**Insights arising from our
33rd Leadership Conversation**

Doing the right thing

- six behaviours and four challenges

June 2019

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Introduction

33 This Insights Report reflects on the key insights that emerged through our 33rd Conversation for Leadership Fellows, on June 4th 2019, on "*Role-modelling integrity in Leadership*".

This followed on from two previous Conversations on integrity in leadership that are written up as the opening Chapters in Volumes 3 and 4 of "Nurturing Wisdom", on our Insights page on the St George's House website.

Even thought this was only a one-day Leadership Conversation, it was rich in resolves and insights, as you will see.

This is why the first part of this Report takes the form of six specific behaviours that it is possible for you to adopt as individual leaders, and also encourage your teams to adopt.

We hope that you will find them helpful for challenging yourselves as to how many merit an instant "*that's me*"!

 We then set out four challenging questions that you might already be grappling with, and present themselves in many ways as lifelong challenges.

As you will see, this focus on being tough on ourselves is intended to make it easier to challenge others about being **tough on themselves** in seeking to do the right thing.

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I tell it straight!

We all seem to agree on the importance of openness and transparency.

Yet in so many teams the language that we use with each other is ambiguous and coded.

We create elaborate "verbal dances", so that if someone disagrees with what we say it's easy to respond with the words,

- *"Oh no, I didn't mean that, you must have misunderstood me!"*

So it's a big deal if we make it a personal resolve to tell it straight!

Minimum code and **no** verbal dances.

Just the plain honest truth, delivered with generosity and clarity.

This then puts us in a position to say to anyone who comes out with some jargonistic gobbledygook,

"No need to give us any bull!

Tell us what you think in plain English."

Whenever we challenge others in this way, it can be very effective to say that they should **challenge us back** if they ever feel the same about us.

Just as we don't want to be on the receiving end of bull, we don't want to offer it up, either!

2 I never knowingly let a colleague fail

The shades of John Lewis make this more memorable, don't they!

One Leadership Fellow said that he agreed this behaviour with his leadership team a while ago and since then it has really made a difference.

Everyone knows that if they **volunteer** any sort of problem with an ongoing piece of work, they can take it for granted that the rest of the team will do what they can to help sort it out.

The idea of personal failure is off the agenda, so long as members of the team alert others to something going wrong **the minute it begins to go wrong**.

The team then has a shared resolve to sort out whatever problems need to be sorted out and learn whatever they can from the experience.

If any tough decisions need to be taken en route to minimise losses and change tack, they are all on board with the process and aware of the action that is being taken - and why.
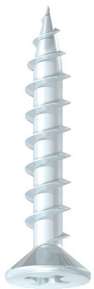
"I'm worried I'm about to screw up ..."

"We're here for you!"

3 I ask pokey questions

One of the strengths of the phrase "doing the right thing" is that it can be a good lead-in to a strong pokey question.

The key is that the language is all about "us" and "we":

- *"I'm just wondering whether we would be doing the right thing if we went down this road .... how can we justify using words in this draft press release that are almost certain to be misinterpreted?"*

Our style of language is inclusive and we sharpen up our question in a way that makes it as hard as possible for others to duck it.

One Leadership Fellow, who chairs a range of Boards, said that he has found one particular phrase really helpful for getting others to soften their position where he felt that they were over-arguing their case with the Board:

*"Can I get it right ... are you saying that **in your heart of hearts** you really believe this will achieve what you say?"*

The phrase "in your heart of hearts" creates a way for them to step back from an over-statement without a complete loss of face.

4 I'm always up for challenging my own assumptions

This is one of those principles that we always ask Leadership Fellows to sign up to at Conversations.

We stress the importance of **self-challenge** as part of our commitment to "connect not convince", to ensure that we don't find ourselves slipping back into what for many of us is an old habit of arguing for a position in order to 'win the room'.

This mindset is incredibly important if we are to behave in a way that reassures others about our overriding commitment to doing the right thing, rather than advancing any particular position or interest.

It is so **counter-cultural** in so many organisations that it isn't enough to adopt this as a mindset.

We need to be **seen** to be challenging **our own** assumptions on occasion, as well as *welcoming* challenge by others.

This is why it is really important to respond with a phrase such as **"*I have been wondering about that myself*"** whenever anyone challenges one of our assumptions.

*"I **must** keep my ego out of this! I clearly didn't think this through nearly enough ... "*

"I respect your challenge, it's very fair. Let me think about it ..."

5 I never undermine what's agreed in the room

This is another one of those behaviours that we agreed with feeling!

We have all been in meetings where something has been agreed in the room, and then within minutes of the meeting ending some team members are walking down the corridor telling each other that the decision is never going to be implemented - and their own teams will be furious when they get to hear about it!

There is no hint of them having any personal responsibility towards the decision that was taken without them having said one word against it in the room.

Whenever we discuss this sort of issue at a Leadership Conversation, we agree that it is up to the Chief Executive or whoever is leading the discussion in the room to insist that people express their personal views **before** a decision is taken.

Once the decision has been taken, everyone who is a party to it has an equal responsibility to support its implementation, irrespective of the position they favoured during the discussion.

Even where the CEO fails to make this explicit, there is a responsibility on everyone at a certain level of leadership to embrace the principle of collective responsibility.

Put up or shut up!

6 I assume that others want to do the right thing too

During this Conversation one Leadership Fellow told of how a senior colleague had recently taken a decision that he personally believed to be fundamentally wrong. With great passion, he explained to us why he thought it would be **so wrong**.

"So why not try and see this person and explain why you think they should rethink their decision?" we asked.

In the final session we invited Leadership Fellows to go on a **"personal leadership walk into the future"** and live the consequences of their new resolves to role-model integrity in leadership.

This particular Fellow got to his feet.

So we asked him to imagine that he had by now been to see his colleague and explained, with the full force of his personal authority and integrity, why it would be such a mistake to go ahead with his previous decision.

"What did he say?" we asked, rather hoping that he would be expecting to have triggered some sort of change of heart.

"Oh, he went ahead regardless", came the reply.

This moment gave us a real insight into the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy when it is set to negative!

To achieve the positive outcome that we want, we need to assume that others want to do the right thing, too.

If we anticipate failure, we shouldn't be surprised if that's the result!

7 How much of a people-pleaser am I?

In the final session of this Conversation, we were discussing how likely we all were to achieve the resolves that we had each adopted.

"The real problem is", said one Fellow, *"that I'm a people-pleaser."*

A number of others immediately shook their heads in agreement, and we immediately saw what a problem this can be when we need to summon up our inner courage to do the right thing!

Once others tell us that their version of "doing the right thing" is different from ours, what does our inner people-pleaser start to do?

A bit of an inner fidget!

"Ah well, we'd probably still be doing the right thing - it would just look a little different from what we had in mind!"

So we need to beware our people-pleasing tendencies, and the ways in which they encourage us to "flex up" what we mean by 'the right thing to do'.

Of course, others might be right about what is the correct thing to do and we might be wrong.

We just need to make sure that we come to this conclusion without our people-pleaser pretending that we all agree when what we're actually doing is **rolling over**!

8 Are we prepared to be vulnerable, to keep off the pedestal?
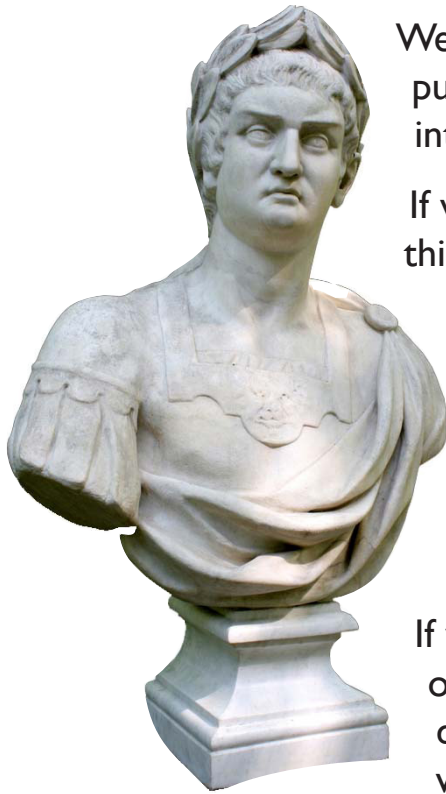
We all know that it can be fatal if we seem to be putting ourselves on a pedestal in any discussion about integrity.

If we have criticisms to make of others, we need to think hard both about the language that we use and the tone that we adopt.

The language of "doing the right thing" is so much less charged, emotionally, than the the word integrity, and has a lot going for it in situations where we fear that others are on the verge of compromising their own integrity.

If we want to be in a position to challenge others on this, we need to think about how we first demonstrate that **we ourselves** are regularly wrestling with integrity challenges.

How can we challenge anyone else on their integrity if we pretend that we never compromise our own?

This is why it is so important for leaders to share with close colleagues some of the ongoing compromises that they feel they have made to their integrity, and how they're acting to avoid them in future.

Whilst this does make us **vulnerable**, it is this that is so crucial to **trust-building** - and making it possible for others to reciprocate.

9 When will I know when my time is up?

In the final minutes of this Conversation, one powerful insight came through.

This was that in order to satisfy ourselves that we **are** acting within our integrity, we occasionally need to pause and ask:

● *is my current leadership role what I'm meant to be doing?*

The answer depends on what sort of life we want, which is why it's so important to pause and reflect before we answer our own question.

As one Fellow with a top global role in a 50,000 strong organisation said in answer to this question,

"I've been running for 30 years and part of me wants to stop. My worry is that if I slow down, what then?"

We can all keep running and running, and keep ourselves **so busy** that we don't have space to ask ourselves these tough questions.

Maybe we're running because we're fearful of what our answers might be.

● *What sort of life do I really want?*

● *How close is that to the life I have now?*

These are quite scary questions for many of us, which is why there is such a powerful link between integrity and courage.

Courage is vital to so many aspects of leadership, not least the **self-leadership** that is called for when it is time for us to move on in our lives to whatever the next stage might be.

10 How much am I up for renegotiating my boundaries?

We had some discussion about the boundaries that we have with others and the extent to which we are responsible for establishing and protecting our own boundaries.

We also recognised that we only need modest boundaries in our most special relationships in life where we can take the integrity of the other person for granted in the same way that we take our own quest for integrity for granted.

Where we feel that the integrity of others is in any way questionable, we need higher boundaries.

We also need to be that bit more vigilant about **not** taking on their "stuff" and making it our own.

For any of us, it would be a great challenge to reflect on how much more we need to **vary our boundaries** with colleagues at work, to reflect the integrity and vulnerability inherent to these individual relationships.

It is so important to appreciate those relationships where integrity and trust are so high that boundaries are already very low, and becoming **lower still.**

The higher the integrity and trust, the lower the boundary can be

Losing fewer morsels of our integrity

It is striking how this theme of boundary-setting came to the fore at the end of this third Leadership Conversation on integrity.

At our first Conversation we had agreed that our integrity is deeply personal to each of us and can not be sub-contracted to our employer or indeed anyone else.

It it **ours**, and ours alone to preserve and protect.

At our second Conversation we had recognised that for most of us the main challenges to our integrity come through **small and forgivable compromises** on our part.

They can occur on a weekly - and sometimes daily - basis, when we let a tricky moment pass or go along with a slight rewriting of the truth, and in that instant lose a "crumb" of our integrity.

These tiny crumbs and morsels add up over time. They end up costing us **chunks** of our integrity - just as the efforts of a small mouse nibbling away at a piece of cheese end up taking out whole chunks!

So it was that at this third Conversation we recognised the importance of setting **higher boundaries for some relationships than others**, if we are to model high integrity leadership and not let go of some of our integrity.

In order to vary the boundaries between ourselves and others, we need to be thoughtful in assessing their integrity as well as being ready to step forward as leaders when we find ourselves at risk of compromising our own.

This requires greater **courage** than we often recognise.

*This interplay between **integrity, courage and boundary-setting** provides a powerful agenda to which we will return at a future Leadership Conversation.*