



Raising our performance as leaders

*Insights from four
Leadership Conversations*

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

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Coming soon

High performance leadership - going for the stretch

October 2019

Achieving your top priorities in 2020

December 2019



Chapter I

Raising our game as leaders

Ten game-changers

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| Recognising our self-limiting behaviours – and telling our inner critic to chill!

What do we see as our self-limiting behaviours as leaders?

It's incredibly important that we try to identify them, because they can so easily get in our way unless we develop personal strategies for leaving them behind.

At the same time, we need to be careful to keep our inner critic on a tight leash!

The more we let ourselves become frustrated by our self-limiting behaviours, the more they can end up holding us back.

Yes, we need to get a grip on them, but don't let's make this all such **hard work!**

If we can lighten up about them, we should find it easier to own them with colleagues and ask for their support with managing them.

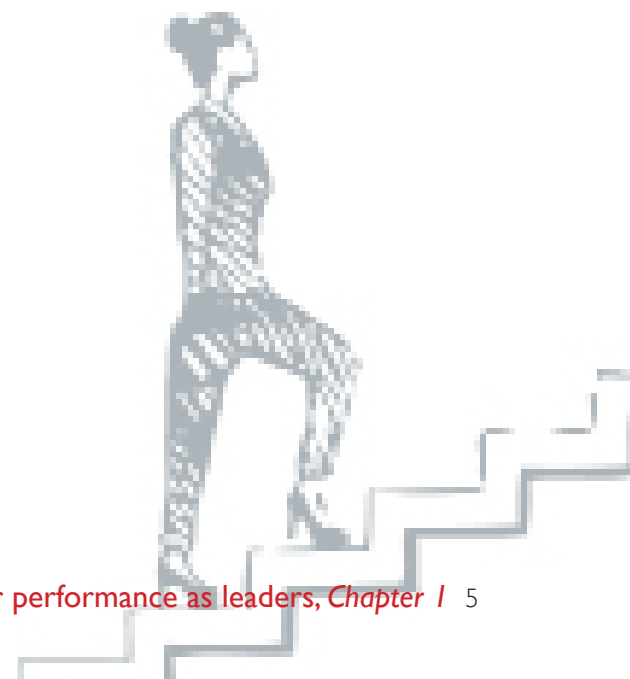
Doing ourselves down

If we picture a list of our top three self-limiting behaviours, quite a few of us will have one in common:

- “Doing ourselves down whenever we get a chance!”

Let's take **that one** off the list.

That would be a great step forward.



2 Being ourselves more – with skill

This was one of our favourite phrases at this Conversation. We need to “*be ourselves more – with skill*”.

Too often, we focus on what we are **not**.

Instead, we need to focus on what sort of leader we **are**, and then apply ourselves to becoming better and better at doing what we already do well.

This is bound to require some changes in our overall style of leadership.

But the crucial point is that we should approach this from the starting point of focusing on what we already do that is in any way special.

Valuing ourselves more

For a good number of us, this means that we need to get a lot better at appreciating the sort of leader that we are, and our particular skills as a leader.

Then we can focus on how to use our leadership skills more effectively as we go through the next year.

The key principle here is that we each need to value ourselves more as a leader.

We can then apply ourselves to our strategy for self-improvement, building on our strengths and assets to enable us to **be ourselves more – with skill**.



3 Asking more from those we trust the most

We need to invest more in our key relationships with those whom we trust the most. We can do this by making a point of asking them for help when we need it.

This way, we might be able to stop feeling that we have to pretend to everyone that everything is fine, at times when we know it isn't.

Cheerleaders

We all need our cheerleaders.

They are the people who see the **specialness** that we bring to our role as a leader, as well as our vulnerabilities and anxieties.

Our top cheerleaders might include a close colleague at work. They might also include our life partner, or our best friend from school or university.

Brutally honest

So often we tell ourselves that we need to protect them from the anxieties that are going round and round in our mind.

In actual fact, we are **honouring** their trust in us if we are brutally honest with them about what is causing us the greatest anxiety.

By letting them be there more for us, we are affirming the significance of all that we share with them.

This is so much more real than pretending all is fine at times when **we want** to say “I’m in a corner and need your help with getting out of it”.

Next year, let’s just say it!

4 Shifting our focus “from exploit to explore”

As leaders, we have trained ourselves to support our key people in exploiting their talents and gifts to the full.

The problem is that we can spend so long focused on talent-building in relation to our organisation as it is **now** that we leave ourselves little time for exploring how we would like our people to develop their roles into the future.

So many leaders tend to sub-contract this area of thinking to someone else, and are then slow to respond to their ideas because they rather resent the fact that they didn't play a bigger part in developing them themselves!

Our team's leading explorer

From now on we need to see ourselves more as our team's leading explorer, dedicating more of our time to thinking through possible futures that the organisation could step into.

Once we have a greater sense of ownership of these alternative futures, we should be able to offer so much more in helping our team to exploit their leadership skills – current and potential - to the full.

Like all successful explorers, we stick close to our key people and make sure they know that we are there for them if they ever trip or fall.

So long as this support is truly two-way, we should be in a position to spend more time charting the way ahead.

We can then exercise the prerogative of a leading explorer telling our team that the mountain summit is just about in sight, and how exciting it will be when we reach it!



5 Getting tougher on ourselves whenever we over-commit

Realistically, there probably aren't many of us who expect to get through the next year without over-committing ourselves as leaders at least a few times.

Undervaluing ourselves

We know **why** we have this tendency to over-commit, don't we?

Most of the time this is driven by our tendency to undervalue ourselves.

Our self-doubt drives us to want to do more to prove to ourselves - and others - that we **are** as good as some of them think we are.

To prove that they are right and our inner voice of self-doubt is wrong, we push ourselves harder to take on more than we should.

Ensuring that we get more things right

Ironic, isn't it.

We get more things wrong because we're taking on too much due to our concern that we might not be as good as others think we are!

Time to pause and say to ourselves "*don't over-commit*".

Apart from anything else, it's our best way of ensuring that we get more things **right**.

In the process, we are more likely to prove right those who have a more generous view of our leadership skills than we do!

6 Giving less time in meetings to tasks and more to colleagues' concerns

Despite all that we know about how leaders should and shouldn't behave with their teams, many of us still spend far too much time in meetings discussing a battery of different tasks, wanting to agree who will do what, when and how.

We treat our top team like a group of managers, and then express surprise when they don't behave more like the leaders we want them to be!

So from now on let's tell our teams that we will sort out as many of the practical tasks as possible **outside** of team meetings.

Supporting each other more

When the team meet together as one, we will then have more time to ask what we should all be doing to support each other more to become a more effective team.

As part of this process, team members will have the space – that never exists within task-based agendas - to ask others to support them with resolving specific concerns that are getting in their way.

Each member of the team would know that our overriding commitment is to enable them to become as good as they can possibly be.

Also, their experience of team meetings would be one where the process of agenda-setting is **shared**, and time is allocated not according to an action-based tick list but according to their needs as leaders.

7 Rethinking our view of duty

A number of Leadership Fellows talk about their current leadership role as a “duty”.

As they use this word, we can sometimes feel the energy levels in the Vicars’ Hall drop!

It sounds like such **hard work** and something that could never be in any way enjoyable.

Why not?

Why can’t we associate duty more with the idea that we’re in a position where we really are being guided by our “true North” and are in with a good chance of **fulfilling our mission** as a leader?

We know the answer, don’t we. We tend to see duty as something that is so often **imposed on us**.

It is not our choice and is instead something that we are **required** to take on.

Part of the package

Yet as leaders we know that there are so many aspects of our role that we need to get on with, like it or not.

Unless we step up and take them on, we won’t be as good as we could be.

So we view them as part of the “package”.

How about some fresh thought leadership around this issue?

Let’s hear it for the duties that a leader **chooses** to take on.

Gosh, look at those smiles!



8 Becoming more measured, especially in drawing out points of learning

We know that many of us can be too frantic – frenetic, even.

We have discussed this at various Leadership Conversations and agreed that the “speed merchants” among us need to be ready to slow down at times, so that those who are feeling left behind have a chance to catch up.

The greater our speed, the more we tend to view anything going wrong as a bit of a car crash.

Instead of calmly drawing out any relevant lessons and learning points, we express anger at the fact that we have had to slow down - and can't wait to speed up again!

Avoiding yet another drama

We all appreciate the importance of momentum and pace.

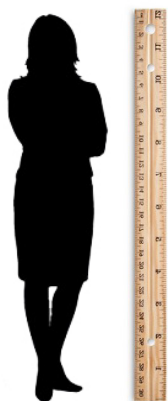
We do need more speed at times.

We also need the ability to pause in a measured way when necessary and ask what lessons need to be learnt, **before** we put our foot on the accelerator again.

The best lesson-learner

More often than not, it is the measured leader who is the best lesson-learner.

It is this sense of measure that avoids yet another drama and converts an error into a learning opportunity.



9 Picturing ourselves in the space we want to be in

This Leadership Conversation was the third one in a row at which we tried a visualisation to picture a situation that we wanted to be in as leaders and imagine our experience of it.

This visualisation didn't work for all of us. But on each occasion it worked for a good number of us, and for some it had a really significant impact.

Creating bridges

Overall, we were struck by the **potential** that this technique could have for enabling more of us to “dream in” the sort of leadership role that we would like to play in the future.

We generally don't use our imagination nearly enough to create bridges between the situations that we find ourselves in at the moment and the situations that we would like to be in, in the future.

Powerful

Many of us could try this technique with our teams.

We might ask them to visualise themselves free from the self-limiting behaviours that hold us all back.

That could be powerful.

Breaking down barriers

Or we might ask them to imagine themselves enjoying our time together as a team more and valuing more highly the distinctive contribution that each member brings.

That could break down a few more barriers between team members, and help everyone appreciate that much more the importance of **diversity** to the success of the team.

10 Becoming more comfortable with our success as leaders

One of the phrases that we used at this Leadership Conversation was that there was a “surfeit of humility” in the room.

The extent to which a number of Leadership Fellows seemed so committed to **putting themselves down** really was striking.

We’re all in favour of leaders having a capacity to be self-deprecatory, but one can take a good idea too far!

We quickly saw **why** this was the case.

Quite a few Fellows in the room were so keen to distance themselves from the egotistical behaviours they saw being exhibited by top leaders in public life that they were in danger of swinging too far the other way.

Becoming “moany”

The motives behind this might be worthy, but the overall result can be other than helpful.

It can mean that instead of being compassionate and generous-spirited whenever we get something wrong, we become that much more self-critical and “moany” about our unworthiness.

Showing compassion

Instead of turning our guns on ourselves, we actually need to show some compassion **towards ourselves** if we are to be quick in learning the lessons of mistakes and sharing them with others.

Even more important perhaps, we need to be feeling pretty confident about ourselves as leaders if we to be as compassionate as we need to be with **others** when they screw up!

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Appreciating ourselves more

To become more compassionate towards ourselves and others in future, some of us need to appreciate ourselves more and enjoy more what we're achieving.

We need to let ourselves become that little bit **more comfortable** with our success, without - Heaven forbid! - slipping into complacency or egotism.

Stretching others more

Our comfort should then permit others to become that little bit more comfortable themselves.

In turn, this should enable us to stretch them more, on the basis that they know that we know how good they are.

They also know that we're sufficiently relaxed with ourselves as leaders for them to take it for granted that we have no "hidden agenda" when we ask them to join us in raising our game and **stepping up as leaders**.





Chapter 2

Stretching ourselves as leaders

I Seeing ourselves as passionately curious

There is probably no better way of putting ourselves in the right frame of mind than reminding ourselves of these wonderful words by Albert Einstein:

- *“I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”*

To stretch ourselves as leaders – really stretch ourselves – we need to let our passionate curiosity drive the way we are and the ways in which we lead.

With this mindset, we become ever more curious to discover new talents of our own as well as of those around us.

2 No longer seeing talents as “permanent attributes”

Once we regard individuals’ talents as capable of developing in ways that can’t readily be predicted, we open ourselves up to a host of new possibilities.

Not least, we see very clearly that the traditional notion of talents as “permanent attributes” is no longer helpful and needs to be left behind as we develop a more dynamic approach towards talent management.

It also enables us more readily to take on the proposition that talent in our working lives is an expression of the sort of person that we are across the whole of our lives.

So when we think about stretching our talents as leaders, we also need to think about how we stretch ourselves across the rest of our lives too.

One is part of the other, like it or not.



3 Sometimes having to “stop, look and listen”

For those of us who see ourselves as passionate optimists, it can be more of a stretch to engage with the passions of others than project our own.

As one Leadership Fellow put it, *“I know that once I get on a roll I can stop listening. In moments when I feel this danger, I tell myself to stop, look and listen”*.

The stretch is in the moment when we **stop**.

4 Encouraging others to lead in a way “not of our ilk”

It’s very easy to fancy ourselves as empowering leaders.

It’s also easy to start off as an empowering leader and then gradually apply conditions, so that others are empowered so long as they lead in broadly the same sort of way that we lead.

Hence the thought that many of us would really stretch ourselves as leaders if we say explicitly to our teams that we wish to empower them to lead in a way that might “not be of our ilk”.

They just need to get the job done to a high standard.

That really would be empowering of others - and stretching for the leader saying it!

5 Creating time to THINK

We can so easily fill every minute of the day, so that we have no time when we are alone and can think.

What a difference it could make if we create 5 to 10 minutes of uninterrupted thinking time for ourselves every day.

We look away from our keyboard and phone and let ourselves think. Without interruption. Wow!



6 Silencing the “background noise” in our head

Once we create some thinking time for ourselves, it might become easier for some of us to still the “background noise” in our head.

So often it is the **intensity of our expectations** towards others that makes it really hard for them to step forward.

They find themselves under such pressure from us to act in a certain way that they feel unable to make up their own mind about what is the best thing to do.

Our stretch as leaders involves us in trying to make sure that any “noise” in our head doesn’t hold them back from thinking through what is best.

This means that instead of saying to them “We must ...” we ask instead “How could we...?” or even “May I follow your lead?”.

7 Owning our energy in moments of challenge

As leaders we need to “own our energy”, especially in moments when we are challenging someone else on some aspect of their performance.

The longer we postpone a challenge, the more likely we are to come across as uptight, and having made up our mind that the other person is in the wrong.

This is why it is so important to ask ourselves whether we come across at times as aggressive or overly judgemental.

Calmness and centredness are so key to challenging others if we want them to be able to receive a difficult message without losing their self-pride in the process.

Hence the stretch challenge for all leaders:

- to think about our energy in moments when we are critical of others, to ensure that any criticism on our part doesn’t make them feel that we’re withdrawing our belief in them – unless that is what we mean, in which case we should say this honestly and without aggression.



8 Learning to console and stretch

We don't often see these two words linked, do we? If anything, we might think of consoling someone if they feel over-stretched and too far out of their comfort zone.

Behind this point there sits an important proposition:

- That stretching others isn't just about "rallying the troops".

One of the best ways of stretching those we are close to in work can be through drawing on our own mentoring skills to console them.

This enables them to feel "seen" and assures them of their significance in the team.

For many leaders, this role of "**Consoler-in-Chief**" can feel like quite a stretch!

This is why it's so important to remind ourselves how much some timely affirmation can help to build greater loyalty on the part of others as well as greater ambition for the organisation.

9 Keeping difficult conversations tightly focused

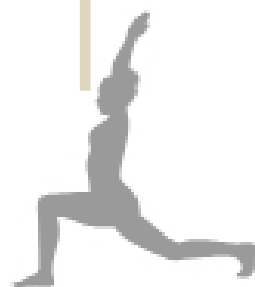
This role of Consoler-in-Chief is one that some leaders take on at the end of a difficult conversation with a close colleague.

Whether or not this is necessary usually depends on how we **open up** the conversation.

It can do so much to reassure the other person if they see right from the beginning that we are keeping the conversation tightly focused on one specific concern.

The stretch here is in staking out our ground thoughtfully, so that they see us as seeking a pragmatic resolution to a situation that they also want to resolve.

It is our best chance of ensuring that they do not receive our challenge as an attack on them.



10 Inviting others to tell us if something might be wrong

We judge our success as a leader not just by the number of “good news stories” that our team come up with.

Perhaps even more important is the bad news that something might not be going as well as it should.

What matters is that we hear this as early as possible in the process of things beginning to slip, so that we can intervene quickly without others’ fear of being blamed getting in the way of speedy action.

The stretch here is to demonstrate our insatiable curiosity by asking whether something might not be right in a situation where this is actually the last thing that we want to hear!

By stressing the **tentative** nature of the judgement that we’re looking for we make it as easy as possible for someone else to raise their concerns without feeling that they are making a definitive statement that things are going wrong.

11 Breaking down challenges into manageable “chunks”

We include this stretch behaviour because it is one of those that is key – and not obvious!

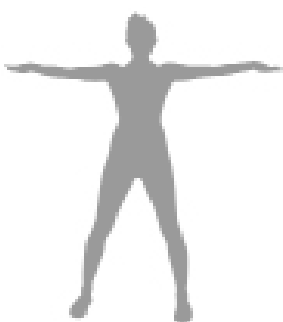
It is so very easy for us to make a challenge appear **bigger** than it needs to be.

Nine times out of ten this is a mistake.

Often the key to bringing out the best in others is to help them in breaking down big challenges into more manageable chunks, so that the stretch involved in delivering each chunk feels more realistic and do-able.

Our stretch is to help define the chunks, even when we think this shouldn’t be necessary.

This can help others avoid the feeling of being over-stretched, which is one of the main triggers for high performers finding that their performance is beginning to slip.



12 Making sure we don't over-think things

Having argued that most of us need to create more personal thinking time, we also want to flag up the danger of over-thinking things.

We need to keep ourselves in an **empowered** mode when we go into our thinking bubble.

If we find ourselves beginning to prevaricate through over-thinking something, the best way of not getting stuck in this thought trap is to say to ourselves,

- *“Stop faffing about and get on with it!”*

Our stretch is in taking ourselves **out of our thought bubble** in that moment when it becomes our excuse for inaction.

13 Valuing ourselves more highly

If we are to identify one more challenge that requires us to stretch ourselves more as leaders, it is surely the challenge of valuing ourselves more highly.

So much of our impact as leaders is determined by our ability to influence others.

If we want others to value our advice more highly, we cannot separate off the value that we place on ourselves as leaders from the value that we wish them to place on our advice.

For so many of us, it is a simple truth that if we are to be valued more by others we need to work that much harder at **valuing ourselves**.

Simple though this truth might be, this doesn't make it easy.

It's a serious stretch for many leaders, which is why the sooner we start this process, the better.



PART TWO STRETCHING OUR TEAMS

14 Making the switch from pressurising to energising

Let's start off Part Two with a really challenging stretch!

How about thinking less about “pushing” our team to perform better and more about “**lifting them up**” to enable them to deliver the results that we want?

This is one of those stretch exercises that challenges the traditional assumption that to be effective leaders need to drive and push others.

The proposition here is that the drivers and pushers are not the most effective leaders over time.

The most effective leaders are those who apply themselves to **building others up**, motivated by the limitless possibilities that can open up as we all seek to realise our full potential.

From pushers and pressurisers to builders and energisers!

That's a seriously stretching proposition. The results should make the stretch more than worth it.

15 Seeing ourselves as leading from WITHIN

This is another proposition that sounds easy and yet is quite counter-cultural for many leaders.

The idea is that we see ourselves as leading from within our teams. We might always find ourselves asking for more, but the language is about “us” - rather than “you” - achieving and delivering more.

If the team is under-performing in some way, we are automatically part of that.

Any criticism is self-directed as well as team-directed.

“We” all then become stronger and more unified through how we learn from “our mistakes” and turn them to advantage.



16 Creating a culture that expects positivity up-front

This positivity is not about creating some sort of artificial optimistic gloss that we use to plaster over all over the realities of the moment.

Rather, it is about us creating a team spirit in which all members of the team are expected to **“cheer each other on”**.

We ask tough questions, of course, because we are passionate in our curiosity.

We also work for ever higher standards of quality and ever better levels of customer satisfaction as we drive up performance.

We do all of this on the basis that **we have each other’s back**.

It is this that makes it so natural to have a “can do” mentality that makes members of the team want to intervene in a positive way the moment someone starts to dwell on the negative for too long.

17 Creating 10 minutes of team time first thing every day

So many of the best teams come together for a few minutes at the beginning of each day to “check in” with each other and highlight any particular challenges for that day.

Ten minutes for a team at the start of each day, on the hoof, is time brilliantly spent.

It can actually **save time** because of all that we feel we can take for granted once we know what other team members are up to.

It’s so much easier for us all to stretch ourselves once we really feel that we have the backing of our team.

And just think of all the emails that don’t have to be sent asking other members of the team what they’re doing at the moment!



18 Shifting the emphasis from “agreement” to “commitment”

We all know how many teams still tend to focus on the number of decisions they have taken at any one meeting.

Therein lies the problem.

We talk too much about what has been “agreed” rather than what the team have committed to make happen.

This is why the stretch behaviour is to talk less about “agreement” and more about “commitment”.

The aim is that over time every team member accepts without question that whenever they agree to something they commit themselves to **making it happen**, too!

19 Making sure that key objectives MEAN SOMETHING!

We don’t need many words on this key stretch behaviour.

Sadly, a lot of team leaders don’t pour enough energy into the process of negotiating and agreeing key objectives with team members.

Too often team objectives are presented as stretching even though there has been little stretch in the process of developing them!

They are poorly formulated and then presented as a fait accompli.

It is so important that objectives and targets are negotiated and agreed up-front, with a **laser-like sharpness** about them so that everyone is clear what they mean – and what they don’t mean.

Are these “*my targets for the team*” or truly “*our targets*”?

This is a question that every team leader should answer.

If they are **our targets**, the stretch comes in being prepared to adjust and renegotiate them to ensure that they are truly team-owned.



20 Knowing where the greatest talents lie in the team

This already sounds like a daunting stretch, doesn't it.

Yet it's one of the most important responsibilities of any team leader committed to leading a high performing team.

The proposition here is that every now and again leaders should make a point of asking their team – as part of an informal conversation – what they see as the main talents that they each bring to the team.

The language of talents gives individuals the freedom to talk in terms of their choosing about the skills and qualities and attitudes that they bring to their particular role within the team.

It also makes it relatively easy to open up a discussion about whether individual members of the team feel that their current role plays to their greatest strengths.

One of the reasons many teams fail to make the shift from mid-performing to high performing is because some team members don't feel that their role is quite right for them.

Yet unless their team leader first asks what they think it is almost impossible to say anything without this coming across as a complaint.

Giving permission for others to express that which they think might be seen as “difficult” ... this is surely one of the most important responsibilities of a leader who wishes to stretch their team by ensuring that everyone is contributing as much as they can.

In the process, everyone in the team gains a better understanding of the different talents around the table, as well as the scope for **drawing out various talents** that much more.

These would be two major pluses for any team. They are made possible by **one opening question** on the part of the team leader, followed by a sustained input of passionate curiosity.



21 Do the team see themselves as “changemakers”?

As you read this question, do you find yourself thinking “I’m not sure about this one”?

If so, may we humbly make the point that this is the problem! So many team leaders don’t know how their team view themselves.

They might **assume** that they see themselves as “changemakers”, or whatever term they want to use.

But they don’t ask the question.

Hence the proposition that we stretch our team – and perhaps ourselves as well – by asking this question.

If a team member says they don’t, a really good response could be,

- *“How can I support you more to see yourself in this way?”*

22 Creating occasional “team sprints”

One of the themes that we have returned to a few times at Leadership Conversations has been the importance of creating occasional “team sprints” that involve a team both in improving the **quality** of their offer and also increasing the **pace** of team-working, all at the same time.

In so many teams it is assumed that increased pace can jeopardise quality, whereas the experience of more and more top performers is that the two go hand-in-hand.

Once team members view themselves as changemakers, it is so easy and natural to lead this sprint culture.

At the end of each sprint, there is a retrospective evaluation in which the team asks,

- *“What do we take from this latest sprint that we want to hang on to – and what do we want to do differently next time?”*



23 Combining practical steps with some radical symbols

Creating a stretch culture usually involves some stretching leadership to help inspire staff across the organisation to raise their horizons.

It also involves work to **challenge established habits** that get in the way of individuals and teams stretching themselves.

This is why in Part Three we give examples of a few radical steps to help stimulate a stretch culture as well as some practical actions to embed it in day-to-day practices.

Pretty well all of the evidence suggests that any winning strategy for delivering a stretch culture lies in how we combine the two: **the radical with the practical.**

24 Reviewing your social purpose - and raising the bar

Is your wider social purpose as an organisation bold enough?

This is a great question to raise with your Board from the standpoint that, with their consent, you would like to set a more ambitious purpose for the organisation.

Some leadership teams can under-estimate the capacity of their staff (and indeed their shareholders) to commit to a broader and higher level social purpose.

If you can secure their backing for this, it should help you in accelerating change and driving stretch.

On its own, high level social purpose is never enough.

As a lead-in to some practical conversations about how everyone now needs to raise their game and increase their impact, it can be a powerful **scene-setter and motivator.**



25 Rethinking how we use Key Performance Indicators

Another way of creating a stronger stretch culture is through rethinking how the organisation uses its key performance indicators.

For example, one radical idea for encouraging greater sharing of responsibility is to encourage various teams to swap their KPIs with each other.

The proposition that one team's bonus payments should depend upon how another team performs is a bold way of conveying the message that teams are dependent on each other for their own success.

Others might favour a slightly less radical model that involves two or even three teams agreeing a small number of shared KPIs.

This way, each team would be reminded of their dependency on the others without feeling that they are giving up nearly all of their control over their performance in relation to their own KPIs.

26 Relocating various teams and departments

Yet another idea, that many larger organisations have deployed at various times, involves different teams and occasionally different departments being relocated.

The aim is either to bring them physically closer to another part of the organisation that they have not worked well with up to now, or to move them away from a team or department where the working relationship has become so cosy that it is now **excluding others**.

This type of move helps to break down the tendency towards silo working that is inherent in all organisations.

Many top performing organisations see it as a natural part of their cycle for shaking things up when various teams show signs of settling into team rivalries, or shared comfort zones, that have become too comfortable!



27 Creating a “high potentials pool” for rising stars

This is now established practice for a wide range of organisations, and we include it because many organisations still hold back from taking this step.

Its great attraction is the recognition that it gives to staff who demonstrate talent and ambition that the organisation wants to nurture over time.

Many Chief Executives can under-estimate the cynicism of staff when they tell them that they want to “grow their own” and promote from within.

This practice of maintaining a “high potentials pool” for rising stars conveys an unmistakeable message that talented individuals who show real potential and are willing to stretch themselves will receive all of the support that they need to progress to the top levels of the organisation.

28 Establishing regular “days in my shoes”

This is another one of those ideas that has been taken on board by many organisations, but is often implemented in a relatively half-hearted way.

The idea is that all employees should have the opportunity to nominate another member of staff who they would like to shadow for one full day to gain a better understanding of what it is like doing their job “in their shoes”.

This helps to build greater trust across the organisation, and can also link in very effectively with cross-departmental **sponsorship and secondment** arrangements.

Being accompanied by someone for a day gives that individual an excellent opportunity to gain a sense of the shadow’s insights and decide whether or not they are someone they would wish to sponsor.



29 Creating occasional internal competitions

The importance of this idea is not so much about the competitions as it is about the pretext that they create for mixing staff up and encouraging them to work together in different ways.

Internal competitions make it possible to create new time-limited competition teams with a common interest in cheering each other on because of their shared desire to win.

Cross-organisation competitions create the option for staff to volunteer for a **different sort of role**, giving them a chance to develop their existing skills and competencies as well as demonstrating some talents that the organisation hasn't been able to witness so far.

They also make it possible for the CEO and top team to recognise individuals who might not have come to the fore within their established team and now step forward into a key role in their competition team.

30 Acknowledging your leadership role as a “space creator”

There are so many ways in which a top team can help to create more of a stretch culture across their organisation.

What they nearly all involve, in one way or another, is the top team coming up with some sort of proposition that creates the space for staff to **showcase under-used talents** and start to develop new ones.

Continued overleaf



30 Acknowledging your leadership role as a “space creator”

Continued

For an organisation to maintain a stretch culture, the Chief Executive and top leadership team need to be committed to shaking things up occasionally and “reshuffling the pack” to make it possible for others to step forward and shine.

By definition, stretch cultures involve a measure of **risk**, both on the part of those who are being stretched as well as the leaders facilitating the stretch.

What makes them so strong is the fact that this risk is predicated on an assumption of belief in others, and their ability to respond positively in a situation where they feel themselves being stretched.

There needs to be a general assumption within the organisation that people can speak up if they feel over-stretched.

Indeed, the whole point of stretch cultures is that they see stretching as a creative and developmental process, and fundamentally an experience that is **confidence-giving**.

It should be easier for a member of staff who feels genuinely stretched to speak up.

The stretch is then involved in creating the **space** for a process of ruthless prioritisation, weeding out those tasks that are dispensable and distracting individuals from the key challenges that require their full attention.

Stretch cultures are **challenging and addictive**.

They also need to be “refreshed” every now and again, so that the leaders of culture change experience the stretch themselves.



Time to stretch?

Once this culture is a part of your present it should always be a part of your future.



Chapter 3

Pre-mortems, night brains & running hares

| Shifting the pendulum – from post-mortems to pre-mortems

So often our reflections in teams take the form of a post mortem. We look backwards and ask what we should have done differently.

Imagine that instead we look forwards. Rather than undertaking yet another post-mortem we ask our team to engage in a pre-mortem.

We create an ambitious target for what we would like to achieve as an organisation in, say, two years' time.

We explain why it excites us.

We then ask the team to imagine that we have gone all out to achieve it – and not quite made it.

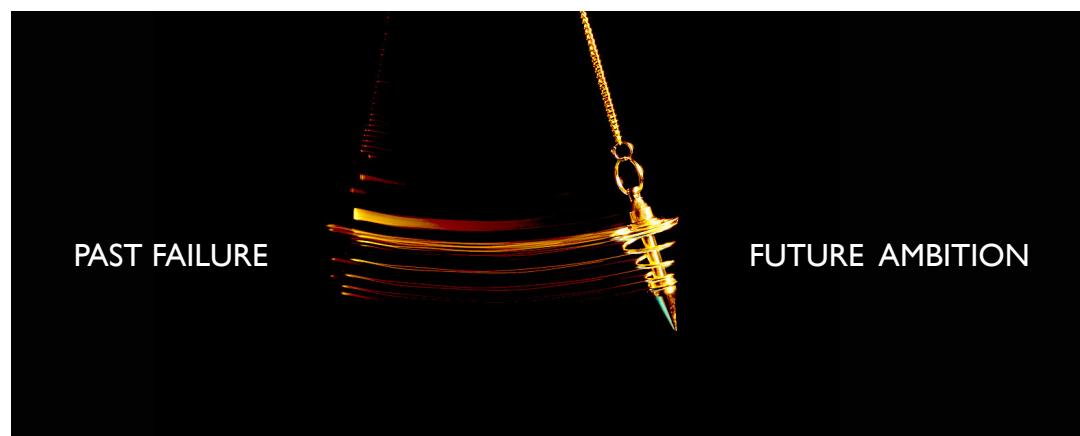
What is it about us as a team that will have **got in our way**?

This makes it much easier to be tough on ourselves, because our topic is all about achieving ambition in the future rather than who is to be blamed for what we failed to get right in the past.

Stepping into each other's shoes

At the same time, imagine asking members of the team to step into each other's shoes for this exercise. The Operations Director imagines themselves taking on the responsibilities of the Sales Director, the Sales Director makes a mental switch to becoming the Director of People, and so on.

This can be a great way of ensuring that team members view shared challenges from the standpoint of others round the table.





“Okay, brain, here’s your starter for ten ...”

2 Getting our night brain on the case ...

*“Sometimes when I’m standing in front of the mirror at night, brushing my hair and getting ready for bed, I will put into words a question that is really worrying me as a leader. I find that **just by putting it into words**, as one of the last things that I do before I go to sleep, that’s enough. More often than not, the next morning I wake up with an answer.*

I make sure I have a pad on my bedside table, because if I don’t write it down quickly I’ll almost certainly forget it!

I feel a bit embarrassed mentioning this, because I know it might sound strange ...”

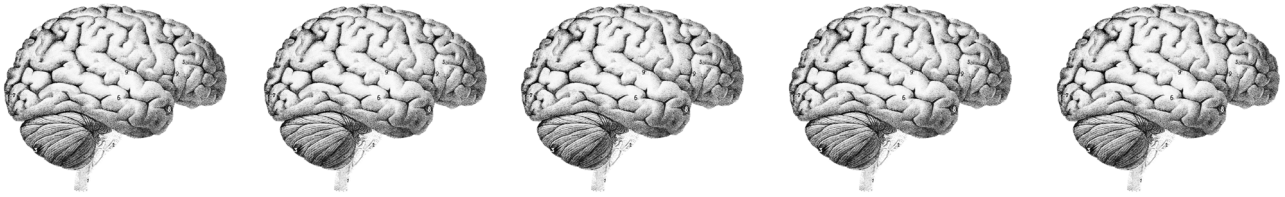
It doesn’t sound strange, does it? A number of us have notepads spread around in strategic places at home, to capture any early morning inspiration that comes to us as we move from the dream-world back into the realities of a new day.

Getting the killer question right!

What really struck the rest of us was how this Leadership Fellow worked at capturing the question that she wanted to try and answer by the next morning.

So, next time you’re in front of the mirror late at night, how about capturing in a few words the question that **you** want your night brain to work on?

Don’t forget to have a notepad at the ready.



"Can I pick your brains for a few minutes"

3 Asking open questions – for a whole day!

Back to the day brain. What don't most of us do enough of with our brain?

We don't listen enough.

We know that active listening should be one of the most important dimensions to our leadership.

How do we help ourselves to make this step change in the ways we engage with listening to others?

One idea from one Leadership Fellow was that for one whole day he should commit to only asking open questions of colleagues.

In many cases he will want to **focus** the question, so that colleagues are clear about the aspect of their business that he wants to explore with them.

The point about the openness of the question is that they know that whatever they say, he will want to understand more.

His aim is to get inside their heads and see the world through their eyes.

Our response was: *"One whole day of active listening? What a commitment would that be!"*

Just half a day would be a seriously big deal.

Some of us might work up to this – and start with an hour!

If this includes you, how about starting on Monday?

4 Asking for feedback when others aren't expecting it

It's been a fairly long meeting with the team. You're looking down at the table as you put all of your papers together in their folder.

With a casual tone, you half look up and say,

"By the way, I meant to ask ... Is there anything I've done in the past week or so that's bugged anyone? If there is, please just say. I'm always open to the idea that I've got things wrong and I really like to sort out problems as we go."

Someone says something about Vincent and Saeeda in the sales team having had their noses put out of joint because you had missed something out that you had promised to say in a speech to the sales team last week.

"Thanks so much for saying that", you say. "I'm terribly sorry. I remember that - and I'll go and see if Vincent and Saeeda are in after lunch. Anything else?"

No rehearsing – and no justifying, either

We ask this question when people aren't expecting us to ask it. They haven't got time to rehearse what they say.

We make a point of being very relaxed and always thanking people for what they say, whatever that might be.

There is no justification, just appreciation.

Members of the team gradually get used to the idea that they can say difficult things to each other and all will be fine.

They also come to feel that whenever the rest of us say difficult things to them, they too are freed from having to justify themselves.

It is so much easier to leave behind "old baggage" when no-one has to justify why they did what they did!



Meeting room

No baggage

5 Avoiding shared reflections that set hares running



This conclusion rather surprised us! We went into this Conversation assuming that it's a good thing to share more of our reflections with those with whom we work most closely.

We ended up appreciating that just as we can socialise ideas too late, so can we **socialise them too early**.

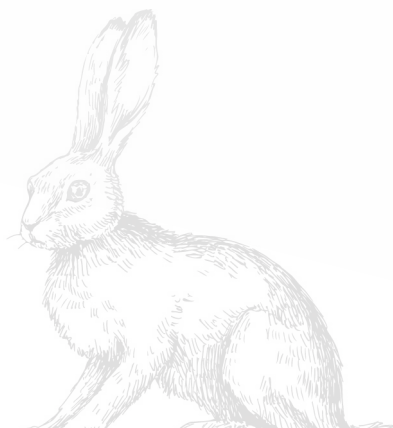
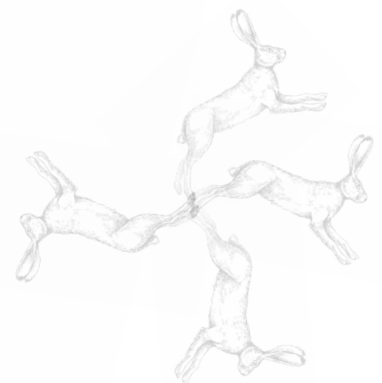
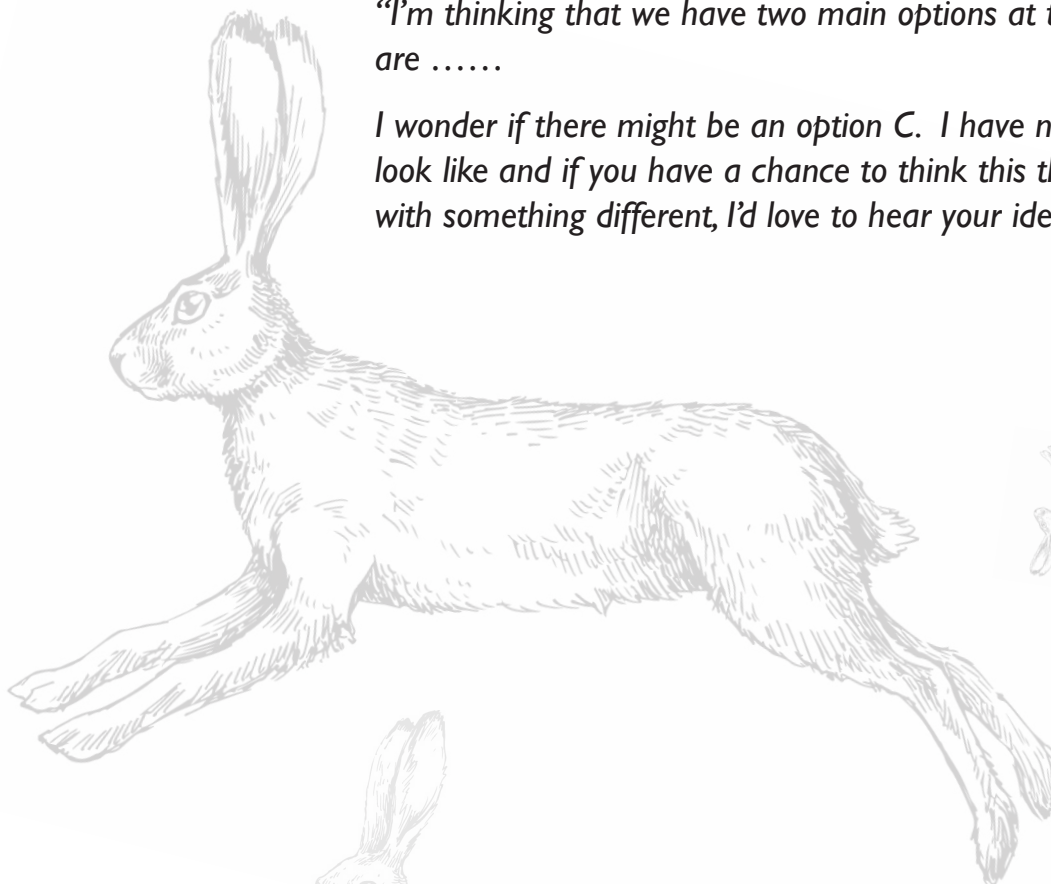
Sometimes some of us can think out loud and then find that we have set a number of hares running **in ways we didn't intend**.

Hence our conclusion that at times we need to keep our thoughts to ourselves for a little longer, until we are clearer about **WHAT** we want to socialise and **WHY**.

At this stage, it can be a really a good idea to "think out loud" about some options that you and your team now face - as one.

"I'm thinking that we have two main options at the moment. These are

I wonder if there might be an option C. I have no idea what it would look like and if you have a chance to think this through and come up with something different, I'd love to hear your ideas!"



6 Thirty minutes personal reflection time at the end of the day?

In the final minutes of this Leadership Conversation, one of our Fellows said that from now on she plans to set aside 30 minutes at the end of each day *“for deep reflection on how I have done”*.

She would make a point of focusing on the learning that she should take away from the day, and not let herself get distracted by her internal perfectionist who could turn almost any situation less than 100% successful into a near disaster!

The first reaction from quite a number of us was that 30 minutes a day for this exercise is a **long time**!

Couldn't you get the job done in 15 minutes? Or 10?

Five, maybe, if you really get a move on and push yourself hard!

Quality time for ourselves

We can all be so reluctant to set aside quality time for ourselves to go through an internal process of asking where we feel we have discharged our leadership role in ways that make us proud, and where we have clearly fallen foul of an old habit of ours that we now need to leave behind.

What is so important about this process of internal reflection is that it should be as regular as possible.

Maybe this will help us identify the right question to submit to our night brain later on!

It can be a really good discipline to say to ourselves:



“I’m only allowed one question, so let’s put to one side all those thoughts that end up being diversions and instead cut to the chase!”



7 “Don’t just stand there – DO NOTHING!”

This made us laugh and we hope it amuses you too!

So many of us are in the “action, action, action” mode.

To us, leadership is about **doing things** and making things **happen**.

Give us a crisis, and it’s so easy for our first question to be “*What should we do?*” rather than “*Why did this happen?*”

Deep within our beings, we know that sometimes the best act of leadership involves us doing nothing.

Whatever “doing” we get up to, that should involve us asking lots of questions to understand as much as we can about the position that we find ourselves in.

Sometimes, what we dub as a near disaster will actually right itself without any intervention on our part.

How hateful can that sound! We do nothing and yet everything is all right once again.

Hence the line at the top of this page. At a certain level of leadership, we need to beware the tendency to dive in with a 20 point action plan.

The best response might well be “*let’s think, reflect - and WAIT!*”



Chapter 4

Driving ambition for our organisation

Hard Truths

We need to face a number of hard truths if we are serious about stretching our ambition and becoming exceptional leaders.

- 1 It is so easy for us to become embroiled in managing day-to-day challenges and internal machinations. By getting too involved, we find our tanks are running on empty when we try to think creatively about our ambitions for our organisations.
- 2 We don't give ourselves enough time to prepare for key meetings, especially those focusing on strategy. So often, we try to snatch thinking time late at night or early in the morning, because we feel it can't be found in any other way.
- 3 Most of us will go to some lengths to avoid difficult personal conversations if we think that they're likely to result in disagreement. As a result, unresolved disagreements often grow into protracted dramas and stand-offs.

So often we find ourselves distracted by the weight of stewardship of our organisation. The grind of keeping the operation going can easily sap our energy and turn what should be a series of stretching ambitions into little more than glimpses of an outline vision.

Driving ambition

We need to stand in our authority as leaders to drive ambitious thinking for our organisation. Our style can be collegiate but we need to be unapologetic about carving out sufficient time and thinking space for us to excel as leaders.

1 Creating thinking time for ourselves

We need to be firm with ourselves and others about setting aside time earmarked for creative thinking to:

- formulate ideas
- prepare for meetings and important conversations
- think through how best to share and develop our thinking at key stages.

Without this discipline, our ambitions for our organisation are unlikely to become reality.

Note to self

🕒 Set aside regular 'me' time for thinking and planning. Maybe a 'power hour' twice a week?

🕒 Let everyone know I'll be incommunicado during my 'power hours'.

🕒 Be ruthless with myself: don't let 'everyday business' priorities or other distractions creep into this time.

2 Sharing our thinking and ambition

We know we need the buy-in of our Boards and colleagues to achieve our ambitions for our organisation. This entails careful planning about how best to share our thinking openly and creating a sense of real shared ownership before any decisions are taken. 1:1 meetings need to be put in the diary with our Directors to listen to their ideas and feedback.

Note to self

🕒 Having thought this through, how do I give time and space to others to do the same? I don't want them to feel ambushed or pressurised - REMEMBER surprises can create 'fight or flight'.

🕒 At what points do I want to share my thinking and what is the feedback I'm looking for? Ideas? Alternative options? Challenges? Risks?

🕒 After my Chair, who do I need to book in to speak to personally next?

🕒 What's my plan for being relaxed in acknowledging concerns up-front in meetings? REMEMBER - I don't need to have all the answers.

🕒 In meetings I need to give everyone time to develop the proposals. An informal ideas-building session?

3 Inviting others to step up

Carving out the space to move from good to exceptional requires us, as leaders, to encourage others to step up and take on leadership roles in areas where they are stronger than us. The more we support others to excel, the stronger we are as leaders.

Note to self

- 🕒 Hold an away-day 'safe session' with my senior team to consider our collective strengths and weaknesses. Be first to share what I see as my shortcomings.
- 🕒 Follow up by being open about my trust in them to step up where I feel they are stronger than me. The sum of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- 🕒 Get the balance right. Avoid over-directing: when something needs to be fixed, rather than jumping in quickly with solutions, first ask what they would recommend. But don't be so hands-off that people flounder in their attempts to get it right.

4 Fast-tracking our best people

We know that amongst our staff there are those who can move from good to exceptional because of their ambition and hunger to learn. We want them to feel that we will invest time in supporting them to grow and blossom.

Note to self

⌚ Does my top team know who our best people are? What is it about them that persuades us they are the best?

⌚ With the top team, what opportunities can I give each of them to grow their strengths so that they become truly exceptional?

⌚ Where do we see them 18 months from now? How do they fit in with our succession plans?

⌚ Are we sure that we're not overlooking any 'rising stars'?

⌚ Among the best, are any 'stuck'? Would they benefit from a move within the organisation?

5 Creating the right pace

Getting the pace right in achieving buy-in to a stretching organisational ambition is probably the toughest nut we all have to crack. Too fast and decisions are likely to be challenged; too slow and inertia will begin to take hold.

As leaders, we need to listen hard and be open to feedback at every stage, before moving forward. If there is dissent from a minority, we need to acknowledge it openly and take from it whatever we can.

Note to self

- 🕒 Use my 'power hours' to sharpen up my ideas at each stage so that they can be easily understood, making it clear to all that it is all 'work in progress' (briefing notes no longer than 1 side of A4).
- 🕒 Personalise and sign emails with briefing attached so that the recipient knows that it is me dedicating time to them personally.
- 🕒 With full Board backing, share the organisation's ambitions with all staff with an outline timetable of the key stages involved in developing our thinking.

6 Permitting our ambitions to evolve

By allowing our ambitions to evolve in response to others' ideas and insights we encourage buy-in. We demonstrate strong leadership when we are seen to let go of some of our ideas in favour of stronger ones put forward by others. In this way, our behaviour persuades others of the value of ideas-building in an open and transparent way.

Note to self

- 🕒 At each key stage, focus on what I need to do to encourage my Board and Senior Executives to share ownership of our ambitions for the organisation.
- 🕒 Show openness to new ideas in the way I respond - both verbally and physically
- 🕒 REMEMBER - so long as we're agreed on the direction of travel, there are options about how we get there and how far we need to stretch.
- 🕒 REMEMBER - ambition isn't a specific goal but a state of constantly striving for our organisation to be the very best.

Final notes to self

⌚ Energising others to develop and share ambitions for our organisation demands my time. It won't happen without me leading it.

⌚ I need to carve out space to plan for the future.

⌚ I need to prioritise more.

⌚ I need to accept that if I want to empower others, I must first empower myself.

⌚ Buy more Post-It notes!