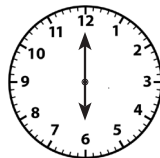




From conflict to creativity



**6.00pm Thursday, January 23 until
3.30pm Friday, January 24 2020**

Background Note and Agenda for our 44th Leadership Conversation

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

This Leadership Conversation builds on our Innovation and Creativity in Leadership theme

The quote below comes from Chapter Two. A link to the whole report is on the final page of this Background Paper.

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.

This is our 44th Leadership Conversation

It focuses one of the greatest challenges facing any leader: how to manage healthy conflict in debate so that it is a creative process that does not become undermined by personal rivalries and defensiveness.

We will:

- Ask how important it is that those of us who are conflict averse "own" this as part of the process of leading a team discussion that involves a significant level of disagreement
- Ask how we might best reassure those team and board members who are conflict averse, so that they don't try to close down a conversation the moment they become concerned by the level of disagreement
- Compare notes about our most effective personal strategies for handling the main protagonists in any disagreement (including ourselves!), ensuring that the conflict is well-natured and if people start to "dig a trench" they are encouraged to put away their spade
- Challenge ourselves about the clarity of leadership that we offer, so that where there are rival views about tough issues, such as holding senior colleagues to account for under-performance, we are demonstrating clear values and modelling consistent leadership styles that help to set a standard for others to follow.

"This is me!"

"Tell us more"

"Yes I can!"



The three stages to our Conversation

Throughout this Conversation we will draw on Chapter Two of Innovation and Creativity in Leadership as well as some of the ideas in Disruptive Leadership, especially [Chapter Two on Disruptive Leaders and Challenging Conversations](#).

We will structure our discussions around three stages:

1 "This is me!"

We put stage one under this heading because early on we want to encourage you to **share a story** that helps us understand better where you are coming from as a leader.

To help us achieve strong connections across our group, please be up for sharing something about yourself in a way that helps others gain some sense of the sort of leader that you are.

2 "Tell us more"

Stage two is under this heading because we hope that by now we will all want to mobilise the power of questioning to draw each other out.

We want to **get behind each other's stories** to understand how we can best support each other in thinking through fresh ways of managing disagreement within our teams to maximise the creative outputs.

3 "Yes I can!"

Our third and final stage is about each of us **stepping into a really empowered place** where we have a greater sense of all that we can make possible as leaders.

For every breakthrough in thinking that we achieve during this third stage, we will be able to identify its origins in the stories that we have each shared and the curiosity that others have shown in response.

"This is me!"

From 6.00pm on Thursday through to 10.00am on Friday

After agreeing our Guiding Principles for this Conversation, we will explore our first question in small groups.

A few days before the Conversation, Pete will discuss this on the phone with as many members of our group as possible. He will then circulate a note with a summary of your initial thoughts and a "killer question" for our first round of small groups.

Our thinking at the moment is that in small groups we should ask you to share with each other a really difficult moment that you have experienced in the past few months in handling conflict in a team situation. If you had your time again, what would you have liked to have done differently?

We will encourage you to share your answers in the form of **stories**.

Listening to others' stories can trigger all sorts of ideas about our own leadership style that we might never even have thought about before this moment.

*"I knew I needed to
keep things light, but
I was so shocked I felt
myself freeze"*

*"Suddenly it was as if two of the
team were locked in conflict and the
rest of us had become onlookers"*



"Tell us more"

From no later than 10.00am on Friday through to 12.30pm

There should come a stage soon after 10.00am on Friday when we have all shared a story about ourselves and identified some of the real challenges that we face in managing conflict within teams.

This involves us offering the direction necessary to ensure that disagreement doesn't turn personal - and if it shows signs of doing so, we pull the discussion back on track as quickly as possible.

You will have seen in our previous report on creative conflict that we covered a lot of ground about how to handle others, not least the "snipers" and "ambushers" in a group who can change the mood in a room within seconds and require a very quick response on our part if the discussion is not to degenerate within minutes.

Whilst we are keen to explore these challenges that we all face, we want to make sure that we don't spend too long discussing **other people** and keep a strong focus on how forthcoming we are in offering **our own leadership** to a group.

This is because it can often be the case that individuals become problematic because of a certain **lack of engagement** on the part of the person leading the group.

Deterrent

Hence the challenge that we want to put to ourselves around how much we are trying to draw others out and build on their personal inputs, thereby creating a sense of shared endeavour that makes it much more difficult for any lone dissident to take over.

Whenever we are able to achieve this, the collaborative spirit among the group acts as a real deterrent when the ambushers and hijackers are thinking of lobbing in their hand grenade!



"Yes I can!"

From 12.30 on Friday through to 3.30pm

In this third stage of the Conversation, we will focus on how we might each become **more creative and courageous** in the ways in which we manage conflict.

We see this stage very much as our "stretch zone", when we hope to push ourselves as hard as we can so that we each come up with our own personalised strategy for handling conflict within groups and teams.

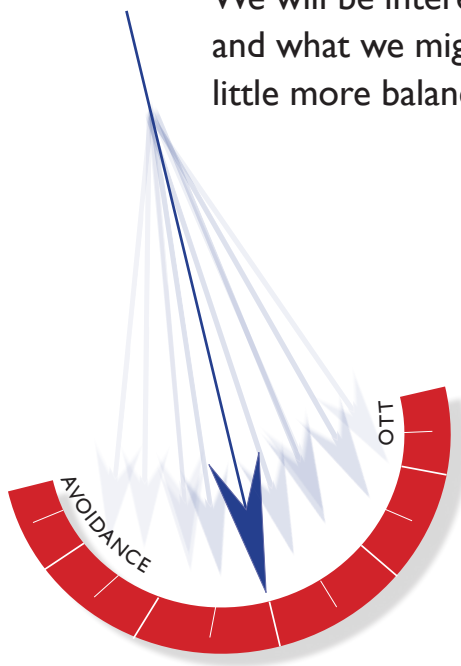
How can we best avoid the "swings"?

In Chapter 2 of Creativity & Innovation in Leadership we discuss how some conflict-averse leaders have a tendency to swing from **avoidance** at one end of the spectrum to going way **over the top** at the other.

Many of us so dislike conflict that we go to great lengths to avoid it and have lots of techniques for looking the other way.

Then when something really throws us we can go up like a rocket, fuelled by our pent up frustration and anger!

We will be interested to hear whether this rings a few bells for you, and what we might each do to make our personal "swingometer" a little more balanced!



Being open to feeling uncomfortable

As we go through the afternoon we hope to risk up our thinking that bit more, and really stretch ourselves until that moment when we "hit the buffers" at 3.30pm!

This is the stage in the day when our Guiding Principles are especially important, not least our principle about being open to feeling uncomfortable.

We nearly always achieve a number of breakthroughs in our thinking in the final 15 minutes or so, as we hope you will experience. When we look back on the Conversation afterwards we can often recall those moments when some of those Leadership Fellows who had the greatest breakthroughs showed signs of being distinctly uncomfortable with the idea that they were toying with.

Because we had by then achieved exceptionally high levels of trust among the group, they were content to remain with this discomfort - and their breakthrough followed within minutes.

This is why we say to Fellows who have not yet joined a Conversation that it is usually best to come with a relatively **open mind** about what you will take away.

In the past, those who took away the most had little if any expectation that they would achieve the particular breakthrough that landed for them in the final minutes of the Conversation!

Yes we can!



Managing conflict better within teams

Following an overnight Conversation at the House, we always ask Leadership Fellows to let the rest of us know, three months after the session, how they have been getting on in taking forward their end-of-Windsor resolves. This is why on page 11 you will see the date for our suggested video follow-up!

After last November's Creative Conflict group, Fellows shared some very thoughtful emails with each other about the ideas that they had each been taking forward to manage conflict better within their teams and reframe the experience so that team members view it as a natural part of the creative process.

We were so struck by how powerful some of these ideas were that we thought it would be useful to put them together within one overall commentary. We share this on pages 11 to 15 as “**Eleven steps to manage conflict better within teams**”.

We hope you feel there are some useful “**nuggets**” here that can support you in developing your own thinking about how best to handle disagreements when they emerge during any sort of team or Board or group discussion that you are leading.



Practical strategies

One of our insights then was that it doesn't serve us to talk simply about disagreement and avoid using the 7 letter C word!

It is a simple truth that a significant number of leaders can quickly be alienated by what they regard as conflict. They really don't appreciate it if the attitude of those of us who are quite comfortable with conflict is that they need to **get over themselves**!

For them the C word is a **real barrier** to moving forward, and we need practical strategies to support them in checking themselves once they begin to **disengage emotionally**.

This is why we put together the 11 steps following the agenda.

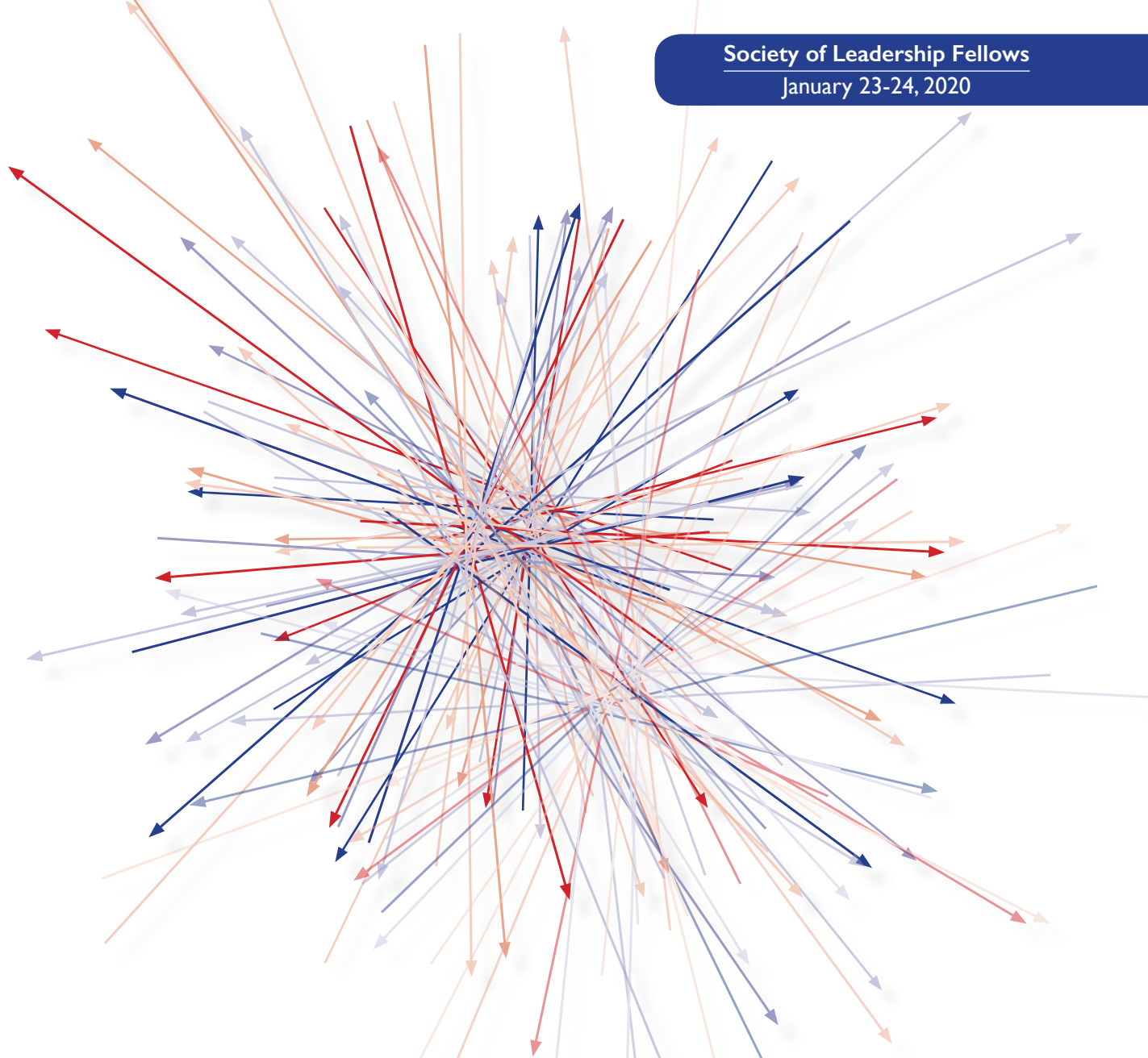
Agenda

Thursday, January 23rd 2020

2.30pm+	You are welcome to check into your room in St George's House
4.30pm	Tea in the House for those joining Evensong in the Chapel
5.05pm	Evensong (<i>optional</i>)
5.50pm	Vicars' Hall. Refreshments, then start of the Conversation at 6.00pm. Introduction to the Guiding Principles and then on to Stage One: <i>This is me!</i> We break for small groups and when we return we encourage you to share some aspect of your personal story that helps other Fellows understand what has shaped your approach towards handling conflict as a leader
7.40pm	Free time/ drinks in the Sitting Room of St George's House
8.15pm	Working dinner in the House Dining Room
9.30pm	We go through to the Sitting room for tea/coffee with port or brandy
9.45pm	Private floodlit tour of St George's Chapel, departing from the Sitting Room (<i>optional</i>). After the tour, please join us for a nightcap

Friday, January 24th

7.45am	Breakfast is served in the House Dining Room. Please clear your personal belongings from your room and bring them down to the Vicars' Hall, so that the domestic staff can prepare our rooms for the next group
8.45am	We start again promptly in the Vicars' Hall. At 10.00am or earlier we move on to Stage 2: <i>Tell us more.</i> We move in and out of small groups as we identify specific challenges that require quality thinking time. We capture key "take aways" as we go and at around 12.20 prepare for Stage 3: <i>Becoming more creative and courageous in managing conflict</i>
12.30pm	A hot buffet lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall and we work together in our groups. There is time for some personal reflection after lunch before a team photo on the West steps of the Chapel (<i>weather permitting!</i>)
1.45pm	Back together as one group, we draw out the key outcomes of our lunchtime discussions. We prepare for our final round of small groups, after which we invite you to sharpen up your personal resolves for drawing out the creativity within so much conflict, in ways that build your confidence as a leader. We close the Conversation promptly at 3.30pm.



Video link-up: April 22 2020

In the final minutes of the Conversation we will also arrange a time for a follow-up video link-up in April 2020 to hear how much progress we have each made in taking forward our resolves.

The key to us making the best possible use of our time is for Fellows to share a brief email beforehand updating the rest of us on how you have acted on your resolves, and especially which ones you found the most challenging – and we then take it from there!

Suggested time for Video Link-up:

3.00 to 4.00pm on Wednesday, April 22nd 2020



Eleven steps to manage conflict better within teams

- 1 If it's a key meeting that could be controversial, plan the time to prepare properly!**

When you have a tough meeting coming up, every second given to planning is time well spent, especially if you think about the tricky moments that cause you concern.

Live them in your mind and picture yourself behaving in the way that you would like. It's so much easier to live this on the day if your brain has been on a journey down that path beforehand.

If there's a sniper in the meeting, picture yourself thanking them for their contribution and then asking others to comment on it, on the basis that you intend to be calm and courteous with them however much they might bug the sh*t out of you.

- 2 Right at the beginning, be clear about the rules of engagement**

Be explicit and up-front, and run through what you regard as the unspoken rules of engagement as well as the spoken rules.

If you fear that there will be pushback from some, say that you are always happy to discuss the rules of engagement – and in asking them to go with these rules for now, you're happy for them to come to you and discuss them at any time.

- 3 In the moment, think of the power of being UNpredictable!**

So often in meetings, we're so much more predictable in our behaviours than we acknowledge. Think of all that you could gain by being that bit more unpredictable!

For example, if you are by nature consensual and keen to please, how about starting a sentence in a more directive way than others expect, with words like "I need you to..."



4 Look for chances to recognise the strengths of others

As you lead the team through discussion, and have a chance to recognise someone's special strengths, perhaps through a recent achievement of some sort, use that chance to acknowledge their specialness.

As part of your prepping beforehand, can you think of everyone in on the meeting, in turn, and ask yourself what you see as their most special strength?

If you can capture some of their strengths as you go through the meeting and genuinely appreciate them, you will blow them away – and as they feel more “seen” by you so are they likely to be more relaxed and confident in managing conflict with each other.

5 When there is a disagreement, make sure you focus on WHAT IS RIGHT rather than WHO IS RIGHT

If this succeeds for a while and someone then begins to over-personalise the argument, ask them to capture the key principle that they favour as a way of refocusing on the **what** rather than **who**.

In this way, you're playing the ball and not the player.

6 Use creativity to make the very concept of conflict less daunting

Conflict IS an ordeal for many of us because we spend so much time trying to avoid it. This is why it can be so good to normalise conflict by making it less of a “thing” to be avoided.

If there is disagreement, affirm it as healthy and keep the discussion warm and relaxed. At the first sign of anyone digging a trench, ask them what they see as the main argument against their position.

They will have to get out of the trench to tell you!



7 When you think of the word challenge, link it to another C word: compassion

When we challenge others, we can go dry and cold in our tone. It's almost a pre-emptive defensiveness; we're backing out emotionally in case they shoot back at us with something that could sting.

How about making a point of letting some warm compassion come through in your tone?

A compassionate challenge is so much easier to embrace than a cold and clinical challenge.

8 If you find your team going into a spiral of negativity, consider a pre-emptive act of kindness

Sometimes conflict in teams is part of an old pattern playing out time and again. Once it starts, it's the familiarity of who is being wound up by whom that helps to trap people in it.

If you feel that the team is about to go into one of these old patterns, think of how you might pre-empt it. An act of kindness, or some sort of recognition?

You eyeball one of the people about to start a "dust-up" with someone else, and surprise them by saying something really kind, or offering some sort of recognition of an achievement of theirs.

If this is warm and sincere, it can change the atmosphere in seconds.



9 Be prepared to restart the discussion - in a different place

Suppose this doesn't work and you feel you're still heading on down the usual road that will end in a destructive row.

How about telling the team that you all know you are limbering up for some more of the "same old, same old" and instead of slipping back into some of the familiar old negativities it would be really good to focus on the values that you want to guide you more in the future?

However you do it, the aim is to deflect the team from slipping into a familiar pattern of negativity either by disarming a protagonist through unexpected kindness or by trying to take the discussion onto higher ground though focusing on core values.

10 Don't let a sniper push your buttons

If you feel this beginning to happen, how about trying out something that you've settled on in your mind before as a way of letting them know that you refuse to be bugged by them.

How about catching their eye and then giving them a big smile? You might feel massively re-empowered!

This can help us a lot with viewing those who get under our skin not as irritants, but as a gift.

They sense our weak spots and ferret around for the right buttons to push.

If we don't let them trip us up, think how we grow through the experience.



II After conflict within a team, your chance to learn lessons is maximised

Once there has been some conflict, some people try to move on as quickly as possible - as if they want to forget about what has just happened.

Instead, how about saying, 15 minutes or so before the of the meeting, *“We had a difficult conversation earlier on that ended up fine, but I know that it threw some of us while it was underway. Let’s think about our positive take-aways from that... what can we learn?”*

Sometimes the best chances for shared learning and creativity come **after** there has been some conflict.

In asking the question in an open and fairly soft way, we can make conflict that much more manageable for those who see themselves as conflict-averse.

In reassuring them afterwards, we can also point to the positive and tangible take-aways that the conflict made possible.

Please click below
to read the
chapter on
creative
conflict



Creativity and innovation in leadership

*Insights from two
Leadership Conversations*

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