



The persuasive challenger



from 10.30am until 4.30pm
on Tuesday, February 4th 2020

Background Note and Agenda for our 45th Leadership Conversation

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

This Leadership Conversation is inspired by our theme on disruptive leadership

A link to this report is on the final page

Our challenge

As leaders, we lament the fact that others often don't embrace our case for change as quickly as they should.

*Our frustration builds up and as it does we challenge them more and more by telling them they are **WRONG**.*

They then respond by becoming even more entrenched and "Dementorish".

Instead of trying harder to deploy our skills of persuasion and engagement, we become ever more strident and insistent and push them further away.

Hence our brief for this Leadership Conversation:
how might we best challenge others in ways that engage them more positively - and enable us to keep our inner Dementor at bay, too?



This is our 45th Leadership Conversation

It focuses on the art of challenging others in ways that enable them to open up to ideas and arguments that challenge some of their long-held beliefs and established ways of working

We will ask:

- What sort of challenger do we each want to be in a world where so many leaders are not challenging enough, and some of those who do challenge come across as so dogmatic and intolerant that they turn others against them?
- How might we each adapt our current style of challenging to become more like the challenger that we would like to be?
- What, practically, do we need to DO when we leave Windsor to act on our resolves so that we can create new leadership habits as persuasive challengers over the next few months?

For example, how might we develop new informal feedback systems with those we trust the most to give us real time feedback after meetings where we have been challenging of others and need to understand more about how that was received in the room?

"This is me!"

"Tell us more"

"Yes I can!"



The three stages to our Conversation

We will structure our discussions around three stages:

1 "This is me!"

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

To help us achieve strong connections across our group, please be up for sharing something about yourself in a way that helps other Fellows gain some sense of how you go about challenging others in meetings - and how open you are to **receiving their challenges** in return.

2 "Tell us more"

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

We want to get behind each other's stories as we think through fresh ways of challenging and persuading others, both to enhance our **influence** as leaders and also our ability to **learn from others** as part of this challenge process.

3 "Yes I can!"

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

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

"This is me!"

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

Our thinking at the moment is that when we break for small groups we will share with each other two moments over the past few months:

- one when we feel that we mounted a **successful challenge** during a meeting and achieved what we wanted in a way that was generally well received all round
- another moment when we feel that **our challenge "bombed"** and we caused a negative reaction that didn't do us any favours at all.

As we share our stories with each other we will ask what lessons we learn from these moments for the sorts of ways in which we need to develop our roles as persuasive challengers in future.

"I thought I was challenging others quite well, but then when someone asked me a question I became completely defensive"

"I told myself I should ask a question first, but know it sounded completely loaded - as if I was just going through the motions!"



"Tell us more"

Whenever we have discussed our challenger roles in previous Conversations, we have tended to find that many of us struggle with finding the right balance between being **too strident** in our challenge or **too timid**.

For any Fellows who tend to go in with all guns blazing, we want to ask how you have come to develop this approach.

Do you find that this works well for you or do you feel that you can come across as rather too belligerent? If it works well, does this mean that you really are **winning people over**?

For those who feel that you tend to be rather timid in your challenge, do you feel that others are more likely to take your thinking on board if you make a point of **not being too pushy**?

Or is it more to do with your **dislike of conflict** and your fear that this could be the result if you press your position too hard?

Building our own levels of courage and tolerance

As we approach 12.45 we will be looking for a challenging question that flows naturally out of the Conversation and provides a good basis for us to work together in fresh groups over lunch.



We rather expect that some of us will want to give time to exploring the theme of **courage**, and how we might push ourselves that bit harder to speak our truth in moments of challenge.



Others among us might want to explore how we could manage better our own levels of **tolerance**, so that we make a point of listening harder to those who disagree with us.

There is a powerful set of leadership challenges for us here that will doubtless influence the strategies that we work up during the afternoon for becoming more persuasive challengers.

"Yes I can!"

As we go through our discussions during the afternoon we hope that we will each be sharpening up in our own minds how much we want to **change our approach** towards challenging others in situations where, for one reason or another, we have failed to make the connection that we were hoping for.

We see this very much as our "stretch zone", when we hope to push ourselves as hard as we can in developing our own personalised strategies for becoming more persuasive challengers.

Key principles for ourselves?

One of the issues we want to press ourselves on is whether we should establish any key principles for ourselves in determining how we manage the process of challenging others.

This is an issue we have learnt a fair bit about since we set up the Society of Leadership Fellows in 2016. For example, one of the principles we often suggest at the beginning of a Conversation is that we should all make a point of questioning others about why they think as they do on any given topic **BEFORE** we offer any sort of challenge.

The principle that questions should come first before we offer any keen opinions of our own has helped a lot in creating a culture in which we all **expect** to be listened to with respect.

Persuasive
Challenger

Are there any particular principles that you would like to set for yourself, to support you in becoming a more persuasive challenger?

We hope that a number of you will suggest different ones, and in the process we will all feel that we have some challenges to **put to ourselves** before we focus on how we might best challenge others!

Connect not convince

Probably the single most powerful principle that we have fleshed out together is that of "connect not convince", that was the key insight arising from our three-night Conversation for Fellows last March. It is written up as Chapter One in our theme on Leading Culture Change (hyperlinked below).



These words from page 9 capture the core proposition:

"Once we choose connection over conviction, it is easier for teams to come together as one, knowing that they hold different views and defer to each other at times on the basis that the honesty and integrity of their relationships come first."

Once we are connected, we can act as one, knowing that in any team it matters to each of us that we understand where the others stand."

Moving beyond "I'm right and you're wrong"

This helps to draw out the crucial link between how people receive our challenge and whether or not they think we're just trying to get them to change their mind!

The more they feel we are on a journey of discovery, the more likely they are to embrace our challenge.

The more they feel we just want to convince them that we're right and they're wrong, the more likely they are to resist us!

Avoiding the wall of defensiveness

However we engage with this and many other powerful ideas that we will explore on February 4th, one thing is for certain: becoming a more persuasive challenger is in so many ways a challenge for life.

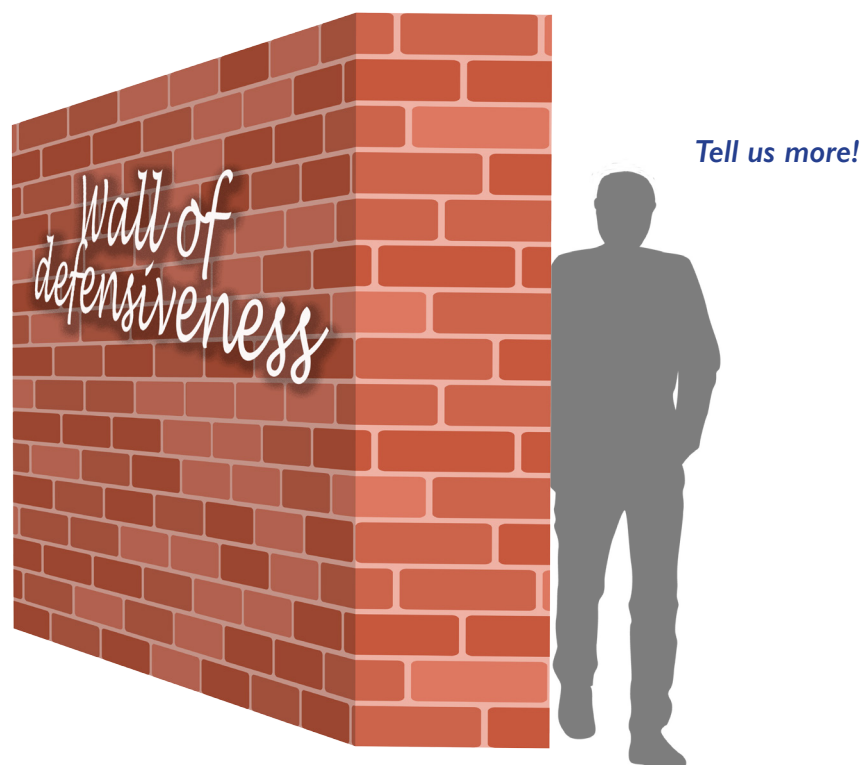
It's one of those destinations we only ever really move towards and never quite arrive at.

Perhaps this is because of the link there seems to be between our capacity to influence others and our openness to receiving their wisdom and letting it help guide our own thinking about the best way of moving forward.

This is why one can't help feeling that we need to reflect on the relationship between **self-challenge** and **challenging others**.

Perhaps the most persuasive challengers of others are those who are most open to self-challenge. It's this openness that is key to others receiving their challenge without feeling bound to hide behind a wall of defensiveness.

They can come out from behind their wall, knowing that their ideas will be treated seriously too!



Agenda

Tuesday, February 4th 2020

-
- 10.30am** Please make sure you are with us by this time. Coffee and light refreshments will be served in the Vicars' Hall from soon after 10.00
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- 10.45am**
Prompt, please We welcome you to the Conversation and invite you to agree on our Guiding Principles as providing the framework for today's Conversation. We then break into small groups for 15 minutes to consider our first question (Refreshments available)
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- 11.15am** We hear your stories and insights arising from small group discussions. After a while we agree on our key challenge for our second round of small groups
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- 11.40am** 2nd round of small groups consider agreed question
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- 12.00 noon** (Refreshments available)
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- 12.05pm** Back in the circle in new seats, we capture the key messages coming forward from this second round of groups, drawing out the most challenging issues that we might want to return to later. From 12.45 we change gear and begin to think our way into the challenge that we want to consider over lunch
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- 1.00pm** Lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall. Over lunch, working groups engage with the agreed question. At the end of lunch, each group nominates one of their number to share with us their own stretching resolve or "big idea" for ensuring that they exceed their own expectations as a persuasive challenger
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- 1.55pm** We gain inspiration from a small number of resolves and agree on a really stretching question for our next round of small groups
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- 2.30pm** In groups we focus on how we want to change our own style of challenging others in order to become more persuasive as well as better able to receive their insights and move on in our own thinking through challenging debate (Refreshments available)
-
- 2.50pm** Back together again as a single group, we sharpen up our key personal resolves and reflect on how we might take on board other Fellows' thinking to stretch ourselves still further
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- 3.25pm** We have a 5-minute comfort break, and light refreshments are available to bring back into the circle (to different chairs, please). We ensure that everyone has an opportunity to benefit from quality feedback from others in the group before we finish on the dot of **4.30pm**.

Please click below
to read
**Chapter One:
Taking on the
Dementors**



Disruptive leadership

*Insights from two
Leadership Conversations*

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