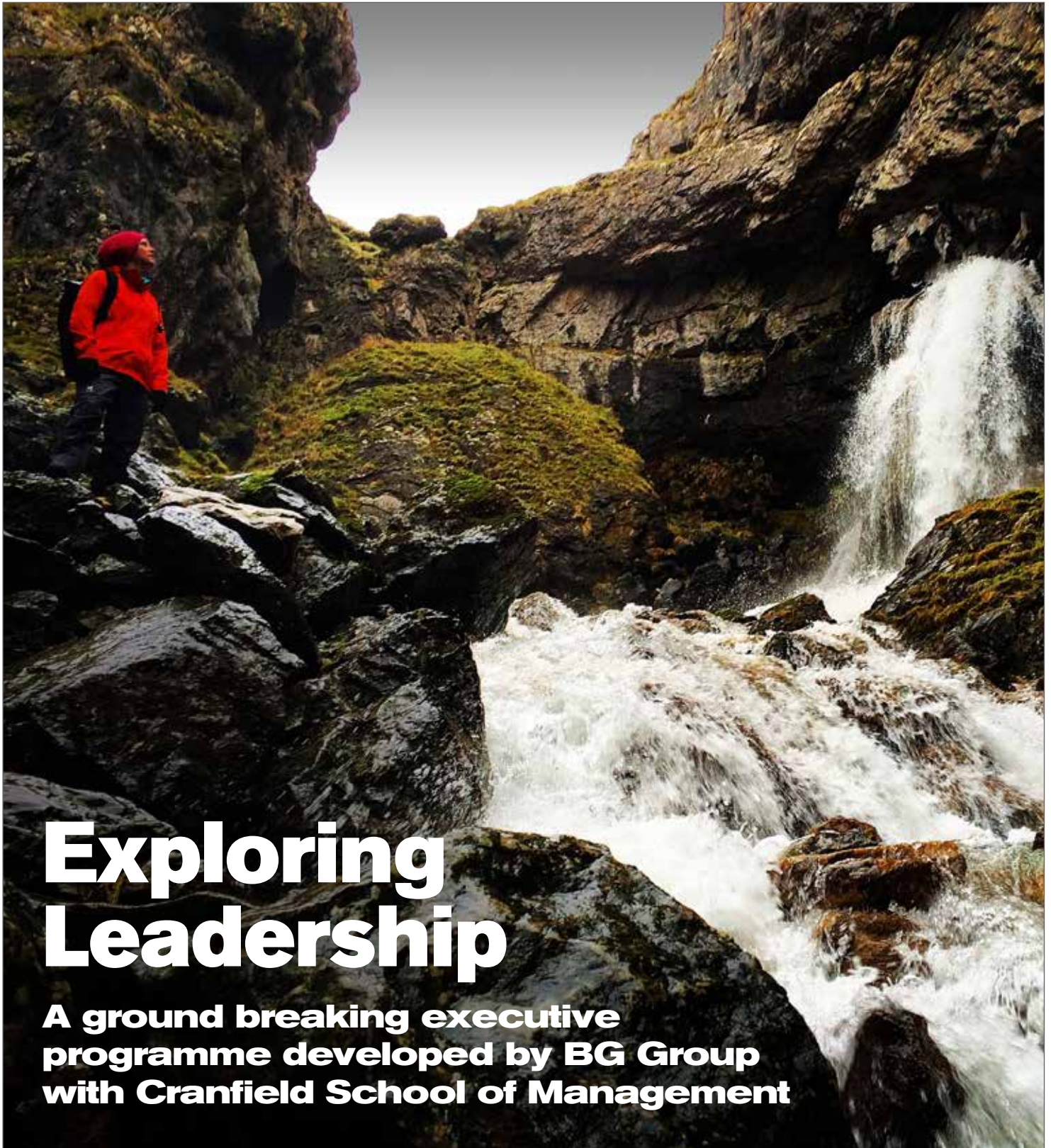


Developing Leaders

Big picture leadership, *fine-tuned* Quarterly



Exploring Leadership

A ground breaking executive programme developed by BG Group with Cranfield School of Management



Coaching themes centred on the three key questions of personal mastery, 'who am I?', 'where am I going?', 'why am I going there?'

Exploring Leadership

BG Group's *Exploring Leadership* Program Developed with Cranfield

The road to hell, so runs the saying, is paved with good intentions. The proverb conjures up images of January gym memberships laid out alongside kitchen gadgets still in their boxes, interspersed with unredeemed coupons that expired ages ago. In the workplace good intentions motivate training programs of every shape and size. But what is the point of spending time and resources on executive education if it does not actually improve participants' performance?

It is a question Mark Threlfall, Executive Development Director at Cranfield University School of Management, asks himself a lot. His answers pivot away from an exclusive focus on traditional notions of knowledge transfer. Instead, in conversations with his broad range of corporate clients, Threlfall emphasises 'Soft Systems Thinking' which enable him and his team to interpret organizational situations and needs at a deeper, intuitive level. The results are custom programs characterized by highly innovative design as well as more effective learning interventions.

One such client is BG Group, the multinational oil and gas company headquartered in Reading in the UK, recently acquired by Shell. BG has operations in 25 countries and produces around 680,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day. It has a major Liquefied Natural Gas business and is the largest supplier of LNG to the United States. As of 31 December 2009 it had total proven commercial reserves of 2.6 billion barrels (410,000,000 m3) of oil equivalent. What BG also has, according to the company's Head of Learning & Development, Craig Darroch, is:

"A complete and mature understanding of the impact of learning on business performance, talent acquisition/retention and strategy execution. All members of leadership and management place a great deal of importance on continuous development, which a lot of companies claim to do, but BG Group authentically focuses attention on impactful learning."

This understanding is aggregated into a corporate leadership model titled LEADS (Learn, Engage, Aspire, Deliver, Skilled) that encapsulates the capabilities and behaviours BG seeks to foster in its business leaders. LEADS aims to provide a fair and consistent way of identifying and developing talent worldwide centred on three core curriculum management and leadership programs, *Management Essentials*, *Organizational Leadership* and *Exploring Leadership*.

The last of these was developed through the collaboration of Darroch at BG and Threlfall at Cranfield. It is a multi-module program combining classic operative program elements with more speculative coaching themes centred on the *three key questions of personal mastery*, 'who am I?', 'where am I going?', 'why am I going there?'

Exploring Leadership is targeted at middle to senior managers at the fulcrum of strategic intent. From the start Threlfall preferred a Catherine wheel rather than trickle down approach, one that could cascade results more effectively across BG's c.10,000 directly and indirectly contracted employees.

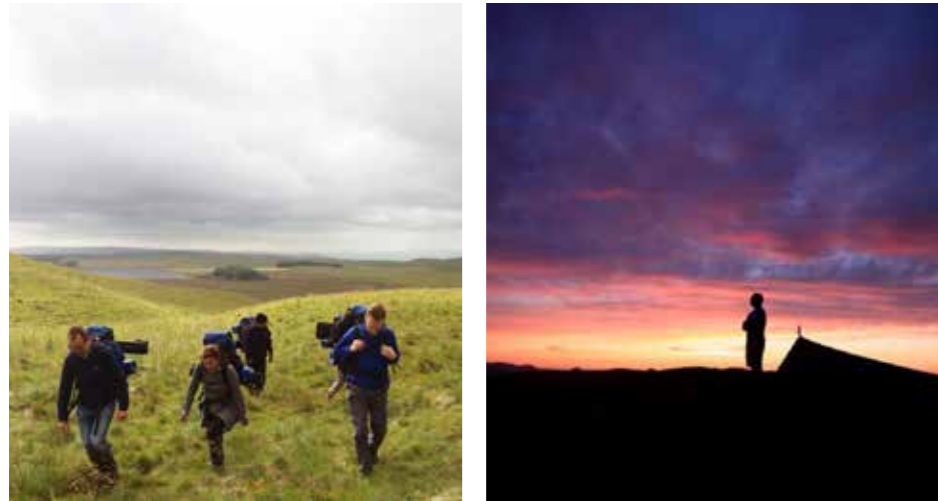
"If you consider the important role the top of the hierarchy have in role modelling the leadership behaviours then the argument for top down holds water. However to develop layers at this level and the one below, in isolation, opens up the possibility of driving a wedge between these two levels. As each embarks upon their own development journey a gap can occur. I'd advocate an approach that incorporates the levels into a collective learning experience so they embark upon the journey together. This then creates an understanding and a 'currency' within these populations and cements relationships." Says Threlfall.

Exploring Leadership is delivered in cohorts of around twenty participants divided into five coaching sets. The program comprises three modules. Day one of the first module focuses on participants' context for leadership and their concept of personal mastery. The intention is that they will have the chance to take a step back from the hectic pace of corporate existence and take a look at the way they are leading their life.

The whole of day two is given over to a period of extended personal reflection, the Solo. Participants are taken out to the country and left. From this splendid isolation, with nothing more than basic shelter and sustenance for up to six hours, comes an experience of solitude providing a powerful opportunity for each individual to have undistracted alone time to reflect on past experiences and see how these can be related to future ambitions.

At the end of the Solo participants, hopefully, will understand that how they lead themselves determines how effectively they lead others. They will be detached from any fixed view of what a leader should do or how they should operate other than to be a real and authentic person focused on adding value both personally and professionally.





Participants then use this enhanced self-awareness to explore how to develop more powerful working relationships. These can be with members of their team, peers, individuals higher up in the company, or key internal and external stakeholders. In their coaching set, participants practice the skills of dialogue, active listening and enquiry so as to broaden and deepen their understanding of relationship-affecting factors. Then they hold a “live” conversation with their coach/facilitator in the role of that key stakeholder with other members of the set providing feedback in real time on impact and effectiveness.

Between modules participants have the opportunity to maintain their learning and personal development momentum through individual coaching sessions (delivered via Skype). The aim of these sessions is to review progress on participants’ inter-modular individual and business developmental commitments, to discuss blockers and enablers, as well as to explore any issues arising within their own leadership context.

Online content is also provided between face-to-face sessions. The Leveraging Your Social Capital aspect of the program looks at the notion of social capital and asks of participants how fit for purpose is their network in terms of allowing them to deliver on strategic goals? This content is examined under the lenses of:

Bonding – How close are participants’ relationships and to what degree are they relationships with high degrees of trust and commonality?

Bridging – How diverse and wide is their network outside of their immediate context?

Brokering –To what extent do they undertake activities across their network which build relationships and deliver shared goals?

Module Two is titled *Looking Up and Out*. This virtual module gives participants the opportunity to explore leadership and innovations in other contexts. There are two key activities *The Leadership Exchange* and *Looking Up and Out*. At the heart of these activities, which are owned and organized by the participant, is the notion of being present and in the moment.

The Leadership Exchange pairs participants with another member of the cohort from a different part of the business with each taking turns to visit the other at work as a host and observer. The observer shadows the host, acting as a mirror, observer and learner. The host is given direct feedback on what has been observed in relation to tasks, interactions and themselves. This ‘bonding’ exercise deploys the social capital terminology, learned between modules, and is targeted at breaking down internal silos to reveal how the other role or function creates value in the organization.



Looking Up and Out involves an experience outside of BG Group (and preferably outside the Oil and Gas sector). This activity can have a direct link into some of the issues that participants are grappling with within their role, or it can be something completely unrelated to their daily focus. The choice is the individual’s to make and they have to organise this for themselves.

Module Three, *Leading Change with Resilience*, commences with participants sharing (with their coaching sets) their Module Two experiences as well as their progress on their inter-modular commitments, outlining key successes and failures, working as a support and challenge group, identifying personal and organizational learning points. At its core, this module explores notions of change by engaging in a dialogue process around *wicked problems* faced within the business.

Having identified what wicked problems are faced by the business, participants consider their collective response in terms of addressing such challenges. “This linkage of organization issues to a personal responsibility,” argues Threlfall, “anchors the wicked problems in each person’s context.”

The final day is spent on a *dialogue walk*. This is a collaborative walk in the country during which participants will work on their own, in pairs and in coaching sets to share their reflections and learning from the program and begin to formulate their intentions for their leadership in the future. The dialogue walk brings together the strands of the

THE SOLO EXPERIENCE is central to not only Module 1, but the whole program, representing both a ‘rite of passage’ and becoming a valued ‘currency’ amongst program alumni. “How was your Solo?” being the brightest red thread connecting those who have completed *Exploring Leadership*.

Mark Threlfall is aware that the Solo element causes anxiety, it is an unfamiliar activity and participants do not know how to approach it; it is equally an ambitious thing for the program leaders to bring into an executive program, being ‘out there’ in many senses – and requires confidence to position it in a corporate learning setting. However, it is based upon well understood fundamentals – and, without a doubt, according to Threlfall, delivers huge impact.

Founded upon the work of MIT professor, Otto Scharmer, and his Theory U (see Developing Leaders issue 2, 2010, “Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges” <http://goo.gl/LNE58L>), and drawing on the work of leadership expert Kevin Cashman, author of “The Pause Principle: Step Back to Lean Forward”, the Solo experience can be delivered in a variety of levels of intensity. For the BG Program, Threlfall and Darroch built the module around a six-hour Solo experience. This takes place in the Yorkshire

Dales in the UK, and also in Australia, and the USA – each of which bring their own weather challenges be that wild and windy or searingly hot.

The day before the main Solo experience, the participants take part in a mini-Solo, of just twenty minutes, where they get to understand the concept and feel what it will be like, being alone with themselves – with no watch, just their own thoughts, in open but limited space and away from the standard ‘activist learning’ approach – experiencing the present. The following day they go to their remote locations in the wild, with three questions circulating in their mind: Who am I? Where am I going [in my life]? Why am I going there? They are required to stay within a 10m square area for six hours, without any further human interaction, before the LD team collects them.

During the six hours participants typically feel a wide range of emotions explains Threlfall, from boredom and restlessness through to increasing moments of lucidity, as the ‘inner chatter’ falls away and thoughts come into their mind that are clearer and more profound. All participants are issued with ‘the envelope’ which they can turn to if they require, to help their reflective thinking. It contains prompts around the Wheel of Life, that asks you to

assess your life in eight distinct segments; or to write a letter to your 18 or 75 year old self. As Threlfall observes, the location is key, it has to have grandeur and scale, and a vista to allow the participant to be immersed in the experience.

The impact of the Solo experience takes different times to land for different people, many return from their location, with a distinct change of attitude, others find that the impact does not arrive until they have returned to the hustle of normal life, and sometimes longer. The wind down that evening is important – no activities are scheduled, as people still have many new thoughts to process. They are however told they must write a poem about the experience to read out to the group the following morning. The poems are received without comment, but force the participants to capture some of their emotions and thinking concisely. “There have been some very powerful and moving poems” recalls Threlfall “but it also shows the participants that to be authentic they have to share, and be strong, even in challenging situations”.

The longer term ‘unpacking’ of the Solo experience takes place in the 1-2-1 and inter-modular coaching, where many of the issues surfaced by the experience are connected to their current situation and future plans.



program, coming back to the *three key questions of personal mastery*. This is then articulated in the creation of a personal intentions video which, once captured, is sent to the participant post program - a gentle reminder of the good intentions considered and resolutions made while on the program.

A key factor in this success of *Exploring Leadership* is its eschewing of the traditional didactic approach to learning, familiar from school and university. In that model, according to Threlfall, the teacher engages in a knowledge transfer process akin to “spray hosing knowledge from the front of the class, in the hope that new information will somehow, miraculously, embed itself in the recipient, ready to be utilised at a later date.”

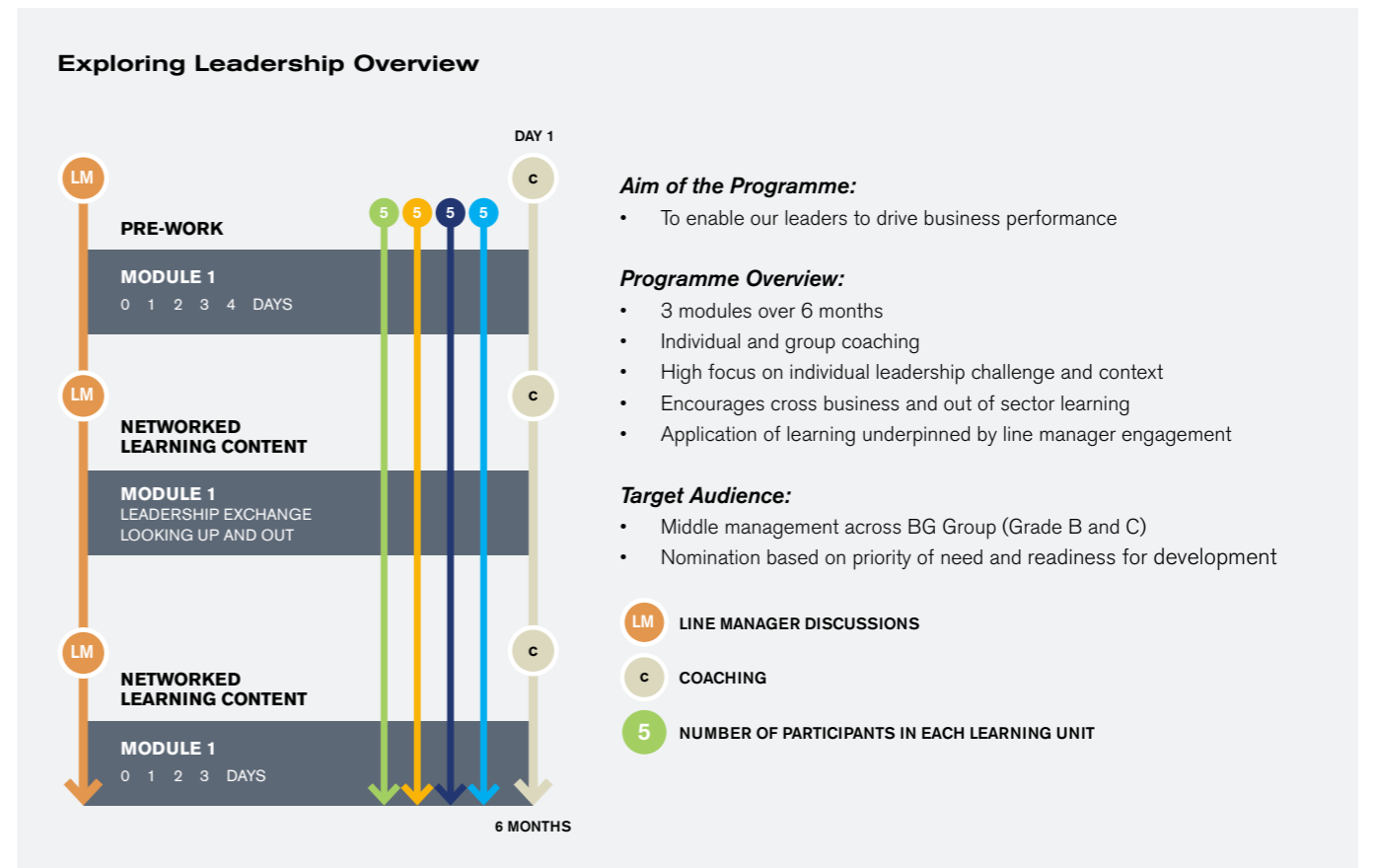
Whether or not the traditional didactic approach is ‘a redundant concept’ in all circumstances certainly it is unlikely to be as effective in a scenario where the learners possess as much, if not greater, knowledge of the business than the instructor. *Exploring Leadership* participants include global experts in their field, laurelled academics and technical managers responsible for multi-billion dollar projects and high value assets. Actively engaging such eminent individuals in productive introspection, as the BG / Cranfield collaboration demonstrates, takes a more creative approach to learning than a chalkboard at the front of a lecture hall.

Many other leadership development programs still operating close to this model, are primarily an intellectual process, and only skirt around the realms of emotional intelligence. The vanguard of executive education best practice however makes the connection to the whole person bringing the intellectual, emotional and visceral into the development space as *Exploring Leadership* sets out to.

“You’ve never been out of college! You don’t know what it’s like out there! I’ve worked in the private sector. They expect results.” Ghostbusters (1984)

What does the client make of all this? For all that the BG/Cranfield collaboration challenges old assumptions about learning; even though the content is more likely to be delivered in the Yorkshire Dales, Australia’s Lamington National Park or the Artesian Lakes outside Houston than in a hotel/conference centre, still there is an eagle eye observing all, looking for a definite return on his company’s investment. Craig Darroch has been around long enough to tell productive and unproductive exec-ed programs apart.

The success of *Exploring Leadership* in delivering that comfort in ambiguity lies in the program’s unique capacity to speak to the participants in terms of who they are, not simply what they do.



“The worst programs I know of have no connection between the content and the needs of the learners or business. I have removed a number of programs from organizations that are more entertainment than education with activities that have no connection to an actual learning need. These might get great feedback from delegates because they are great fun. Fun in learning is a key element but it shouldn’t be the only component. A number of programs use the creative arts or abstract activities and expect people to make the correlation between lessons and personal development areas. Often this assumption gives a bad name to using the creative arts or experiential learning and this is unfortunate as these activities definitely can play a great part in leadership programs, but the activities need to be carefully selected based on the business need.”

“The best programs are carefully designed in conjunction with the business using a cross section of views and data about what needs to change in a leadership community. The content should be designed using appropriate activities that will help people understand the need for learning with a focus on the application or ‘So What’ of every activity. The best programs connect with each person on the program so that people feel an individual approach even though the design is for the full community. It is based on the context and requirements of the business rather than the view of generic latest thinking and ownership must be by the participants to continue their learning beyond the boundaries of the formal program.”

BG group is an organization with a predisposition towards an engineering culture. Engineers tend to like linear things, processes possessing definite beginnings and ends. For the expert engineer lack of certainty in outcome is a difficult concept to accept. But truly transformational development is not a linear, sequential process that unfolds neatly allowing it to be distilled down into a toolkit. It must equip individuals to be comfortable to lead within an emerging future and be comfortable with notions of ambiguity and uncertainty.

The success of *Exploring Leadership* in delivering that *comfort in ambiguity* lies in the program’s unique capacity to speak to the participants in terms of who they are, not simply what they do.



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For the past four years, Cranfield School of Management has been consistently ranked amongst the top 10 business schools worldwide for customized executive development and we are also pleased to announce that the Exploring Leadership program highlighted in this article has been awarded the 2016 EFMD Excellence in Practice Gold Award for Executive Development.

Whether you have a specific development need now or would like to talk more generally about how we could support development in your organization, please get in touch. We would be delighted to talk to you.

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