Society of Leadership Fellows,
St George's House

Nurturing Wisdom

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Volume

4

March 2019

Introduction

Volume 4 of Nurturing Wisdom brings together the Insights reports inspired by eight Leadership Conversations convened by the Society of Leadership Fellows at St George's House, Windsor Castle between September 2018 and March 2019.

We are immensely grateful to those Fellows who joined these Conversations (numbers 22 to 29 in our series) and shared the insights captured in the pages that follow.

The Chapter headings in the Executive Summary over the next three pages are hyperlinked, so that Leadership Fellows can quickly dip into any part of the document and draw on it to support you in your ongoing development as leaders.

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March 2019

Executive Summary

Under the eight Chapter headings below we summarise their key themes.

Please click on the heading to take you straight to the Chapter of your choice.

1 Integrity in Leadership

This Chapter captures the key insights arising from our 2018 Gathering for Leadership Fellows and a one-day Leadership Conversation the following day.

The Gathering coincided with the 17th Anniversary of 9/11, which led us to draw out some powerful insights that we took into the Conversation the following day. We explored the exceptional difficulty of using the word integrity in a work setting when the context is one in which we are challenging someone about a possible compromise to their integrity. This led us to come up with a "big idea" that is set out in this Chapter.
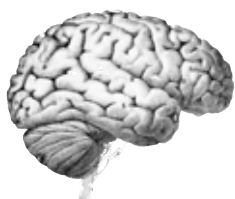
2 Pre-Mortems, Night Brains & Running Hares

Draws out some of the key ideas coming out of our January 2019 Leadership Conversation on "Think, Reflect, Act – getting the balance right".

Argues that there should be a "shift in the pendulum from post-mortems to pre-mortems" with teams assessing their capabilties in relation to future ambitions. Also tells the story of how some Leadership Fellows draw on their "night brain" to solve key challenges that are worrying them and warns of the dangers of setting too many hares running through sharing half-baked ideas.

3 Creative Conflict

Captures the key insights arising from our November 2018 Leadership Conversation on "Managing conflict to maximise creativity".
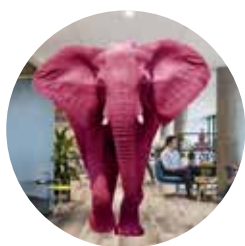
The Chapter sets out 12 challenges to support Leadership Fellows in steering leadership teams through processes of creative conflict. They acknowledge the very high level of preparation and conscious engagement that creative conflict requires of leaders, not least because of the powerful reactions that many of us have towards the term "conflict".

Executive Summary

4   Raising our game as leaders in 2019

Draws out 10 key insights and propositions arising from our December 2018 Leadership Conversation on "Achieving your top priorities in 2019".

Argues that for many of us our overall challenge is to do with our mindset and in particular our readiness to be more generous-spirited in our judgements of ourselves as leaders. Instead of leading to complacency, this should enable us to be tougher on ourselves and stretch those around us more.

5   Priorities, frogs, marathons and lions

This Chapter follows on from the previous one and reflects the outcomes of a Conversation a few weeks into the year on the theme of achieving our key priorities by year end.

It identifies four challenges faced by leaders committed to achieving key priorities: doing the tough stuff first ("eat the frog"); stepping up to the role of chief energiser, viewing leadership more as a marathon than a sprint and constantly drawing on and building our personal courage.

6   Taking on the Dementors

This draws on the main themes of an overnight Conversation in February 2019 on embracing the challenge of disruptive leadership.

It argues that many disruptive leaders can find their energy drained in the face of constant resistance and negativity, in the same sort of way that the Dementors drained the energy of the wizards in Harry Potter. It explains how easy it is for leaders to take on some of these Dementorish behaviours ourselves, and explores how we might project greater positivity and reassurance as disruptive leaders.

Executive Summary

7 Flying Pigs & Thought Leadership

Draws on the main themes of a one-day Conversation in March 2019 on becoming more effective as a thought leader.

The Chapter explores how we might best develop our roles as thought leaders who inspire others to rethink what is possible. This involves us developing a significant connection with them, often through sharing our personal story. The report also explores how we should manage our fear in these moments, and argues that when we feel able to own our fears this makes it easier for others to own theirs.

8 Stretching ourselves as leaders

Captures the key insights arising from a Leadership Conversation that took place in October 2018 on "Stretching our top talent".

The Chapter sets out a wide range of aspects of "stretch leadership", as a way of releasing talent and driving up team performance. It breaks down a 30-point "stretch programme" under three main headings: stretching ourselves as leaders, stretching our teams and creating a stretch culture. This was one of our most fascinating Leadership Conversations since the start of the series in 2016.

CHAPTER 1

Insights arising from our
2018 Gathering for Leadership Fellows
and our 22nd Leadership Conversation

Integrity in Leadership

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

Introduction

This Chapter draws on the main themes of our Leadership Conversation on Integrity in Leadership that took place on September 12th 2018, following a Gathering for Leadership Fellows in the Chapel on the same theme on the previous evening.

The Gathering fell on the 17th Anniversary of 9/11, which is why we chose this theme as a way of reflecting on some of the enduring challenges that leaders face all these years after that awful day that changed the world for ever.

We start the Chapter with extracts from inputs by two Leadership Fellows that opened up the hour-long "mini Conversation" that took place in the Quire. During the subsequent discussion a number of Fellows shared some powerful personal stories about the challenges that they have faced over the years to their integrity as leaders.

One of the key messages that we took away from our discussions on both days was that it can require immense personal courage to take one's stand on an issue of integrity.

Following the Gathering in the Quire, a number of Leadership Fellows commented on the very high levels of openness and mutual trust that we have developed with each other since the House set up the Society in 2016.

This really means the world to us. It has helped to make possible some of the personal breakthroughs in thinking that a wide range of Fellows have experienced across different Leadership Conversations and are evident throughout all eight chapters in this fourth volume of Nurturing Wisdom.

"*Aside from the flesh that clothes your bones, integrity is all you have.*"

"Without integrity, who are you? What are you for? It is actually all you have. So don't trade it, don't sell it cheap, don't push down your conscience when it's telling you an inconvenient truth. Act from your integrity. Because if you lose your integrity, you lose yourself."

Steve Drummond

Leadership Fellow and former Chief Executive of CO2e.com, a joint venture with Cantor Fitzgerald that ran the world's first online carbon trading platform.

Steve's team worked on the 101st floor of One World Trade Centre. His joint CEO and all but one of the team died on 9/11.

"*Building integrity is our best defence against future darkness.* "

" *9/11 mirrored back to us our vulnerabilities as a society. We forever lost a sense of collective invulnerability that day. But rather than attempting to treat our vulnerabilities as deadly weaknesses, we need to own them collectively at every level, as building integrity is our best defence against future darkness.*

Our very vulnerability is the path to authentic connection – and that connection lead us to higher integrity in our decisions, our behaviours and our ability to see and experience others' perspectives. It's in those messy places that we as leaders can hone our empathy, our ethics and our moral compasses, and thus allow others to see and experience who we truly are. "

Sarah Kling
International Leadership Fellow

"If you lose your integrity, you lose yourself"

This was a powerful phrase of Steve's, wasn't it.

As we discussed in the Conversation in the Quire, there are moments when we might have to pay a heavy price for not "losing ourselves".

We might find that we keep our integrity and lose our job instead.

In these moments, we need to draw on courage deep within our being to be able to act according to what our integrity tells us to do.

It's not ALWAYS "all or nothing"

At the same time, we need to be careful not to view integrity in terms of these "all or nothing" moments.

For many of us, the main times when our integrity is challenged can not be described as life-changing moments.

Rather, we tend to compromise our integrity in one of those many **"grey zones"** in life, when we don't really see ourselves as facing a fundamental decision that will determine the sort of person that we are.

So we let ourselves come up with an argument in our head (such as not wanting to upset someone else, or create an unnecessary "drama") to justify why we are not doing what we know to be the right thing.

"An inconvenient truth"

This is why, for so many of us, the threat to our integrity comes through lots of small compromises, when - to use another powerful phrase of Steve's - we **"push down our conscience"** because it's telling us "an inconvenient truth".

In these grey zones, vulnerability can help a lot

This is the real challenge that we need to engage with if we are to lead with high integrity.

Part of the answer as to **how** we might best engage with it comes in the quote from Sarah's speech.

Her argument was about how our vulnerability enables us to achieve a real **connection** with others that makes possible a dialogue about upholding our integrity in those many areas of our lives shaded grey.

Creating a "bridge"

Through making ourselves vulnerable, it becomes possible to create a "bridge" from which it is easier to challenge others in a non-confrontational way about the choices that they face, in what Sarah described as a "messy place".

We do so by sharing **why** we empathise with the option that would involve a certain compromise to their – and our – integrity.

From this starting point of empathy, we can then explain why we think this would be wrong.

Vulnerability builds trust

Instead of confronting them with the wrongness of their proposed action, we manage to **engage** with their line of thinking and explain why we are nevertheless drawn to a different conclusion.

It is this vulnerability that builds trust.

This trust then makes it so much easier for others to back off from a position that could have resulted in them losing another "small bit" of their integrity.

The quest for wholeness

How consistent are we?

At our June Conversation on Leading with Integrity (written up in Chapter One of Volume 3 of Nurturing Wisdom) we spent some time discussing the various meanings of integrity, one of which is "the state of being whole and undivided".

Reminding ourselves of this some three months later, we asked how much we seek to live our integrity as leaders in a way that is "whole" and **consistent** across our personal and professional lives as leaders.

Our instinct was to **want** to be consistent.

Yet as we opened up this discussion, we realised that there are fundamental differences in the ways in which we engage with our own integrity in our personal and professional lives.

Personal support and challenge groups

A number of us have personal support and challenge groups comprising close friends we have known well for years.

Sometimes we bring them together for a meal every few months or so, and at other times we ask for their advice on a one-to-one basis.

Many of us working in this way have invited and encouraged these close friends to be **tough** in the feedback that they give us.

They have a good instinct for how much radical candour we can take before we become defensive, and we know how tough we can expect each of them to be with us.

Most important, perhaps, we all know that any criticism of us compromising our integrity as leaders is coming from close friends who we **invited** to be critical.

A key insight

In work situations it is very different, and it is this difference that gave rise to one of the key insights that came out of this Conversation.

In a work setting, we are bound to feel much more **threatened** if a colleague dares to challenge our integrity.

If such a challenge comes uninvited, it immediately raises the concern that they might have shared this with others before raising it with us.

Should such a challenge be allowed to stand, and become the "word on the street", then we know that it could potentially be career-limiting.

One of the greatest barriers in the way of our progression as a leader would be the idea that we have questionable integrity.

"Are WE doing the right thing?"

Hence our insight that whenever we want to challenge others at work about their integrity, **integrity is one of the last words that we should use!**

Instead, any challenges about integrity in relationships at work should be set more in the context of *"Are WE doing the right thing?"*

This is sufficiently unthreatening to make it possible for us to say some tough things without others feeling pushed into a hyper defensive position.

If they still choose to interpret this as an attack on them personally, it is much easier to say, *"But my challenge was to **all of us**, myself included"*.

Integrity is one of the last words that we should use!

Initiating difficult conversations

To lead with integrity, we need to be able to initiate difficult conversations with colleagues at work in which we ask tough questions, such as:

● Are we too defensive - or self-aggrandising - in the ways in which we present ourselves to others?

● Are we sometimes too "economical with the truth", in the ways in which we present disappointing results and poor performance to our Board/ senior colleagues/ shareholders and customers?

● Do we really acknowledge a higher loyalty to the truth, in our dealings with each other and the outside world?

● What are those lasting values that we see as being at the heart of our working practices, and how do we engage with others when we see them breaching these values in some way?

Not putting ourselves on a pedestal

However courageous we might be, we can all have only so many difficult conversations.

Moreover, if we appear to appoint ourselves as the moral conscience of our team or organisation we are likely to create resentment.

We could so easily be seen as putting ourselves on a pedestal and appearing to regard ourselves as better than others, as we deem their behaviours to fall short in some way.

How can we avoid being seen as self-righteous and yet still manage to keep focused on promoting and modelling high integrity behaviours?

Time for the big idea!

In trying to answer this question we came up with our "big idea"!

As so often happens with big ideas, we used some familiar language from another part of our lives and moved it across to this part.

A good number of us were distinctly excited about the idea of taking this forward.

As you will see, it is capable of being adapted and customised in all sorts of ways.

Create a Mastermind group

The group's mission

- To mastermind a new strategy for us to behave and perform at our very best, through

  - **Asking** what behaviours we need to adopt towards each other to achieve higher levels of truthfulness and transparency to enable us to become a truly outstanding organisation

  - **Stress testing** our vision of this high integrity, high transparency culture in relation to our current culture and ways of working, asking what we would need to change to move significantly closer to this vision.

A protected zone for free thinking

The experience of being a part of this Mastermind group would need to feel **very different** from the experience of being part of one of those formal committees and planning groups that can make many leaders roll their eyes when the very phrase is mentioned.

The Mastermind group would be seen as non-bureaucratic and creative, and **fearless** in drawing out any "inconvenient truths".

Everyone invited to join the group would regard it – genuinely – as a zone for free thinking where just about anything can be said in the knowledge that it will be received positively.

Like all good Mastermind groups, the emphasis would be on peer-to-peer support and mentoring.

Everyone involved would feel a sense of shared purpose, as well as a common commitment to **being themselves.**

Six possible ground rules
for your Mastermind group

❶

In this space, we are all equal

❷

We leave our egos outside the door

❸

Who said what is never shared with others

❹

We speak our truth to each other

❺

**We never seek to impose our
views on anyone else**

❻

**Whenever we are critical, we
talk of "we" - not you or they**

A catalyst for culture change

Stress testing your vision for tomorrow

A Mastermind group working along these lines could become a powerful catalyst for culture change, stress testing your vision for the future against the realities of today, as an organisation always committed to "doing the right thing".

Reaching out across the organisation

Such a group should be careful to reach out across the organisation and draw in the ideas of staff at all levels:

- Putting to them your vision for how you would like to behave towards each other in an organisation that always seeks to do the right thing, and

- Drawing out their candid views about what they regard as genuinely achievable.

Longer-term culture change

By the end of this stress-testing exercise, you should have:

- A shared understanding of how much stress your current culture can accommodate as you seek to move towards your shared vision

- Some powerful insights into the longer-term culture change that you need to promote to underpin your wider ambitions as a high integrity, high performing organisation.

A high integrity, high performing organisation

The best brains of the organisation
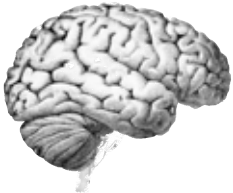
The Chief Executive must be seen to be personally committed to the success of the Mastermind group.

Before its first meeting, there needs to be an expectation that it will include the best brains of the organisation.

An informal think tank

For the Mastermind group to be truly radical and challenging, it needs to see itself as an **informal** think tank.

A Mastermind group should never be seen as a rival to formal decision-making processes.

This is why, after the group has done its work and disbanded, it should be the Chair who takes away the outcomes and shares their recommendations with the Board and top team.

Once they have decided which ones they wish to make their own, they need to take them forward with a sense of purpose and pace.

Raising the bar

If they truly lead a top performing organisation, they will be ready at some stage in the future to "raise the bar" that bit higher as an organisation that regards the integrity of its people as one of the keys to its success.

Time for another Mastermind group

Then it might well be time for another Mastermind group to stress test the organisation's latest ambitions against its established culture and working practices.

Knowing when to take our stand

A Mastermind group could do much to support an organisation in opening up difficult debates, in a relatively unthreatening way, about those behaviours that are compromising the integrity of individuals and detracting from the core values of the organisation.

At the same time, Mastermind groups won't spare us from our own responsibility as leaders for deciding whether to speak up in response to something happening that we believe to be wrong.

- Do we risk upsetting others by saying *"I think we might be about to do the wrong thing here"*?

- **Or** do we let the moment pass on the basis that it's not such a big deal, and life is too short to kick up a fuss every time we find ourselves in a situation where the standards of integrity being applied aren't quite as high as we would like them to be?

Asking the "pokey questions"

One Leadership Fellow said that we all have our own **"internal GPS tracker"** and if we paid more attention to that we would be in a better position to ask the "pokey questions" that are so important to flushing out questionable practices as soon as they present themselves.

This is why, in so many ways, the struggle for higher integrity organisations takes place in the "shades of grey".
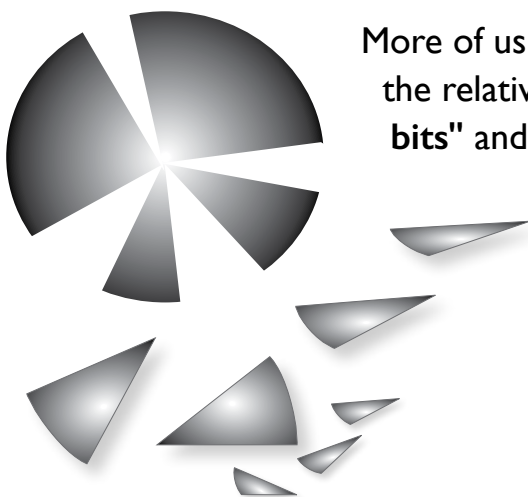
More of us need to take a stand more often in relation to the relatively small things that could well cost us **"small bits"** and **"crumbs"** of our integrity.

Courage mixed in with anger

Otherwise, if we say nothing and subsequently find ourselves confronted by some "big decision" that we have to oppose, it is no surprise that our courage will be mixed in with a large dose of anger.

Part of this anger might well stem from the fact that we failed to challenge at any time building up to that decision.

We are now unable to challenge from a clear position of principle, because we are already heavily compromised as a result of our own inaction on all those occasions when we said to ourselves,

● *"We'll let it go, it's not such a big deal".*

Postponing the day of reckoning

In these moments when we let something go, we might have been postponing the day of reckoning.

If and when that day comes, we could well find that the anger we are projecting onto others is anger also meant for **ourselves**.

For we know that we are now in a corner and feeling distinctly disempowered as a leader, because of the previous times when we failed to speak out.

No single right way

These issues are **hard** and there is no single right way of leading with integrity.

At the same time, this challenge of **knowing when to take our stand** seems to be the right one on which to end this note.

It is one that we all need to grapple with as part of our commitment to integrity in leadership.

CHAPTER 2

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Pre-mortems, night brains & running hares

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This second Chapter reflects the insights gained through a Leadership Conversation in January 2019 on the theme of "Think, Reflect, Act – getting the balance right".

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

It is 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 Chapter heading, we have also changed the title to stir your curiosity that much more!
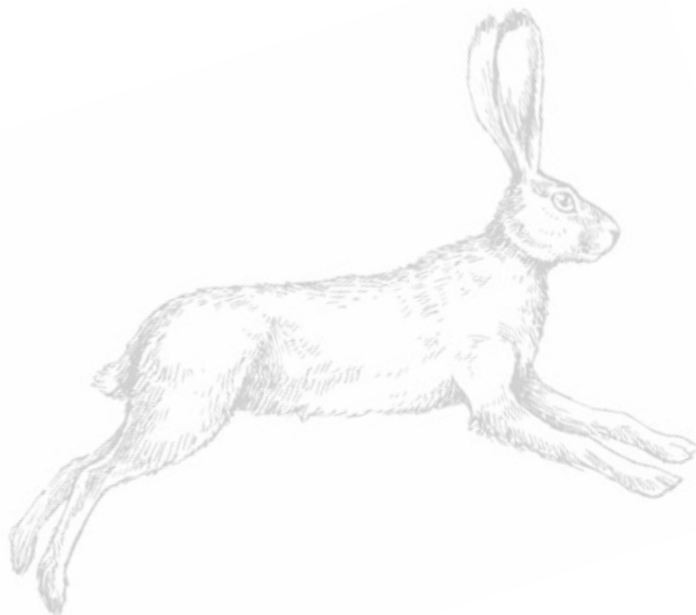
Shifting the pendulum – from post-mortems to pre-mortems

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.

PAST FAILURE   FUTURE AMBITION
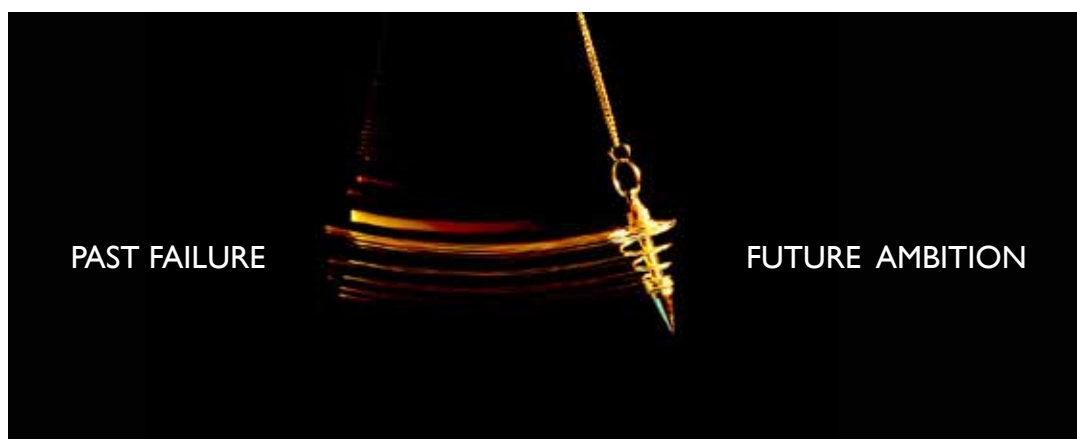
"Okay, brain, here's your starter for ten …"

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.

Meeting room ☞

No baggage

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!

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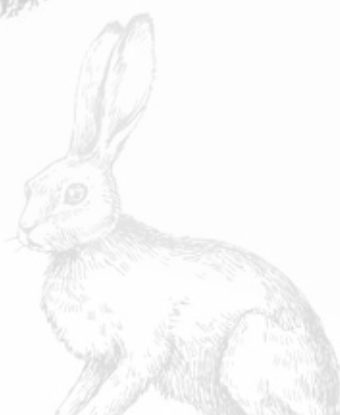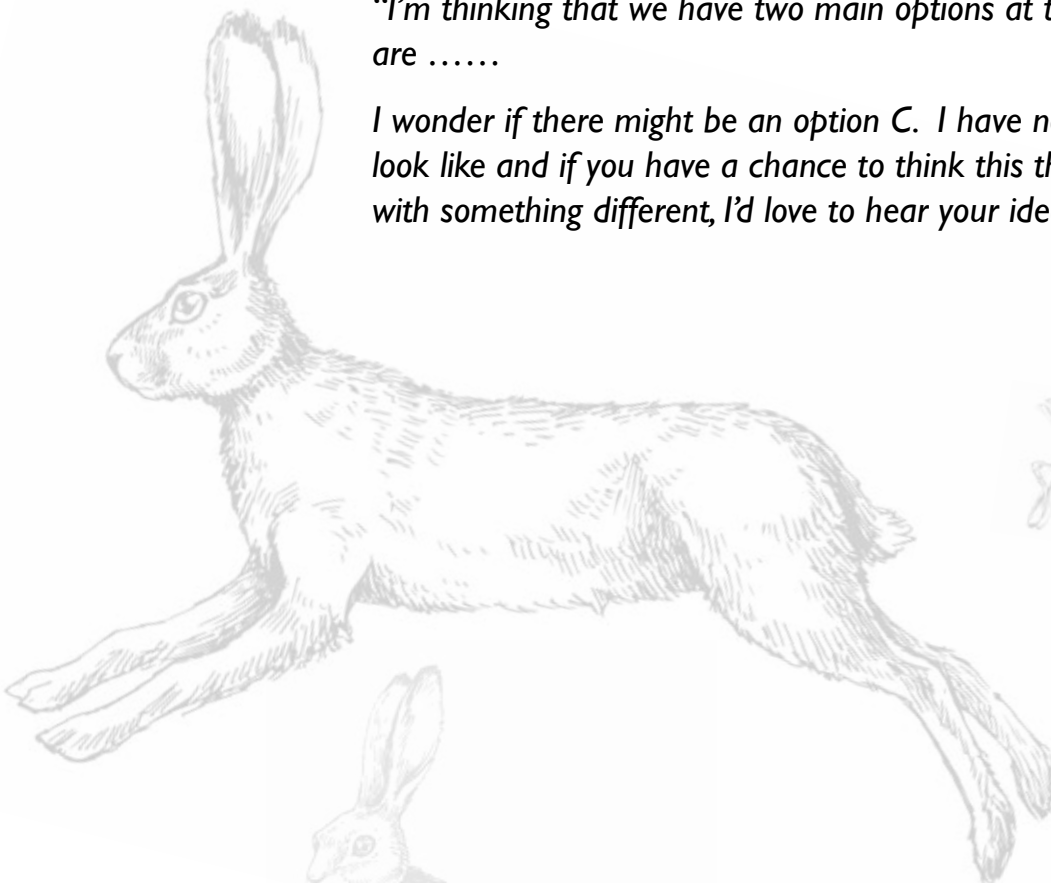
6 Thirty minutes personal reflection time at the end of the day?

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:

30:00

DAILY REFLECTION TIME

*"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!"*

CHAPTER 3

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Creative Conflict

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This Chapter draws on the main themes of a Leadership Conversation that took place in November 2018 on the theme of "Managing Conflict to Maximise Creativity".

Through our discussions we appreciated what powerful reactions many of us have towards the term "conflict" and why some of us are deeply conflict-averse.

We ended up with a strong sense of our responsibility as leaders to help reassure those who are fearful of conflict, for whatever reason, and to commit greater time and energy to thinking through how we might steer our leadership teams through processes of creative conflict.

To this end, the Chapter sets out 12 challenges to support Leadership Fellows in considering how best to develop this role.

Taken together, these challenges remind us that creative conflict requires a very high level of preparation and conscious engagement on the part of leaders.

So long as leaders are willing to make this commitment, the prize – both in terms of outcomes and the quality of working relationships - can be immense.

Leading a process of creative conflict

12 challenges for myself as a leader

1   How prepared am I, psychologically?

2   How can I help to make conflict okay?

3   Should we agree some "team rules"?

4   How can I introduce some fun into the process?

5   What should I do if someone "pushes one of my buttons"?

6   Should I call people out on unhelpful behaviours?

7   What should I say if someone starts digging a trench?

8   Have I got a handle on my "inner peacemaker"?

9   How do I avoid getting ambushed by a "sniper"?

10   Am I okay about the "right ending" not always being a happy one?

11   How should I handle my internal "post-mortem"?

12   How aware am I of my "swings"?

How prepared am I, psychologically?

You're leading a discussion with your Board, or your Executive team or a group of partners. How can you best prepare for this?

Some people say *"I'm sorted out, I've read the papers"*.

That's fine. And we take that for granted. What we mean is how prepared are you **psychologically?**

How much discussion have you had in **your head** about how you feel about conflict and how you're going to handle this with the group?

If you're not keen on conflict, as is true for many of us, the last thing you want to do is pretend that you're chilled about it.

If you appear to give the message *"bring it on"*, it won't convince anyone, least of all yourself.

Making a connection with everyone in the room

Some of us find it incredibly helpful just to have 3 or 4 minutes on our own shortly before the meeting, thinking of the faces of everyone who will be joining us.

In our minds, we need to make a connection with each of them before they walk into the room.

We know that those who are conflict-averse will almost certainly need some reassurance from us, once we begin to have some disagreement, that it is all fine and necessary.

During these few minutes, we have the space to get clearer in our minds about what we're going to say right at the beginning to **set the right tone and put everyone at their ease.**

2 How can I help to make conflict okay?

Before you start you need to be clear about the words you want to use right at the beginning to make clear that in your view:

- Conflict is often **necessary** to tackle key strategic challenges

- Whenever we disagree there needs to be mutual respect, so that everyone feels their voice is being heard

- There is a world of difference between creative conflict and unpleasant disagreement – and once unpleasantness enters in creativity is nearly always driven away.

To help make sure that there is no unpleasantness, we all need to try **not to take things personally.**

Once we do, it is easy to take offence that isn't intended – and if that happens, a meeting can quickly degenerate into name-calling.

A sign of your strength as a team

It can have quite an impact if you contrast how some people view conflict – as a sign of failure – with your view of it as a sign of your strength as a team.

It is then easy to reassure those who are hesitant about conflict. You are recognising that it triggers very different feelings in different people, so much so that:

- *One person's row is another person's enjoyable wrestle!*

You hope that during the discussion no-one will duck any difficult issues.

Your aim is to deal with them openly and honestly, on the basis that **any disagreement should be an agreeable disagreement.**

3 Should we agree some "team rules"?

To help navigate your way through a tricky discussion, team rules can be a huge asset, especially if you find that someone over-strikes a position.

Instead of putting yourself in a position where it's you against them, you can remind them that what they have just said is **inconsistent with the team rules** – and you hope that they and everyone else will make a point of getting behind the team rules once again.

It's best just to have a small number. Here are some possibilities:

- **We value difference**

- **We consider WHAT is right and not WHO is right**

- **We support each other in solving problems**

- **We disagree without being disagreeable**

- **We always speak well of each other**

- **We don't take things personally**

- **We don't go along with "pocket vetoes"**

- **We put the mission of our organisation before our own interests.**

Sometimes it helps to have a one-line summary of your mission at the top of the agenda for the meeting.

This makes it easier to press on with a tricky conversation when you hit a difficult patch and some people want to **pretend that you all agree when you know you don't.**

4 How can I introduce some fun into the process?

Conversations that involve a degree of conflict can be really hard work. As the person leading the conversation, your role is to keep it as light as you can, especially in those moments when you're encouraging people to be creative.

You want them to feel that they can think out loud and try out new ideas without any fear of being "shot down" if their idea doesn't quite land with the rest of the team.

For conflict to be creative, you need to be able to say that you hope people might actually **enjoy** that part of the conversation where you are trying to come up with some fresh ideas.

The group need to believe that you believe in their creativity.

As you are building up new ideas, it can be a really good idea to split the group into small groups of two or three to come up with specific propositions.

Using their imagination

Some teams use role-plays and improvisations, whilst others use artwork and sometimes Lego products to encourage small groups to come back with something visual to illustrate their overall idea.

The more you encourage them to use their imagination to bring their idea to life, the better – especially if you then make a point of thanking those who do.

Don't believe that you have to plan all of this on your own. How about asking a member of your team some time beforehand to give you a few minutes to talk some ideas through?

You might share the leadership of the session with them, so that **together you create a process that feels different – and fun.**

5   What should I do if someone "pushes one of my buttons"?

One of the greatest risks that you will face is that someone says something that pushes one of your buttons – and having said how you want everyone to be open-minded you suddenly hear yourself putting someone down for something they've just said!

## What should you do in that situation?

Apologise, very quickly – and say that something that was said just pushed one of your buttons and you shouldn't have jumped in the way that you did.

You can draw some good lessons out of this moment of tension **and** take people with you, so long as you are quick to apologise and say that you took a comment personally, which made you more defensive than you should have been.

This makes it REAL!

If you are seen to give the benefit of the doubt to someone who has said something that clearly bugged you, this should be an advantage later on if someone else flares up at something that is said.

In that moment, you can say that someone clearly pushed one of **their** buttons, just as happened for you earlier on - and you are sure that no slight was intended.
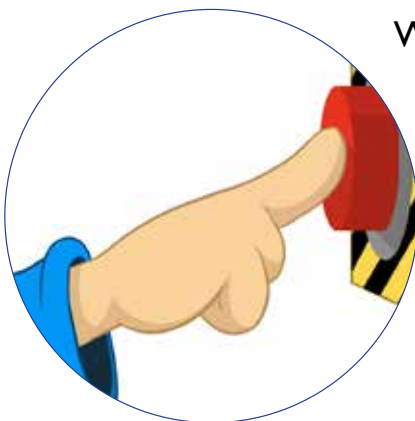
What this shows, you can say, is that we are all vulnerable to someone saying something that triggers a deep reaction within us.

All we need to do in these moments is take a pause and focus again on the rules for the discussion that we all agreed at the outset - such as the rule that **we don't take things personally.**

6 Should I call people out on unhelpful behaviours?

This is a tricky question and definitely one of those with no single answer to cover all situations! In general, most of us would say "yes", so long as you can do so with a **light touch**.

There are inter-personal conflicts in just about all teams, and sometimes members of a team will sit there waiting for two people to resume the low-level antagonism that they slip into at just about every team meeting!

When one of these habits presents itself, it is important to try and call out this behaviour, generously.

Otherwise it becomes a diversion that makes it **more difficult** for the team to get into a frame of mind where they see themselves as more creative than they usually allow themselves to be.

Defusing moments that cause irritation

It is also important to try and defuse any moments that cause irritation and divert the group from your creative mission.

For example, imagine that you have a meeting coming up with some key partners and one of them has a habit of accusing others of not discussing "the elephant in the room".

Why not try to find a stuffed elephant and put it in the middle of the circle?

You can say that if anyone feels we're ignoring the elephant in the room, can they pick up the elephant and describe what they see!

You can achieve so much by referring generously to behaviours that, if left unacknowledged, can easily **stifle the group's creativity just when it is beginning to flow.**

7 What should I say if someone starts digging a trench?

This is a tough one, isn't it. Once a disagreement is underway, some people seem to have an inner programming that makes them reiterate time and again a position they have already argued for.

Whether the reason for this is their compulsive need to win an argument or their fear of losing, the fact remains that you are sitting there watching them dig their trench – and you're wondering what is the best way of intervening.

If you want to help someone **stop digging,** it is important to start off with some positive recognition of what they have already offered the team.

So you might say that they have brought out very well the force and clarity of the argument behind the position that they favour.

What is the number one argument AGAINST?

How about then asking them to capture what they see as the number one argument against what they are proposing? If they resist this ("there aren't any!") you are in a very strong position to press harder:

- *"We all know that whatever we agree on at the end of this discussion will have some strong upsides and also a number of significant downsides. James, you have argued a strong case for one option, and I'm sure we all respect this. May I ask what you see as the main case **against**?"*

Some Leadership Fellows make a point of insisting that every member of their Executive team advocating a specific proposal should also point out what they regard as the number one downside of their proposition, as part of their initial presentation.

It's a terrific way of **building in respect for difference from the beginning of a discussion!**

8 Have I got a handle on my "inner peacemaker"?

We might say that we're just **great** at handling conflict and would never want to close down a difficult conversation before it has run its course.

Yet the fact is that a lot of Chairs of Boards and Chief Executives are regarded by their colleagues as having a tendency to do just that. They have a habit of closing down conversations when they think a natural solution to the conflict is presenting itself and others are being rather slow in not seeing this as clearly as they do!

A lot of us have an "inner peacemaker" that can quickly engage with a disagreement to point out what the obvious way would be of moving forward and keeping everyone happy at the same time.

Deployed sparingly, this inner peacemaker can be a tremendous asset. In the context of a discussion where you want some creative conflict, it can actually **get in the way**.

Inviting the team to challenge you

One of the best ways of keeping your inner peacemaker in check is to say to the team that if any of them feels you are closing down a difficult discussion too quickly, you want them to say so – and you undertake to **hold back** and let the discussion run for that bit longer.

Next time you can see a possible compromise solution, how about instead saying that you see **two or three main views** coming forward - and capturing each of them in one or two sentences?

You then ask whether anyone who hasn't yet taken part in the conversation has any thoughts about how you might draw on the best elements of these views to create a fresh approach towards moving forward.

Sometimes it is a stronger act of leadership to ask the question of your team **rather than doing their thinking on their behalf!**

9 How do I avoid getting ambushed by a "sniper"?

So many of us dread chairing a meeting with a sniper, whose speciality is objecting from the sidelines. They start off with low-level criticism and ramp up their negativity and cynicism as the meeting goes on.

At first we smile and thank them for their comment and it's not long before we want to give them a piece of our mind. Tempting though this might be, it's the very worst thing that we could do.

Don't let the others switch off!

Just think, here you are trying to lead a discussion with some creative conflict, and you know you have a number of conflict-averse people who need to be handled with care as you move forward.

The moment they witness you getting into a shooting match with someone else, they will vacate the space, mentally, within seconds!

Once they have switched off it will be almost impossible to bring many of them back in on the conversation.

This is why it is best to use your light touch and inclusive style of leadership to focus not on the sniper but on the rest of the group:

- *"So, Sarah, you're clearly not a fan of any of the ideas that have come up so far. Let's give you a few minutes to come up with something positive of your own and let me bring in some of those who have been quiet in this conversation. Yvonne, can I draw **you** out and ask which of the different ideas so far you favour the most …"*

What the sniper is really challenging you to do is to keep your powder dry, because once the shooting starts they have won!

Your No 1 one weapon against them is the engagement and positivity of other members of the group.

10 Am I okay about the "right ending" not always being a happy one?

This is an important question, isn't it. We throw ourselves into leading a meeting that we know will be difficult and we so want to be successful.

We give it everything we can and it's natural for us to want a "happy ending".

Yet sometimes a happy ending simply isn't real, and we need to remind ourselves of this as we steer the discussion.

Think of the not uncommon experience for many leaders of working with a team to discuss the latest plan for "restructuring" and streamlining the top of the organisation.

You know there are lots of good things that will come out of it. Yet the fact is that some jobs will go and some of the people in the room expect to be polishing up their CV in the not too distant future.

Being real with you

In this situation, it's important to draw out as much creative thinking from this current team as is possible.

It's also important that they have the opportunity to share their sense of sadness and loss about the team being wound up, and experience this being honoured by **you.**

For them, a "good ending" to the meeting is **not** necessarily the happy ending that enables everyone to leave the room on a high. That simply wouldn't be real.

It's more important, surely, that they can be **authentic** with each other and with you.

The trust that this helps to engender between you and your new team should **make possible exceptional levels of creativity when the time is right.**

11 How should I handle my internal "post-mortem"?

After chairing a meeting in which we were hoping for some really creative conflict, quite a few of us have a habit of going home and "burning energy" worrying.

We worry about not having been good enough. We worry about how some might have felt about what others said. We worry also about what others might have felt about what **wasn't** said. We just worry.

Yep, it is good if we ask ourselves some tough questions, such as

- Did I do enough prepping for the meeting?

- If I had my time again, how could I have improved my intro – and the team rules?

- Was I quick enough to reassure those who looked a little panicky the moment the first disagreement started?

- Did I press people hard enough to keep going when some wanted to give up once the discussion got difficult?

Give yourself a break!

Let us assume that overall you offered compassion and reassurance, as well as continuing to push people hard to land the creative outputs that you came up with at the end.

Let's also assume that the team didn't quite climb the mountain in the way that you hoped - and you, no doubt, **could** have been better.

All that said, isn't it now time to give yourself a break?

Self-flagellation won't help with mountain climbing.

A little more self-compassion and self-reassurance should help rather a lot more.

12 How aware am I of my "swings"?

One of the insights that came out of this Leadership Conversation was the tendency of some conflict-averse leaders to swing from **avoidance** at one end of the spectrum to going **way over the top** at the other.

We so dislike conflict that we go to great lengths to avoid it.

We have lots of tactics and techniques for bypassing it and generally looking the other way.

Deep down, we know what we are doing and so we get more and more bugged with ourselves and the position that we have put ourselves in.

This all builds up and then one day someone says something that pushes one of our buttons rather too hard and we just **blow**.

We go seriously OTT and surprise not only everyone else but also ourselves.

After that, we tell ourselves to calm down and not be unreasonable.

So we edge back to avoidance and then more avoidance and the cycle starts all over again.

Time to cut out avoidance

We **know** that if we are to lead a process of creative conflict we need more modest swings.

That means much less avoidance – and **no** going over the top.
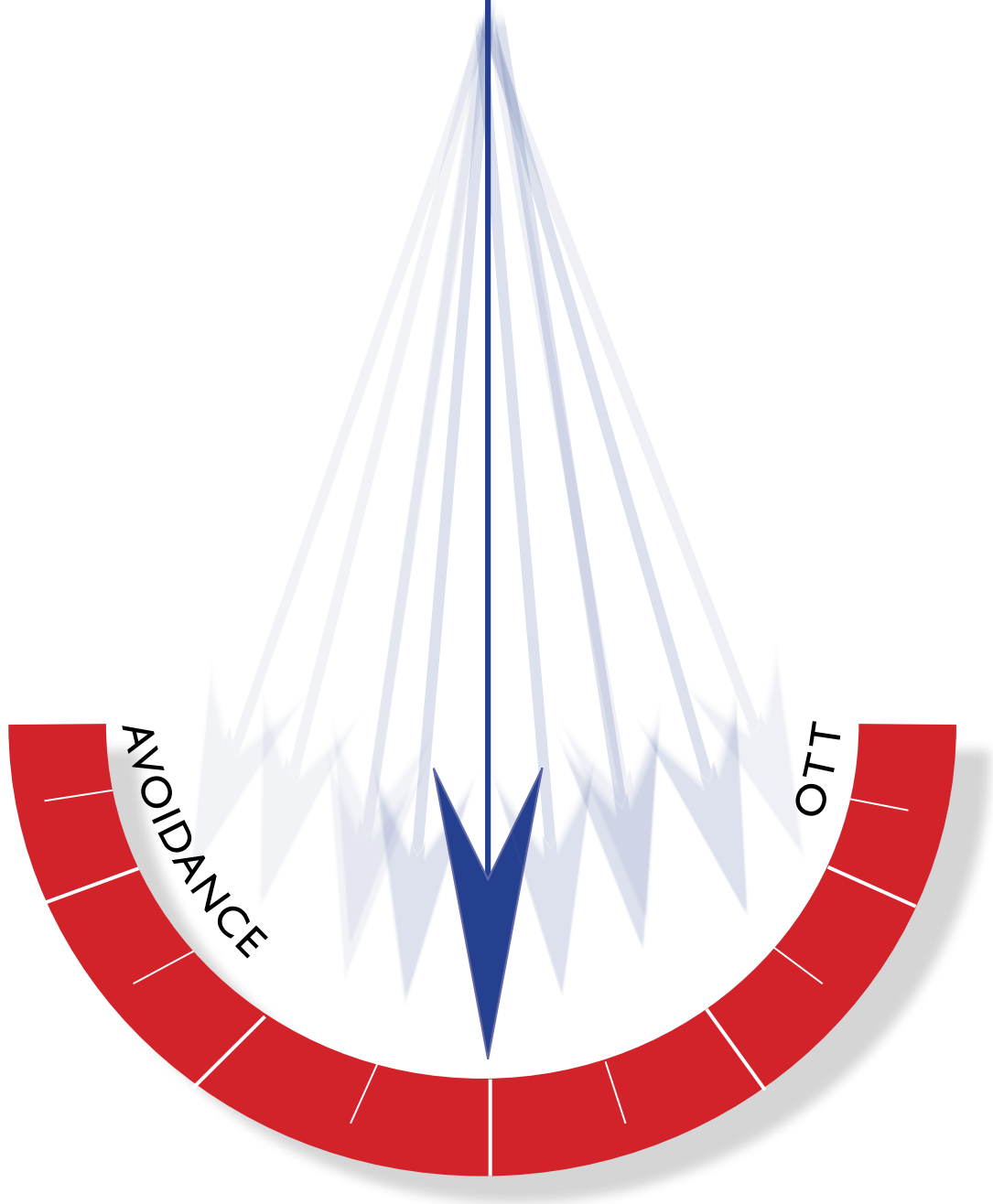
How wild is your personal swingometer? Honestly?

Time to cut out all that avoidance, don't you think?

Okay, we'll be realistic.

Let's go for as little avoidance as possible – for now!

How wild is
your personal
swingometer?

AVOIDANCE

OTT

CHAPTER 4

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Raising our game as leaders in 2019

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This Chapter draws on the main themes of a Leadership Conversation that took place in December 2018 on the topic of "Achieving your top priorities in 2019".

Our overall conclusion was that for many of us our number one challenge is not to do with any specific leadership skills that we might lack.

Rather, it is to do with our mindset as leaders and in particular our readiness to be more generous-spirited in our judgements of ourselves as leaders.

Instead of leading to complacency, it is this generous-spiritedness that should enable us to be tougher on ourselves and stretch those around us, on the basis that we are committed to building on all of our key strengths as we move forward.

Ten game-changers for 2019

1   Recognising our self-limiting behaviours – **and** telling our inner critic to chill!

2   Being ourselves more – with skill

3   Asking more from those we trust the most

4   Shifting our focus from "exploit to explore"

5   Getting tougher on ourselves whenever we over-commit

6   Giving less time in meetings to tasks and more to colleagues' concerns

7   Rethinking our view of duty

8   Becoming more measured, especially in drawing out points of learning

9   Picturing ourselves in the space we want to be in

10   Becoming more comfortable with our success as leaders.

Recognising our self-limiting behaviours – and telling our inner critic to chill!

At this Conversation, we started by asking what we see as our self-limiting behaviours as leaders.

It's incredibly important that we try to identify them, because they can so easily get in our way unless we develop personal strategies for leaving them behind.

At the same time, we need to be careful to keep our inner critic on a tight leash!

The more we let ourselves become frustrated by our self-limiting behaviours, the more they can end up holding us back.

Yes, we need to get a grip on them, but don't let's make this all such **hard work!**

If we can lighten up about them, we should find it easier to own them with colleagues and ask for their support with managing them.

Doing ourselves down

If we picture a list of our top three self-limiting behaviours, quite a few of us will have one in common:

● "Doing ourselves down whenever we get a chance!"

Let's take **that one** off the list in 2019.

That would be a great step forward.

2 Being ourselves more – with skill

This was one of our favourite phrases at this Conversation. We need to "*be ourselves more – with skill*".

Too often, we focus on what we are **not.**

Instead, we need to focus on what sort of leader we **are**, and then apply ourselves to becoming better and better at doing what we already do well.

This is bound to require some changes in our overall style of leadership.

But the crucial point is that we should approach this from the starting point of focusing on what we already do that is in any way special.

Valuing ourselves more

For a good number of us, this means that we need to get a lot better at appreciating the sort of leader that we are, and our particular skills as a leader.

Then we can focus on how to use our leadership skills more effectively as we go through 2019.

The key principle here is that we each need to value ourselves more as a leader.

We can then apply ourselves to our strategy for self-improvement, building on our strengths and assets to enable us to **be ourselves more** – with skill.

Leadership skills

Being ourselves more

3 Asking more from those we trust the most

We need to invest more in our key relationships with those whom we trust the most. We can do this by making a point of asking them for help when we need it.

2019 is the year we need to stop feeling that we have to pretend to everyone that everything is fine, at times when we know it isn't.

Cheerleaders

We all need our cheerleaders.

They are the people who see the **specialness** that we bring to our role as a leader, as well as our vulnerabilities and anxieties.

Our top cheerleaders might include a close colleague at work. They might also include our life partner, or our best friend from school or university.

Brutally honest

So often we tell ourselves that we need to protect them from the anxieties that are going round and round in our mind.

In actual fact, we are **honouring** their trust in us if we are brutally honest with them about what is causing us the greatest anxiety.

By letting them be there more for us, we are affirming the significance of all that we share with them.

This is so much more real than pretending all is fine at times when **we want** to say "I'm in a corner and need your help with getting out of it".

In 2019, let's just say it!

4 Shifting our focus "from exploit to explore"

As leaders, we have trained ourselves to support our key people in exploiting their talents and gifts to the full.

The problem is that we can spend so long focused on talent-building in relation to our organisation as it is **now** that we leave ourselves little time for exploring how we would like our people to develop their roles into the future.

So many leaders tend to sub-contract this area of thinking to someone else, and are then slow to respond to their ideas because they rather resent the fact that they didn't play a bigger part in developing them themselves!

Our team's leading explorer

In 2019 we need to see ourselves more as our team's leading explorer, dedicating more of our time to thinking through possible futures that the organisation could step into in 2020 and beyond.

Once we have a greater sense of ownership of these alternative futures, we should be able to offer so much more in helping our team to exploit their leadership skills – current and potential - to the full.

Like all successful explorers, we stick close to our key people and make sure they know that we are there for them if they ever trip or fall.

So long as this support is truly two-way, we should be in a position to spend more time charting the way ahead.

We can then exercise the prerogative of a leading explorer telling our team that the mountain summit is just about in sight, and how exciting it will be when we reach it!

5 Getting tougher on ourselves whenever we over-commit

Realistically, there probably aren't many of us who expect to get through 2019 without over-committing ourselves as leaders at least a few times.

Undervaluing ourselves

We know **why** we have this tendency to over-commit, don't we?

Most of the time this is driven by our tendency to undervalue ourselves.

Our self-doubt drives us to want to do more to prove to ourselves - and others - that we **are** as good as some of them think we are.

To prove that they are right and our inner voice of self-doubt is wrong, we push ourselves harder to take on more than we should.

Ensuring that we get more things right

Ironic, isn't it.

We get more things wrong because we're taking on too much due to our concern that we might not be as good as others think we are!

Time to pause and say to ourselves "*don't over-commit in 2019*".

Apart from anything else, it's our best way of ensuring that we get more things **right**.

In the process, we are more likely to prove right those who have a more generous view of our leadership skills than we do!

6 Giving less time in meetings to tasks and more to colleagues' concerns

Despite all that we know about how leaders should and shouldn't behave with their teams, many of us still spend far too much time in meetings discussing a battery of different tasks, wanting to agree who will do what, when and how.

We treat our top team like a group of managers, and then express surprise when they don't behave more like the leaders we want them to be!

So let's make 2019 the year when we tell our teams that we will sort out as many of the practical tasks as possible **outside** of team meetings.

Supporting each other more

When the team meet together as one, we will then have more time to ask what we should all be doing to support each other more to become a more effective team.

As part of this process, team members will have the space – that never exists within task-based agendas - to ask others to support them with resolving specific concerns that are getting in their way.

So as we go into 2019, each member of the team will know that our overriding commitment is to enable them to become as good as they can possibly be.

Also, their experience of team meetings will be one where the process of agenda-setting is **shared,** and time is allocated not according to an action-based tick list but according to their needs as leaders.

7 Rethinking our view of duty

A number of Leadership Fellows talk about their current leadership role as a "duty".

As they use this word, we can sometimes feel the energy levels in the Vicars' Hall drop!

It sounds like such **hard work** and something that could never be in any way enjoyable.

Why not?

Why can't we associate duty more with the idea that we're in a position where we really are being guided by our "true North" and are in with a good chance of **fulfilling our mission** as a leader?

We know the answer, don't we. We tend to see duty as something that is so often **imposed on us**.

It is not our choice and is instead something that we are **required** to take on.

Part of the package

Yet as leaders we know that there are so many aspects of our role that we need to get on with, like it or not.

Unless we step up and take them on, we won't be as good as we could be.

So we view them as part of the "package".

How about some fresh thought leadership around this issue in 2019?

Let's hear it for the duties of a leader.

Gosh, look at those smiles!

8 Becoming more measured, especially in drawing out points of learning

We know that many of us can be too frantic – frenetic, even.

We have discussed this at various Leadership Conversations and agreed that the "speed merchants" among us need to be ready to slow down at times, so that those who are feeling left behind have a chance to catch up.

The greater our speed, the more we tend to view anything going wrong as a bit of a car crash.

Instead of calmly drawing out any relevant lessons and learning points, we express anger at the fact that we have had to slow down - and can't wait to speed up again!

Avoiding yet another drama

We all appreciate the importance of momentum and pace.

We do need more speed at times.

We also need the ability to pause in a measured way when necessary and ask what lessons need to be learnt, **before** we put our foot on the accelerator again.

The best lesson-learner

More often than not, it is the measured leader who is the best lesson-learner.

It is this sense of measure that avoids yet another drama and converts an error into a learning opportunity.

9 Picturing ourselves in the space we want to be in

This Leadership Conversation was the third one in a row at which we tried a visualisation to picture a situation that we wanted to be in as leaders and imagine our experience of it.

This visualisation didn't work for all of us. But on each occasion it worked for a good number of us, and for some it had a really significant impact.

Creating bridges

Overall, we were struck by the **potential** that this technique could have for enabling more of us to "dream in" the sort of leadership role that we would like to play in the future.

We generally don't use our imagination nearly enough to create bridges between the situations that we find ourselves in at the moment and the situations that we would like to be in, in the future.

Powerful

Many of us could try this technique with our teams.

We might ask them to visualise themselves free from the self-limiting behaviours that hold us all back.

That could be powerful.

Breaking down barriers

Or we might ask them to imagine themselves enjoying our time together as a team more and valuing more highly the distinctive contribution that each member brings.

That could break down a few more barriers between team members, and help everyone appreciate that much more the importance of **diversity** to the success of the team.

10 Becoming more comfortable with our success as leaders

One of the phrases that we used at this Leadership Conversation was that there was a "surfeit of humility" in the room.

The extent to which a number of Leadership Fellows seemed so committed to **putting themselves down** really was striking.

We're all in favour of leaders having a capacity to be self-deprecatory, but one can take a good idea too far!

We quickly saw **why** this was the case.

Quite a few Fellows in the room were so keen to distance themselves from the egotistical behaviours they saw being exhibited by top leaders in public life that they were in danger of swinging too far the other way.

Becoming "moany"

The motives behind this might be worthy, but the overall result can be other than helpful.

It can mean that instead of being compassionate and generous-spirited whenever we get something wrong, we become that much more self-critical and "moany" about our unworthiness.

Showing compassion

Instead of turning our guns on ourselves, we actually need to show some compassion **towards ourselves** if we are to be quick in learning the lessons of mistakes and sharing them with others.

Even more important perhaps, we need to be feeling pretty confident about ourselves as leaders if we to be as compassionate as we need to be with **others** when they screw up!

Continued overleaf

Continued

Appreciating ourselves more

To become more compassionate towards ourselves and others in 2019, some of us need to appreciate ourselves more and enjoy more what we're achieving.

We need to let ourselves become that little bit **more comfortable** with our success, without - Heaven forbid! - slipping into complacency or egotism.

Stretching others more

Our comfort should then permit others to become that little bit more comfortable themselves.

In turn, this should enable us to stretch them more, on the basis that they know that we know how good they are.

They also know that we're sufficiently relaxed with ourselves as leaders for them to take it for granted that we have no "hidden agenda" when we ask them to join us in raising our game and **stepping up throughout 2019**.
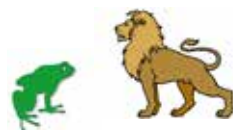
CHAPTER 5

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Priorities, frogs, marathons and lions

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This Chapter draws on the main themes of a Leadership Conversation that took place in February 2019 on the topic of "Achieving your top priorities in 2019–5 weeks in".

It follows on directly from Chapter Four.

You will see that we are continuing to develop our format in a way that conveys a small number of the ideas that we explored in Windsor and seeks to make them as accessible as possible.

This is a theme to which we will return!
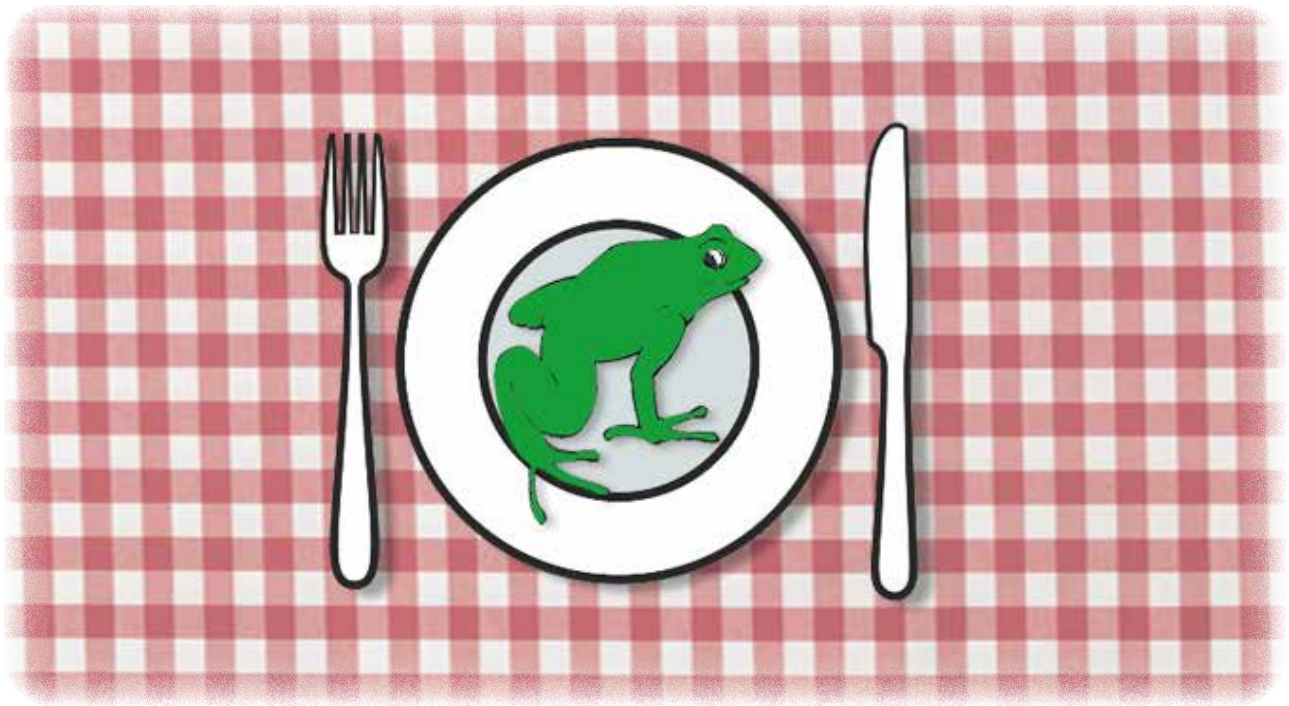
Tough stuff first

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!

Tough stuff first

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.

Chief Energiser

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.

It's a marathon

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.

Personal courage

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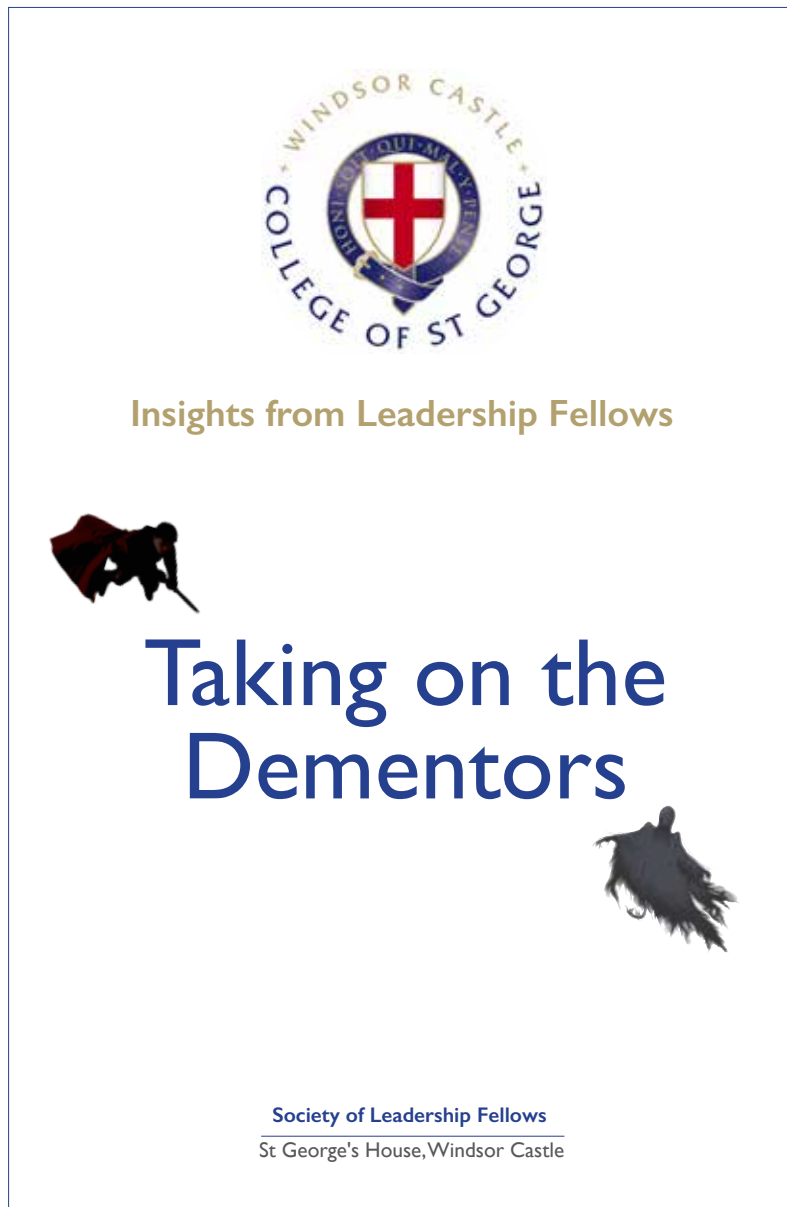
The lion is a pussycat! Ha, what was all the fuss about?

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

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

CHAPTER 6

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Taking on the Dementors

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This Chapter draws on the main themes of a Leadership Conversation that took place in February 2019 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.

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

Challenging the Dementors

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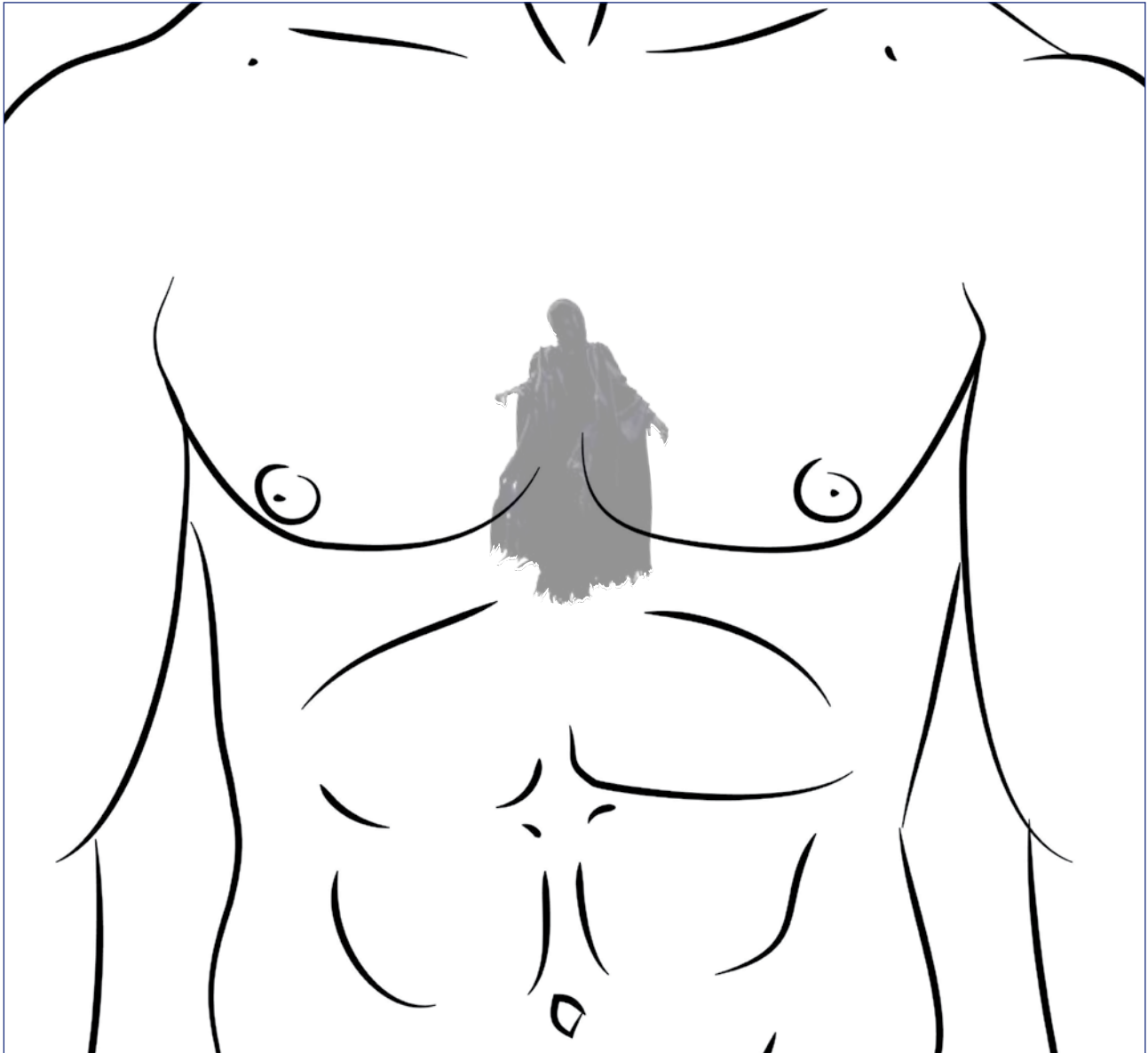
"What a bunch of Dementors," we think. *"They just don't get it. If only we could zap them!"*

Instead, they're zapping us – and our energy.
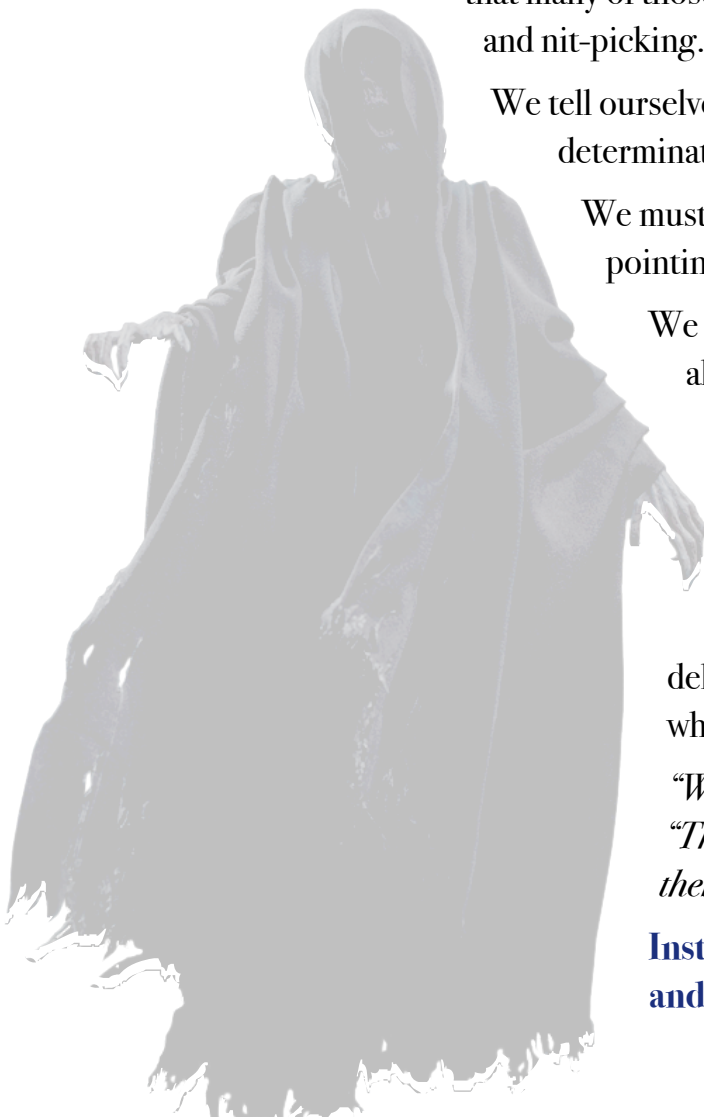
Facing our inner Dementor

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!

Facing our inner Dementor

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.

Finding our own Patronus

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 tusstle with the external Dementors that are instilling in us a sense of despair.

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!

CHAPTER 7

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Flying pigs & thought leadership

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

This Chapter draws on the main themes of a Leadership Conversation that took place in March 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.

You don't have to think -

I'll do that for you!
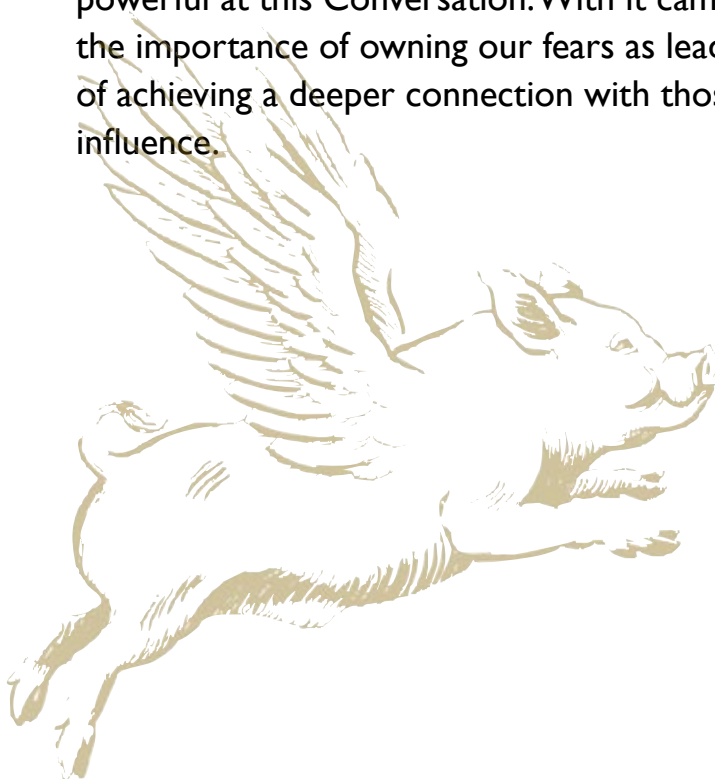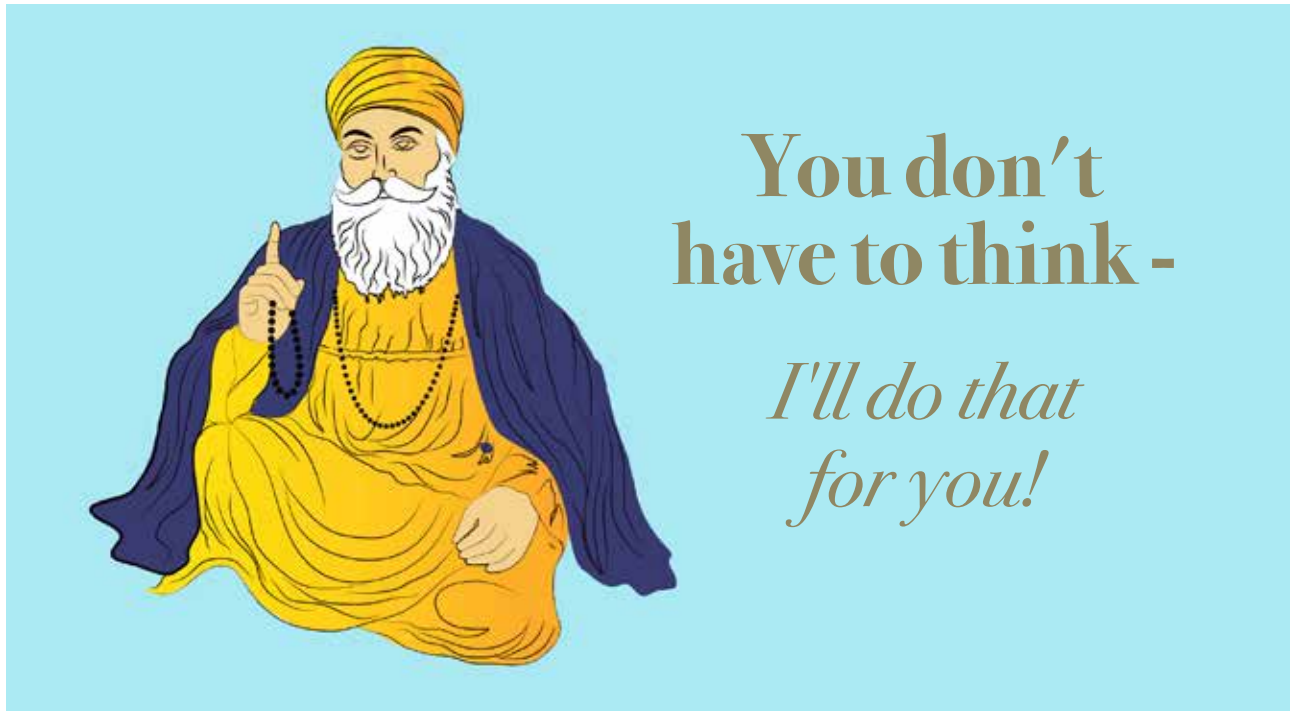
Making clear that we don't see ourselves as gurus!

We know that when some people conjur 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 away 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!

"I hope they don't realise how scared I feel"

"I hope he's not going to ask us any difficult questions ... that would be scary!"

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!

CHAPTER 8

Insights from Leadership Fellows

Stretching ourselves as leaders

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

A three-part stretch routine for leaders!

This Chapter draws on the main themes of a Leadership Conversation that took place in October 2018 on the topic of "Stretching our top talent".

The discussions resulted in a wide range of ideas coming forward about how we might best stretch ourselves as leaders.

We capture them in a three-part "stretch routine" that we hope will provide a useful resource for Fellows to dip into:

Part One: **Stretching ourselves as leaders**

Part Two: **Stretching our teams**

Part Three: **Creating a stretch culture**

1 Seeing ourselves as passionately curious

There is probably no better way of putting ourselves in the right frame of mind than reminding ourselves of these wonderful words by Albert Einstein:

● *"I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious."*

To stretch ourselves as leaders – really stretch ourselves – we need to let our passionate curiosity drive the way we are and the ways in which we lead.

With this mindset, we become ever more curious to discover new talents of our own as well as of those around us.

## 2 No longer seeing talents as "permanent attributes"

Once we regard individuals' talents as capable of developing in ways that can't readily be predicted, we open ourselves up to a host of new possibilities.

Not least, we see very clearly that the traditional notion of talents as "permanent attributes" is no longer helpful and needs to be left behind as we develop a more dynamic approach towards talent management.

It also enables us more readily to take on the proposition that talent in our working lives is an expression of the sort of person that we are across the whole of our lives.

So when we think about stretching our talents as leaders, we also need to think about how we stretch ourselves across the rest of our lives too.

One is part of the other, like it or not.
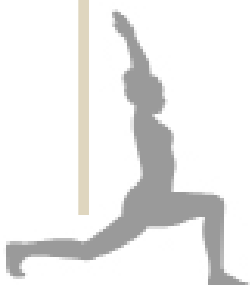
3 Sometimes having to "stop, look and listen"

For those of us who see ourselves as passionate optimists, it can be more of a stretch to engage with the passions of others than project our own.

As one Leadership Fellow put it, "*I know that once I get on a roll I can stop listening. In moments when I feel this danger, I tell myself to stop, look and listen*".

The stretch is in the moment when we **stop**.

4 Encouraging others to lead in a way "not of our ilk"

It's very easy to fancy ourselves as empowering leaders.

It's also easy to start off as an empowering leader and then gradually apply conditions, so that others are empowered so long as they lead in broadly the same sort of way that we lead.

Hence the thought that many of us would really stretch ourselves as leaders if we say explicitly to our teams that we wish to empower them to lead in a way that might "not be of our ilk".

They just need to get the job done to a high standard.

That really would be empowering of others - and stretching for the leader saying it!

5 Creating time to THINK

We can so easily fill every minute of the day, so that we have no time when we are alone and can think.

What a difference it could make if we create 5 to 10 minutes of uninterrupted thinking time for ourselves every day.

We look away from our keyboard and phone and let ourselves think. Without interruption. Wow!

6 Silencing the "background noise" in our head

Once we create some thinking time for ourselves, it might become easier for some of us to still the "background noise" in our head.

So often it is the **intensity of our expectations** towards others that makes it really hard for them to step forward.

They find themselves under such pressure from us to act in a certain way that they feel unable to make up their own mind about what is the best thing to do.

Our stretch as leaders involves us in trying to make sure that any "noise" in our head doesn't hold them back from thinking through what is best.

This means that instead of saying to them "*We must …*" we ask instead "*How could we…?*" or even "*May I follow your lead?*".

7 Owning our energy in moments of challenge

As leaders we need to "own our energy", especially in moments when we are challenging someone else on some aspect of their performance.

The longer we postpone a challenge, the more likely we are to come across as uptight, and having made up our mind that the other person is in the wrong.

This is why it is so important to ask ourselves whether we come across at times as aggressive or overly judgemental.

Calmness and centredness are so key to challenging others if we want them to be able to receive a difficult message without losing their self-pride in the process.

Hence the stretch challenge for all leaders:

- to think about our energy in moments when we are critical of others, to ensure that any criticism on our part doesn't make them feel that we're withdrawing our belief in them – unless that is what we mean, in which case we should say this honestly and without aggression.

8 Learning to console and stretch

We don't often see these two words linked, do we? If anything, we might think of consoling someone if they feel over-stretched and too far out of their comfort zone.

Behind this point there sits an important proposition:

- That stretching others isn't just about "rallying the troops".

One of the best ways of stretching those we are close to in work can be through drawing on our own mentoring skills to console them.

This enables them to feel "seen" and assures them of their significance in the team.

For many leaders, this role of "**Consoler-in-Chief**" can feel like quite a stretch!

This is why it's so important to remind ourselves how much some timely affirmation can help to build greater loyalty on the part of others as well as greater ambition for the organisation.

9 Keeping difficult conversations tightly focused

This role of Consoler-in-Chief is one that some leaders take on at the end of a difficult conversation with a close colleague.

Whether or not this is necessary usually depends on how we **open up** the conversation.

It can do so much to reassure the other person if they see right from the beginning that we are keeping the conversation tightly focused on one specific concern.

The stretch here is in staking out our ground thoughtfully, so that they see us as seeking a pragmatic resolution to a situation that they also want to resolve.

It is our best chance of ensuring that they do not receive our challenge as an attack on them.

10 Inviting others to tell us if something might be wrong

We judge our success as a leader not just by the number of "good news stories" that our team come up with.

Perhaps even more important is the bad news that something might not be going as well as it should.

What matters is that we hear this as early as possible in the process of things beginning to slip, so that we can intervene quickly without others' fear of being blamed getting in the way of speedy action.

The stretch here is to demonstrate our insatiable curiosity by asking whether something might not be right in a situation where this is actually the last thing that we want to hear!

By stressing the **tentative** nature of the judgement that we're looking for we make it as easy as possible for someone else to raise their concerns without feeling that they are making a definitive statement that things are going wrong.

11 Breaking down challenges into manageable "chunks"

We include this stretch behaviour because it is one of those that is key – and not obvious!

It is so very easy for us to make a challenge appear **bigger** than it needs to be.

Nine times out of ten this is a mistake.

Often the key to bringing out the best in others is to help them in breaking down big challenges into more manageable chunks, so that the stretch involved in delivering each chunk feels more realistic and do-able.

Our stretch is to help define the chunks, even when we think this shouldn't be necessary.

This can help others avoid the feeling of being over-stretched, which is one of the main triggers for high performers finding that their performance is beginning to slip.
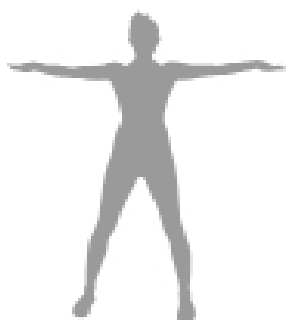
12 Making sure we don't over-think things

Having argued that most of us need to create more personal thinking time, we also want to flag up the danger of over-thinking things.

We need to keep ourselves in an **empowered** mode when we go into our thinking bubble.

If we find ourselves beginning to prevaricate through over-thinking something, the best way of not getting stuck in this thought trap is to say to ourselves,

- *"Stop faffing about and get on with it!"*

Our stretch is in taking ourselves **out of our thought bubble** in that moment when it becomes our excuse for inaction.

13 Valuing ourselves more highly

If we are to identify one more challenge that requires us to stretch ourselves more as leaders, it is surely the challenge of valuing ourselves more highly.

So much of our impact as leaders is determined by our ability to influence others.

If we want others to value our advice more highly, we cannot separate off the value that we place on ourselves as leaders from the value that we wish them to place on our advice.

For so many of us, it is a simple truth that if we are to be valued more by others we need to work that much harder at **valuing ourselves**.

Simple though this truth might be, this doesn't make it easy.

It's a serious stretch for many leaders, which is why the sooner we start this process, the better.

14 Making the switch from pressurising to energising

Let's start off Part Two with a really challenging stretch!

How about thinking less about "pushing" our team to perform better and more about "**lifting them up**" to enable them to deliver the results that we want?

This is one of those stretch exercises that challenges the traditional assumption that to be effective leaders need to drive and push others.

The proposition here is that the drivers and pushers are not the most effective leaders over time.

The most effective leaders are those who apply themselves to **building others up**, motivated by the limitless possibilities that can open up as we all seek to realise our full potential.

From pushers and pressurisers to builders and energisers!

That's a seriously stretching proposition. The results should make the stretch more than worth it.

15 Seeing ourselves as leading from WITHIN

This is another proposition that sounds easy and yet is quite counter-cultural for many leaders.

The idea is that we see ourselves as leading from within our teams. We might always find ourselves asking for more, but the language is about "**us**" - rather than "you" - achieving and delivering more.

If the team is under-performing in some way, we are automatically part of that.

Any criticism is self-directed as well as team-directed.

"We" all then become stronger and more unified through how we learn from "our mistakes" and turn them to advantage.

16 Creating a culture that expects positivity up-front

This positivity is not about creating some sort of artificial optimistic gloss that we use to plaster over all over the realities of the moment.

Rather, it is about us creating a team spirit in which all members of the team are expected to "**cheer each other on**".

We ask tough questions, of course, because we are passionate in our curiosity.

We also work for ever higher standards of quality and ever better levels of customer satisfaction as we drive up performance.

We do all of this on the basis that **we have each other's back**.

It is this that makes it so natural to have a "can do" mentality that makes members of the team want to intervene in a positive way the moment someone starts to dwell on the negative for too long.

17 Creating 10 minutes of team time first thing every day

So many of the best teams come together for a few minutes at the beginning of each day to "check in" with each other and highlight any particular challenges for that day.

Ten minutes for a team at the start of each day, on the hoof, is time brilliantly spent.

It can actually **save time** because of all that we feel we can take for granted once we know what other team members are up to.

It's so much easier for us all to stretch ourselves once we really feel that we have the backing of our team.

And just think of all the emails that don't have to be sent asking other members of the team what they're doing at the moment!

18 Shifting the emphasis from "agreement" to "commitment"

We all know how many teams still tend to focus on the number of decisions they have taken at any one meeting.

Therein lies the problem.

We talk too much about what has been "agreed" rather than what the team have committed to make happen.

This is why the stretch behaviour is to talk less about "agreement" and more about "commitment".

The aim is that over time every team member accepts without question that whenever they agree to something they commit themselves to **making it happen**, too!

19 Making sure that key objectives MEAN SOMETHING!

We don't need many words on this key stretch behaviour.

Sadly, a lot of team leaders don't pour enough energy into the process of negotiating and agreeing key objectives with team members.

Too often team objectives are presented as stretching even though there has been little stretch in the process of developing them!

They are poorly formulated and then presented as a fait accompli.

It is so important that objectives and targets are negotiated and agreed up-front, with a **laser-like sharpness** about them so that everyone is clear what they mean – and what they don't mean.

Are these "*my targets for the team*" or truly "*our targets*"?

This is a question that every team leader should answer.

If they are **our targets**, the stretch comes in being prepared to adjust and renegotiate them to ensure that they are truly team-owned.

20 Knowing where the greatest talents lie in the team

This already sounds like a daunting stretch, doesn't it.

Yet it's one of the most important responsibilities of any team leader committed to leading a high performing team.

The proposition here is that every now and again leaders should make a point of asking their team – as part of an informal conversation – what they see as the main talents that they each bring to the team.

The language of talents gives individuals the freedom to talk in terms of their choosing about the skills and qualities and attitudes that they bring to their particular role within the team.

It also makes it relatively easy to open up a discussion about whether individual members of the team feel that their current role plays to their greatest strengths.

One of the reasons many teams fail to make the shift from mid-performing to high performing is because some team members don't feel that their role is quite right for them.

Yet unless their team leader first asks what they think it is almost impossible to say anything without this coming across as a complaint.

Giving permission for others to express that which they think might be seen as "difficult" … this is surely one of the most important responsibilities of a leader who wishes to stretch their team by ensuring that everyone is contributing as much as they can.

In the process, everyone in the team gains a better understanding of the different talents around the table, as well as the scope for **drawing out various talents** that much more.

These would be two major pluses for any team. They are made possible by **one opening question** on the part of the team leader, followed by a sustained input of passionate curiosity.

21 Do the team see themselves as "changemakers"?

As you read this question, do you find yourself thinking "I'm not sure about this one"?

If so, may we humbly make the point that this is the problem! So many team leaders don't know how their team view themselves.

They might **assume** that they see themselves as "changemakers", or whatever term they want to use.

But they don't ask the question.

Hence the proposition that we stretch our team – and perhaps ourselves as well – by asking this question.

If a team member says they don't, a really good response could be,

● *"How can I support you more to see yourself in this way?"*

22 Creating occasional "team sprints"

One of the themes that we have returned to a few times at Leadership Conversations has been the importance of creating occasional "team sprints" that involve a team both in improving the **quality** of their offer and also increasing the **pace** of team-working, all at the same time.

In so many teams it is assumed that increased pace can jeopardise quality, whereas the experience of more and more top performers is that the two go hand-in-hand.

Once team members view themselves as changemakers, it is so easy and natural to lead this sprint culture.

At the end of each sprint, there is a retrospective evaluation in which the team asks,

● *"What do we take from this latest sprint that we want to hang on to – and what do we want to do differently next time?"*

23 Combining practical steps with some radical symbols

Creating a stretch culture usually involves some stretching leadership to help inspire staff across the organisation to raise their horizons.

It also involves work to **challenge established habits** that get in the way of individuals and teams stretching themselves.

This is why in Part Three we give examples of a few radical steps to help stimulate a stretch culture as well as some practical actions to embed it in day-to-day practices.

Pretty well all of the evidence suggests that any winning strategy for delivering a stretch culture lies in how we combine the two: **the radical with the practical**.

24 Reviewing your social purpose - and raising the bar

Is your wider social purpose as an organisation bold enough?

This is a great question to raise with your Board from the standpoint that, with their consent, you would like to set a more ambitious purpose for the organisation.

Some leadership teams can under-estimate the capacity of their staff (and indeed their shareholders) to commit to a broader and higher level social purpose.

If you can secure their backing for this, it should help you in accelerating change and driving stretch.

On its own, high level social purpose is never enough.

As a lead-in to some practical conversations about how everyone now needs to raise their game and increase their impact, it can be a powerful **scene-setter and motivator**.

25 Rethinking how we use Key Performance Indicators

Another way of creating a stronger stretch culture is through rethinking how the organisation uses its key performance indicators.

For example, one radical idea for encouraging greater sharing of responsibility is to encourage various teams to swap their KPIs with each other.

The proposition that one team's bonus payments should depend upon how another team performs is a bold way of conveying the message that teams are dependent on each other for their own success.

Others might favour a slightly less radical model that involves two or even three teams agreeing a small number of shared KPIs.

This way, each team would be reminded of their dependency on the others without feeling that they are giving up nearly all of their control over their performance in relation to their own KPIs.

26 Relocating various teams and departments

Yet another idea, that many larger organisations have deployed at various times, involves different teams and occasionally different departments being relocated.

The aim is either to bring them physically closer to another part of the organisation that they have not worked well with up to now, or to move them away from a team or department where the working relationship has become so cosy that it is now **excluding others**.

This type of move helps to break down the tendency towards silo working that is inherent in all organisations.

Many top performing organisations see it as a natural part of their cycle for shaking things up when various teams show signs of settling into team rivalries, or shared comfort zones, that have become too comfortable!

27 Creating a "high potentials pool" for rising stars

This is now established practice for a wide range of organisations, and we include it because many organisations still hold back from taking this step.

Its great attraction is the recognition that it gives to staff who demonstrate talent and ambition that the organisation wants to nurture over time.

Many Chief Executives can under-estimate the cynicism of staff when they tell them that they want to "grow their own" and promote from within.

This practice of maintaining a "high potentials pool" for rising stars conveys an unmistakeable message that talented individuals who show real potential and are willing to stretch themselves will receive all of the support that they need to progress to the top levels of the organisation.

28 Establishing regular "days in my shoes"

This is another one of those ideas that has been taken on board by many organisations, but is often implemented in a relatively half-hearted way.

The idea is that all employees should have the opportunity to nominate another member of staff who they would like to shadow for one full day to gain a better understanding of what it is like doing their job "in their shoes".

This helps to build greater trust across the organisation, and can also link in very effectively with cross-departmental **sponsorship and secondment** arrangements.

Being accompanied by someone for a day gives that individual an excellent opportunity to gain a sense of the shadow's insights and decide whether or not they are someone they would wish to sponsor.

29 Creating occasional internal competitions

The importance of this idea is not so much about the competitions as it is about the pretext that they create for mixing staff up and encouraging them to work together in different ways.

Internal competitions make it possible to create new time-limited competition teams with a common interest in cheering each other on because of their shared desire to win.

Cross-organisation competitions create the option for staff to volunteer for a **different sort of role**, giving them a chance to develop their existing skills and competencies as well as demonstrating some talents that the organisation hasn't been able to witness so far.

They also make it possible for the CEO and top team to recognise individuals who might not have come to the fore within their established team and now step forward into a key role in their competition team.

30 Acknowledging your leadership role as a "space creator"

There are so many ways in which a top team can help to create more of a stretch culture across their organisation.

What they nearly all involve, in one way or another, is the top team coming up with some sort of proposition that creates the space for staff to **showcase under-used talents** and start to develop new ones.

30 Acknowledging your leadership role as a "space creator"

Continued

For an organisation to maintain a stretch culture, the Chief Executive and top leadership team need to be committed to shaking things up occasionally and **"reshuffling the pack"** to make it possible for others to step forward and shine.

By definition, stretch cultures involve a measure of **risk**, both on the part of those who are being stretched as well as the leaders facilitating the stretch.

What makes them so strong is the fact that this risk is predicated on an assumption of belief in others, and their ability to respond positively in a situation where they feel themselves being stretched.

There needs to be a general assumption within the organisation that people can speak up if they feel over-stretched.

Indeed, the whole point of stretch cultures is that they see stretching as a creative and developmental process, and fundamentally an experience that is **confidence-giving**.

It should be easier for a member of staff who feels genuinely stretched to speak up.

The stretch is then involved in creating the **space** for a process of ruthless prioritisation, weeding out those tasks that are dispensable and distracting individuals from the key challenges that require their full attention.

Stretch cultures are **challenging and addictive**.

They also need to be "refreshed" every now and again, so that the leaders of culture change experience the stretch themselves.

Time to stretch?

Once this culture is a part of your present it should always be a part of your future.

To return to any one of these Chapters, please click on the image.