

ONLINE INSIGHTS

Oxford Organisational Effectiveness Programme



How strategic alignment helped this diplomat transform his decision making

Trent Smyth, Executive Director,
The Chief of Staff Association

'I did understand strategic alignment, but it was something that I sort of avoided,' admits Melbourne-based Trent Smyth, a recent participant in the Oxford Organisational Effectiveness Programme (previously Oxford Strategic Alignment). 'When you've already written your business plan, it's easy to resist a fresh piece of paper.'

As Executive Director of the Chief of Staff Association, Trent's day job is to represent the interests of chiefs of staff worldwide. The association's members are drawn from corporations, governments, royal households, family offices, the military and diplomatic corps.

'The roles of private secretaries, consuls or chiefs of staff are quite analogous,' he says. 'Essentially, they all represent the interests of a principal – be it a country or ambassador.'

'We help them with networking and convening, but our focus recently has been on certification and education.'

Trent's eyes were first opened to the world of diplomacy in 2012, after a successful career in commercial

property development. He was invited to become Malawi's first Honorary Consul in Australia. A role as secretary to the Consular Corps Melbourne soon followed. His secretarial role ensures that relations between the Corps' 81 diplomatic missions and the Australian government and the State of Victoria are well looked after. He liaises between those countries, the Australian Government, quasi-government bodies, and non-government services such as the fire department and police. He is also involved in ensuring their interests are represented at major events including the Australian Open or the Australian F1 Grand Prix.

'It's very much a roll-your-sleeves up and get-stuck-in kind of role,' he says.

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Trent's interest in the Oxford Organisational Effectiveness Programme was motivated by his responsibility to the members of the Chief of Staff Association. 'As a public benefit organisation, you have a charter and a responsibility – not only to your shareholders – but to your staff and members. People are relying on us to get things right and to do it on their behalf. It seemed only right that we checked our strategic alignment.'

Being clear on your purpose

The programme resonated almost immediately with Trent. 'What came out strongly was whether or not you are aligned to your purpose. That's where it begins. I now understand that if you feel like you are changing your purpose, you are probably in a different business altogether.'

'Before the programme, I had more of a feeling of what we wanted to achieve. Being able to articulate it in less than 25 words was a challenge.'

Trent believes that the programme has enabled him to focus much more clearly. 'If anything, the problems that we faced were cloaked in opportunity. We were looking at so many opportunities, but when we started aligning purpose, it gave me the power to say no.'

One of Trent's favourite quotes is from former US Navy Seal, Jocko Willink: 'Discipline is freedom'. 'It sounds counter-intuitive,' he says. 'But without being true to our purpose and members, we would have been going down the wrong track and chasing opportunities that we didn't need to be in.'

The need for absolute focus

From a personal perspective, the programme has allowed Trent to safely let things go and be confident about the areas where he needs to put more energy. 'In the past, it was easy to be a jack of all trades. We could do this, and we could do that. But being aligned is about staying on the game: only focusing on the things that matter and ensuring that everyone else is on the same page.'

Trent has already made significant changes to the association – many while he was still on the programme. 'Understanding our purpose has helped us revisit our product mix. We said to ourselves that if we are helping chiefs of staff become more effective, then education, skills, knowledge, and connectivity mattered. Anything else was a nice-to-have, so we put them to one side. While they would have been fun, they were not delivering directly on our promise to members.'

The programme has helped Trent and the team become more defined in what they are doing, clearer and more confident in what they are deciding. 'It's easy for anyone to spend workshops, a day, a weekend, coming up with beautifully written vision, value and purpose statements. But if they end up gathering dust in the drawer or on the shelf, they won't contribute to your overall purpose.'

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T: +44 (0)7701 305954

E: onlineexceed@sbs.ox.ac.uk