



# **Authenticity and trust in leadership**

*Insights from two  
Leadership Conversations*

**Society of Leadership Fellows**  

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St George's House, Windsor Castle

# Contents

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**Chapter 1** **Being more authentic as a leader** **3**

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**Chapter 2** **Becoming more trustworthy** **17**

*December 2017*

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**Coming soon**

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**High trust leadership: driving up performance**

*March 2020*

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## **Chapter 1**

# **Being more authentic as a leader**

# Six key propositions

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- i** **Authenticity is fundamentally linked to TRUST**

The power of authenticity as a concept is fundamentally linked to trust. Our level of trust in someone else is crucial to determining how authentic we can let ourselves be with them
- ii** **We need a better sense of what is DISTINCTIVE about our authenticity**

We need to be more conscious of what we want to “put out there”, otherwise we will find that in our quest to become more authentic we actually become too concerned with pleasing others
- iii** **We need a stronger sense of SELF-LOYALTY**

The powerful concept of loyalty can easily be used as a cover for a leadership style this is so externally focused that we lose sight of one of our core needs as a leader: loyalty to our own values and principles
- iv** **Many of us need a stronger sense of what we EXPECT from ourselves**

As leaders we can easily end up being tougher on ourselves than we are on others. This is why we need to change the balance between external and internal expectations by putting integrity and courage centre-stage
- v** **We need to develop our capacity for SELF-COMPASSION**

Through working on the value of self-compassion, we can become tougher -and more compassionate – with others as well as ourselves
- vi** **We need to create more TIME for ourselves**

We need to create more time for ourselves, to **be** as well as to **do**, and to affirm the joy of “bringing all of ourselves” into our authenticity as leaders.

# Ten questions

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- 1** Do we agree that authenticity isn't ALWAYS a good thing?

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- 2** With whom do we most want to be authentic?

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- 3** In our key relationships as leaders, how do we manage the interface between authenticity and trust?

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- 4** If we had to capture our "better self" in a few words, what would we each come up with?

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- 5** Which characteristic of ours best defines us as an authentic leader?

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- 6** How much is our authenticity as a leader about how we want to BE – and how much is it about the IMPACT we want to have on others?

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- 7** We love to talk about our loyalty to others. How important is it to be loyal to ourselves, as part of our authenticity?

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- 8** What is it that causes us to be tougher on ourselves than on others? Is it that we are more fearful of their harsh judgement than we are of our own?

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- 9** How can we bring the spotlight back on to the standards by which we want to judge ourselves as leaders?

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- 10** How do we NOW feel about authenticity?

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## I Do we agree that authenticity isn't ALWAYS a good thing?

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Have you noticed that whenever people refer to authentic leadership there nearly always seems to be the assumption that it is bound to be a good thing?



**Authentic leader = tick in the box**

**Really? *At all times and in all situations?***

On a day when you wake up feeling gripped by indecision and fear, or so stressed that you know you're at risk of biting off the head of the first person who says the wrong thing, is it really a good idea to let your feelings dictate your behaviour on the basis that this is you being "authentic"?

***Surely not!***

This doesn't mean that you have to pretend to be full of joy and optimism at times when you might actually be feeling depressed and pessimistic.

It just means that you might need to keep your head down for a few hours and hope that you're not put on the spot until you are in a better state to perform as **the leader that you want to be**.

### **Setting authenticity in context**

What this tells us is that authenticity needs to be set in context if it is to be useful as a concept.

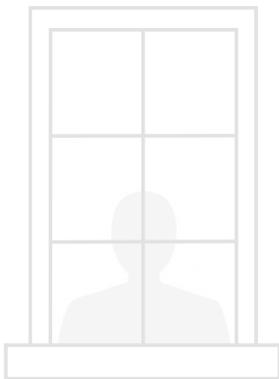
Out of context, it becomes yet another generalised abstraction that has little relevance to the real life needs of leaders.

authenticity...  
in context

## 2 With whom do we most want to be authentic?

As leaders we have different levels of professional and personal responsibility to different people. So it's really important to ask the question:

- in whose eyes do we most want to be seen as authentic?



### A “window into our true self”

This question reminds us that authenticity really is a big deal. It offers someone a “window into our true self” and a chance to see who we really are.

If we offer this to someone, then it is important that we accept responsibility for what we have done.

The fact that we don't want to **lie** about who we are doesn't make us **obliged** to expose our inner selves to everyone we come into contact with.

### It's fair to be selective

So, it seems fair and reasonable to say that we should be selective in deciding **who** is going to be granted a view into our inner selves, and when.

Of course, most of us say that we want to be seen as authentic by our immediate team of closest confidantes at work.

So far, so good – and then it gets rather tricky. For example, when CEOs talk about the Chair of their Board, and Chairs talk about their CEO, a lot of uncertainty can come in.

This is no surprise, because our degree of authenticity with others depends to a large degree upon how much we trust them. In some of these key work relationships, trust is sometimes more **precarious** than either side will openly acknowledge.

### 3 In our key relationships as leaders, how do we manage the interface between authenticity and trust?

This is another one of those questions that we all need to think about pretty hard before knowing what's the right answer. It is also one where there is, of course, no single right answer.

#### Authenticity up-front – to help **BUILD** trust

For some leaders, the offer of real authenticity with someone is a means of building greater trust.

The simple fact that authenticity involves a measure of risk on our part contributes a lot to the trust-building process.



As we let ourselves be authentic with others about our ambitions and fears as a leader, this helps our relationship move on to a different – and higher - level.

We know we are taking a certain risk, and we know that it can bring us some real benefits in terms of building trust.

#### Trust **BEFORE** true authenticity

In the case of other relationships, we can regard this degree of self-disclosure as a step too far.

We tell ourselves that if we are to let our guard down and be truly authentic, we first need to establish a higher level of trust.

Until that time, we need a measure of guardedness to ensure that we don't let ourselves become too vulnerable to individuals whose honourable intentions towards us cannot yet be taken for granted.

Every relationship is different. What's key is that we **trust ourselves** in determining the degree of authenticity that we should offer in each particular relationship.

# Authenticity & trust

## 4 If we had to capture our “better self” in a few words, what would we each come up with?

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This theme of authenticity and trust draws out a powerful point:

- When we talk of authentic leaders, we tend to make the assumption that what they share about themselves “authentically” makes it possible for others to achieve a **stronger connection** with them.

This connection is often described as being with their “better self”.

### **Describing what you see as your “better self”**

This is why it would be a really good exercise for you and your immediate team to give yourselves the challenge of describing in as few words as possible what you each see as your “**better self**”.

We find that when leadership teams first ask themselves this question, they tend to come up with quite general terms such as:

- Approachable/ open-minded/ encouraging/ resilient/ curious/ adaptable/ strategic.

Most of these words apply to a wide range of leaders and don’t shine a particular light into anyone’s personal authenticity as a leader.

After all, if a leader didn’t feel able to associate themselves with all of these adjectives to one degree or another, there would be grounds for concern.

### **Identifying something more distinctive**

This explains why we asked ourselves a more focused question in Windsor, to encourage Fellows to identify something more distinctive about their leadership style that they would like others to see as key to their authenticity.

It was a question that triggered some really fascinating answers.

**Authenticity  
& your better self**

## 5 Which characteristic of ours best defines us as an authentic leader?

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If you go through this exercise with your team, some might want to stick with calling themselves “good listeners” or “calm in a time of crisis”.

We suggest that you give yourselves 15 minutes or so in groups of 2 or 3 to sharpen up your personal answers, and then set aside quite a bit longer to share your answers among the team. And make a point of saying that no-one can “recycle” anything that has already been said. It’s a great ground rule!

### “The joy of bringing ALL of yourself ...”

In Windsor, the answer from one Leadership Fellow really captured our imagination as a group.

He defined authenticity in terms of:

- “The joy of **bringing all of yourself** to something and **being part of something bigger** than yourself”.

When you look at these words, they are the sort of language that wouldn’t be out of place at an evangelical rally. Yet here we were thinking about them in a Conversation about authentic leadership – and it was **exciting!**

What really gripped us was the way in which this combined two propositions:

- Us giving all of ourselves to something, joyfully - in a way that many associate with mindfulness
- This something else being “bigger” than us and having a wider purpose that enables us to have a greater impact as leaders **because** we are part of something bigger. Wow!

*Joy - and something bigger than ourselves*

## 6 How much is our authenticity as a leader about how we want to BE – and how much is it about the IMPACT we want to have on others?

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In these Insights reports we do not generally share detailed outputs from the Conversation. In this case, however, we want to offer more to help explain the discussion that this then made possible for us.

As other Leadership Fellows came up with different phrases to describe what authenticity means to them, they focused on how they want to be as leaders. They used terms such as:

- **Stretching themselves to grow**
- **Setting high standards**, whilst being a good listener with an open style
- **Leading from the front**, whilst caring for and nurturing others
- Showing that “I want to **know**” the individuals I’m working with and “**care** about what matters to them”
- Being **fiercely loyal**, “doing the best for my people and the organisation in every situation”.

The words that other Fellows used emphasised how they wanted to increase their impact as leaders, for example by:

- Providing **positive creative disruption**
- Demanding the **extraordinary** as well as offering real time **honest feedback**
- **Enabling curiosity** through insightful facilitation
- Inspiring others to **maximise their potential**
- **Optimising** the value of people.

BEING

IMPACT

## 7 We love to talk about our loyalty to others. How important is it to be loyal to ourselves, as part of our authenticity?

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As this discussion went on, we found ourselves spending more and more time talking about what others expect from us. This is why every now and again we made a point of pulling ourselves back to the fact that authenticity is in a very fundamental sense about what we expect from **ourselves**.

### **Asking what sort of leader we WANT to be**

If we are to be seen as authentic by others, we need a pretty good idea of whether the ways in which we are currently positioning ourselves as a leader actually reflects what we want.

This is why it can be so helpful to talk about loyalty, because this enables us to challenge ourselves about **where we see our loyalties lying**.

### **What holds back so many leaders?**

Through this discussion we shared the insight that so many leaders are held back by their ongoing preoccupation with what others think of them.

The fact that their sense of loyalty is so outward-facing stops them from acknowledging their loyalties to **themselves**, that they have to see if they are to step into their full potential as a leader.

### **Giving ourselves a good kicking**

It is our occasional lack of loyalty to ourselves that makes it so easy for us to be tougher on ourselves than we are on others.

We all say that people follow **authentic and not perfect leaders**. Yet many of us love to give ourselves a good kicking on those occasions when we are other than perfect!



# Authenticity & loyalty

## 8 What is it that causes us to be tougher on ourselves than on others? Is it that we are more fearful of their harsh judgement than we are of our own?



This line of thinking led to another insight that took a number of us by surprise and yet seemed completely natural once we had let ourselves spend a few minutes thinking it through.

A range of concerns quickly came to the surface about how we were performing as leaders. Namely:

- We tend to be “**cowardly** with our teams”
- We let our leadership be “too much about others”
- We’re “not nearly as tough on others as we are on ourselves”
- We “**hold back from being our best** when we know others aren’t being theirs”.

### **Worrying most about what OTHERS think**

We were clear that our first instinct is to worry most about what others think of us.

Why is this? In part it’s because a term like authentic makes us ask what **others** think of our leadership and not how **we** feel we’re performing as a leader.

So, whenever we consider our authenticity as leaders, wouldn’t it be good if we could spend a little more time focusing on the values and virtues that we want to associate ourselves with, so that they really can drive our behaviours in a more conscious way than they tend to do at present?

*Authenticity & ducking harsh judgement by others*

## 9 How can we bring the spotlight back on to the standards by which we want to judge ourselves as leaders?

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The thought here is more about us **changing the balance** between external and internal expectations, so that the expectations that we set for **ourselves** come to the fore rather more than at present.

### **Integrity and courage – putting them centre-stage**

This takes us back to the insights from previous Leadership Conversations on the theme of courage in leadership and leading with integrity.

If we are to become rather more willing as leaders to risk criticism from others for the sake of our own principles and standards, we need a clear sense of our “bottom lines”.

Our personal integrity and courage need to be at the very heart of our internal dialogue that enables us to say to others “I am drawing a line in the sand just there, and **beyond that point I will not go**”.

### **The importance of self-compassion, too**

As we work at projecting our own values rather more, we also need to create space to think through the force of **self-compassion**, building for example on the excellent work of [Kristin Neff](#) on this theme.

For the vast majority of leaders, more self-compassion could only be a good thing.

It should also enable us to **expect more** of others and **show them some compassion too** at those times when they fail to meet the high standards that we expect of them.

Authenticity, standards  
& self-compassion

## 10 How do we NOW feel about authenticity?

At the end of this Leadership Conversation, our general sense was of continuing to value the concept of authenticity as a way in to asking ourselves some tough questions about the sort of leader that we **want to be** – and therefore want to project to those around us.

### Devaluing the importance of what we stand for

At the same time, a number of us came to the view that our cultural preoccupation with authenticity has contributed to the process of many of us devaluing the importance of what we stand for as leaders as we seek to “adjust and trim” to make sure that those around us give us the thumbs up!



This is why we ended up spending a fair bit of time discussing **what is important to us**, as well as our authenticity. We ended up with a wide agreement that our own sense of integrity and self-loyalty and self-compassion need to be seen as sitting at the core of our authenticity.

We also challenged ourselves with the thought that at times the “authentic us” might not be particularly pleasant to be with. A desire for authenticity requires us to find ways of **owning** our not so likeable side, as well as defining more clearly the core virtues that we will draw on in those moments whenever we take the moral high ground as a leader.

One other rather practical point came to the fore in the final stages of this Conversation. Most of us do not create enough time for ourselves, with the result that we don’t perhaps know ourselves as well as we think we might.

### More time needed – for ourselves

We need to place a higher premium on the **time** that we all need just to **be**, and remind ourselves of the simple **joys of life**, without having to be tied in to some worthy mission that accounts for every moment of our working life.

*Using the word joy again brings to mind the words of one of our Leadership Fellows during this Conversation to describe what authenticity means for him ...*

*“The joy of  
bringing all  
of yourself to  
something and  
being part  
of something  
bigger than  
yourself”*



## **Chapter 2**

# **Becoming more trustworthy as a leader**

# 6 Insights

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## 1 Trust and championing others

Sometimes our keenness to demonstrate our trust in colleagues we value highly can lead to us giving our trust too freely – and in a way that means we’re not there for them when they most need us.

## 2 Trust and keeping others happy

Our desire to be seen as trustworthy by others in our own team can mean that we become over-concerned with meeting their expectations towards us – at the expense of our expectations towards them.

## 3 Trust and risk-taking

Our concern not to jeopardise the trust of a risk-averse colleague – or boss – can lead to us copping out of taking risks with them.

## 4 Trust and managing disagreement

Our concern not to jeopardise others’ trust in us can make us question our own judgement about what is the right thing to do, in situations where others disagree.

## 5 Trust and setting the standard

We are so keen to keep control over the standards of working in our business that we insist on “owning” them ourselves, without thinking about the impact on staff attitudes - and the danger of them regarding our controlling behaviours as a sign of our lack of trust in them.

## 6 Trust and our top challenge: trusting ourselves

The challenge of becoming more trustworthy as a leader can easily result in us spending most of our time thinking about how others view us. In the process, we can fail to ask ourselves the killer question that will determine our success more than anything else: how much do we trust our own judgements as a leader?

# Trust and championing others

## Danger

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We place our trust in a colleague to take responsibility for a major new assignment and then leave them to it.

The burden of our belief in them means that they are unable to turn to us for help when they encounter a serious problem. When the problem becomes so serious that we are called in, we take back their responsibility and withdraw our trust.

## Coaching tips

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- Great that you want to develop someone you clearly believe in. But how is it that you gave them a major new responsibility without asking them to take it for granted that you would be there for them the moment they run into a difficulty and want your help and advice?
- If you simply tell someone who's taking on a fresh and challenging task that you trust them and don't also say that you're there to help them get out of any holes they land themselves in, it's no wonder that they don't tell you as much as they should. By over-investing trust in them, you helped to make them fearful of letting you down. This meant that they couldn't trust you enough to respond the right way at the time when they needed you the most.
- Instead of being quick to punish them for their failure, you should have been quicker to take responsibility for your own failure in not offering them any sort of life raft after you threw them in the deep end.

## 2 Trust and keeping others happy

### Danger

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We are given responsibility for leading a new team and want to demonstrate what an inclusive team player we are.

We are careful to ask what they expect of us and do all that we can to fit in with the current team culture. We quickly realise that we are so busy trying to fit in with others that they lose sight of our expectations of them – and when we say that we want to put in place some major changes in how the team works, they are surprised and tell each other that they're not sure where they stand with us and so can't really trust us.

### Coaching tips

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- For members of your team to feel able to trust you as their new leader, they need to feel that early on they are developing a good sense of the sort of leader that you are. If you intend to introduce some changes that they are likely to regard as radical, give them the signal that you want to behave in a way that some might well be uneasy with. This way, you are less likely to take them by surprise later on. Surprises can do a lot to undermine trust, since people can easily persuade themselves that a new leader deliberately kept them in the dark because of a “hidden agenda”.
- We are often tempted to want to keep people happy, and can justify this to ourselves as a way of retaining their trust. The problem with this is that it ignores the truth that trust is to a large degree conditional on us behaving as the sort of leader we purport to be. Leaders whose main concern is to keep their people happy are “trusted” as relatively weak and reactive leaders. If you want to be trusted as a strong and purposeful leader, you need to demonstrate this in your behaviours.
- At the same time, you should make a point of inviting feedback about how members of your team are experiencing you as their leader. If they see you as receptive to their ideas, they are likely to trust you more as a leader who is purposeful and also responsive to them.

## 3 Trust and risk-taking

### Danger

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We have an idea that brings with it some risks that we believe to be worth taking for the sake of the business benefits that it would bring.

Our enthusiasm for the prize isn't shared by some of those we need to convince. Their focus is mainly on the risks and because of this we tell ourselves to back off and give up on the idea lest our colleagues see us as a compulsive risk-taker.

### Coaching tips

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- Instead of being deterred by your risk-averse colleagues, why not factor this in to the advice that you give? Tell them that you had an idea you wanted to raise with them and rejected on the grounds that it's too risky. Having thought about it some more, you have come up with a way of de-risking it to a considerable degree, so now you have a proposal that could be made to work.
- By acknowledging up-front their dislike of risk-taking you give yourself your best chance of disarming them and persuading them to follow the course that you want. In the process, you build their trust in you as someone who respects their wariness of risk-taking and is ready to reshape an idea to ensure that it fits in with their approach towards the business.
- There are bound to be times when you can't de-risk a good idea in this way. In these cases, it is important to introduce some rigour into the process of assessing what the risk really is. Risk-averse leaders tend to withdraw from a line of thinking fairly quickly once they sense danger. When they see a "red light", it is important to ask them to engage in some thoughtful risk assessment, on the basis that the light would only turn to green if they are reassured as a result of this assessment. Sometimes our response to them bottling out too quickly can be to do the same, and it is this that we need to avoid.

## 4 Trust and managing disagreement

### Danger

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We hold back from offering our personal judgement because we feel that it's more important to retain the "trust" of those with whom we disagree.

Afterwards others feel that we haven't been open in arguing for what we believed to be the best course of action. They interpret our behaviour as showing us to be unreliable, because we have been willing to go along with something even though we're clearly not happy about it.

### Coaching tips

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- In this sort of situation, be transparent with others about why you feel as you do, making clear that there might well be a difference in approach – and if so, you would like to discuss it in an open way.
- Even if you end up disagreeing about the best way of moving forward, the others are likely to value your honesty – and feel they can trust the fact that they know where they stand with you. It is such a falsehood to believe that they have to agree with you to trust you.
- The key to high trust relationships is that we all feel a certain obligation to explain why we think as we do and be ready to shift in our thinking if others persuade us that they have a better idea. It is the transparency of our argument and our readiness to move on in our thinking that enable others to trust us a lot. Sometimes the fact that we can disagree on an issue we feel passionately about, and understand where we are each coming from, brings us closer together and helps us to trust each other more.

## 5 Trust and setting the standard

### Danger

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We are proud of the fact that we co-founded our business and are now developing a global profile. We see ourselves and our co-founder as “owning” the vision of our business and also the standards of performance that we expect of our teams and can’t imagine how this might have a negative impact on their attitudes towards us.

After all, if we hadn’t set up the business none of them would be in their present jobs. So what’s the problem with us owning the standards that we expect them all to meet?

### Coaching tips

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- ➔ Rather than focusing on what might be your entitlements as the founder and business leader, why not start by focusing on the needs of your people? You know that your best people constantly need to feel stretched, if they are to keep on giving of their best. So why treat your standards as off limits?
- ➔ Instead, wouldn’t it be better to say that you and your co-founder have set a series of minimum standards? You could explain these in vivid detail and then say that where any team members can beat these standards, and/ or come up with smarter ways of working, you want to hear about this and to learn from them.
- ➔ By trusting your people in this way, it doesn’t give away control. On the contrary, it encourages your best people to come to you with ideas and suggestions that enable you, together, to set higher standards. This way, they can trust you as someone who wants them to help you raise the bar rather than being wary of you as someone who is saying “back off, this is all mine!”

## 6 Trust and our top challenge: trusting ourselves

### **Danger**

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Trust really matters to us. So we are careful to ask how much others trust us as a leader. In the process we realise not only that people have wildly different expectations towards us, but also that they all have different sorts of “triggers” that can cause them to trust us more – or less.

We can spend so long seeking to win others’ trust that we fail to invest the time we should be giving to thinking through how we should behave as a leader. This is rather strange, really, since we are the ones responsible for our own performance as a leader – not anyone else.

### **Coaching tips**

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- Be very clear with yourself about whose trust matters to you the most. Who are the people with whom you most share your higher purpose in your professional life? So much can be gained from working at developing exceptionally high levels of mutual trust with them.
- Beyond this core group, perhaps the knack is to expect more modest levels of trust among these people you do business with occasionally. After all, they have different notions of their higher purpose and are bound to attach quite a few conditions to the level of trust they can invest in their relationship with you.
- However much trust you might achieve in your relationships with others, please don’t diminish the fundamental importance of your trust in yourself as a leader. The best leaders need to feel able to be in a situation where you might be the only person holding one particular view. If others are to line up behind you, they need occasionally to witness you trusting in your own judgement as a leader and standing your ground.

# We each need our honest challengers

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There is much to be said for inviting two or three people that we trust a lot to act as our honest challengers. We ask them to agree that we will occasionally have a few minutes together and discuss whether there is anything particular about our leadership style that might be creating barriers in the way of others trusting us more.

It is important that we encourage them to 'say it as it is' and hold back from diluting any difficult messages to make them more palatable.

We can also use this time with our challengers to bounce ideas off them in a way that we can only do with a trusted confidante.

It can be so useful to say to a trusted challenger,

*"If I were to do so-and-so, how do you think others would react?"*

## Learning to trust ourselves more

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Our aim is that through our behaviours as a leader we demonstrate our capacity to step up to the challenges that we face – and, through the way that we do so, inspire others to follow suit.

Two or three trusted personal challengers can support us so much with this by enabling us to sharpen up our own instincts and judgements as a leader, and learn to trust ourselves more.

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It is this interplay between our self-trust and the trust of others that is so key to our development as a high trust, high performing leader.