

Real World Impact Women Transforming Leadership Programme



The European Society of Cardiology and the Oxford Women Transforming Leadership Programme

Changing the model of successful leadership in the cardiology profession

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Shing-Wai Wong

Associate Director, Executive Education, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

The need for a new type of leadership

The combination of ageing populations, costly new techniques, new patterns of disease, rising public expectations, and ever-increasing competition for finite resources is placing healthcare systems worldwide under strain. Although there are different funding models, people in every system face having to make the same trade-offs between costs and quality of care – pitting the professional ethos of medicine directly against the concept of healthcare as a business. And while politicians and the public seem keen for healthcare services to be models of prudence and efficiency, when faced with actual failings in care or a high-profile case of trade-offs having to be made, their response is invariably emotional and lays the blame squarely on cultural and leadership failures.

Delivering improved care and organisational performance in this context requires new approaches to leadership at all levels that are collaborative and engaging, and that allow space for innovation and development.

However, old habits, old career paths, and old leadership models die hard.

Despite women making up 50 per cent of graduates from medical school, they remain under-represented in leadership roles in all fields of medicine. And cardiology has one of the worst imbalances of all. Indeed, recent researchers found that women cardiologists had a 37 per cent lower chance of being a full professor at US medical schools than men. Within the European Society of Cardiology (ESC), although 33% of members are female, only 15% of Fellows of the ESC (FESC) – a title of recognition and excellence – are women, and with correspondingly low representation in positions of leadership.

Women in ESC

Despite their current low representation in leadership positions, there has been a huge increase in the number of women training to be cardiologists. The Women in ESC initiative was designed to ensure that women coming into the field are sufficiently armed for successful careers.

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‘Since the Women in ESC initiative was started, we have seen greater energy amongst the women members,’ said Professor Barbara Casadei, ESC President 2016–2018 and one of the women behind the development of the group. ‘There is greater visibility and engagement and a real feeling that the group will continue to evolve. Importantly, the Women in ESC initiative has dispelled the popular myth that professional women are not seeking leadership positions and are less ambitious than their male colleagues.’

The ESC Grants

Professor Casadei participated in the Oxford Saïd Women Transforming Leadership Programme in 2014, thanks to a nomination from the Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, part of the Nuffield Department of Medicine at the University of Oxford. She admitted that she had resisted the idea at first, but that once the programme had started she found plenty of ‘aha’ moments: ‘The most powerful idea for me was about developing my own style of leadership and building on my strengths,’ she said. ‘The encouragement to “only do what only you can do” resonated very strongly too: I used to take on too many duties that occupied a lot of my time but were fairly “invisible”, simply because I found it difficult to say “I won’t do that”. I am more aware now and much better at prioritising and only taking on tasks that I enjoy and where I feel I bring added value.’

She was determined that this opportunity for personal development should be extended to more women working in cardiology and so proposed to the ESC Board that they should sponsor places on the programme. They agreed to provide grants to fund five places in 2015, which was increased to seven in 2016 and eight in 2017.

ESC members are invited to apply for the Grants, which are particularly intended to support women who are taking on new responsibilities, either within the ESC, their national cardiology society



or their workplace. ‘You don’t have to be moving from a senior to a super-senior role,’ emphasised Barbara. ‘You could be working in a research group and wanting to make your first steps towards independence, for example. All transitions are demanding, and the Women Transforming Leadership Programme can help you prepare for change in a constructive and positive way.’

The Programme

Women Transforming Leadership was launched by Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, in 2013 after careful development. Its name represents both its own philosophy and the different qualities that women can bring to the pattern of global leadership.

The programme aims to support women to lead and manage change in complex and changing environments, which makes it particularly suited to women in cardiology given the challenges facing the medical sector generally and cardiology in particular.

Programme Director Kathryn Bishop explained: ‘We built the programme around looking at leadership through three lenses: the individual leader, leadership in the organisation, and the responsibilities of leadership beyond the organisation. The backbone of the

week is the development of “A strategy for you”, in which participants use different strategy models, coaching sessions, and a diverse range of activities and conversations to develop a personal leadership blueprint and plan that they can put into action as soon as they return to their workplace.’

Teaching sessions range from a review of the academic literature on women’s leadership to a practical lesson in negotiating skills and a journey ‘into the forest’ with the inspirational Olivier Mythodrama, who use Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* to explore issues including culture, change, and identity.

In addition, the programme allows individuals to connect with other outstanding female leaders from across the world. Since its launch, more than 240 women have attended the programme, representing 20 broad sectors of work, over 50 nationalities and 45 working countries. Chiara Bucciarelli-Ducci, Consultant Senior Lecturer in Cardiology from the University of Bristol and one of the first ESC Grant winners in 2015, said, ‘There were five cardiologists there, but 56 women on the programme altogether. When I talked to them I found that we had so many things in common, despite coming from completely different fields. It was surprising and refreshing at the same time to realize that the

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frustrations I sometimes face in my role are frustrations that many women also experience in different sectors and different countries. The course offers the opportunity to share and discuss the main problems one experiences in the work place, but also enables one to find solution capitalizing on other people's experience. The final result is that one also feel a little less frustrated.'

The personal impact

Nina Johnston, Chief of Staff, Department of Cardiology, Uppsala Academic Hospital, joined the programme after being made Head of Department. She realised that the promotion would necessitate a complete change in her leadership style. 'As a medical doctor you're trained to deal with issues. You have to be a leader on the floor as you take care of patients, but it's always about action and getting things done. When you become a Head of Department you are suddenly managing people, not directing activities. And it felt particularly difficult having been promoted internally, as I was leading people who had been, and in fact still were, my peers! The programme for her was all about finding a style of leadership that was authentic and would work in this new context, and developing new skills, such as negotiation.

For Susanna Price, Consultant Cardiologist and Intensivist, Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust, the main message was to 'work with my strengths and not to bury myself in my weaknesses ... It was great that the programme started with the question, "Who are you?" Self-awareness is so important: what are your qualities? What are your strengths, what are your weaknesses?'

She also enjoyed finding new perspectives from talking to the other participants. 'It was an outstanding opportunity to meet so many extraordinary women who work in extraordinary circumstances. In my narrow world of medicine I couldn't contemplate meeting people who are

so high up in the UN, or who are doing amazing work in Afghanistan. It was utterly humbling to be able to sit and learn from them how they manage, how they got to be where they are. I met ladies who are lawyers in countries where women are just not lawyers, and yet they have succeeded in that. And to me it was just inspiring.'

Professor Casadei concluded, 'The programme did not just give us leadership skills and tools – though they were very valuable. Through the "Strategy for you" I felt I had the chance to better understand myself and identify the type of leader that I might become. The lessons of Women Transforming Leadership have stayed with me years after I attended the programme.'

The organisational impact

The immediate impact of the first set of ESC Grants in 2015 was that it created the start of a community of senior women within the organisation. As Susanna Price said, 'It really was a super-smart investment by the ESC. By enabling us to go on this programme they built an instant network of five leading female cardiologists. We all experienced this extraordinary environment together... it was very strategic, very smart.'

Of course, the network within the ESC has also been able to extend its influence into the participants' own organisations. 'The common denominator was that we all had leadership roles in our own institutions, and often in society as well,' said Sigrun Halvorsen, Professor and Head of Cardiology, Oslo University Hospital. As Susanna Price explained further, 'I have a role in my own hospital, but I also have a national role in terms of teaching, training, education, and also roles within the ESC.'

Chiara Bucciarelli-Ducci agreed: 'One of the highlights of the programme is the networking. The network lasts well beyond the week you are in Oxford, and that creates a community that will grow over the years... the Women Transforming Leadership Programme is just the beginning.'

Participants also emphasised that the learning on the programme was about more than their personal development. 'I learnt much more about strategic thinking, and about developing awareness of structures and society,' said Susanna Price. 'It helps you understand behaviours, how you can lead people better, and how you can play on the strengths of the people around you, not just as an individual but as an organisational leader.'

The view from Oxford Said

'The creation of the ESC Grants for the Oxford Women Transforming Leadership Programme is an example of an innovation by a professional body that has had a powerful and far-reaching impact. Individual women are being supported as they move into leadership roles, therefore influencing change in hospitals and universities across Europe. But, perhaps even more importantly, they are diffusing a variety of different leadership styles throughout the cardiology profession, transforming the idea of what successful leadership looks like. This is an extraordinarily enlightened approach that will go a long way towards tackling complex challenges in a variety of specialisms. And having heard its many stories of personal success and extended reach to others as part of the multiplier effect, we know that it is working.'

Shing-Wai Wong

Women Transforming Leadership Programme

Next cohort: Annually in October
www.sbs.oxford.edu/wtl

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