



How to handle, and equip others for, 'discomfort' as a leader

From 6pm on Thursday 8th June until 4.00pm on Friday 9th

This topic came to the fore in conversations at our recent Fellows dinner gathering, the first since the pandemic, when we were discussing what we would most like to have our next conversation on.... It has always been a truth of leadership that it requires us to step out of our comfort zone, but our current context seems to be taking this to a new level! Partly due to the level of complexity and unpredictability we now face, there is a growing sense that there are almost no comfortable decisions to be made these days.

Our role as leaders of course is to stand in the discomfort, take the uncomfortable decisions at the necessary time and hold for the reverberations of these – without 'leaking' our own emotional reactions in the process.

This in itself is a constant work and something we will explore in this Conversation. But beyond this, we will explore another facet – the 'democratisation of discomfort' and 'purposeful discomfort'. What is our role in holding others in it? Not to a level where people wilt and despair, but to a level where the true energy and resolve that is needed can be accessed - by everyone, not somehow 'manufactured' by us as leaders?



Agenda

The Conversation will follow our usual flow in 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 from our experience
- **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”

Before the Conversation, we will invite you to do a short reflection of your own experience of discomfort in leadership, not only when it was positive and when not, but also noticing the difference when you took it all onto yourself, or in some way 'socialised' the discomfort with others involved, again noticing where this helped and where it did not!

There is no doubt that expectations on us have grown, particularly in relation to big issues such as mental health, diversity, sustainability, whilst economic and commercial forces seem to be getting simultaneously harsher... What does it really take to sustain our own focus, balance and equanimity in the midst of this?

After arriving in the Vicars Hall and sharing some introductory thoughts and questions, we begin the Conversation with a sharing of some of our more memorable recent experiences the 'discomfort' of leadership, particularly those where we consciously did not try to take it all on ourselves and relieve others of the burden, but to some extent held people in it. This should provide some interesting substance for our conversations and story telling over dinner, where we will broaden the conversation and look at some of the bigger challenges in our leadership/society today and the degree to which we may be 'dumbing these down' by avoiding the true discomfort of them.



“This is me”

The following morning we will pause to reflect and notice what was 'stirred' yesterday before taking the conversation a little deeper. We will share a bit more about how we personally handle discomfort, pausing to notice the 'inner state' that gets activated and how our unconscious responses trigger us – for example, to minimise, catastrophise, protect or avoid. We will look also at the subtleties of the process and some of the other 'dis-' words that we could perhaps be working with more positively and intelligently – 'dis-quiet', 'dis-ease', 'dis-satisfaction', dis-sonance'

“Tell Us More”

After the morning break, we will drill deeper into some of the most relevant themes we have surfaced during the first phase above. We will explore how we give discomfort a more balanced attention – firstly simply having the inner presence of awareness to notice it, then acknowledging and even welcoming it. Like many emotional states, once we learn to stay in it, it yields a more positive energy – what is the discernment behind the discomfort, what is the truth it is pointing us to? How do we develop the capacity for discomfort in others and be honest and courageous in this? And this can apply up the system as well as down it!

We will also look at the process of sharing it, not shielding it. There is so much emphasis in organisations today on 'engagement' and 'accountability' but this gets much harder when it gives rise to more uncomfortable feelings – and if we are not careful as leaders we can take responsibility for these and try to ease them, rather than recognise that they are part of the process of performance and growth. This will take us into the sharing of our learning as leaders from the experience of holding people in this – an ongoing process of enabling everyone in the organisation, irrespective of their experience, to share in the working through of discomfort and challenge, to the extent that is right for them...

A key theme in this will be the exploring of responsibility. Is it a truth of leadership, especially today, that we take on too much and don't keep it in the right place – and maybe take on too much of the wrong stuff and not enough of the right stuff? Another theme will be creating a context for this that builds capacity and confidence. We all know it is overcoming the toughest challenges that builds true resilience, all the more so when we overcome them together.



“Tell Us More”

We will also take a broader perspective – let's really understand the times we are in, probably compared to the much cosier times we grew up in as leaders. There are probably bigger things at play now, and a different maturity required of us? So, the more we can help others stand in the reality of what we are in, and get beyond pet cliches and empty words, the less trivial the discomfort we find ourselves having to handle as leaders.

This we hope will create the space for an interesting and powerful enquiry as we leave the conversation. What do we need to let go of, to step into what really matters?

“Yes I can!”

By the end of the morning, we will naturally be starting to reflect on the implications of the conversation for our own personal leadership, both in terms of how we manage our inner state, as well as how we influence and challenge what is going on around us.

This will inform our purposeful reflection over lunch, after which we will help each other really shift our own mental models about how we are leading in this space. This is where the wonderful combination of deep respect with deep challenge that is so characteristic of the Fellows will really come into its own.

We will close the conversation with a pause to look back and 'hoover up' all the wisdom that has been gleaned and shared – particularly the very practical wisdom, the little tips, practices and insights that emerge spontaneously, often in offline chats, as we talk and share experiences together.

We will then pair up to help each other to firm up on our specific resolves - and maybe even offer to stay in touch from time to time to help each other with this.

Finally, we will come back together and end with a parting reflection.



Timings: Thursday 8th June

- 1430 You are welcome to check in to your room in St George's House
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- 1630 Tea in the House for those joining Evensong in the Chapel
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- 1705 Evensong (*optional*)
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- 1750 **Vicars' Hall.** Refreshments, then start of the Conversation at 6.00pm. Introduction to the Guiding Principles and then on to Stage One: ***This is me!*** We work in small groups sharing our stories and experience.
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- 2000 Working dinner in the House Dining Room
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- 2130 We go back to the Sitting Room for tea/coffee, and after dinner drinks
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- 2145 Private floodlit tour of St George's Chapel, departing the Sitting Room (*optional*).
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Friday 9th June

- 0745 Breakfast is served in St George's House. Please clear your personal belongings from your room and bring them down to the Vicars' Hall, so that the domestic staff can prepare the rooms for the next group
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- 0845 We start again promptly in the Vicars' Hall. At roughly 10.00am we move on to Stage 2: ***Tell us more***. We move in and out of small groups as we identify specific aspects and challenges in our different situations that require more focused attention and quality thinking time. We capture key insights and take-aways as we go and at around 12.30 start preparing for Stage 3: ***Yes I can!***
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Friday 9th June cont...

1245 A hot buffet lunch is served in the Vicars' Hall and we work together in our groups, reflecting on how our insights from the morning are speaking to us and our intentions as leaders. At 1.40 we have a team photo on the West steps of the Chapel (weather permitting!)

1345 Back together as one group, we draw out our lunchtime reflections and engage in our final round of small group work as we clarify and solidify our intentions. At around 3pm we invite each of you to work in pairs over tea or coffee to sharpen up your personal resolves and commitments, after which we come back together as a whole group to close the Conversation, finishing promptly at 4.00pm.

1600 Conversation close

Video link-up:

At the end of the Conversation we will confirm the arrangements for our follow-up zoom call to check in on the progress we have each made in progressing our resolves.

The key to us making the best possible use of our time in this is for Fellows to post a brief Whatsapp beforehand updating the rest of us on how you have been getting on, and especially which ones you found the most challenging. We then take it from there!

Suggested date and time for Zoom Follow up:

Friday 15th September 4.00pm – 5.00pm