



Rebalancing our lives as leaders

*Insights from two
Leadership Conversations*

Society of Leadership Fellows

St George's House, Windsor Castle

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Chapter I

Facing up to the challenge

“What would a better version of me look like?”

We asked ourselves what sorts of leaders we want to be in three years time.

As we explored this question in small groups, a number of us quickly came to the view that we can't answer this question just in relation to our lives at work.

We need to answer it in relation to the **whole** of our lives.

This is when it got difficult and we had to confront some hard truths.

We might have been able to wriggle off this hook and avoid some moments of reckoning.

But one Leadership Fellow made this impossible for us, when he answered the question that we had set ourselves with another one:

- *“What would a better version of me look like in three years time?”*

Aargh! Now we had to face a much bigger challenge.

We had to talk about the **whole of our lives**.

A truth we didn't want to face

As we broadened our discussions in this way, one truth quickly presented itself.

It was a truth that some of us didn't want to face.

But once we had engaged with it we couldn't look away.

We over-invest in our working lives as leaders

When we talk about our lives as leaders, our minds nearly always go straight to our lives at work.

We know that in our relationships at home, in our family and among our friends and in the community, we exercise all sorts of different leadership roles.

Yet when we think of leadership we first think of the role of ours that enables us to “put food on the table”.



Little left to give

In this role, we drive ourselves so hard to achieve what we want that we often have little left to give by the time we get home.

We have poured whatever we have to give, and sometimes more besides, into trying to be the leader that we want to be at work.

More passive

At home we become more passive, and more of a recipient.

“What’s on television, darling?” With iPhone and iPad lined up alongside us, ready for occasional texting and short emails when we feel we can get away with it, we go through the motions of being “present”.

We are, physically, and that's often just about it.

Not emotionally present

There are so many times when we are not emotionally present and our partner and family know it.

Maybe we have a few brief bursts of engagement with the people we love in our non-work life.

But in truth we know that these bursts of energy come out of what is left over, after we have given as much as we can to our life at work.

Three resolves to rebalance our lives as leaders

1 **Don't "boil the ocean"**

Get real about priorities and the 80/20 rule.

Instead of taking on 80% or more ourselves, focus on the critical 20% and apply ourselves – as leaders – to building and empowering those around us to take on the 80%.

If we tell ourselves that we are indispensable, we're on a hiding to nothing.

2 **Stop being "the sludge in the frying pan"**

That's how one Leadership Fellow described himself by the time he gets home in the evenings, with virtually nothing left to give.

It doesn't just demean us, it demeans our partner and family.

We can change this. After all, we are leaders!

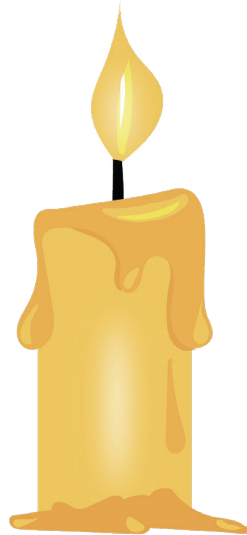
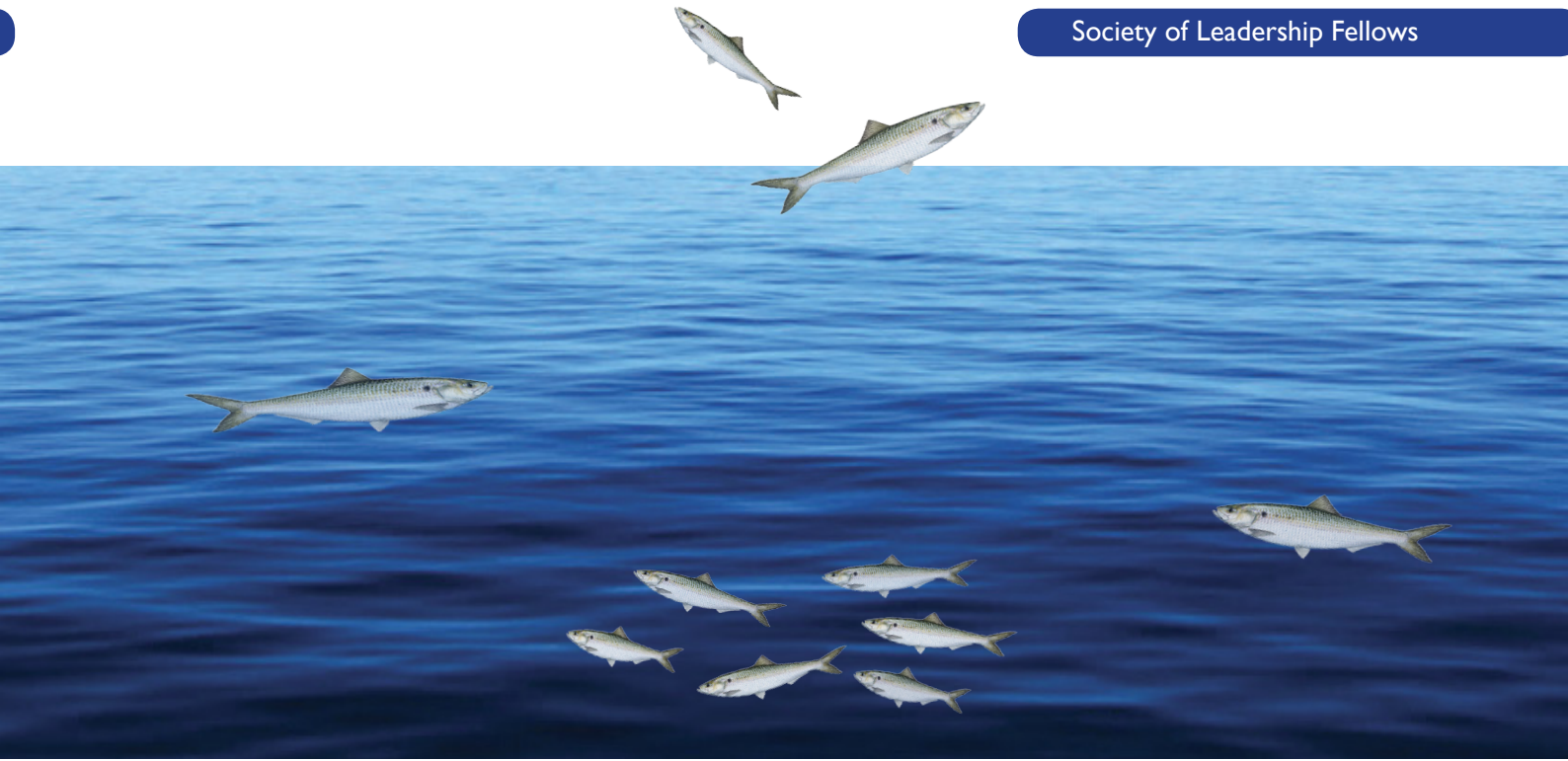
3 **Be emotionally present**

We talk about how we fail to be emotionally present when we're at home.

If we can change this, we might be in a better position to change how we are at work, too.

After all, if we were more emotionally present at work we would be more aware when we reach those moments of overload.

We would hear the voices within us warning of the dangers of burn-out.



Leaders who think they can boil the ocean...
**can't hold a candle to those who succeed
through leveraging the talents of others**

Three steps to help change our mindset

1 Remind ourselves that leadership is a privilege

Some leaders can seem so burdened down by the pressures of leadership. We can almost see their shoulders slouched forward, over-burdened with the pressures of office.

Once we tell ourselves that we are privileged, doesn't it feel different.

We feel blessed to be able to drive change and impact on others in the ways that we do.

We walk tall in so many different ways.

2 Value the journey and not just the outcomes

This is one of the things that changes once we see ourselves as privileged.

The burdened leader is weighed down by the pressure of wanting to achieve so many outcomes.

The privileged leader values the journey, as well as being driven by outcomes, too.

It does matter **how** we achieve what we want, and how much members of the team feel that they are essential to this success.

3 Aim to succeed through others

The privileged leader who appreciates their route as well as the destination gets their kicks out of succeeding through the actions of others.

We see ourselves as discoverers and promoters of talent, and delight in watching others shine.

Our role is to "know the moments that matter the most" and make sure we are present then, in every sense.



Imagine a drum roll... and it's getting louder!

The greatest ideas are the *simplest*

William Golding *Lord of the Flies*

Achieving a new work-life balance as leaders: how about **colour coding** ALL of our lives?

Quite a number of leaders have colour codes that help you - and your PA - in organising your life at work.

A number haven't yet reached the stage of having any sort of colour devoted to your personal time at work that you might use for thinking and preparation before meetings. But you're moving in the right direction!

A small number of leaders have taken this concept on to the next stage and developed a colour coding system for the whole of your lives.

Five colours in this holistic system

In Windsor, we were attracted by the image of using a “box of crayons” to draw our life. We envisaged ourselves using five different colours for this holistic system, covering:

WORK

FAMILY

ME TIME

FRIENDS

VOLUNTEERING

If you like this idea, you might want to start by asking what the ideal should be.

First, however, we need to embrace the **real challenge** of asking how much of our energies we currently invest in our working life and how much we have left for the rest of our life.

How do you allocate your time and energy at the moment?

Can we think in terms of each of us having a relatively finite amount of energy that we share with others across our life?

On this basis, can we start with two killer questions:

- 1 ***What proportion of your energy do you pour into your life as a leader at work?***
- 2 ***How much does this leave you for family/friends/volunteering and YOU?***

Please be brutally honest with yourself in this moment.

Starting with your time as a leader, at work

We know that some of us have spent years trying to avoid question one.

How much of your energy do you commit to your life at work?

60%? 70%? More?

- Being really, really honest, are you sure that if you say “maybe around 70%” you’re not deceiving yourself?

Suppose we settle on 80%!

It might sound incredibly high to some – and for others, it might feel as if you have got off rather lightly!

This 80% figure might well be on the low side if you’re one of those who “*feel guilty when you’re not working*”, even when you’re in designated family time.

Looking at the residue, and how you use this time

Whether you are left with 20% of your overall energy, or slightly less or more, you now need to ask how you share this out at the moment.

- How much of you do you share with your **partner and family**?
- How much do you hold back for “**you time**”
 - whether that’s pursuing a hobby or a sport or just curled up on the settee with a book?
- How much time do you give to **voluntary work**
 - whether that’s being an unpaid Non-Exec Director on a Board, or just occasionally helping with a Saturday night soup run for those sleeping rough, or whatever it might be?
- And how much of yourself do you give to your time with **close friends**?

No time to spare for this luxury

When we discussed this in Windsor, some Fellows said that they haven’t had close out-of-work friends for years.

It’s as if they told themselves some years ago that they no longer had time to spare for this luxury.

As a result, they were anxious about how they would go about changing this.

Knowing the baseline that you are starting from

Now you know the baseline that you’re starting from.

Even though you might not want to shout about the figures that you’ve come up with, at least you have confronted the truth of how you allocate your time and energy at the moment.

Now let’s ask what you would like the position to be in twelve months time.

Setting your 12 month target for yourself at work

Once again, let's start with the key question:

- ***In twelve months time, how much of your total personal energy system would you like to be investing in your leadership at work?***

Could you keep that to 50% or does that feel unrealistically low?

Some successful leaders manage to split their time on the basis of:

- 1/3 for work
- 1/3 for family and friends
- 1/3 for "me time" and volunteering.

Offered up without condition

We know that however you divide your energy "cake", so much of the cake has been offered up to your leadership at work without condition up to now.

This is the key factor that needs to change.

You need a realistic target

Whatever percentage figure you set for the proportion of your overall energy that you give to work, the key is that you are setting some sort of limit.

You are **taking back control**.

When you are setting your 12 month target, please remember that it's better to have a 60% target and aim to beat it than to have a third/ a third/ a third target and dismiss that as a silliness in a few months time.

You need a realistic target that you have some faith in.

This will then enable you to move on to the next stage and ask how you want to divvy up that which is left among the other strands of your life.

The other **four** colour codes

Out of what is left, please now think of yourself in twelve months time and ask how you would like to be dividing your energy and time between

- your partner/family
- yourself
- your voluntary commitments and
- your friends.

Valuing each colour in its own right

As you answer this question, it will be important to think through how you want to value and protect the energy that you invest in these parts of your life in a way that you have maybe never quite done before.

In this situation, the real challenge is to leave behind the old habit of defining each colour in terms of that which is **left over** once we've given all that we need to give to work.

Now you are creating new limits and boundaries, so that each colour here exists on its own terms and in its own right.

Sharing your promise with those you are close to

Once you are clear what you're aiming for, it is important to challenge yourself on whether this actually is a **promise** that you are making to yourself.

If it is, it could be really good to share this with those you are close to, because it is a promise that you are making to them, too.



Agreeing practical steps for moving forward

For those who are promising to increase your emotional commitment to your partner and family, it can help a lot if you share with them a small number of practical steps that you have in mind to help you in making this transition.

The key here is to get specific - and **put it out there!**

You will have to let go of some well-established habits, and you know that they became established in the first place through you putting yourself in a frame of mind that involved a fairly high degree of denial.

Four specific steps you could take straight away

For severe workaholics (and there are a few of us around!) it could be a really significant step forward to say:

- i You won't take your iPhone/iPad or laptop into the bedroom again. You will close the lid on your laptop whenever you are in a family situation, unless you agree that there is a **compelling reason** for why you need to keep half an eye on your Inbox (you know you need to make it difficult for yourself here, or nothing will change!)
- ii For at least one day at the weekend you will not look at your Inbox at all, and you'll expect to stand by this undertaking as a point of honour
- iii For key work colleagues who occasionally need to communicate with you on weekday evenings or at weekends, you will agree a certain out-of-work time zone when you can receive urgent telephone calls, on the basis that any calls at other times will go straight to your answerphone
- iv You will also agree that beyond a certain time in the evening you will not respond to any texts or emails from work colleagues, unless you can describe the situation as an emergency whilst keeping a straight face!

An ongoing process of negotiation

We need our partners and families and friends to help us navigate quite a tricky transition here.

We first need to **want** to make this transition, and to be clear in our minds that the better version of ourselves that we want to be in the future requires us to change the balance between our working lives and the rest of our lives.

Changing this balance and then maintaining the new balance once we have achieved it will require an ongoing process of negotiation and adjustment, accompanied – hopefully! – by lots of affirmation of all the good things that are being made possible as we move forward.

Once we are no longer “boiling the ocean” and wouldn’t even joke about being the “sludge at the bottom of the frying pan”, won’t that be brilliant!

Having honest discussions at home

The great appeal of the colour coding idea is that it forces us to be honest with ourselves.

Once we have achieved this, it will be so much easier to have the discussions that we need to have at home about how we want to reform ourselves.

Whilst this might initially be greeted by an element of scepticism, we know that there will be a huge amount of goodwill towards us from all who really want the best for us.

What an act of leadership!

And doesn’t it show the importance of **self-leadership** for the fully rounded leader.

You are

taking back

control

as a leader

No more denial!



Okay, the phrase “fully rounded leader” might feel a little ambitious at the moment!

The fact is, though, that if you pick up this idea of colour coding to try and move towards the better version of yourself that you want to become across your entire life, that will be a really big deal.

You will be able to say to your partner,

“I buried my head in the sand for so long! And now it feels like a lifetime ago since we were together in the same room and I wasn’t even emotionally present....”





Chapter 2

Goodbye workaholism!

The challenge

So many leaders believe that the energy and recognition that they seek come overwhelmingly from their lives at work.

In order to change this significantly, we all need to ask ourselves how we could gain greater energy from the non-work parts of our lives.

We also need to ask what we can do to define ourselves more in relation to the whole of our lives rather than just those parts in which we are defined as a leader.

To measure up to this challenge, we first need to ask ourselves what it is that reinforces the tendency of so many leaders to become workaholics in the first place!

Time to fess up!

To be able to say "goodbye, inner workaholic" we first need to ask ourselves what it is about the way we behave as leaders that reinforces our tendency to become workaholics.

As we engaged with this question in Windsor, four answers came forward. They help to explain why it is much easier for leaders to slip into workaholism than to resist it.

1 We over-indulge our perfectionist

Many of us spend too long engaged with tasks that should have taken us half as long.

We also have a tendency, when faced with any sort of crisis, to raise the stakes to a point where anything less than a near-perfect outcome is seen as little short of a disaster!



One Fellow described this as a tendency to "awfulize" difficult situations.

Combine this with our tendency to push too long for perfection, and we have a recipe for being taken over by occasional dramas in a way that edges us more and more to the life of a workaholic.

2 We fail to curb our people-pleaser

So often at Conversations, Leadership Fellows will admit to being "people pleasers".

We know that we like to do what other people ask of us and recognise that each time we fail to say "no" makes it even more difficult next time.

Yet many of us keep on rushing round doing what is asked of us and then venting to our partner at home or a close colleague at work when we have run out of time to pursue our own priorities.

Our workaholic and our people-pleaser reinforce each other. To rein one in we need to rein in the other.

Time to fess up!

3 We make ourselves overly available

How many times have we said something along the lines of "My door is always open"?

Yet we know that when we are on a tight deadline, or prepping for a key meeting, the last thing we want is for someone to come in and offload about something that is bugging them in that particular moment.



People who set clear boundaries around their time at work, and know that they need to leave the office at a certain time because of something important in the rest of their life, can't always have an open door policy.

There are times when we need to be **unavailable** to others at work. Or else we will become even less available to our families and friends outside work.

4 We over-think things

This is one of those propositions that we definitely don't need to over-think!

For those of us who have a tendency to get lost inside a thought bubble about something, we know that the energy loss can be huge.

We tell ourselves that what we previously saw as an interesting challenge has now become more difficult than we expected it to be.

So we try to make a virtue out of taking our time.

We start to procrastinate, because that's what over-thinkers do.

We work harder and harder because we're not moving forward, because key decisions aren't being taken.

Sound familiar?

Eight steps to tackle workaholism

So, what do we need if we are to be successful in taking on these behaviours, which are pretty strong habits for many of us?

This is the question that we asked ourselves and we came up with a range of ideas. You will know which ones work best for you as a leader.

1

Offer real candour - about ourselves

This was the first key word that made us pause. Candour.

We all need to be candid with ourselves about **how much of ourselves** we are investing in our working lives as leaders.

Too many of us are in too much **denial** about how much of ourselves we are giving to our working lives.

How about putting candour at the top of the list for this particular topic.

Candour about ourselves, with ourselves.

2

Show compassion - towards ourselves

We have used this term a few times and it felt really important that this should be used now.

We know that it is so very easy for leaders to slip into a state of workaholism without ever intending that family and friends should feel neglected in the ways that they so often do in the face of an absentee workaholic.

So we should be compassionate towards ourselves because we're taking responsibility for these consequences and saying we're going to do something to **change them!**

3

Accept the need for self-discipline

If we're going to recognise that we **do** have a pretty obsessive-compulsive attitude towards our work, whilst being generous-spirited towards ourselves so that we don't turn this into an excuse for prolonged self-flagellation then let's **go for it!**

If we do, this will require real self-discipline on our part.

Self-discipline in making sure that we're not so drained energetically by our lives at work that we have very little left for anything else.

Discipline in the way we act and behave as a leader.

This quickly brings to mind another word that we will almost certainly need to use to describe some of our new behaviours as leaders hoping to become former workaholics: ruthless!

4

Become more ruthless

A lot of us don't like this word, do we? At least not when we apply it to ourselves.

Yet the truth is that our absence of ruthlessness for a lot of the time is an important cause of the problem that we now have with workaholism.

We know that there are people at work who count themselves as among the "**comfortably numb**".

Instead of complaining about them when they're not around and covering for them when they under-perform, isn't it now time to have a few difficult conversations?

We need people around us that we can rely upon and trust to take on work that we would otherwise do ourselves.

If we can't trust them to share the burden, why are we keeping them there?

5

Get practical

As well as dealing with under-performance issues that we should have dealt with long ago, we need to look at **our own performance** - and not least the amount of time that we give to sitting in front of a computer screen.

We have to cut down the "unnecessary noise" that stops us thinking more clearly and resolving tricky issues more quickly at work.

We don't have to come up with all the solutions ourselves! In fact, there is much to be gained from asking others at work for their help and advice.

It's a great way of reminding them that we **are** serious in altering the balance between our life at work and our life outside work.

One idea that one Fellow has used to great effect has been to tell everyone that all emails with their name in the c.c. box will automatically go into their Trash file.

If they want to engage with them directly, they need to put their name in the "To" box and say clearly what they're asking for.

The moment they told everyone they were doing this, it had the desired impact.

Email traffic was dramatically reduced as people got the message:

- If you want to land in my Inbox, make sure you need something from me first!

6

Tell family and friends "This is it!"

If we are serious about tackling our workaholism, we know there are times when we're going to get cold feet.

We will have lots of good reasons - and excuses - for why we can't extricate ourselves from all sorts of commitments at work that we will almost certainly have to withdraw from to create more space in our non-work life.

How do we help ourselves to hold the faith and make sure that we keep going in those moments when we're thinking that stepping free from workaholism is one big step **too far**?



We declare our intentions to our family and closest friends - and we do so **loudly**!

We tell them that we have short-changed them for too long and we're now making a **firm and binding undertaking** to become a better partner/ parent/ family member/ friend from this moment onwards.

We have decided there is **no turning back**, which is why we want them to tell us in no uncertain terms if they see us faltering and slipping back into old habits.

We put it out there, and trust in the active grapevine among our nearest and dearest to spread the news on our behalf.

Then we've done it!

We're not just becoming more ruthless with some others who should have experienced this some time ago.

We're becoming more ruthless in the ways we're managing **ourselves**, knowing that if we're serious about ending our work-centric approach towards life there really is **no alternative**.

Time to say it as it is - and make sure we put ourselves on a hook so large that there's no getting off it!

7

See this as an act of bravery

One thing we always tell ourselves at Leadership Conversations is that there can be a world of difference between deciding something is the "right thing to do", sitting round discussing it in the Vicars' Hall, and then going back to our daily lives and making a reality of our resolves.

We have learnt that significant changes in our behaviours as leaders often require a significant degree of bravery on our part.

This is surely one of those cases where we need to see ourselves as being brave.

It is especially important to use the *b* word because we know that ending a pattern of workaholic behaviours is not just about changing our email protocols and telling the family that after years of promising to reform this time it's for real!

It involves us rethinking in a pretty fundamental way **how we define ourselves in relation to others**.

So many workaholic leaders define themselves overwhelmingly through the nature of their job title and the organisation that they work for.

It is this **self-definition** that helps to trap them into their workaholic behaviours.

We know that if we are to find new ways of engaging with all of the different strands of our lives, we will - over time - need to develop a **broader sense of our identity** as a human being.

In our many relationships, we will need to find ways of signalling the importance that we attach to aspects of our lives that go beyond our narrow professional identity as a leader.

It will be especially important for some of those we're closest to at work to understand how much we value our Thursday evening art class, or being in time for the Board meeting of a local charity that we support - or making sure that we get home in time to cook dinner!

8

Discovering the power of BEING

As we opened up these themes of discussion in Windsor, we were very aware that the quest to become an ex-workaholic is so very much about a positive quest to become **more comfortable** with wanting to live the whole of our lives more fully.

Once we had embraced this proposition, we could see how the struggle to let go of workaholic behaviours is at the heart of the struggle to become **our true selves**.

We all know that many workaholic behaviours are initially triggered by our fears of failure as leaders.

As we begin to let go of these behaviours so we can, hopefully, **reframe** these fears.

We can do this by letting ourselves experience the **joy** of all that we are achieving, in relation to our family responsibilities and friendship groups, as well as the commitment that we are making to **ourselves** in our personal time.

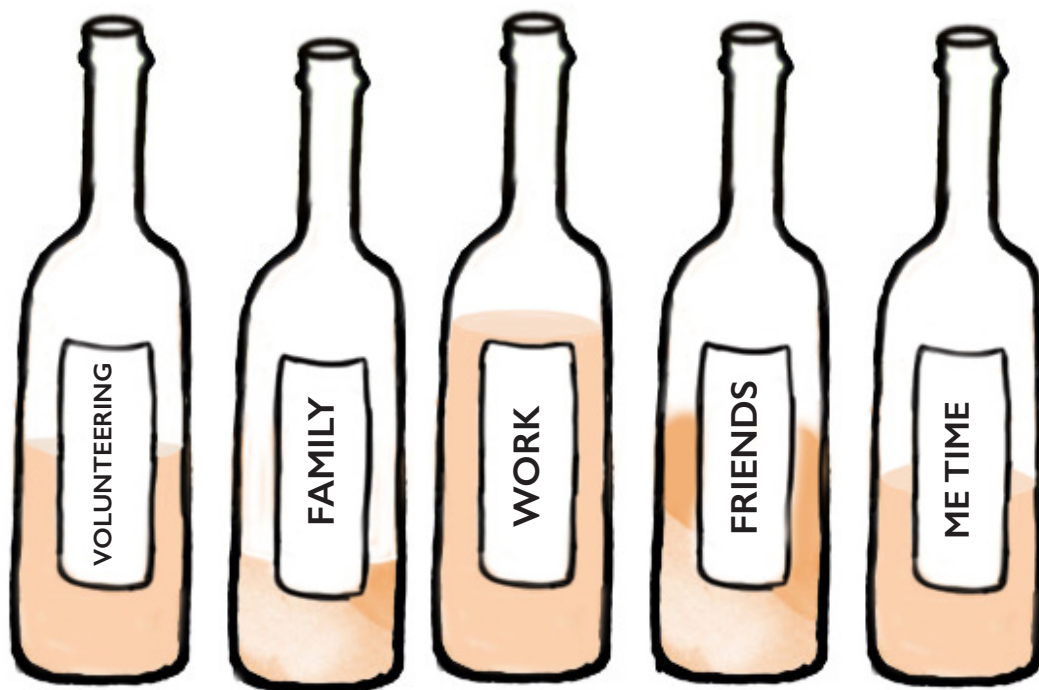
In the process, we come to develop a fuller sense of the power of **being** as well as the power of achieving.

For a leader on the road to becoming an ex-workaholic, there can be something incredibly powerful about just experiencing some time sitting on a settee and doing virtually nothing apart from **being**.

The idea of having nothing to do in the moment tends to instil panic in the mind of the workaholic.

For a leader letting go of this workaholism, it can induce a new-found sense of liberation and power.

As well as the occasional wobbles, of course, which is why we all need our families and friends to keep us on track!



Let's drink to
ex-workaholics!
Always work
in progress...