



# As a leader, do I “tone myself down” too much?



From 10.30am until 4.30pm  
on Tuesday, October 29th 2019

**Background Note and Agenda for our 40th Leadership Conversation**

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

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“I know I can be over the top sometimes, which is why every now and again I do tone myself down a bit.

Then some people say I come across as too controlled and not really authentic.

So I tell myself to chill out and just be myself ... and still worry that others are telling each other that I can be a bit OTT.

*I’m wondering if I should just tone myself down – for good!”*

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**Anonymous –**  
*could be one of many leaders*

# 40

## For our 40th Leadership Conversation

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### We will engage with four main questions:

- 1 Are there times when it is **RIGHT** for us to tone ourselves down as leaders?
- 2 If we do so, should we try to minimise the danger of coming across as inauthentic by acknowledging in some way that we are doing this?
- 3 When we tone ourselves down, is there **SOMETHING ELSE** we should be doing as well?
- 4 Are there situations in which we need to tone ourselves **UP** more – and from our experiences, what are the best examples of **WHEN** and **HOW** we should go about toning ourselves up?



**Tuesday, October 29th**

**Vicars' Hall, 10.45am – 1.00pm**

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### **First round of small groups**

After our welcome and introduction to the Society's Guiding Principles, we break into small standing groups for 15 minutes and share our answers to the questions:

- 1 In those moments when we tone ourselves down, which aspect of ourselves as leaders do we feel most unsure about and want to tone down?**
- 2 When we think some more about this aspect of ourselves, what do we think is the real cause of our behaviour?**

*Examples of leadership behaviours that we might want to tone down sometimes:*

- over-talking
- becoming too entrenched in debate too quickly
- appearing over fearful of the idea of taking risks, even when they are relatively controlled
- or the opposite: coming across as excited by the idea of risk-taking even when there is a significant chance of failure.



## Is there another way of handling these situations?

As we discuss your answers, we want to ask ourselves whether there is something else that we **SHOULD** be doing instead, and are **NOT** doing in these moments when we are toning down some aspect of ourselves as a leader.

*Below we give three examples, each of which involves us asking a question to help us avoid toning down our behaviours in a way that simply dilutes the behaviour that we fear might be used against us.*

For example,

- **If I feel that I am compulsively over-talking**, rather than telling myself to stay silent should I try to break this habit by asking a question of someone else so that **THEY** talk instead?
- **If I am highly risk averse**, rather than trying to pretend that I am not should I instead ask someone else how they are justifying the risk to themselves?
- **If I tend to over-attach to a fixed position**, should I make a point of asking someone what they see as the killer weakness of this position – or better still, try to articulate it myself and express some uncertainty about how best to respond to it?

### Question for our next round of small groups:

Once we have opened up this discussion to some degree, we then want to move on and explore this issue from the other end of the spectrum and ask how strong the case might sometimes be for toning ourselves up.

Hence our question for small groups:

- **Is there some aspect of our way of being as a leader that we need to tone UP?**

Please ask yourself if there is something you are already quite good at and would like to get better at – and could usefully **put out there more as a leader**, if you were to focus on developing this aspect of your leadership style.

Once you have identified this,

- **Can you see any unexpected links with the ideas we have already discussed about toning ourselves down?**

As before, when we return from groups we will have a general discussion to draw out the main insights from your answers.

As we do so, we will challenge ourselves – and each other – on how we might become more effective leaders with little need to tone ourselves up or down because we're fairly happy with how we are!



## Tuesday, October 29th

*Vicars' Hall, working lunch from 1.00 – 1.45pm*

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A few minutes before 1.00 we break into new groups of four or five, for a working lunch in the Vicars' Hall.

We will identify a Leadership Fellow to facilitate the discussion at each table and ensure that we keep focused.

Our thinking is that we should ask two key questions over lunch:

- 1 **What is our top personal take-away from this morning's discussions, that we can draw on to improve our understanding of when we should – and shouldn't – tone ourselves down as a leader, and how transparent we should be about this?**
- 2 **Is there similarly a top personal take-away about when we should – and shouldn't - tone ourselves up as a leader?**

The answers that we bring back after our team photo on the West Steps of the Chapel at 1.45pm will have a major impact on how we spend our time between now and our finish time of 4.30.

**The aim is that after lunch we each have:**

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**One top take-away**

*in relation to toning ourselves **DOWN***

**One top take-away**

*in relation to toning ourselves **UP***

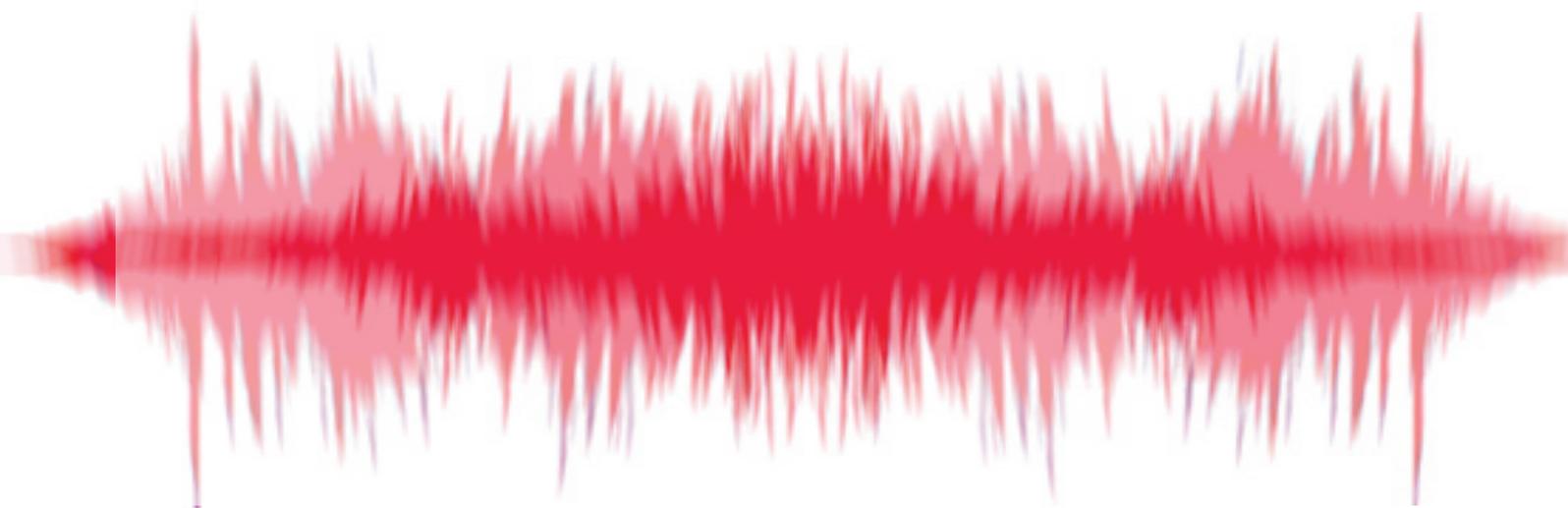
## *Vicars' Hall, 1.50 – 4.30pm: Hearing your top take-aways then refocusing on one or two key challenges*

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Back in a single circle, we hear your top take-aways that you have sharpened up over lunch.

As we go through this discussion, we also want to keep a look out for:

*the one or two issues where we would be up for another burst of collective energy to help us move further forward in our thinking.*



The plan is that after half an hour we will break for another round of small groups to engage with the one or two issues where we need some more creative thinking from us all.

It is key to the success of these Leadership Conversations that during the afternoon discussions we are honest with each other about those issues where we feel we haven't got much further than the level of a soundbite.

This is the key time when we need to pour our shared energies into coming up with some fresh insights.

Then once we are back from groups, we will hear how you have moved forward in your thinking, capturing **key breakthroughs** as we go.

## Asking what we've each learnt from other Fellows

Shortly before 3.30pm we want to start preparing for our final round of groups, when we want to ask you two questions:

- 1 **What is the most useful insight that you take from another Leadership Fellow today and how might you DRAW ON IT to become a better leader?**
- 2 **Can you please develop this idea in some way to offer us SOMETHING EXTRA?**

We then want to hear as many of you as possible answer this before we finish the Conversation on the dot of 4.30pm.

We have only recently introduced these questions for our final round of small groups, and it is really exciting hearing how much we have all learnt from each other.

For the House, these few minutes capture the power of our maxim that whenever we come together as Leadership Fellows we seek to “nurture each other’s wisdom”.

The result gives us a host of significant take-aways by the end. A whole number land in literally the final 15 to 20 minutes, as you will see!



# Key timings

## Tuesday, October 29th 2019

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| <b>10.15am+</b>     | Coffee and light refreshments served in the Vicars' Hall. Please make sure you are with us by <b>10.30</b> to meet other Fellows  |
| <b>10.45am</b>      | We welcome you to the Conversation and invite you to agree on the Society's Guiding Principles as the framework for today's Conversation. We then break into our first round of small groups (questions on page 4)  |
| <b>11.45am(ish)</b> | 2nd round of small groups considers agreed questions (suggestions on page 6). <i>Refreshments available</i>   |
| <b>12.05pm</b>      | Back in the circle, we capture the key messages coming forward from groups. From 12.45 we change gear and begin to think our way into the challenge that we want to consider over lunch   |
| <b>1.00pm</b>       | Lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall. Over lunch, working groups engage with the questions on page 9   |
| <b>1.45pm</b>       | Team pic on the West Steps of St George's Chapel  |
| <b>1.50pm</b>       | We hear your take-aways as a result of your lunchtime discussions and ask what are the one or two key issues where we need another surge of energy to achieve some breakthroughs in our thinking  |
| <b>2.30pm</b>       | New small problem-solving groups (refreshments available)   |
| <b>2.50pm</b>       | Back together again as a single group, we hear your ideas. After half an hour or so we agree the questions for our final round of small groups (page 9) and break into groups at around 3.30. Back again as one group at 3.50 we hear as many of your answers as possible before bringing the Conversation to a close on the dot of <b>4.30pm</b> . |

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**Self-balancing leadership:**



**Realistic or a step too far?**