Pushing boundaries

Louise Teboul is the operations director of leadership organisation Common Purpose in the Midlands, and has been inspiring the leaders of today and tomorrow across the region’s business community for the last 15 years.

HENRY CARPENTER catches up with the much sought-after course operator two months into lockdown and discovers her work schedule is as busy as ever.
LT: What makes a great leader?

Louise Teboul: I think authenticity is key. This current situation is almost helping people to be a little bit more authentic and there has to be an appropriateness to the authenticity. It’s okay for us to be human; I think that makes us more accessible. Openness and empathy are really important.

HC: Particularly now I imagine. Has it been important.

Openness and empathy are really that makes us more accessible. Appropriateness to the authenticity. Authenticity is great leader?

What makes a great leader?

HC: I think authenticity is a bit more open, empathetic and helping people be a little bit more

LT: This is the really fascinating thing and is probably why I’m still here. Every cohort is different. We have big corporates to SMEs, not-for-profit organisations, charities, sole traders, housing associations... we even had a vicar on the last programme. Part of the challenge is constantly ensuring that we’ve got as diverse a group together as possible.

HC: I was having a bit of a mid-life crisis. I’d worked in a big PR firm consultancy but I came to the point where I felt that I wanted to make a difference and give something back. I’d always wanted to work in Birmingham where I’ve got a family connection. My grandfather was French and relocated to Birmingham after the war, and my father had a small business in the city.

HC: We have both. We ask people to put their people’s job titles and authority. This isn’t about who’s a lawyer or who’s a banker and we ask people to put aside any preconceptions.

HC: The job for Common Purpose came up 15 years ago as a programme director for Birmingham. Some people thought I was mad, taking a cut in pay and losing the perks I was used to.

HC: What is also fascinating is that the alumni network is really active afterwards; it’s not a transaction whereby you come and do a programme and it finishes. People are supported after their experience and that’s great from a sustainability point of view. The senior leaders will quite often come back and contribute for the future leaders’ programmes and the future leaders will contribute for student leaders’ programmes.

HC: How about the Common Purpose approach?

HC: It’s very much a collaborative approach. We ask: “How do we solve complex problems?” It’s not me sitting there and saying “These are the ten things you need to do.” It’s about having a conversation and picking the brains of these amazing people. I challenge our participants to reflect on what insights they are going to take from the programme and what are they going to do differently which we know works.

HC: We create this safe and confidential space where we effectively take away people’s job titles and authority. This isn’t about who’s a lawyer or who’s a banker and we ask people to put aside any preconceptions.

HC: You then get that challenge and objectivity from people who are outside of your world because you’re not bogged down in the detail, or the politics with a small P, or the bureaucracy. They just ask questions from a genuine point of curiosity.

HC: Do you work with seats of power?

HC: Yeah, definitely. We have not only worked with university leaders but also their students. This is fantastic for the students because they get that experience of getting out and looking at real-life challenges meeting the leaders who are part of our alumni network. We’ve also had schools and teachers involved before.

HC: How does Common Purpose look now compared to 15 years ago?

HC: It’s been a huge change. We’ve adapted our programmes and our offering to suit our clients’ needs.

Our programmes are shorter than they used to be but are still quite intense. People are becoming more time-poor and have a lot of other priorities, so our products have adapted.

HC: However, we don’t have this fantastic programme aimed at future leaders called the Streetwise MBA that focuses on the idea of aligning with cultural intelligence.

HC: We also have a framework called the Core and Flex framework, which is understanding who you are at your core and what is core to you, and how you can flex to get the best from the people that you work with. It’s quite deep and personal and we look at things like blind spots and there’s a 360 degree feedback there. That’s new and I’ve been working on that for a couple of years.

HC: Birmingham is a great place to be able to immerse people in a real experience of diversity and different cultures. And we don’t just mean ethnicity – it relates to introverts, extraverts or it could be cognitive diversity. It could be all sorts of diversity. I love that.

HC: We aren’t doing students’ programmes 15 years ago, so it’s wonderful to work with future leaders. Also, we realised a few years ago that to be sustainable we needed to concentrate on regional consultations. So, a lot has changed.

HC: How far ahead do your clients come from?

HC: We have people from across the whole of the Midlands. Last year someone came from London. I believe that if the quality of the content and the conversation is strong enough, people will travel for it. I think a lot of people are really interested in a local context, relationships and a more diverse network.

HC: Let’s look ahead five, ten years down the line. Have you got any grand plans?

HC: We’ll definitely be doing more virtually. We have already started to connect our alumni more globally and I think that gives us a fantastic opportunity. But I don’t think the essence of what we do will change – helping leaders cross boundaries. The mechanism will perhaps adapt.
But I don’t think the essence of what we do will change – helping leaders cross boundaries. The mechanism will perhaps adapt and change but one thing I’ve been very proud of, and one of the reasons I’ve stayed so long, is that we don’t lose sight of what our purpose is. There definitely will be new products. I have no doubt, for instance, that new initiatives could be built around environmental leadership.

Really, it is about crossing boundaries and exploring a higher purpose.

HC: There is obviously a huge appetite for the approach you take.

LT: Over the last year or 18 months there has been more of a push towards organisations and leaders thinking about their purpose. I think the next generation of people coming into work are expecting that. There’s been a push from millennials as they seem more interested in this area.

I do think this current crisis will mean it continues. The financial bottom line is what many organisations and businesses have been set up to focus on and that’s what they’re judged by. But I do think the emphasis will change because everyone from consumers to staff will start to look at other measures more . . . and I think that’s a really healthy thing.

HC: The work you do seems all-encompassing. Do you find it easy to switch off?

LT: I have given up thinking about work-life balance! I think about life balance. I love what I do so much and in the ‘normal world’ I’m out at events from the early morning to late at night. It’s often really long hours, but I love it.