Speaking Truth to Power

In partnership with

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Foreword

Trent Smyth AM

An executive working as a chief of staff takes on complex organisational and leadership responsibilities while occupying an ambiguous position in the hierarchy. Previously associated primarily with the military and politics, the role is becoming increasingly common in professional firms, businesses of all sizes, and nonprofits. However, it remains little understood.

Twenty-five years ago, many of the responsibilities associated with the commercial chief of staff would have been absorbed by an executive assistant: a trusted person, but mainly occupied with logistics and administration. More recently, we started to see consultancy firm graduates spend a couple of years as a chief of staff on the way to a profit-and-loss (P&L) responsibility. It was a way to build credibility, connections, and networks, but it was a transitional job.

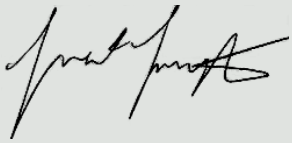
Now there is a sense that it is becoming a 'destination role' and a professional occupation in its own right. This raises questions about who the chief of staff is responsible to, the infrastructure around them, the type of experience needed to fulfil the role, and the skills and qualities that lead to success.

These are some of the questions that we grappled with during the first Chief of Staff Executive Certification Programme, delivered in partnership with Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, in April 2022. Over forty chiefs of staff, from across the world and in diverse organisations and sectors, came together for a week of deep reflection, debate, and discussion, guided by contributions from leading academics and high-profile expert speakers. The programme, hosted by The Chief of Staff Association, is conducted twice annually at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford.

This report aims to capture a flavour of those discussions and to highlight some of the key insights that emerged from the programme, as well as indicate areas where further discussion may be needed. We are grateful to the programme participants for allowing us to communicate their thoughts and ideas in the anonymous quotes scattered throughout.

The programme has been a decisive first step towards standardising formal education for chiefs of staff and recognising the role as a professional career destination.

Trent Smyth AM



Chief Executive Officer
The Chief of Staff Association

Defining the Role of Chief of Staff

'I see my role as being the glue, the joiner: being a sounding board, providing a sanity check, speaking truth to power, being able to reflect other people's views, knowing the right time to champion certain things – and that can be bottom-up but also top-down because you've got the context that other people perhaps don't have.'

What's in a name? Job titles and career paths.

Around half the programme participants used the title *'chief of staff'*. Others reported a variety of job titles, including Director of Operations, Special Projects Director and Executive Assistant. Some chiefs of staff have a dual role, and some have an additional role with P&L responsibility.

Typically, the people working in military and government departments, politics, or large professional service firms held the chief of staff job title. They talked about their roles as structured and occupying a clear position in the organisational hierarchy, which gave them formal authority. However, they were aware that this formal authority was limited, and that they also needed to use influencing and political skills if they were to get anything done.

'Your principal can stand up in front of the leadership team and say, "this is my chief of staff, you must listen to them". But what they say versus what happens once the principal is out [of the room] is very different. ...'

Even where the chief of staff role and title are established, however, the extent of authority associated with them varies according to context. For example, in politics, especially in the United States, it is usual for a politician's campaign manager to become chief of staff on election. This grants authority, but it also means that the fortunes of the chief of staff are tied to the principal: when they are out of office, the chief of staff is too. The role of chief of staff in this environment is therefore characterised by uncertainty; in addition, there is no continuity for the organisation. In contrast, in the military, the chief of staff reports to the position and not to an individual; the governance architecture protects the individual postholder.

The challenge of being *'tied'* to the principal (or not) is a key issue that emerged several times during different discussions in the programme, and is relevant to all chiefs of staff, whatever their job title. Chiefs of staff working in business environments, however, including those start-ups and nonprofits, had a much more unstructured approach, describing themselves as *'working in the nuance, and being OK with that, and using it to influence.'* Some participants said that it can be useful to have the title because it means that *'people know what you do and what your role is'*. Although it is possible to create influence and define the role through explanation and building relationships, that takes time, which is not always available; the job title can be a shortcut to being heard. Others thought that, even when they had the chief of staff job title, it could be misunderstood or not understood at all, so constant work to define the role continued to be needed.

A frequent route into the chief of staff role is through Operations, a boundary-spanning function that involves working with different departments across the whole organisation. In fact, in organisations that do not have a separate chief of staff, the chief operations officer will often perform that role, knowingly or not.

'The approach I take is to meet every staff member at least every month and go through every workstream. I'm lucky because I'm Head of Operations as well as chief of staff. I make all the decisions.'

In many organisations, there has been resistance to calling anyone chief of staff because the word *'chief'* suggests that another executive is being added to the C-suite.

'The moment they hear the word chief, it's "Whoah! We want you to do what you're doing but we're not so sure about giving you this title."'

'There was a lot of push-back about the use of "chief"'

A number of participants enjoyed the ambiguity of their role (whether or not they had a chief of staff title) because it allowed them to operate under the radar and *'manoeuvre around the organisation'*. However, this vagueness tends to cloud any sense of career progression. Sometimes, from a personal as well as an organisational perspective, that is important. One participant reported that, having been an Executive Assistant for many years, when approached and asked to take on the chief of staff role, they insisted that they should be given the title (which they were).

Who's in charge? Reporting lines and relationships.

No two chief of staff roles are the same, although they all have a similar core. The roles are negotiated individually, depending on the relationship with the principal (usually a CEO or other senior leader) and on the principal's relationship with their leadership team. In larger organisations, it is not uncommon for more than one senior leader to claim to have their own chief of staff, although the titles and duties are not necessarily the same.

'Just because you've got the title chief of staff, that doesn't mean that's what you're doing. And other people might be doing the same as us but be called something different.'

The chief of staff reports directly to their principal, and is expected to liaise with the rest of the leadership team. The exact nature of that wider relationship, however, is ambiguous: are they senior or junior to the rest of the leadership team? Are they acting as a leader in their own right, or only as a proxy for the principal? Can they tell other leaders what to do? Who is accountable?

'If I introduce myself I'd be the chief of staff, but my responsibility is to make sure that the whole of my principal's leadership team moves forward. So I try to frame it a little bigger than just the one individual.'

'We've got a senior leadership team of 15 who are all more senior than me. They are in essence the staff who do the work and are accountable in a way that I'm not, but my job is to try and manage up and around them to do all the work at the right time and with the right outputs to support the principal.'

'I have no resources. They can consent and evade.'

While working at a very senior level in the organisation, chiefs of staff typically do not have access to many traditional sources of power: they usually do not *'own'* anything or manage large numbers of staff.

There is an office, but it is the principal's office: there is seldom anyone reporting directly to the chief of staff.

This was a relief to many, because having a formal line management role entails one-to-ones, HR processes, and a lot of administration.

They said that these responsibilities would detract from the role of chief of staff – no one has unlimited time. Indeed, one participant reported having decided to move people out of their reporting line because they had been *'spending so much time trying to be a great manager.'*

Not having a fixed place in the hierarchy gives the chief of staff the flexibility to 'roam where you need to roam at the appropriate time' but it can also give them a sense of being an outsider. This can feel lonely and frustrating.

'[People see me as] someone that everyone is just reporting to, and I'm not a part of their group. They don't think I'm there to be a thought partner.'

But what do you actually do? Roles and responsibilities.

Participants described themselves variously as: *'orchestrator'*, *'fixer'*, *'doer'*, *'confidante'*, *'human intelligence officer'*, and *'consigliere'*. They worked discreetly, effectively, and behind the scenes, with a wide and flexible brief: *'You can do anything anywhere'*.

Bridget Kustin, economic anthropologist and Research Fellow at Saïd Business School, led a session on anthropology which resonated with many, especially the concept of being aware of what is not being said.

'It's about the nuance that other people in the organisation may not be paying attention to. Other people in the organisation may be saying, "Well we have Zoom. We can have our meetings on Zoom." But the chief of staff is paying attention to a lot of interactions outside of formal meetings: where the business is really done, where the influence is being created, the fact that you need to get that face-to-face essence on top of those formal meetings.'

This is possible because the position of chief of staff is that of a *'proud generalist'*. No one else is able to stand back and think about the organisation without a specific lens or sphere of responsibility. They are one of the very few people who can be expected to take a broad view, and to look into the future as well as back into the history of the organisation.

But there is a reason that participants also described the chief of staff role as like the narrow neck of an hourglass. Information and insights from across the organisation are channelled through them and then, if necessary, disseminated across the leadership team: *'We manage up and we manage down and we're right there in the middle'*. This role, of providing *'information triage*' and *'filtering'*, puts them absolutely at the centre of the organisation, with a wide awareness of both hard information and employee sentiment. They are gatekeepers, who sometimes prevent access but who know when to escalate problems and pass them on. Crucially they do not see it as their role actively to solve the problems, with one participant passing on advice that they had been given when they first took on the role:

'People are going to bring all of these problems to your principal's office. Make sure you put the monkey back on that person's back as they go out the door and carry it, otherwise you're going to drown.'

In fact it is vital that chiefs of staff do not want to specialise or 'own' either problems or initiatives. One participant gave an example of an individual who was so passionate about diversity and inclusion that they focused too much on it, to the exclusion of other initiatives: *'Really they should have moved into HR and become the D&I [diversity and inclusion] officer.'*

However, issues such as corporate culture, governance, and crisis management (including *'consequence management'*, a phrase coined during the discussion on post-pandemic working) come under their purview. For example, one participant noted that, in a company that has recently been acquired, the chief of staff was responsible for *'keeping the start-up culture alive'*. This also means that they have a role in organisation-wide change-management programmes and in the recent but highly important issue of corporate activism.

For further reflection.

How far would increasing clarity about the role be useful?

Participants frequently spoke about a constant process of clarifying their own roles and negotiating territory.

'None of us have any clear definition of the role, and we're all told to "make it your own"! But you don't necessarily have the guide rails and the boundaries to make it your own. And that's a challenge to governance because you don't have a left and a right. You're just figuring it out.'

Creating clarity around the role would: *'stop people asking what you do; we do all of us a disservice by continuing the narrative that it's an enigma.'*

However, at the same time, ambiguity was very useful to them. It enabled them to join and influence discussions across the whole organisation, and to wield a considerable amount of *'soft power'* through their networks and emotional intelligence. This echoed Anoushka Healy, Chief Strategy Officer of News Corporation, who referred to ambiguity as the *'superpower'* of the chief of staff1. It suited many of them to keep some boundaries blurred:

'There might need to be a core definition ... but also some ambiguity for the role and responsibilities.'

Where should the balance be struck?'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Challenges and Opportunities Within the Role - Individual

'I've had the time there to really build up a reputation. And in that room I'm very fortunate to have a fantastic executive team that I'm working with that does trust me; we've spent years working together, going through some really tough situations, to be able to build up and really have that trust, integrity, honesty, and being willing to say the things that nobody ever wants to say, which I think is a huge benefit … I can't imagine working somewhere where I don't have that, but that's 100 per cent built on reputation.'

Leading without (formal) authority.

It seems to be broadly accepted that chief of staff is a leadership role, but one that does not always carry with it direct authority – that is, power to enforce obedience.

In fact, participants made a key distinction between formal authority – which they do have to a certain extent, and which is given – and informal authority, which is earned. In common with many other leaders in all sectors and types of organisations, participants not only called on informal authority most frequently in their leadership, but believed that it was essential: formal authority alone does not make a good leader.

Formal authority derives from the job title – and here the *'chief'* word can be helpful – and is also reflected from the principal. People know that the chief of staff can speak for, or at least can speak easily to, the principal.

'Your principal has to set the tone, and be there, and empower you to speak on their behalf. If you don't have the "top cover" and tone provided by your principal, you lose the power to operate, regardless of your title.

Informal authority is earned through reputation, respect, networks, and KSEB (Knowledge, Skills, Experience, and Behaviours). It is also linked to *'Capability – being known to do that job well and being trusted to get that job done'* and *'being known for having an in-depth understanding of the organisation and the matter in hand'.*

A reputation for capability can be built on relatively *'small wins': 'It could be just logistics, getting things done on time and being reliable; it could be dealing with a complicated HR matter that someone else doesn't have time to do'.*

Networks are also important: *'networks that we cultivate, closed networks with trusted people; but also open networks through which we source different opinions and foster more innovation and sense of collaboration.'*

These are objective attributes that contribute to informal authority: people listen to you and take your advice or opinions seriously because of them. Effective leaders enhance this type of authority with influence or soft power, based on EQ (emotional intelligence or emotional quotient) and social and political skills. Qualities associated with building influence include loyalty, integrity, diplomacy, kindness, humility, and sincerity.

These qualities are key to the chief of staff's ability to connect with a wide range of people across the organisation, and are also brought into play when they are required to have difficult conversations with other leaders in the organisation.

This can happen because the principal wants to preserve their own relationships with members of the senior team and not expend any social capital. The chief of staff therefore has to adopt the role of *'bad cop'*.

Participants discussed the tactics they used in having these difficult conversations, and the skill of being able to *'disagree without being disagreeable'*. It was useful to think about these conversations being motivated by kindness (*'You're having this difficult conversation because you care about this person'*) and to focus not on what you're telling them to do but *'how you make them feel'*.

'You enter the room leading with EQ, showing sympathy and understanding for what that person is going through and facing, and the decision they're trying to make.'

A particularly useful technique is asking questions, because it *'comes across a lot softer and often helps people come to the conclusion on their own.'*

Five Cs for courageous communication.

- **Clarify** Reflect and check your own understanding of what is happening.
- **Corroborate** Use trusted sources to confirm that this is what other people have noticed.
- **Context** Prepare for the conversation: select environment and timing.
- **Conversation** Initiate and guide the conversation with emotional intelligence and diplomacy. Ask open questions to help the individual to identify issues for themselves and decide how to move forward.
- **Confirm** Agree the next steps. Do you need a follow-up conversation? Do you need to flag something to other senior leaders? Do you need to talk to the strategy team?

Gathering information, taking the organisational pulse, and perfecting peripheral vision

The chief of staff is the principal's eyes and ears *'on the ground'*: someone whom people will talk to, and someone who can interpret what is going on and what is not being talked about. This part of the role is about not just listening to whoever is shouting loudest, but being able to *'take the pulse'* of the whole organisation.

'You cannot execute [strategy] if you do not have emotional intelligence, you've developed your perception or intuition. … if you don't know your audience, from the lowest HR person pushing papers to your most senior leader, you are not going to be effective. You can have the tools, but you always have to continually reassess. And so … I just get up from my desk, I walk four floors down and into a random office, and sit down and just say "what's troubling you? What's going on with your world?"' … That's how you develop trust, that's how you get a sense of what's going on in the organisation.'

This is a time-intensive process: *'Just give them long enough, and just shut up.'* But *'hanging about'* and listening to people, not necessarily in a directed way, is seen as *'part of the job'*, and that involves creating the time to do it.

'Hanging about' also helps with developing peripheral vision – 'a sense of what might be there'. No one would want to constrain activities by worrying about a risk that has a small chance of happening, but it is important to have awareness that can be brought to the forefront if necessary. 'It's about not just being aware of what's right in front of you, but the things that are slightly off centre – those are often the things that are ill-prepared for and therefore can cause the greatest damage'.

This awareness is important background knowledge when the organisation faces any sort of crisis. But at that point, when new information is arriving thick and fast, and decisions have to be made, the chief of staff needs to narrow the field of vision, and create an environment in which it is possible to receive, filter, and otherwise keep on top of the critical information.

Change management.

Whether it's digital transformation, decarbonisation, mergers and acquisitions, or simply adapting to new hybrid working conditions after the COVID-19 pandemic, change management is part of the experience of all types of organisations.

The chief of staff is not always leading the change project, but has a vital role to play in *'sequencing'* or *'choreographing'*, making sure the right people are *'in the room'*, and connecting with the organisational culture and the feelings of staff.

'Figuring out not just who the key decision-makers are but who the key influencers are. They're not necessarily the same.' Who is the person who has been there a long time, who has that industry knowledge, is the sort of person that everyone turns to? That's someone who needs to be brought along.'

'As we work across the enterprise we do need to make sure that we know who needs to be around the table and when, we've also got budget and finance – they're going to underwrite everything that goes on – are the people factors here at play? HR/ The comms package? Driving everything that we're doing on the marketing side. But also logistics and procurement. What's that timeline look like? What's the reality?'

While change management programmes should always start with understanding the strategy – never with people – the chief of staff's emotional intelligence and networks are vital to ensuring that the strategy can be executed.

'People are core to it, but unless you're clear on the strategy you don't know where you're headed. It's not about not making people at the centre, it's about being clear on the objective for the future, and then people will be core to that.'

'You can have a plan that you whiteboard, that you talk about. But when you go to execute the one thing people don't account for very well is that human element. And it is really real – the pain, the despair, the pressure. People have a hard time with change.'

Participants shared tips for building a culture of *'healthy dissent'*, including *'good team/bad team'*, in which one team argues for the idea, the other against, and *'what could go wrong?'*:

'You go round the table asking "what could go wrong?" And if everyone responds that it's a brilliant strategy and nothing will go wrong, reply, "but if you had to think of something that could go wrong, what would it be? You MUST find something"'.

Organisations need the chief of staff to drive the *'adoption'* process: *'Organisations usually invest a tonne upfront and in the communication, but don't invest anything in the later adoption of it'*.

In particular, as the change managers aim to bring everyone in the organisation up the *'change curve'*, it is important to remember that not everyone is at the same place in the process. The leadership is invariably further ahead because they have been talking about it for longer and been involved with the planning. It is the role of the chief of staff to keep reminding the leadership that there are other people who are not on the same page.

'Humans don't react like a Gantt chart. They don't follow a slide pack.'

Once again, empathy and emotional intelligence are brought into play in order to anticipate and answer staff questions. In particular, everyone always wants to know when the change will happen and what it will mean for their jobs. *'It's about being able to say, "I don't know, but these are the key decisions that are going to inform us, and this is the timeline".'*

For further reflection.

Hourglass or Swiss Army Knife?

The two analogies for the chief of staff role that most resonated with participants were those of the hourglass (*'We manage up and we manage down and we're right there in the middle'*) and the Swiss Army Knife – they are generalists with a wide variety of skills that can be applied in any situation.

The Swiss Army Knife analogy might suggest a dispersed, responsive role, in which the chief of staff turns a hand to whatever needs doing; while the hourglass suggests concentration and the chief of staff as organisational lynchpin.

Do most chiefs of staff do both? Or does each individual incline more towards one style?

Challenges and Opportunities – Organisational

'We make our plans, we roll out with a lot of pressure, things are happening fast, sometimes it's easy to lose sight of the forest through the trees… Having the mind to step back and say 'how's it going?' Is this still relevant? Is this still the priority? [The chief of staff] ought to be that plug into corporate activism and culture.'

Learning from the pandemic and post-pandemic working.

When the programme took place, in April 2022, most organisations were still raw from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and were trying to navigate new ways of working. Less than half the cohort were back in the office full-time and the rest were operating a hybrid model.

Chiefs of staff, having had a central role in management of the crisis, were now increasingly seeing themselves as 'consequence managers' – as well as *'chief organisational culture officer, chief wellness officer, chief health officer*'.

Most participants saw the forced move online as an opportunity. What is lost by not being in the same room as someone to interpret body language or capture nuances of expression can be compensated for by *'seeing them in their comfortable environment, with their pets around them, and you can ask follow-up questions about the bookshelves behind them. So the snapshot that you get into their everyday life … is awesome.'*

It was also an opportunity to build trust by *'having endless opportunities to show tolerance as well as to show interest.'* When a toddler interrupts a call, for example, *'you tell them that's OK, over and over again.'* It was also, as many organisations discovered, a great leveller: *'The thing about remote is that it would let people who traditionally didn't have a voice, have a voice.'*

The response was *'about being human'*. And *'meeting people where they are'*. Some teams, for example, liked playing online games together; others sent each other gifts; *'It was figuring out what worked for each team'*.

In the early days of the crisis, participants were aware of the temptation to rush to a solution, but agreed that it was more important to facilitate, *'and first to stand back and get the measure of what people need during this crisis'*. They reported conducting surveys and focus groups, collecting data, and inviting the employees to tell them what they needed. This, certainly at first, was very tactical: creating employee assistance programmes, making it possible for employees to see therapists, for example, hosting online meditation and yoga programmes.

Most participants reported that large online programmes introduced by their organisations were successful at first. But as the pandemic wore on, the dropout rate reached 80%. Many of these online programmes have now been stopped, and other solutions are being found in the new, hybrid working environment.

This was a prompt for chiefs of staff to re-examine their own role, move from crisis management into consequence management, and facilitate the return to the office or change to hybrid working.

'It helps you become very intentional about what you're doing. You have to think carefully about when you need to be together in the office and what can be dealt with online. Make sure you're in step with other people rather than assuming that everyone will fall in around you.'

Participants described how organisations were deciding which new practices to discard, and which to keep.

One organisation used to think it important in strategy meetings to get people together in one place regularly and to make presentations, resulting in *'death by powerpoint'*. In their first virtual meeting after lockdown was implemented, they abandoned the powerpoint presentations and asked people to discuss their top five issues in a two-page white paper. This worked so well that even though they can have strategy meetings in person now, the white papers remain.

In contrast, another participant was trying to reverse the pandemic habit of *'going straight to email'*, instead encouraging *'walk and talk, then email'*.

They also urged regularly reprioritising goals when making changes, asking, *'Are these goals really relevant in this new environment that we are in?'*

Corporate activism.

Organisations are increasingly taking a stand on a range of social and political issues. From making public statements to actively pushing for change, the question is no longer *'should we?'* but, *'how are we going to do it?'*

'Silence is no longer an option. We cannot do nothing. If you are silent then you are complicit: that's what the perception is'.

On the other hand, organisations cannot do everything, especially as they have their own *'jobs'* to do. How do they decide which issues to support, what to do, and how to measure the effectiveness of their actions? These questions fall within the core remit of the chief of staff.

Many companies fall into the trap of supporting the issue du jour, either because they are keeping up with their competitors or suppliers, or because they are receiving pressure from staff. For example, participants reported that their organisations had made expressions of support for Ukraine, largely in response to staff demand. However, few companies had responded in the same way to other armed conflicts. If companies are not just to respond uncritically to what is *'popular'*, they need to find some way of *'parsing out the things we respond to'*.

Authenticity and alignment with organisational values should guide this process.

'My company responds to issues and engages in corporate activism based on our own values. For anything that falls outside that it's kind of a "no comment".'

'There's no better protection than to be clear about your purpose and your mission, and then make sure that your activism is firmly anchored on that.'

And participants admired responses that had been based on action – not just statements and not just throwing money at the issue through philanthropic donations. Without action, organisations were opening themselves to accusations of *'slacktivism'*.

The role of the chief of staff is not to be the decision-maker, but to align: to bring enough people and relevant voices together to make sure that alignment occurs and that the organisation is not inadvertently responding to someone's pet project. There is virtually no one else in the organisation who can do this.

'Our role is always to frame the challenge and then facilitate. So who are the right people to have in the room? You know everyone in the organisation internally, you know the players externally, your job is to get the right people in the room to have the conversation.'

Once the decision has been made, it can be up to the chief of staff to manage the budget and execution of ideas, although larger organisations are already beginning to develop teams assigned to corporate activism.

Ownership of the idea is emphatically not the responsibility of the chief of staff. They can give an opinion, but the idea must be *'owned'* across the organisation.

An interesting group of political and social issues includes anything linked with diversity and inclusion, because those are likely to affect staff directly. Everyone agreed that action had to be taken, because diversity and inclusion are, or should be, firmly anchored in the organisational values.

'There is no option. You have to live your values. You have to stand up for what you say around your values.'

'... you are expected to carefully build an operating environment in the day to day of what you do. Which means societal responsibilities. And if it does become business-as-usual, it's not called activism: it's just what you do.'

For further reflection.

How far should organisations pursue corporate activism? While action is preferable to making a few statements or social media posts, is there a danger that corporate power and money can skew the political or social action playing field? That causes supported by the largest organisations have the highest profiles and attract a disproportionate amount of attention and further funding?
Equally, while acting in response to employee requests or pressure may feel democratic, it is a very raw form of democracy and leads to the danger that only the loudest voices are heard. How does the chief of staff go beyond facilitation to ensure that decisions are truly objective and aligned with the organisational purpose and mission?

Closing thoughts.

The chief of staff occupies a unique role in an organisation, in the same way that the CEO role is also unique.

As a result, it can be lonely. Some participants spoke about the need to have a trusted confidante within the organisation – but who should that be? What is it appropriate to share? How far might you inadvertently break confidentiality because 'you know everything'?

This is part of the value of the Chief of Staff Association Certification Programme. It brought together people doing this same, sometimes lonely, role but in a range of different organisations, and allowed them to share their experiences and discuss their challenges in a safe space.

Many new ideas emerged that will continue to be discussed by future cohorts of the programme. This report closes with just a few further questions to ponder.

Are you a chief of staff to the principal or to the organisation? If you come and go with the principal, how do you manage the handover to your successor? There does not seem to be an accepted formal process. Does a rapid turnover of chiefs of staff risk reducing organisational resilience? All the discussions during the programme reinforced how connected the chief of staff is, and how crucial their role of gathering and assessing insights from across the organisation.

If a new principal joins an organisation with a strong vision and a mandate for change, they will often feel that they need a specific, very trusted individual to be chief of staff. They want to bring their own person with them. This is understandable, yet there is potentially enormous strength in having someone embodying institutional memory, who knows what happened in the past and what has been tried before; someone who can provide reassurance and continuity for people lower down in the hierarchy, as well as support to the new principal.

How do you negotiate the key relationship with your principal? This was rarely explored during the week: problematic or challenging relationships were more likely to be with other members of the leadership team. However, the relationship bears further examination.

Many chiefs of staff are characterised by being approachable. Everything that was said during the programme about emotional intelligence, social skills, and empathy translates into being someone that a member of staff or another leader can feel comfortable voicing concerns to – in a way that perhaps they would not to the CEO. Is there a sense in which some CEOs, who, as we know, already have so much on their plates, are effectively delegating part of their leadership role to the chief of staff? If so, what are the implications for professional development and career planning for the chief of staff?

'Some of us have the personality and would like to be CEO, would like to be forward-facing. Others want to stay connected to the people. And the influence and that connection is more important than the power.'