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Leading with Impact: A Sandler Lanz Programme for Senior Women

By Veronica Hannon

Have you wished you had handled a difficult conversation more effectively, played that board meeting differently, dealt more firmly with a tricky direct report or negotiated more successfully with a challenging client? Imagine instead being in control of the impact you have as a leader moment by moment – having the confidence to be your most skilful and sophisticated self no matter what the circumstances.

It is this capacity that the Sandler Lanz Senior Women's Impact Programme seeks to address. Journalist and communications expert Veronica Hannon explores the genesis and philosophy of the programme and speaks to four highly successful alumni.

Created and delivered by Catherine Sandler and Kate Lanz, the programme helps leaders identify where they go wrong when under pressure and to generate new and more effective behavioural strategies. The programme, which consists of one full and one half day, is carefully tailored to meet the needs of each member of the group. It focuses on the rapid and intensive development of influencing skills and the ability to communicate effectively even in highly uncomfortable situations.

Kate Lanz describes how the programme came about:

"In 2008, we had worked with several senior women who had gained a good deal from individual coaching but were looking for something extra to help them consolidate their 'in the moment' leadership behaviours when faced with particularly difficult situations. We could not find any courses that were suitable so decided to create our own programme. By limiting each group to a maximum of five or six, we are able to meet specific needs to an unusual degree while keeping their investment of time and money to a reasonable level. We have run four groups now and have had tremendously positive feedback".

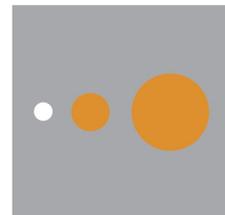
Why just for women?

There could be a question about why this is a women-only programme. "We are strong believers in the benefits of single-sex groups for this kind of event," Catherine explains. "Experience shows that trust and rapport can be established exceptionally quickly, which is important as the programme is short and intensive and is based on experiential learning. The more the participants are able to open up and work outside their comfort zone, the faster and deeper the progress they make.

We work very hard to create a safe and confidential environment. We take only one woman from each organisation or sector so delegates can share personal and professional information honestly without fear of external repercussions. We are considering running a men-only version of the programme as the need to enhance leadership impact and become consistently skilful when under pressure does not only apply to senior women. That said, we have found that senior women who often work in a male-dominated environment welcome the chance to compare notes and make sure that this situation does not lead to less confident or high-impact behaviour on their part.

Experiential learning and powerful feedback deliver fast results

All participants arrive having undertaken pre-work that generates a good deal of data about their individual strengths and weaknesses in the area of leadership impact. After exploring an influencing model (used by London Business School) and hearing from a body language specialist, each delegate presents a real situation from their workplace and role-plays the 'difficult conversation' with the help of one of their peers. This is filmed and the footage reviewed. Catherine and Kate draw out constructive feedback from the other members of the group and provide their own feedback. This method enables extraordinary progress to be made in a short space of time.



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Caroline Grounds, a partner in the Transactions team at Ernst & Young attended the first Senior Women's Impact Programme. While Caroline has forged a long and very successful career in the firm, she had received feedback internally that she was coming over at times as too impatient. Admitting that this could happen when she was under particular pressure from her client work, and aware that she found certain colleague relationships difficult to handle, Caroline joined the programme with a view to stepping outside her comfort zone and taking a much closer look at herself as a leader.

"It was only by participating in a role-play session and having the opportunity to review it on video afterwards that I realised how much I was over-anticipating situations and responses. I was often too ready to 'battle through' my ideas, especially when I was in meetings, when a calmer approach would have been more effective. I understood that I wasn't actually giving people enough time to reflect or respond to me or my input and I was coming across as combative", says Caroline.

"Although I was very uncomfortable being filmed and the early footage was dreadful to watch, the feedback from the other senior women – and from Catherine and Kate – provided me with specific and constructive insights on what I was doing wrong (and right) and how to change that. Learning how I come across to people who don't know me was incredibly helpful and I quickly realised how I could use that to begin to do things differently with those I work with," she says.

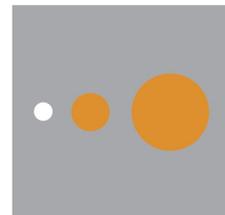
"During the role plays it's very important not to let people carry on when things have veered off course," says Kate Lanz. *"Leaders need to experience what it feels like when they approach situations in a way which is genuinely skilful and they will usually repeat the exercise several times before achieving this. We have seen almost all the programme participants experience a 'breakthrough moment' in which they find the confident, effective 'voice' they are looking for. The highly supportive atmosphere and the feedback from both coaches and peers are incredibly powerful in helping each individual gain insight and embed new behaviours – fast!"*

Another participant was **Sarah Weir**, Head of Arts and Cultural Strategy for the Olympic Delivery Authority. She moved into this role after being the boss of Arts Council England, London. In one step she had gone from leading a large organisation with a sizeable budget to a newly created role at the Olympic Delivery Authority with no dedicated budget and a team of two. Her first objective was to raise sufficient funding to enable art to be imaginatively integrated into the delivery of the Olympic park infrastructure.

"With no initial budget and a tiny team, my primary role within the Olympic Delivery Authority was that of an influencer to very senior stakeholders and decision-makers. Arts and culture within a construction company context are not always easy bedfellows and I had to learn a wide range of different developers', builders' and construction companies' languages very fast. I also had to deal with a much wider range of people at a junior level than I had been used to for many years; I was feeling some initial frustration and because I was getting impatient, I was not dealing with it well," says Sarah.

"I quickly recognised that my leadership style was stuck, I had been using it for twenty years in senior roles and now it wasn't getting the results I wanted. My particular influencing style was focused on painting a vision of the far future and then driving it through. The programme helped me realise that the focus on the shorter-term target of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and the successful delivery of the Olympic park required a different approach, especially as I needed to learn leadership without being the overall leader," she explains.

As a direct result of securing a better understanding of her influencing style, Sarah recognised that while being tough and persistent may drive results, it also has drawbacks and could be experienced as inflexible and dogmatic. *"Much of this leadership style was developed in my early career growing up in the City and rising to be the first female MD in the Lloyd's insurance market. I had to do business like that then, but I don't need to be like that now - my current role requires a much wider range of skills to use in this different environment,"* she says. She believes she has applied her insight and learning from the programme with immediate positive results. For example, she allowed a junior colleague to run an important meeting instead of leading it herself as she normally would, which enabled her leadership to be experienced in a different way and significantly improved some key working relationships.



The importance of body language

Just as critical as gaining self-awareness, changing behaviours and using a range of influencing styles, learning to lead with impact also requires individuals to reflect on the way they use their body and voice. The Senior Women's Impact Programme includes sessions with Ailsa Gudgeon, the Sandler Lanz specialist voice and body communication coach. Ailsa works individually enabling each participant to identify what they need to unlearn and relearn in relation to their posture, breathing, voice, body language and image.

Celia Gaffney runs Fairmile Consulting that she founded in 2006 after leaving KPMG. Fairmile now helps organisations operationalise their strategy.

"In setting up the business I moved quickly from being a partner in a large organisation with a big brand to establishing and running a new set-up and delivery approach. During this transition I wanted to continue my professional development so I could stay ahead in key areas such as effective client service. My leadership role is now much more self-reliant and I have to deliver continuously," explains Celia.

By focusing on her leadership behaviour – including her body language and voice – Celia Gaffney has become more conscious of her own reactions and responses to tricky situations. *"With the insight I gained from the programme, I'm able to stay focussed on what I need to achieve as a leader, rather than losing perspective and being lost in detail. I accept now that I don't need to seek permission for something to happen. I realised this is a tremendous waste of business time and leadership energy. Now I can cut to the chase, ask the killer questions and get the results,"* she says.

A senior executive at a leading American investment bank spoke enthusiastically about what she had gained from the experience. In particular, she realised that at meetings with more senior people (in what is an extremely male-dominated environment), her impact and authority tended to drop away.

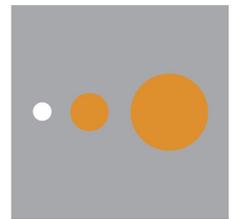
"The biggest outcome of the course was recognising that I needed to come across with more gravitas and impact in my dealings with senior colleagues. Working with other women leaders in a small group environment, through their feedback and seeing myself on camera, I was able to address how I could change my body language and behaviour to reframe my approach. Back in the organisation I can now step up and work in partnership with my colleagues. I am also very aware of unhelpful triggers, such as self-doubt, and can change my style and achieve a much better outcome," she explains.

Remaining calm and focused under pressure

Coping with pressure is part of leadership but all leaders have their 'hot buttons' – people or situations that they find particularly difficult to handle. When stressed in this way, it is easy for a leader to 'revert to type' and fall back on one or two preferred ways of dealing with difficult challenges. The more sophisticated versions of themselves that they have learnt and developed over many years often fall away in the heat of the moment. The recent recession, continued economic uncertainty and high levels of organisational change mean that current pressures on leaders in the workplace remain particularly high.

Caroline Grounds' business area in Ernst & Young, for example, was hit by the recession as for a period there was less deal activity and more client businesses struggling with the consequences of the recession. Caroline explains that, despite this, the insights into herself that she gained via the programme meant that *"I was able to develop a new mindset and approach to clients and colleagues. For many of them this was their first experience of recession; the associated uncertainty and change in circumstances was hugely unsettling and so it was important to keep them calm and reassured through my behaviour. To achieve this I had to know how I was coming over to others so that I could understand how to connect emotionally with their situation."*

Sarah Weir agrees, *"Of course I recognise that I do revert to type when under stress, but now I'm much more conscious of this and have learned strategies to stop myself! Doing this successfully is about bringing these issues into your full consciousness and not letting them lie in the sub-conscious where they do little good."*



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Embedding behaviours

As senior leaders, these women had attended many other management programmes and had found that often theory failed to translate into practice. With this programme, there was vivid recall and the conviction that the experiential learning in particular had embedded new behaviours that could immediately be put into practice within their organisations, and soon became second nature.

The tangible outcome for Celia was having the tools at her disposal that she can use to stay focussed on the business outcome she was trying to achieve. The programme also helped her lift her leadership to another level. *“Catherine speaks about how to sustain energy and performance and I’m now much, much better at that.”*

Although only a day and a half, the Senior Women’s Impact Programme is rigorous and far-reaching. Its success is largely down to the creators of the programme who bring an unusual level of experience, skill and commitment to every aspect of the event. *“Catherine and Kate set the tone of the day. They are technically first class and bring a modern application to their work. At the same time, they are well grounded in the realities of delivering in a commercial world. They know where the bar is set and how good you need to be to perform at that level,”* says Celia.

Kate concludes, *“For us, this programme has been a joy. Helping successful, high-performing women to develop their self-belief and enhance their impact is a real privilege. The members of every group have demonstrated an exceptional honesty and determination to be the best leaders they can be and seeing the speed of their progress has been hugely rewarding. We look forward to our 2011 programmes!”*