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
depth – 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’,
efforts them to think deeply, critically,
and differently. And they return to their
organisations with a renewed sense of
purpose. WTL alumnas 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.