Insights arising from our
34th Leadership Conversation

Fairness, shields & accountability

June/July 2019

Society of Leadership Fellows
St George's House, Windsor Castle
This Insights Report reflects on some of the key insights that emerged through our 34th Conversation for Leadership Fellows, on managing the challenge of being fair as well as decisive.

We started our discussions by focusing on the desire of many leaders to be seen to be making choices that are fair to all concerned.

As we opened up this theme, we came to appreciate how much our leadership behaviours can be driven by the fear of being seen to be unfair. As you will see, it is this that gives rise to the shield in the title of this report!

We also recognised the importance of leaders establishing clear lines of accountability. These are so very important to organisations avoiding the default of letting fairness become overly focused on staff who articulate some sort of grievance.

This was another fascinating Leadership Conversation. We are very grateful to those Fellows and guests who joined us for the ways in which they engaged with this theme and then drew out a range of challenging personal resolves as a result of their leadership walks into the future, in the final session.

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We nearly all say that we want to be fair leaders. Of course, who wouldn't want to be fair?

When we drill down into this term, we find that many of us are driven by a fear of unfairness.

It is this fear that becomes our shield.

We often hide behind it, and use it to justify to ourselves why it's a good thing to avoid a difficult conversation with someone who has in some way under-performed.

"Can't risk being unfair", we think. "Let's just hope they don't make any more mistakes or we'll have to say something."

If and when things do go wrong again we feel we have no choice. We have to put down our shield and say there's a problem.
Instead of being thanked for not having said anything before, we find ourselves immediately on the defensive:

"I thought everything was okay and now I find you’ve been building up a case against me, behind my back. How can I trust someone who lets me believe everything is okay when it isn’t?"

We tell ourselves that we had nothing but the best of intentions, and now our motives are being entirely misconstrued.

Yet the truth is that we were so keen not to be unfair that we rather compromised ourselves by withholding our concerns about this individual’s performance.

**Skewing our judgement**

So many of us make this mistake, pretty regularly.

We let our fear of being unfair become such a powerful shield that it skews our judgement as leaders.

In the process, "fairness" becomes our all-purpose justification for trying not to upset anyone!

Not only does it fail in this purpose, but it sometimes backfires - spectacularly.

Hence the importance of reminding ourselves that fairness in leadership is not about avoiding upsets. Nor is it about decisions by committee.

It's about being fair across a number of fronts: to individuals, to teams, to ourselves and to the organisation.

It is fair to ourselves and the organisation to tell someone when they let us down.

So long as our spirit is one of **assuming the best**, what could be unfair about that?

Assuming the best, we **want** our concerns to be proved wrong!
2 Being prepared to stop and listen

Someone comes into your office in a rage. They've been let down and it's incredibly unfair.

You are up to your neck in work and this surprise interruption is, to say the least, unwelcome.

Do you stop what you are doing and ask them to explain the problem?

Or do you say it's not particularly convenient at the moment and would they mind fixing a time with your PA?

In this situation, some of us are quick to say that unfortunately the time isn't right, but later on next week should be easier....

For good measure, we add that it will be better to talk when they've had a chance to calm down.

We're then surprised when they walk straight out, without saying another word!
In this sort of situation, it is so very easy to forget one important principle: in matters to do with fairness, timing is key.

The person who has invaded our space has a clear sense of grievance and wrongdoing.

For them, this is personal.

They have been let down or judged unfairly. And they need to tell us how they feel.

How we respond in this moment could determine their view of us as leaders for a long time to come.

This is now about more than fairness.

It's about whether they feel taken seriously and how much they matter to us.

If we let that moment pass, and ask them to leave without making sure that we fix a time to talk one-to-one, ideally within hours, that moment will almost certainly go with them for ever.

They needed to share their story, and what did they get?

They were blanked. Given the cold shoulder. Told to join the queue for a date in the diary.

**Our need for control**

Ironic, isn't it! We tell ourselves how much we don't want to be unfair, and yet in these moments we so often let our need for control and order take precedence over a colleague's need to be heard.

We know they're almost boiling over and yet we convey the message that this is their problem.

What's fair about that?
Those of us who fear the idea of being seen to be unfair know that this isn't the only fear in our being! Far from it.

Another one that many of us share is the fear of argument and confrontation.

The idea of someone coming into our personal space at work and offloading their angst and anger can almost make our blood run cold!

We might well be busy, but we know that this is really just an excuse!

The simple fact is that we don't like arguments and we have no desire to get drawn into a confrontation between two other people.

If only we can release ourselves from this fear of confrontation, it becomes so much easier to create space for someone to let go of some of their negativity.

We don't have to take on their rant and make it our own. We just have to listen!
No need to offer an instant fix

The leaders who don’t like others ”having a rant” tend to be the ones who need to interrupt and correct any inaccuracies.

They seem to find it impossible to hold back and say nothing.

Yet so often this is all the ranter is asking for.

They hardly ever want an instant fix. They just want to get off their chest why they feel they have been treated so unfairly.

Once they have said their piece it is possible to say how useful it would be to reflect and perhaps consult with others.

But the ranter needs to dump some of their stuff first!

Compassion trumps candour

As we discussed this in Windsor, we rather found ourselves questioning one of the assumptions that we have made at many Leadership Conversations, where we have put the desire for candour right at the top of our list of leadership qualities.

Our thought was that in this sort of situation, what we’re really being challenged on as leaders is our compassion.

We need to be mindful of our personal assumptions and biases, and be careful to put ourselves in the shoes of the person in front of us.

What we’re really being called upon to show is some respect and compassion, so that we can gently encourage them to hope for an outcome where the negativity of the situation can be left behind sooner rather than later.
4 Key work accountabilities

At this Conversation, we were very clear that fairness is about context.

In so many leadership situations, the key to getting context right is to define individuals' accountabilities.

- What are they responsible for?
- What are they expected to achieve, by when and with what support?
- What are the tracking systems in place for ensuring that where targets aren't being achieved and support isn't forthcoming, action is taken to get back on track?
- Where individuals and teams fail to meet their agreed targets, what are the consequences - in terms that can be understood by all concerned before they find themselves being held to account?
Defining consequence is key to fairness

It is the failure of many leadership teams to deal fairly with under-performance issues that gives rise to charges of unfairness.

In so many organisations where performance is medium to good, high performers have two consistent laments:

1. They are under-recognised for performing above the expectation of their Board and top team.

2. The under-performers are not being held to account in the way that was previously agreed.

In short, the desire of the leadership team not to be seen to be unfair in the eyes of the under-performers results in the top performers feeling under-appreciated and not properly seen.

This sense of unfairness on the part of the top performers can do considerably more damage to the overall performance of the organisation than a defensive sense of not being understood on the part of the low performers.

Consequence counts

This is why it's so incredibly important that leaders define the consequences of success and failure in meeting agreed targets.

There will, of course, be exceptional circumstances when leaders need to use their discretion and perhaps moderate the consequences of failure or go the extra mile in rewarding success.

The principle remains, however, that fairness requires leaders to hold their people to account for their performance.

Consequence counts.

Without consequence there can be no real accountability.

Without accountability there can be no real sense of fairness.
5 Resetting our own moral compass

We started this report with the image of the shield because it seems to reflect the way fairness is viewed within many workplace cultures.

For many leaders, their quest for fairness is driven to a large degree by their desire not to be seen to be unfair.

The difficulty with this approach towards fairness is that it takes a concept that is already highly subjective and defines it primarily through the eyes of others.

At this Leadership Conversation, our sense was that we need to let go of this "shield".

It just gives us the illusion of protection, because it is about our fear of others seeing us in a negative light.

Instead, we need to reset our own moral compass to help us take stock of our overall direction of travel as leaders.

This should provide a broader context within which we can set our own standards of fairness and integrity.

This should strengthen us in offering greater clarity of accountability to others, and being ready to show compassion when they experience a sense of unfairness.

It should enable us to see unfairness as a state that we occasionally help our teams, and ourselves, to pass through.
Passing through unfairness: our leadership of others (and sometimes ourselves!)

occasional rants
sense of grievance
wrapped up in self

focused forward
carrying little “baggage”
assuming the best