



Insights arising from our
31st Leadership Conversation

Culture Change:

*farewell, impatient
bus driver!*

May 2019

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Let's BE the culture we want to SEE

This Insights Report reflects on some of the key insights that emerged through our 31st Conversation for Leadership Fellows, on April 25-26 2019, on “*Stepping forward as leaders of culture change*”. It followed on from a Conversation on leading culture change in 2018 (Nurturing Wisdom, Volume 2, Chapter 3).

This time, we quickly came to focus on the importance of calling out behaviours that detract from the culture that we are seeking to embed.

As we explored this challenge we were increasingly struck by the extent to which our impatience as leaders to drive change in the shortest time possible can so easily result in us ignoring some of

these behavioural challenges that are so vital to embedding high performing people-centric cultures.

As always with our Leadership Conversations, we were struck by the openness and creativity that Fellows brought to the session. It reminded us of how important our focus on behaviours really is if we are to address the greatest challenge of all in culture change, and that is **living** the culture we want to see coming into being!

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*“So what would
Maureen have said?”*

Creating space for people to let go

Picture yourself as a Chief Executive, having been appointed nine months previously and discussing with a group of stakeholders your plans for the coming year. *"I wish Maureen was still here"*, says one.

You **want** to say that your predecessor is enjoying her retirement and if anyone else mentions Maureen's name again soon you will scream.

Instead, you try to smile as much as you can - through gritted teeth - and say, *"So, if Maureen were here now what do you think she would say?"*

This story was told by a Leadership Fellow at this Conversation. It reveals the sense of **loss** and **grief** that many people experience when a leader leaves their organisation after a long time in post.



This demonstrates so well the principle that leaders committed to culture change need to create space for staff to let go of past loyalties. If they feel we can't see them, they're that much more likely to reciprocate by resisting us when we get out our "fresh broom".

They want to be on our bus, but they also want it to be okay to grieve for the loss of Maureen. Not too much to ask for, surely.

“When anyone disagrees with you, you never seem to take on board what they have to say. Can you tell me why it's not okay for you to be wrong, at least once or twice? I'm wrong loads of times!”



Calling out unhelpful behaviours

We all agree that culture change should involve us in calling out behaviours at odds with the values of our organisation.

Many of us say that whilst we like this in theory, we tend not to do much about it ourselves because we don't want to seem too critical of others and risk an upset that could lead to *"unintended consequences"*.

When we look at this more closely, we know that calling out behaviours should **not be** about offering criticism and judgement.

The best way of ensuring that it isn't about "storing things up" is to call out bad behaviours as and when they happen, in a way that is informal and conversational - and respectful.

We offer our comments in a spirit of generous challenge, on the basis that everyone on our bus has behaviours that we need to leave behind.

We stress that this is all part of our commitment to creating a healthy and vibrant culture.

Indeed, we see this process of calling out unhelpful behaviours as a way of everyone on this bus **supporting each other more**.





“The moment you think I’m not living our values, please say!”

Inviting others to challenge us

Whatever we say about not wanting to be seen to be critical, we know how some people respond when anyone challenges any of their behaviours. *"Who are they, sitting up on high, telling the rest of us how we should be behaving?"*

Part of our leadership challenge lies in demonstrating the sincerity of our view that calling out behaviours really is about **all of us** striving to be better, and not just a few sitting in judgement of everyone else.

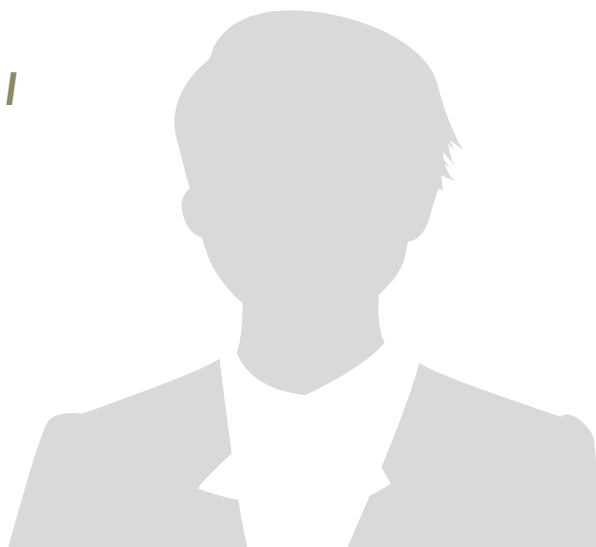
So, how about saying at a meeting of your top team that you would like **their advice** about which behaviours of yours they find unhelpful?



Perhaps also say that rather than them writing this down and paying for a consultant to read out a few anonymous soundbites, you would much **prefer it** if there could be the honesty between you that means they tell you this face-to-face. You will learn so much more this way.

You assume their best intent, just as you ask them to assume this of you. And you think it will be a happier bus if we all share this responsibility between us. **So, who's going to speak first?**

“What do you think I should stop, start or continue?”



Conversations for renegotiating behaviours

So, you have invited feedback from members of your top team, thanked them for their honesty and asked them to tell you when you repeat these behaviours, because it can take weeks and sometimes months to break some longstanding habits.

You have modelled a behaviour you want others to adopt. How?

One idea is that every now and again your team should have a conversation in which each member asks the others which behaviours of theirs are most important for **achieving the goals of the team** and which ones sometimes **get in the way** of the team being as good as it could possibly be.



Every few weeks or so you each ask the others, in team meetings and/or one-to-ones: **what would they like you to start doing, stop doing and continue to do?**

People are bound to be hesitant at first, but after a period of time trust should build quickly and everyone should feel that on their bus they're able to be **more real with each other**.

"If we need these systems for our clients, shouldn't we use them with our staff, too"

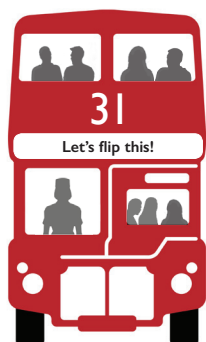


Using our customer IT tools for the benefit of our staff, too

In recent months our Fellowship has been strengthened by the appointment of a range of leaders from some major global corporate players. Some have highly sophisticated IT systems for assessing and tracking their customers' needs and expectations.

"So I suppose you have super-duper systems for tracking staff needs as well," asked another Fellow when we were discussing their IT systems for customers. *"Oh no",* came the reply, *"they're super basic!"*

The moment that was said, light bulbs went on across the Vicars' Hall! *"I think we should flip this",* said one. *"What we use to understand our external customers should also be used for our internal customers!"* *"That's right,"* said another. *"Whatever is good enough for our clients should be good enough for our staff team."*



So, for leaders who want to understand more about how those on board are thinking, don't just rely on personal conversations and what your HR team are telling you.

Your customer services team might well have a few other tools that are getting rather dusty!



“I need to stop trying to live an impossible week!”

Creating space for ourselves to hold space for others

At this Leadership Conversation we started off by asking ourselves about one of the most important outcomes from our previous session on this theme, which was that one of the key roles of a culture change leader is to *“hold the space for constructive conversation”*.

When we engaged with this question in small groups, we quickly came back with the answer that a good number of Leadership Fellows simply don't have the **time** to hold space for constructive conversation. We are all so fixed on pouring as much into our working life as possible that many of us are on constant overload.

So the message here is simple, isn't it. If we are to have the option of stepping forward and engaging with staff outside of the scheduled meetings booked in for months ahead, we first need to stop trying to *“live an impossible week”*.

Maybe we just need to dub this as an unhelpful habit and invite others to challenge us on this. *“If you know I'm in the office when I should be at home with my kids, please turn the lights out.”*

Stop the bus, the boss needs to get off for a while!



A double-edged sword

Impatience is such a double-edged sword for leaders.

In many ways, it's an essential dimension of high energy leadership. Yet through this series of Leadership Conversations we have seen times when undue impatience has got in the way of a leader achieving their strategic objectives.

The area of culture change provides one of the best examples of where many leaders would benefit from curbing some of their restless impatience.

Whilst this might be truly challenging for some, the simple truth is that leaders who wish to achieve lasting culture change first need to achieve a significant connection with staff at every level of their organisation.

This requires perseverance and empathy and generous-spirited challenge.

There is no guarantee that this will result in the culture that you seek.

What is pretty certain, though, is that if you **lack the patience** for this you should expect to join the ranks of those leaders who lament the poor culture of their organisation.

Do they blame themselves for this?

Hardly ever.

If they had any idea of how much they could have really changed their culture, wouldn't they have worked **harder to curb their personal impatience?**

