



Insights arising from our
36th Leadership Conversation

Facilitating strategic ideas-building

August 2019

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

"How we do stuff to win!"

One of the most important decisions any leader needs to take is whether or not to ask a group to sign up to a small number of guiding principles at the beginning of an ideas-building session where your role is to act as the facilitator.

Some talk of groundrules or "rules of the road", whilst others avoid words such as rules or even principles because people can find them a turn-off.

Instead, they prefer to talk of how a group needs to think about "*how we do stuff to win*", and avoid getting involved in spats that could result in some people taking their eye off the ball.

Some feel that they know their team so well that they don't need agreed principles of any sort.

Leaders who do ask an ideas-building group to agree some groundrules at the outset say that they are important for building trust and creating a sense of **shared purpose** among the group.

It only takes one person acting as a "derailer" or "hijacker" to jeopardise everything the group is trying to achieve.

Where the same group comes together every now and again for some sort of strategic ideas-building, there is a lot to be said for introducing two or three principles right at the beginning that address past behaviours that could get in the way if they come up again.

For example, if one or two members have a habit of becoming entrenched in their views, the guiding principle of "*connect not convince*" could help.

Similarly, if some feel that there can be a lack of respect for minority views, it could help to write the words "*every idea is a good idea*" on a large whiteboard.

Space to challenge assumptions

Strategic ideas-building tends to be most effective when it takes place in a dedicated chunk of time.

Too often it is slotted in as a single item towards the end of a long agenda during which the energy in the room has been all about managing performance and taking decisions.

In this situation, it is incredibly difficult to develop the open and thoughtful spirit in the room that is so important for testing out new - and sometimes uncomfortable - ideas.

The sense of collective impatience that has built up in the room by then makes it almost impossible for people to focus on a conversation designed to stretch thinking.

As a result, when the group becomes stuck on a tricky issue there isn't the collective will to find a way through.

Building in time for reflection

Too often people can try to close down discussion about a challenging idea on the basis that it might result in the wrong decision being taken.

This is why the best strategic ideas-building often takes place in a context where people have agreed that they are coming together to challenge some of their own assumptions and seek some fresh thinking, on the basis that they will have time to reflect on their outcomes **before** coming back together again and taking decisions.

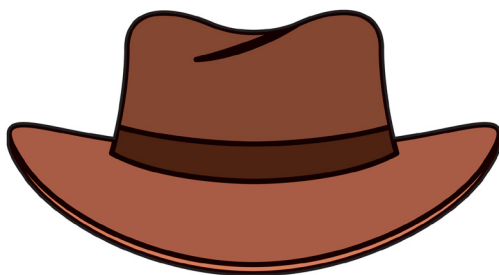


This is where the role of the facilitator is so important in reassuring a group that the session is about **opening up ideas** without any danger of anyone being "bounced" into a quick decision on an issue that needs to be thought through very carefully.

We need to know which hat we're wearing!

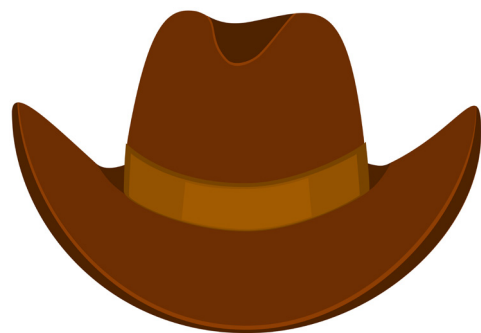
It is when leaders start off a meeting wearing the hat of an energising, driving leader and then try to switch mid-way to becoming a more questioning and reflective leader that things can go badly wrong!

We need to know which hat we're wearing for which meeting - and make sure that others involved in the meeting know, as well.



The action leader

- Driving change
- Setting pace
- Making things happen
- Moving the business forward



Facilitative leader

- Asking probing questions about "difficult stuff" where thinking is still unclear
- Sharpening up options and pressing for greater clarity on the basis that decisions can come later

Watch out for that guard!

We're facilitating an ideas-building meeting and feel it's going well.

We begin to relax and think that the risk of opening up a discussion without having sorted out in our mind what we want the outcome to be is paying off!

Then someone throws in a curve ball. Wham! That was unexpected.

We can't help feeling thrown by this, and as we do so we can sense all eyes in the room looking at us expecting us to say something significant.

In our mind, we can see our inner panic button coming into sight, getting bigger by the second.

What a lot of us do in this situation is to **keep going**.

It's as if we're driving down a motorway, and can see a crash happening in front of us, and put our foot on the accelerator to try and avoid it.

This is what we do now. We speed up instead of slowing down.

As we do so, we **bring our guard up** a little too. We try not to let on that we've been thrown by what has just been said.

In discussing this sort of moment in Windsor, our general feeling was that we let ourselves down if we become too guarded in this situation.

Our best response to some sort of "ambush" is nearly always to **show our humanity**.

Ask the ambusher what they want to achieve.

Pause to think. Ask for some reactions from others.

Be calm and measured, and prepared to think out loud.

Let our guard down a little more, instead of putting it up.

In the words of one of our Leadership Fellows, "*make it human*".

Helping a group to live possible futures

So, let us assume that in facilitating an ideas-building session we know what "hat" we're wearing, we make sure that everyone else involved in the session does, too, and we respond in a relatively unguarded and open way when something trips us up.

What would success look like?

The phrase that we came up with at this Leadership Conversation was about helping a group to "*live possible futures*".

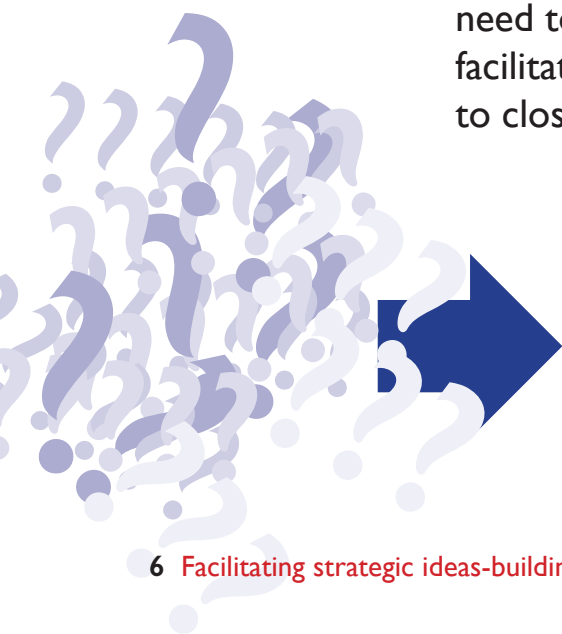
To some, this might not sound such a big deal.

To those of us who delight in the challenge of facilitation, we know that achieving this is quite something!

Three conditions

For a group to engage with a number of possible futures, three conditions need to be met:

- 1 They need to be okay about some people saying that they **prefer** one scenario over another;
- 2 They need to have a sense of **discipline and focus** to be able to define the differences between alternative futures, in a way that is meaningful for everyone involved;
- 3 Those who can easily feel threatened by disagreement need to be sufficiently **confident** in the process, and the facilitator, for differences to be aired without them trying to close down the debate.



Possible futures 1, 2 and 3

The importance of story-telling

As has happened on a number of occasions in different Leadership Conversations, we quickly agreed on the importance of story-telling for bringing to life different possible visions of the future.

Spirit of empowerment

The more individual members of the group can be encouraged to outline their vision of the future in terms of stories that bring out their passion for the organisation and its mission, the easier it is to engender a spirit of empowerment that is so incredibly important to releasing the group's creative energies.

Also, the device of story-telling makes it easier to **draw out contrary views** without descending into the sort of negativity that quickly saps the energy of a group and turns off those who are in any way conflict averse.

Once a group has a number of different stories in front of it, it is possible to explore the attractions and downsides of each one in turn.

What is especially appealing about this approach is that it is so much easier for a group to challenge existing practices in the context of achieving **future ambitions**.

Avoiding defensive responses

As facilitators, we are much less likely to trigger defensive responses if we can ask the question,

"What would we need to change about the ways in which we work together for this exciting story to become a reality?"

The more we frame this question in relation to future practice, rather than the here and now, the easier it is to discuss behaviours that need to be left behind for the overall strategy to be achieved.

A walk in the park!

You might be looking at this heading and thinking, "*That's NOT what this is! It sounds achievable and I like the emphasis on story-telling, but this is far from being a walk in the park!*"

We agree, completely. Where this heading comes from is our discussion about the importance of varying the format of facilitations.

At our Leadership Conversations we always break into small groups of two or three at least once an hour, and often encourage Fellows to walk around the Lower Ward of the Castle in small groups to reinvigorate themselves as well as seeking whatever inspiration they can from the marvellous views across the river to Eton College Chapel.

So our thought was that whenever we are facilitating strategic ideas-building sessions we should be a little more thoughtful about how we organise small break-out groups.

People should move around regularly, and if the meeting room is close to a park, why not go for a short walk? Seriously.

Some people do their best thinking walking!

Even if they don't come back from the park with some inspirational ideas, they will be in a much better frame of mind to inspire each other once they're together again.

Sometimes we are really unimaginative in the ways in which we handle the process of strategic ideas-building.

It is no surprise that some groups are so predictable in the ideas that they come up with, in response to the process that we use for generating these ideas!

3 rules of the road for facilitators

- 1** Only one hat at a time
- 2** Try to keep your guard down; if you put yours up, others will follow suit
- 3** Move the group round every now and again, and if it's not pouring with rain aim to get them outside at least once!



"The facilitator said it wouldn't rain!"