The Golden Thread

Executive Education Programme
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‘Alignment is not a destination. It is the golden thread held by the chief of staff in the face of an environment that never stays still.’

The Golden Thread

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Foreword

When Cohort 11 of the Chief of Staff Association's Executive Education Programme gathered in Oxford in the spring of 2026, the world outside was not standing still. Regional conflict in the Middle East, the accelerating rise of AI, and deepening questions about the purpose and trustworthiness of institutions were very much present in the room. Oxford University was not an antidote to any of this. But it served as a reminder of something important: that education and rigorous thinking have historically been among the most durable resources humanity uses to solve its hardest problems.

Oxford was, after all, where Howard Florey and Ernst Chain developed penicillin into a mass-produced medicine, where Richard Doll and Austin Bradford Hill established the link between smoking and lung cancer, and where the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine was developed in ten months to protect millions of lives. It is also the small limestone city where J.R.R. Tolkien and Iris Murdoch found their imaginations, and Malala Yousafzai expanded her career in activism. Despite its specific coordinates on the map, Oxford has a habit of sending currents felt across the world.

Programme Director Allyson Stewart-Allen and Academic Director Jonathan Trevor designed the week around four disciplines: environment scanning, transforming, aligning and influencing. Each day built on the one before it, moving from the external landscape inward, from the macro forces reshaping the world of business to the specific tools, frameworks and leadership instincts that chiefs of staff can bring home and act on. In the language of this report, the journey moved from reading the environment clearly, to shaping the conditions for strategy to hold, to leading with authority and influence.

What follows captures that journey: the key ideas, the frameworks, the voices of the faculty, and the responses of the cohort. What it cannot capture is the atmosphere of collegiality that I experienced first-hand, or the impact of special guest speakers on those present; Dr Jo Salter MBE, one of the RAF's first female fast jet pilots; John Amaechi OBE, organisational psychologist and former NBA player; and Sam White, former Chief of Staff to Sir Keir Starmer.

The world and its challenges do not stand still. If anything, the events of March 2026, made a programme designed to support and elevate leaders feel more timely and necessary.

Trenth Smyth AM
Chief Executive Officer



Introduction

This report is written for two audiences who, at their best, work as one.

The first is the chief of staff, the person closest to leadership, operating at the intersection of strategy and execution, influence and accountability. The second is the principal, the CEO, founder or senior leader who relies on that partnership to navigate an environment that rarely stays still long enough to be planned for with total confidence.

What follows is drawn from five days at Oxford University, where Cohort 11 of the Chief of Staff Association's Executive Education Programme gathered in March 2026.

The week brought together chiefs of staff from across sectors and geographies, working with some of the world's leading thinkers on purpose, strategy, alignment, culture, AI governance and leadership. The articles in this report distil the ideas that emerged from that week, not only as a record of what was taught, but as an attempt to make those ideas useful to anyone in or around the chief of staff role, whether or not they were took part.

The report has two key lenses. The first asks chiefs of staff to look outward, at the forces reshaping the world of business, at the question of what organisations are actually for, and at the limits of conventional planning in conditions that resist prediction. The second lens is fixed on the organisation itself, the cultural assumptions that shape behaviour below the surface, the alignment gaps that undermine good strategy, and the AI governance questions that all leaders must address.

Throughout, a single argument runs: that the chief of staff role is not a support function—it is a strategic one. The person in that role is often the first to see where the thread between intention and reality is fraying as well as the best placed to hold it together. For principals reading this report, that is an argument for investing in the role and the people who hold it. For chiefs of staff, it is a reminder of what the work is actually for.

The ideas here belong to the faculty who taught them, the researchers who developed them, and the cohort members who tested them against their own experiences. The report is an attempt to bring those ideas to a wider audience, and to make the case, clearly and without exaggeration, that in these uncertain times, the work described in these pages is not optional. It is how the chief of staff and principal will help their organisation stay the course.

Henry Martin
Editorial Manager



Business has changed. Have you?

You might think the question 'what is a business for?' involves a complex answer.

Historically, this hasn't been the case.

In the 1950s, Peter Drucker proposed that business existed to create and keep a customer, not to amass profit, which was just an outcome or part measure of business success.[1]

In the 1970s, Milton Friedman wrote that its purpose was to increase profits legally and within the rules of fair competition. Friedman's model, which actively negated social or environmental responsibility, defined corporate governance for a generation and many boards still operate in this mode.[2]

By 1984, R. Edward Freeman made a different case. His stakeholder theory argued that a business should create value not just for shareholders, but for all stakeholders including employees, customers, suppliers, communities and investors. His position did not argue against profit: it argued that profit at the expense of the stakeholder was ethically insufficient and strategically short-sighted. [3]

The debate between shareholder (Friedman) and stakeholder (Freeman) business models continues today, but the historical moment has moved on, not least in an era defined by climate emergency, disproportionate wealth divide, demographic changes and a shifting economic leaderboard.

In 2019, the US Business Roundtable (representing 181 of the largest companies in the US) adopted Freeman's model, conceptually at least. In the UK, the British Academy Future of the Corporation programme (chaired by Professor Colin Mayer CBE) ran from 2017 to 2020 with a more detailed proposition building on Freeman:

> *'We use the term "purposeful business" to summarise a system in which the purpose of business is creating profitable solutions for problems of people and planet, and not profiting from creating problems.'* [4]

As a thought experiment, you might ask which model your organisation works within and what the role of a chief of staff might be in this dialogue. You also might question whether the Friedman and Freeman models need be mutually exclusive? Can we profit our shareholders, people and planet at the same time, even if governments, regulators, investors and customers are not making us directly accountable?

This was a key prompt delivered by Professor Mayer to chiefs of staff at the CSA's Executive Education Programme. The purpose of business, whatever theories you subscribe to, has changed. Have you changed with it?

The gap between intention and reality

Most organisations take pride in publishing their values in corporate

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[1] Drucker, P.F., *The Practice of Management* (Harper and Row, New York, 1954)
[2] Friedman, M., 'The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits', *The New York Times Magazine* (13 September 1970)
[3] Freeman, R.E., *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (Pitman Publishing, Boston, 1984. Republished by Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[4] The British Academy, *Policy and Practice for Purposeful Business* (The British Academy, London, 2021) p. 6.

communications and strategy. But how are these values embedded in organisational execution and operations?

The gap between what a business says it stands for, and what it rewards and does, is acutely visible from the chief of staff's position.

Chiefs of staff are close enough to leadership to observe the conversations that result in decisions being made, and close enough to the organisation to see how these decisions play out. Often, as a proxy for the principal, the chief of staff is directly tasked to monitor the ways in which actions adhere to stated values.

In his session at Oxford, to help chiefs of staff in this undertaking, Mayer introduced the cohort to the S.C.O.R.E framework.[5] Devised by Rupert Younger for the Enacting Purpose Initiative (where Mayer is co-chair), S.C.O.R.E. was developed to help boards, senior stakeholders and shareholders ensure that purpose is enacted in practice.

The framework has five elements: Simplify, Connect, Own, Reward and Exemplify. Each one addresses a different place where purpose tends to drift from intention to reality. Is your purpose simple enough for everyone to understand and act on? Is it connected to every decision the organisation makes? Does the board genuinely own it? Are the behaviours that advance it being rewarded and measured? And does leadership exemplify it, including when things go wrong?

For a chief of staff each of these five elements represents a place where the gap between intention and reality can surreptitiously begin to stretch, and where early and honest intervention can prevent it from widening.

This might mean auditing whether incentive structures genuinely reward the behaviours the organisation claims to value. Or it might mean clarifying to your principal, privately and clearly, when their decision pulls against the organisation's stated purpose. This will be familiar to chiefs of staff who are accustomed to asking the question that nobody else in the room wants to voice, particularly when short-term pressure starts to push long-term commitment aside.

Participants in our cohort found Mayer's session on the purpose of business clarifying and practically useful. One described it in terms of how it changed their day-to-day thinking:

> *'This session gave a really clear perspective on what purpose means in practice, not just as a concept. It made me think more carefully about how decisions connect back to a bigger direction.'*

This shift, from purpose as an abstract value to purpose as a lens for evaluating individual decisions, is where the chief of staff's role becomes tangible and necessary for their principal. Another participant described the direct impact on their work with their CEO:

> *'Mayer's brilliant take on the purpose of business really hit home. It has given me the tools to bring more depth to my work, allowing me better to support my principal through more informed and critical thinking.'*

What is striking about this response is not its enthusiasm, but the practical application of S.C.O.R.E. in the CoS-principal partnership. Taking concepts and turning them into practices is what CSA executive education is designed to do. Information is good and beneficial. But reorientation is equally powerful, and practical tools especially so.

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[5] Mayer, C., Eccles, R. and Younger, R., *Enacting Purpose within the Modern Corporation* (The Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance, September 2020)

Using the S.C.O.R.E. framework is not the work itself; it's a tool for providing the insight that an organisation and principal need for estimating where their operations are succeeding (or flagging) with respect to their stated mission and purpose (here we might return to the purpose of business set out above).

The S.C.O.R.E. framework also gives the chief of staff a rigorous approach to assessing drift; it can be used at multiple times during their principal's tenure to track improvements (or regressions) and gives the chief of staff a language, or way of defending their findings to the principal, shareholders, board and wider employees.

'The S.C.O.R.E. framework can be used at multiple times during their principal's tenure to track improvements (or regressions) and gives the chief of staff a language, or way of defending their findings to the principal.'

The limits of forecasting

Aligning business purposes with day-to-day operations is important. Understanding the conditions in which your business operates is equally so, given that one may impact the other. These conditions, however, are constantly shifting, and becoming harder to read by conventional means.

Climate emergency; regional conflict in the Middle East; global trade protectionism; volatile energy and commodity markets; disrupted supply chains; retaliatory tariff wars; inflation; technological disruption; AI—this menu of risk and uncertainty is one that every organisation must reluctantly choose from if they have not done so already.

The Oxford cohort had the opportunity to address this under the guidance of Dr Cho Khong, who opened his session *Navigating Uncertainty and Scenario Planning* with a distinction that many in the room had not fully considered before: there is a fundamental difference between risk and uncertainty.

Risk is calculable. It has historical precedent, a probability curve and a range of known outcomes. Uncertainty has none of these things. It is genuinely unknown, not just difficult to measure but impossible to model from existing data.

Most corporate scenario planning treats uncertainty as if it were a risk. But this, Khong argued, is one of the most common and costly mistakes leadership teams make. Khong impressed on his audience that they operate in turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous (TUNA) conditions that cannot be mitigated by a risk assessment.

Instead, a different model is needed: the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach (OSPA). Originally developed by Khong's colleagues Rafael Ramírez and Angela Wilkinson in their book *Strategic Reframing: The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach* (2016), the OSPA strategy enables strategists to become more capable and flexible thinkers who can frame future contexts to strengthen leadership judgement for when crises emerge.[6] The goal here is not to predict,

[6] Ramírez, R., and Wilkinson, A. *Strategic Reframing: the Oxford scenario planning approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

but to prepare. A chief of staff, despite their principal's wishes, does not have a crystal ball to turn to. But they can develop the mindset to prepare for when a crisis emerges.

Put another way, in TUNA conditions, a single-point forecast is not just unreliable, it creates a false sense of security that can leave an organisation dangerously exposed when reality diverges from the plan, which, in a TUNA environment, it reliably will. The question is not whether your forecast will be wrong. It is whether your organisation is built to survive being wrong. This distinction between forecasting and scenario planning landed clearly with participants. One put it simply:

> *'I didn't understand the difference between scenarios and a forecast before Khong's teaching, but now I am able to differentiate the two terms.'*

This might sound like a modest insight, but its implications are meaningful. The moment a leadership team stops asking 'what *will* happen?' and starts asking 'what *could* happen and are we *ready* for it?' the quality of strategic conversation changes considerably.

For a chief of staff, that shift in question is often the difference between a leadership team that is merely reactive and backfooted, or one that is agile and prepared.

Building multiple futures

Specifically, OSPA asks chiefs of staff to construct several plausible versions of a scenario and then test their strategy against each one. The method works by identifying two high-impact, highly uncertain driving forces, and plotting them against each other on a two-by-two matrix. The result is four divergent but coherent scenarios, each representing a different possible world. The organisation then asks: does our strategy hold up across all four? If it only works in one, it is fragile. If it holds across all four, it is resilient.

Shell's use of scenario planning, one of the most cited examples in the field, shows that organisations willing to think in multiple futures are better placed to respond when circumstances change dramatically.[7] The value is not necessarily in predicting which scenario will emerge. It is having thought through the implications of each one before the pressure switch is activated.

Crucially, as Shell demonstrates, this scenario planning allows leaders to challenge assumptions about the future, as well as to generate ideas for fixing problems today.

For chiefs of staff, this approach has immediate practical applications. Much of the role involves helping a principal make decisions under conditions of incomplete information and time pressures. Scenario planning does not eliminate these pressures: it reduces the number of decisions that must be made from scratch in the middle of a crisis, because the thinking has already been done. One participant described exactly this dynamic:

> *'As an organisation, we've explored forecasting and worst case events, but we've stopped short of building multiple, coherent scenarios. Implementing this session's takeaways will help me answer key questions around balancing long-term initiatives with short-term reactive responses to our contextual factors and inevitable surprises.'*

[7] Bentham, J., 'The scenario approach to possible futures for oil and natural gas', *Energy Policy*, Volume 64, 2014, pages 87-92.

The phrase ‘inevitable surprises’ is worth pausing on. It captures something important about the chief of staff's role in strategic planning: that part of the job is helping the organisation prepare for things it cannot yet name, so that when they arrive the response is considered rather than reactive.

What distinguished Khong's session, by many accounts, was its practical immediacy. The methodology was taught through application, participants working in small groups to build scenarios relevant to their own organisations and sectors. For some, that shift from abstract framework to live exercise was where the real learning happened:

> *‘I absolutely loved the scenario planning with Prof. Khong. The hands-on exercises were incredibly effective and allowed for a complete shift in how I approach future-thinking. It was one of the most practical and thought-provoking sessions of the programme.’*

This response points to something broader about how chiefs of staff engage with new thinking. The chief of staff role is inherently applied.

Frameworks, such as S.C.O.R.E., or the TUNA mindset, earn their place when they can be picked up and used immediately. Scenario planning, done well, is exactly that kind of tool: rigorous enough to be credible in a boardroom, flexible enough to be adapted to almost any organisational context.

Taken together, Mayer and Khong make a complementary argument. Mayer asks whether your organisation knows what it is for. Khong asks whether it knows what it is heading into. Both questions sit at the heart of what it means to read the environment clearly and both land directly in the chief of staff's territory. Not because the chief of staff owns the answers, but because they are often the person best placed to ensure the right questions are being asked. In a world that does not stay still long enough to be forecast, S.C.O.R.E. and OSPA are valuable tools for preparing for all weathers.



What lies beneath

Often in mainstream media there are headlines and articles that a chief of staff is uniquely positioned to decipher.

The coverage is carefully worded, neutral in tone, informational and dispassionate: so cool it's the literary equivalent of a blanket snuffing out a fire.

In December 2025, Apple announced the departure of four senior leaders within a single week, spanning the departments of artificial intelligence, design, legal affairs and environmental policy.[8] Earlier that year, its Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer had both stepped back from their roles. Apple's response was consistent: these were long-planned successions, orderly transitions and strategic decisions.

That framing may be entirely accurate but a chief of staff reading the pattern—the scale, the speed, the breadth of functions affected—might be forgiven for thinking differently. Beyond the example of Apple, when an organisation loses senior leaders across multiple critical functions in quick succession, we might ask if we are seeing just the tip of the iceberg? This is territory that Professor Sue Dopson mapped at Oxford in her session *Culture, Change and Leadership*.

Using the metaphor of the iceberg for company culture, Dopson suggested that glancing at the tip of the iceberg (as one might glance at a headline) only reveals the smallest amount of information. Her prompt to chiefs of staff is: be the glaciologist,map the breadth and shape of what lies beneath.

Below the waterline

Dopson opened her session by making a claim that most organisations would rather not confront.

Culture is not a soft, HR-driven concept. It is the ultimate risk factor to strategic execution.

The frameworks, dashboards and meeting structures that organisations tend to most carefully are, in cultural terms, not particularly important.

The intellectual forerunner to her argument is the work of Edgar Henry Schein, organisational psychologist and professor emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Schein's *Organisational Culture and Leadership* (1985) transformed the abstract concept of culture into a practical tool that managers and students have continually used to better understand the dynamics of organisations and change.[9] His three-tiered model of organisational culture is still used by managers today and divides organisational culture into three levels.

The first is artefacts, the visible, tangible elements of an organisation. These include architecture, technology, office layout, dress code, visible or audible behaviour patterns, and public documents such as employee orientation handbooks.

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[8] The executives who departed or announced their departure in late 2025 included John Giannandrea (Senior Vice President, Machine Learning and AI Strategy), Kate Adams (General Counsel), Lisa Jackson (Vice President, Environment, Policy and Social Initiatives), Alan Dye (Vice President, Human Interface Design), Jeff Williams (Chief Operating Officer) and Luca Maestri (Chief Financial Officer). Sources: *Fortune*, *CNN Business* and *TechCrunch.*

[9] *Poulose, C.,* 'Identifying Major Obstacles Impacting Strategy Execution in Large-Scale and Small-Scale Organizations in the U.S.', *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management*, Volume 14, Number 10, (October 2024).

The second level is espoused values: the stated beliefs, mission statements, and leadership principles that organisations articulate about themselves. Then there is what lies beneath both: basic underlying assumptions.These are the unconscious, deeply ingrained beliefs about how to survive and succeed within the organisation.

These are not written down anywhere.They are absorbed over time, passed between colleagues, reinforced through behaviour and rarely questioned. They are also, in Schein's framework and in the iceberg, where culture lives.

Most people in an organisation operate at or near the surface, managing artefacts, communicating espoused values and executing visible strategy.

The chief of staff, by virtue of their proximity to the principal and their cross-functional visibility, is one of the few people who moves between levels.

They are in the room when decisions are made, and in the corridor when the reaction to those decisions plays out.

They see both the tip of the iceberg and, if they are paying close attention, what lies beneath. That positioning is both an advantage and a responsibility. The advantage is visibility and the responsibility is honesty: are you willing to name what is seen, even when it is uncomfortable to do so?

'You are not a neutral observer of organisational culture. You are part of it. Your own behaviour, the stories told about you... shapes the cultural landscape you are trying to read and influence.'

Your subculture problem

One of the most useful insights from Dopson's session was a direct challenge to a common assumption: that an organisation has a single, coherent culture. It does not.

Organisations are, instead, made up of subcultures: distinct groups with their own histories, priorities and ways of making sense of leadership messages. What lands as inspiring in one part of the business may land as threatening in another. What reads as clarity in the commercial team may read as rigidity by research and development teams. A leadership message that resonates with data-driven teams may leave relationship-driven teams cold.

Much of the chief of staff role involves translating between the principal and the organisation, between functions that speak different professional languages, between the intention behind a decision and the way it lands.

Dopson put it plainly: chiefs of staff must change their language according to the different cultures and stake-holders they are appealing to. Deliver data to data people. Deliver emotion to relationship people. Adopting this method is not a form of manipulation. It is a leadership communication strategy.

We all come to work with what Dopson called a social backpack: the accumulated experiences, assumptions and identity that each person carries into the organisation. A chief of staff who ignores the contents of those backpacks, and treats the organisation as a single unified culture, will consistently misunderstand why good strategies stall and why well-intentioned changes meet resistance. The latter, Dopson suggests,

is rarely irrational. It is almost always cultural.

Participants found this dimension of the session particularly resonant. One noted:

> *'As an anthropology student in my undergraduate studies, I appreciated Prof. Dopson's session very much because learning to see culture from this lens can be transformative. Culture is hard to change but we can start with subcultures and influence.'*

Another described a more personal reckoning, directly related to the chief of staff role at their organisation:

> *'Prof. Dopson opened my eyes to the fact that there will always be stories and myths about my leadership, and it is important for me to understand that problems are never stagnant [and] to preserve and prioritise some organisational culture that is important to team alignment.'*

That second response points to something relevant that not every chief of staff has the space to reflect upon. As a chief of staff, you are not a neutral observer of organisational culture. You are part of it. Your own behaviour, the stories told about you, the assumptions others have formed about you and your role—all of this shapes the cultural landscape you are trying to read and influence.

Awareness of this dynamic is not a soft skill you can hone slowly, or move down on the priority list.

It is part of your discipline as a leader to understand the space you occupy.

Dopson put this more directly: 'Pay attention to what you're paying attention to.' If you are a chief of staff only looking at the tip of the iceberg, at the artefacts, you are allowing the organisation's deeper assumptions to continue to shape behaviour unchecked. This provocation appealed to several students:

> *'Prof. Dopson's culture framework illuminated new, interesting aspects of my work — both to celebrate and to adjust. Working in pairs for an extended conversation really supported this learning. I also found the top leader challenges somewhat cathartic to review.'*

That word, cathartic, is worth unpacking.

Understanding culture honestly, including your own role within it,requires a degree of self-awareness that can be uncomfortable. But it is also clarifying.

The chief of staff who can see below the waterline, who understands the assumptions driving behaviour, who reads the subcultures accurately, who names what others will not, is not just a better cultural observer, they are a more effective strategic partner for their leader.

The leader as architect

Management literature has long been drawn to heroic narratives of leadership. Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) established the philosophical foundation.[10] James MacGregor Burns's

[10] Carlyle, T., Kinser, B.E. and Sorensen, D.R., *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)



Leadership (1978), and Bernard Bass's subsequent work on transformational and charismatic leadership, then built an influential academic framework around the exceptional leader who elevates and transforms those around them.[11] Critics have noted that this tradition exaggerates the heroic leadership bias, and that the dangers can be considerable, particularly when a leader's vision is intentionally misleading or when followers lack the psychological safety to push back.[12]

Dopson offered a quieter and more useful reframe: leaders are not heroes; they are architects, judged not on their own performance but on how well the people around them are working together.

That distinction matters particularly for chiefs of staff, whose influence operates without formal authority.

Cultural impact, rather than positional power, is often the primary lever available to chiefs of staff, who need to operate across the organisation's hierarchy, even if it claims it doesn't have one.

Returning to Apple: the company may well be right that its leadership changes were planned, orderly and strategically sound. The official narrative may be sincere. But the chief of staff's instinct to look beyond the surface explanation, to ask what the pattern reveals, is precisely the kind of thinking that Dopson's session was designed to sharpen.

Culture is not a problem to be solved. It is a condition to be understood, tended to, and when necessary, honestly challenged. The chief of staff cannot fix it from the outside. But they can be the person who sees clearly what others cannot or will not see. In the right moment, for growth and stability, this is exactly what a chief of staff is called on to do.

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[11] Burns, J.M., *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). See also Bass, B.M. and Riggio, R.E., *Transformational Leadership*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[12] Eaton, L., Bridgman, T., & Cummings, S., 'Advancing the democratization of work: A new intellectual history of transformational leadership theory', *Leadership*, Volume 20, Number 3 (2024)



The golden thread

Most organisations do not have a strategy problem. They have an alignment problem.

Research by Donald Sull and colleagues at MIT Sloan School of Management found that two-thirds to three-quarters of large organisations struggle to implement their strategies.

A separate survey of more than 400 global chief executives identified execution as the number one challenge facing corporate leaders across Asia, Europe and the United States (placing before innovation, geopolitical instability, and top-line growth).[13] The problem, in almost every case, is not the quality of thought, but the distance between the strategy or intent, and the work or execution.

Professor Jonathan Trevor gives this 'distance' a name. He calls it misalignment and argues that it is the silent killer of good strategy.

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The metaphor of the golden thread has a long history.

In literature, mythology and philosophy it describes the single continuous line that holds a complex structure together: the thread you follow to find your way through the labyrinth, or the connecting principle that gives disparate elements their coherence.

In management, it has come to mean something specific: the unbroken line between what an organisation intends to do and what it actually does, at every level, in every function, every day. For Trevor another name for the golden thread is 'strategic alignment' and it builds the bridge between strategy and execution.

Strategic alignment is the deliberate arrangement of an enterprise's core value drivers including purpose, strategy, capabilities, people, culture, structure, processes and systems. These all work together to drive performance and enhance enterprise qualities. As a value chain, the values are linked and cannot be treated separately. Each link depends on the one before it and the business is only as strong as its weakest link.

Most organisations invest considerable effort in the first two links—articulating purpose and designing strategy—but less in ensuring that the organisation and its people are genuinely configured to deliver them. The result is what Trevor describes as driving with the handbrake on.

Your organisation's destination is clear. Your intent is genuine. But your organisation is burning fuel, talent, and capital without generating forward momentum.

For a chief of staff, this image is immediately recognisable. The experience of watching a well-designed strategy lose traction (not

[13] Sull, D., Homkes, R. and Sull, C., 'Why Strategy Execution Unravels and What to Do About It', *Harvard Business Review* (March 2015).

because it was wrong, but because the organisation was not aligned to deliver it) is one of the most common and frustrating experiences of the role.

The alignment trap

Organisations and their chiefs of staff crave alignment to function well. That said, when achieved, all stakeholders should be wary of an alignment trap.

An alignment trap occurs, not when an organisation is poorly aligned, but when it becomes too well aligned, rigidly configured around a strategy that once worked but no longer fits the environment it is operating in.

The history of business is full of organisations that fell into the alignment trap. Nokia dominated the mobile phone market until its internal alignment around hardware engineering and existing product logic made it structurally unable to respond when the smartphone shifted the competitive ground entirely.[14] Kodak understood digital photography earlier than most (its engineers invented the digital camera in 1975) but their deep (and profitable) loyalty to chemical film meant they did not want to cannibalise their existing business model. By the time they eventually re-aligned to focus on digital, their competitors had the market share. [15] These are not failures of vision. They are failures of realignment.

Trevor's framework asks a direct question of every organisation: is your structure configured to deliver your current strategy or your historical one? The two are often different. And the gap between them widens quietly, through incremental decisions, legacy resource allocation, and the natural human tendency to protect what has worked before.

This is where the chief of staff's role becomes most consequential and possibly uncomfortable. Naming misalignment requires a degree of courage that cuts across hierarchy, function and legacy interests. It means telling a commercial leader that their team's structure is not configured for the strategy they are being asked to execute.

It means raising a flag when the people plan and the strategic plan are pointing in different directions. It means holding the strategy as the objective standard against which everything else is measured, rather than allowing it to be negotiated away by competing priorities.

Trevor was direct about this in the session. The chief of staff's job, in moments of misalignment, is to depersonalise the conflict. The question is 'not who is right?' It is 'what does the strategy require?'

Participants recognised this immediately. One said:

> *'This was one of the strongest sessions of the programme. Very clear, and directly applicable to how I think about alignment in my role. It brought everything together in a way that made sense immediately.'*

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[14] Lamberg, J-A., Lubinaitė, S., Ojala, J. and Tikkanen, H., 'The curse of agility: The Nokia Corporation and the loss of market dominance in mobile phones, 2003–2013' *Business History,* Volume 63, Number 4 (2019).

[15] Doz, Y., and Kosonen, M., *Fast Strategy: How strategic agility will help you stay ahead of the game* (Pennsylvania: Wharton School Publishing, 2007). See also Estrin, James, 'Kodak's First Digital Moment' *The New York Times*, 12 August 2015.

Another described the personal impact:

> *'Prof. Trevor offered a clear, practical framework for organisational alignment without oversimplifying the complex and perpetual nature of this work. It is exactly what I was looking for in joining this programme. I also appreciated the intellectual honesty, the reframe around our roles as alignment officers, and the common challenges across our cohort.'*

That phrase, 'alignment officer', direct from the front lines, is worth dwelling on.

The chief alignment officer

Trevor made a specific claim in his session that reframes the chief of staff role in a meaningful way: 'Chiefs of staff are systems leaders. You get to operate at an enterprise level when relatively few leaders do.'

Most leadership roles are defined by their domain: the CFO owns the numbers; the CMO owns the brand; the COO owns delivery. The chief of staff owns none of these things directly, and that, paradoxically, is what makes the role so well suited to the work of alignment. The chief of staff moves across the whole organisation. They see the connections (and disconnections) that functional leaders, by virtue of their specific remit, may not.

Research from MIT Sloan School of Management found that even when senior leaders believe strategic alignment is strong within their own teams, the picture across the organisation is starkly different.

In one study, 97% of senior leaders said they had a clear understanding of the company's priorities, yet when middle managers were asked the same question, the results told a very different story at 28%.[16]

The gap between what leadership believes is aligned and what is actually aligned on the ground is one of the most consistent findings in the strategy execution literature.The chief of staff, sitting at the intersection of the executive office and the broader organisation, is often the first person to see that gap clearly.

This is what Trevor means by systems leadership. It is not about authority. It is about perspective: the capacity to hold the whole enterprise in view and notice where the golden thread is fraying or lost.

This work is never finished.

Trevor used a quietly powerful image to describe the nature of alignment: the search for the perfect blossom.

The perfect blossom exists, briefly and beautifully, and then the conditions change and the search must begin again.

—

Alignment is not a destination. It is the golden thread held by the chief of staff in the face of an environment that never stays still.

The chief of staff who implements Trevor's framework, who can read where the thread is strong and where it is fraying, and who has the honesty and the skill to name what they see, is doing some of the most valuable work an organisation can ask of any leader. The golden thread is easy to lose. The chief of staff's job is to hold it.

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[16] Sull, D., Sull, C., and Yoder, J., 'No One Knows Your Strategy, Not Even Your Top Leaders' *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 12 February 2018

Do the right thing



There is a question that every organisation adopting agentic AI will eventually have to answer, not just for regulators or auditors, but for itself.

The question isn't 'Does this AI function work? Nor is it 'Are we legally compliant?' It's 'Do we understand what this system is doing, who it affects, and are we in control of it?' For most organisations the honest answer at present is, quite simply, a solid 'No'.

The risk of adopting AI poorly has a high probability and is typically (despite adoption speed and need) under-discussed.

This tension was at the fore of Dr Johann Laux's session at Oxford.

Laux, a Departmental Research Lecturer in AI, Government and Policy at Oxford's Internet Institute, suggested that the chief of staff can be a key player in ensuring oversight of AI adoption, and assessing the balance between business need and unforeseen outcomes.

The problem with 'human in the loop'

The standard reassurance offered when AI governance is questioned is that there is a human in the loop. A human will review the output. A human will make the final call. The algorithm recommends, the human decides. Laux challenges this approach directly, not because human oversight is wrong in principle, but because the way it is typically implemented does not reflect how humans behave.

When a decision feels routine, people tend to trust what an AI system tells them without much scrutiny (automation bias), particularly when they are busy or tired. When a decision feels important, the opposite can happen. People distrust the algorithm even when the data clearly supports its recommend-ation (algorithm aversion).

The result is 'governance' that swings between uncritical acceptance and irrational rejection, depending on the circumstances.

The human check is neither reliable nor consistent. It is not enough for an organisation to allocate a named individual and say, 'they are responsible for checking what the AI does and this is our governance model'.

Designating a person as the human in the loop provides the appearance of accountability without the substance. Automation bias and algorithm aversion prove that such 'governance' or oversight is flawed, with the approach completely disproportionate to the reputational and legal risks that may follow. Laux's research at Oxford asks how human oversight of AI systems can be implemented effectively and his answer

moves the question from individual ethics to institutional design. The implication is significant. If you cannot rely on any individual to maintain consistent, high-quality oversight of an AI system, you must build a governance architecture that assumes they will not.

Laux calls this institutionalised distrust, not as a counsel of despair, but as a design principle. Build the checks into the system. Do not rely on the person.

For a chief of staff, this reframe is both practical and uncomfortable.

Practical, because governance architecture, the design of processes, accountability structures, and review mechanisms etc., is squarely within the role's territory.

Uncomfortable, because it asks leaders to be honest about the limits of their own judgment, and to design systems that acknowledge those limits explicitly.

From ethics to law

Laux introduced a second concept that has direct implications for how organisations think about AI governance: juridification.[17] This describes the process by which ethical considerations —initially soft, voluntary, and aspirational —harden into legal requirements. In some regions this is already happening.

The EU AI Act, Regulation 2024/1689, is the world's first comprehensive legal framework for artificial intelligence. The regulation classifies AI systems by risk level and imposes obligations proportional to the potential for harm. It is not a voluntary framework or a set of guidelines. It is binding EU law with fines up to €35 million or 7% of global annual turnover.[18]

The Act divides AI systems into risk categories: unacceptable risk systems are prohibited outright; high-risk systems, including those used in healthcare, employment, education, and critical infrastructure, are subject to stringent conformity requirements; limited and minimal risk systems face lighter obligations.

The practical implication for any organisation operating in or supplying to European markets is that AI governance is no longer a choice. The question is not whether to govern AI responsibly. It is whether to do so proactively, on your own terms, or reactively, under regulatory compulsion. Organisations that wait for the law to force the conversation will find themselves building governance frame-works under pressure, with less time, less internal knowledge, and far higher stakes.

‘Organisations that wait for the law to force the conversation will find themselves building governance frameworks under pressure, with less time, less internal knowledge, and far higher stakes.’

[17] Laux, J., ‘From Ethification to Juridification: Human Oversight and the Potential Crowding Out of Ethicists by Lawyers in AI Governance’, *SSNR* (August 14, 2025).
[18] Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 13 June 2024 (Artificial Intelligence Act). Published in *Official Journal of the European Union*, 12 July 2024. Entered into force 1 August 2024. Penalty provisions: Article 99(3). Implementation timeline: Article 113.

This is where the chief of staff's cross-functional visibility becomes directly relevant.

AI deployment decisions are rarely made in one place. They happen across procurement, product development, operations, HR, and customer functions. The governance questions (i.e. who owns the oversight, how it is documented, what happens when something goes wrong etc.) cut across all of them. The chief of staff is often the only person with a clear enough view of the whole to spot the gaps before they become problems. One participant described exactly this dynamic:

> *'With all the buzz about AI—and pressure to move quickly to 'catch up'—I appreciated this reminder to slow down and make thoughtful decisions. I also liked the scenarios the professor used to make us think about how this topic shows up in real life.'*

Another described the session's impact on their organisation directly:

> *'I updated my governance policy. This was very useful'*

And a third captured the wider significance:

> *'Dr Laux was a hit with the entire group. While our organisation hasn't yet reached this level of AI integration, the insights he shared are invaluable for future-proofing our strategy. I now feel much better equipped to address the ethical questions and challenges that will inevitably arise as we evolve.'*

That last response deserves attention. The participant's organisation had not yet reached advanced AI integration and yet the session felt urgent and directly applicable. That is the point. Governance frameworks are significantly harder to build after deployment than before it.

The time to think about how an AI system will be overseen, what data it will use, who it might affect, and what recourse exists when it fails, is before it goes live, and the chief of staff can act as the intermediary between departments and company levels to help make this happen.

Ethics is now part of your job

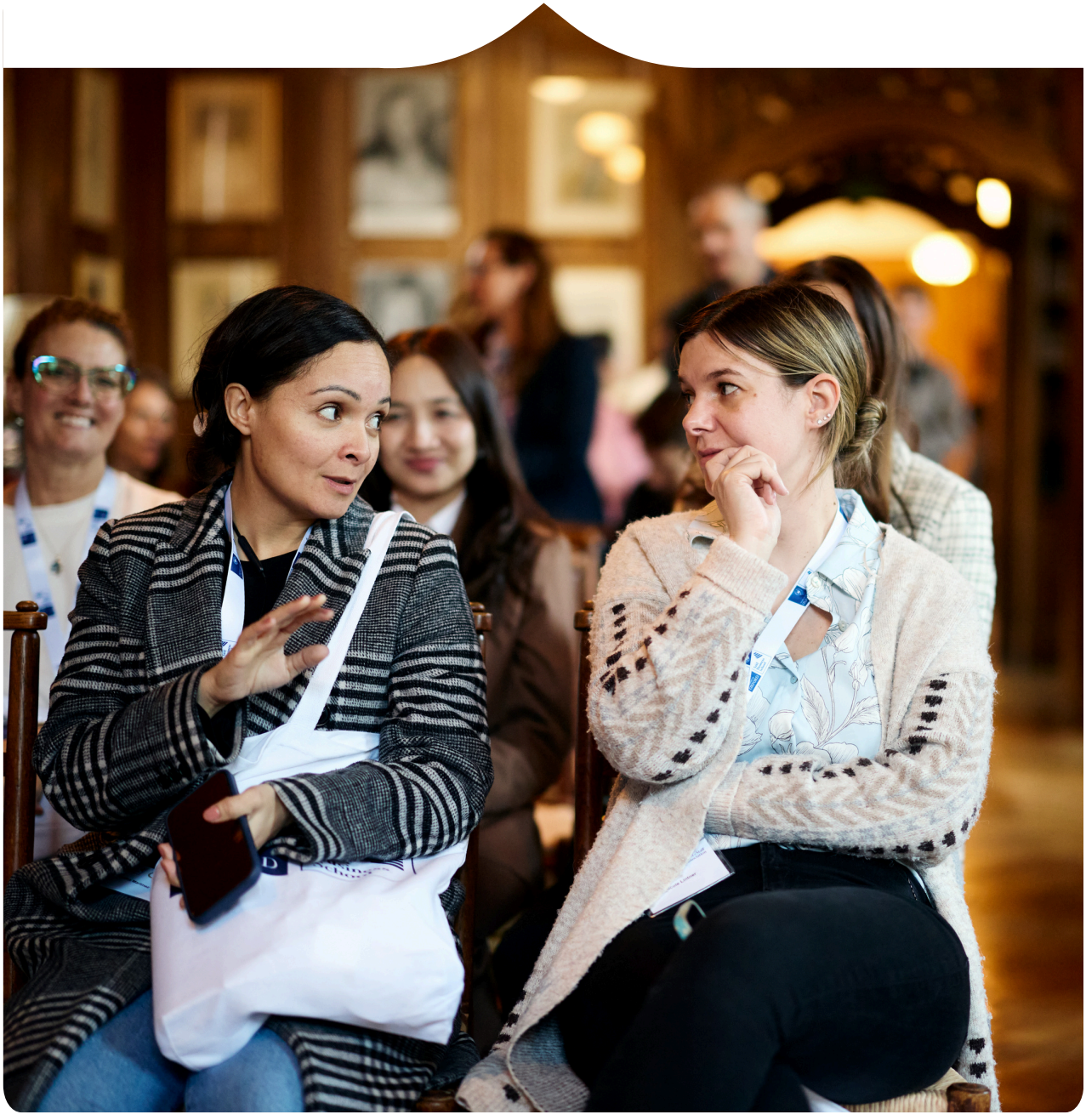
In his session, Laux was direct to chiefs of staff: whether you acknowledge it or not, ethics is now part of your job. That is not a statement about personal virtue. It is a statement about professional responsibility.

The juridification of AI is already underway but if your organisation is still treating AI ethics as a compliance exercise or something to demonstrate rather than practise, you will be poorly prepared for what follows.

For a chief of staff, this means building AI governance into the conversation with the principal before deployment decisions are made, not after. It means asking who is responsible for oversight and what that oversight actually looks like in practice. It means ensuring that the people making AI adoption decisions have access to the right expertise (be it legal, technical, or ethical) and that those perspectives are genuinely heard rather than managed. It means designing governance processes that do not depend on any single individual's vigilance, because that vigilance will, at some point, fail.

None of this requires the chief of staff to be a technical expert in AI. It requires them to be an honest broker: the person who ensures that governance questions are answered before deployment rather than after the first incident.

Juridification only moves in one direction. The ethical frameworks of today will become the legal obligations of tomorrow. The chief of staff who understands this trajectory, and acts on it early, is not slowing their organisation down. They are keeping it one step ahead.



The pit and the podium

What does leadership look like in the moment where preparation meets execution and every decision, verbal cue, or gesture has a consequence?

Towards the end of the Executive Education Programme, two carefully designed sessions gave the cohort an opportunity to experience leadership and execution in action. The first involved a factory floor and Formula One control centre and pit: the other the acoustics of a 19th-century Oxford chapel and the conductor's podium. These special sessions were designed to explore applied leadership beyond the classroom sessions which had preceded them. Though each looked different to the other, the truths they revealed about leadership were harmonious.

The pit wall

The 'away day' at MK-7, the Red Bull Technology Campus in Milton Keynes, had been a closely guarded secret throughout the week, generating wild theories from the cohort. (Chiefs of staff do not like information withheld from them, it turns out). Arriving without this intel meant arriving open, without the instinct to categorise or pre-judge the experience before it had landed.

At Red Bull the cohort witnessed first-hand, alignment in action, as well as how marginal gains can be the chief of staff's best friend. As they learned, the difference between winning and losing in Formula One is measured in fractions. These fractional gains are the product of hundreds of accumulated decisions and actions (from across the company) that must be geared towards one unified goal: success. The pit stop that takes 3.5 seconds rather than 2.5 seconds does not just lose the car's position in a race. In a sport defined by margins (that most instruments would struggle to measure), a wasted second can place you last.

When Sir Dave Brailsford became performance director of British Cycling in 2003, he introduced what he called the aggregation of marginal gains, the idea that if you broke down every single component of riding a bike and improved each one by just one percent, the cumulative effect would be transformative. The gains extended well beyond the obvious (from nutrition and training to aerodynamics) to the detail of finding the right pillow for each cyclist: because better sleep means better performance. From 2003 to 2013, British Cycling won 59 world championships across disciplines, and British cyclists won the Tour de France multiple times for the first time in the event's history.[19] Red Bull Racing applies the same logic at speed and in real time, under conditions where the cost of inattention is immediate and visible.

[19] Myers, J., 'This coach improved everything by 1%, putting Britain on the road to Rio Olympic glory' *World Economic Forum,* 17 August 2016.

What F1 Performance Coach David Osgathorp made clear in his presentation at the impressive MK-7 Mezzanine (surrounded by winning cars), is that this culture of precision does not begin on race day. It is built through the discipline of the debrief, after one race day and before the next.

Red Bull's company-wide debrief, which welcomes feedback from across departments, is not a witch-hunt to find someone to blame for the loss. Instead, it interrogates a system and analyses events: the car positioning that was fractionally off, the communication that broke down, the moment of fatigue that slowed a reaction.

The question is not about who failed. It is what in the system allowed the failure to happen.

For a chief of staff, that reframe carries direct practical weight. An organisation that responds to failure by finding a person to hold responsible learns nothing and reproduces the failure. An organisation that responds by interrogating the system learns something it can act on.

The no-blame debrief is a precision instrument encouraging honest, depersonalised analysis that the chief of staff is often best placed to moderate.

The day also returned to a question that had run through the programme since Jonathan Trevor's alignment framework: the difference between real-time intelligence and lagging indicators. A championship team does not review lap times on Monday to understand what went wrong on Sunday. The data is live, continuous, and acted upon mid-race.

The gap between a signal and a decision is measured in seconds. For chiefs of taff operating in organisations where the primary source of strategic intelligence arrives in a monthly report, that gap is worth examining honestly.

Participants felt the connection to their own roles immediately. One said:

> *'This was an outstanding experience and one of the highlights of the programme. Seeing the level of precision, coordination, and detail behind the scenes made a strong connection to the chief of staff role. It really showed how much work happens in the background to enable performance at that level.'*

Another captured something that the classroom sessions had established theoretically and Red Bull demonstrated visibly:

> *'There is really nothing like exploring theory in practice. Red Bull is an incredible example of alignment, and I was struck by how the ethos and culture—more even than a specific theory of coordination—builds a cohesive, coherent company.'*

That observation echoes what Trevor had argued: that alignment is not primarily a structural achievement, it is a cultural one. Yes, systems and processes matter, but what holds them together is a shared and deeply held understanding of what the goal is and why every detail in service of it matters.



The podium

If Red Bull showed what execution looks like when an organisation is aligned around fractions of a second, Balliol Chapel showed what leadership looks like when every framework, every metric and every professional protection is removed and a chief of staff must respond with instinct alone.

For this session, the cohort were guided by the conductor, Peter Hanke, whose approach was simple in concept and daunting in practice. He placed chiefs of staff in front of a professional choir and asked them to conduct (or lead) without support in place. No briefing notes. No framework. No slides.

Conducting, in Hanke's view, is not a metaphor for readership, it *is* leadership, with the significant difference that it is entirely non-verbal. In performance,the conductor can communicate only through body language and gesture. Strip away the language (or the email, the meeting, the carefully worded brief etc.) and what remains is the quality of presence, trust and connection that a leader either has or does not.

This experience produced some of the most candid responses of the entire week. Several participants described it as the most powerful session of the programme. Others found it confronting. A few found it uncomfortable. All these responses are, in their own way, the point. One participant described what it revealed about the role itself:

'I am often working behind the scenes, leveraging one-to-one relationships and conversations, so it really challenged me to own my leadership impact. This session will stay with me for a long time.'

A second student described what happened when the usual protections were taken away:

'This was much more powerful and profound than I could have imagined. The professor was brilliant at interpreting leadership style through the way each person conducted. And I'm impressed by the courage and vulnerability shown by our cohort during this session.'

The conducting session worked precisely because it removed the protections that leaders typically rely on. There is no positional authority in front of a choir. There is no agenda to hide behind, and there can be no ego. There is only the gesture, one's presence, and the relationship between the person holding the baton and the choir watching it.

For a chief of staff, whose influence operates largely without direct authority over budgets, headcount or commercial outcomes, this was not an abstract lesson. It is a direct description of the conditions in which the role operates every day.The chief of staff does not command; they connect, guide and create the conditions for others to perform and harmonise.

Two models, one argument

A pit lane in Milton Keynes and a college chapel in Oxford have very little in common on the surface. What they share is a specific and hard-won understanding of where performance actually comes from.

The conductor makes no sound. The pit crew member crosses no finish line. The chief of staff holds no direct accountability for the commercial outcome. But all three carry full responsibility for what the performance produces. This responsibility is exercised not through authority, but through the quality of preparation, attention and presence they bring to everyone around them.



Conclusion

At the end of the week, the cohort were asked two questions. How has your understanding of the chief of staff role evolved during the programme? And what key themes, discussions, or insights have shaped your thinking? The responses were candid, considered and in several cases, still forming.

What emerged most consistently was a shift in how participants understood the role itself. Not as an operational support function—responsive, proximate, useful—but as something more deliberate. A strategic integrator. A systems leader. An alignment officer. Someone who sits at the intersection of strategy, communication and execution, and whose job is not simply to support the principal but to shape the conditions in which good decisions get made.

One participant framed it simply: the role is about enabling leaders and teams to perform at their best. Another described it as an 'Align, Execute, Amplify' engine, a formulation that captures something the programme returned to repeatedly, in different registers, and from different directions. A third put it in terms that any chief of staff will recognise immediately: trust with the principal, influence without authority, and the ability to operate across both strategic and operational horizons at the same time.

Several participants noted that the programme gave them not just new frameworks, but a new language for their leadership, and for expressing instincts they had not previously been able to defend.

That is an important practical takeaway. Part of any education is not to necessarily provide answers, but to provide a more rigorous way of asking and defining the right questions.

One participant carried a handful of quotes out of the week that stayed with them. Among them:

- *'Farmers don't grow crops: they create the conditions for crops to grow.'*
- *'When ego leaves the room, magic happens.'*
- *'Pay attention to what you're paying attention to.'*

Each of those observations appeared somewhere in the week's sessions. Each describes, in its own way, what the chief of staff role asks of the people who hold it.

The programme, in the words of one participant, offered time and space to reflect and gain confidence. That is a more humble ambition than transformation, but the chief of staff who leaves Oxford with confidence is better placed to do the work that matters, and to keep the golden thread in sight.



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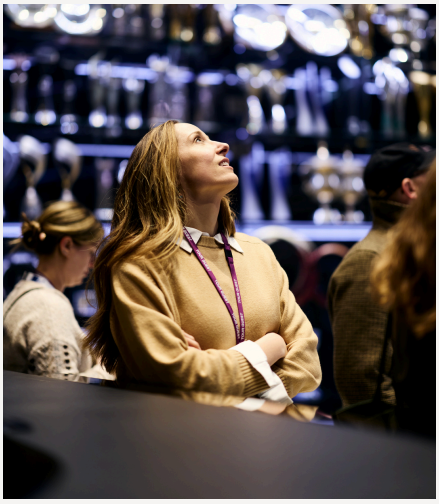








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Top, left to right: Lien Nguyen, Marcelo Moreira Silva, Maha Abdellatif, Colette Kessler. **Bottom, left to right:** Kimberly Crowe, Allyson Stewart-Allen, Jonathan Trevor, Brian Pontifex, Trent Smyth. **Next page:** Anne Borozan, Annelot Verbruggen, Joerose Tharakan.






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