



# **Creativity and innovation in leadership**

*Insights from two  
Leadership Conversations*

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

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## **Chapter 1**

# **Leaders as innovators**

# Innovation

*Innovation is about responding to change in a creative way; generating new ideas, conducting R&D, improving processes or revamping products and services. It's also a mindset in your business.*

Business Development Company

*The process of translating an idea or invention into a good or service that creates value or for which customers will pay.*

Business Dictionary

## A spectrum of definitions

*Technically, "innovation" is defined merely as "introducing something new;" there are no qualifiers of how groundbreaking or world-shattering that something needs to be only that it needs to be better than what was there before.*

Business Week

*Innovation: a creation (a new device or process) resulting from study and experimentation; introducing something new.*

Wordnet

# As a leader of innovation - *nine questions to help me become more effective*

**When I  
 talk about  
 innovation,  
 what do I  
 MEAN by it?**

KNOWING WHAT I MEAN BY INNOVATION

Some talk of innovation as just being about development and execution, after the stage where ideas have been nurtured and grown.

Others talk more generally about innovation being about ideas-building + execution + follow-up. They argue that staff become more attracted to the idea of becoming innovators if they can connect with the ideas behind proposed innovations.

### *Note to self*

*I need to know what I mean by innovation. Whatever definition I go for, I need to spell out the prize that I hope we will gain through innovations, without overloading people with more context than they need.*



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**When I discuss innovations with others, how much should I share 'the WHY'? Or should I just concentrate on the HOW and WHAT?**

PUTTING THE CASE FOR

If I take a broader definition of innovation, it's more natural to share the "why". I can explain the ideas and ambitions that are driving the innovation process and spell out what I hope we'll achieve if and when the innovations come to pass.

If I concentrate solely on innovation as execution, I need to be clear about my wider strategy for fostering a culture of innovation. I need to argue the case for innovation at a more general level, in a way that inspires people to bring forward ideas for doing things differently - and better.

*Note to self:*

*One of my priorities is to promote a stronger culture of innovation. Understanding 'the why' could really raise people's motivation and confidence to become innovators themselves.*

3

**When considering proposals for new innovations, how do I keep the process as simple and sharp as possible?**

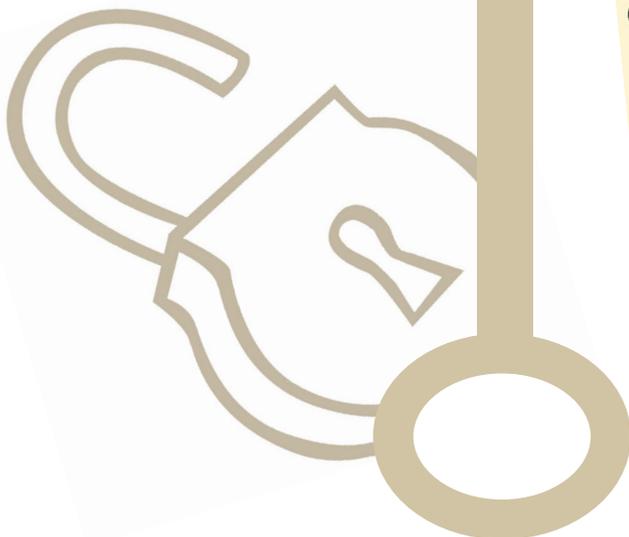
## CONSIDERING PROPOSALS

I know that different businesses have different systems for considering new ideas. One CEO told me that their people produce a one-side concept paper if they have an idea for an innovation. In some businesses, the technical people do full-scale proposals and drawings for an innovation and present them to their Development Director.

I am a little hesitant about asking people to draw up detailed plans before discussing their ideas, although I know there's one killer question for anyone with a new idea: precisely how would it work?

*Note to self:*

*I need to make a point of asking whether our processes encourage people to come up with ideas and kick them around with others. I'm not sure they do. If other Directors agree, I need to ask them about their ideas for improvement before sharing my own.*



4

**At what stage should I assess the business case for an innovation? Do I wait until I'm satisfied about the technical case or should I assess the two as one?**

## ASSESSING THE BUSINESS CASE

Some businesses make a point a point of telling their people that if they have any ideas for innovations, they first need to explain how they would work. They are asked to focus on ensuring the idea is technically robust, before promoting the positive business impact it could bring. I know that some innovations are incredibly complex. BUT I'm really not sure about keeping the technical case for an innovation separate from the business case in this way.

I worry that this split approach could be very disempowering for the technical team. I could tell them I like their ideas and then a few weeks later, having done the figures, announce we've decided that the business benefits aren't big enough to justify doing anything with them. That might well make them feel "next time we have an idea, don't let's bother!"

*Note to self:*

*I will send a note round my people saying that when we discuss ideas for innovation it would be good to talk through the business case once we're all clear how the innovation would work. Even though we won't be able to come up with detailed forecasts, we should have a pretty good understanding of the possible business benefits that the idea could bring.*

5

**When people are pitching to me, how should I respond? Concentrate on keeping quiet and listening-or question and probe?**

SHAPING MY RESPONSE

Some Directors have a policy of holding back when people do their pitch. They may ask a few questions and then just listen – and decide afterwards whether to take the idea on to the next stage and work up the business case.

I tend to make a point of asking quite probing questions of those who pitch to me. They might have drawn up a concept paper, but I feel I learn much more about the potential of their ideas from how they answer my questions.

I make a point of saying what I think about the ideas there and then. So whilst I may take a few days to think them through, the team feel that they know where they stand with me.

I do wonder whether it's right to hold back and just listen when a team are pitching for a particular innovation. I can see the advantage that you're not making any commitments in the heat of the moment. But as a leadership model, I'm not convinced.

If we're not even demonstrating curiosity as leaders, and trying to get behind what people are saying to us, what sort of statement are we making about our style of leadership?

*Note to self:*

*In principle, I want to be as curious and transparent as I can be. So when people are putting forward their proposals I will be up for drawing them out as much as I can and saying what I think, making clear that I'm still forming an opinion and nothing is chipped in tablets of stone.*

6

**If I have to say  
“no”, how do I  
say so?**

SAYING NO

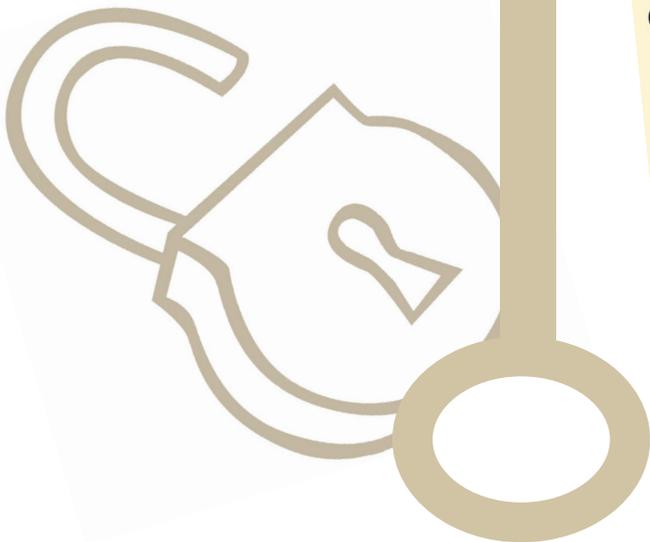
Aha, the case against being fully transparent! If I have to say no, I wouldn't have to say so to their face.

I can see the benefits of this – and as I think this, I know it's wrong. If I'm not keen on an idea, or I think the costs might outweigh the benefits, I think I have an obligation to say this there and then.

I know that what I mustn't be is dismissive. I need to thank them for all their efforts and suggest how the idea might be stronger. If this means modifying it significantly, I need to be ready to say so, stressing that I would be happy to talk to them again as soon as they have a revised proposition.

*Note to self:*

*When I say no, I should also say that I hope to be able to give them a yes when they come back with a revised proposal! I also need to make a point of congratulating them on the tenacity they have already shown in moving their ideas as far forward as they have done.*



**Do we have some sort of “sandpit” for trying out innovations?**

TESTING OUT INNOVATIONS

I am a great enthusiast for innovations and relish the opportunity to discuss ideas about how things might be done better. I am also very clear that innovations only flourish when the wider culture is right and people are given every encouragement to be ruthless with their own ideas so that if they're not working they are the first ones to say so.

This is why I like the language of having a “sandpit” where we try out innovations and let ourselves reshape and remodel them early on as we test them out in practice.

I know of so many situations where people become over-attached to “their” ideas and find it really difficult to start afresh if something hasn't worked in the way they intended. This is why, whenever we back a new idea, I want it to be clear that we expect its advocates and sponsors to be ready to recast it as they test it out, without anyone letting their ego get in their way.

*Note to self:*

*At my next team meeting, ask the team to sign up to the principle that those proposing innovations are always encouraged to build in processes for continuous review - feedback, ongoing tweaking and innovation.*

**When I drive an innovation myself, am I as tough on myself as I am on others?**

BEING TOUGH ON MY OWN IDEAS

We all know that some of the most innovative leaders can be the least democratic! They also tend to be very intuitive.

Whilst it is a great strength, it can easily keep people trapped in the “I’m right” school of thinking! They can miss some of the early warning signals that their innovation isn’t working in the way intended. When they finally accept things have been going wrong for quite some time, the stakes are higher than they should be.

I need to be pretty tough on myself and invite others to be robust with me in working through innovations I propose. Under scrutiny, if the idea isn’t sound, I need to be the first to say so.

Also, I need to be up-front in saying that if we really want to become more innovative we all need to make sure that our fear of failure doesn’t get in our way.

I’ve always liked the phrase “right next time”. It enables us to take some risks and go with the flow, sharing the mindset that if we’re not right this time there is always the next!

*Note to self:*

*Share the message that we all need to be tough on our own ideas as well as those of others. That includes me! Everyone needs to know that I respond well to challenge. Simply put, I need to walk the talk - and that's precisely what I intend to do.*

9

**Could I be  
doing more  
to make  
innovation  
creative, fun  
and rewarding?**

Making innovation fun

Innovation begins with playing with ideas. The challenge is to create a safe space in which to experiment.

In the past, I have been involved in some competitions for new ideas that have been terrific fun. We have split people into small teams and invited each one to come up with its own distinctive innovation. We have all had a vote for the idea that we favour the most (excluding our own, of course!) and have awarded a generous prize to the winning idea. At other times, we have offered prizes for the innovation that has had the greatest impact after three months in the sandpit! There is so much that can and should be done to make innovation fun.

*Note to self:*

*Tell people I want to  
make innovation more fun  
and ask for their ideas.  
Maybe I should consider  
introducing a prize for  
the most innovative idea  
that is developed in a  
way that enables staff  
to have real fun putting  
it together?*



***“Ideas won’t keep.  
Something must be done about them.”***

Alfred North Whitehead



## **Chapter 2**

# **Creative conflict**

# Leading a process of creative conflict

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## **12 challenges for myself as a leader**

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- 1** How prepared am I, psychologically?
- 2** How can I help to make conflict okay?
- 3** Should we agree some “team rules”?
- 4** How can I introduce some fun into the process?
- 5** What should I do if someone “pushes one of my buttons”?
- 6** Should I call people out on unhelpful behaviours?
- 7** What should I say if someone starts digging a trench?
- 8** Have I got a handle on my “inner peacemaker”?
- 9** How do I avoid getting ambushed by a “sniper”?
- 10** Am I okay about the “right ending” not always being a happy one?
- 11** How should I handle my internal “post-mortem”?
- 12** How aware am I of my “swings”?

# I How prepared am I, psychologically?

You're leading a discussion with your Board, or your Executive team or a group of partners. How can you best prepare for this?

Some people say "*I'm sorted out, I've read the papers*".

That's fine. And we take that for granted. What we mean is how prepared are you **psychologically**?

How much discussion have you had in **your head** about how you feel about conflict and how you're going to handle this with the group?



If you're not keen on conflict, as is true for many of us, the last thing you want to do is pretend that you're chilled about it.

If you appear to give the message "*bring it on*", it won't convince anyone, least of all yourself.

## **Making a connection with everyone in the room**

Some of us find it incredibly helpful just to have 3 or 4 minutes on our own shortly before the meeting, thinking of the faces of everyone who will be joining us.

In our minds, we need to make a connection with each of them before they walk into the room.

We know that those who are conflict-averse will almost certainly need some reassurance from us, once we begin to have some disagreement, that it is all fine and necessary.

During these few minutes, we have the space to get clearer in our minds about what we're going to say right at the beginning to **set the right tone and put everyone at their ease**.

## 2 How can I help to make conflict okay?

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Before you start you need to be clear about the words you want to use right at the beginning to make clear that in your view:

- Conflict is often **necessary** to tackle key strategic challenges
- Whenever we disagree there needs to be mutual respect, so that everyone feels their voice is being heard
- There is a world of difference between creative conflict and unpleasant disagreement – and once unpleasantness enters in creativity is nearly always driven away.

To help make sure that there is no unpleasantness, we all need to try **not to take things personally**.

Once we do, it is easy to take offence that isn't intended – and if that happens, a meeting can quickly degenerate into name-calling.

### **A sign of your strength as a team**

It can have quite an impact if you contrast how some people view conflict – as a sign of failure – with your view of it as a sign of your strength as a team.

It is then easy to reassure those who are hesitant about conflict. You are recognising that it triggers very different feelings in different people, so much so that:

- *One person's row is another person's enjoyable wrestle!*

You hope that during the discussion no-one will duck any difficult issues.



Your aim is to deal with them openly and honestly, on the basis that **any disagreement should be an agreeable disagreement**.

### 3 Should we agree some “team rules”?

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To help navigate your way through a tricky discussion, team rules can be a huge asset, especially if you find that someone over-strikes a position.

Instead of putting yourself in a position where it's you against them, you can remind them that what they have just said is **inconsistent with the team rules** – and you hope that they and everyone else will make a point of getting behind the team rules once again.

It's best just to have a small number. Here are some possibilities:

- **We value difference**
- **We consider WHAT is right and not WHO is right**
- **We support each other in solving problems**
- **We disagree without being disagreeable**
- **We always speak well of each other**
- **We don't take things personally**
- **We don't go along with “pocket vetoes”**
- **We put the mission of our organisation before our own interests.**

Sometimes it helps to have a one-line summary of your mission at the top of the agenda for the meeting.

This makes it easier to press on with a tricky conversation when you hit a difficult patch and some people want to **pretend that you all agree when you know you don't**.

## 4 How can I introduce some fun into the process?

Conversations that involve a degree of conflict can be really hard work. As the person leading the conversation, your role is to keep it as light as you can, especially in those moments when you're encouraging people to be creative.

You want them to feel that they can think out loud and try out new ideas without any fear of being “shot down” if their idea doesn't quite land with the rest of the team.

For conflict to be creative, you need to be able to say that you hope people might actually **enjoy** that part of the conversation where you are trying to come up with some fresh ideas.

The group need to believe that you believe in their creativity.

As you are building up new ideas, it can be a really good idea to split the group into small groups of two or three to come up with specific propositions.

### Using their imagination



Some teams use role-plays and improvisations, whilst others use artwork and sometimes Lego products to encourage small groups to come back with something visual to illustrate their overall idea.

The more you encourage them to use their imagination to bring their idea to life, the better – especially if you then make a point of thanking those who do.

Don't believe that you have to plan all of this on your own.

How about asking a member of your team some time beforehand to give you a few minutes to talk some ideas through?

You might share the leadership of the session with them, so that **together you create a process that feels different – and fun.**

## 5 What should I do if someone “pushes one of my buttons”?

One of the greatest risks that you will face is that someone says something that pushes one of your buttons – and having said how you want everyone to be open-minded you suddenly hear yourself putting someone down for something they’ve just said!

### **What should you do in that situation?**

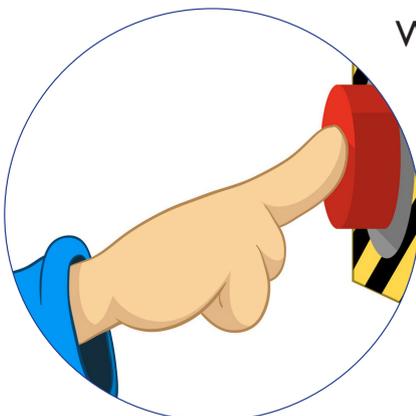
**Apologise**, very quickly – and say that something that was said just pushed one of your buttons and you shouldn’t have jumped in the way that you did.

You can draw some good lessons out of this moment of tension **and** take people with you, so long as you are quick to apologise and say that you took a comment personally, which made you more defensive than you should have been.

### **This makes it REAL!**

If you are seen to give the benefit of the doubt to someone who has said something that clearly bugged you, this should be an advantage later on if someone else flares up at something that is said.

In that moment, you can say that someone clearly pushed one of **their** buttons, just as happened for you earlier on - and you are sure that no slight was intended.



What this shows, you can say, is that we are all vulnerable to someone saying something that triggers a deep reaction within us.

All we need to do in these moments is take a pause and focus again on the rules for the discussion that we all agreed at the outset - such as the rule that **we don’t take things personally.**

## 6 Should I call people out on unhelpful behaviours?

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This is a tricky question and definitely one of those with no single answer to cover all situations! In general, most of us would say “yes”, so long as you can do so with a **light touch**.

There are inter-personal conflicts in just about all teams, and sometimes members of a team will sit there waiting for two people to resume the low-level antagonism that they slip into at just about every team meeting!

When one of these habits presents itself, it is important to try and call out this behaviour, generously.

Otherwise it becomes a diversion that makes it **more difficult** for the team to get into a frame of mind where they see themselves as more creative than they usually allow themselves to be.

### **Defusing moments that cause irritation**

It is also important to try and defuse any moments that cause irritation and divert the group from your creative mission.

For example, imagine that you have a meeting coming up with some key partners and one of them has a habit of accusing others of not discussing “the elephant in the room”.

Why not try to find a stuffed elephant and put it in the middle of the circle?



You can say that if anyone feels we’re ignoring the elephant in the room, can they pick up the elephant and describe what they see!

You can achieve so much by referring generously to behaviours that, if left unacknowledged, can easily **stifle the group’s creativity just when it is beginning to flow.**

## 7 What should I say if someone starts digging a trench?

This is a tough one, isn't it. Once a disagreement is underway, some people seem to have an inner programming that makes them reiterate time and again a position they have already argued for.

Whether the reason for this is their compulsive need to win an argument or their fear of losing, the fact remains that you are sitting there watching them dig their trench – and you're wondering what is the best way of intervening.



If you want to help someone **stop digging**, it is important to start off with some positive recognition of what they have already offered the team.

So you might say that they have brought out very well the force and clarity of the argument behind the position that they favour.

### What is the number one argument **AGAINST**?

How about then asking them to capture what they see as the number one argument against what they are proposing? If they resist this (“there aren't any!”) you are in a very strong position to press harder:

- *“We all know that whatever we agree on at the end of this discussion will have some strong upsides and also a number of significant downsides. James, you have argued a strong case for one option, and I'm sure we all respect this. May I ask what you see as the main case **against**?”*

Some Leadership Fellows make a point of insisting that every member of their Executive team advocating a specific proposal should also point out what they regard as the number one downside of their proposition, as part of their initial presentation.

It's a terrific way of **building in respect for difference from the beginning of a discussion!**

## 8 Have I got a handle on my “inner peacemaker”?

We might say that we’re just **great** at handling conflict and would never want to close down a difficult conversation before it has run its course.

Yet the fact is that a lot of Chairs of Boards and Chief Executives are regarded by their colleagues as having a tendency to do just that. They have a habit of closing down conversations when they think a natural solution to the conflict is presenting itself and others are being rather slow in not seeing this as clearly as they do!

A lot of us have an “inner peacemaker” that can quickly engage with a disagreement to point out what the obvious way would be of moving forward and keeping everyone happy at the same time.



Deployed sparingly, this inner peacemaker can be a tremendous asset. In the context of a discussion where you want some creative conflict, it can actually **get in the way**.

### Inviting the team to challenge you

One of the best ways of keeping your inner peacemaker in check is to say to the team that if any of them feels you are closing down a difficult discussion too quickly, you want them to say so – and you undertake to **hold back** and let the discussion run for that bit longer.

Next time you can see a possible compromise solution, how about instead saying that you see **two or three main views** coming forward - and capturing each of them in one or two sentences?

You then ask whether anyone who hasn’t yet taken part in the conversation has any thoughts about how you might draw on the best elements of these views to create a fresh approach towards moving forward.

Sometimes it is a stronger act of leadership to ask the question of your team **rather than doing their thinking on their behalf!**

## 9 How do I avoid getting ambushed by a “sniper”?

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So many of us dread chairing a meeting with a sniper, whose speciality is objecting from the sidelines. They start off with low-level criticism and ramp up their negativity and cynicism as the meeting goes on.

At first we smile and thank them for their comment and it's not long before we want to give them a piece of our mind. Tempting though this might be, it's the very worst thing that we could do.

### **Don't let the others switch off!**

Just think, here you are trying to lead a discussion with some creative conflict, and you know you have a number of conflict-averse people who need to be handled with care as you move forward.

The moment they witness you getting into a shooting match with someone else, they will vacate the space, mentally, within seconds!

Once they have switched off it will be almost impossible to bring many of them back in on the conversation.

This is why it is best to use your light touch and inclusive style of leadership to focus not on the sniper but on the rest of the group:

- *“So, Sarah, you're clearly not a fan of any of the ideas that have come up so far. Let's give you a few minutes to come up with something positive of your own and let me bring in some of those who have been quiet in this conversation. Yvonne, can I draw you out and ask which of the different ideas so far you favour the most ...”*

What the sniper is really challenging you to do is to keep your powder dry, because once the shooting starts they have won!

**Your No 1 one weapon against them is the engagement and positivity of other members of the group.**

## 10 Am I okay about the “right ending” not always being a happy one?

This is an important question, isn't it. We throw ourselves into leading a meeting that we know will be difficult and we so want to be successful.

We give it everything we can and it's natural for us to want a “happy ending”.

Yet sometimes a happy ending simply isn't real, and we need to remind ourselves of this as we steer the discussion.

Think of the not uncommon experience for many leaders of working with a team to discuss the latest plan for “restructuring” and streamlining the top of the organisation.

You know there are lots of good things that will come out of it. Yet the fact is that some jobs will go and some of the people in the room expect to be polishing up their CV in the not too distant future.

### Being real with you

In this situation, it's important to draw out as much creative thinking from this current team as is possible.

It's also important that they have the opportunity to share their sense of sadness and loss about the team being wound up, and experience this being honoured by **you**.

For them, a “good ending” to the meeting is **not** necessarily the happy ending that enables everyone to leave the room on a high. That simply wouldn't be real.

It's more important, surely, that they can be **authentic** with each other and with you.

The trust that this helps to engender between you and your new team should **make possible exceptional levels of creativity when the time is right**.



## How should I handle my internal “post-mortem”?

After chairing a meeting in which we were hoping for some really creative conflict, quite a few of us have a habit of going home and “burning energy” worrying.

We worry about not having been good enough. We worry about how some might have felt about what others said. We worry also about what others might have felt about what **wasn't** said. We just worry.

Yep, it is good if we ask ourselves some tough questions, such as

- Did I do enough prepping for the meeting?
- If I had my time again, how could I have improved my intro – and the team rules?
- Was I quick enough to reassure those who looked a little panicky the moment the first disagreement started?
- Did I press people hard enough to keep going when some wanted to give up once the discussion got difficult?

### Give yourself a break!

Let us assume that overall you offered compassion and reassurance, as well as continuing to push people hard to land the creative outputs that you came up with at the end.

Let's also assume that the team didn't quite climb the mountain in the way that you hoped - and you, no doubt, **could** have been better.

All that said, isn't it now time to give yourself a break?

Self-flagellation won't help with mountain climbing.

A little more self-compassion and self-reassurance should help rather a lot more.



## 12 How aware am I of my “swings”?

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One of the insights that came out of this Leadership Conversation was the tendency of some conflict-averse leaders to swing from **avoidance** at one end of the spectrum to going **way over the top** at the other.

We so dislike conflict that we go to great lengths to avoid it.

We have lots of tactics and techniques for bypassing it and generally looking the other way.

Deep down, we know what we are doing and so we get more and more bugged with ourselves and the position that we have put ourselves in.

This all builds up and then one day someone says something that pushes one of our buttons rather too hard and we just **blow**.

We go seriously OTT and surprise not only everyone else but also ourselves.

After that, we tell ourselves to calm down and not be unreasonable.

So we edge back to avoidance and then more avoidance and the cycle starts all over again.

### **Time to cut out avoidance**

We **know** that if we are to lead a process of creative conflict we need more modest swings.

That means much less avoidance – and **no** going over the top.

How wild is your personal swingometer? Honestly?

Time to cut out all that avoidance, don't you think?

Okay, we'll be realistic.

**Let's go for as little avoidance as possible – for now!**

How wild is  
your personal  
swingometer?

