



Insights arising from our
29th Leadership Conversation

Flying pigs & thought leadership

March 2019



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

Introduction

This Insights report draws on the main themes of our 29th Leadership Conversation that took place on March 14 2019 on the topic of “Becoming more effective as a thought leader”.

As always, this Conversation proved to be fascinating, not least because of the personal stories that some of our Leadership Fellows shared with each other. We continue to witness levels of trust among Fellows reaching new heights, and so appreciate the natural openness and depth of curiosity that Fellows bring to these Conversations.

Through this Conversation, we shared some real excitement about the idea of developing our roles as thought leaders who “bring others into spaces they wouldn’t have got into on their own”.

To achieve this, it’s incredibly important that we don’t seek to do others’ thinking for them and instead draw on our passion and curiosity to support them in **developing themselves** as ideas generators and thought leaders.

As you will see from the next few pages, the theme of fear was powerful at this Conversation. With it came some fresh insights into the importance of **owning our fears as leaders**, as part of the process of achieving a deeper connection with those whom we seek to influence.

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You don't
have to think -

*I'll do that
for you!*

Making clear that we don't see ourselves as gurus!

We know that when some people conjure up the image of a thought leader they bring to mind some some sort of guru figure.

No thanks! The idea of the thought leader who says to their people that they will spare them the burden of having to think for themselves is not for us.

We say this because some of us feel that over the years too many thought leaders have been seen to have only one mode, and that's their **transmission mode**.

There have been too many statements starting with *"My position is..."* and not enough of

- *"I think this because ... and I would love to hear what you think, on the basis that I am always open to moving on in my thinking".*

This is why our starting point is that thought leadership should involve **the two modes of transmit and receive**.

If you disagree, let's of course discuss it!



Inspiring others to rethink what is possible

How often do we challenge a team to think about doing something differently from the way they've done it in the past, only to see someone looking back at us as if to say "*pigs will fly before **that** changes round here*"?

So often people can meet our challenge to rethink what is possible with a look of disbelief and incredulity. We need to be ready to remind them that part of our role as leaders is to drive through change, without being put off by those who have become too comfortable with the status quo.

This requires us to show real courage and vulnerability in those situations where people respond to our ideas with defeatism, and sometimes cynicism.

Rather than getting into an emotional lock about who is right or wrong, it is generally so much more effective if we capture once again the **case for change** and ask them to engage with the argument.

We mustn't just go along with them behaving like a commentator offering odds on who is going to come out on top in the latest office "power struggle"- or which pig might make it into the sky!

Engaging with those who are “comfortably numb”

The challenges facing thought leaders don't just come from articulate cynics.

In fact, if we draw them out and are seen to honour their arguments, we can often look back on their inputs as positive - and very important for enabling us to sharpen up key choices that have to be made.

There is another group of staff that is often larger and quite a bit more problematic. They are the ones who tend to be “comfortably numb”.

They say as little as possible because they don't want to engage.

Their position is that as leaders we're paid a lot more than them so we should get on and do what we're paid to do.

Once we know what we want them to do, we should tell them - and if they don't like it, they reserve the right to tell us then.

Why should they engage with us now?

This isn't their problem, thank you very much!





This is SCARY stuff!

So what should we do about it?

We know we have the professional sceptics to engage with, as well as the diehard cynics - and of course the comfortably numb.

Many of them wouldn't mind at all if we came along and said that we want to do their thinking for them. In fact some of them would rather prefer us in this "transmit only" mode, since they would have the added bonus of being able to blame us when things go wrong.

Yet we want to give out the message that we're keen to try some ideas out on them. We really want to know their views and grow some new ideas together - and we're not confident that on our own we've got it right.

In fact, there are some aspects of the discussion where we're genuinely **unsure** about the best way ahead, and in these areas we want to share our concerns before asking them to help develop our shared thinking.

We look around the room at the sea of faces.

Restless curiosity? Hardly any sign of that. General boredom more like.

This is scary, and getting scarier by the minute. Beam me up, Scotty!



Recognising that we're not the only one feeling fear

So many leaders will be familiar with this moment, when our sense of being scared expresses itself through a stomach pain, or a chest pain, followed by a sense of nausea.

In these moments when we feel fear, many leaders come across as rather **cold and detached**.

This is our way of trying to protect ourselves in a situation where we feel vulnerable and exposed.

Understandable though this might be, responding in this way serves no-one.

Just think: you have almost certainly spent longer thinking about what you want to say than anyone else in the room.

You also have the authority and leadership position that others don't have. And despite all of this you still feel fearful.

So how do you think some of the others are feeling?

If we can't own our fear, how can anyone else be expected to own theirs?

Owning our fear - and sharing our story

So many people still seem to believe that a thought leader needs to keep a certain **distance** from those we are seeking to influence.

Yet the reality is that those who don't particularly want to hear what we have to say are the ones keeping their distance from us.

So our role as thought leaders needs to be to reach across these gaps and create some sort of **connection** that feels real, and honest, from both sides.

Often the most effective way of doing this is to offer a personal story that demonstrates **why** the ideas that we want to share are so important to us.

The story makes us real. It creates a bridge that enables those who can't quite connect with us to leave behind their disengaged judgmentalism and move towards us.

As part of being real, why not own our fear?

We're almost certainly not the only ones feeling fear, and in owning ours we might make it easier for others to own theirs.

Just the fact of owning our fear makes it less menacing for us, too.



"These aren't just abstract ideas and nice sounding words. They change people's lives. Let me share with you something from my story..."



Pouring in passion and then building confidence

Once we have achieved a real connection with the group, it is our personal passion that enables us to bring to life a discussion about ideas.

Our passion makes it possible for those involved to see how the ideas that we are exploring really do **matter** to us. It also drives us in another respect, too, in helping us to sharpen up the key questions that we want to raise with the group on issues where we are genuinely seeking their inputs and ideas.

Just as we pour our passion into the framing of questions, so is it important not to withdraw it when we are engaging with how people respond. For every member of the group who engages with what we ask and shares some personal reflection, we need to respond with **genuine appreciation**.

Thought leaders who fail to build the confidence of groups that they work with have little chance of drawing on their insights to enhance the quality of the ideas they raise with them.

This is why it's so important to recognise that truly empowering thought leaders are also confidence-builders at many different levels.



Stirring the “comfortably numb”

Going back to our title of *Flying pigs and thought leadership*, it's worth reflecting that the image of flying pigs seems to work in two ways.

On one level, it captures the **profound scepticism** that so many choose to let themselves feel when we go to them, as thought leaders, and talk on the basis that change is possible - and is more likely to happen if those of us in the room get behind it.

All of the shared insecurities and sense of collective disempowerment of groups and teams are captured through the gut reaction that *"pigs will fly before we make any difference round here"*.

The image works on another level too.

It is sometimes tempting to believe that pigs will be seasoned fliers before some thought leaders have developed a strong receive mode as well as their transmit mode!

One Leadership Fellow said that some thought leaders still prefer to be in the guru-like mode of **"transmission imposition"**, and he had a point!

Rather than wanting to connect with those they are talking to, all these thought leaders really want is for others to say, *"I agree, you're right!"*

Leaders who can say that they are feeling nervous, and uncertain in opening up a discussion in which they don't know all of the answers to their questions, demonstrate a level of **humility** that is instantly reassuring.

They offer an unexpected degree of vulnerability, which makes it possible for others to risk being vulnerable with them.

This is one of the very few things that can stir the "comfortably numb" and make them open to engaging with an open-minded thought leader.



This might not be as exciting as witnessing flying pigs, but for thought leaders committed to making a difference it's a great second best!

