



Women at Oxford Saïd

Spoilt for choice: Oxford's options for developing women leaders

Caroline Scotter Mainprize investigates the differences between the Women Transforming Leadership and the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme

Two years ago I interviewed the Chief Executive of a large company about why he had decided to send every member of his leadership team on the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme (OSLP).

He had participated in the programme himself, he said, and found it so powerful and inspiring that he wanted to share that experience with his colleagues. He also felt that it would vastly improve the functioning of the team if they all 'spoke the same language'. He proudly listed all the members of the C-suite who, over time, had benefited from the programme, concluding triumphantly with the sole woman in the team (it was a male-dominated industry), whom he 'sent on Women Transforming Leadership'.

He was so full of the benefits of the Oxford leadership programmes that I didn't like to niggle, but I did later ask Tracey Camilleri, OSLP Programme Director, what she thought.

'It's difficult,' she admitted. 'Many aspects of the programmes do look similar at first glance – both include sessions drawing on the arts and humanities; both have a strong coaching element – but they

are in fact fundamentally different, and it's not helpful if one becomes "the women's programme" and the other is "the men's programme". The women who come on the OSLP contribute hugely and get a vast amount of confidence from the learning environment.'

Kathryn Bishop, Programme Director of Women Transforming Leadership Programme (WTL) agreed. 'We created WTL for a specific purpose. Obviously we're delighted to welcome any woman on to the programme who feels that it is right for her at that time, but for some individuals and at some times, OSLP may be more suitable.'

As Camilleri said, the programmes are similar in many ways. Both develop leaders through business school material and other approaches, including contributions from the arts and humanities, interactive case studies, and discussions. Both address you as an individual leader and the challenges you face, equipping you to rise to them successfully. And both facilitate learning from faculty and, through discussion, from the other participants.

They are structured differently, though. WTL starts with a focus on you and your strengths and moves 'outwards' to consider your challenges. It features psychometric profiling, coaching, and focused work on your career journey, culminating in the completion of an individual 'strategy for you'. OSLP starts by looking out at the challenges presented by a changing context. It puts leaders' own leadership challenges at the heart of the programme and offers multiple lenses, approaches and insights into those challenges. The programme is very personal: small tutor groups operate throughout the week and the tutors work with participants through all the sessions and breaks.

Of course the most obvious difference is that WTL is a women-only programme and OSLP is designed for both male and female leaders. 'Leadership itself is fundamentally gender-neutral, even though there are some leadership styles that are more readily associated with women and others with men; WTL isn't about teaching "women's leadership," said Bishop. 'But research has made it very clear that women do face barriers



to progress that are just unknown to men. They also do some things very differently, such as networking. Women shouldn't have to change their style, but it does help if they can understand exactly what is going on and develop strategies to overcome the barriers. This is done best in an all-female environment.'

OSLP was started in 1982 by Sir Douglas Hague at the behest of the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In its early years it was dominated by male leaders but it has evolved radically since and now is proudly a programme for men and women leading all over the world in both public and private sectors. Last year the faculty included a large number of global female faculty: Professor Sue Dopson, Majken Askeland from Norway, Trudi Lang from Australia, Helen Adams from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, the Italian designer Clara Gaggero Westaway, the conductor Victoria Ely, leadership specialist Samantha Rockey from South Africa, as well as the Programme Director, Tracey Camilleri. No one could call this a men's programme any longer!

Carrie Lomas completed OSLP in 2015, when she was between two leadership jobs. 'I had just left a large, established organisation where I had worked for a very long time and into which I had been well and truly socialised,' she said. 'I needed to reflect on and explore

my leadership style, work out what worked best for me and, crucially, what I should take into the new environment. It therefore made sense to choose a programme where I could experiment and test my ideas in a context that was similar to the one I was going into – in other words, that had men in it.'

Having spent her career in tech organisations, Lomas was aware of the challenges that can face ambitious women, particularly in male-dominated organisations. But they were not the challenges that she needed to address at the time. Her priority was to take herself out of her comfort zone and look at leadership from a completely different perspective – and OSLP delivered that. Lomas wrote that conducting a choir (very much outside her normal area of expertise) under the perceptive eye of Peter Hanke was 'the most exhilarating, astonishing, all-consuming and frightening thing I have ever done, ever'.

One way of understanding the different roles of the two programmes is to look at how past participants describe their experiences. OSLP alumni often talk about having been helped to 'let go' of old ideas about leadership or old identities. They describe the programme as liberating, refreshing, and transformational; it 'helps you to feel comfortable being uncomfortable',

encourages you to think deeply, critically, and differently. And they return to their organisations with a renewed sense of purpose. WTL alumnae almost always refer to the new and exciting experience of being in a room full of women leaders. They talk about discovering their own leadership identities or of feeling reassured that their own leadership style is valid or effective. Many of them are eager to share what they have learnt with women throughout the organisation.

Ultimately there is nothing to stop any woman leader participating in both WTL and OSLP – the only constraints are time and budget. But if you are trying to decide which one to do first, perhaps it would help to think of them like this.

If you are an experienced leader, responsible for leading a team and at or near the top of your organisation, and looking for something that will give you a range of fresh, surprising, and challenging perspectives that you can absorb to enrich your leadership and have an impact on your organisation, choose OSLP.

If you have an interest in women's leadership development and careers, for yourself but perhaps also for other women in your organisation or sector, and want to develop a personal strategy to reinforce your leadership and achieve your goals, choose WTL.