



# **Courage in leadership**

*Insights from 3  
Leadership Conversations*

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

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*July 2017*

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## **Chapter 1**

# **Different aspects of courage**

# Courage in Leadership

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**A**s leaders, having a sense of higher purpose gives us a reason beyond simply our egos to be courageous. We move out of our comfort zones to do the best for our organisations. But these acts are still personal: every time we are courageous we know there is some type of personal risk involved.

Taking the risk is easier when our backs are against the wall. We're all familiar with the way our popular culture projects a derring-do image of leadership courage: leading from the front, taking our people over the top and defying the odds.

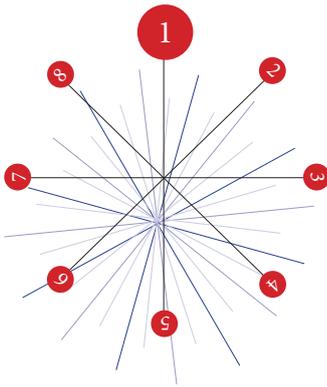
It is a lot harder when, as leaders, we have the choice either to let things ride or take the more difficult route that carries the risk of failure.

Courage is completely subjective: what makes one person feel vulnerable holds no fear for another.

Only we will know which of the following types of courage would take us, as individuals, out of our comfort zones and help in making us stronger leaders.

# Different aspects of courage

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## Having the courage to be vulnerable as part of our leadership

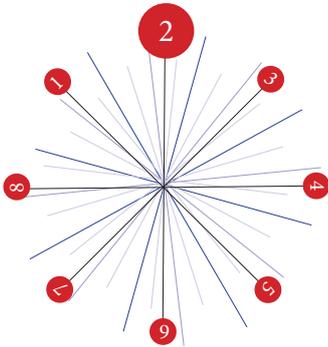
Sharing when we have doubts, and are uncertain, can be tremendously difficult. As leaders, it makes us vulnerable, and some of us resist showing our uncertainties because we don't want to risk appearing weak.

The danger of masking this vulnerability is that others can so easily feel that as leaders we can't be trusted because we are pretending to be what we are not.

More and more, those around us expect us to be honest with them about our doubts and anxieties.

*Courage helps us to own our vulnerability and regard it as a natural part of our leadership. We want those who work for us to feel that we are real and 'authentic'.*

*Having doubt also helps to build our credibility as leaders at times when we say, "On this issue I have no doubt, which is why I ask you to back me wholeheartedly".*

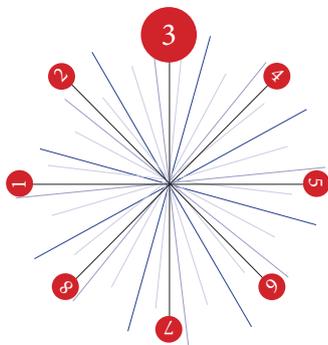


### Having the courage to slow down

As leaders, many of us like to move fast. For us, slowing down and getting close to those who are struggling to keep up is way out of our comfort zones. And yet, we might need to slow our pace if they are to have any chance of co-owning our sense of mission and purpose.

Our challenge is to help them in moving out from their safe spaces, by stopping and listening to what they have to say and encouraging them to share why they're struggling.

*Courage helps us to slow our pace so we don't become detached from our teams. It makes it possible for those in the 'slow lane' to speed up. Then we're off again – connected.*

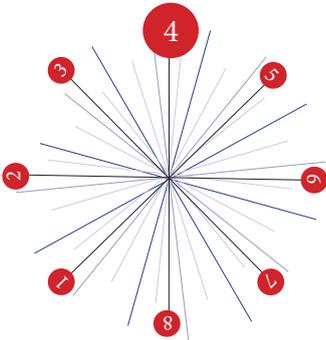


### Having the courage to accept things are messy

As leaders, many of us want a high degree of “tidiness” around us. It gives us a sense of control and order.

The problem is, though, that sometimes it's a sham - and a way of avoiding the mess that we know is all around us (if we say the word Brexit, nothing more need be said!).

*Courage helps us to accept the limitations on our ability to control the mess around us. We might still aspire to greater tidiness, one day. But we remind ourselves of the virtue of patience so that we can focus on the deeper challenges we face. If there is to be mess, better to have it on the surface where we can see it, rather than lurking in corners unseen.*

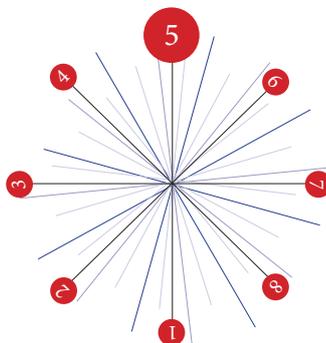


## Having the courage to work without a long-term plan

Many of us plan our professional development – where we want to be in 10 years time and the stages for achieving this. But what happens if, en route, there are unexpected opportunities that we haven't anticipated? Do we blind sight or discount them because they're not in our plan?

For some leaders, taking opportunities is part of their DNA, while for others the risk of leaping into something unplanned takes a real act of courage.

*Courage helps us to trust our intuition by taking opportunities that feel right and, if they turn out wrong, treating our failures as building blocks, not quick-sand.*

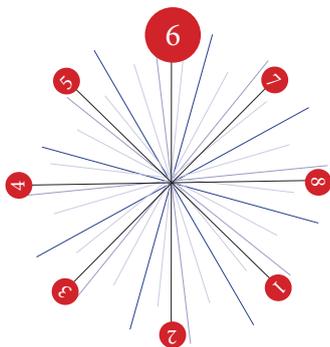


## Having the courage to be unpopular

As leaders, many of us have learnt that the more successful and visible we are, the more we become a target for those who disagree with or dislike what we stand for and say.

We interpret the criticism as personal, whereas it might well be generated by our leadership success and recognition of the team that we lead.

*Courage helps us to accept that as leaders we will be disliked by some. Albeit uncomfortable, being disliked can be an indicator of our success as leaders. When we are grappling with feelings of unfairness and hurt, it can be good to challenge ourselves on whether we would rather be ignored. This is not the ambition of many successful leaders!*

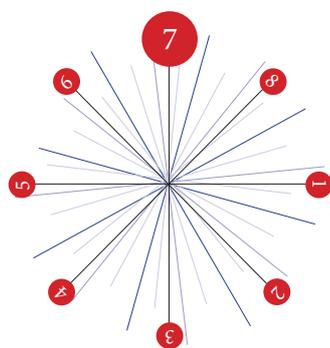


### Having the courage to see off saboteurs

At some point we all encounter behaviours that go beyond criticism, and are designed to undermine our leadership and the culture we want to set for our organisations.

For many of us, direct confrontation is deeply uncomfortable. An effective way of handling sabotaging behaviours is to tell ourselves that the attack is on what we stand for - our higher purpose - and not on us personally, although it can feel like that in the moment!

*Courage helps us to challenge the behaviour of those who want to scupper our intent, however uncomfortable this is for us. It keeps us focused on our wider mission and strengthens us in not getting drawn into a personal battle with the would-be saboteur.*



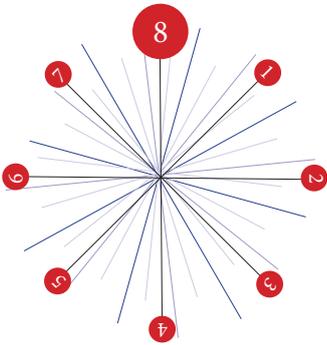
### Having the courage to accept others' high expectations

One of the most terrifying aspects of leadership is when we feel others believe that we're better than we think we are. We're frightened that if we try to do all that they are asking of us we will fail to rise to the challenge and show that their faith in us has been misjudged.

We don't have to prove to them but to ourselves that we are as good as they believe we are.

Of course, they may have got it wrong, and we might end up failing to meet their high expectations of us. But we also know that we almost certainly fail as leaders if we don't try.

*Courage helps us to accept others' belief in us. We engage with our fears that they might have over-estimated our natural abilities. We then apply ourselves to leading according to the highest standards that we set ourselves, clear that if we do fall short at some point we will convert that into a key learning moment in our ongoing leadership development.*



## Having the courage to test ourselves rather than waiting until we're tested

When we think of courage, we tend to think of situations where our back is against the wall. It is easier to be brave when the only other option is defeat!

Harder still can be the courage that is called for when we try to do things differently, because we think that is the right way to go.

It's about moving out of our comfort zones to take us from good to best. No one else is asking for it or expecting it, only ourselves.

*Courage helps us to have the energy and drive to strive to be our best even though we know we're already 'good enough' to keep others satisfied with our performance as leaders.*

*As leaders, if we don't have the courage to challenge ourselves to be the best, and constantly to raise our game, how can we expect people across our organisation to want to go 'from good to great'?*

## Finding our strength to be courageous

However strong we may appear as leaders, we all need at least one person who we know is watching our back and is 'there for us'. Whether our personal support network is just one person or more, they do so much in helping us to find our courage in those moments when we are challenged to move out of our comfort zone.

Their relationship with us, whether personal or professional, is one of absolute trust. These are the people who know when we are being courageous, when no one else does – and often also when our courage is in danger of deserting us.

We can share our doubts with them, allow them in to ask the hard questions, and share our shortcomings because they know who we are, what we want to achieve and the courage we need to do so.

In so many ways, they remind us that our courage needs to draw on the strength and recognition of those closest to us.

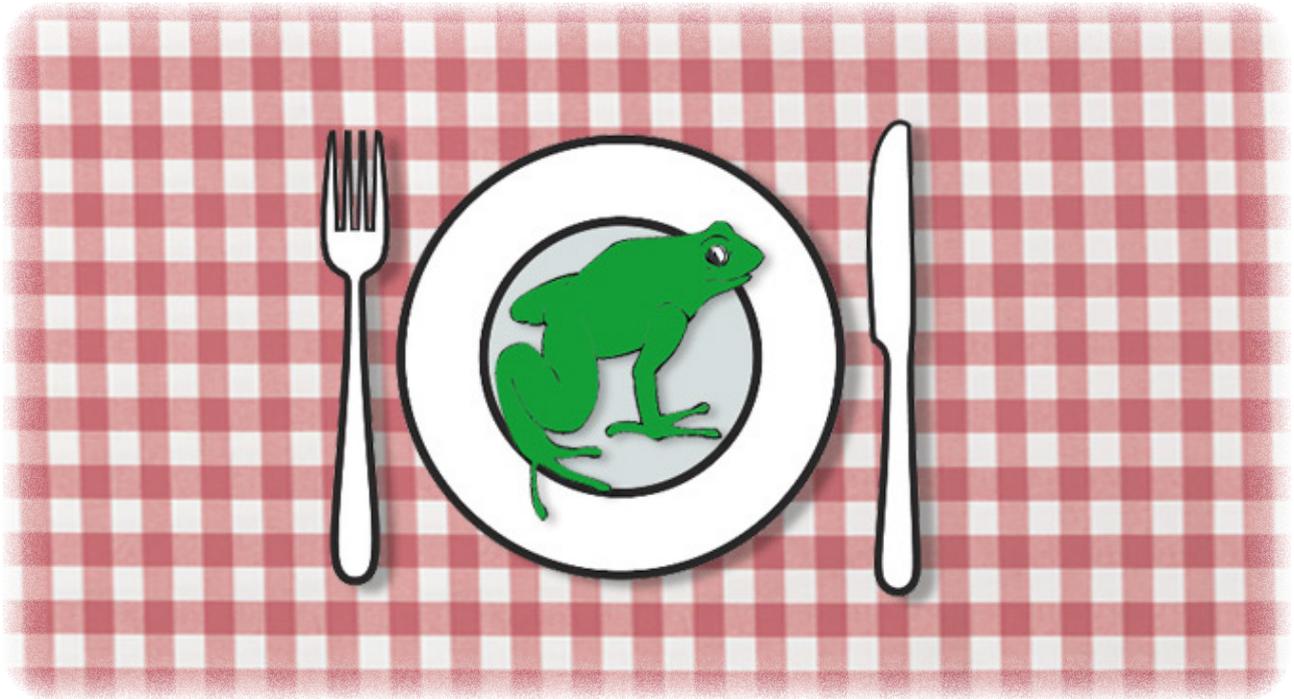
Whilst leadership is so often a lonely experience, courageous leadership is invariably an experience made possible by the informal support network that picks us up when we are down and affirms us when we are up.





## **Chapter 2**

# **Achieving our priorities *with courage***



## Tough stuff first

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We've all heard the Mark Twain quote about making ourselves eat a live frog every morning so that we go into the day knowing that nothing worse can happen.

We laugh about it, whilst knowing that it contains a very powerful truth.

For all bar a tiny number of us, it's simply not our natural way to start each day by dealing with whatever is on our "To do" list that we really don't want to do.

Instead, we tell ourselves that we will check our emails and have a quick word with colleagues, and then we have to join some meetings and lo and behold there's simply not time to deal with those priorities that we've already put off for too long!

### **Avoidance behaviours**

Many of us can keep ourselves busy in this way for months on end without ever admitting that these are avoidance behaviours!

We also fail to ask ourselves why those who work in our team should bother eating any frogs themselves when they see that we've left one croaking on our plate for so long!

### Spreading ourselves too thin

Having the courage to deal with tough stuff first isn't just about the routines that we create for ourselves, important though routines are.

It also requires us to accept that we often spread ourselves too thin.

We pretend that we have almost limitless energy and then find that something tough comes along requiring extra engagement on our part and we can't get involved because we're already over-extended.

Who puts us in the position where we just don't have time to take on the tough stuff because the diary is already chokka?

Exactly. It's us! Another avoidance behaviour on our part!

### Our need to be needed

At Leadership Conversations we often discuss our need as leaders to be liked. Many of us also have a need to be needed.

We keep on diving into quite operational work with our teams and then remain stuck in for longer than we intended. If challenged on this, we have at least 101 reasons for why the team love it and how they feel "seen" and affirmed by us.

We're not quite owning our need to be needed, which can so easily result in us spending time on non-essential work.

We're also not asking the team whether they would prefer us to be with them or off sorting out the difficult stuff instead.

We know what answer they would give us, if they were to speak their truth. But this would require them to show some courage in a situation where they know we're being other than courageous!



*"No emails until I've had that difficult conversation"*



## Chief Energiser

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Many of us know that one of our primary responsibilities is to give out energy to those who work to and with us – and keep on giving it out as our remit extends.

To give out energy by the bucket load, we have to **receive it** – and keep on receiving it.

This is why one of the CEOs who was part of this Leadership Conversation said that every morning when she wakes up her resolve is to **do what gives her energy!**

The truth is that the more we put out there, the more we need to worry about how quickly we will be able to replenish our reserve tanks once they have run dry.

It is truly a great gift that we can often draw terrific energy from those who believe that they have been inspired in some way by us.

As they step forward more, so do we feel ourselves re-energised by them.

### **Our inner critic**

In focusing on our leadership roles as Mr or Ms Energiser, we need to own the fact that many of us have a force within us that can nearly paralyse us as leaders by almost strangling our own energy supply.

This is our inner critic, that internal voice that can start going jibber-jabber in one of our ears at what feels like a second's notice and keep up its running commentary of negativity and self-doubt for hours on end!

Sometimes we so want to silence this voice. However, we know that we can't be too ruthless with it because this capacity of ours is an essential part of our self-defence system.

Sometimes it is completely in the right when it gives us an early warning about something and we need to take decisive action!

### **A time limit**

So, how should we handle this internal voice?

Surely the best way is to get it used to the idea that it can have brief moments "in the sun", after which it needs to go quiet again in the knowledge that we have stopped listening!



*"Okay, inner critic,  
you have **30 seconds**  
starting now!"*



## It's a marathon

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Some of us view leadership as a sprint. We run hard and keep on running until we have to stop because we're out of beans and are on the verge of falling over.

Then as soon as we've caught our breath we're off again at full pelt, finding it increasingly difficult to hide our irritation from those who ask us to slow down so that they can catch up.

### **Keeping energy in reserve**

Imagine that we see leadership instead as a marathon rather than a sprint. It changes everything, doesn't it?

We have to pace ourselves because we can't afford to be reckless with our energy.

Moreover, if we're running in a team we have to think about our pace in relation to other members of the team.

At times we need to slow down a little so that others can catch up.

At other times, when we build up speed again, we have to keep focused on the amount of the marathon that remains.

We need to keep enough energy in reserve for the final big push.

## Number one pace-setter

This reminds us that when we are thinking about achieving our top priorities as leaders, and becoming more courageous in those moments when we are tempted to play it safe, we need to see ourselves as number one pace-setter as well as chief energiser.

We model for others the pace that we hope they will want to follow too.

As they respond to our pace, we pour energy into the process of keeping us together as one team.

We encourage and affirm, sometimes signalling to individual team members that they're better than they think and can run harder.

We also become more intuitive as we learn to gear into their energy better. We don't want to be too far in front because this can be dispiriting for those taking up the rear.

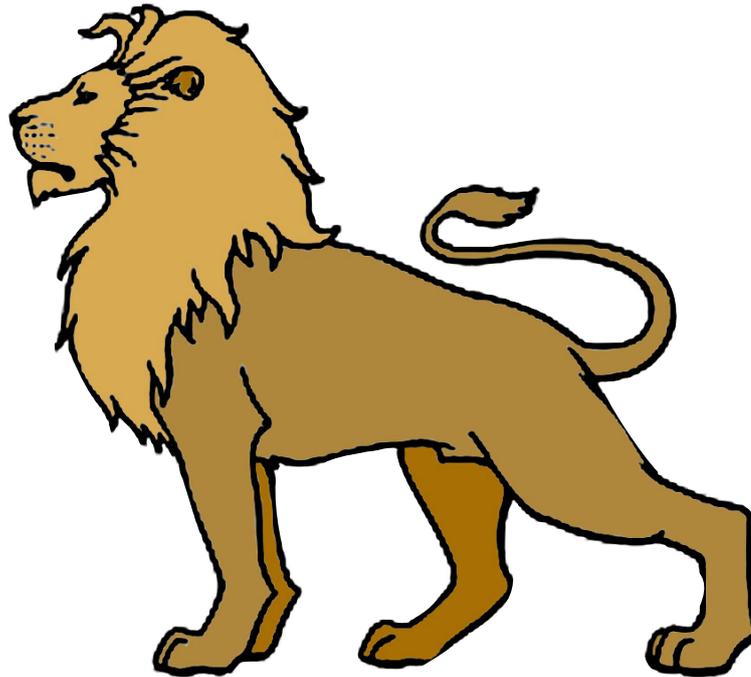
When we slow down for them to catch up, we do so not with resentment but in a spirit of appreciation of what the team has achieved so far.

When we quicken our pace again we are conscious of willing the others on, doing all we can to convey our belief in the ultimate success of the team.

There's one other great benefit of seeing leadership as a marathon.

All marathon runners know that the time spent practising can be **really special "me time"**.





## Personal courage

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After a plate-bound frog, why the lion, you might wonder?

We know the problem with the frog is its taste!

With the lion, it's very different.

Any encounter with the lion, and we expect it to be terminal within seconds - and distinctly messy, all at our expense.

Why does the lion matter in the context of us achieving our top priorities as leaders?

Because there are all sorts of situations that we fear and so we avoid.

Each time we avoid them, we disempower ourselves more as a leader.

This is why we need to think of our own courage and tell ourselves that we have lots of it within our being.

**Once we have told ourselves that our personal courage will enable us to take on that which we fear, we might well be surprised to find the lion metamorphosing into something much less fearsome.**

### Facing our fear of conflict

So many of us know that achieving our top priorities will involve some others feeling threatened by us.

We know that once anyone feels threatened there might well be conflict as they try to stop us from achieving what we want.

For many of us, this seven letter "C word" is a powerful trigger that mobilises our internal avoider big time.

In our mind, we picture ourselves entering a room and the lion sitting there. The frog is no longer on the plate and we are just about to take its place.

### Reframing the fear

Suppose we now reframe the fear. If it were a lion in the room, we might take a nice steak for it to eat (and some protection as well!)

If it's just a fierce human, we think of adopting a tone that doesn't play into their fierceness and treats them instead as if they are reasonable.

*"I hear you're not very keen on this plan of ours. I'm so keen to understand what is in your mind and whether we can find some creative way of working together over the next few months."*

We take control of our fear and show courage at the same time.

As we draw on our courage, we urge ourselves to take the next step forward.

The lion is a pussycat!

Ha, what was all the fuss about?

**Maybe I won't have to eat that frog tomorrow morning, after all.**



*"Deep down, I'm a pussycat, really!"*



## **Chapter 3**

# **Stepping into the future *with courage***

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

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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*

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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***

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Leadership Fellows 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.

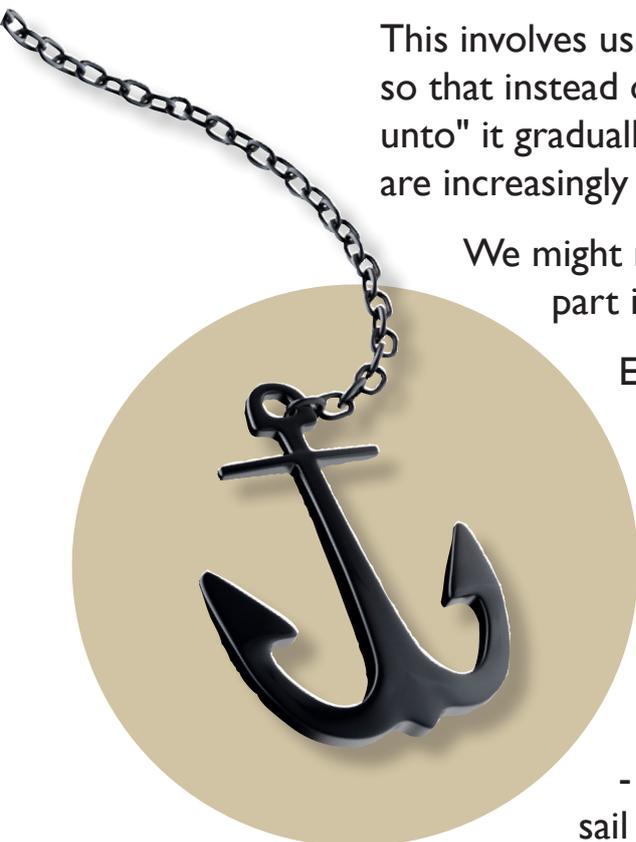
If we are to move forward, we first need to support some others in showing the courage to **reconnect with themselves**.

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" 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*

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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!*

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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*

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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?

(The struggle with the 'Dementors' is explored more fully in our theme about **Disruptive Leadership**.)

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!**

