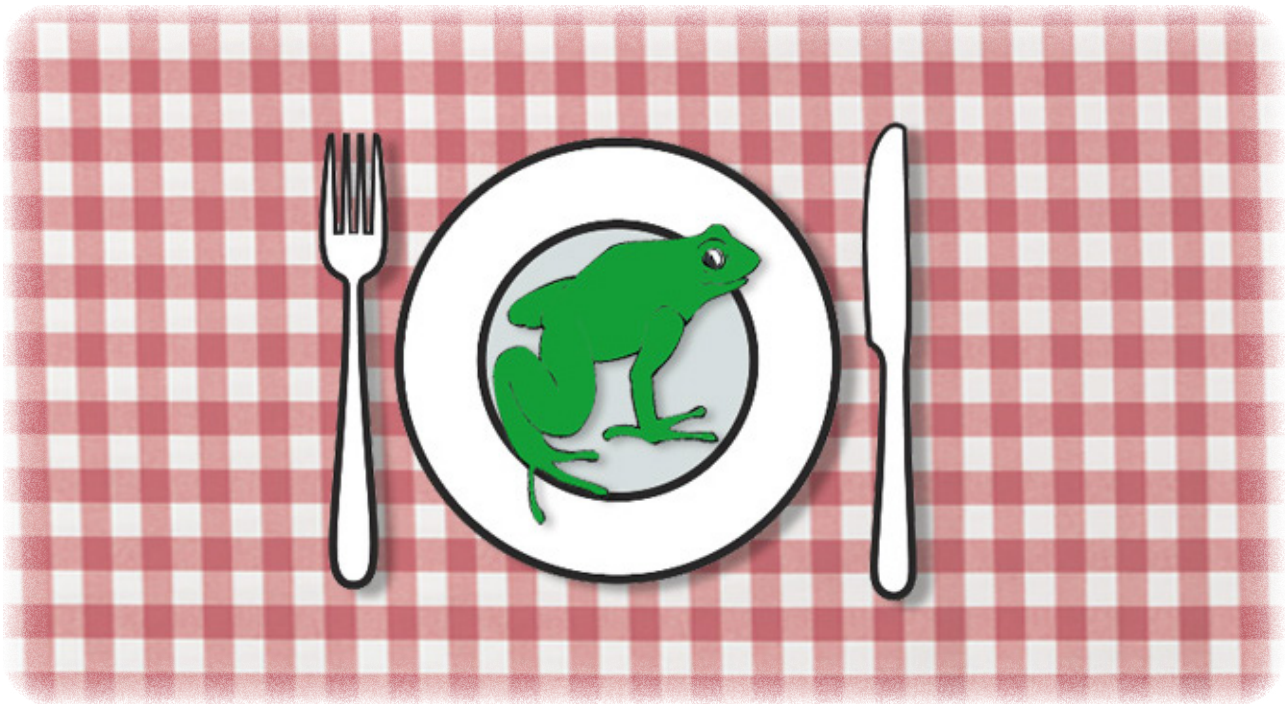
In keeping with the style of our most recent Insights reports, we have opted for a format that conveys a small number of the ideas that we explored in Windsor in a way that makes them as accessible as possible for those Leadership Fellows who were not a part of the Conversation.

We hope that you find this a stimulating read.

As always, we would very much appreciate feedback from Fellows about how you would like us to develop the format of these Insights reports in future.

Pete Ashby
Director, Society of Leadership Fellows
St. George's House, Windsor Castle
pete.ashby@stgeorghouse.org

February 11, 2019



Tough stuff first

We've all heard the Mark Twain quote about making ourselves eat a live frog every morning so that we go into the day knowing that nothing worse can happen.

We laugh about it, whilst knowing that it contains a very powerful truth.

For all bar a tiny number of us, it's simply not our natural way to start each day by dealing with whatever is on our "To do" list that we really don't want to do.

Instead, we tell ourselves that we will check our emails and have a quick word with colleagues, and then we have to join some meetings and lo and behold there's simply not time to do what we really don't want to do!

Avoidance behaviours

Many of us can keep ourselves busy in this way for months on end without ever admitting that these are avoidance behaviours!

We also fail to ask ourselves why those who work in our team should bother eating any frogs themselves when they see that we've left one croaking on our plate for so long!

Spreading ourselves too thin

Dealing with the tough stuff isn't just about creating routines for ourselves that involve us taking this on before we do the "easy stuff".

It also involves us accepting that we often spread ourselves too thin.

We pretend that we have almost limitless energy and then find that something tough comes along requiring extra engagement on our part and we can't get involved because we're already over-extended.

Who puts us in the position where we just don't have time to take on the tough stuff because the diary is already chokka?

Exactly. Another avoidance behaviour on our part!

Our need to be needed

At Leadership Conversations we often discuss our need as leaders to be liked. Many of us also have a need to be needed.

We keep on diving into quite operational work with our teams and then remain stuck in for longer than we intended. If challenged on this, we have at least 101 reasons for why the team love it and how they feel "seen" and affirmed by us.

We're not quite owning our need to be needed, which can so easily result in us spending time on non-essential work.

We're also not asking the team whether they would prefer us to be with them or off sorting out the difficult stuff instead.

Deep down, we know it would be better to eat the frog for tea than leave it on the plate and see it still there the next morning.



"No emails until I've had that difficult conversation"



Chief Energiser

Many of us know that one of our primary responsibilities is to give out energy to those who work to and with us – and keep on giving it out as our remit extends.

To give out energy by the bucket load, we have to **receive it** – and keep on receiving it.

This is why one of the CEOs who was part of this Leadership Conversation said that every morning when she wakes up her resolve is to **do what gives her energy!**

The truth is that the more we put out there, the more we need to worry about how quickly we will be able to replenish our reserve tanks once they have run dry.

It is truly a great gift that we can often draw terrific energy from those who believe that they have been inspired in some way by us.

As they step forward more, so do we feel ourselves re-energised by them.

Our inner critic

In focusing on our leadership roles as Mr or Ms Energiser, we need to own the fact that many of us have a force within us that can nearly paralyse us as leaders by almost strangling our own energy supply.

This is our inner critic, that internal voice that can start going jibber-jabber in one of our ears at what feels like a second's notice and keep up its running commentary of negativity and self-doubt for hours on end!

Sometimes we so want to silence this voice. However, we know that we can't be too ruthless with it because this capacity of ours is an essential part of our self-defence system.

Sometimes it is completely in the right when it gives us an early warning about something and we need to take decisive action!

A time limit

So, how should we handle this internal voice?

Surely the best way is to get it used to the idea that it can have brief moments "in the sun", after which it needs to go quiet again in the knowledge that we have stopped listening!



*"Okay, inner critic,
you have **30 seconds**
starting now!"*



It's a marathon

Some of us view leadership as a sprint. We run hard and keep on running until we have to stop because we're out of beans and are on the verge of falling over.

Then as soon as we've caught our breath we're off again at full pelt, finding it increasingly difficult to hide our irritation from those who ask us to slow down so that they can catch up.

Keeping energy in reserve

Imagine that we see leadership instead as a marathon rather than a sprint. It changes everything, doesn't it?

We have to pace ourselves because we can't afford to be reckless with our energy.

Moreover, if we're running in a team we have to think about our pace in relation to other members of the team.

At times we need to slow down a little so that others can catch up.

At other times, when we build up speed again, we have to keep focused on the amount of the marathon that remains.

We need to keep enough energy in reserve for the final big push.

Number one pace-setter

This reminds us that when we are thinking about achieving our top priorities by the end of 2019, we need to see ourselves as number one pace-setter as well as chief energiser.

We model for others the pace that we hope they will want to follow too.

As they respond to our pace, we pour energy into the process of keeping us together as one team.

We encourage and affirm, sometimes signalling to individual team members that they're better than they think and can run harder.

We also become more intuitive as we learn to gear into their energy better. We don't want to be too far in front because this can be dispiriting for those taking up the rear.

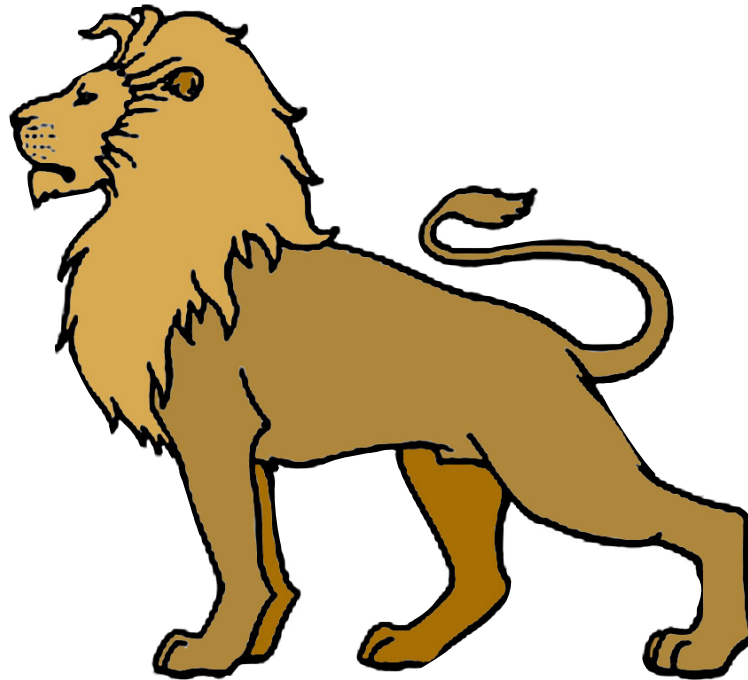
When we slow down for them to catch up, we do so not with resentment but in a spirit of appreciation of what the team has achieved so far.

When we quicken our pace again we are conscious of willing the others on, doing all we can to convey our belief in the ultimate success of the team.

There's one other great benefit of seeing leadership as a marathon.

All marathon runners know that the time spent practising can be **really special "me time"**.





Personal courage

After a plate-bound frog, why the lion, you might wonder?

We know the problem with the frog is its taste!

With the lion, it's very different.

Any encounter with the lion, and we expect it to be terminal within seconds - and distinctly messy, all at our expense.

Why does the lion matter in the context of us achieving our top priorities in 2019?

Because there are all sorts of situations that we fear and so we avoid.

Each time we avoid them, we disempower ourselves more as a leader.

This is why we need to think of our own courage and tell ourselves that we have lots of it within our being.

Once we have told ourselves that our personal courage will enable us to take on that which we fear, we might well be surprised to find the lion metamorphosing into something much less fearsome.

Facing our fear of conflict

So many of us know that achieving our top priorities for 2019 will involve some others feeling threatened by us.

We know that once anyone feels threatened there might well be conflict as they try to stop us from achieving what we want.

For many of us, this seven letter "C word" is a powerful trigger that mobilises our internal avoider big time.

In our mind, we picture ourselves entering a room and the lion sitting there. The frog is no longer on the plate and we are just about to take its place.

Reframing the fear

Suppose we now reframe the fear. If it were a lion in the room, we might take a nice steak for it to eat (and some protection as well!)

If it's just a fierce human, we think of adopting a tone that doesn't play into their fierceness and treats them instead as if they are reasonable.

"I hear you're not very keen on this plan of ours. I'm so keen to understand what is in your mind and whether we can find some creative way of working together over the next few months."

We take control of our fear and show courage at the same time.

As we draw on our courage, we urge ourselves to take the next step forward.

The lion is a pussycat! Ha, what was all the fuss about?

Maybe I won't have to eat that frog tomorrow morning, after all.



"Deep down, I'm a pussycat, really!"