



Insights arising from our  
35th Leadership Conversation

# Goodbye, workaholism!

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

# The challenge

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So many leaders believe that the energy and recognition that they seek come overwhelmingly from their lives at work.

In order to change this significantly, we all need to ask ourselves how we could gain greater energy from the non-work parts of our lives.

We also need to ask what we can do to define ourselves more in relation to the whole of our lives rather than just those parts in which we are defined as a leader.

To measure up to this challenge, we first need to ask ourselves what it is that reinforces the tendency of so many leaders to become workaholics in the first place!

# Time to fess up!

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To be able to say "goodbye, inner workaholic" we first need to ask ourselves what it is about the way we behave as leaders that reinforces our tendency to become workaholics.

As we engaged with this question in Windsor, four answers came forward. They help to explain why it is much easier for leaders to slip into workaholism than to resist it.

## 1 We over-indulge our perfectionist

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Many of us spend too long engaged with tasks that should have taken us half as long.

We also have a tendency, when faced with any sort of crisis, to raise the stakes to a point where anything less than a near-perfect outcome is seen as little short of a disaster!



One Fellow described this as a tendency to "awfulize" difficult situations.

Combine this with our tendency to push too long for perfection, and we have a recipe for being taken over by occasional dramas in a way that edges us more and more to the life of a workaholic.

## 2 We fail to curb our people-pleaser

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So often at Conversations, Leadership Fellows will admit to being "people pleasers".

We know that we like to do what other people ask of us and recognise that each time we fail to say "no" makes it even more difficult next time.

Yet many of us keep on rushing round doing what is asked of us and then venting to our partner at home or a close colleague at work when we have run out of time to pursue our own priorities.

Our workaholic and our people-pleaser reinforce each other. To rein one in we need to rein in the other.

## Time to fess up!

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### 3 We make ourselves overly available

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How many times have we said something along the lines of "My door is always open ...."?

Yet we know that when we are on a tight deadline, or prepping for a key meeting, the last thing we want is for someone to come in and offload about something that is bugging them in that particular moment.



People who set clear boundaries around their time at work, and know that they need to leave the office at a certain time because of something important in the rest of their life, can't always have an open door policy.

There are times when we need to be **unavailable** to others at work. Or else we will become even less available to our families and friends outside work.

### 4 We over-think things

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This is one of those propositions that we definitely don't need to over-think!

For those of us who have a tendency to get lost inside a thought bubble about something, we know that the energy loss can be huge.

We tell ourselves that what we previously saw as an interesting challenge has now become more difficult than we expected it to be.

So we try to make a virtue out of taking our time.

We start to procrastinate, because that's what over-thinkers do.

We work harder and harder because we're not moving forward, because key decisions aren't being taken.

Sound familiar?

# Eight steps to tackle workaholism

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So, what do we need if we are to be successful in taking on these behaviours, which are pretty strong habits for many of us?

This is the question that we asked ourselves and we came up with a range of ideas. You will know which ones work best for you as a leader.

**1**

## ***Offer real candour - about ourselves***

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This was the first key word that made us pause. Candour.

We all need to be candid with ourselves about **how much of ourselves** we are investing in our working lives as leaders.

Too many of us are in too much **denial** about how much of ourselves we are giving to our working lives.

How about putting candour at the top of the list for this particular topic.

Candour about ourselves, with ourselves.

**2**

## ***Show compassion - towards ourselves***

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We have used this term a few times and it felt really important that this should be used now.

We know that it is so very easy for leaders to slip into a state of workaholism without ever intending that family and friends should feel neglected in the ways that they so often do in the face of an absentee workaholic.

So we should be compassionate towards ourselves because we're taking responsibility for these consequences and saying we're going to do something to **change them!**

3

## ***Accept the need for self-discipline***

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If we're going to recognise that we **do** have a pretty obsessive-compulsive attitude towards our work, whilst being generous-spirited towards ourselves so that we don't turn this into an excuse for prolonged self-flagellation .... then let's **go for it!**

If we do, this will require real self-discipline on our part.

Self-discipline in making sure that we're not so drained energetically by our lives at work that we have very little left for anything else.

Discipline in the way we act and behave as a leader.

This quickly brings to mind another word that we will almost certainly need to use to describe some of our new behaviours as leaders hoping to become former workaholics: ruthless!

4

## ***Become more ruthless***

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A lot of us don't like this word, do we? At least not when we apply it to ourselves.

Yet the truth is that our absence of ruthlessness for a lot of the time is an important cause of the problem that we now have with workaholism.

We know that there are people at work who count themselves as among the "**comfortably numb**".

Instead of complaining about them when they're not around and covering for them when they under-perform, isn't it now time to have a few difficult conversations?

We need people around us that we can rely upon and trust to take on work that we would otherwise do ourselves.

If we can't trust them to share the burden, why are we keeping them there?

## 5

**Get practical**

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As well as dealing with under-performance issues that we should have dealt with long ago, we need to look at **our own performance** - and not least the amount of time that we give to sitting in front of a computer screen.

We have to cut down the "unnecessary noise" that stops us thinking more clearly and resolving tricky issues more quickly at work.

We don't have to come up with all the solutions ourselves! In fact, there is much to be gained from asking others at work for their help and advice.

It's a great way of reminding them that we **are** serious in altering the balance between our life at work and our life outside work.

One idea that one Fellow has used to great effect has been to tell everyone that all emails with their name in the c.c. box will automatically go into their Trash file.

If they want to engage with them directly, they need to put their name in the "To" box and say clearly what they're asking for.

The moment they told everyone they were doing this, it had the desired impact.

Email traffic was dramatically reduced as people got the message:

*- If you want to land in my Inbox, make sure you need something from me first!*

## 6

***Tell family and friends "This is it!"***

If we are serious about tackling our workaholism, we know there are times when we're going to get cold feet.

We will have lots of good reasons - and excuses - for why we can't extricate ourselves from all sorts of commitments at work that we will almost certainly have to withdraw from to create more space in our non-work life.

How do we help ourselves to hold the faith and make sure that we keep going in those moments when we're thinking that stepping free from workaholism is one big step **too far**?



We declare our intentions to our family and closest friends - and we do so **loudly**!

We tell them that we have short-changed them for too long and we're now making a **firm and binding undertaking** to become a better partner/ parent/ family member/ friend from this moment onwards.

We have decided there is **no turning back**, which is why we want them to tell us in no uncertain terms if they see us faltering and slipping back into old habits.

We put it out there, and trust in the active grapevine among our nearest and dearest to spread the news on our behalf.

Then we've done it!

We're not just becoming more ruthless with some others who should have experienced this some time ago.

We're becoming more ruthless in the ways we're managing **ourselves**, knowing that if we're serious about ending our work-centric approach towards life there really is **no alternative**.

Time to say it as it is - and make sure we put ourselves on a hook so large that there's no getting off it!



## 7

## *See this as an act of bravery*

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One thing we always tell ourselves at Leadership Conversations is that there can be a world of difference between deciding something is the "right thing to do", sitting round discussing it in the Vicars' Hall, and then going back to our daily lives and making a reality of our resolves.

We have learnt that significant changes in our behaviours as leaders often require a significant degree of bravery on our part.

**This** is surely one of those cases where we need to see ourselves as being brave.

It is especially important to use the *b* word because we know that ending a pattern of workaholic behaviours is not just about changing our email protocols and telling the family that after years of promising to reform this time it's for real!

It involves us rethinking in a pretty fundamental way **how we define ourselves in relation to others**.

So many workaholic leaders define themselves overwhelmingly through the nature of their job title and the organisation that they work for.

It is this **self-definition** that helps to trap them into their workaholic behaviours.

We know that if we are to find new ways of engaging with all of the different strands of our lives, we will - over time - need to develop a **broader sense of our identity** as a human being.

In our many relationships, we will need to find ways of signalling the importance that we attach to aspects of our lives that go beyond our narrow professional identity as a leader.

It will be especially important for some of those we're closest to at work to understand how much we value our Thursday evening art class, or being in time for the Board meeting of a local charity that we support - or making sure that we get home in time to cook dinner!

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## ***Discovering the power of BEING***

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As we opened up these themes of discussion in Windsor, we were very aware that the quest to become an ex-workaholic is so very much about a positive quest to become **more comfortable** with wanting to live the whole of our lives more fully.

Once we had embraced this proposition, we could see how the struggle to let go of workaholic behaviours is at the heart of the struggle to become **our true selves**.

We all know that many workaholic behaviours are initially triggered by our fears of failure as leaders.

As we begin to let go of these behaviours so we can, hopefully, **reframe** these fears.

We can do this by letting ourselves experience the **joy** of all that we are achieving, in relation to our family responsibilities and friendship groups, as well as the commitment that we are making to **ourselves** in our personal time.

In the process, we come to develop a fuller sense of the power of **being** as well as the power of achieving.

For a leader on the road to becoming an ex-workaholic, there can be something incredibly powerful about just experiencing some time sitting on a settee and doing virtually nothing apart from **being**.

The idea of having nothing to do in the moment tends to instil panic in the mind of the workaholic.

For a leader letting go of this workaholism, it can induce a new-found sense of liberation and power.

*As well as the occasional wobbles, of course, which is why we all need our families and friends to keep us on track!*



Let's drink to  
ex-workaholics!  
Always work  
in progress...