



From good to exceptional

*Insights from four
Leadership Conversations*

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

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Chapter 1

Taking off our mask

The key proposition

The key proposition that emerged through this Conversation was that many leaders are held back from moving from good to exceptional by **limited self-belief**.

Two key behaviours

We focused on two behaviours essential to moving forward:

- engaging more closely with others
- leading with pace.



Limited self-belief

Limited self-belief affects our behaviours in all sorts of ways, such as:

Being defensive

"I am who I am, take it or leave it"

Blaming others

"I can't do what I'm meant to do because others get in my way"

Over-thinking

"Everything is so complicated! I have to assess all of the risks and just don't have time".

These behaviours result in us getting stuck. They make us lose pace and block close engagement with others.

The behaviours quickly become our masks. They hide us from being who we are and the effort of concealment saps our energy.

The gap opens up more and more between what we say and what we think.

Hiding behind our masks

The mask says one thing, while the person behind it is thinking something very different.

Lion

I'm strong, brave and in control. You'll regret it if you cross me



Please don't call my bluff and expose me as the coward I really am

Fixer

I set the standards I want us all to achieve



I've got to check everything, as I don't trust things will be done properly without me

Loyalist

I'm there to support my Chair/CEO/team



Oh no, I've created a role trap for myself and now I'm boxed in

Strategist

I'm a big picture, blue-sky person



I'm not operational, others deal with the detail

Communicator

I inspire our vision and values with words



Don't ask me what difference it will make to our bottom line

Putting on a front rather than being our true selves traps us. It leads to under-performance. If we let it continue it can lead to crisis.

Dropping our front

Moving forward is not simple. It is a constant struggle to be as good as we can be. We need to be brave to pull off our masks to give us the space to create new leadership behaviours that nurture self-belief.

Exceptional leadership is pacey: not frenetic, but energised in an infectious and charming way to those around us. This attracts them to being part of our leadership 'bubble'.

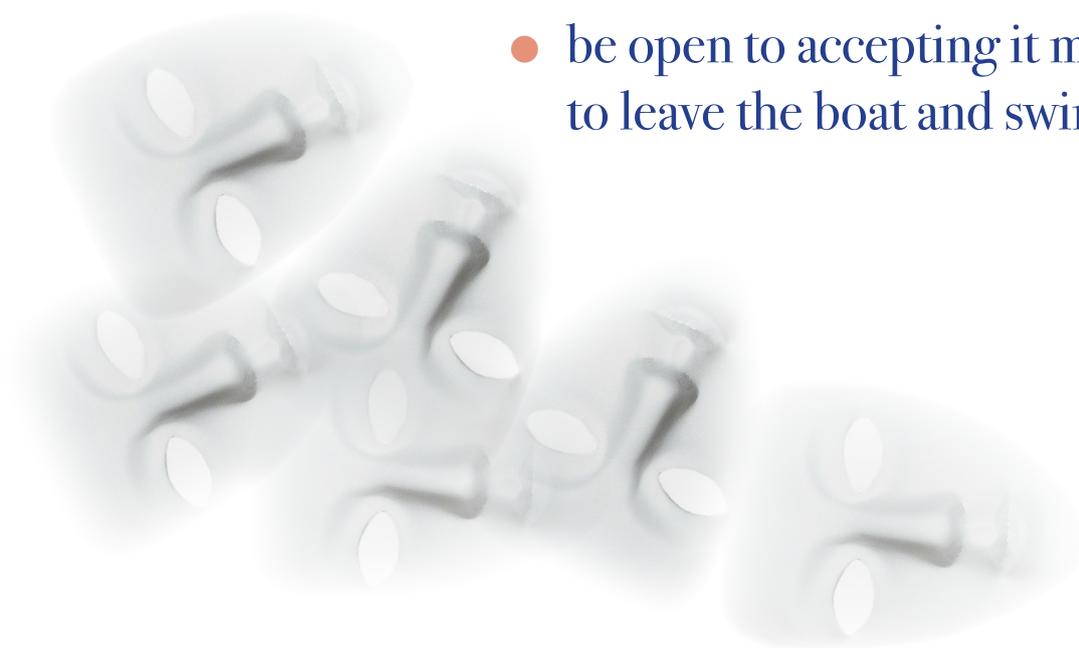
We can drop our front by being more direct and open with others about:

- our intent
- our ambition for the business
- our acceptance that we can't control everything
- our openness to questions and
- our fallibility.



Freed, and engaging more closely with others, we can:

- share our vision and invite people to question it
- give up fixing and start coaching at a pace
- dare to get it wrong, knowing we will learn a huge amount whatever the outcome
- live in the moment, and not let our past get in our way
- rock the boat when needed
- be open to accepting it might be time to leave the boat and swim.



Closer engagement through different types of conversation

We each need a personal strategy grounded in our identity as a leader. The strategy sets our direction and helps us to move forward at pace.

We speak our truth as part of a conversation rather than a statement in its own right.

Engagement is two-way. We need to create a safe space in which others feel that they can equally be themselves.

Our tone needs to be light, the body language positive. Our purpose is to persuade others to see the impact of their behaviour on us, and help ourselves to see our impact on them.

Asking and not telling can often transform a conversation from an aggressive/defensive encounter into something really positive.

Instead of...

Your are stopping me from...

You don't trust me

I can't take on any more

That's not my problem

We need to stay focused and not take on anything else

Try...

Why do you feel this is the wrong approach?

What needs to be in place for us to give it a try?

Can we look at our priorities and see what we might need to drop?

That is worrying. Maybe some of us should put our heads together?

It's an exciting idea but how does it fit in with everything else?

Trusting in ourselves and others

It is fair to say that many of us started this Conversation with our masks on! It is often how we are with people we haven't met before.

We felt safe to drop them as soon as we felt we could trust each other and begin to engage closely.

Developing personal strategies for improving our leadership requires trust.

Trust in ourselves. And trust in others around us acting as 'critical friends', who are committed to supporting us as leaders in moving from good to exceptional.



Chapter 2

Eleven qualities of exceptional leaders

Eleven qualities of exceptional leaders

On the pages that follow we set out 11 qualities of exceptional leaders.

In describing them as qualities, we should make clear that we do not regard them as in any way constant or fixed.

Rather, our sense is that as leaders we can all have moments when we demonstrate some of these qualities.

The challenge for us all is to develop them into new habits and constants that define our leadership over time.

Even then, if and when we achieve this in relation to some of these exceptional traits, we are bound to find that we slip back sometimes.

Constantly reviewing our own leadership behaviours

In these moments, we need to remind ourselves that exceptional leadership requires us constantly to review our own leadership behaviours, aware that none of us occupy fixed positions on the spectrum from not-so-good to good and then exceptional leadership.

Our position on this spectrum varies, not just every month or every week but often daily.

If some of our leadership behaviours are exceptional on a Monday afternoon, there is no reason to assume that we will continue to be exceptional on the Tuesday morning!

*Our position on this spectrum
varies - often daily*

Self-awareness

Indeed, we require exceptionally high levels of self-awareness, and ongoing self-assessment, if we are to have any chance of defining ourselves as a leader who is exceptional more often than we are good - or goodish!

This is said not in a spirit of pessimism. Rather, it is said from a standpoint of appreciating what a big step it is to go from good to exceptional – and then retain whatever these exceptional behaviours might be as a natural part of being a leader.

The precarious nature of exceptional leadership

If we are to have more than occasional glimpses of acting in a way that is exceptional, we have to become addicted to the process of constantly bettering ourselves as leaders.

This is why those leaders who are exceptional for rather a lot of the time are readier than anyone else to talk of those times when they have been other than exceptional.

It is their awareness of the precarious nature of exceptional leadership that spurs them on to keep on raising their game – and raising it ever higher, so that when they do slip back it is to a higher base line than it was last time they slipped back.

*We have to become addicted
to the process of constantly
bettering ourselves as leaders*

From good to exceptional:

a constant state of *movement*
rather than a *state of being*



Capturing the eleven exceptional qualities:

- Seeking out “the diamond in the rough”
- Seeking to capture the essence of every challenge
- Drawing out others’ truth and in the process fostering their courage
- Promoting a team ethos in which we support each other in becoming exceptional
- Trusting our intuition in moments when it tells us to declare ourselves
- Accepting that at times leadership requires us to hold back, without compromising our sense of authority
- Being prepared to be ruthless in how we prioritise the use of our time
- Regarding directive leadership as a last resort, because we expect those around us to respect our authority and influence
- Seeking to solve problems through our influence over others
- Challenging ourselves on whether we are compromising our offer as a leader, whenever we “tone ourselves down”
(we explore this further in Chapter 3)
- Letting our insights into our own strengths and shortcomings heighten our awareness of others.

In our relationships with those around us, we seek out “the diamond in the rough”

Whenever we are asked to describe our strengths as leaders, so many of us speak in broad terms.

We also tend to do so when we describe the leadership strengths of those with whom we work most closely, using terms such as “confident”, “strategic”, “fair” and “passionate” that only tell us a limited amount about someone’s leadership skills.

It doesn’t have to be like this.

We can follow the lead of those who have developed the ability to identify the special gifts of their closest colleagues at work.

They play them back to them every now and again, as a way of encouraging them to appreciate these gifts as much as they do.

Those leaders who are the best talent-spotters have a real knack for capturing the particular gifts of individuals – and then helping others to see how they might deploy them most effectively.

If we can also work on our ability to see “the diamond in the rough”, we should find it much easier to support others in managing those aspects of their leadership that aren’t so strong.

2 In every challenging situation we seek to capture the essence of the challenge

Every day we are bombarded with stories of situations that offer potential opportunities – and dangers – for our organisation.

So often, those who share these stories with us offer too much commentary on the basis that it is up to us to draw out whatever lessons we want.

It doesn't have to be like this.

Some leaders have trained themselves to draw out the essence of a situation very quickly indeed.

They achieve this partly through the questions that they ask and partly through the feedback that they offer the person updating them on the situation that they face.

It is an exceptional knack to be able to distil the core truth of a story and then share this in a way that encourages others to see themselves as part of a shared endeavour to understand the dynamic that drives a given situation.

This enables us to convert what can so easily be a “dumping session” into a more analytical discussion, in which others know that they are expected to offer some judgement of their own.

It helps to make best use of our time and energy, by focusing on the core leadership challenge for our organisation – and avoiding the temptation to convert a story into a “soap opera”.

3

We draw out others' truth and in the process foster their courage

We all know that we tend not to ask enough questions. Whenever we do so, we're aware of some colleagues telling us what they think we want to hear.

We know that they will hold back from offering us "difficult news" unless they are under pressure to tell us the unvarnished truth.

If we change our behaviours, this can move on too.

It is up to us to make a point of reminding others that the truth matters above all else, and we would always rather hear some difficult truths than be "protected" from having to confront them.

The moment we feel that someone is "managing the truth" on our behalf, we need to be up-front in asking them to tell us exactly how they see that situation, without feeling a need to soften the message to make it easier for us to receive it.

As we experience them being more honest and direct with us, so do we need to show appreciation of this.

It is in these sorts of moments that we embolden them, and we experience their awareness of their own courage in sharing a message that they expected us to dislike.

As we build others' courage we build our own too, knowing that the courage to face hard truths is one shared by too few leaders.

4 We promote a team ethos in which we support each other in becoming exceptional

We all say how committed we are to building the team around us. Yet when it comes to it, so many of us keep our team at arm's length.

We tell them how important they are whilst being reluctant to let them believe that we are dependent upon them for our own success as a leader.

This needs to change if we are to become an exceptional team leader.

Those leaders who head up exceptional teams have developed their own way of enabling every member of the team to feel believed in, by them.

They are quite relaxed about making clear to the team how much they depend upon them for their own success.

It is this reciprocal dependency that is at the heart of exceptional team leadership.

Team members constantly step up in the face of challenge because they believe that the success of the team, and its leader, requires them to step up.

They have no difficulty in acknowledging the importance of what others offer them, because they experience the others, and the team leader in particular, acknowledging what they themselves make possible for the whole team.

It is the team leader's belief in the exceptionalness of the team that is the hallmark of the exceptional team leader.

5 We trust our intuition in those moments when it tells us to declare ourselves

Some of us like to describe ourselves as intuitive leaders, whilst others prefer to describe themselves more as reflectors.

Even among those of us who like to see ourselves as intuitive, we will often say how we need to try not to be rash by “jumping in” too quickly.

We all know that there is nothing exceptional about this line of thinking.

We might be sitting in a meeting and suddenly someone says something that triggers a voice in us saying that we need to come in straight away and question what we have just heard.

We know that we have a split second to decide, and if we let the moment pass it might never return.

In various Leadership Conversations we have referred to these as the moments when we need to be prepared to be a “disruptive leader”.

At these times, the disruptive leader listens to the “moral driver” that tells us something is wrong and requires us to engage there and then.

It is a moment of bravery for us when we act on that split second decision, and as we do so we need to focus on what we are putting out there, especially the generosity of our tone.

If whatever we say is said generously, there is every chance that the right tone plus the right content will together offer something exceptional.



We accept that at times leadership requires us to hold back, without compromising our sense of authority

However confident we might be as leaders, we can all experience a time when something happens to us that causes us a sense of inner outrage. We feel wronged, perhaps by someone very close to us, and experience a sense of loss of equilibrium.

Our emotions tell us that we need to do something “radical” that underlines how unacceptable is the behaviour of others and how they should never put us in this situation again.

These are the times when an exceptional act of leadership might be to hold back and do nothing – for a while at least.

Such a response is completely counter-intuitive for so many leaders.

Yet it is in some of these really upsetting moments that an exceptional leader will hold back and tell themselves that however awful the situation might be, there is something underway that needs to be allowed to play out.

What we are required to do as a leader is to appear to accept an unacceptable behaviour on the part of someone else.

We need to do so without letting ourselves become a “victim” or compromising our own authority as a leader.

Then, when the time is right, we will have a chance to present in a calm and authoritative way our own proposals for ensuring that whatever happened before will never happen again.

We keep our emotions under control – and choose the right time for righting the wrong.

7 We are prepared to be ruthless in how we prioritise the use of our time

We all tell ourselves that time is the great leveller, and we have to be incredibly careful with our use of time if we are to succeed.

Yet we find that too often our time is deployed in response to what others expect of us rather than how we ourselves think we should be spending our time.

We can all get a grip on this, at any time – so long as we are prepared to link our use of time to our higher purpose as a leader.

Leaders who are exceptionally good at planning their time are careful to ensure that anyone controlling their diary is fully up to speed with their priorities at any given moment.

They are also careful to protect a proportion of their time so that it can be used for thinking/ reflection/ creative time without having to have any formal purpose (“*Thinking committee of one*”) stamped on it.

When mistakes are made with time-planning the exceptional leader is prepared to be ruthless.

They have no difficulty in keeping control of their time because they are so focused on what they wish to achieve as a leader.

If something is not a priority, then it is dispensable.

These moments must be handled with sensitivity, of course. But the principle remains that exceptionalness is vitally dependent on us always reminding ourselves of our overriding mission and purpose.

Delivering our mission requires discipline and focus - and occasional ruthlessness, not least in how we deploy our time.

8

We regard directive leadership as a last resort, because we expect those around us to respect our authority and influence

There are still many leaders who will talk about what they have “instructed” their team to do and how frustrated they sometimes are by the failure of their staff to do what they were told. They often justify their behaviour as directive leaders on the basis that they are in too much of a hurry to wait for others to catch up.

The more a leader feels a need to instruct others, the more they call into question their own authority as a leader.

We all know that for any of us to become a good leader, we need to invest time in developing our relationships with those around us, in a way that builds mutual respect for our respective roles – and authority.

Some leaders have an exceptional ability to ensure that others do as they ask of them, without ever issuing an instruction.

It is a matter of pride that they would never need to **tell** their close colleagues what to do, because to do so would call into question the specialness of the bonds that they have developed together.

They just say what they would like to happen and that is more than sufficient.

It is no surprise that leaders who have an exceptional capacity for influencing others can regard it as an act of failure on their part if they need to issue any instructions to junior staff.

What is so special about some of these influential leaders is their ability to initiate change through **substituting suggestion for instruction**.

They then build pace on the same basis - through their capacity to attract exceptionally high levels of loyalty from those around them.

9

We seek to solve problems through our influence over others

The vast majority of leaders will talk about how they get their “kicks” out of doing things, and especially solving problems. The problem is that some leaders so like solving problems that they tend to keep the problem-solving to themselves.

This leaves colleagues feeling excluded and reinforces the image of these leaders as loners.

This is not difficult to change, so long as these leaders first accept that their own behaviours constitute the real problem.

There really is something exceptional about leaders who enjoy using their influence over others to encourage them to take ownership of problems that they would previously have wanted to sort out themselves.

Influencing others in this way is not only empowering for the others but also for the leader who is investing so much of their own self-esteem in their role as an influencer.

They also have the added bonus of freeing up some of their own time. So as well as influencing others they have also influenced their own diary for the better!

The only possible problem with this approach comes when the person you're influencing to solve a problem ends up saying that they can't solve it.

In these cases they have to become a different sort of problem-solver and take on the responsibility for finding someone else to solve the problem.

In the process, they might even get to enjoy the process of influencing through enlisting others to solve problems on their behalf.

10 Whenever we “tone ourselves down”, we challenge ourselves on whether we are compromising our offer as a leader

So many leaders tell the story of how they are sometimes in situations where they need to hold back from saying what they really want to say, in case they cause offence or upset. The phrase “Let me tell you what I nearly said ...” can slip off the tongue so very easily!

We know that sometimes this is necessary. At other times, this ranks as one of the most common self-limiting behaviours of so many leaders.

There IS an alternative.

Instead of justifying themselves, the exceptional leader in this particular case challenges themselves.

Before they decide that they're not going to say something on the grounds that it might make them unpopular with one or two people, they know that they will be holding themselves to account for their behaviour a little later on.

Of course, there are times when discretion is the better part of valour and it might well be the best thing to hold back.

The point is, however, that holding back can so easily become a way of life.

This is why so many exceptional leaders tend to make themselves go through a process of self-challenge, whenever they decide to tone down how they present themselves.

They know that if they don't do so they could easily find themselves slipping into a "safety first" habit that is familiar to many 'okay' leaders and has little to do with exceptionalness. We develop this theme further in Chapter 3 on "Finding our sweet spot".

Our insights into our own strengths and shortcomings heighten our awareness of others

Some leaders are reluctant to analyse or discuss their strengths on the basis that they don't want to be "arrogant" or indulge in "navel-gazing". Absolutely - up to a point!

This is why it is so important that whenever leaders talk of their own strengths, they don't stop there. Instead, they keep going and talk about what they're not so good at, too!

They make clear that assessing our strengths as leaders is just the beginning of a process of reflection.

Once we have a clear sense in our head of our key strengths, and those areas where we want to work at becoming exceptional, it is then much easier to move on to the next stage.

This involves us asking ourselves where we are not so strong – and where we have shortcomings that result in us getting in our own way unless we learn to manage them better and ask others to support us in keeping them in check.

It is when leaders are seen to be relaxed about discussing our own shortcomings – as well as our strengths – that it becomes easier for them to ask members of their immediate team to reciprocate.

They might even remind them of the notion popularised by Brene Brown and others of leaders "belonging to themselves".

Whatever our strengths and weaknesses might be, we own them, because we belong to ourselves.

It is from this standpoint of ownership and 'self-belonging' that it is much easier to support others in seeing more clearly their own areas of exceptionalness as leaders, as well as managing their own shortcomings.

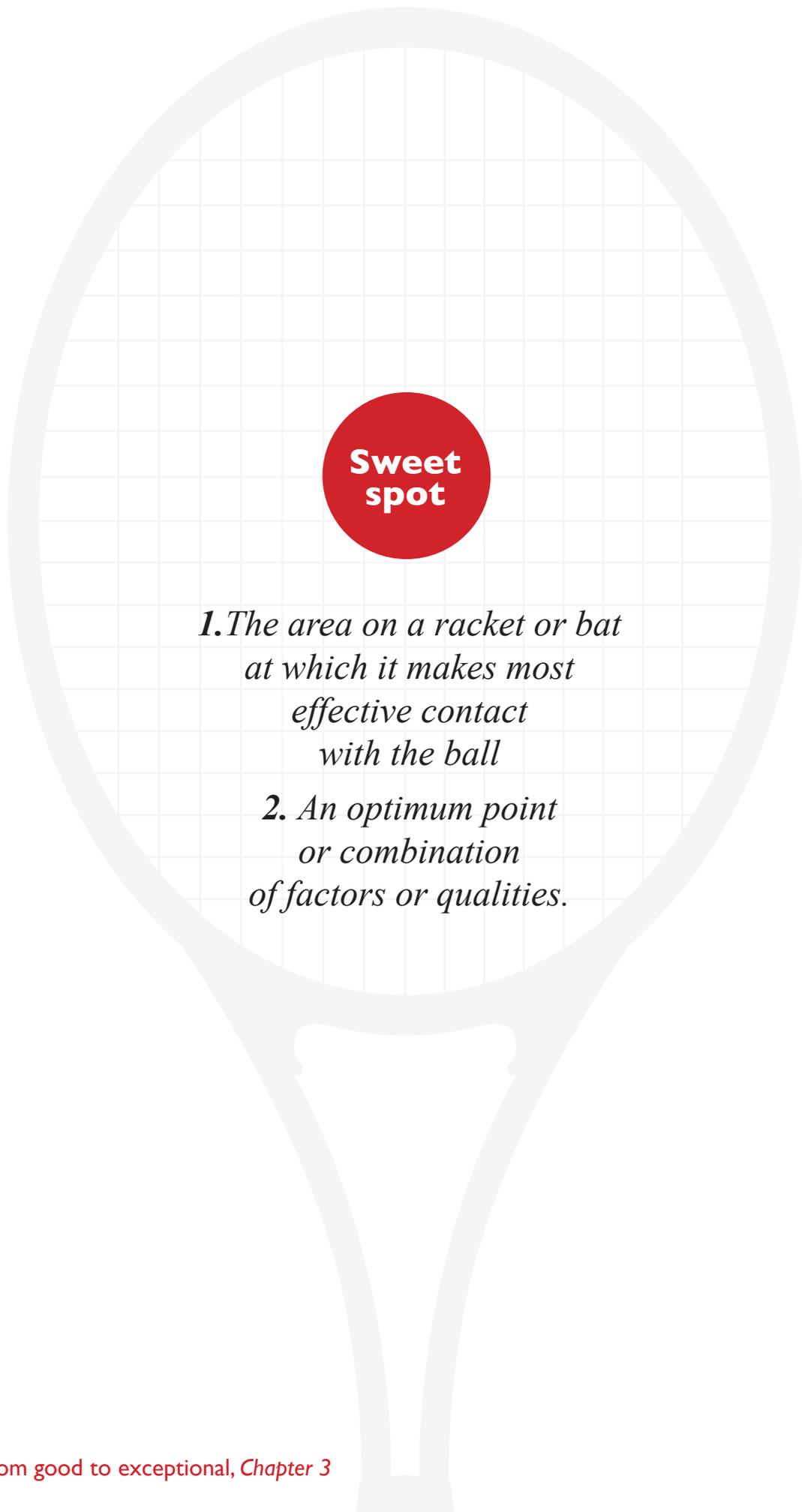
From good to exceptional:

a constant state
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Chapter 3

Finding our sweet spot



**Sweet
spot**

- 1. The area on a racket or bat at which it makes most effective contact with the ball*
- 2. An optimum point or combination of factors or qualities.*

How much should we "tone ourselves down" or "tone ourselves up"?

#NoWrongNotes

We are picturing ourselves as leaders on our journey from good to exceptional and (as we say on page 16)

- Challenging ourselves on whether we are compromising our offer as a leader whenever we "tone ourselves down".

Is it possible for us to find our sweet spot, where any toning up or toning down of our behaviours would be a **positive choice** on our part?

In this sweet spot we would have a sense of our **natural balance** as leaders, and so would be best placed to avoid compromising our leadership offer because of what we think others expect of us.

There are no wrong notes

Maybe it's most useful to think of ourselves in this sweet spot as any musician would do.

We are **always ready to improvise**, and vary our tune, as we respond to the tunes of others.

In the world of jazz, this commitment to improvisation and to living in the moment is at the heart of the integrity of every musician.

So, how about ...

- *approaching our lives as leaders on the basis that there are no wrong notes?*

This would be our starting point, whether we are toning ourselves up, or down, or not at all.



"I'm playing all the right notes... but not necessarily in the right order!"

Probably one of the most famous moments in British television comedy is the Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show in 1971, when Eric Morecambe said these famous words to André Previn.

Every Christmas people laugh into their mince pies as they revisit this moment. As well as being hugely funny it contains a great message.

Instead of fewer notes, why not try different ones?

#ChangeTheTune

Let's consider how we might apply this approach to those situations where we tone ourselves down.

Most commonly these are situations where we think we have gone rather over the top.

This might be by overtalking, or becoming overly passionate in arguing our case or perhaps a little too adversarial in disagreeing with someone else.

So we try to **soften our approach** by talking less, or toning down the passion as much as we can, or smiling more as we tell someone else why they're wrong and we're right!

Doing something different

Imagine that instead of doing less of what we're currently doing we do something **different**.

- Rather than simply talking less, we make a point of asking the other person one or two thoughtful **questions** to draw them out more and understand them better
- Or instead of simply becoming less passionate, we slow our pace and focus on the **clarity** of what we're saying
- Or instead of smiling more as we try to crush someone in an argument, we become **less adversarial** and ask if there might be a "third way" that we could explore together.

We don't just play less of the same tune.

We try a new one!

We need to wait for our cue!

#Wait4theFullStop!

Whether we're watching a full symphony orchestra or a jazz band, the one thing we know is that good musicians are so skilled at knowing their cue that they make the whole process look seamless, as well as quite effortless!

They would **never** strike a note without some sort of agreed cue to join in.

Yet as leaders we often don't expect any sort of cue before we dive in.

Many of us show no compunction about interrupting others mid-sentence rather than waiting for a natural pause.



We might have no choice with some people, because they have refined the skill of hardly pausing for breath at the end of one sentence before racing on to the next.

In most cases, however, so many of us would do well to apply the maxim that we seek to **come in after a full stop rather than a comma.**

We need an exceptional reason to interrupt someone mid-sentence. If we do so, we could at least make the point that we would **rather not.**

The power of the pause

To encourage others to follow suit, we could probably work a little harder at pausing at the end of sentences.

We need a sense of our **presence** as a leader, as we hold these moments.

It's then easier for others to hold back when we reach a comma, because they know we will pause when we come to a full stop - or better still, a **question mark.**



Letting ourselves feel the fear!

#NoWrongNotes!

Imagine a musician who occasionally plays in a small gig in their local village hall. One day, out of the blue, a letter arrives inviting them to come and play at a sell-out concert in the Royal Albert Hall!

The idea is scary beyond belief. Yet it is the sheer scale of the scariness that in a funny sort of way makes it easier for us to rise to this sort of challenge.

We tell ourselves that we have to give it everything we've got, and more besides, **just to survive!**

Time and again in Leadership Conversations Fellows have told stories of some remarkable challenges they have taken on.

When it came to it they conquered the challenge and grew hugely through the experience!

Yet in situations where we are asked to take on a relatively modest challenge, we will often wriggle and complain and come up with just about every excuse under the sun for why we should give it a miss.

Fearlessness

In our sweet spot, let's occasionally treat an extra gig in the village hall as if it's a solo spot in the Royal Albert Hall!

This way, we manage to avoid ducking a modest challenge by making ourselves view it as nothing short of **awesome!**

In the process, we develop our sense of fearlessness as well as rising to the challenge.



Being more comfortable with ourselves

#NoWrongNotes!

Whether we think of a member of a symphony orchestra or a jazz musician, the one thing we know is that when they perform well they look so **comfortable** with themselves.

They know they're doing what they're meant to be doing.

It's this knowledge that gives them a sense of contentment.

Whenever we are in our sweet spot as leaders, we experience this contentment as well.

Our sense of comfort with ourselves embraces our ongoing sense of movement.

Occasionally we move through different highs and lows, experiencing elation and disappointment in turn.

As we do so, we need to make sure that we don't move too far from the centre of our sweet spot.

Avoiding "low lows"

The danger for us lies in "high highs" and "low lows".

The latter can so easily contaminate the former and the former help to create the latter.

Hence the importance of keeping fairly close to the **centre** of our sweet spot.

This is where we are **most comfortable in our own skin**.

We know we're doing what we're meant to be doing.

Being comfortable enough to "rock the boat"!

When we talk about wanting to be comfortable as leaders, the comfort we are thinking of is rooted in us feeling secure in the knowledge that we're on track to **fulfil our personal purpose as a leader**.



It is this sense of comfortable **purposefulness** that enables us to "rock the boat" if and when we need to do so.

It is **so much easier** to do the right thing, and say what needs to be said, when we feel that we are doing and saying what our sense of purpose requires us to do and say.

Where comfort and purpose come together

At the very heart of our sweet spot, comfort and purpose come together.

Our comfort helps to resecure us in our sense of purpose, and our awareness of this enables us to moderate the highs and lows.

If and when they show signs of knocking us off track, our overriding sense of purpose gives us the incentive to move back towards our sweet spot and think again about the notes that we're playing.

In these moments, we can gain so much from a little more improvisation or perhaps a new jamming session!

We can try out a few new notes, knowing that we'll get them right.

As for their order, we don't all have to agree, do we?

**We avoid
high highs
and embrace
occasional highs**

**A process of constant movement
Comfort and purpose come together**

OUR SWEET SPOT AS LEADERS

**We always play the right notes
We know there is no single right order**

**We embrace
occasional lows and
avoid low lows**



Chapter 4

From high performing to top performing

Ten Insights

Our experience of working with our Leadership Fellows is that most Fellows are high performers - in some cases, to an exceptional degree.

Working together, we learn so much about the challenges involved in remaining as a high performing leader - and gradually becoming a true **top performer**.



Acknowledging different cycles of leadership

High performing leaders need to go through different cycles of leadership. Unless we acknowledge the different challenges of different cycles, we will not be in a position to devote the time and energy that we need to give to the specific leadership challenges that we face in any one cycle.

One of the key characteristics of high performers is that we can so easily become frustrated by all that we haven't got time to do.

When we are in the cycle of acting as driver leaders, we want to create space for thinking more strategically.

Similarly, when we are working through our strategic vision to present to the Board, we can so easily feel that we would rather be spending our time driving change within our organisation.

We find it very easy to wish for every day to have at least 30 hours, rather than the spartan 24 granted to us!

One of the best ways of managing our tendency to become overly impatient and frustrated is to recognise that different cycles of leadership require us to prioritise our time in different ways.

During one cycle we might be acting as drivers of change whilst in another we are setters of strategic direction, whilst in another we are champions of product innovation and in another we are empowering people developers.

Different leadership roles need to come to the fore at different times, and during each particular cycle we need to honour the additional requirements that they place on our energies as leaders.

Only 24 hours in a day...

2 Zooming in and out

As leaders, we need occasionally to “zoom in and out” if we are to support others in managing their own performance. The skill of juggling this process of selective interventions sits at the heart of being a successful high performing leader.

We know that as leaders we mustn't spend too long immersed in the inner workings of our business. At the same time, we know that we mustn't become too detached from the business, either.

We need occasionally to zoom in, and look in depth at challenges of under-performance, supporting those involved in putting in place a strategy for recovery, as well as establishing ongoing mechanisms for challenging and monitoring, before zooming out again.

Juggling these two states of leading, that involve us in leading from close up in one minute and then backing off so that others can step forward and take our place in another minute, is one of the most important challenges of leadership.

*We need occasionally to zoom in
... and out again*

3 **Owning our ‘inner controller’**

A common trait of high performing leaders is to become rather ambivalent when others come up with an idea. We find ourselves thinking “I’m the one round here who’s meant to have the ideas”.

When someone comes to you and proposes that something should be done differently, and asks whether that’s okay or would you rather think about the idea before deciding, what do you say?

You might be tempted to say that your answer is “yes, go ahead”.

Really? Are you sure?

For those of us who might be in denial about how controlling we really are, it can be good to challenge ourselves on how much we say yes to others’ ideas – and how often we say we’ll get back to them.

Time to control our inner controller a little more, perhaps?

*We say we're not controlling...
really?*

4

Getting riskier

We love talking about empowering others. The challenge to ourselves is how far are we prepared to go in modelling the behaviours that we want newly empowered members of our top team to adopt.

It is always important to try to look at ourselves through the eyes of others.

When we talk about wanting them to feel more empowered, what do they think?

Some might love the sound of this. They want to become more empowered and so they love the fact that we're talking the same language.

But for others this can sound rather scary. Suppose something goes wrong and they're then left to take responsibility for that mistake. How will we react then?

If and when they feel this, it is natural for them to look more closely at how we are leading and what sorts of risks we are taking.

Whenever we take a risk, do we own it? And are we okay – really okay – if the risk doesn't pay off?

We need to think very carefully about our own behaviours as risk-takers, if we tell senior colleagues that we want them to become a little riskier and chill out about the inevitability of occasional failure.

If we ourselves hate to fail, we shouldn't be surprised if others are fearful of failure too.

*Are we okay about risking
and failing?*

5 Transparency before ‘clarity’

High performing leaders tend to talk of the importance of “providing clarity”, and “presenting things the right way”. They don’t often acknowledge that this can easily have the effect of closing down real debate and implying that the future of our particular business is more predictable than we know it to be.

In the ways we define our roles, leaders can come across as very protective towards our senior staff, keen to offer them clarity and security even when we regard the future as unclear and far from certain. In these moments, it is important to challenge ourselves about why we insist on offering a false certainty.

Some of us believe that true higher performance requires truly high levels of transparency and disclosure.

We would rather say it as it is, even when “it” is messy and uncertain.

We would also rather share the options in our head and involve our senior staff in the process of deciding which one – if any – is the best one for our organisation.

High performers tend to be very highly motivated individuals. What can be more motivating than their CEO saying to them, “*We have some choices to make, and I want to share with you how I see them. I’m unsure as to which one is the best one for us, and I want to ask for your advice before deciding what to recommend to the Board*”.

Some might worry about lack of clarity in this statement, because they regard clarity as somehow synonymous with offering greater certainty.

Others of us would say that transparency – and empowerment – trump this version of clarity any day.

We aspire to the clarity involved in being open and honest about uncertainty – and the need to make imperfect choices in circumstances where there is no single right thing to do.

We have choices...

6 Beware “over-thinking” problems

Whenever we look at areas of under-performance, we should beware over-thinking the problem. We don't have to understand every aspect of what brought about the under-performance, or our personal response to it, before we take direct action to address it.

So often, under-performance in one part of an organisation will require the Chief Executive or Executive Director concerned to have a “difficult conversation” with one or more people responsible for that under-performance.

Some hold back from having these difficult conversations for months – and years! – and every time they are challenged on this they come up with some reason for why now is not the right time to have this conversation.

Increasingly, they might focus on why it is that they're avoiding the conversation. It might be their “baggage” from a previous job, or the particular vulnerability of the individual concerned, or a corporate culture of avoiding difficult conversations - or their fear of failure as a leader.

The more these reasons – and justifications - come to the fore, the more daunted they are by the idea of having the difficult conversation, that is postponed time and again.

The simple truth is that we don't need to engage in an in-depth psychoanalysis of ourselves or the corporate memory of our organisation to be able to sit down with someone responsible for significant levels of under-performance and say,

“*This isn't working, is it*”

Just get on and say it!

7 Beware over-reach

High performing leaders have a tendency to over-reach themselves, and take on too much with too little capacity to deliver as fully as they would wish to do.

Sometimes, this can be sustained over quite a long period of time. But it is almost impossible for it to be sustained indefinitely.

We know that this process of over-committing and over-reaching ourselves can easily become habitual.

It is indeed a habit of many high performing leaders. And it is possible to break this habit and still be a high performing leader.

There are all sorts of ways in which we can challenge ourselves when we feel that we are about to over-reach ourselves.

We can also invite those around us to challenge us, too.

Those high performing leaders who consistently over-reach themselves tend to have a sense of **their own indestructibility**. As a result, they can become careless in how they manage their own energies.

Consistent over-reach is one of the main triggers of burnout in high performing leaders.

This is why we all need to learn how to pace ourselves better and become more ruthless in deciding how we spend our time.

Too often, the time when many high performing leaders worry about burnout is when it's too late.

Next stop is burnout!

8 Not getting sucked into negative “dramas”

Even among high performers who manage to avoid over-reaching themselves, there is a sense of constantly being fully stretched.

It is at times when we are most stretched that we are prone to getting sucked into negative “dramas” that are being played out among our Board or senior leadership team or key partners.

We need to be wary of the danger of these dramas draining our energies further, when we already have little spare capacity left.

If we let ourselves get drawn into a negative drama, it can play havoc with our performance.

This is because we find ourselves over-reacting to other challenges – not because they’re especially difficult, but because we have let ourselves become overly distracted by the fall-out from the negative drama.

*Playing havoc with
our performance*

9 **Beware over-dependency**

High performers can spend so long fixed on their organisational mission(s) of the moment that they spend too long in one particular organisation or sector. Where this happens, they can become fearful of applying for any sort of external position because their “comfort zone” as a leader is too dependent upon their current position and organisation.

This is an insight that applies to some high performing leaders, and definitely not all. It comes through individuals becoming so tied up with a sense of mission that is so inextricably linked to their particular organisation that they lose sight of what they have to offer as a leader, uncoupled from their current role.

As they lose their sense of mobility in relation to the wider labour market, this can make them feel over-dependent on their current position and organisation, and quite disempowered as leaders.

We each need to develop our own strategy for avoiding this. The key is that we occasionally ask ourselves how much we see our leadership authority as organisation-dependent.

It is so important that we regard at least some of our authority as deriving from our personal experiences and insights that go with us wherever we might work.

We need not to let our authority as leaders – that is so crucial to our wider impact and influence – be seen as too narrowly dependent on our current role.

Over time, this would be bound to become unhealthy not only for ourselves but also for the organisation that we help to lead.

Our organisation doesn't own us

10 Beware making too many assumptions

As we reflect on the challenges facing high performing leaders, we should be careful to avoid making too many assumptions about the sorts of leaders who are high performers.

For example, our superficial definition of a high performer is that they have some significant performance successes under their belt.

It is the fact of these successes that makes them a high performer and so we might assume that they are confident in their successes.

On the contrary, it is not uncommon for high performing leaders, regarded by the rest of us as a huge success, to regard themselves as a failure.

In some cases, this is because they set themselves such ambitious targets that they are destined to fail in their own eyes, however successful they might be.

In other cases, it is because they are so driven by a fear of failure that this failure script dominates their view of themselves to the point where they continue to sabotage their own success, come what may.

Fear of failure is simultaneously a great strength and a potential weakness.

On the one hand, it is a great motivator that spurs on so many leaders to work harder and harder – and perform to an ever-higher standard.

On the other hand, it can mean that once they have achieved a certain level of performance they become overly cautious lest future failures compromise their achievements to date.

Fear of failure - both a strength and a weakness

Questions for your team to assess how best to improve your overall performance

Before you come together for this informal team discussion, ask every member of the team to consider their personal answer to the following question:

A

In order to become a higher performing member of this team, what would I like to be MORE OF and LESS OF – in no more than 10 words in total?

This question really helps everyone focus on their own performance, and how they would like to change in order to perform more highly.

It's quite a tough question, as well, which is why people need a little time to think about it beforehand.

Once you have all offered your personal answers, and had some cross-team discussion about what you've each come up with, the next question is intended to help you focus on what you could each do to achieve a significant improvement in your performance as a leader.

B**If you could do ONE RADICAL THING to improve your performance now, what would it be?**

Even if you are a team of four, it would be a good idea to split into two groups of two to consider your answer to this question.

In each small group, make sure that you facilitate each other and narrow down your options to one specific thing that you could do that really would be a “game changer”.

What is the one thing that others almost certainly wouldn't be expecting you to do and would enable you to improve your performance significantly in a really short period of time?

It's a question that is worth considering carefully. And it's worth pushing each other to come up with something risky to bounce off the rest of the team.

The best game-changers are nearly always those that in one way or another represent unpredictable leadership behaviours.

Even if you say something and then feel that it's a step too far, it might well be that this idea is the one that helps you land on what becomes the winning idea for you.

It is so important that you each press yourselves to come up with something significant, because once you are all in this thinking space it should make you more receptive to the next question, that is in many ways the most important so far:



What is it about YOU that is standing in the way of you doing this radical thing, and how might you best overcome it?

This is the stage when you are challenged on the levels of trust among you as a team.

You need to have a pretty high level of trust to be able to engage with this question, and indeed this is the time when it is important to build the team's sense of self-confidence by saying that the fact that you're asking this question is itself a recognition of the high level of trust that you have already achieved as a team.

It is also worth stressing that when people share with each other the leadership behaviours of theirs that can get in their own way, this very fact helps to dilute massively any negative fall-out from them.

We all have 'bad habits' that detract from our performance as leaders, and the very worst habits are the ones that we refuse to own.

So long as we declare a habit and are ready to ask others to support us in managing it, we have in one fell swoop taken away a huge element of the capacity of that habit to disrupt our key relationships with colleagues.

Depending upon the amount of time that you have set aside for your team to have this discussion, you could finish once you have all had a chance to respond to question 3 and then share any thoughts that are triggered by the responses of others.

If you are still keen to take the discussion further, our advice would be that you go straight on and ask:

D

Imagine yourself undertaking a role in this team that most excites you. Give yourself permission to think of ANY role. What is that role and why does it excite you?

In all sorts of situations, one of the most important responsibilities of the Chief Executive is to give permission to others to say things that they don't quite feel able to say.

This sort of question gives permission to members of your team to say out loud if they want to be doing a different sort of job from the one they're doing at the moment.

The simple fact that it is so open, and trusts others to say what they think is right, can increase levels of trust among a team to a significant degree.

In some teams, people can feel trapped in the wrong role and unable to say anything about this – for years! – because no one in a leadership position has asked them what they want in a way that has made it possible for them to give a really honest answer.

Whatever others might say, there is nothing that you need to “fix” straight away.

You can easily say that you want to think about your team members' answers and then discuss them in one-to-ones before coming back and having another discussion with the team about future portfolios in one or two weeks' time.

Top performing AND contented?

Could you ever see yourself as a contented top performing leader?

Top performing **and** contented? These words don't seem to come together naturally, do they?

When we think of some top performing leaders, we think of people who give the impression that whatever others might do, and however much they might drive up their performance, they will never be satisfied.

They take the phrase “continuous improvement” and seem to interpret it to mean “continuous dissatisfaction with the performance of others”!

This is why it is important to end with this challenge to all of us who seek to become top performing leaders.

The drive to perform to ever higher standards might well be a permanent obsession of ours.

It might well mean that when anyone uses a phrase like “If it ain't broke, don't fix it”, we can't help pulling a face and groaning.

At the same time, it would be good, wouldn't it, if a few more really high performing leaders gave themselves permission to be a little more contented – and to own this contentment in their relationships with those they urge on to higher levels of performance.

Contentment is **not** synonymous with complacency!

It can, indeed, provide a good basis for ongoing self-improvement, in that it enables us to say that we know we perform to a level high enough to meet the standards that we expect of ourselves – and we now want to become that much better because performing to a still higher standard is desirable and worthwhile in its own right.

How exciting is that. And how rounded is the notion of the contented top performing leader.

Not **too** contented, of course.

*Our inner
restlessness
and impatience
can just
about embrace
the notion
of contentment
so long as
we don't
have to
shout about
it too
loudly!*
