



The empowering leader

*Insights from three
Leadership Conversations*

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

Contents

Chapter 1	Empowering others as leaders	3
	<i>September 2017</i>	
Chapter 2	Flying pigs and thought leadership	16
	<i>March 2019</i>	
Chapter 3	The power of curiosity	21
	<i>February 2020</i>	



Chapter I

Empowering others as leaders

Six Insights

1 To empower someone else as a leader, we first need to establish an emotional connection with them.

Unless a leader has an emotional connection with the person they are seeking to empower, they will not be able to achieve the trust and openness that are so essential to the process of empowerment. Without this understanding, the person who is meant to be feeling empowered can easily feel that this is little more than an excuse to offload additional work onto them.

2 Empowerment involves risk, since it involves a transfer of authority that cannot easily be withdrawn.

There is risk on both sides. On the one hand, the person being empowered needs to believe that their Chief Executive or Director has their back and won't undermine their authority by overruling their judgement. On the other hand, the person doing the empowering needs to feel confident that they won't be exposed to ill-considered judgements being made by a subordinate overly keen to demonstrate their newly acquired authority.

3 Successful empowerment requires discipline, especially the discipline to avoid tinkering.

Many of those leaders keen to empower those around them often have a tendency to enjoy "interfering" whenever they feel like it. Successful strategies for empowering others require leaders to be disciplined in avoiding tinkering, whilst being careful to ensure that the empowerment is achieving its aim of helping to drive up performance and standards.

Insights

4 Strategies for empowering other leaders need to be tailored to their individual needs, recognising that some like to dive in at the deep end whilst others need to stay in the shallow end for a little longer.

Empowerment is not an entitlement to be offered to all who ask for it. We need to see it as a personal act of recognition, because the process of transferring authority to someone has to be geared in to that individual's own leadership style to ensure that they can ramp up their leadership at a pace that works for them, whilst feeling "seen" and supported every step of the way.

5 Leaders always need to be alert to the dangers of unintentionally disempowering others, as can happen in the case of high-octane leaders setting a pace that few can sustain.

It can be truly intimidating working for a leader who appears able to juggle countless priorities and do everything they want at an awesome pace. Such leaders need to reassure those they seek to empower that they don't necessarily need to move at the same frenetic pace. Otherwise the benefits of agile leadership can so easily be eclipsed by a culture that is unduly competitive – and disempowering.

6 For many leaders, empowering others will take them out of their comfort zones.

A wide range of leaders have behaviours that are inherently disempowering of others, for example through their highly controlling style of leadership or their need to move at such a speed that others are left rushing to keep up. Strategies for empowering others more as leaders challenge many of the empowerers to step outside their comfort zone and develop new leadership behaviours more geared up to coaching and mentoring those they seek to empower.

Three key questions to help empower others more as leaders

Drawing on these six insights, we propose three killer questions as the framework for any discussion to empower others more as leaders.

Direct questions and an ongoing conversation are at the heart of the empowerment process.

Key Question

Do we know how to get the best out of each other?

“

We need to make sure that we're both on the same page, so that we don't get any wires crossed.

I hope we will each be up-front about what might worry us as we move forward, and make sure that we are discussing what sorts of assurances we each need from the other to keep any worries down to a minimum.

We know that we're having this conversation because we trust each other and I hope we see ourselves as at a stage where we will be able to build greater trust and openness between us as we move forward.

So let's identify pinch points and share where misunderstandings could occur. Let me start by asking you how you think I can get the best out of you – and then I will tell you how I think you should be able to get the best out of me. ”

Key Question

What do we need to agree up-front to ensure that we handle this process well together?



Moving on, it would be good to talk a little more about what you most need from me, and I'll then share with you what I would like from you to make sure that I'm kept up to speed.

I also want us to agree that if ever you feel I'm in danger of breaking this agreement and taking back from you decision-making powers and other authorities that I have passed on to you, you will challenge me on this as soon as you feel something is going wrong.

Similarly, I undertake to tell you the moment I begin to worry about something, so that we can sort it out before anything comes between us.

I want you to feel confident that I am here to protect your new authority and build your leadership role.

I also want you to consider my needs too, and make sure that you consult me before any tricky decisions are taken when you think I might have a view that needs to be taken on board.

My undertaking is that I will do all in my power to affirm your new authority because I am 100% in favour of empowering you more as a leader.

At the same time, I need to know from you that if you think I might disagree with you about something, you will want to consult me first and talk the issues through.

So, if I find myself in a position where I'm witnessing something being decided that I should have been consulted about, I will expect to be able to make some comment that is NOT undermining of your authority but creates the space for you to suggest that you would like to take a little more time before taking a firm decision.

This is all about us working in a closer partnership with each other, on the basis that you know how committed I am to building your authority and I know that you are on the look-out for any signals from me, so that if for some reason I have been left out of the loop I can take it for granted that you will listen hard and act quickly if I show some sign of discomfort. ””

Key Question

Do you feel able to empower those who report to you and in whom you trust?

““

I see this process of empowering you more as a leader as part of a shift to empowering more and more of our higher performing staff as leaders throughout the organisation.

I see myself as leading this shift through you and other members of the team who are stepping up more – and I expect that you will want to do the same with members of your team who you trust. Are you up for this? ””

From player-manager to coach

This outline of three key elements in an empowerment process shows how important is the engagement between the empowering leader and the individual they are seeking to empower.

Engagement and connection – they are at the heart of this empowerment process.

They only become possible when there are already fairly high levels of trust and openness. These make possible significantly higher levels of trust and openness as the empowering leader supports the empoweree in building their own authority as a leader.

In the process, the empowering leader becomes closer to the person they are empowering and transforms their relationship from that of “player-manager” more into that of coach and mentor.

This transformation underlines the truth known by all top performers across every sport, that the best coaches are very close to those they champion and support.

Working more closely together

What is SO important to the success of this empowerment process is that empowerer and empoweree start off accepting that it is neither automatic nor easy. It is genuinely difficult and challenging and the only way to be confident that it will succeed is through working more closely together.

Those who have failed most spectacularly as empowering leaders are those who think that empowerment means “There you are, this is what you’re leading on - go and get on with it”.

Those who have succeeded the most – often learning lots through not always getting it right, as is always the case for succeeders – know that the reality is very different. Empowerment is really about leaders saying to those they seek to empower:

"I have faith in you to step up now and want you to know that you are NOT on your own. Whenever you get stuck or need support, I am here for you. If we stick close, we can't go wrong, and as we stick close, this process of empowering you will be ongoing. I hope that this business will benefit from your leadership for so long as we can offer you ongoing opportunities to keep on developing and stretching yourself, so that you really can associate us with realising your true potential as a leader."

Empowering others – how very self-empowering

For leaders who seek to empower those they believe in, and find themselves moving into a role of team coach, the experience can be truly self-empowering.

In the process of becoming closer to their best people, they find themselves able to exercise greater influence over those they value the most as co-leaders of their business.

They gain all of the benefits – and excitement – that come to those who experience their own actions both improving business performance AND enhancing the job satisfaction of those they look to as the up-and-coming leaders of their business.

For any leader who believes in their people...





Chapter 2

Flying pigs and thought leadership



You don't
have to think -

*I'll do that
for you!*

Making clear that we don't see ourselves as gurus!

We know that when some people conjure up the image of a thought leader they bring to mind some some sort of guru figure.

No thanks! The idea of the thought leader who says to their people that they will spare them the burden of having to think for themselves is not for us.

We say this because some of us feel that over the years too many thought leaders have been seen to have only one mode, and that's their **transmission mode**.

There have been too many statements starting with *"My position is..."* and not enough of

- *"I think this because ... and I would love to hear what you think, on the basis that I am always open to moving on in my thinking".*

This is why our starting point is that thought leadership should involve **the two modes of transmit and receive**.

If you disagree, let's of course discuss it!



Inspiring others to rethink what is possible

How often do we challenge a team to think about doing something differently from the way they've done it in the past, only to see someone looking back at us as if to say "*pigs will fly before **that** changes round here*"?

So often people can meet our challenge to rethink what is possible with a look of disbelief and incredulity. We need to be ready to remind them that part of our role as leaders is to drive through change, without being put off by those who have become too comfortable with the status quo.

This requires us to show real courage and vulnerability in those situations where people respond to our ideas with defeatism, and sometimes cynicism.

Rather than getting into an emotional lock about who is right or wrong, it is generally so much more effective if we capture once again the **case for change** and ask them to engage with the argument.

We mustn't just go along with them behaving like a commentator offering odds on who is going to come out on top in the latest office "power struggle"- or which pig might make it into the sky!

Engaging with those who are “comfortably numb”

The challenges facing thought leaders don't just come from articulate cynics.

In fact, if we draw them out and are seen to honour their arguments, we can often look back on their inputs as positive - and very important for enabling us to sharpen up key choices that have to be made.

There is another group of staff that is often larger and quite a bit more problematic. They are the ones who tend to be "comfortably numb".

They say as little as possible because they don't want to engage.

Their position is that as leaders we're paid a lot more than them so we should get on and do what we're paid to do.

Once we know what we want them to do, we should tell them - and if they don't like it, they reserve the right to tell us then.

Why should they engage with us now?

This isn't their problem, thank you very much!





This is SCARY stuff! *So what should we do about it?*

We know we have the professional sceptics to engage with, as well as the diehard cynics - and of course the comfortably numb.

Many of them wouldn't mind at all if we came along and said that we want to do their thinking for them. In fact some of them would rather prefer us in this "transmit only" mode, since they would have the added bonus of being able to blame us when things go wrong.

Yet we want to give out the message that we're keen to try some ideas out on them. We really want to know their views and grow some new ideas together - and we're not confident that on our own we've got it right.

In fact, there are some aspects of the discussion where we're genuinely **unsure** about the best way ahead, and in these areas we want to share our concerns before asking them to help develop our shared thinking.

We look around the room at the sea of faces.

Restless curiosity? Hardly any sign of that. General boredom more like.

This is scary, and getting scarier by the minute. Beam me up, Scotty!



Recognising that we're not the only one feeling fear

So many leaders will be familiar with this moment, when our sense of being scared expresses itself through a stomach pain, or a chest pain, followed by a sense of nausea.

In these moments when we feel fear, many leaders come across as rather **cold and detached**.

This is our way of trying to protect ourselves in a situation where we feel vulnerable and exposed.

Understandable though this might be, responding in this way serves no-one.

Just think: you have almost certainly spent longer thinking about what you want to say than anyone else in the room.

You also have the authority and leadership position that others don't have. And despite all of this you still feel fearful.

So how do you think some of the others are feeling?

If we can't own our fear, how can anyone else be expected to own theirs?

Owning our fear - and sharing our story

So many people still seem to believe that a thought leader needs to keep a certain **distance** from those we are seeking to influence.

Yet the reality is that those who don't particularly want to hear what we have to say are the ones keeping their distance from us.

So our role as thought leaders needs to be to reach across these gaps and create some sort of **connection** that feels real, and honest, from both sides.

Often the most effective way of doing this is to offer a personal story that demonstrates **why** the ideas that we want to share are so important to us.

The story makes us real. It creates a bridge that enables those who can't quite connect with us to leave behind their disengaged judgmentalism and move towards us.

As part of being real, why not own our fear?

We're almost certainly not the only ones feeling fear, and in owning ours we might make it easier for others to own theirs.

Just the fact of owning our fear makes it less menacing for us, too.



"These aren't just abstract ideas and nice sounding words. They change people's lives. Let me share with you something from my story ..."



Pouring in passion and then building confidence

Once we have achieved a real connection with the group, it is our personal passion that enables us to bring to life a discussion about ideas.

Our passion makes it possible for those involved to see how the ideas that we are exploring really do **matter** to us. It also drives us in another respect, too, in helping us to sharpen up the key questions that we want to raise with the group on issues where we are genuinely seeking their inputs and ideas.

Just as we pour our passion into the framing of questions, so is it important not to withdraw it when we are engaging with how people respond. For every member of the group who engages with what we ask and shares some personal reflection, we need to respond with **genuine appreciation**.

Thought leaders who fail to build the confidence of groups that they work with have little chance of drawing on their insights to enhance the quality of the ideas they raise with them.

This is why it's so important to recognise that truly empowering thought leaders are also confidence-builders at many different levels.



Stirring the “comfortably numb”

Going back to our title of *Flying pigs and thought leadership*, it's worth reflecting that the image of flying pigs seems to work in two ways.

On one level, it captures the **profound scepticism** that so many choose to let themselves feel when we go to them, as thought leaders, and talk on the basis that change is possible - and is more likely to happen if those of us in the room get behind it.

All of the shared insecurities and sense of collective disempowerment of groups and teams are captured through the gut reaction that *"pigs will fly before we make any difference round here"*.

The image works on another level too.

It is sometimes tempting to believe that pigs will be seasoned fliers before some thought leaders have developed a strong receive mode as well as their transmit mode!

One Leadership Fellow said that some thought leaders still prefer to be in the guru-like mode of **"transmission imposition"**, and he had a point!

Rather than wanting to connect with those they are talking to, all these thought leaders really want is for others to say, *"I agree, you're right!"*

Leaders who can say that they are feeling nervous, and uncertain in opening up a discussion in which they don't know all of the answers to their questions, demonstrate a level of **humility** that is instantly reassuring.

They offer an unexpected degree of vulnerability, which makes it possible for others to risk being vulnerable with them.

This is one of the very few things that can stir the "comfortably numb" and make them open to engaging with an open-minded thought leader.



This might not be as exciting as witnessing flying pigs, but for thought leaders committed to making a difference it's a great second best!





Chapter 3

The power of curiosity



The *persuasive* leader

This Chapter is inspired by a Leadership Conversation that we held in February 2020 on the theme of "The persuasive challenger".

We asked what sort of challenger we each want to be in a world where many leaders are not challenging enough, and some of those who do challenge others come across as so dogmatic and intolerant that they drive any opposition underground!

One of our main insights was that the most persuasive leaders tend not to see themselves as winners of arguments. Whilst they wouldn't be disappointed to win an argument, their higher purpose is more about achieving a deeper connection with others so that they can understand better what it is that gives them a different view of the world from their own.

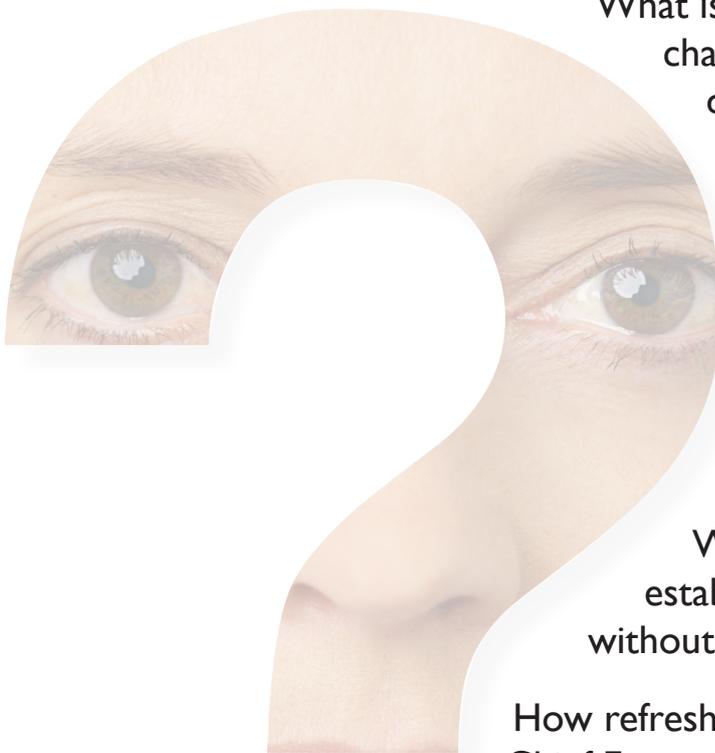
Persuasive leaders have a keen sense of the **power of curiosity** as an immense resource with the capacity to transform all sorts of relationships within a relatively short period of time.

Deployed the right way, curiosity can do so much to empower the person offering it as well as those on the receiving end.

I Curiosity and self-challenge

We are familiar with linking curiosity to self-challenge, since this is something that we do in St George's House in all of our Leadership Conversations.

Our Guiding Principles lay down the importance of us all "challenging our own assumptions" as well as being "constantly curious".



What is so important about self-challenge is that it enables us to demonstrate curiosity in what others are saying on the basis that **we apply this very same curiosity to ourselves.**

We're not subjecting anyone else's opinions to any more scrutiny than that which we apply to our own.

We are genuinely hungry to establish the truth, in all situations, without fear or favour.

How refreshing for senior colleagues when a Chief Executive regularly **puts themselves on the spot.**



The only downside is that it is more difficult to feel picked on if your CEO says they want to challenge you in the same way they've been challenging themselves!

Part of the power of self-challenge is that it enables us to model the behaviours that we expect of others.

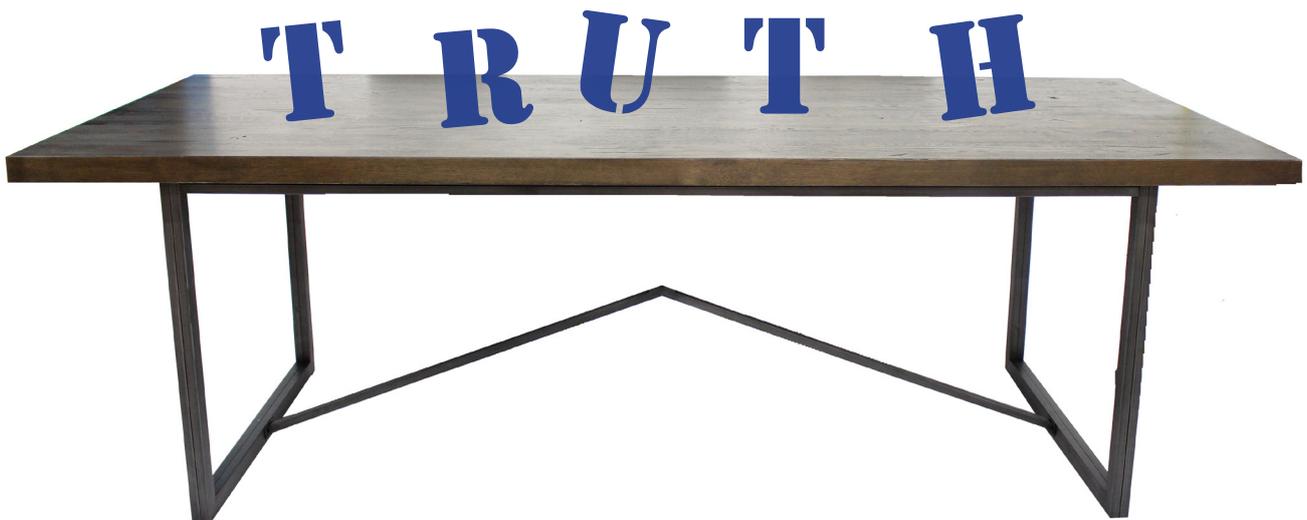
"So I have been challenging myself really hard: Is there a lesson we need to take away from our drop in income over the last quarter that I've missed?"

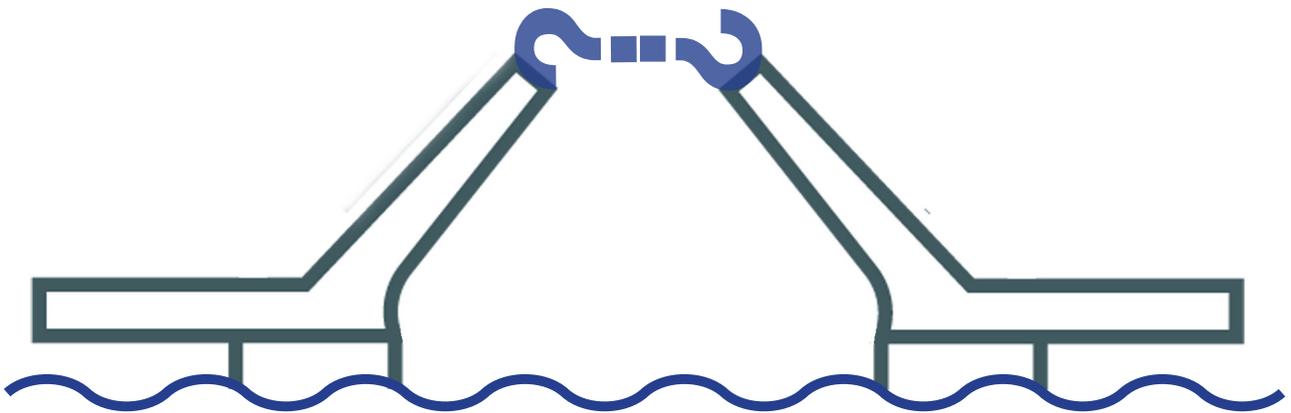
I've picked out three things we need to do differently, and want you guys to tell me if there is something else.

Whatever assumptions you've each made about what we need to learn, please make sure that you challenge them - and keep on challenging them!

I reckon I'll have missed at least one key lesson and I want us to draw it out.

It's time to get the truth on the table ... not just part of the truth but all of the truth!"





2 Curiosity and bridge-building

Early on during this Conversation we were talking about how much we each ask questions of others, and one Fellow told us how exhausting it can sometimes be.

"I'm always asking questions of our staff teams, because I want them to be more positive towards our overall change strategy. But I find it is all making me so tired!"

So, we asked, why are you asking these questions?

Is it to get inside their heads more or to encourage them to line up behind where you and the top team want to take them?

"I'm zealous for our strategy," came the answer. "I'm asking the questions because I want them to move towards our position."

This was a real insight for us, because we could see how tempting it is to deploy curiosity as a device for encouraging others to shift their position.

The problem is that if this is how we see it, it is bound to be how many others receive it.

Instead of building bridges, this approach can actually make the barriers between ourselves and sceptics higher than they already are!

The phrase that we latched on to was curiosity without judgement.

It had real significance for us, having just sensed the limitations of those situations where leaders draw on curiosity as a means of winning allies for their established position.

Instead, we pictured ourselves drawing on curiosity as a means of **moving towards others**, curious to understand more about where they are coming from whilst consciously holding back as much as possible from judging their position.

As bridge-builders, our primary aim is not to persuade. It is to engage more with those who don't agree with us.



"You stay put, I'm coming to you"

We would like to move together to a new position of enhanced understanding of each other, and from that shared vantage point make an assessment of how great - or limited - might be the areas of genuine co-operation.

If it is not possible to achieve a meeting of minds, there will almost certainly need to be an honest conversation.

This will take place in an environment that has involved us in drawing on our curiosity **without judgement** to enable us to create a bridge that wasn't properly there before.

3 Curiosity and kindness

The image in our minds here was of one of those really tough moments that might involve someone being told that they will not be kept on at the end of their probation or are perhaps being made redundant after many years service.

In these sorts of situations, there is always a tendency for people to go cold. They stick to the briefing they were given by HR and for a brief period become impersonal and bureaucratic followers of process!

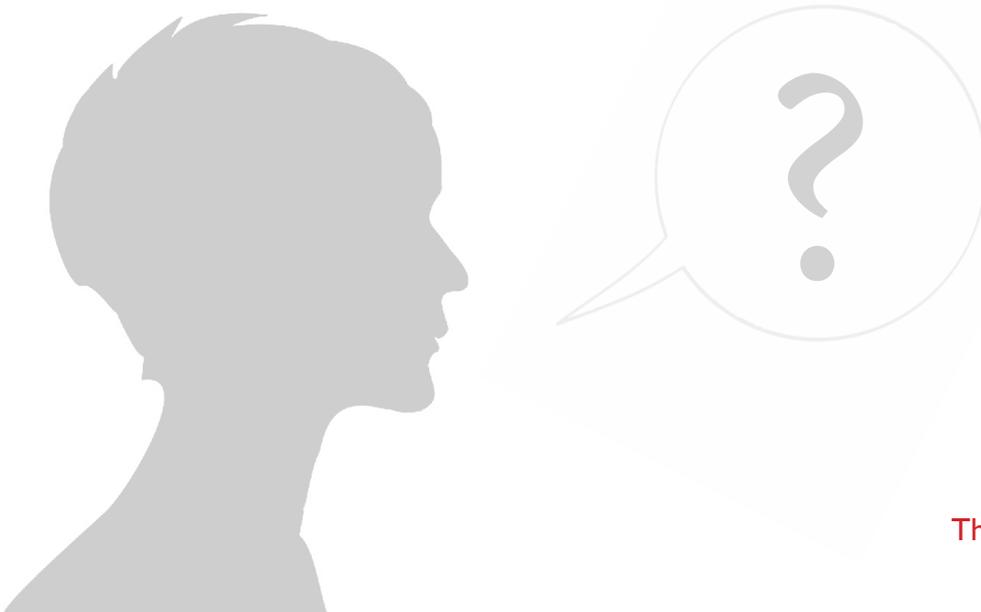
Instead, isn't it better to offer some genuine human curiosity:

- *"Are you okay?"*
- *"I honestly don't think things are working at the moment ... do you feel the same as me?"*

In these cases, we don't let loose our inner bridge-builder because we recognise that there is already a significant gap that might not be bridgeable.

What we do is to show some kindness and humanity through questions that demonstrate compassion.

Kindness and honesty can come together. As one Fellow put it, *"you're not being kind if you're not being honest"*.





4 Curiosity and culture change

Curiosity in relation to culture change is all about leaders making clear how much importance they attach to colleagues asking each other open questions as a way of engaging and connecting more as one overall team.

A small number of key phrases that come from the Chair of the Board and the CEO can achieve so much if they are used time and again in a natural and relaxed way.

These are phrases such as:

- *No such thing as stupid questions*
- *We listen to understand not convince*
- *We challenge with respect*
- *Whenever we share our No.1 idea we share its No.1 weakness too!*

What matters is not just the words. It is how we use them and encourage those around us to make them their own.

In a spirit of curiosity, we also need to ask each other how best to **refresh** these words every now and again.

Curiosity: a great resource for leaders in empowering others

- Modelling the principle of self-challenge
- Challenging others in a spirit of readiness to change our own mind
- Building bridges with critics and dissidents on the basis of questions offered without judgement
- Introducing the personal in a way that shows kindness and humanises cold HR processes
- Strengthening a culture of inquiry and constant learning
- Bringing to life the words of Albert Einstein: *"I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious."*



"Brainbox had a point, but you know what can happen to us cats if we get too curious! Tea, anyone, no questions asked ...?"

