



# 40 Years of Strategic Leadership

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# Background

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To commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme (OSLP) we conducted some research with alumni to explore the impact that attending the programme had on their leadership. Looking to the future, we also sought to understand the challenges that they were experiencing in the post-pandemic world and the capabilities that they believe leaders need to develop to be future-fit.

Four of the themes that emerged are particularly pertinent in today's global context:

- Leadership in uncharted territory
- The growing scope of leadership
- Putting humans at the centre of the organisation
- Slowing down to speed up

The OSLP evolves in conversation with the alumni – the programme today is different, in many ways, to the initial iterations in the 1980s. Leadership challenges change over time. However, the human centred aspect of leadership, described in the four points above, has always been at the centre of what we do. Rather than approach those challenges directly, OSLP participants engage with experts and thinkers from Oxford from a broad array of disciplines. They offer new perspectives and experiences that challenge, provoke different thinking and, combined with the tutorial method that is central to the programme, leave participants with renewed confidence and capability. In May 2022, we ran the OSLP for the first time since the pandemic. In what follows, we discuss how the faculty that we worked with provided new sources of inspiration for dealing with each of the four leadership challenges.



# Leading in uncharted territory

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That the world is uncertain and complex is so common to leadership literature as to sound clichéd. However, for many of the leaders that we interviewed the COVID-19 pandemic was the most profound experience of uncertainty in their careers. One of our interviewees, a CEO in an Indian manufacturing organisation, described how it wasn't just the solutions, but the problems that had become unclear:

*'We know we're going to face problems that we don't yet recognise. So where leadership has to focus in the future, and the success of that leadership will depend on what things you're going to change **within** you. That is the change that will help you to change things **around** you.'*



Our interviewees also described the sense that the future was becoming less and less clear. Nonetheless, using the pandemic as an example, within the disruption lay the opportunity to experiment and rethink some of the assumptions that had underpinned their organisations in the past. By seizing these opportunities rather than seeking to return to pre-pandemic models, leaders felt that they were starting to shape the future. A charity CEO told us how the pandemic forced his team to think again about the way that they delivered services to the people who needed them:

*‘The pandemic unlocked huge opportunities but also created massive disruption. It has forced change that could have taken years to evolve. For example, by adopting a hybrid model rather than face to face meetings (which we had felt morally bound to offer), we have hugely reduced waiting times and costs.’*

During OSLP Margaret Heffernan drew on her own leadership experiences and the research she undertook for her book entitled ‘Uncharted’. She described how organisations can get blindsided by the search for efficiency, shaving a few minutes from a process here, or a few dollars from a budget there. This approach may be appropriate for managing complicated issues in a relatively stable environment, but it does not work for *complex* challenges, where the dynamics are shifting, and patterns are emergent. With Margaret, we were able to discuss what strategising for a complex world looks like, how to embed experimentation within busy, stretched organisations, and how to make space for the small changes that might make a big difference.



How do leaders adapt when they feel they are bombarded by new and more complex problems at an increasing pace? One way that we approach this challenge on the OSLP is through the lens of improvisation, with our colleagues Lizzie Palmer and Rob Poynton. In experiential exercises, they demonstrate the art of noticing and experimenting *in the moment*. These are practices that have lasting impact.

A technology leader from the finance sector described learning to manage uncertainty using these ideas and, in doing so, 'getting comfortable with being uncomfortable'.

Another CEO from the energy sector reminded us how this sense of uncertainty is growing. The need to improvise in uncharted territories is increasingly fundamental to the role of leadership:

*'The unknown is unlimited and the only way to go to the unknown is to improvise'*



# The growing scope of leadership

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Unsurprisingly, with more complexity comes the sense that the scope and span of the leadership role is becoming wider and more challenging. One of the biggest shifts over recent years has been an increased focus on an organisation's role in society. Leaders need to be more mindful that their role is not just a financial or functional one but, as one of our interviewees put it, they are part of a 'wider game':

*'The game is urgent and demanding. Leaders need to make time to step away and to gain the strategic perspective to see that we're playing a part in a much wider game. We need to look for a broader impact for our work.'*

This requires, as one interviewee, a Surgeon General from the Middle East described, a more ambitious perspective on the real role of leadership:

*'New leaders have to understand that they don't live for themselves. They don't work only for their organization, but they have to think more globally, to grasp the bigger picture. Leadership is a transcendent experience: we should go beyond doing things for our business, our department, our hospital.'*



This sentiment was echoed by one of our survey respondents who described the kind of capabilities that leaders need to develop to manage this larger scope:

*'[Leaders need] critical thinking, strategic creativity, the ability to think beyond the "now" to understand the impact of one's decisions in the future, the ability and capability to think and act beyond one's personal self and instead consider others. Intellectual capability must be matched by moral and ethical conscientiousness.'*

This 'moral and ethical conscientiousness' involves managing tensions, between profit and societal impact, between building an efficient organisation in the present and evolving the culture for the future. A CEO in the retail and real estate industry talked about his sense that leadership is a 'far greater job' than it was earlier in his career:

*'It is a far greater job than it was before because it involves many different elements, especially if you take as part of the responsibility, culture and sustainability, equity and inclusion, things beyond profit and loss. It totally changes the job.'*



Such tensions are what our colleague, the psychologist and leadership coach Jon Stokes refers to as 'leading in the swamp'. The focus of his work is to bring the personal and contextual together. He helps leaders to think about how they use their unique history, experience, and capability together to navigate the kind of tensions that our interviewees described. Rather than provide answers or step-by-step guides to managing 'in the swamp' he encourages leaders to shift their perspective on their own discomfort. In his words 'if you're not uncomfortable, then you're not leading'. This realisation that every leader is struggling is a powerful one for some participants, as described by the CEO of an NGO:

*'We all take a peculiar and particular path to leadership – exploratory, often accidental rather than planned. You arrive without knowing what you don't know but with a particular history to reflect back on. I got confidence from the fact we all had peculiar journeys but there was a commonality amongst us. It validated my day-to-day approach where I often felt uncertain, faced with rapid change. To hear that "the swamp" was the place of leadership was validating – it's not about heroic leadership.'*





# Putting humans at the centre of the organisation

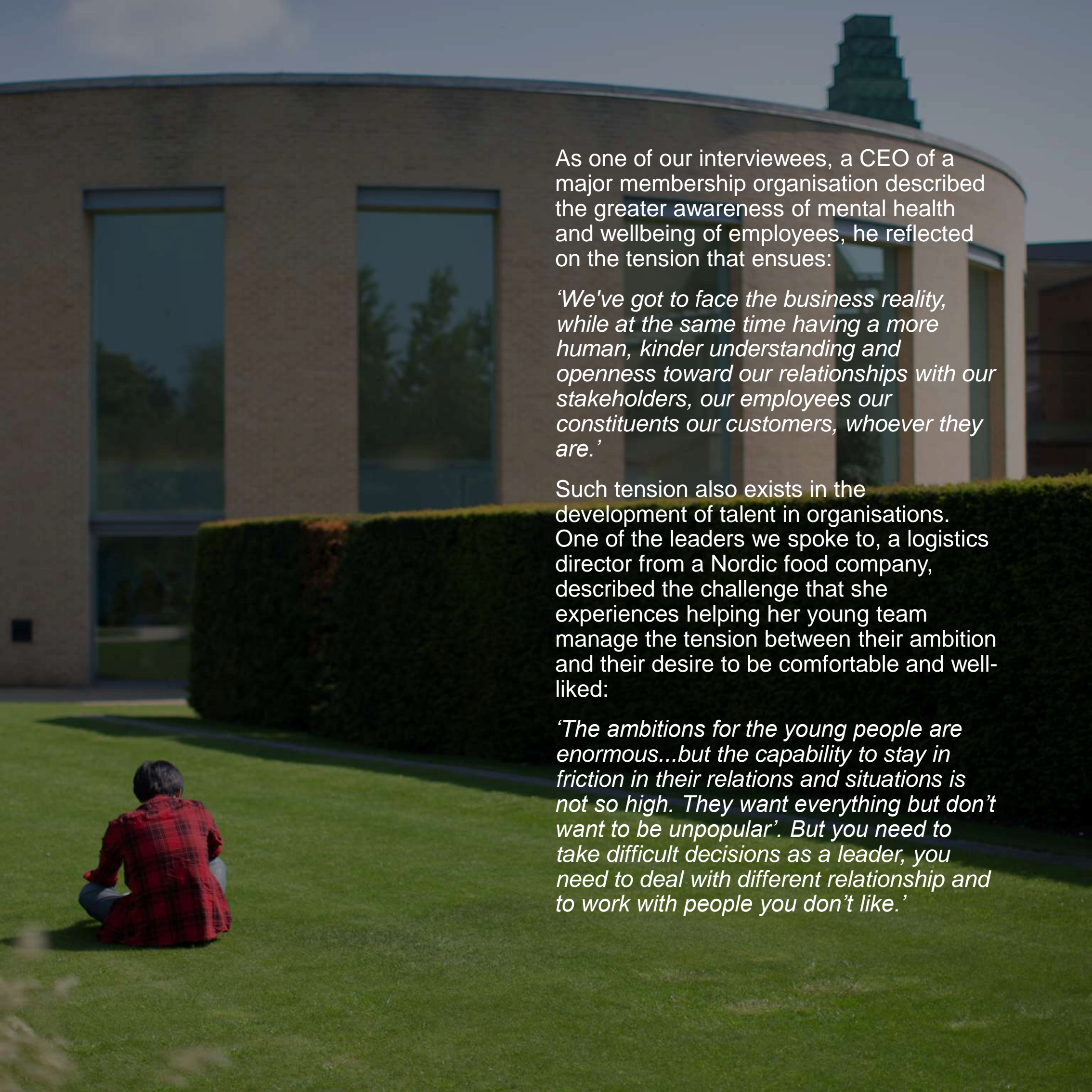
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Leadership has always been about people and statements about people being ‘our greatest asset’ are commonplace. However, many of our interviewees described the way that living through the pandemic, and the virtual working that it entailed, made leadership more ‘human’ than it had been before. This shift was described by a leader in the property sector:

*‘In the past, I don't think it was ever really about people to the level it should have been, it was about targets and KPIs... Now it's about mental health, it's about people having the balance right in their life.’*





A person wearing a red and black plaid shirt is sitting cross-legged on a green lawn, facing away from the camera. In the background, there is a modern, curved building with large windows and a dark, tiered structure on the roof. The scene is set outdoors during the day.

As one of our interviewees, a CEO of a major membership organisation described the greater awareness of mental health and wellbeing of employees, he reflected on the tension that ensues:

*'We've got to face the business reality, while at the same time having a more human, kinder understanding and openness toward our relationships with our stakeholders, our employees our constituents our customers, whoever they are.'*

Such tension also exists in the development of talent in organisations. One of the leaders we spoke to, a logistics director from a Nordic food company, described the challenge that she experiences helping her young team manage the tension between their ambition and their desire to be comfortable and well-liked:

*'The ambitions for the young people are enormous...but the capability to stay in friction in their relations and situations is not so high. They want everything but don't want to be unpopular'. But you need to take difficult decisions as a leader, you need to deal with different relationship and to work with people you don't like.'*



Managing such tensions is part of the broader challenge of creating a sense of belonging, in which people feel able to experiment and can 'stay in friction', as our interviewee put it. In many cases, this is not secondary to the leader's work, it is core to the work, as described by a technology director from the finance sector:

*'The duty of care, is probably one of my top "must haves". It is at the heart of what you do...the sense of belonging, being part of our family is something that we have to work really hard at.'*

These topics were brought to life in the OSLP this year in different ways. Owen Eastwood, performance coach to world-leading teams, described the foundational role that belonging plays in sustaining high performance. One of the authors of this paper (TC) described her research with Sam Rockey (OSLP tutor) and Robin Dunbar (Professor of evolutionary psychology) into how leaders can create the conditions in which all employees can thrive. At the level of the individual, we weave energy and vitality into the programme through helping people to understand the science, to adopt new practices and giving them time to reflect. Early morning movement, whether in the gym or through Tai Chi on the lawn, is a way of bringing wellbeing into the programme.



There was a collective sense that this need to create and maintain a sense of belonging had become even more difficult in the post-COVID hybrid environment. A senior leader in government described the challenge she was having sustaining connection. Her experience was that, even as the scope of her role increased, her social connection was shrinking:

*'I've always been somebody who likes to make connections with individuals and find it easier to do that within physical space. With the actual presence of somebody you get signals that you simply can't get in this virtual environment. I just feel less connected to people, despite putting much more effort in. I'm finding it much harder to establish relationships. In some ways I feel like my leadership influence has shrunk somewhat.'*



# Slowing down to speed up

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It is accepted that the speed of change outstrips the learning capability of human mind. An academic leader we interviewed described the learning challenge that this presents:

*‘The speed at which we’re capturing and analysing data, I believe, has now exceeded the pace at which humans normally learn.’*

Leaders, meanwhile, experience a pace that they are struggling to keep up with and need to develop new ways of learning that make a virtue of the speed of change. As one of our interviewees put it

*‘We have to focus on the human being, how to deal with all the speed, how to connect up with the pace from outside and make it change the organisation.’*

Our response to the pace of change is often to try to learn faster, to make decisions quicker, and to do more. However, one of the things that our interviewees clearly appreciated was the way in which their OSLP experience was one of depth and reflection rather than an attempt to cram busy minds full of the latest on-trend business topics.

In May this year, Professor Ian Goldin welcomed attendees to ‘the slowest week of the rest of your life’, reflecting both the quickening pace of ongoing change and the unique opportunity the programme offered to step out of the speed-driven response mode and into a way of thinking that is more reflective and where discussions of philosophy can take precedence over technicalities.

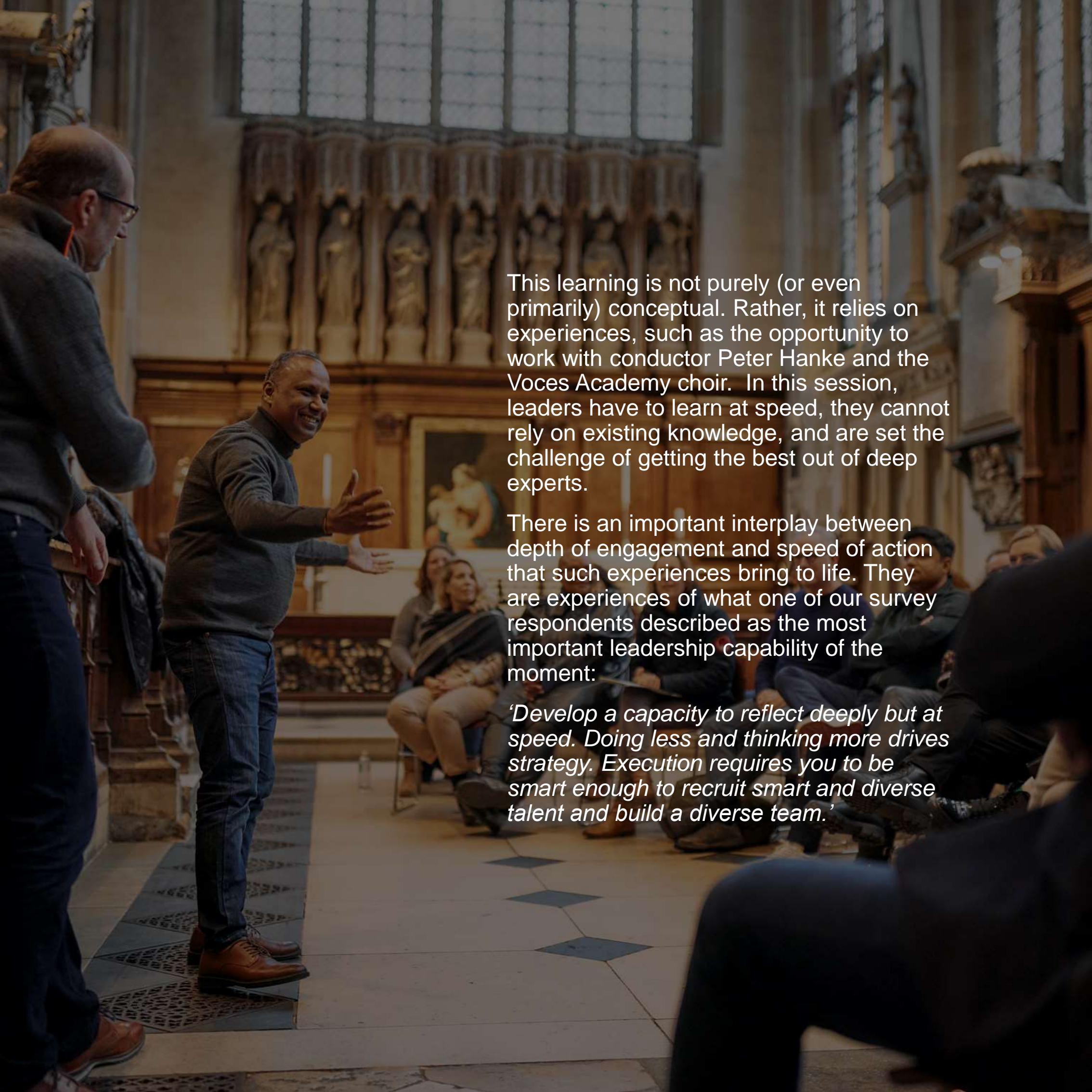


None of this is to say that the experience of OSLP is one of ‘retreat’ away from speed and complexity but rather one that affords leaders with the chance to apply wisdom before moving to action. The topics discussed are always broad and far-reaching but there is something about the willingness to stay with the challenge rather than to fly into solution mode that attendees find reassuring. One of our interviewees, a senior partner in a global law firm, described the day after the programme finished:

*‘I felt calm and at peace within myself. A sense of calm and strength is the way that I felt immediately after the programme.’*

Why would this be the case? One of the reasons, we think, is that in the absence of easy answers, we prioritise ways of thinking, seeing, and being. Sometimes the answer is to *slow down* and look deeper. Delegates in May 2022 worked with Chris Thorogood, the deputy director of the Oxford Botanical Gardens and a global expert on rare plant exploration. Stepping into his world, even momentarily, generated insights about the importance of deep engagement with what one can actually see, as opposed to relying on data and facts.





This learning is not purely (or even primarily) conceptual. Rather, it relies on experiences, such as the opportunity to work with conductor Peter Hanke and the Voces Academy choir. In this session, leaders have to learn at speed, they cannot rely on existing knowledge, and are set the challenge of getting the best out of deep experts.

There is an important interplay between depth of engagement and speed of action that such experiences bring to life. They are experiences of what one of our survey respondents described as the most important leadership capability of the moment:

*'Develop a capacity to reflect deeply but at speed. Doing less and thinking more drives strategy. Execution requires you to be smart enough to recruit smart and diverse talent and build a diverse team.'*

# Conclusion: cultivating the ‘inner polymath’

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Managing each of the challenges discussed in this article requires leaders to adapt their thinking and behaviour. As one of our survey respondents put it, leaders need to:

*‘Stay light on our feet: in the pandemic we had to pivot to homeworking almost overnight, achieving a speed of change and a tolerance for uncertainty that in “normal” times would have been almost unthinkable. We need to retain that propensity for movement.’*

The challenge, often discussed in tutor group conversations, is that senior leaders have often developed a repertoire of behaviours and ways of thinking that have served them well in their careers and been a significant factor in their growth. Drawing on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, theatre director Richard Olivier introduced leadership archetypes and the way that over-reliance on strengths (or in Shakespearian terms ‘rough magic’) can derail leaders. He gives leaders the chance to experience the discomfort of ‘putting new actors on stage’.

There are interesting paradoxes for leaders to manage. They need to accept the limitations in their capacity to learn and, at the same time, flexibly adapt to change. They need to engage broadly and bring good ideas from the edges of their organisations into the centre. At the same time, they need to know when to slow down and explore deeply. They need to know when to take ‘centre stage’ and practise the art of orchestration, creating space for the huge talent in their organisations to flourish. To manage these paradoxes, the OSLP invites participants into the world (or the mind) of the polymath, not in the sense of achievements but in attitude. It makes space for an expanded way of thinking and time to practise new ways of working. A leader in a supra-national finance institution describes the opportunities that arise from cultivating the ‘inner polymath’:

*‘There were diverse areas: issues that normally we do not immediately link to management, like learning from experiences that we can find in Shakespeare or how a music orchestra is led. We were exposed to new methods of working together as we approach managerial tasks, like building with Lego or even marshmallows – that’s how it’s different from most other programmes. Looking ‘left and right’ - and not only to the latest textbook for what we can take from other disciplines.’*





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