



# **Leaders as facilitators**

*Insights from two  
Leadership Conversations*

**Society of Leadership Fellows**  

---

St George's House, Windsor Castle

# Contents

---

**Chapter 1**   **Defining your different roles as a facilitator**   **3**

*January 2017*

---

**Chapter 2**   **Helping a group to live possible futures**   **16**

*July 2019*

---

**Coming soon**

---

**Facilitating strategic ideas-building**

*May 2020*

---



## **Chapter I**

# **Defining your different roles as a facilitator**

# Leaders as Facilitators

---

The key proposition that emerged from our Conversation was that when leaders act as facilitators they need to empower themselves by taking on a number of different roles, as



Trust-builder



Lead listener



Empowerer



Permission-giver



Pace-setter



Protector

The balance of these roles depends on the purpose and composition of a group.

We put the role of trust-builder first because a facilitator has lead responsibility for building high trust relationships between themselves and all members of a group.

The level of trust a facilitator builds has a direct impact on the creativity of the group and the willingness of its members to take risks in testing out new thinking and ideas.

# Roles

---



## Responsibilities

- Setting out clearly up-front the aims of the discussion. All involved need to understand whether it is consultative or its purpose is to conclude with a final decision;
- Establishing clear boundaries for the discussion and acknowledging openly other agendas that will influence thinking within the group;
- Having a personal relationship with each member of the group that makes them feel safe in taking risks when trying out new ideas.



## Responsibilities

- Underlining the importance of everyone learning from each other by listening closely to what each has to say;
- Demonstrating 'deep listening' by following and keeping the flow of discussion from one person to the next;
- In a generous and supportive manner, probing and questioning participants' ideas to understand more clearly what they are saying.



### Responsibilities

- Affirming that everyone in the group has been invited because they have a distinctive and special role to play;
- Emphasising that everyone is invited to contribute on the basis of what they believe to be right at any point in time;
- Creating a safe space in which everyone's voice is heard and valued.



### Responsibilities

- Encouraging risk-taking with ideas and changing our minds, with the understanding that we are always on the look out for a better idea;
- Taking away any sense of a participant having to defend any idea they have put forward, and actively encouraging open-mindedness within the group in moving forward and breaking new ground;
- Emphasising that creativity in building ideas is not a competitive activity, and often involves the development of radical new combinations of ideas that may have previously appeared to be opposed to each other.



### Responsibilities

- Thinking through beforehand how to maintain the energy of a discussion and a sense of moving forward through physical movement (e.g. by changing chairs) and some plan for moving in and out of smaller ideas-building groups;
- Maintaining free flowing discussion by ensuring that everyone involved in the discussion responds to what has been said by the person beforehand and creating a shared awareness that prepared statements, recapping the whole discussion or going off at a tangent are not valued contributions;
- Keeping to agreed agenda times.



### Responsibilities

- Protecting minority views at all costs by ensuring that those holding them feel their contributions are sought and valued. Those in the minority must never feel nervous of speaking up because of the strength of views expressed by the majority;
- Stressing that the group need to respect differences of view for thinking to evolve and move on. By giving space for different views to be expressed, it is far easier for people to accept that the majority view should prevail in the end as the way ahead;
- Adhering to the ground rules and the transparency of the discussion. Once the group own the groundrules they will look to you as the facilitator to uphold them.

## Living the event beforehand in your mind

---

As a rule of thumb, you need to give as much time to planning a discussion as to facilitating it. As facilitator you need to live in the moment with your group, and you will only have confidence to do this if you're fully prepared.

The more you've thought through the event beforehand, the easier it will be to facilitate it.

Most team events and away-days that fall short of expectations don't succeed because trust isn't built within the group from the start.

Groundrules can really help a facilitator deal with behaviours that close down discussions, such as over-talking, bullying, breaking the flow, side-tracking and not listening.

## Before the facilitation, you need to have considered:

---



*Does the process you have designed allow enough time for everyone to have their say?*



*Who's in the group and what do you know about each of them?*



*How are you going to inject energy into the group if it becomes stuck and starts going over old ground?*



*What are the groundrules that you want the group to adopt to support you as their facilitator and build trust?*



## Groundrules

---

Groundrules are a shared commitment of the group to work together according to key principles agreed at the outset.

Groundrules are affirmations of how members of a group propose to behave as equal contributors to an ideas-building process. As such, they are expressed as positives: 'we will, rather than we won't'.

Some feel the expression 'groundrules' sounds restrictive and prefer to use other terms such as group protocols. Whatever term is used, agreement of the groundrules is a shared commitment of the group to work together differently from their usual conduct in meetings. Once they are agreed, they are owned by the group.

As facilitator, you are guardian of the groundrules and need to be diligent in upholding them.

The groundrules should be chosen and worded carefully to reflect the purpose of an ideas-building session, and help those involved to build the trust needed for them to be creative.

## The bank of 15

---

On the next three pages we set out a 'bank' or longlist of 15 groundrules, each summarised with a memorable phrase. Such phrases can be helpful during discussions for you as facilitator to remind participants in a relaxed way the moment any of them are broken.

# Bank of Groundrules

| Groundrule<br>memorable phrase                  | Why select it?<br>To whom is it most relevant?  |
|---|---|
| <b>1</b> <b>We build trust as we go</b>         | <p>Asks for an act of faith from all that trust will be built through the way group members work with each other. Acknowledges that many ideas-building sessions fall short of expectations because of a lack of trust within groups.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> everyone in a group, but especially doubters that the event will be an open and creative ideas-building session</p> |
| <b>2</b> <b>Be prepared to change your mind</b> | <p>Loosens up those who find it challenging to move in their thinking through open debate; reassures everyone that you don't have to defend an idea you put forward.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> position-takers, trench-diggers</p>  |
| <b>3</b> <b>Strictly confidential</b>           | <p>Gives group members the confidence to speak freely, without any fear of come back outside of the event.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> leaders wanting to test out options informally before taking them forward for formal decision-making</p>   |

# Bank

| Groundrule<br>memorable phrase        | Why select it?<br>To whom is it most relevant?  |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <b>4</b> <b>Deep listening</b>        | <p>Encourages all to listen closely to what is being said and respond to the person who has spoken immediately before them.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> mobile phone and tablet junkies, side-talkers, prepared speech-makers, re-cappers</p>                             |
| <b>5</b> <b>No hidden agendas</b>     | <p>Encourages trust in the process, clarity about the context in which the discussion is taking place and what's in and outside of discussions.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> cynics and conspiracy theorists who assume that everyone has a hidden agenda</p>              |
| <b>6</b> <b>All equal, all needed</b> | <p>Reassures less senior participants that they have been invited because it is important their voice is heard, whatever their status in their day jobs.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> over-talkers who will need to be asked to hold back for others to have their say</p> |
| <b>7</b> <b>Connect not convince</b>  | <p>Discourages persuaders from making a pitch; encourages understanding without advocacy.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> highly passionate believers/ advocates who want to 'win the room'</p>   |

# Bank

| Groundrule<br>memorable phrase              | Why select it?<br>To whom is it most relevant?  |
|---|---|
| <b>8</b> <b>No bad idea or view</b>         | <p>Creates a sense of confidence and freedom; encourages everyone to take risks with ideas.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> those who want to close down discussion, bullies</p>  |
| <b>9</b> <b>Contribute not compete</b>      | <p>Underlines that everyone's ideas are valued.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> those who want to prove their worth by 'taking out' those who disagree with them</p>  |
| <b>10</b> <b>Clarity not consensus</b>      | <p>Emphasises the need for people to say it straight and avoid fudging differences for the sake of seeming to agree.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> quick decision-makers, those who are conflict averse</p>   |
| <b>11</b> <b>Respect for minority views</b> | <p>Protects those who disagree with the majority and helps them feel safe to voice their views. Demonstrates the integrity of the process; every idea will be heard and honoured.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> those who see themselves as in the majority and can become intolerant of minority views</p> |

# Bank

| Groundrule<br>memorable phrase   | Why select it?<br>To whom is it most relevant?   |
|--|--|
| <b>12</b> <b>Free flowing discussion</b>                                 | <p>Prevents prepared statements from derailing discussions. Encourages deep listening, and the idea of building ideas rather than sharing position statements.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> speech-makers, poor listeners</p>   |
| <b>13</b> <b>Breaking new ground</b>                                     | <p>Stops the group from staying in the 'safe zone' with what we know. Encourages creative risk-taking where no one is sure of the best way ahead.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> 'reflectors', those who are risk averse</p>  |
| <b>14</b> <b>Tough on ourselves and each other – but always generous</b> | <p>Prevents everyone from just accepting everything put forward and encourages questioning for greater clarity and understanding. Ensures that questions are expressed kindly and stops summary attempts to shut down ideas.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> non-enquirers, lazy thinkers, bullies</p> |
| <b>15</b> <b>Plain English</b>   | <p>Discourages the use of 'sound bites', jargon and acronyms unfamiliar to some members of the group.</p> <p><i>Most relevant to:</i> those who fear being seen as 'intellectually inadequate' and feel under pressure to use words of five syllables when they know that two would do</p>             |



## 3 Key Questions to consider when choosing groundrules

Having read through the bank of groundrules, there are three key questions we invite you to consider. Your responses will inform your selection of the three or four groundrules that best suit your needs and those of your group.

---

**Which groundrules will be most helpful to me in building trust among the group?**

---

**What are my particular strengths and weaknesses as a facilitator, and which groundrules will best help me increase my confidence?**

---

**Which groundrules will help me ensure everyone takes part in the discussion?**

### ***To be continued ...***

This Leadership Conversation was absolutely clear about the importance of a facilitator as trust-builder. In future we will explore the other roles that a facilitator needs to play, not least as the pace-setter, constantly energising a group and building momentum when necessary, as well as slowing the group down when more curiosity is needed to draw out an insight that could otherwise be missed.





## **Chapter 2**

# **Helping a group to live possible futures**



## "How we do stuff to win!"

---

As we discuss in Chapter One, 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.



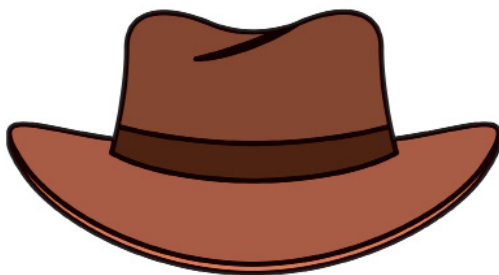
This is where the role of the facilitator is so important in reassuring a group that the session is about **opening up ideas** without any danger of anyone being "bounced" into a quick decision on an issue that needs to be thought through very carefully.

## We need to know which hat we're wearing!

---

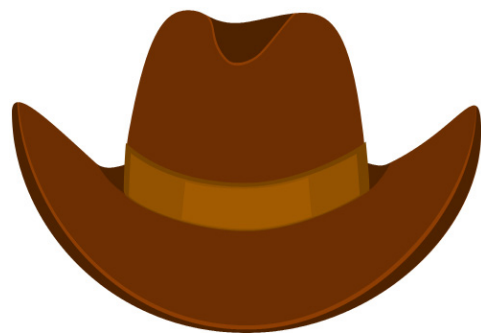
It is when leaders start off a meeting wearing the hat of an energising, driving leader and then try to switch mid-way to becoming a more questioning and reflective leader that things can go badly wrong!

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*".

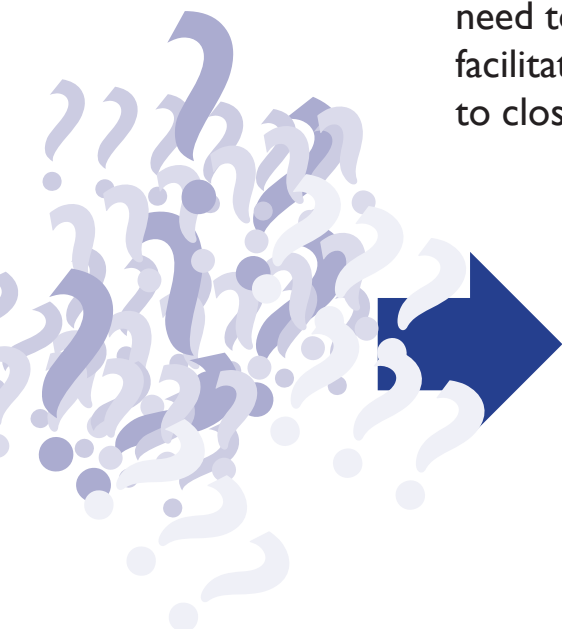
To some, this might not sound such a big deal.

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.

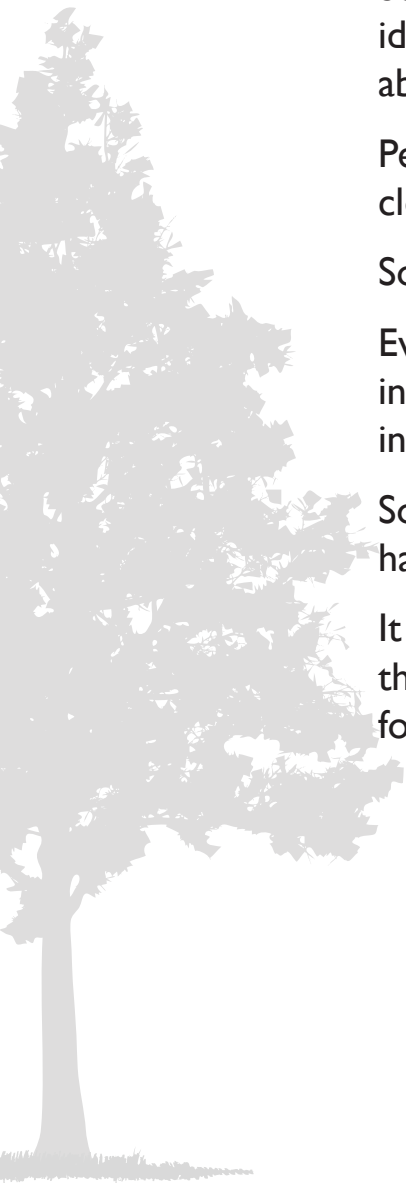
People should move around regularly, and if the meeting room is close to a park, why not go for a short walk? Seriously.

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!"*