



Insights arising from our
32nd Leadership Conversation

Stepping into the future *with courage*

May 2019

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

A life-changing experience

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This Insights Report reflects on some of the key insights that emerged through our 32nd Conversation for Leadership Fellows, on May 12-14 2019, on “*Maintaining the courage to reach for the stars*”.

By the end of our time together every member of the group said that the experience had been life-changing. This was because the spirit of mutual support among us became so strong that we were each able to make really significant steps forward in drawing on our inner courage to reach for the stars.

The title of the report reflects one of the main breakthroughs in thinking that we achieved during our time together. This is captured in the first two of the eight propositions that follow.

In our final proposition, on pages 10 and 11, we suggest how these ideas might support disruptive leaders in managing any Dementors inside your organisation, as well as your inner Dementor, to ensure that you achieve a stronger bedrock of support for your core business strategy.



As often happens, this insight landed in the final five minutes of the Conversation. It is quite remarkable sometimes how our shared energies need to reach a **crescendo** - and then we achieve an insight that seems incredibly powerful and in its own way quite obvious, all at the same time!

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To understand why the present needs to change, we first need to see into the future

Early on during this Leadership Conversation we had a fascinating discussion about what it means to be a visionary leader. One member of our group said that "*visionaries no longer tolerate the present*".

This sparked some debate about the extent to which it's a good idea for leaders to demonstrate intolerance towards the present.

In the final few minutes of this Conversation, we returned to this theme and the pin dropped!

Visionary leaders often have the capacity to be very clear in their minds about what sort of future they want for their organisation. For them, carrying this vision round in their heads is a natural thing to do!

It is their **clarity of thinking** about the future that they aspire to for their business that fosters their intolerance of so many present day practices.

The problem, of course, is that not everyone shares this capacity to develop such a lucid vision of the future.

Without this reference point, intolerance of the present can so easily come across as unjustified and unfair.



2 *Visionary leaders need to spend more time sharing their story about the future*

This proposition follows on directly from the first. It requires us to face what for some leaders is a hard truth.

Visionary leaders who can see clearly into the future have a tendency to become intolerant not only towards the present but also towards **those around them** who don't immediately share their clarity of vision.

We don't all have equal eyesight. So those leaders who are blessed with strong eyesight when it comes to seeing the future surely have a **responsibility** for ensuring that others are given time to catch up and see what comes so naturally for them.

For any who become impatient with the idea of having to share their vision a few times, it is worth remembering that sight is **only one** of our main senses.

People with relatively poor eyesight can have **incredible intuition** that is not shared by the leader with brilliant eyesight.

They will be able to sense things about the future that aren't even on the radar of their clear-sighted leader!

They can add so much, especially where their visionary leader invites them to help create a **shared vision** as the basis for stepping into the future.



3 *When we feel the physical sensation of fear, we should interpret this as preparation for a moment of courage*

We have all had those moments when we feel our system being taken over by fear.

We have a key speech to make or a really difficult meeting to chair and a few hours beforehand our body is giving us some unmistakable signals that it doesn't like what is just about to happen.

What do we tend to do?

So often we feel **critical of ourselves** for feeling this fear.

We feel as if we are letting ourselves down and should somehow be able by now to manage this situation better!

Instead of turning on ourselves for feeling this fear, wouldn't it be better if we regard our inner turmoil as a **natural part** of the preparation that we have to go through to achieve what we want?

It is all part of the process of getting ready to draw on the courage that we will need later on to make a success of our "big moment".

Instead of letting us down, our system is actually helping us by signalling that this is now a time of preparation.

During this time we are getting ready to step forward into an uncertain future **with courage**.



**Our
preparation
time**

4 *We should be careful NOT to clarify too much! Fuzziness is fine so long as it doesn't turn into a fog*

How often have we heard leaders say that they have to offer their people certainty because this is what's expected from them?

When we have discussed this at previous Leadership Conversations, we have ended up agreeing that leaders who insist on offering certainty in situations that are distinctly uncertain can find themselves compromising their integrity as leaders.

This is why we were talking this time round about the importance of offering clarity where we feel that we can do so from a position of integrity, whilst acknowledging those aspects of our vision for the future that are still evolving.

As we identify areas of fuzziness, we need to explain **how** we intend to go about finding our way through them so that we don't simply accept them as given.

If we let the fuzziness become a fog, this will tend to erode the confidence of our people at a time when we want to support them in developing a stronger sense of shared purpose.

The knack is to avoid over-clarifying our vision whilst also making clear that if we are to step into the future with courage, fuzziness and blur have their place **only for so long**.



BEWARE

possible
fog

5 *As leaders, we're connectors. If we're empowering leaders, we help to connect people with **THEMSELVES***

We talked a lot at this Conversation about the importance of connection.

The whole process of stepping into an uncertain future requires a high degree of connection between leaders and their wider staff team.

For those leaders whose main work is around empowering individuals and groups whose life experiences have been really disempowering, this role as connectors is doubly important.

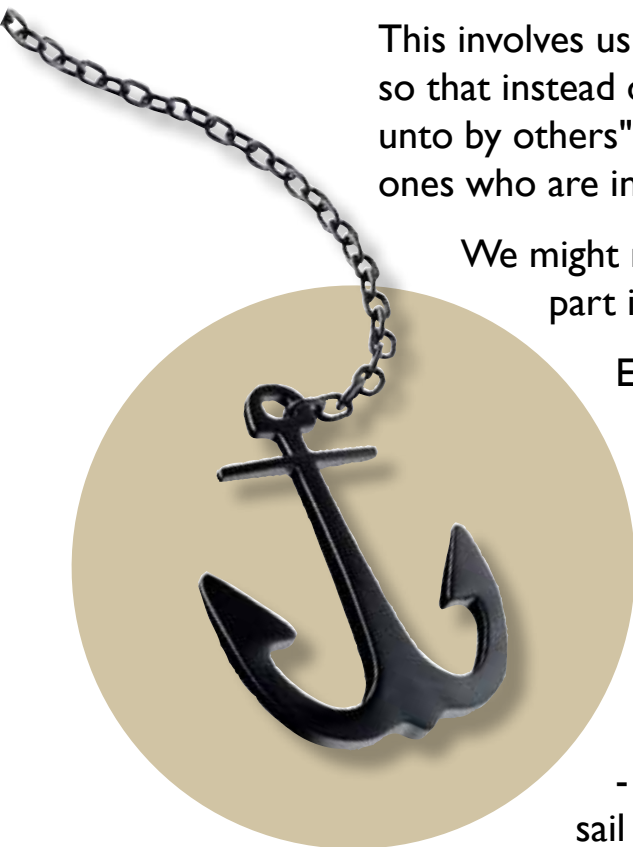
If we are to move forward, we first need to support them in reconnecting with **themselves**.

This involves us in helping them to change their narrative of life, so that instead of it being a narrative in which they are "done unto by others" it gradually becomes one in which they are the ones who are increasingly **driving** change.

We might need to support them early on by playing our part in "speaking truth to power".

Even when we do this, our aim should be to take "I" out of the narrative, so that the story is increasingly about "us" - with "us" being those who are in the process of empowering themselves.

For those who were previously disempowered by becoming stuck in some way, it's as if they have **raised their anchor** on their "boat of life" - and are now experiencing the power of setting sail once again.



6 A two-letter word: one of the keys to success

So many of us struggle with this.

It's a word that we know we don't use nearly enough.

As a result, we get used to taking on too much.

As we try to justify this overload to ourselves, we comfort ourselves with the thought that at least it's nice to be needed!

If we are to break out of this syndrome, there is no substitute for what one of our Fellows described as *"the one two-letter word that can form a sentence in its own right!"*

The challenge facing many of us who are not good at saying "No" is that we will almost certainly need to use it first with the very people who have probably benefited the most from us getting into this habit.

They are bound to be rather surprised when we respond to their next request with the word "No".

We might well find that in this moment they display rather dreadful listening skills.

So we will probably need to experience their surprise quite a few times if we are to break our habit of being unable to say "No".

It takes **courage** to break this habit - and vigilance not to slip back into it!



No
means
no

7 *If we tend to back off when challenged, it's time for NINJA wisdom. Step forward and turn the heat up to full!*

At Leadership Conversations we spend quite a bit of time discussing how we would like to respond when we're challenged.

We keep on coming back to this because many of us are **conflict averse** and our instinct is to back off in the face of challenge.

More often than not, we are told that we should **embrace challenge** and stand our ground.

Whilst that's all fine, it doesn't offer us practical advice about what we should do.

One suggestion this time was that we could take a leaf out of the book of Japan's Ninja warriors, who defeated their enemy using unconventional warfare. They showed how the silent art of ninjutsu can achieve so much more than aggressive attack.

As one Leadership Fellow put it,

"Ask yourself what the other person wouldn't expect you to do - and then do it, silently and calmly."

This means that if they expect you to back off, you step forward and turn the heat up to full!"

By turning the dial we demonstrate the courage to change the rules of the game.



8 *Looking forward before we look back – and then **ENGAGING** our people with this vision*

At this Conversation, we all learnt so much when we took on board the proposition that to mobilise others in support of changing the present, they first need to have a chance of sharing our vision of the future – and ideally co-creating it with us.

The fact is, however, that this happens very little.

Where leaders offer up a vision to others, it is **so often** on the basis of “*Here it is, sign up now*”.

We don’t offer it up in a way that enables others to feel we are really committed to them sharing our sense of what the future looks like.

It is **relatively easy** to tell others what is wrong with the here and now and why it needs to change to enable us to create the future that we would like for our organisation.

It is **so much harder** to let our imagination take us into the future, and really move on in our thinking, and then share this with others on the basis that we want their input too.

**Future comes 1st
Present comes 2nd**

We need to do this **first** if we are to put ourselves in the best possible position to discuss how we need to vary the present to enable us to **move towards** our shared vision of the future.

This is surely the best way of fostering **shared intolerance** towards those behaviours and practices that are blocking our path forward, and creating a **common resolve** to tackle them together.

Disempowering the Dementors

As you read these words, do they make you wonder what they might imply for your struggle with the Dementors - those inside your organisation who try to block any changes that you want, as well as your **inner** Dementor that can so easily get into a lock with those around you?

(These ideas from an earlier Conversation are written up in [Chapter 6 of Volume 4 of "Nurturing Wisdom"](#).)

Just think how it would **help** if any Dementors had to rail against your vision for the future **before** they could take aim at your intolerance of poor practices in the here and now.

It would be a lot more difficult for them to move against you once you have some bedrock of support for your vision, and everyone knows they have all had a chance to speak their truth.

Similarly, wouldn't it be easy to keep your inner Dementor on a tight leash if you could tell yourself that you are moving forward and taking your people with you.

There could be a new mood of harmony in the land.

Stepping into the future with courage - and rather docile Dementors. **There's a thought!**

