



Insights arising from our
23rd Leadership Conversation

Stretching ourselves as leaders

October 2018

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



A three-part stretch routine for leaders!

This Insights Report draws on the main themes of our Leadership Conversation that took place on October 16-17 on “Stretching our top talent”.

It was the 23rd Leadership Conversation that we have held since the Board of St George’s House established the Society of Leadership Fellows in 2016.

The discussions resulted in a wide range of ideas coming forward about how we might best stretch ourselves as leaders.

We have captured them in a three-part "stretch routine" that we hope will provide a useful resource for Fellows to dip into:

Part One: **Stretching ourselves as leaders**

Part Two: **Stretching our teams**

Part Three: **Creating a stretch culture**

As always with our series of Leadership Insights, we would be delighted if any Fellows wish to share this report with your immediate teams and key partners.

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1 Seeing ourselves as passionately curious

There is probably no better way of putting ourselves in the right frame of mind than reminding ourselves of these wonderful words by Albert Einstein:

- *“I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”*

To stretch ourselves as leaders – really stretch ourselves – we need to let our passionate curiosity drive the way we are and the ways in which we lead.

With this mindset, we become ever more curious to discover new talents of our own as well as of those around us.

2 No longer seeing talents as “permanent attributes”

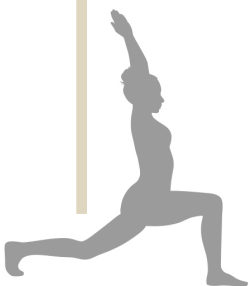
Once we regard individuals’ talents as capable of developing in ways that can’t readily be predicted, we open ourselves up to a host of new possibilities.

Not least, we see very clearly that the traditional notion of talents as “permanent attributes” is no longer helpful and needs to be left behind as we develop a more dynamic approach towards talent management.

It also enables us more readily to take on the proposition that talent in our working lives is an expression of the sort of person that we are across the whole of our lives.

So when we think about stretching our talents as leaders, we also need to think about how we stretch ourselves across the rest of our lives too.

One is part of the other, like it or not.



3 Sometimes having to “stop, look and listen”

For those of us who see ourselves as passionate optimists, it can be more of a stretch to engage with the passions of others than project our own.

As one Leadership Fellow put it, *“I know that once I get on a roll I can stop listening. In moments when I feel this danger, I tell myself to stop, look and listen”*.

The stretch is in the moment when we **stop**.

4 Encouraging others to lead in a way “not of our ilk”

It’s very easy to fancy ourselves as empowering leaders.

It’s also easy to start off as an empowering leader and then gradually apply conditions, so that others are empowered so long as they lead in broadly the same sort of way that we lead.

Hence the thought that many of us would really stretch ourselves as leaders if we say explicitly to our teams that we wish to empower them to lead in a way that might “not be of our ilk”.

They just need to get the job done to a high standard.

That really would be empowering of others - and stretching for the leader saying it!

5 Creating time to THINK

We can so easily fill every minute of the day, so that we have no time when we are alone and can think.

What a difference it could make if we create 5 to 10 minutes of uninterrupted thinking time for ourselves every day.

We look away from our keyboard and phone and let ourselves think. Without interruption. Wow!



6 Silencing the “background noise” in our head

Once we create some thinking time for ourselves, it might become easier for some of us to still the “background noise” in our head.

So often it is the **intensity of our expectations** towards others that makes it really hard for them to step forward.

They find themselves under such pressure from us to act in a certain way that they feel unable to make up their own mind about what is the best thing to do.

Our stretch as leaders involves us in trying to make sure that any “noise” in our head doesn’t hold them back from thinking through what is best.

This means that instead of saying to them “*We must ...*” we ask instead “*How could we...?*” or even “*May I follow your lead?*”.

7 Owning our energy in moments of challenge

As leaders we need to “own our energy”, especially in moments when we are challenging someone else on some aspect of their performance.

The longer we postpone a challenge, the more likely we are to come across as uptight, and having made up our mind that the other person is in the wrong.

This is why it is so important to ask ourselves whether we come across at times as aggressive or overly judgemental.

Calmness and centredness are so key to challenging others if we want them to be able to receive a difficult message without losing their self-pride in the process.

Hence the stretch challenge for all leaders:

- to think about our energy in moments when we are critical of others, to ensure that any criticism on our part doesn’t make them feel that we’re withdrawing our belief in them – unless that is what we mean, in which case we should say this honestly and without aggression.



8 Learning to console and stretch

We don't often see these two words linked, do we? If anything, we might think of consoling someone if they feel over-stretched and too far out of their comfort zone.

Behind this point there sits an important proposition:

- That stretching others isn't just about "rallying the troops".

One of the best ways of stretching those we are close to in work can be through drawing on our own mentoring skills to console them.

This enables them to feel "seen" and assures them of their significance in the team.

For many leaders, this role of "**Consoler-in-Chief**" can feel like quite a stretch!

This is why it's so important to remind ourselves how much some timely affirmation can help to build greater loyalty on the part of others as well as greater ambition for the organisation.

9 Keeping difficult conversations tightly focused

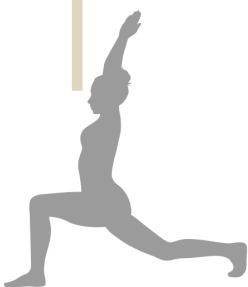
This role of Consoler-in-Chief is one that some leaders take on at the end of a difficult conversation with a close colleague.

Whether or not this is necessary usually depends on how we **open up** the conversation.

It can do so much to reassure the other person if they see right from the beginning that we are keeping the conversation tightly focused on one specific concern.

The stretch here is in staking out our ground thoughtfully, so that they see us as seeking a pragmatic resolution to a situation that they also want to resolve.

It is our best chance of ensuring that they do not receive our challenge as an attack on them.



10 Inviting others to tell us if something might be wrong

We judge our success as a leader not just by the number of “good news stories” that our team come up with.

Perhaps even more important is the bad news that something might not be going as well as it should.

What matters is that we hear this as early as possible in the process of things beginning to slip, so that we can intervene quickly without others’ fear of being blamed getting in the way of speedy action.

The stretch here is to demonstrate our insatiable curiosity by asking whether something might not be right in a situation where this is actually the last thing that we want to hear!

By stressing the **tentative** nature of the judgement that we’re looking for we make it as easy as possible for someone else to raise their concerns without feeling that they are making a definitive statement that things are going wrong.

11 Breaking down challenges into manageable “chunks”

We include this stretch behaviour because it is one of those that is key – and not obvious!

It is so very easy for us to make a challenge appear **bigger** than it needs to be.

Nine times out of ten this is a mistake.

Often the key to bringing out the best in others is to help them in breaking down big challenges into more manageable chunks, so that the stretch involved in delivering each chunk feels more realistic and do-able.

Our stretch is to help define the chunks, even when we think this shouldn’t be necessary.

This can help others avoid the feeling of being over-stretched, which is one of the main triggers for high performers finding that their performance is beginning to slip.



I2 Making sure we don't over-think things

Having argued that most of us need to create more personal thinking time, we also want to flag up the danger of over-thinking things.

We need to keep ourselves in an **empowered** mode when we go into our thinking bubble.

If we find ourselves beginning to prevaricate through over-thinking something, the best way of not getting stuck in this thought trap is to say to ourselves,

- *“Stop faffing about and get on with it!”*

Our stretch is in taking ourselves **out of our thought bubble** in that moment when it becomes our excuse for inaction.

I3 Valuing ourselves more highly

If we are to identify one more challenge that requires us to stretch ourselves more as leaders, it is surely the challenge of valuing ourselves more highly.

So much of our impact as leaders is determined by our ability to influence others.

If we want others to value our advice more highly, we cannot separate off the value that we place on ourselves as leaders from the value that we wish them to place on our advice.

For so many of us, it is a simple truth that if we are to be valued more by others we need to work that much harder at **valuing ourselves**.

Simple though this truth might be, this doesn't make it easy.

It's a serious stretch for many leaders, which is why the sooner we start this process, the better.



14 Making the switch from pressurising to energising

Let's start off Part Two with a really challenging stretch!

How about thinking less about “pushing” our team to perform better and more about “**lifting them up**” to enable them to deliver the results that we want?

This is one of those stretch exercises that challenges the traditional assumption that to be effective leaders need to drive and push others.

The proposition here is that the drivers and pushers are not the most effective leaders over time.

The most effective leaders are those who apply themselves to **building others up**, motivated by the limitless possibilities that can open up as we all seek to realise our full potential.

From pushers and pressurisers to builders and energisers!

That's a seriously stretching proposition. The results should make the stretch more than worth it.

15 Seeing ourselves as leading from WITHIN

This is another proposition that sounds easy and yet is quite counter-cultural for many leaders.

The idea is that we see ourselves as leading from within our teams. We might always find ourselves asking for more, but the language is about “us” - rather than “you” - achieving and delivering more.

If the team is under-performing in some way, we are automatically part of that.

Any criticism is self-directed as well as team-directed.

“We” all then become stronger and more unified through how we learn from “our mistakes” and turn them to advantage.



16 Creating a culture that expects positivity up-front

This positivity is not about creating some sort of artificial optimistic gloss that we use to plaster over all over the realities of the moment.

Rather, it is about us creating a team spirit in which all members of the team are expected to “cheer each other on”.

We ask tough questions, of course, because we are passionate in our curiosity.

We also work for ever higher standards of quality and ever better levels of customer satisfaction as we drive up performance.

We do all of this on the basis that **we have each other’s back**.

It is this that makes it so natural to have a “can do” mentality that makes members of the team want to intervene in a positive way the moment someone starts to dwell on the negative for too long.

17 Creating 10 minutes of team time first thing every day

So many of the best teams come together for a few minutes at the beginning of each day to “check in” with each other and highlight any particular challenges for that day.

Ten minutes for a team at the start of each day, on the hoof, is time brilliantly spent.

It can actually **save time** because of all that we feel we can take for granted once we know what other team members are up to.

It’s so much easier for us all to stretch ourselves once we really feel that we have the backing of our team.

And just think of all the emails that don’t have to be sent asking other members of the team what they’re doing at the moment!



18 Shifting the emphasis from “agreement” to “commitment”

We all know how many teams still tend to focus on the number of decisions they have taken at any one meeting.

Therein lies the problem.

We talk too much about what has been “agreed” rather than what the team have committed to make happen.

This is why the stretch behaviour is to talk less about “agreement” and more about “commitment”.

The aim is that over time every team member accepts without question that whenever they agree to something they commit themselves to **making it happen, too!**

19 Making sure that key objectives MEAN SOMETHING!

We don’t need many words on this key stretch behaviour.

Sadly, a lot of team leaders don’t pour enough energy into the process of negotiating and agreeing key objectives with team members.

Too often team objectives are presented as stretching even though there has been little stretch in the process of developing them!

They are poorly formulated and then presented as a *fait accompli*.

It is so important that objectives and targets are negotiated and agreed up-front, with a **laser-like sharpness** about them so that everyone is clear what they mean – and what they don’t mean.

Are these “*my targets for the team*” or truly “*our targets*”?

This is a question that every team leader should answer.

If they are **our targets**, the stretch comes in being prepared to adjust and renegotiate them to ensure that they are truly team-owned.



20 Knowing where the greatest talents lie in the team

This already sounds like a daunting stretch, doesn't it.

Yet it's one of the most important responsibilities of any team leader committed to leading a high performing team.

The proposition here is that every now and again leaders should make a point of asking their team – as part of an informal conversation – what they see as the main talents that they each bring to the team.

The language of talents gives individuals the freedom to talk in terms of their choosing about the skills and qualities and attitudes that they bring to their particular role within the team.

It also makes it relatively easy to open up a discussion about whether individual members of the team feel that their current role plays to their greatest strengths.

One of the reasons many teams fail to make the shift from mid-performing to high performing is because some team members don't feel that their role is quite right for them.

Yet unless their team leader first asks what they think it is almost impossible to say anything without this coming across as a complaint.

Giving permission for others to express that which they think might be seen as “difficult” ... this is surely one of the most important responsibilities of a leader who wishes to stretch their team by ensuring that everyone is contributing as much as they can.

In the process, everyone in the team gains a better understanding of the different talents around the table, as well as the scope for **drawing out various talents** that much more.

These would be two major pluses for any team. They are made possible by **one opening question** on the part of the team leader, followed by a sustained input of passionate curiosity.



21 Do the team see themselves as “changemakers”?

As you read this question, do you find yourself thinking “I’m not sure about this one”?

If so, may we humbly make the point that this is the problem! So many team leaders don’t know how their team view themselves.

They might **assume** that they see themselves as “changemakers”, or whatever term they want to use.

But they don’t ask the question.

Hence the proposition that we stretch our team – and perhaps ourselves as well – by asking this question.

If a team member says they don’t, a really good response could be,

- *“How can I support you more to see yourself in this way?”*

22 Creating occasional “team sprints”

One of the themes that we have returned to a few times at Leadership Conversations has been the importance of creating occasional “team sprints” that involve a team both in improving the **quality** of their offer and also increasing the **pace** of team-working, all at the same time.

In so many teams it is assumed that increased pace can jeopardise quality, whereas the experience of more and more top performers is that the two go hand-in-hand.

Once team members view themselves as changemakers, it is so easy and natural to lead this sprint culture.

At the end of each sprint, there is a retrospective evaluation in which the team asks,

- *“What do we take from this latest sprint that we want to hang on to – and what do we want to do differently next time?”*



23 Combining practical steps with some radical symbols

Creating a stretch culture usually involves some stretching leadership to help inspire staff across the organisation to raise their horizons.

It also involves work to **challenge established habits** that get in the way of individuals and teams stretching themselves.

This is why in Part Three we give examples of a few radical steps to help stimulate a stretch culture as well as some practical actions to embed it in day-to-day practices.

Pretty well all of the evidence suggests that any winning strategy for delivering a stretch culture lies in how we combine the two: **the radical with the practical.**

24 Reviewing your social purpose - and raising the bar

Is your wider social purpose as an organisation bold enough?

This is a great question to raise with your Board from the standpoint that, with their consent, you would like to set a more ambitious purpose for the organisation.

Some leadership teams can under-estimate the capacity of their staff (and indeed their shareholders) to commit to a broader and higher level social purpose.

If you can secure their backing for this, it should help you in accelerating change and driving stretch.

On its own, high level social purpose is never enough.

As a lead-in to some practical conversations about how everyone now needs to raise their game and increase their impact, it can be a powerful **scene-setter and motivator.**



25 Rethinking how we use Key Performance Indicators

Another way of creating a stronger stretch culture is through rethinking how the organisation uses its key performance indicators.

For example, one radical idea for encouraging greater sharing of responsibility is to encourage various teams to swap their KPIs with each other.

The proposition that one team's bonus payments should depend upon how another team performs is a bold way of conveying the message that teams are dependent on each other for their own success.

Others might favour a slightly less radical model that involves two or even three teams agreeing a small number of shared KPIs.

This way, each team would be reminded of their dependency on the others without feeling that they are giving up nearly all of their control over their performance in relation to their own KPIs.

26 Relocating various teams and departments

Yet another idea, that many larger organisations have deployed at various times, involves different teams and occasionally different departments being relocated.

The aim is either to bring them physically closer to another part of the organisation that they have not worked well with up to now, or to move them away from a team or department where the working relationship has become so cosy that it is now **excluding others**.

This type of move helps to break down the tendency towards silo working that is inherent in all organisations.

Many top performing organisations see it as a natural part of their cycle for shaking things up when various teams show signs of settling into team rivalries, or shared comfort zones, that have become too comfortable!



27 Creating a “high potentials pool” for rising stars

This is now established practice for a wide range of organisations, and we include it because many organisations still hold back from taking this step.

Its great attraction is the recognition that it gives to staff who demonstrate talent and ambition that the organisation wants to nurture over time.

Many Chief Executives can under-estimate the cynicism of staff when they tell them that they want to “grow their own” and promote from within.

This practice of maintaining a “high potentials pool” for rising stars conveys an unmistakable message that talented individuals who show real potential and are willing to stretch themselves will receive all of the support that they need to progress to the top levels of the organisation.

28 Establishing regular “days in my shoes”

This is another one of those ideas that has been taken on board by many organisations, but is often implemented in a relatively half-hearted way.

The idea is that all employees should have the opportunity to nominate another member of staff who they would like to shadow for one full day to gain a better understanding of what it is like doing their job “in their shoes”.

This helps to build greater trust across the organisation, and can also link in very effectively with cross-departmental **sponsorship and secondment** arrangements.

Being accompanied by someone for a day gives that individual an excellent opportunity to gain a sense of the shadow’s insights and decide whether or not they are someone they would wish to sponsor.



29 Creating occasional internal competitions

The importance of this idea is not so much about the competitions as it is about the pretext that they create for mixing staff up and encouraging them to work together in different ways.

Internal competitions make it possible to create new time-limited competition teams with a common interest in cheering each other on because of their shared desire to win.

Cross-organisation competitions create the option for staff to volunteer for a **different sort of role**, giving them a chance to develop their existing skills and competencies as well as demonstrating some talents that the organisation hasn't been able to witness so far.

They also make it possible for the CEO and top team to recognise individuals who might not have come to the fore within their established team and now step forward into a key role in their competition team.

30 Acknowledging your leadership role as a “space creator”

There are so many ways in which a top team can help to create more of a stretch culture across their organisation.

What they nearly all involve, in one way or another, is the top team coming up with some sort of proposition that creates the space for staff to **showcase under-used talents** and start to develop new ones.

Continued overleaf



30 Acknowledging your leadership role as a “space creator”

Continued

For an organisation to maintain a stretch culture, the Chief Executive and top leadership team need to be committed to shaking things up occasionally and "reshuffling the pack" to make it possible for others to step forward and shine.

By definition, stretch cultures involve a measure of risk, both on the part of those who are being stretched as well as the leaders facilitating the stretch.

What makes them so strong is the fact that this risk is predicated on an assumption of belief in others, and their ability to respond positively in a situation where they feel themselves being stretched.

There needs to be a general assumption within the organisation that people can speak up if they feel over-stretched.

Indeed, the whole point of stretch cultures is that they see stretching as a creative and developmental process, and fundamentally an experience that is **confidence-giving**.

It should be easier for a member of staff who feels genuinely stretched to speak up.

The stretch is then involved in creating the **space** for a process of ruthless prioritisation, weeding out those tasks that are dispensable and distracting individuals from the key challenges that require their full attention.

Stretch cultures are **challenging and addictive**.

They also need to be "refreshed" every now and again, so that the leaders of culture change experience the stretch themselves.



Time to stretch?

Once this culture is a part of your present it should always be a part of your future.

