



Insights arising from our
28th Leadership Conversation



Taking on the Dementors

March 2019



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

Introduction

This Insights report draws on the main themes of our 28th Leadership Conversation that took place on February 25/26 on the topic of “Embracing the challenge of disruptive leadership”.

Through this Conversation we gained some keen insights into the challenges facing disruptive leaders as we seek to sustain the changes in thinking and ways of working that we are looking for.

We also explored some of the barriers that stand in the way of disruptive leaders and the entrenched nature of the opposition that can so easily sap our energies over time.

As we discussed the ways in which some people will seek to resist any disruption to their established ways of working, one Leadership Fellow said,

“They can suck any positivity out of almost any situation, which is why some of us call them the Dementors”.

Suddenly we were all transported back to the world of Harry Potter!

The word stuck and as you will see it offers a way of drawing out the challenges that we face not just from the Dementors out there, in our organisations and the wider systems within which we work, but also from the Dementors within.

This is a theme to which we will return!

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

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Challenging the Dementors



Dementors drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them... Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you.

Extract from a description of Dementors by Remus Lupin, Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

When we think of ourselves as disruptive leaders, so many of us have noble ambitions.

We can see the future that others can't quite see and believe it's our responsibility to share our vision.

We can see compromised standards and inefficiencies in the ways we do things at the moment - and want to change them, fast!

We can see how some of our people could be so much better than they are - and want them to step up now!

We want to help our people, and our organisation, go to the next level - and keep on driving up standards across every aspect of our business.

Whilst we talk the language of positivity and big ideas, we find that many of those around us talk a language of negativity and nit-picking.

We tell ourselves that we need to show resilience and determination.

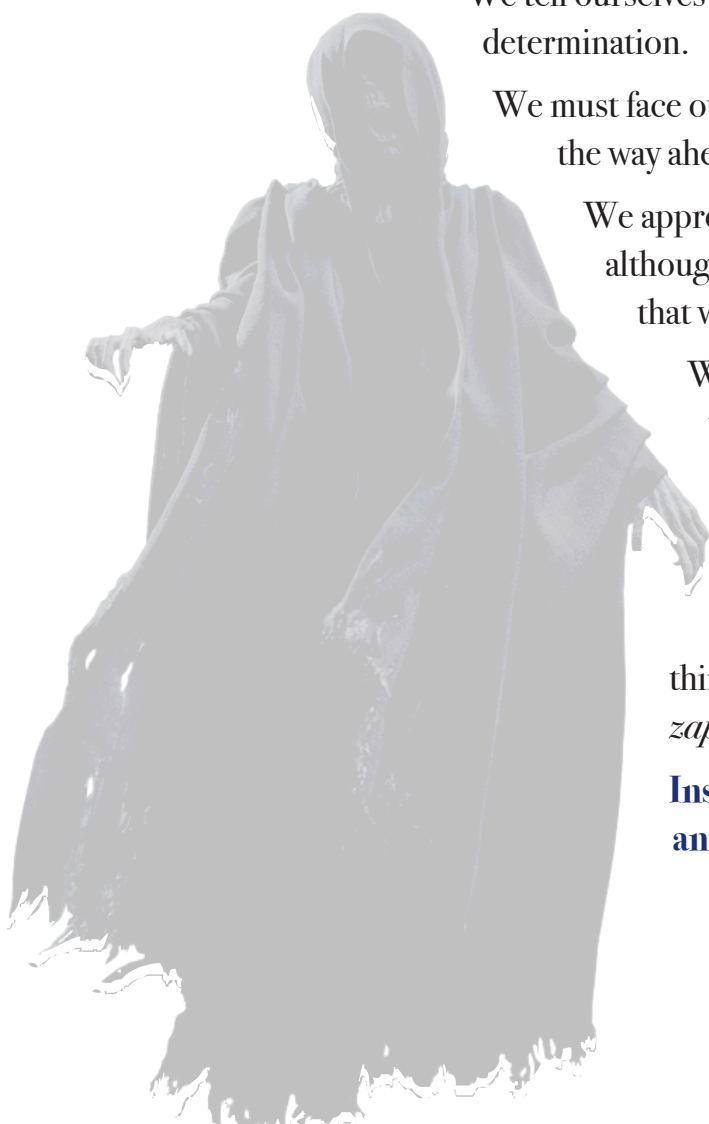
We must face our fears and keep on smiling and pointing the way ahead.

We appreciate it when some come on board, although we're not surprised because we think that what we're proposing is just so obvious.

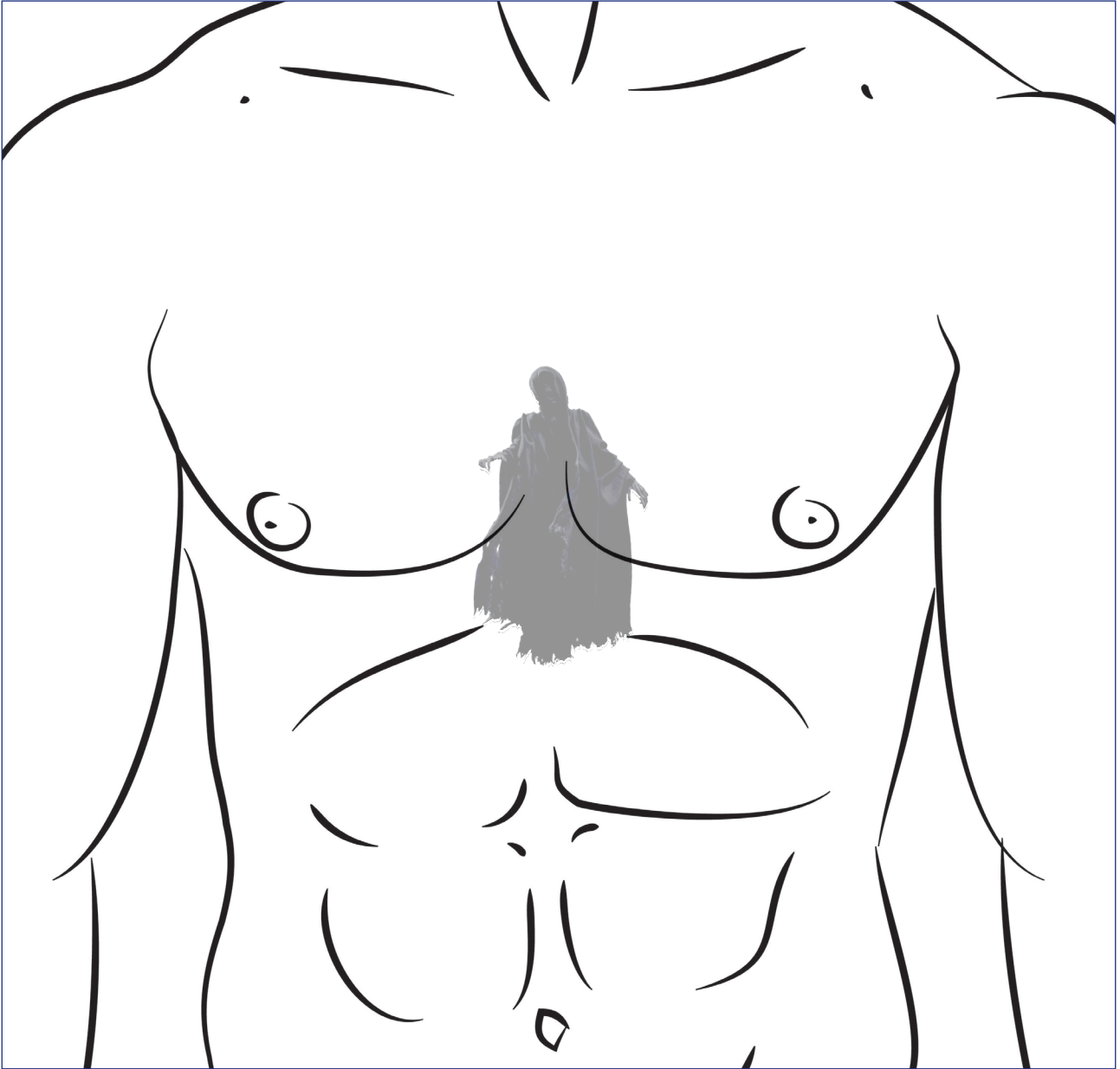
We feel our energy draining away when we encounter the "energy vultures" and "mood hoovers" that seem to delight in telling us why we can't achieve what we want.

"What a bunch of Dementors," we think. "They just don't get it. If only we could zap them!"

Instead, they're zapping us - and our energy.



Facing our inner Dementor



As the Dementors try to block our path and drain our energy, what do we do?

Do we try to persuade and reassure them, constantly appealing to their higher selves?

Or do we tell them to get on the bus **now**?

We haven't got time to wait for them to catch up.

The crisis is here and if they're not on the bus they'll get run over!

One of the things that drives us forward is our sense of **impatience**. In our minds we can sometimes see what will go wrong before it's happened, unless others get into line now.

So we don't apologise for letting this impatience show itself sometimes.

What we tend not to see is the impact this can have on others.

The energy behind our impatience and urgency can become quite overwhelming for them.

This is why they get so bolshy. They think this is their only way of avoiding being flattened by us.

Whilst we might think we gave them time to reflect on the case we put to them, they saw it as tokenistic. We had already made up our minds and then had the cheek to say we wanted their buy-in!

If we're being really honest, we have to admit that we do rather like a crisis. We know that once we've got everyone used to the idea that we need to disrupt old habits in times of crisis, they will soon get used to non-stop disruption. How great is that!

Gosh, they thought they were our Dementor.

Without realising it, **we've become their Dementor!**

Whether it's our impatience, or our variable listening skills, or our reluctance to accept that we are ever wrong, or our so called resilience that can easily turn into bloody-mindedness.... whatever it might be, we can become rather 'Dementorish' when we don't get what we want.

Do we acknowledge our inner Dementors?

Hardly ever.

Finding our own Patronus



Those who are followers of Harry Potter will know about the importance of the Patronus as a guardian for wizards and witches against the Dementors.

Different wizards have their own Patronus: Harry's (above) is a stag, Hermione's is an Otter and Ron's is a Jack Russell Terrier.

The wonderful thing about these silver animals is that **they can not feel despair**. This is why they can see off the Dementors.

Just imagine yourself, as a disruptive leader, having the capacity to protect yourself from ever coming close to despair.

It wouldn't only protect you from the external Dementors. It would protect you from your inner Dementor, too.

How many of us own our inner Dementor? Not many. Strange, isn't it, because we know that the strengths of any leader can quickly turn "dark" when they take them a little too far.

What we tend not to see is how this works at the level of energy – and especially our own energy.

Precisely what the Dementors out there do is to sap our energy.

This is why so many disruptive leaders will talk of how they have experienced exhaustion and burn-out.

So often our response is to mirror what is happening to us and strike out at the energy sappers.

In some ways, this is no surprise.

What **is** a surprise is the extent to which we don't take responsibility for the fact that we're doing this.

The great irony is that when we ourselves become energy sappers, we are doing the opposite of what we claim to be doing as disruptive leaders.

Some disruptive leaders will talk of how our role is to **free up energy** where it has become blocked in the inner workings of an organisation.

Others will talk of how our role is to **turn negative energy into positive energy**.

What we **don't** talk nearly enough about is how we might protect ourselves from the despair that begins to take us over when the blockers and resisters and underminers – and all of the other sorts of Dementors that are out there – respond to our passion and vision with cynicism and indifference.

What many of us tend to do in the face of these external Dementors is to become less tolerant and more impatient.

We continue to talk the language of inclusivity and collaboration, whilst entrenching and drawing on our inner Dementor to get into a tussle with the external Dementors that are instilling in us a sense of despair.



Finding our own Patronus

If we were to picture ourselves as having our own Patronus, we would be more likely to protect our own energy and keep well away from any counsel of despair.

We would **engage more** with the refuseniks and dissidents, and share with them more of the case for the disruption that we seek.

We would be open to adjusting our timetable for delivery, to some degree at least, and maybe even rethinking some aspect of our core proposition as part of a process of real negotiation.

We would want to **reassure** those who are concerned and fearful that all will be fine and we will be alongside them as we go through the change process together.

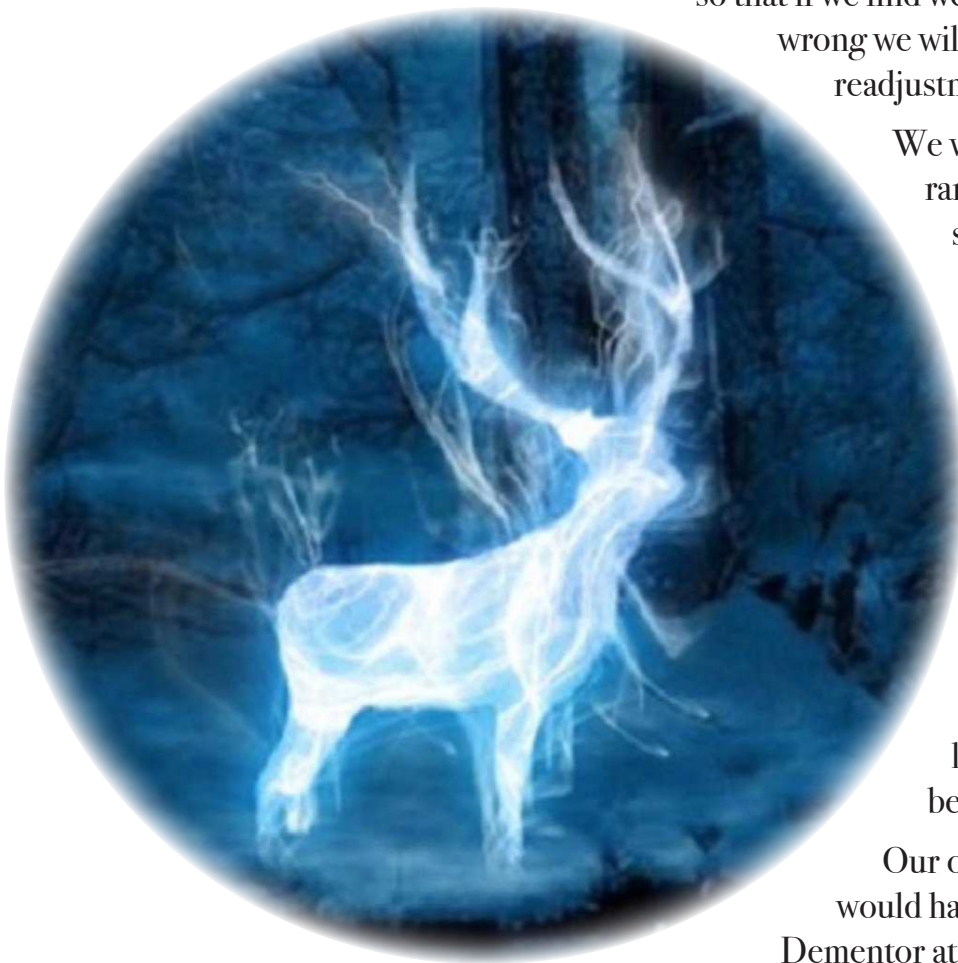
We would build up the confidence of our people, telling them that we respect their fears and will constantly review our plans as we move forward, so that if we find we've got some things wrong we will be able to make rapid readjustments.

We would draw on the full range of our leadership skills, and our personal humanity, to ensure that everyone feels listened to and seen.

Our bottom line would be that there's no room for despair on this bus.

It's this more than anything else that would enable us to leave all the Dementors behind at the bus stop.

Our own inner Patronus would have kept our inner Dementor at bay too.



Wizards
Way

**Dementors
Queue on
the left**

**No wands
on the bus**

*I was about to get
on and this bloke
Patronus said
there's no room!*

