



Insights arising from our
30th Leadership Conversation

Connect *not* convince

April 2019

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

Introduction

30

This Insights Report reflects on some of the key insights that emerged through our thirtieth Conversation for Leadership Fellows, on March 24-27 2019, on “*Outstanding leadership: five key elements*”.

We identified these elements as trust, integrity, courage, championing of others and striving for exceptionality.

This Conversation itself proved to be quite exceptional. We achieved higher levels of trust and two-way feedback and shared “stretching” than we have ever achieved among a group of Leadership Fellows, partly because of the fact that the Conversation spanned three nights and also because of the ways in which we just gelled as a group.

It was a privilege to be a part of the group and truly exciting to experience how we are developing an ever stronger sense of community among our Fellows.

As always, we have written this report around some of the core themes of our discussions. The three words that we have chosen for the front cover capture **one of the most transformational principles** that any leadership team could adopt in the ways in which you work together.

Pete Ashby
Director, Society of Leadership Fellows
St. George's House, Windsor Castle

pete.ashby@stgeorghouse.org

April 2nd, 2019

*“If you can keep your head when
all about you are losing theirs and
blaming it on you ...”*

If, by Rudyard Kipling, circa 1895

These are the first two lines of Kipling’s poem **If**, written in a style of giving advice to his son John on the challenge of becoming a man.

In so many ways, they capture one of the key virtues that leaders are occasionally called on to display: the ability to draw on their courage to demonstrate calmness at a time of crisis.

It is this capacity for calmness that can enable an outstanding leader to let the blame of others float above them.

In so many crises and emergencies where leaders have achieved a powerful connection with others, what they have spoken about afterwards has been their **state of being** rather than what they said.

As Captain of the ship, the leader’s role is sometimes to act as **Chief Reassurer**, steering the ship through turbulent waters, offering an authoritative and calming presence when others are pressing the panic button.

In this situation, the leader is called on not to convince those who are “losing their head” that they’ve got it wrong, but rather to embody the calmness and focus that the situation calls for.

This achieves a connection with others that enables them to take their finger off the panic button.

“If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too ...”

Kipling's **If**

We know that many leaders have a high degree of self-trust. The challenge is in knowing when our levels of self-trust are actually too high and lead to us becoming **over-reliant** on what our intuition tells us.

Whenever this happens, we can easily find ourselves unable to check ourselves if we are actually in the process of making a mistake.

This danger is compounded by the fact that others tend to hold back from challenging us when they see us as heavily reliant on our sense of intuition.

Why take on anyone who has already made up their mind that they're right?

This is why it is so incredibly important that we stress - time and again - how much we are up for being challenged.

Having freed ourselves from any need to convince others that we are right, we should be in a strong position to welcome genuine challenge.

We can draw insights from the “doubting” of others and in the process model one of the key behaviours underpinning outstanding leadership.

*“If you can meet with triumph
and disaster and treat these two
imposters just the same*”

Kipling's **If**

We drew a lot from these lines, and they helped us to understand why some Fellows who strike the rest of us as successful are so reluctant to describe themselves in this way.

We have all been in situations heralded by others as a triumph, and yet viewed by ourselves through the prism of “could have been better”.

Similarly, we have surely all lived through moments that some others described as disastrous - and we know could have been a lot worse than they were!

Both terms can so easily become imposters whenever we fail to link them to the insights and lessons that they offer us.

The hyperbole of triumphs and disasters can be positively unhelpful, which is why one Fellow said that “*success comes not through what we do but through the learning*”.

Rather than seeking triumphs, why not just aim for ongoing movement forward?

This way, we can focus more clearly on the scope that always remains for self-improvement, whether we are part of a near-triumph or a near-disaster.

“Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story ...”

Desiderata, Max Ehrmann, 1927

In the very buzzy WhatsApp group that we set up after this Leadership Conversation, we reminded ourselves of the resonance between our discussions and Max Ehrmann’s famous poem Desiderata.

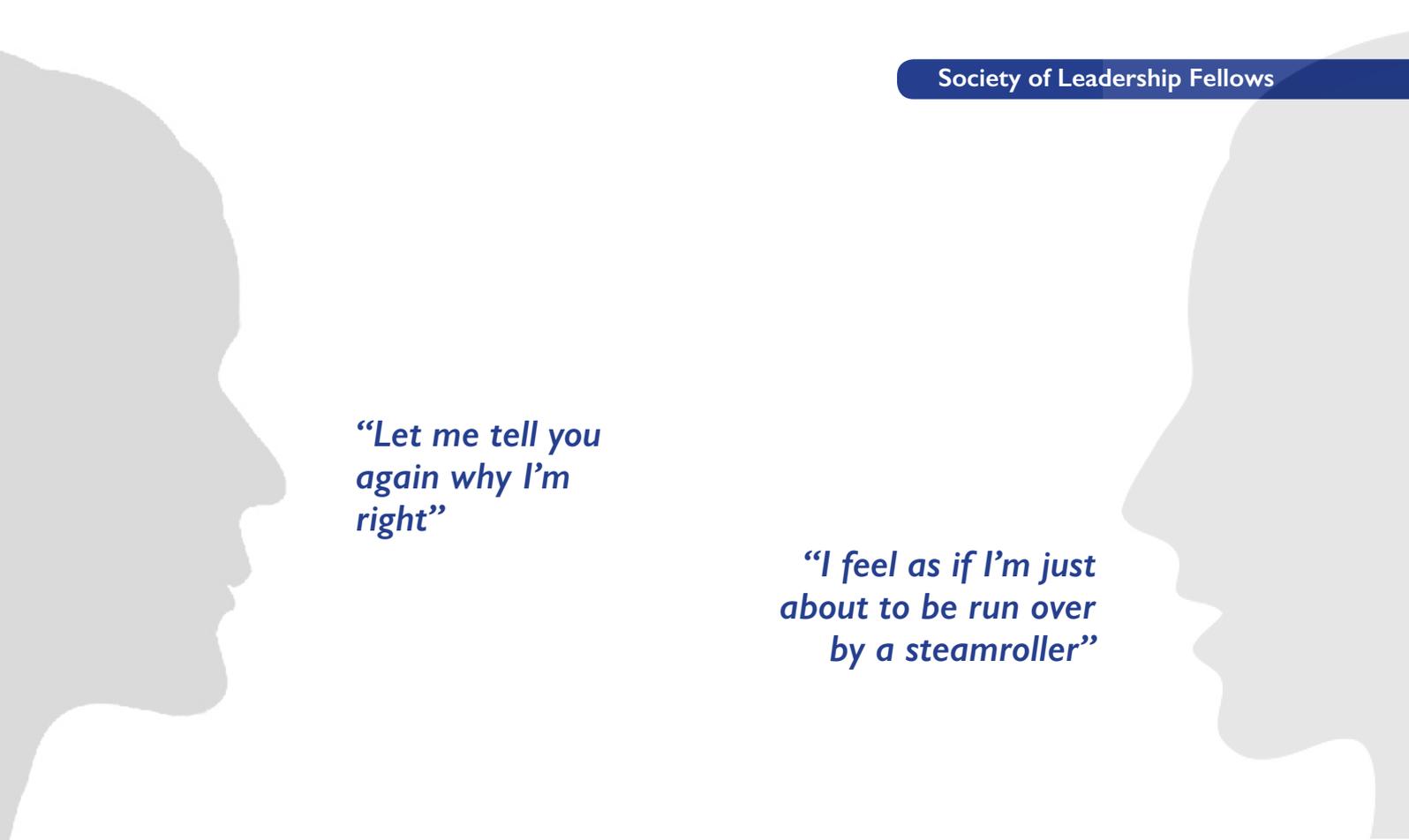
Our emphasis on leaders being calm and serene evoked his famous opening phrase, “*Go placidly amid the noise and the haste*”.

His words about speaking our truth quietly are especially relevant to our theme of connect not convince.

They make so much sense once we see our mission as being about engaging with others and listening hard to what they have to say, rather than winning converts to our cause!

One Fellow reminded us of the importance of “slow looking” in the visual arts. It is this skill of slowing down the pace sometimes, and probing more deeply, that is so key to outstanding leadership.

The more we speak our truth quietly and clearly, the easier it is to focus our attention on others doing the same.



*“Let me tell you
again why I’m
right”*

*“I feel as if I’m just
about to be run over
by a steamroller”*

We include this exchange above because we had a powerful discussion about the danger of some of us developing “steamroller-like behaviours”.

This theme enabled us to confront head-on the challenge that some of us face when others feel flattened by the force of our energy!

It is a particularly strong challenge for leaders who can become really passionate during debate and argue their case with such force that others find themselves switching off.

In these moments the passionate leader can either keep going, on the basis that they are just being “true to themselves”, or slow down and talk more quietly, on the basis that they have lost their connection with others and want to re-establish it.

When we view this from the standpoint of connect not convince, there isn’t really much of a choice, is there?

We step out of our steamroller.

The fact that we didn’t intend to flatten anyone should make it easier to think again about how we might best adjust our style in order to reconnect.



In so many situations, we seem to make the assumption that we need others to agree with us for them to do what we are asking of them.

Whilst this might sometimes be true, there are many professional situations where the opposite is the case!

Senior leaders will say that they would rather be part of a minority that has been listened to, and respected, than part of a consensus that depends on them pretending to agree with what they actually believe to be wrong.

Once we choose connection over conviction, it is easier for teams to come together as one, knowing that they hold different views and defer to each other at times on the basis that the honesty and integrity of their relationships come first.

Once we are connected, we can act as one, knowing that in any team it matters to each of us that we understand where the others stand.

Otherwise, people can so easily feel pressurised into appearing to agree with others for the sake of it being claimed that everyone is of the same mind.

“Let our *brightness* shine!”

In this Conversation, one of our themes was that as leaders we have a responsibility to “let our *brightness shine*”.

In giving ourselves permission to shine, and “*play bigger*”, we make it easier to challenge those around us who might feel that it is safer to remain in the shadows and “*play small*”.

This challenge is immeasurably more effective when it comes from a place where we suspend any need to convince and instead commit to active listening and genuine engagement.

We are not seeking to convince others that they must now play bigger.

We are sharing with them our intention to do so and our invitation to join us on this path from a position of real connection.

giving ourselves
 permission to **shine**,
 and **play bigger**

play bigger
 play bigger
 play bigger

Connect *not* convince

It feels so respectful of others.

It sets us on a path from which we can truly reject the imposters of triumph and disaster.

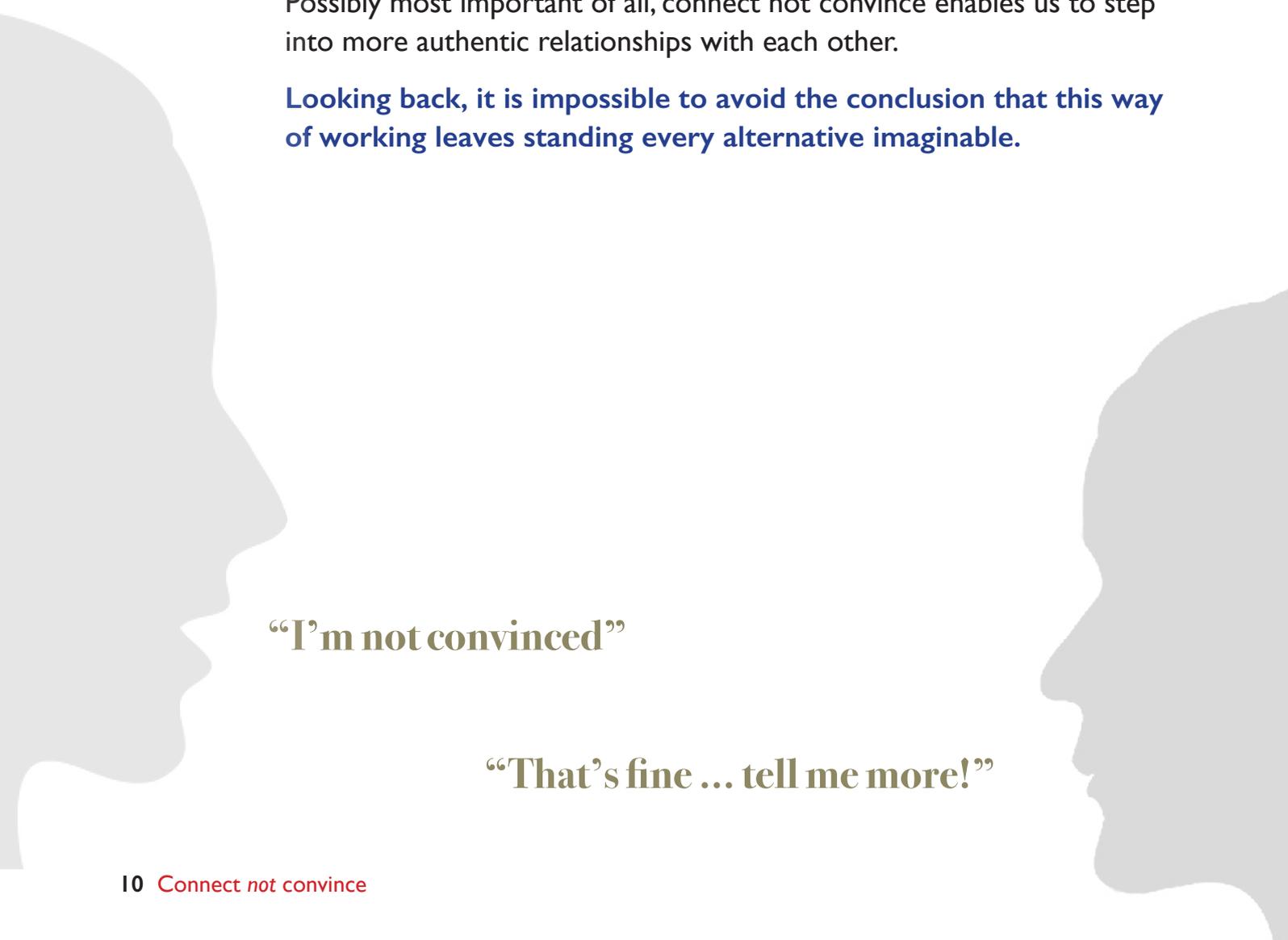
It provides the bedrock for a way of engaging with others that is all about shared learning and development.

If we really live connect not convince, we discover the true force of the Buddhist proverb that “*when the student is ready the teacher will appear*”.

We referred to this more than once during the Conversation, and delighted in the experience of achieving exceptionally high levels of mutual trust - and naturally becoming each other's teacher!

Possibly most important of all, connect not convince enables us to step into more authentic relationships with each other.

Looking back, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that this way of working leaves standing every alternative imaginable.



“I’m not convinced”

“That’s fine ... tell me more!”