



# Vital Leadership:

The art and science of human energy



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# About this paper

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This year marked the 40th anniversary of the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme. As part of the celebrations, Tracey Camilleri (Associate Fellow and Programme Director, 2012 – 2022) and Gavin Weeks (Associate Fellow and Tutor) conducted research with alumni, supported by Sue Dopson (Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Academic Director of the OSLP). Consisting of interviews with 20 alumni and a survey completed by 67 alumni, the research focused on the impact of the OSLP, the experience of leading through the COVID pandemic and future leadership challenges.

The particular challenge of sustaining energy was one of the themes that emerged from our interviews. In this paper, we summarise some of the existing research and thinking related to energy and introduce themes and insights that emerged from our interviews.

Our research builds upon an existing focus on energy and vitality on the programme in sessions led by one of the authors of this paper (Gavin Weeks). This focus is in keeping with the ethos of the OSLP, where global and contextual issues are explored at the same time as personal leadership challenges.



# Introduction: Energy challenges and opportunities

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## An emerging energy crisis?

In 2010 the authors Tony Schwartz, Jean Gomes, and Catherine McCarthy co-wrote a book entitled *The Way We're Working Isn't Working*<sup>1</sup>. The book was written in response to rising burnout and concerning mental health statistics. Schwartz and his long-time collaborator Jim Loehr, the sports psychologist had already introduced the concept of 'energy management' into popular management literature in 2003.<sup>2</sup> More recent evidence suggests nonetheless that **our ways of working are still not working**. McKinsey (2021) reports the rate of subjective burnout at up to 49% of professionals in public and private sector organisations across five continents (even then, the study authors suggest that this statistic is possibly an underestimate).<sup>3</sup> Smaller academic studies have explored burnout in multiple populations (doctors, nurses, teachers, and entrepreneurs to name a few<sup>4</sup>).

There is evidence, for example, that burnout is associated with other mental health conditions which, cumulatively, are responsible for nearly 18 million workdays being missed in the UK alone.<sup>5</sup>

Academic research demonstrates the role of work in influencing human energy. Research using experience sampling (a method in which data is collected on multiple occasions during a working week) shows that energy at work follows a particular trajectory, increasing on the weekend and dropping on Monday. Energy (measured by the relationship between vitality and fatigue) stays flat until the weekend. This pattern of energising at the weekend and fatiguing during the week is what many people would expect, but it is perhaps a sad indictment on the way work is organised.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the authors of the study quoted above also found that the increase in energy experienced over the weekend is predicted by quality and quantity of sleep.

## The role of leaders as energisers

Organisations, and the teams within them, have a type of energy. This has been explored by Heike Bruch and Bernd Vogel at the University of St Gallen and Henley Business School, respectively.<sup>7</sup> **Leaders play a disproportionate role in unleashing the energy of teams within their organisations.**

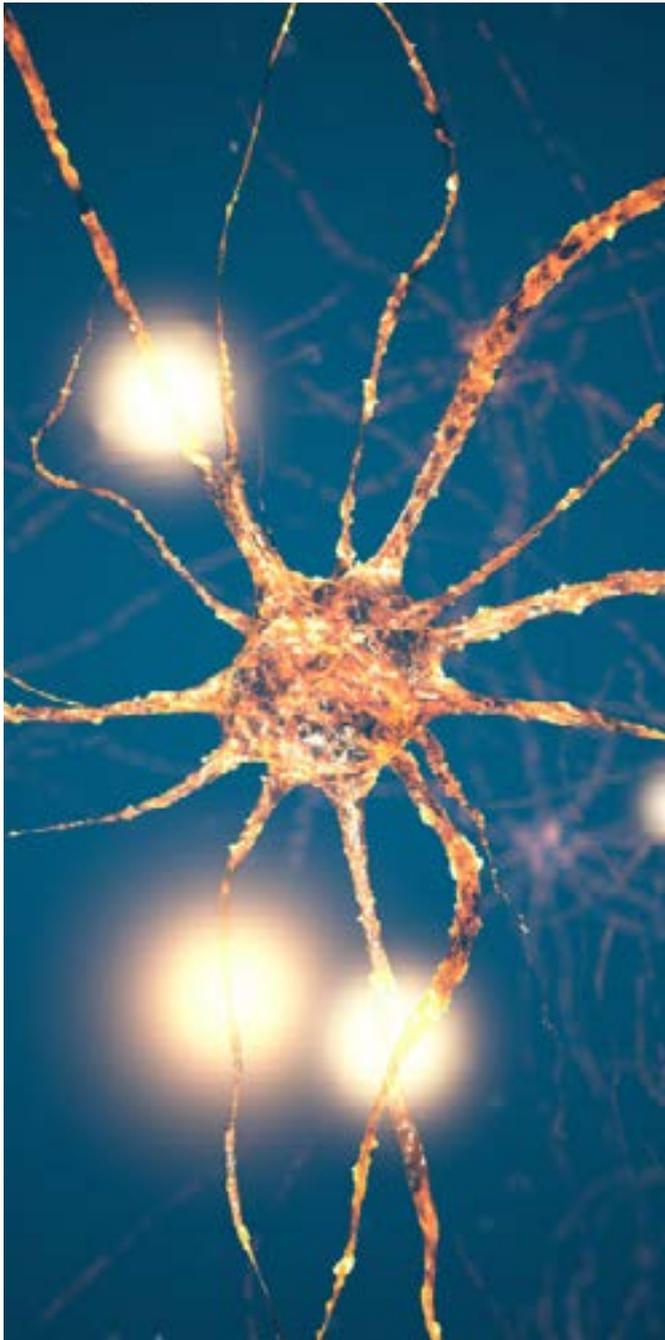
The impact that leaders can have as energisers or, conversely, energy drains, was studied in detail by Wayne Baker and Rob Cross, at the Universities of Michigan and Virginia respectively. They explored how leaders can create energy in interactions and the conditions in which this energy emerges in interactions. In doing so, they demonstrate the value of vision, hope, engagement, participation, and progress.<sup>8</sup>

## Human sustainability

Human energy is important in the short-term. Looking at it through the lens of sustainability arguably increases its relevance as a topic for leaders. The current focus is on sustainability from a planetary perspective but there is less attention paid within organisations to how we sustain ourselves at a social and biological level. Current burnout statistics are concerning, but put in the context of increasing spans of both lives and careers, there is a longer-term, more general need for people to manage their energy. Working into one's 70s is likely to be a necessity for many current workers. Even those who have the financial security not to need to work are likely to want to engage in some professional activities late into their adult years. This will only be possible if we have the physical, psychological, and indeed emotional capability to do so. Put simply, **we cannot keep working in ways that are unsustainable for ourselves and the people around us.**

# Research themes

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## The connection between energy and engagement

Our sample noted that energised people have the resources to contribute more to their organisations, to generate and innovate, and to create new value for customers and stakeholders.

What was clear from our research was that **finding ways to manage one's energy enables a greater level of connection and engagement**. As one of our interviewees put it:

*'It is crucial, therefore, for people to be able to recognise the fluctuation in their energy and recognise the impact that this has on the quality of their engagement.'*

Our interviewees recognised that this was particularly the case during the acute phase of the coronavirus pandemic. As one Australian HR Director described:

*'When we got out of lockdown and all the rest of it, I noticed that I was actually quite depleted...I had very little in my toolkit that could actually bring my energy back out. It was literally just rest, time out.'*

There was recognition that managing energy is not just a short-term challenge but one that is integral to sustaining engagement throughout one's career. One of our interviewees, a senior supply chain director, described the challenge as one of maintaining 'heart capacity':

*'You will need to stand up and keep running 20 years more. You cannot run out of your heart capacity at this young age. We need to understand this.'*

## Leaders are an energy source

Another theme that emerged was that **leaders create the context in which their people can thrive in their work**. The leaders that we spoke with were acutely aware of the role that they have in either energising, or draining, the teams of people around them. This influence can be because of tension between the standards and goals that they set and the physical and emotional resources that are required to deliver them. Our sample of leaders take this responsibility incredibly seriously. As one of our interviewees put it:

*'Whether he likes or not like he has to look energetic. He has to radiate energy from within because it's like a solar system, you know, without sun our solar system cannot exist, we will not exist, the leader is like that.'*

The extent to which leaders are, or indeed should be, the source of energy is debatable. However, there is some evidence to suggest that human energy is contagious.

It is, therefore, a responsibility of leaders to think about (and manage) the quality of the energy that they bring into their work and instil in their teams. One of the CEOs that we spoke with put this responsibility succinctly:

*'I ask myself – what is the energy I bring into the room personally? Someone remarked I looked tired at Christmas – I was – but I had felt I was masking it. It's a bit like posture – it requires constant maintenance and intention. It may feel like an indulgence to focus on one's own energies but it's not.'*

## Time, energy, and focus

A further theme in the research was the relationship between time, energy, and focus. In our survey, we asked leaders about the challenges that they face in managing energy. Of over 60 comments, 18 mentioned increased time commitments and competing demands, including the sheer volume of work, and the additional time taken to balance the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders.

As well as challenges around the time commitments required just to keep up, there are also 'energy trade-offs' associated with balancing different kinds of activity. These related challenges are perhaps best summarised in the following:

*'Navigating a dual focus from our Board of on the one hand management (assurance, detail, problem solving) and on the other, leadership and strategy (Inspiration, people, experimentation, goal orientation). The former can sap the energy and focus for the latter.'*

There was a recognition that managing the balance of effort, time commitment, and focus is a major opportunity and factor in sustaining effectiveness as a leader. A senior leader in academia described the benefit of doing so:

*'You have to take care of yourself spiritually and emotionally to be effective, as leader, and if you don't it will slowly erode your ability to perform...when I did so I wasn't working anywhere near the hours I did before, and I found my effectiveness was probably better and my level of happiness and the quality of my life was transformed.'*

# Ideas and practices for managing energy

As part of our research we asked leaders about those things that help them to sustain energy amidst the challenges of the fast pace and complexity of organisational life.

## Build physical foundations

One of the strong themes that emerged was the recognition of the need to attend to the physical foundations of energy. Getting enough quality exercise was the prominent theme. Of 60 survey respondents who answered the question we asked about managing energy, 17 referenced some form of movement, be that exercising in the gym, walking or Tai Chi.

For some respondents, attending the OSLP had provided an opportunity to reflect on the investment that they were currently making in their physical fitness. Two of our interviewees had gone from leading sedentary lives dominated by long hours in the office to exercising nearly every day. One pharmaceutical CEO described the impact that morning sessions of physical exercise, maintained beyond the programme, had had on his overall state of energy:

*'If I'm healthy, I'm energetic, I can deliver more to the organisation. Now at 6pm I am as good as at 9am in the morning because of the exercise, dietary habits, heightened energy levels. I feel a hell of a lot of difference in my alertness, acumen, precision, communication.'*

Whilst recognising the physiological impact of exercise on energy, it is the subjective and psychological benefits that we are most interested in. Our interviewees referenced the impact that exercise can have as a stimulus for thinking and a way of priming oneself for the day ahead. The context of the pandemic made these benefits particularly salient. One of our interviewees described her routine of walking outside before days of virtual engagements:

*I like walking my own and I find it keeps my head straight, big skies, big landscapes ...there's just a way by which thoughts find a structure or new thoughts come into your mind and you can only really understand that when it happens to you.'*



It is often the case that leaders (and people in general) struggle to find the time to exercise enough. One of our interviewees, a CEO in the finance sector, described how, on returning from the OSLP, he managed to find time for meaningful exercise every day. He was able to do this even though challenges in both his business and his family life had increased, requiring him to be fully present from early in the morning until late in the evening. In his own words:

*'It seems odd but it's a discipline that's made a world of difference to my day.'*

It is comforting, perhaps, to think that a seemingly small change to one's daily practice, can have a disproportionate benefit in terms of overall energy and wellbeing.

## Questions for reflection

- **What relationship do you notice between your physical fitness and mental clarity?**
- **How strong are your physical foundations?**
- **How could you create enough space for daily, purposeful movement?**



## Cultivate dynamic balance

Despite the fact the articles declaring ‘the end of work-life balance’ are commonplace in popular and business literature, the need to find balance was commonly referred to in both our interviews and qualitative survey responses. The challenge of finding balance was put succinctly by a senior property director:

*‘[It’s] how leadership fits into your life rather than how your life fits into your leadership responsibility.’*

Our respondents described a dynamic balance rather than one based on equal distribution of time across different areas of life. This includes balancing one’s investment of time and energy at home, work and in other areas of life; and a balance in the intensity of one’s engagements. A logistics director in a Nordic food company put it like this:

*‘You cannot manage others if you cannot manage yourself. My priorities are my daughter, husband, my exercise, my friends. These are the priority before work, actually. You cannot go through life neglecting the heart part of you, so you need to focus on this. All the great leaders I know are doing the same. They are running, exercising, singing in the choir, there are different ways of getting this balance.’*

This notion of finding dynamic balance between different roles, areas of responsibility, interests, and relationships has at its heart an acceptance that leaders’ lives are multifaceted, and that vitality emerges when there is harmony between those facets. This is a means of maintaining and sustaining energy and likely to be protective of leaders’ mental and emotional wellbeing.

As well as paying attention to the investment of one’s energy in important facets of life, our interviewees alluded to the need to create balance between activities that require focused energy and those that allow for regeneration. An HR Director from the banking sector explained this challenge:

*‘It’s about self. I think previously balance for me was work and family, that was the balance... but the last two years work and family that has depleted me as well. You actually need to create time for yourself personally to re-energise.’*

The work of leadership is taxing primarily not due to its physical intensity but because of the need for sustained attention over long hours. This can lure leaders and professionals into patterns of work that are unsustainable. It is all too easy to ignore the need for rest and recovery, and to fail to notice the rhythms of energy that occur throughout the working day. Our experience working with participants on the OSLP, suggests that **many leaders fall victim to an expectation imposed, either by themselves or others around them, that they should be ‘always on’.**

As well as taking time for oneself to re-energise it is also crucial to pay attention to rest, and to find the appropriate rhythm of work of different kinds of intensity. In our survey, we asked respondents what they would like to do to manage their energy better. Of 60 comments, nearly 25% referred either to sleep or to taking more breaks. Note that this was a question about what they *want to do* rather than what they *do*.

## Questions for reflection

- **When do you do your best work? At what time of day?**
- **Which important roles in your life do you find energising? Which ones deplete your energy?**
- **How do you recover your energy?**



## Find reflective space

Related to the concept of rhythm and recovery, our respondents described the importance of reflective time as a means of re-energising. One technology director from the finance sector described how attending the OSLP had been so energising because of the time that was afforded for thinking and reflection:

*'The beauty of the time in Oxford was having the time to think and reflect. I wrote so much in that week. Still to this day I struggle to get time just to think. I'm not good at that.'*

The crucial importance of this time for reflection was described by an interviewee who is a leadership professor and board member:

*'The most difficult leadership challenge I have is leading myself...you have to create tangible measurable plans for each of those areas like 'how are you going to take care of yourself?' This is going to be unique to each one of you, but I've never met a great leader that doesn't take time during every day to be by themselves.'*

It is tempting to take time away only as an act of recovery or when there is a complex matter or problem to deal with. As one of our interviewees, a senior surgeon and government executive, described, it is perhaps better when reflection is a regular (even daily) practice:

*'Sometimes you have to sit and reflect – you don't need to wait until you've got into trouble but think about*

*what you can do differently. I try to disconnect, with anything that I love to do.... you can come back with fresh energy.'*

Recovery of attention and executive functioning can occur during time away from the workspace but, equally, can be a practice done in short bursts through the day. As a CEO in the finance sector put it:

*'I also do five-minute bursts of meditation – I often have back-to-back meetings so I try to switch off, to focus on my breathing otherwise my brain is a bit like MTV – moving from business issue, to risk issues to compliance issues, to communications with the media, to staff related issues and so on.'*

This could be a crucial 'micro-recovery' practice, particularly during the days full of meetings that are so common when working virtually.

## Questions for reflection

- **When are you best able to slow down and reflect?**
- **What benefits do you experience when you are able to take time out and reflect on your work and leadership?**
- **What practices do you have to slow down amidst the busyness of organisational life?**



## Integrate and disrupt

One of the things that became clear in our conversations with leaders is the extent to which they manage their energy by being discerning about the work that they take on, focusing on tasks and projects that are meaningful. For example, when exploring the reasons why some work is energising and some quite the opposite, one senior medic and government minister made the link between meaning and purpose (or lack of) and the experience of burnout:

*'You can get burnout even when you're not doing a lot of work but when that work is not of value to you, impactful, or taking you towards what you are striving for. It is not about the amount of work that you're doing.'*

Deciding where to focus their efforts is one way that leaders described actively managing their energy in work. One of our interviewees, a senior director in a government setting, described being discerning about the work that she takes on as a way of managing energy:

*'Allowing myself to do the bits of the job which I like doing and not spending all the time doing the bits which wear me down...recognising that split gives you the energy and giving you the energy is actually a valuable thing as a leader.'*

This aspect of energy relates to purpose, the integration of external impact with internal energy. This balance is, of course, more easily described than achieved. It requires discipline, empowerment of others, and an ability to stay focused amidst the distraction that is a ubiquitous part of daily life.

As well as integration, many of our leaders described **the value of deliberate disruption of routines, ways of working and thinking, in re-energising themselves**. This kind of disruption need not be in the workplace. In fact, it is quite likely that it would

occur in new environments or in response to different stimulation than one is used to. In fact, one of our interviewees described the impact of attending the OSLP in these terms, saying: '*OSLP **shuffles** you and creates **vibration** in yourself.*'

Such vibration can occur in daily life as well as during programmes that are deliberately designed to challenge and 'shuffle' attendees' experience. For example, one senior logistics director described the value of creativity:

*'You need to be exposed to art and culture and music. We didn't have this for two years. If we lose our creativity, then we lose ourselves. The main challenge will be how to maintain creativity, this is where the heart energy comes from.'*

One manufacturing CEO described the way that learning, through challenge and creativity, impacts not just one's personal energy but also develops greater capacities for leadership:

*'Every day, you must learn something because your team wants to learn from you. They look at you as a teacher, they look at you as a mentor, they look at you as a coach. They don't look at you as a boss. You have powers from being a leader, by being the boss, but by becoming a coach, a teacher, solving problems for your people, in that way you earn their respect.'*

## Questions for reflection

- **When do you feel most connected and purposeful in your work?**
- **How much of your time do you spend doing work that is genuinely energising?**
- **What do you do to challenge and energise yourself outside of your comfort zone?**



## Energise the system

**Energy is not just a source of dynamism that exists within an individual, but it can flourish – or not – between people.** It is relational in nature. Our interviewees and respondents recognised that they are both energised and potentially drained by the people around them. Sometimes, enabling energy in another can be as simple as offering a different view. As one of our respondents, a charity CEO put it:

*'I find that having other minds around you, offering different perspectives, helps with energy.'*

This possibility for energised connection, of course, has been impacted negatively by the virtual working during (and as a legacy of) the pandemic. As one senior government executive explained to us:

*'My organisation is working entirely virtually. It is hard to make the connections. One of the struggles involves achieving a sphere of influence, which is much harder to create. It's harder not only to make the number of connections but also to get the quality of those connections. **We could have 50 people on a virtual call, but they won't be paying attention in the same way they would be if we were in a room together.***

Leaders that we spoke with are recognising the energy that arises when people are once again able to collaborate in person. As one technology leader put it:

*'The energy that I'm seeing now with people in the office is heightened, watching human interaction again, watching humans interacting face to face, with a whiteboard and a pen.'*

There is something uniquely energising in environments where groups share focused attention.

The leaders we spoke with were also mindful of the impact that they have on the energy of others within these environments. As one of our interviewees, CEO of a membership organisation, told us:

*'Leaders don't get to define their own emotions...they have to match to the needs of the team, the person, the circumstances. The pandemic has brought that right to the top – I can't sit at home and be depressed... in leadership, who we are and how we are affects so many people.'*

He was conscious that the energy that he brought into the room, virtual or otherwise, had an impact on those around him. Beyond the energy that one brings into the room, leaders have to be mindful of the role that they play with their teams and the impact that this has on their collective energy. One consultant and leader in academia put it this way:

*'Your role is to create that energy and to be the orchestra leader and as a great artistic leader you don't jump in the front row and grab the violin from the first chair. Great organisations have leaders that see themselves as servants and as orchestra leaders, not as the first violinist.'*

## Questions for reflection

- **What is the energy that you bring to your team?**
- **In what ways might you drain others' energy?**
- **How do you enable energy to flow freely?**

# An energised future

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Our research complements and expands existing and emerging work on energy. In this section, we connect our findings to existing research and literature.

We know, for example about the value of movement and exercise for sustaining health and wellbeing. The benefits for leaders extend beyond that. Our interviewees talked, for example, about the impact that exercise has on their quality of thinking. This is consistent with research conducted at Stanford, which demonstrated that low-intensity exercise improves creative thinking. Interestingly, walking outside increased this effect, in line with some of our interviewees' personal experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Our research is also a reminder of the interrelationship between energy, purpose, and learning. Gretchen Spreitzer and Christine Porath at the Universities of Michigan and Georgetown, respectively, describe two core components of individual thriving: vitality and learning.<sup>10</sup> They argue that vitality without learning is wasted energy. In contrast, learning and challenge without vitality is unsustainable. The leaders that we spoke with described the interplay between these two related concepts, with a sense of vitality coming when work is integrated with purpose, and a different, more disruptive energy that arises from learning and creativity.

The relationship between the nature of work and energy connects to a broader tradition of research into optimal human experiences. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, best known for introducing the concept of *flow* into common language,<sup>11</sup> described the '**optimal experience' that arises when individuals invest their 'psychic energy' into meaningful work**. The interesting thing that happens in this state is that the experience becomes, in his words 'autotelic', which means that it is meaningful in and of itself and doesn't rely on external reward.

In the introduction to this paper, we remarked on the fact that sustaining and generating human energy is a perennial challenge for leaders. Honest reflection on these challenges, both individually and as organisations, presents opportunities for change. We think that

leaders can begin making these changes by applying some of the ideas we have presented above and in particular reflecting on the questions for leaders that have emerged from this work. Making and sustaining such changes can make a meaningful difference to the prevalence of burnout in our organisations. Beyond that, thinking about the many ways in which we are energised (or indeed drained) could stimulate new approaches to work.

This research emphasises the important role that leaders play in generating and sustaining energy. The relationship between energy and attention is particularly relevant – our interviewees mentioned, for example, the importance of creating spaces in which teams can collaborate and focus together and contrasted this with the challenge of finding focus during the virtual working that was necessary as part of the pandemic response. Shared attention is one of the conditions in which so-called 'emotional contagion' can occur. In observational research, Anca Metiu and Nancy Rothbard at ESSEC, France and the Wharton School, respectively, demonstrated that shared emotion arises from shared attention. This shared focus led to more project breakthroughs, a greater sense of efficacy and more innovation. They describe how 'mutual focus of attention led to a feeling of urgency and focus that infused both individual and group efforts and became a reservoir of energy on which individuals drew'<sup>12</sup> (p18).

In their description of 'New Power', Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms explained that the role of leaders is to channel power rather than hoard or control it:

*'New power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it's most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.'*<sup>13</sup>

Using Heimans and Timms as inspiration, leaders don't have to 'create' energy but enable it to flow. In that sense, **the role of successful leaders is not just to channel power but also to channel energy and create the conditions for energy to flow within the organisation.**

What would be possible if leaders could channel energy more successfully? A vision of an energised future was described by an HR director from the financial services industry:

*'How do we create work that gives people energy?... we all have been in places where you work on something, and you could keep working on it, because you love it and it gives you energy...I'm sure there's a way of working, that we can actually now shift to where you do what gives you energy. It's a whole workforce thing that I feel as though we're on the cusp of what haven't quite cracked, as yet.'*

Such a shift could have massive implications for wellbeing and burnout, individual and collective development, and human sustainability. Whilst this future of work might be some way off, it is one in which we would be able to state, with confidence, that **the way we are working is working.**

# The authors

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## Tracey Camilleri

Tracey is the co-founder of Thompson Harrison, along with Sam Rockey, and is an Associate Fellow at Oxford University's Säid Business School (OSBS). At OSBS, she has designed and directed the flagship Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme (2012-2022) as well as bespoke senior development programmes. She is known for her innovative design approach, her focus on the dynamics and practice of successful groups and what it means to lead healthy, thriving organisations in a world increasingly dominated by process and machines.

Earlier in her career she variously ran her own consulting company, WMC Communications, worked as an associate for the private investment bank, Allen and Company, as new business director for the publishing company, Marshall Cavendish, a teacher of English literature at St Paul's Girls' School, and as a research associate at Bain and Company. Her book, *The Social Brain*, written in partnership with Sam Rockey and evolutionary psychologist, Professor Robin Dunbar, will be published by Penguin Random House in Spring 2023. Tracey has an MA from Oxford University.

## Gavin Weeks

Gavin is an Associate Fellow at Säid Business School, University of Oxford and is a tutor and faculty on the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme – one of the leading open leadership development programmes in the world.

Gavin also works with Thompson Harrison, a London-based leadership and organisational development consultancy, where he designs and facilitates leadership programmes, coaches individuals, and works with senior leadership teams, often around culture and purpose. He is particularly interested in vitality: helping leaders to sustain energy, engagement, and growth in a fast-changing context. He uses these principles in leadership programmes and with coaching clients.

Gavin's career began in clinical psychology, initially in the National Health Service. Alongside this he had a private clinical practice, facilitated resilience programmes in organisations, and worked as a performance psychologist within professional sports. He joined SABMiller in 2012 and was responsible for executive assessment and development within the global Talent Management team, with a particular focus on managing complexity. He left SABMiller in 2017 to work independently and as an associate of Thompson Harrison.

Gavin has a doctorate (PsychD) in Clinical Psychology, from Surrey University, an MSc in Neuropsychology and BSc in Psychology, both from University College, London.

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