

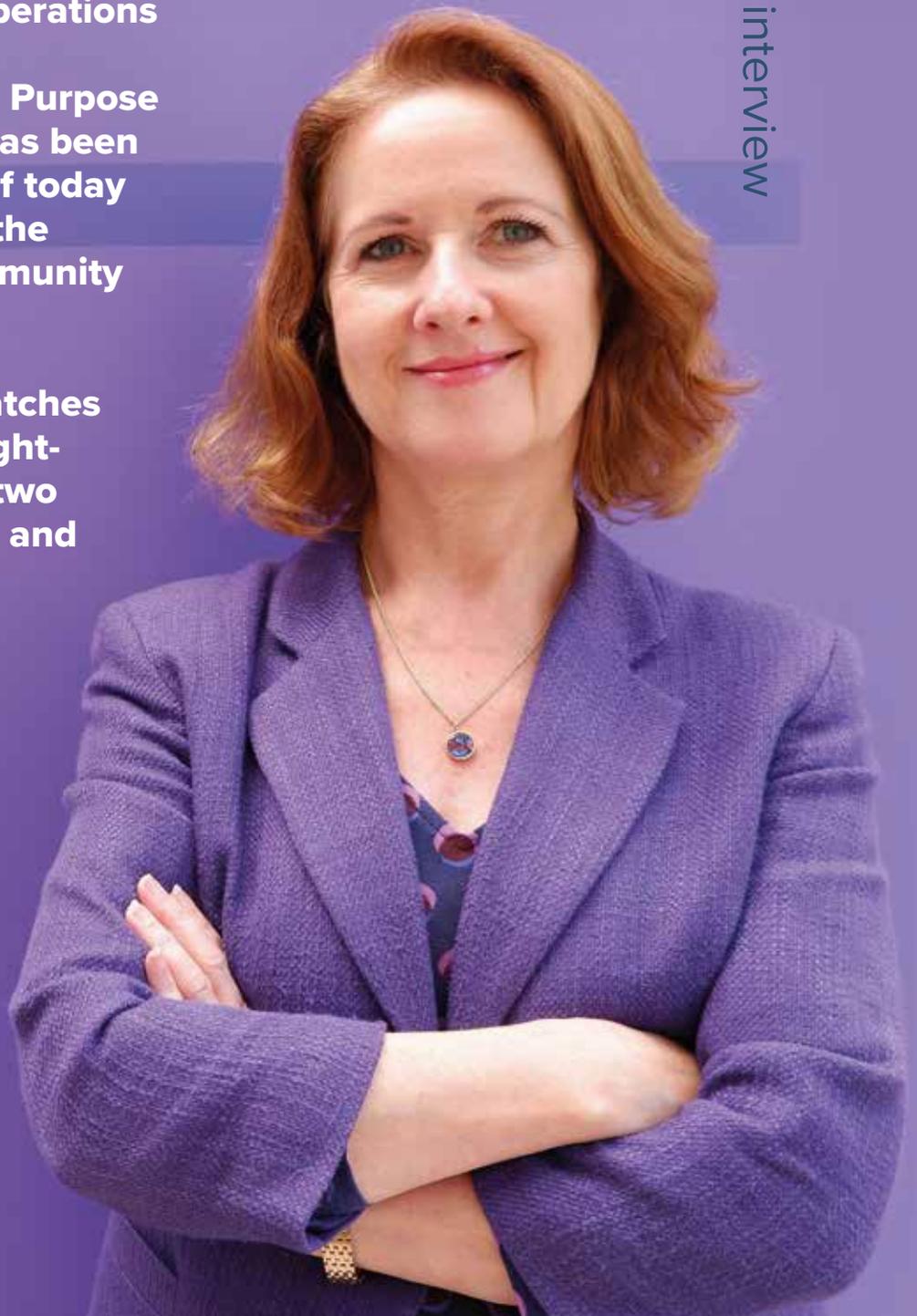
Pushing boundaries

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.

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Henry Carpenter: What makes a great leader?

Louise Teboul: I think authenticity is key. This current situation is almost helping people 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 lockdown meant something entirely new for leadership?

LT: It's really interesting because it is forcing people to be more agile. I used to work in crisis comms and quite often with a situation you know what the end game is, but this is like nothing any of us have ever experienced. It's going on much longer. There's much more uncertainty. So that's a huge challenge for leaders – they are having to be agile and adapt constantly, and they don't necessarily have the answers.

Leaders are having to offer clarity because that's what their staff, customers and stakeholders need. Some leaders are having to be a bit more open, empathetic and understanding about the challenges. They are realising that it's okay to get in touch with people to check on how they're doing.

It's not about you as a leader, it's about you as an individual, and that

chimes with my views with leadership. Leadership is not about authority; it's about people stepping up and out and making a difference. I think this is a fascinating time for leaders and I do think there will be some very positive things coming out of all this.

HC: How have you found leaders' response to the current situation?

LT: I've found that some have taken an optimistic attitude while others, quite understandably, have become far more entrenched and needed time to get their heads around it.

HC: We are now two months into lockdown. What has this meant to your work pattern?

LT: In some ways it's changed a huge amount and in other ways it hasn't. Our leadership programmes are usually experiential and involve taking people out and about, so that's changed massively, but we've been able to replicate much of what we do online. Using Zoom we've had breakout rooms, Q&A sessions, and we've been able to offer people the chance to connect and talk about leadership, while sharing challenges and opportunities in a real way.

We are very much about peers talking to peers. We've done virtual learning groups with our senior leaders' programme, we're doing café conversations, we've run some virtual alumni events . . . so we've adapted what we would normally do and people have been responding really well. I'm very proud of the team and grateful to our contributors.

HC: When the initial paralysis set in, how quickly did you have to adapt?

LT: Very quickly. We've always done blended learning, including webinars and other virtual modules. We had our international forum due in March which would have comprised 100 of us from across the world. We had already decided to run that virtually so in a way we were guinea pigs for what we could achieve with Zoom. It was a rapid turnaround.

I am part of the UK senior team and we started our Birmingham

programme the week lockdown was being considered. We made the decision one day and delivered the following day.

None of us wanted to let our customers and participants down. Obviously people have had new pressures put on them, but we've been really encouraged at how many wanted to continue with us and find they are getting value from the programmes. We pivoted very quickly and it was a steep learning curve for some of us.

HC: Tell me more about Common Purpose. When did the Birmingham operation launch and how many regions are there?

LT: Common Purpose started 30 years ago and Birmingham launched in 1991. There are only seven regions. We're a not-for-profit organisation and are much smaller than people imagine.

HC: How did you get involved?

LT: I joke that I was having a bit of a mid-life crisis. I'd worked in a big PR comms 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.

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.

When I worked in the oil industry, our refineries put people on Common Purpose. I used to lead the philanthropic giving side of the operation so I'd work with charities and see the huge impact this could make.

However, I didn't want to just send out cheques and give away money. I wanted to do something that used my skills but had meaning. I love working with people so came in and

thought I'll do it for a year to see if it works out. The longest I'd ever stayed anywhere before this job was five years!

HC: Tell me about your clients and how they vary.

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.

I am constantly fascinated by the amazing people I get to meet. We bring them together and they then learn from each other and with each other.

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: And what about the Common Purpose approach?

LT: It is very much a collaborative approach. We ask: "How do we solve complex problems?" It's not me sitting

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there going: "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.

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.

You then get that challenge and objectivity from people who are outside of your world because they'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 education?

LT: 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 about 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?

LT: We have changed in that 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 really quite intense. People are becoming more time-poor and have a lot of other priorities, so the products have adapted.

Back then, we didn't have this fantastic programme aimed at future leaders called the Streetwise MBA that focuses on this idea of leading with cultural intelligence.

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 report too. That's new and I've been working on that for a couple of years.

Birmingham is a really 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, extroverts or it could be cognitive diversity. It could be all sorts of diversity. I love that.

We weren'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 conurbations. So, a lot has changed.

HC: How far afield do your clients come from?

LT: I 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?

LT: 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.

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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



Louise Teboul at the Common Purpose 30 years event

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.



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