



# Hard &/or Soft?

From 10.00am until 4.30pm on Thursday October 14th

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This is a powerful and challenging polarity that we have noticed becoming more and more prominent in our conversations with leaders. When do we need to be 'soft' – open, approachable, imprintable, available, empathetic – and when do we need to be 'hard' – strong, decisive, confident, focused, challenging? And what happens when we get these reversed – when soft becomes weak, indecisive, pliable and hard become intolerant, cold, withdrawn...? And how do we get the balance right between these things? Is it an 'either-or', or is there a 'both-and' to be found, and how do we go about finding this?

The idea of strong back, soft front serves both as a metaphor and a practice for returning to balance in our-selves and in our organisations.

A strong back, our capacity to uphold ourselves, especially during difficult times. Grounded, yet flexible, equanimity and stability.

A soft front, our capacity to accept life as it is rather than longing or worrying about the future and wishing things were different.

It is the capacity to hold these simultaneously that enables us to flourish - as humans in relationships and as businesses in systems/structures

When we find ourselves out of balance and out of connection it is often this polarity that we seem to have reversed. We harden in stoic resistance and soften in collapse. We reverse language, aren't 'soft' skills actually the hardest of all?

When conflict arises we can harden our hearts and defend our boundaries yet, softening our hearts in compassionate inquiry may be the very approach that brings us back in to relationship.

This conversation invites us to explore what has hardened, calcified in us and in our systems that requires flow and what has softened or yielded that requires strength. As we see, so we cultivate a different response, that enables us not only to weather storms but to grow through them.



## Agenda

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The Conversation will follow the same flow as our face to face conversations, following three key stages:

- **This is Me** – taking stock of where we find ourselves currently in relation to this theme and the questions that are arising
- **Tell Us More** – enquiring more deeply into our learning and insights as we probe into this experience
- **Yes I can, Yes I will** – turning wisdom and insight into intention and practice.

### This is me

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We begin with an honest and frank enquiry into our own experience of the reality of this polarity between hard and soft. In this phase of the conversation we will encourage you to share your own stories and learning journey on this theme. What have you learned from your experience so far? Where have you got this right and what is telling you that you are getting it right? Where have you got it horribly wrong and how did you handle that?

As we share our stories we will find some key themes emerging amongst us – some simple practicalities to notice and share but also the beginnings of the deeper knowing we are accessing here. As we look back over our own journey of hard and soft responses, of strength and vulnerability, of courage and conformity, what is it that we start to see – what are the little warning signs we have learned to notice and conditions that tell us there is something non-obvious we need to be attending to?

### Tell Us More

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This takes us towards the end of the morning into the second phase of the discussion which will then inform our thinking over a break for lunch and a reflective walk. What is the **discerning wisdom** we need to access here that helps us know when to intervene and when to let be. How do we access this wisdom? What questions do we need to ask of ourselves and others? How do we

ask these questions in a way that unlocks generativity and intelligence, rather than fear and self-protection?

Following our reflection and presencing in this enquiry, sharing the deeper knowing of the heart and gut as well as the head, we will move into the closing phase the conversation ...

## **Yes I can**

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Here we crystallise the insights from our wisdom into our own intentions and commitments as leaders. What do we want to take forward in our practice, or further enquiry? What is becoming clear to us in terms of practical changes we need to make:

- In terms of how we personally are responding to life as it is
- How we are sensing with more subtlety into the things that are emerging right now
- How we encourage a climate conducive to 'right-shaping' our responses – where our key colleagues and teams feel they can strengthen without hardening, soften without weakening?

Any specific interventions or conversations we know we need to initiate on our return.



## Timings: Thursday October 14th

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| 1000 | Log on and meet each other online before we begin  |
| 1015 | Introduction to the Guiding Principles and then on to Stage One: This is me. We break into small groups and share some aspect of your personal story   |
| 1045 | We develop the conversation and begin to pull out some of the patterns and connections in our sharing.   |
| 1130 | Screen and Coffee Break  |
| 1150 | We move into the second phase of the conversation: tell us more. We identify the rich seams in what has been shared and mine these. This involves us accessing the deeper knowing that lies beneath our experience.  |
| 1300 | Break for lunch and personal reflection, usually a walk, alone or in pairs (on the phone). What is really speaking to us in this?  |
| 1400 | Back together as one group, we draw out the key outcomes of our lunchtime discussions and the deeper significance of these for our stance as leaders.  |
| 1445 | Moving into the third phase, 'Yes I can', we prepare for our final round of small groups, after which we invite each of you to sharpen up your personal resolves to enable you to become more effective as leaders who make a point of "reflecting peaceful strength" in the mirror. |
| 1500 | Screen and Coffee Break  |
| 1520 | We work on helping each other sharpen our commitments and intentions and develop a personal practice to help manage this duality on an ongoing basis.  |
| 1615 | Closing words and insights, finishing the Conversation promptly at 4.30 pm.  |
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