'Leading In These Times'

Main themes emerging from our September Zoom Conversations

Again a huge thank you to all of you who took the time out in the midst of a busy day at such a full-on time to get us started in this series of leader to leader exchanges! As ever it was very enriching to see how quickly, in just the space of two hours, we managed to get to the depth we did. It is such a testament to the trust and maturity of this Fellowship. Thank you.

Our prompt for sharing was a short reflective monologue: 'I am at peace about…. I am not at peace about…' and it was helpful simply to articulate this, for some of us simply to appreciate some of the things that were strong and clear in our leadership and for some of us just to be able to express some of the deeper things that were troubling us helped us get a different perspective on them. The simple truth of stepping into disturbance, not avoiding it.

It was lovely at the end, after such a short session together that people described themselves in various ways as having arrived "stressed, burdened, tired, do I have the time for this…?!" and leaving "calm, re-invigorated, hopeful, lighter…." 😊. And we should note with thanks the quality of listening and deep understanding that was given that makes this kind of transition possible. This is of course a truth we can apply in our daily lives as we encounter people caught in their various burdens.

Some of the key themes that emerged that seem characteristic of the times we find ourselves in were:

- An increasing attentiveness to mental health and well-being: a real, heartfelt concern over people who are losing touch with their stability points – whilst recognising our limits in being able to shoulder responsibility for this. The importance of giving and holding space for people to be able to process their very different experiences of working life during covid. An understanding that the blurring of home/work boundaries were being handled in such different ways by people, but that vigilance is needed, particularly over the more self-contained who are less likely to send out signals of increasing stress or dislocation.

- The overhanging emotional climate – a certain trepidation or gloom about the imminence of a second wave. But as we spoke this was balanced by a gratitude for and increased awareness of people's amazing adaptability in the face of all that has happened – looking back at the journey since March and remembering/learning from this. Noticing what we can trust, rather than get caught by our anxiety over the next wave. But acknowledging that the growing fatigue and weariness is a new factor, with again the acknowledgment that this may be mood-driven as well as the inevitable draining that occurs when a short haul becomes a long haul.

- A liminal time – awareness of deep personal transition in ourselves and others. Many of us have been going through a process of having to find our own 'core' or 'rootedness' – a stability of being rather than doing. This of course is an up and down process and finding such stability can be elusive. 'Almost as soon as you think you have found it; you are in trouble' because by definition it cannot be pinned down or contained. It is a very different kind of learning and one no doubt we shall continue to explore.

- As part of this, being able to stay in the edginess/out of control-ness to let the clearer knowing come through. (The infamous 'Bear Hunt' children's book: you can't go round it, you can't go over it, you've got to go through it…"). People seem to be developing a powerful noticing and self-awareness – for example catching ourselves doubting/ speculating and second guessing/worrying/losing confidence. And as we notice this and ground more in what is actually present we come back to a more rooted strength - Finding more trust/calm/perspective. We do what we can.

- Also developing the capacity to notice when we fall out of touch – and the effects of that. Both physically, cannot touch, and globally, unable to connect/travel. How we can mistake our little world for 'the' world – the need to be intentionally calibrating our experience with that of others – listening.

- A particularly rich theme in one of the conversations was a personal journey towards 'learning to love myself' in these times – and how deeply settling this was, removing unnecessary anxiety and driven-ness. And the paradoxical truth of how 'I then find myself caring much more about others' – a more expanded capacity to love others.

- A big theme for all of us was the blessing and the curse of <u>responsibility</u>. The very quality that takes us into leadership and drives us forwards so easily becomes a burden and a worry. How do we hold it firmly, but lightly – what is ours to hold and what is not – how do we keep it in the right place with the right people holding it, allowing people to make their own choices and to learn from these.

- Another thread was 'Passionate vulnerability'…. 'I care so deeply and I just don't know what to do…' the feelings of frustration and powerlessness that can come with this. Learning to trust the underlying passion and vision without being derailed by the frustration and disappointment. The need to pause, find space and reclaim perspective. Finding an inner and outer peace – a number of you commented on how helpful it was to breathe and access the 'gut' as a source of inner stability. The poet TS Eliot speaks of all this is his poem Ash Wednesday *'Teach us to care… and not to care…. Teach us to be still..'*

- And some simple, helpful practicalities - 'Shed' with thanks to Sara Milne Row - sleep, hydration, exercise, diet…. Being 'purposefully selfish' – choosing our energy level for the situation ahead - … 60%, 100%, 140% ..?

- And finally the recognition, one of the main reasons why we so value these sessions, that we are not alone – that much of what we are going through and holding is not just our own, it is in everyone. 'Self as instrument' - what we are going though is what others are – how do we support people out of the wisdom of our own hardships, and the learning and wisdom that flows. How do we apply our own learning to help others and have the humility to ask others to help us learn from their wisdom?

Let's see how these themes develop over the next few months – there is much here to be attentive and enquiring into.

Looking forward to seeing you in a couple of weeks.

Very best wishes,

Chris and Karen

Leading In These Times' – Main themes emerging from our July Zoom Conversations

Firstly, a huge thank you to those amongst the Fellows who took the plunge and joined us for our first Zoom conversation.

As many commented, it felt very timely – a rare opportunity to share some purposeful reflective space coming out of lockdown - and most importantly a chance to recognise that many of the things we felt we were each carrying personally were in fact shared themes and concerns facing many leaders at this time.

Opening questions and themes that Fellows brought to the conversations:

- What just happened? A chance to pause and really see the structural, social and psychological fractures that we are now living in and leading through.
- Accessing the learning from our experience of leading in the moment: What do we do when we genuinely don't know what to do?
- What quality of leadership brings people through this? That is real, that respects the diversity of reactions, has the humility of unknowing and the courage and optimism to shape new possibilities?
- How do we connect meaningfully with those really being deeply and harshly impacted by this – beyond our own privilege?
- Is this a time to re-set, for long term as well as short term? Habits, assumptions, ways of working, emergent strategies, sustainable lifestyles, the notion of control and predictability, the potential of technology, relationships, the balance of priorities

Our conversation then explored in more depth the overlapping circles of **ourselves** and our **contexts**…. What is happening 'in here' and 'out there' and how is each affecting the other? What is happening on the surface, more reactive, and more importantly below the surface, where deeper change is outworking?

Some of the big themes that stood out when we explored our individual and shared contexts were:

Context

i.   Social
A lot of our attention was drawn to wider social concerns:

- A much greater awareness of *inequalities* - race, disabilities, health, economic power, age, gender, education. So difficult to get listening for non covid-critical issues: e.g. chronic care, disability access. What is the role of public policy at a time like this and what is our role in shaping it/creating the right conditions for how it is being formulated? Real, deep questions about the functioning of our State.
- A particular concern for the generational dynamics
    - younger with a lost sense of a future – bleak. But the energy for transformation and radical thought/action. How to release/harness?
    - Older, what does it mean to be a wise elder, with the privileges we have enjoyed. What should we be letting go of – giving space to others?

- The Pandemic; seeing the losses and gains through this period. How much people gave out of their own goodwill: innovation, adaptability, sheer dedication. Productivity and customer service may have increased, but has mental health and well-being of employees decreased?
- Geo-political trends and dynamics that are outworking below the surface as we all deal with Covid. How do we capture the balance of economic and environmental considerations? How do we balance our attention and focus on the scale, meta-changes, with those of immediate concern. Where do we start? It is so easy to lose touch with our bigger priorities, e.g. the health of our planet. If we have '7 years to stop irreversible damage', what are we really doing?
- Such positive learning around human kindness - creativity, growth and potential. The power of community rediscovered – how we have got to know people so much more fully and differently both at work and home.
- Noticing a growing faith/spiritual inquiry by a younger generation
- The evolution of our shared leadership culture - Who are we becoming? What do we stand for? Which Values and Voice are being brought to the fore?

By way of a summary, the one core question and challenge that came through for us as leaders from all of this was *"what have we been able to overlook in the past that we can no longer overlook?"*

ii. Organisational

At the **Organisational** level there were a number of more immediate concerns that seemed to be pressing in on us as leaders. Probably the biggest was the question of sustainability. In a remedial sense, this was about dealing with increasing depletion and exhaustion.

- Aware of how differently different people were being impacted – how to get the right level of support to the right people. How the people who were seemingly the most self-contained proved to be the greatest worry
- Mental well-being: the anxieties and trauma that people are burying: longer term impact of these
- How to keep up the level of communicate in these new ways and how exhausting
- Conscious of everything you say as a leader is heard and magnified
- Lack of control, and voice - carrying the decisions of others I don't agree with

More proactively, the conversation was around how we sustain positive learning from our response to the pandemic

- Humanising our work-places,
    - How people who were previously unappreciated in our organisations came to the fore: 'key workers' - cleaners, production workers, supply chain.
    - Giving care and consideration to each other – seeing each other in our own homes, humanising our working relationships; less easy to be judgmental and dismissive of each other
    - The de-hierarchising effect of Zoom – listening attentively to everyone, equal voice, people speaking directly into problems, not filtering. More straight, honest, better upward feedback channels
    - The learning we have all gained about being really conscious of work-life boundaries and the rhythm of the working day. More scope for working in our own ways.

- How we were able to respond with such pace and innovation when we needed to.
- A genuine learning environment, where we took decisions and learned as we went along.
- A more compassionate leadership emerging, allowing greater trust without letting standards slip.

Ourselves

As the conversations moved to a more personal level, the value of the St George's House 'safe space' came straight to the fore. People were able to be really open about what they were experiencing and how they were finding it as a leader right now and the invitation to bring the deeper wisdom of 'head, heart and gut' to this unleashed some powerful insights about what is really going on for us and what is really needed by us, and of us, in these times.

The first thing was **'finding space'**:

- Space to simply notice where we are at and what is speaking to us
- Noticing how we tend not to do this without prompting – tend not to listen to our own hearts and bodies – mind becomes hyper-active
- Where we have used busyness and distraction as avoidance
- Notice what we are bumping into, e.g. our own attachments and assumptions
- Cognitive activity extraordinarily heightened, exhaustingly so - but a realization that there was a lot of wisdom below the surface that need to access differently.

The **honesty** of the conversation was refreshing and people were able to acknowledge feelings of hurt or failure, often at our own sense of helplessness in the face, on the one hand, of the larger forces at work around us that are setting our organisations back and, on the other, the expectations of people around us who we can feel in some way we are 'letting down'. This highlights the perennial issue for leaders of the **responsibility** we take but how we have to bound this in the light of what we can and cannot control. *'Teach us to care, and not to care….'*, as the poet TS Eliot framed it, *'…teach us to be still'*. If we are not careful it can feel very personal. It was therefore very restorative to hear how we were all working hard to keep our perspective in this dilemma and to help each other regain it.

Another big theme that emerged was the importance of learning to listen to and '**trust your gut'** as a leader in times like this – that there is a point of stability on the inside that we can access when there is so little on the outside. One particularly interesting theme was how willing and able people had been to trust their gut in the early phases of the pandemic, but how gradually this had been eroded over time as self-doubt increased and people started looking for certainties externally – in a context, of course, where government has been struggling hugely to provide them.

What became obvious as we began sharing was how much we carry **emotionally**. As leaders we do not only carry our own emotions but also the emotions of those around us, projected and introjected, and even the emotional climate of our wider society. This emotional turbulence can have a direct impact on our thinking and was one of the main factors behind the sense of increasing overload and lack of personal clarity that have become more prevalent as we have travelled through this. This reinforced the need to pause, breathe, feel - clear the heart as well as the mind and **get perspective back.**

Another interesting conversation opened up around the theme of '**survival'** – when is it OK just to be in survival mode and not to be harsh on ourselves for being there. i.e. not burdening ourselves with

unrealistic expectations about some of the bigger strategic questions when we just have to stabilise the ship, and ourselves. Having a healthy survival mentality that has us able to ask for help and let go of unrealistic self-perceptions. Otherwise we just pass on this stress and frustration into the systems around us (work and home)

Next Steps

Having established such a great platform, the conversations will continue in the zoom **leader to leader exchanges** over the next 6 months or so, giving us all a chance to journey together and share the ups and downs of our learning during this extraordinary period in our history. We all know we will face different times and stages on this journey, from just 'hanging on', to renewing our hope and sensing into our power and potential to influence lasting change – in ourselves, our teams, our systems and indeed our society. The power in this community as we do this will be the way we help each other to keep perspective and unlock the emerging wisdom that is always available just below the surface.

During this time we will also identify themes topics for future conversations, particularly in the new **'Leading In These Times' stream** which we have built into next year's programme.

Currently we have included the following in our thinking for next year:

- Responses to upheaval - retrench or re-imagine?
- Connection and Community
- Younger Generation
- Creating listening and ownership for change during 'crisis as normal'
- Addictions & Freedom in the workplace
- Making Space for bigger life decisions
- Emerging narratives of 'these times' – how these may shape our reality
- Cultures and Climates of Fear and Love in our organisations
- Re-imagining team across hierarchies and boundaries

We will be in touch shortly to start booking people on to the new programme of conversations over the next 12 months or so. It looks like places will be capped at 16 for the foreseeable future, so be sure to book a place early if a particular programme interests you.