The Art of Servant Leadership

In partnership with

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Saïd Business School

Foreword

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What a difference five months make. During the first Chief of Staff Certification Programme in April 2022 a session on corporate activism prompted discussions about the value and appropriateness of organisations' statements condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By September 2022, participants in the second programme were reporting on the wider impacts of rising energy prices as a consequence of that invasion. April's concerns about how to return to the office after the COVID-19 pandemic had expanded to encompass a war for talent in almost every sector and questions about how to restructure long leases of massively underpopulated office buildings.

It was an important reminder, if a reminder were needed, of the complex, balancing role of the chief of staff. Chiefs of staff are often described as providing a vertical filter, gathering information from across the organisation, assessing it, and communicating upwards where necessary. But they also typically face both outwards and inwards, sensing changes in the external environment and connecting them with internal strategic decisions. And in some organisations they are the people who can look both forward and backwards, linking possible futures with the developments of the past and framing them to influence the present.

This report focuses on the issues surrounding the notion of balance, investigating how chiefs of staff connect the external and internal environments, and past, present, and future. It looks at how the priorities change in different sectors and different types of organisation, and at what the implications are for leadership style and capabilities.

We are grateful to participants for their openness and engagement during the programme, and also, of course, to the academics and guest speakers who stimulated and guided their discussions. The anonymous quotes capture a flavour of the intense but lively nature of the programme – but nothing can replace the experience of being right in the middle of it. I look forward to seeing many more members of the Chief of Staff Association in Oxford in the future to contribute to our growing body of knowledge about the role and the skills required to execute it.

Trent Smyth AM

Chief Executive Officer
The Chief of Staff Association

Making Space in a VUCA Environment

'The impact of the disruption is potentially impacting in a very stressful way on leaders, who can be in fight-or-flight mode. Mindset is key. Mindset is super-critical in being able to turn that around.'

The outward-facing roles of the participants meant that they were quick to map the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) environment in which all their organisations were operating. Successive crises such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic led to a shared sense of '*how fast we're all moving*' and a feeling that some organisations were '*punch drunk*'.

Many participants described leaders as being perpetually in a reactive or 'fight-or-flight' mode, focused on short term survival and without the time or space to think long-term.

"The leaders are in the present moment but all of the staff are in the future, thinking about the job and where they're going to be and what's the next restructuring going to look like, where the leaders are in a sort of fight or flight, just like how are we going to deliver day to day? Because they're overwhelmed by the amount of change. So it's interesting that you can have the employees in one place and the leaders in another place at different times.'

One participant even reported that their organisation had to 'outsource' strategic thinking because leaders were too occupied with ensuring that the core operations were still functioning to be able to think about the future.

Although participants were confident that it is possible to reframe challenges as opportunities, their discussions exposed streams of unintended consequences associated with each change. For example, following the pandemic, many organisations have recognised the benefits to their staff of home-working and hybrid working. Linked with that is the thought that they no longer need to spend as much money on office space as pre-pandemic.

'We are looking at office space…. We've got empty floors. Forget empty spaces: we've got empty floors. So when you say how can you change that office budget, how do we push money to where people need more? How can we reallocate this? It's stretching your dollar in a way that you've never had an opportunity to stretch before.'

However, apparent opportunities come with complex trade-offs:

'There is a challenge in some areas for office space, because there are lease agreements that go on for six, seven, eight years. It doesn't matter if there's a pandemic: we're not getting out of it. And at the same time we need money to change staff, reskill them.'

Balancing this trade-off became another example of a challenge that could be reframed as an opportunity for the future.

'During the pandemic we looked over every single agreement that our company was stuck in, so to speak, to see what can we get out of? And how can we move that money and put it in new areas that we haven't really needed before. So I really see the budget as both challenge and opportunity. It also made us way smarter with our costs. We really looked over absolutely everything.'

'The pandemic really made us have to rethink everything and what we put our money in and what we tie our money to. I think the pandemic helped us become more resilient going forward. Now we try not to get into any long term commitments that ties up money … Now we try to have agreements that only

extend for a year or two. We've tried to be a lot more agile in terms of our money and what we put it in... We're being more creative in how we look at money and what we use money for.'

Another complex challenge is digital transformation, particularly the implementation of AI (Artificial Intelligence) processes. Participants noted that there were differing levels of 'workplace preparedness' in both organisations and individuals.

'If you're people-focused or a small business it might be very difficult to transition. Though if you're people focused you're still more nimble and agile. But as companies age, whether it's through older board members or principal decision makers who aren't really part of the generation that's setting up web 3.0, different AI methods makes it a little bit more challenging.'

They noted that there could be different types of inequality: *'The group of people who are tech-enabled are really surging forward, and a group that are not so tech-enabled are being left behind'*.

Prioritising people and communication

Participants argued that, in responding to external challenges and particularly when reframing them as opportunities, it is vital to prioritise people. Organisations should not panic or succumb to the fear of disruption by

laying people off. And they need to improve their *'candour' and communication, listening hard in order to understand 'what's not said but people feel anyway'.*

'People are the most important quality we have within any organisation [and they] inevitably feel the impact. Whether you're looking at climate change, geopolitics, COVID, it's always the people who are most affected. Whether in terms of their health, their ways of working, relationships and connections with the rest of their family and geography.'

'When it's an external factor that affects the people initially it always feels like a challenge but over time it becomes an opportunity. And in terms of resilience, communication will help you face the challenge in the short term but also capitalise on the potential for opportunity in the long term.'

Keeping the balance – the chief of staff

All of these issues play right into the skillset of the chief of staff: dealing with people, communication, listening, framing and reframing, and prioritising.

They also clarify two key activities that successful chiefs of staff are performing, often under the radar, that are crucial to organisational and leadership resilience.

1. Making space

External forces can put leaders under pressure to make quick decisions and, particularly, to be seen to make those decisions. This is why so many leaders, according to participants, appeared to be reactive and focusing only on the very short term. A case study of the Oxford University Hospitals' response in the very early days of COVID (taught by Professor Karthick Ramanna from the Blavatnik School of Government) showed the benefits of maintaining a long-term focus even in a crisis – but also the very great temptation towards knee-jerk reactions.

The chief of staff is often the only person who can ask leaders '*to take a minute to slow down, to look at things from a different space.*'

Creating more space in which to interrogate decisions and view them from different perspectives is also important when leaders are not reacting to external crises but too focused on delivering a future vision.

'If we're thinking so much about the future and how we're going to adapt, how is that going to impact our people? If you're so forward-thinking, how does that impact your core operations and how do you keep those in balance?'

Alignment and connection are key. Developing an inspiring vision has to go hand-in-hand with knowing how to bring people with you from the present into that new future, and that often involves learning from the past. The chief of staff has the ability to seize the still place in the centre of the organisation to '*always remain in the present but l*ook to the past to learn how to adapt for the future'.

2. Continually recalibrating

Keeping this balance – between short and long term, present and future, and external and internal – is a matter of making constant small readjustments, and remaining aware of long-term strategic priorities when '*There's always that thing coming through the door*'. Saïd Business School's Eleanor Murray described organisational resilience as '*a process, not an outcome*', achieved by '*constantly calibrating and recalibrating – what's happening in the external environment? and how will strategies play out internally? Always holding up a mirror to the leadership.*' This helps the leadership make the necessary strategic and operational changes that ensure the stability of the organisation.

For the chief of staff, this is about '*being able to look at micro and macro at the same time, being able to be flexible, to be genuine and able to support leaders*'. Another participant echoed this, saying that maintaining balance can involve '*holding two possibilities in your head at the same time'.* As in other contexts, the chief of staff must also be able to ask the right questions, and new questions that help the leaders to '*think outside the box*'.

For further reflection

Chiefs of staff in corporates and other business organisations seem to come to the role either through operations (including project management) or communications. Which tools or skills from either of these areas would be useful in creating a more deliberate approach to anticipating the disrupting influences of the future?

Activating Responses Internally

'There's only so much you can do with an organisation's culture from the bottom up if the leaders aren't showing the way. People will say, "I know you say fail fast but with my boss you can't fail at anything". They're going to say "we watch what our leaders are doing and we follow that" and those are the unspoken norms within an organisation's culture.'

The constant calibration and recalibration referred to by Eleanor Murray in the last section is not just about *'pivoting the strategy'* but about organisational preparedness and adaptability. The leaders, including the chief of staff, need to be able to bring the organisation along with them as they respond to changes in a volatile external environment. This requires an understanding of organisational culture and an ability to structure and activate networks.

Culture

There is no single, ideal culture. Different organisational forms often go hand in hand with different cultures and all can be effective.

The question is not *'can we create a better culture'* but *'do we have the best culture for our organisation in the situation we are now? What do we need to change and how can we change?'*

Culture can be measured along two dimensions: sociability and solidarity. Participants mapped where their own organisations sat against those two axes, and some interesting challenges revealed themselves.

'... people don't understand what a culture is. There are all of these old hurts that people are trying hard how to right. There's silos. There's a lot of things that people are trying to fix and not understanding how to do that. And there's a lot of toxic behaviours.'

'My company is a very small company but spread across the world. So we have very similar goals. We work with the same clients, same vendors and it's

very clear what we're trying to do. At the same time we all work remotely. We have a culture but it's one where we're all constantly on face-to-face or zoom time with our co-workers.'

'I've been at lots of organisations that push you up the sociability aspect of the graph, and some people feel the pressure to make their work lives and their personal lives one in those environments. And there's a lot of people who want to be able to shut it off. Who need to disconnect, who want to disconnect. Not feel forced to make work their social life, their personal life. Are we forcing employees who would otherwise be huge assets to our organisation in a way their don't want to move?'

There was a strong sense of the importance of leaders' modelling behaviours, and therefore of the importance of chiefs of staff being able to work with them to help them identify and reflect the desired culture.

'I believe that leaders create the culture by the way they show up every day. They're going to be creating those norms that say "we need to not fail" or "productivity's number one", so being able to work with those leaders around their resilience I believe will make the whole organisation resilient holistically.'

Participants also suggested that some chiefs of staff may have personalities better suited to one type of culture than another.

'I think there are a lot of people who are personally wired for a communal type of organisation, where they thrive in highly relational, high touch, lots of social connections types of environments. And others who would be very adept at leading in a fragmented organisation, where there's a lot of siloes, and could navigate those.'

It is possible to implement strategies to change cultures, by encouraging behaviour that demonstrates either sociability or solidarity, according to where you think the organisation needs to be. In fact, it is possible to make quite significant cultural shifts even over a period of weeks. But that means being very deliberate about your choices. Ask yourself, is that really the culture we require for the effective operation of our business?

'You need a chief of staff who understands the market, the community, the landscape, and the style'

Networks

Chiefs of staff are invariably well networked, both internally and externally.

They can be part of closed networks, in which everyone knows everyone else, and information moves very fast between them.

They are often also part of open networks, where people make connections outside their immediate departments, fields, or specialisms. Indeed, it is natural for chiefs of staff to find themselves as nodes connected to many different open and closed networks: they are *'network brokers'.*

Network structure matters when trying to activate and align people, particularly when needing to activate the right people at the right time. Closed networks potentially activate fast, because information flows so quickly – although that can make it difficult for people to challenge each other, resulting in 'ignorant certainty'. Open networks, on the other hand, move very slowly and take a lot of effort.

For the individual chief of staff there is power in being a network broker, helping you to navigate internal dynamics. You have information advantage: if something *'really cool'* emerges from elsewhere in the organisation, you are the first one to know.

'It's also about control and the information access you have that's one way; you can also control the information flow other ways, and the power that comes alongside that. You're not only the one who's the first to know, you can be the one who leads the communication and translation of it.'

For further reflection

Being deliberate about network management can shore up individual power and influence for the chief of staff. But organisational culture is a wider issue. Where in the organisation should the decision be made about the 'right' type of culture for effective operations?

Building Confidence in Community

The Oxford programme itself exemplifies the benefits of open networks for chiefs of staff. It brings together diverse people from different sectors to share and challenge ideas and experiences. Every participant went back to their organisation with new information to share and new tools to try out. But they also learnt that, while they may sometimes feel 'peripheral' in their organisations – on their own but temporary members of many different teams, parachuted into special projects – they are also members of a community that unites them.

And when it came to sharing the major challenges of their role, they discovered that the issues that they might have thought unique to their sector or organisational type are in fact common across the function.

Government/Military	Not for Profit
- Creating/recreating incentives to achieve policy objectives - Explaining/simplifying the complex - Connecting policy making with applicable practice - Communicating with politicians - Navigating different interest groups/ alignment - Activating the right people at the right time → network activation - Finding + empowering the right talent - Quality control	- COS as COO aligning internal objectives and resources with activity - Alignment with care purposes, adaptability and agility on strategy - Resource/revenue hunting - Succession planning - Creating the right incentives/alignment through change moments - Connecting practice with purpose during change - Activating different networks/stakeholders - Building communication language that connects - Being servant leader / leverage
Private	**Tertiary**
- Being a connector - Understanding/decoding changing norms for the organisation - Connective tissue between leader and organisation - Creating the right culture - Aligning capabilities inside with objectives - Communicating internally / insight gathering - Influence without authority - Being a coach to the principal	- Obtaining legitimacy/mandate/authority in policymaking - Navigating different interest groups/ "championing" - Activating the network/relational hearts and minds work - Managing divergent structures/incentives

The Chief of Staff as Leader

'It is about navigating governance structures. We as chiefs of staff need a complex understanding of power structures and influencing without authority. We can understand structures and the fact that authority exists. We might not have it but we can understand how it's laid out and how to strategically navigate it and so have influence.'

A recurring theme during discussions of the chief of staff role is whether it can be described as a leadership position and, if so, what sort of leadership it represents. Where does authority, influence, and decision-making power 'sit' within the organisation, and how does the chief of staff interact with those dynamics?

A common assumption is that the chief of staff 'leads without authority', and, indeed, that is what some participants identified as a major challenge.

'I realised I had no authority over the people I was working with. So I think my biggest challenge would be leading without authority, earning that social licence and getting people to play together well.'

However, there is a spectrum; and a discussion of what chiefs of staff actually do revealed that in many organisations they in fact operate with a large amount of formally 'delegated' authority. They represent the principal in some meetings, for example, or are placed in charge of key projects or functions.

'Many times the chief of staff is like an arm of the leader themselves.'

'There are certain things like IT, HR, different workstreams that don't have a clear leader, then I end up as a de facto leader for those.'

At least one participant had been able to exercise hiring-and-firing authority outside their own team, although this seems to be very rare.

But chiefs of staff can also have an informal authority that is derived from their relationship with their principal. They are perceived to be close enough to know the principal's mind, through working in partnership with them, or are able to call on the principal's support if they ask for it.

'I help my principal coordinate and strategise different workstreams.'

In some organisations there is a wider sense of collective responsibility or ownership, which can extend across many teams, suggesting the possibility of shared authority.

'I have a firm belief and my boss has a firm belief that we all ought to know how each other does their jobs. So that I can step away for a week and I have a team that can keep going without bothering me. We have ownership, but we own it together.'

But how important is authority to leadership anyway? One of the discussion groups during the programme started their presentation with an interesting analogy. Imagine, they said, an executive team meeting: all of the most highly paid and powerful members of the organisation's C-suite gathered in one room. The fire alarm goes off, and it is clearly not a test. How are they going to find their way to safety? The door opens to reveal the janitor – much lower down in the hierarchy than anyone in the room, but someone who knows the building like the back of his hand, and knows not only where the fire started but where it is probably going to spread. The entire team shows no hesitation in following the janitor:

'he has become the de facto leader and formal authority has gone out the window'.

What makes a leader is the fact that people 'follow' them – literally in this analogy, mentally in the case of most chiefs of staff. A successful chief of staff is a leader because people are willing to listen to them and to be influenced by them.

What sort of leadership is this, and how does a chief of staff develop the skills to be able to exercise it?

Servant leadership

The chief of staff leads discreetly, under the radar. They may not describe themselves as a leader, even privately, but they exert influence both through being the trusted advisor of their principal and through the strength of their own networks: they are the *'chief convenor'*.

'Increasingly there's a lot more network effect and value in organisations, rather than just the hierarchy.'

'In matrix organisations it's about how do I form collaborations between people and groups? How to make those networks work.'

'The trick was bringing over the core leadership group so that they knew who you were. If you can solve this at the top level, it sort of all cascades from there.'

Importantly, their focus is on supporting the principal and on doing what is right for the organisation.

'My purpose is to work with my principal to achieve the objectives of the company.'

Participants were clear that they did not need overt recognition of what they were doing for the organisation, and accepted that it was sometimes necessary that some senior stakeholders did not realise that they were involved at all.

'There's a limit to how much you can influence and how much authority you can exert. You have to make [them] believe that it was their idea.'

This sounds very much like the idea of 'servant leadership', first described by Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1970 essay 'The servant as leader'. He wrote:

'The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.'

The servant leader is characterised by empathy, honesty, listening and understanding, commitment to the organisation/purpose, and integrity – qualities shared by participants in the Oxford programme.

It is important to recognise that being a servant leader as chief of staff is not about 'looking after' your principal or following their orders but about being able to act as a trusted advisor, who is prepared to disagree (diplomatically) or question decisions when appropriate, because you are acting for the good of the organisation.

'A good relationship with the principal is at the base of everything ... it's about understanding the principal's style, positioning, what they're trying to achieve.'

'You have to be close to your principal but you also have to have that independent sense and judgement. You are not just an absolutely loyal servant.'

Soft skills and good habits

Trusted advisors cannot be hired in. They have to grow, and build their reputation through executing and enabling effectively. Discussions throughout the programme suggested the skills needed to influence as a servant leader, and some of the daily habits that effective chiefs of staff build into their daily practice.

- Concentrate on doing the 'small' things well, all the time: *'help the trains run on time'*.

- Learn *'Defence against the Dark Arts'*: this is really about manoeuvring politically. 'Politics' is often interpreted as something sinister and toxic, but leaders need to develop and practise political skills such as reading the room, understanding others' motivations, navigating organisational dynamics, negotiating, *'horse-trading'.* You need to know who you can have conversations with and to be able to build partnerships – not just with your principal but with the whole senior team.

- Create space for regular, in-person interactions: *'You have to go and break bread with people and you have to get them to break bread with each other'*.

- Build alliances by walking the halls; chat to colleagues informally, see what they're like in their own office environments, find out what their interests are.

- Check in frequently and casually – know how teams work so that you can recognise when something is 'off'.

- Be the broker in networking situations – make introductions, connect people and ideas.

- Give credit wherever, whenever and to whoever possible. Even when the credit is really due to you.

For further reflection

As observed in the Report from April's programme, the chief of staff's relationship with their principal is at the heart of everything they do. How does the principal's leadership style influence the extent of the servant-leadership practised by the chief of staff?

Conclusion

One of the most interesting exchanges during the programme came when one of the speakers was surprised to discover that participants were 'OK' with ghostwriting for their principals. The speaker described it as 'someone's taking credit for your work' and even as 'stealing'. They tried to persuade participants to see it as detrimental to their career progress, as they would not be able to claim their own achievements:

'It's deliberately a shadow role, but then how do you get the recognition you deserve?'

Participants, however, insisted that *'You're looking at the outcome, aren't you?'* and *'It's not about us, it's about them. Their success is our success'.*

These comments cement the idea in the previous section, that chiefs of staff display a purpose-led 'servant leadership' style. They also reinforce the special combination of characteristics that is common to successful chiefs of staff.

They are invariably highly capable and with exceptionally well-developed social skills. They can grasp the essence of a problem and quickly activate their networks to develop a solution. They can hold more than one idea in their heads at a time and be comfortable with ambiguity. But not only are they content to stay out of the limelight and let their principal take credit for their initiatives, they seem actively to enjoy it. When talking to each other during the programme, participants showed a certain amount of pride in their ability to work behind the scenes as an *éminence grise*: exercising power without anyone really realising it.

The speaker was not wrong in highlighting the contradiction inherent in this attitude, however. As a chief of staff, the better you are at your job, the less people are going to know it. And potentially that could make it harder to move on.

That is where the Chief of Staff Association comes in. Alongside the professional development activities it offers to members, it is working to raise the profile of the role in general. These reports from the programme do more than synthesise the discussions that take place: they are starting to help shape a broader understanding of this crucial yet by definition understated role in the centre of a wide variety of organisations.

There is much more still to be done. We welcome further discussions and insights from chiefs of staff and their colleagues to help expand their influence and strengthen their position as servant leader and chief convenor.