

## ONLINE INSIGHTS

Online programmes at Oxford Saïd

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# Oxford's online leadership programme 'created better conversations'

Arijit Paul, Head of Global Resources (Assets) at Schlumberger, discusses the Oxford Executive Leadership Programme

Schlumberger is one of the largest and oldest oilfield services companies, with an established culture and tradition. We place a great deal of emphasis on technical and engineering skills. Most managers joined – as I did – as field engineers and then worked their way up. Over the years, we have tried several internal and external leadership development programmes.

In addition, we have teams in over 120 countries. To expect groups of managers to travel to an in-person education programme would be expensive – not just in terms of travel costs but in time taken out of the office. True, some universities have begun to open satellite centres all over the world, but it is hard to be confident that they are all of the same quality as their parent universities.

So when I saw that Oxford was offering an online leadership programme (Oxford Executive Leadership Programme) I decided to give it a go and evaluate it. Having started (and given up) some MOOCs in the past I was particularly interested to explore the opportunities for interaction promised by the programme.

### Using an online platform

The GetSmarter platform was excellent – intuitive and easy to use; I even did

some of the programme on my mobile. The content was thought-provoking but very practical too. I liked the way that every module contained examples of how people had got value from the tools and methods that were being introduced to us. It was flexible, as I expected an online programme to be – but only up to a certain extent as it was rigorous too. Every week you had to submit a different assignment for feedback and a grade! There was surprisingly little wriggle room.

The most important idea that I took from the programme is that leadership is not one-size-fits-all. There is no single mould for an effective leader – it changes according to the team, culture, location, and sector. The programme was very good at communicating this, I think because the cohort was very diverse. People connected from all over the world and there were ample opportunities to

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talk and participate in the chat room. This is particularly important for people in organisations where many employees have experienced only one environment for the whole of their careers, have mostly had the same or similar educations, and been socialised in the culture and 'ways' of the company. As a result the organisation's employees all tend to think the same (or at least similarly) and make the same assumptions.

The conversations I had with other participants on the programme showed me perspectives on aspects of leadership that I had never considered before. And in fact, because I was working throughout the programme, I continued many of those conversations with my colleagues in the office. We would talk about leadership principles and try to connect them with what we were doing at work.

### Better conversations

I think that as an online programme OELP actually created as good, and in some instances better, conversations than an on-campus programme would. A challenge that many people have as leaders is a difficulty in really listening to other people. To be honest, when you put a lot of competitive alpha types in one place, many tend to respond too quickly and sometimes without putting in too much thought. But a written conversation slows things down and helps you think more carefully about what the other person is saying, and about what you want to say too.

A few times someone would type something and I would feel tempted to respond quickly, but instead I re-read it and sometimes realised that I may have misinterpreted the initial statement. I developed a habit of checking with people and asking 'is this what you mean?'

There was one memorable occasion on the programme when I came across someone with a point of view so different from my own that I realised I had encountered true 'out of the box' thinking. It prompted many different conversations and really made me think differently.

### New reflections on managing change

We were discussing the module on managing change. Schlumberger – like, I suspect, many oil and gas companies – is well used to change and restructuring. The entire oil and gas industry has dramatically downsized in the last decade. We have ingrained into employees the understanding that change is a constant and something that we need to be able to handle. During the discussions, therefore, I honestly said that as far as I could see it's really not that difficult, people can manage change, and there was no need to make much of a big deal about it.

Someone challenged me. They said that they did not think it was that easy, and that maybe people looked as if they accepted the change but that underneath they may not have internalised it.

I found this idea so intriguing that I mentioned it to my wife that evening, and was surprised when she said, 'Change is not that easy. You don't see how it affects you, but we in the family do. We're constantly moving, you're gone for days, you're buried in your work. It affects your general demeanour and your health, and affects how we are as a family.'

This really did make me think. And they're right. It is not fair to assume that change is a way of life, especially as we strive to make the industry attractive to young people. It has made me reflect on how we handle communicating change and the next time I will definitely do some things differently.

Our new CEO has reiterated the company's focus on 'people first'. We are not taking our employees for granted. Any change should be accompanied by direct, appropriate communications with the people, via video webcasts where possible. We must see things from the employees' point of view.

### Beyond the boundaries of the programme

There is an additional point linked to this that only occurred to me later. I sailed through the assignments during the first seven weeks of the course but did not do as well on the last one. The feedback was that the assignment was supposed to be about personal reflection and I focused too much on the business.

Basically, I needed to do more soul-searching. And though I did not perhaps have the time to do enough for that assignment, I have certainly done so since. You can argue that an off-site, in-person programme is a good thing – people get the chance to reflect more deeply, think differently in a different place. Obviously that can be a strength. But what I liked about OELP was the way it permeated its own boundaries and started influencing my conversations at work and home even while I was following it.

As the course reminded us, leadership is not just about going to work. It is also about how you are with your family and especially your kids, how they see you and what you do, and what kind of role model you are to the next generation.

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