



GETTING BEYOND THE TROPES OF OUR TIMES

From 9.45am until 4.30pm on Wednesday 10th December

The noun 'trope' is defined as an idea or expression that has been used by many people.

One of the risks of hosting leadership Conversations is we become a forum for the perpetuation of 'tropes' - socialised, 'sound-bite' narratives that are substitutes for original and critical thinking. It is interesting to notice how the same narratives and even language can surface in people from very different backgrounds and contexts - a clue that powerful socialisation, even indoctrination, may be at work.

Some have passed into common speak and mask insidious untruths – "Hard work never killed anyone....", "Free Markets...", "No time..". Loaded words that seem to be in play today in May 2024 as we write this include: 'Collapse in Trust' ; 'Threat of AI' ; 'Toxic Political Culture' ; 'Broken Institutions'; 'Polarised society'; 'Shortage of skilled workers'; 'Mental health epidemic'; 'Identity politics'; 'Green'; a particularly worrying phrase that is coming more and more into play is 'third world war'. The problem with these 'tropes' is that not only do they become a substitute for intelligent thought, they also become self-fulfilling. As we start to act on the basis that these are 'true', they become the truth we enact.

This is equally true in our organisational and professional settings, where narratives about strategy, culture, groups and even individuals become substitutes for critical thought and substantive dialogue. This Conversation will focus on our role as leaders in breaking through the surface of cliché, labelling and lazy thinking into robust dialogue that makes a real difference to real issues.

You may notice your responses as you read the above. You may recognise some you are using yourself. Irrespective of whether they are 'true', how often do you find yourself expressing them as an uncritical assumption?



AGENDA

Who is this for?

This Conversation is for all of us as leaders in our times, given the influence we have to shape the narratives that shape our systems and our society!

It may be particularly relevant to you if you are noticing a lack of critical analysis and breakthrough thinking within and between your team(s) and organisation(s). Where are people not thinking for themselves and where do you need more of that?

How will it flow?

There will be two threads to this Conversation:

- An opportunity to step back and use the depth and breadth of perspective in the Fellowship to critically challenge and explore some of the prevailing assumptions that are current today. We will ask you to do a bit of action enquiry before the session to inform this
- Sharing our wisdom and learning on how as leaders we take people below the surface into substantive dialogue and genuinely informed decisions.



AGENDA

Themes we expect to cover include:

- Understanding Tropes: Recognising the role of common expressions or clichés in simplifying complex issues and shaping discourse.
- Impact of Tropes: Exploring how tropes can obscure deeper issues, leading to oversimplification and potentially indoctrination.
- Exploring Reality and Complexity: Encouraging a deeper investigation into the complexities behind tropes to foster informed and open-minded decision-making.
- Dialogue vs. Cliché: Moving beyond clichéd expressions to engage in meaningful and progressive conversations.
- Critical Thinking: How to navigate and challenge the simplified narratives provided by tropes.
- Trope Busting: Identifying and critically analysing tropes to understand their underlying implications and foster more thoughtful discourse.
- Leadership in a Trope-Driven World: Examining how leaders can recognise, challenge, and counter simplistic narratives to encourage a culture of depth and understanding in their teams and organisations.

Recognising that people will come into the Conversation with different needs and perspective we will create small group streams to explore the different aspects of this.

We will then pull these together at the end to provide an overall picture in which we can look at our own situation and inform where we place our own critical focus as leaders.

AGENDA

Following our usual flow, the Conversation will proceed through three phases:

- **"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!"

We will begin by sharing our own encounters with tropes in our professional and personal lives, exploring the effect these are having for good or ill and examining the interests they are serving.

We will also look at the 'ebb and flow' of meaning around these – who is perpetuating them, who is challenging them and why? What is this telling us?

Based on this we will then pull out some key threads to explore in more depth in small groups in the next phase of the Conversation.



“TELL US MORE”

These will be refined on the day, but the focus for the enquiry may involve some or all of the following:

- Nominating and unpicking popular tropes to open up the complexity behind tropes, and the quality of thinking/discourse that is needed to work meaningfully with these.
- Reflection on how tropes function, including the emotional and 'political' aspects of this as well as the rational. How therefore do we need to tackle these 'non-rational' forces as leaders?
- Facilitated discussions to "bust" these tropes open, exploring the narratives they create and the realities they mask.
- Group brainstorming on strategies to spot and prevent simplistic narratives within our organisations.
- Developing personal and organisational practices to encourage critical thinking and reality-based decision-making in a trope-driven world.



We are only going to be able to get to a certain depth on these substantive themes in a one-day Conversation. Therefore, our primary aim will be to get rapidly below the surface to open up new ways of thinking and looking at things – we may then follow these up in more depth on future Conversations.

“YES I CAN!”

In the closing phase of the Conversation, we will focus on the actions and commitments that will help us translate the insights that have arisen into our own leadership intentions, practices and actions.



This will be where we support and challenge each other to get more specific about the changes we would like to be making and what it is that may be holding us back.

In particular, we will help each other focus on a couple of 'critical arenas' in which we will consciously seek to deepen the quality of dialogue and discourse using our learning from the Conversation.



Timings: Wednesday 10th December

- 0915** Arrivals, refreshments and introductions.
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- 0945** 'Gathering together' Introductions, purpose, Guiding Principles.
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- 1015** Stage One: **"This is me!"** We break into small groups and share some aspect of your personal story, from which we develop the Conversation and open up the main issues arising.
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- 1115** Tea and Coffee Break.
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- 1130** We move into the second phase of the Conversation: **"Tell us more"**. This involves us accessing and sharing the deeper, sometimes hidden knowing that lies beneath our experience.
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- 1300** Break for lunch and continued reflection, perhaps a walk, alone or in pairs. What is the wisdom that is starting to emerge in this?
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- 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.
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- 1445** Moving into the third phase: **"Yes I can!"** In small groups or pairs, over coffee, we sharpen up our personal insights and intentions in relation to the questions we have been exploring. What is this emerging leadership wisdom inviting/calling/moving us towards?
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- 1500** Working Tea and Coffee break.
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- 1545** We work on helping each other sharpen our commitments and resolves in the light of our intentions.
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- 1615** Closing words and 'gathering up' of the wisdom that has flowed, large or small.
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- 1630** Conversation close.
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