The LBS/Circle Senior Leader Towards Outstanding Programme

Towards Outstanding

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, Circle Health Group and its people faced challenges the like of which had never previously been encountered in the modern era. The global pandemic and the subsequent UK National Health Service demand of the private sector for extraordinary support, was exacerbated by the complexities of merging two hugely dissimilar organisations and the almost over-night transition to virtually delivered healthcare. It put untold pressure on Circle’s senior leaders. The need to support them, retain them and, in turn, enable them to support their staff and patients, was urgent, critical, and pivotal to the new organisation’s success.

Circle Health Group has the UK’s largest network of private hospitals, over 8,500 staff and services over 2,000,000 patient visits per year. Towards Outstanding, named to reflect Circle’s aspiration to be universally recognised as ‘Outstanding’ by its regulators including the UK Care Quality Commission (CQC), was the result of close collaboration between Liverpool Business School (LBS) and Circle’s Board and Learning and Development Team.

Liverpool Business School (LBS), part of Liverpool John Moores, is a modern civic University. LBS seeks to make a difference in its research and by providing a driving force for development of leaders, social value and wellbeing. LBS not only understood the challenges, the people, and the healthcare ecosystem, but quickly established a cohesive relationship with Circle’s L&D leadership.

Each of Circle’s hospitals is led by a senior leadership team including Executive Directors and Directors of Clinical Services. The acquisition of BMI Healthcare by Circle Health had introduced new ways of thinking, new investment, and the beginning of a new ‘can do’ mindset. It was clear these senior leaders needed to be connected and empowered to perform to their maximum potential.
The LBS/Circle Senior Leader Towards Outstanding Programme

04 | Executive summary

The scale and investment in the programme, and the partnership with LBS, for 250 of Circle’s most senior leaders, reflected the importance of the challenges faced. LBS and Circle’s L&D leadership team embarked upon intense research and engagement to identify content and an approach which would deliver on its objectives. The result was an entirely bespoke programme built on the premise of close collaboration. We had an unswerving commitment to relevance, not only to Circle’s business needs, but critically, to participants’ emotional, professional, and technical needs.

The Towards Outstanding programme has now been delivered to 250 senior leaders over the course of six days between 2020 and 2023 using a blended learning approach. Circle’s senior people are leading effectively and a learning culture has been established for everyone. And above all, patients are benefitting from outstanding care.

For the organisation, the programme has contributed to results and Circle is now rated as one of the UK’s top 25 best big companies to work for in 2021 and 2022 as measured by Best Companies. Improvements can be seen across the Group:

- Improved retention rates of 85% (2019: 81%)
- Vacancies have fallen from 14% of the workforce to just 8%
- Reduced staff turnover by 2.6%

125 out of the first 250 Senior Leaders have themselves become coaches to other staff on our new Coaching Guide and Grow Platform.

The Towards Outstanding Programme also opened doors to other programmes and large-scale reskilling. When we got our team leaders together for their own learning journey, they reported feeling more supported, trusted and cared for by the senior leaders on the programme. There is a real positive vibe and the senior and team leaders feel more encouraged and empowered.
Leadership in healthcare is critical in meeting increases in demand, delivering quality of care and retaining staff. The way employees are nurtured has an impact on care provision and organisational success. Leaders in Circle were seen as supportive, with a good sense of community.

Our challenge was to identify the principal leadership skills which would make a difference, support collaboration, empower and energise teams.

This programme offered Circle and LBS the dual opportunity to tackle priority issues in the business and to elevate leadership development practice. In brief, we used business analysis to identify what lay behind our culture and values and followed up with multi-level research to discover the impact.
The challenge was to ensure the processes and focus of learning used in the Towards Outstanding Programme would support delivery of key priorities:

1. **Identify what effective leadership looks like in the new organisation?**
   - Unify the organisation through culture change
     - BMI - established steady-state risk averse – merged with Circle rapidly growing – lacked presence in the UK – aspirational – with strong investment
     - Meet increased demand for services through operational improvements

2. **Establish a leadership culture which supports the organisation’s Philosophy, behaviours and values**
   - Bring together hospitals with common leadership behaviours and values
   - Deliver innovation to address operational pressures
   - Reduce work and time pressures to improve quality for patients
   - Collaborate to deliver the best patient focused care

3. **Enhance and sustain staff recruitment and retention**
   - Address shortages of staff in the face of a shrinking pool for recruitment
   - Value senior leaders and invest in their development
   - Identify the key factors in retaining staff

To achieve this, we took a number of approaches to shape the programme:

- Identify what effective leadership looks like for this group of leaders at this stage in the new organisation
- Provide a clear focus on applying learning in the workplace and self-directed learning
- Create a sense of community where leaders share learning, create common purpose and improve innovation
07 | First steps

Identify what leadership looks like in the new organisation

From interviews, focus groups, feedback and network analysis and latest research, LBS was able to get a clear picture of the organisational context as well as issues and language which would resonate. LBS asked questions about the culture of the organisation, the views of senior leaders, the overall sense of community, and the view on empowerment.

The aim was to identify what lay behind the business challenges, and the way the organisation connected with each other in social networks.

We listened and identified what we needed to do most and where to invest our time:

- **Change culture**: Elements of the old risk-averse, top-down culture meant leaders were not necessarily ready to embrace change. Bringing together processes across merged parts of the business made change harder. Circle recognised the value of engaging with staff for new ideas, change and process improvement.

- **Address operational pressures affecting quality and safety**: Supporting people to remove significant operational barriers impacting effective leadership and applying higher levels of decision making to quality and efficiency improvements.

- **Support recruitment and retention**: Attracting staff and retaining talent, with demand nationally outstripping supply means day-to-day workload pressures remain challenging and the annual staff turnover rate in 2019 stood at 15.6%. One of the main reasons for leaving was dissatisfaction with how people were being managed and led. This was an imperative for change.
The challenge

Apply learning in the workplace

We looked at informal and formal learning routes as well as the constraints and opportunities for learning transfer. We recognised the importance of participants’ readiness to learn and self-directed learning to ensure learning practices continue. Our engaged learning process focused on both skills and tools, sources of evidence-based good practice, and stretched thinking with thought leadership.

A sense of community

It was also vital to recognise the disjointedness of the current hospital structure and bring people together to share ideas. Our initial research recognised community as an important factor for staff retention, job satisfaction and ultimately recruitment and we needed to make the most of this.
Circle chose LBS from a range of national suppliers in a tendering process. The aim was to provide a “supportive, positive, strengths-based leadership programme.” This meant enabling leaders to take ownership for shaping culture and delivering innovative practices.
Commitment to long standing relationship

We have developed a sustained and balanced partnership which recognises LBS’ skills in delivering new thinking backed up with research and Circle’s focus and commitment to the things that make a difference to performance. We undertook a process of ‘getting to know you’.

Engagement of sponsors and participants to probe issues was vital, including the involvement of the Chief Executive Officer. This level of buy-in was followed up with Senior Executive participation on the programme itself.

A series of briefings is planned, spearheaded by LBS, to keep communications open, responding to the feedback our leaders have given and energising development for the future.

Evaluation

We evaluated the programme and gained insights from leaders on what they valued. We further examined data from a two-stage survey to review the perceived skills development, collaboration of leaders, their connectedness and performance related to key business challenges.

We also set in motion analysis of social networks to help measure potential improvements in leadership connections. This meant collecting social network data in two phases at the beginning and after the end of the programme.

Timelines

The timeline, 2020-2023, included COVID restrictions and operational pressures to support the NHS teams in delivering healthcare. Yet the commitment never wavered. Involving every senior leader was central to the success of the programme and helped to deliver culture change at this level.

- COVID meant that LBS flipped to online learning and has now been agile enough to go back to a face-to-face approach. Throughout, LBS maintained the sense of community and supported leaders to connect.

91% of participants told us that they rated the effectiveness of delivery highly.

- Social network analysis was recognised as important to support the merged organisation. Its value is in showing individuals how to make the most of the interactions with their colleagues and partners.
Partnership principles

Towards Outstanding, a product of close, constructive partnership between LBS and Circle had a foundation of sound research, was bespoke to the needs of its students, and focussed on delivering success and a legacy for individuals and their teams. In partnership we planned and delivered learning based on agreed principles to meet our priorities:

- Masterclasses to address emerging practice and thought leadership
  - Deliver confidence in skills and knowledge
  - Adopt culture change
  - Support further skills

- Coaching and action learning to promote collaborative outcomes
  - Share expertise
  - Skills for working with teams
  - Networking and collaboration

- ‘Flipped learning’ content with focus on application in workshops
  - Fact finding and reading pre-session
  - Ability and confidence to make things happen

- Recognise the workplace as an important place to learn
  - Group working
  - Networking opportunities
  - Adopt a supportive environment for change

- Self development and reflective practice
  - Skills of reflection
  - Practice self development for sustainable skills increase
  - Motivate and develop confidence

As a result of our joint working we have also developed the outline for a Corporate University: A new partnership with LBS and Teesside Universities is being developed to take our programmes further and embed the relationships to deliver for leaders.
In 2020 we launched the Towards Outstanding programme to all senior leaders. Groups were deliberately structured in mixed cohorts from different disciplines to connect our leaders, encourage collaboration, and cross-functional working. The audience included Executive Directors (Hospital General Managers), Directors of Clinical Services (DoCS), Functional Managers/Leaders.

The programme aimed to deliver individual and team opportunities to understand strengths and personal growth potential, as well as promoting self-directed learning in the workplace.

The detail of the themes was developed initially through the needs analysis process. It was subsequently refined iteratively through participants’ responses to workshop activities, helping to shape the detailed design.

Leaders were actively encouraged to lead, reflect and apply their learning through coaching and self-managed action learning.
The themes and flow of the programme and delivery approach are important to enable learning and explore thinking.

The Towards Outstanding programme began with strategic intentions and engaged senior leaders in imagining their ideal future, whilst surfacing their current reality. Discussion identified priorities, opening up a range of areas, which the programme then addressed in detail. Too often these conversations don’t happen across a distributed organisation; here was a significant opportunity to gain a shared understanding and collaborative sense-making.

Workshops on leadership and culture identified the critical role leaders play and how they can realise their own and the organisation’s ambitions. Culture was examined, including delivering the aspirations and vision. Enabling that vision and culture through people was covered in two modules on Creating High Performance Teams and Managing People and Talent. Vitally, in the merged organisation, this was about sharing experiences, breaking down silo-working and enabling a performance driven culture.

Strands were brought together with financial business cases for growth, innovation and improvement projects to enable operational improvements.

The success of Dragon’s Den pitches to the National Finance Director of Investments, illustrates the efficacy of the learning and approach with a number of process changes and development opportunities now in place or in train.
Meeting challenge 1
Effective leadership in the new organisation

Survey analysis identified **skills/competence, self-efficacy, work engagement** and **resilience** as the key characteristics of effective leaders in Circle right now. This means leaders who are confident and have belief in their own abilities (self-efficacy). Such leaders are more likely to persevere to perform across a range of indicators and perform successfully.

We asked Towards Outstanding participants to rate their effectiveness as leaders including resilience, engagement and skills development post-programme.

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<th>Participants said...</th>
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<td>...there is an evidence base which says that confidence and competence results in successful performance.</td>
<td>Did Towards Outstanding boost confidence and competence?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>...self-efficacy is enhanced when leaders are connected and their work outcomes improved when they are engaged.</td>
<td>Has work engagement improved as a result of the programme?</td>
<td>Yes, absolutely</td>
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<td>...organisations with engaged employees provide a better patient experience, fewer errors, lower infection and mortality rates, stronger financial management, improved employee morale and motivation, and lower absenteeism and stress[1].</td>
<td>How do you rate your resilience, and ability to deal with difficulties, setbacks and pressure?</td>
<td>This has increased substantially, and almost as much as our self-efficacy.</td>
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<td>...we want to provide our leaders with useful, relevant and engaging opportunities for self-development.</td>
<td>Has the programme been useful to you, do you feel it has helped you develop as a leader?</td>
<td>94.8% indicated it was a successful learning and development programme.</td>
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The L&D initiative

The ‘good’ and ‘excellent’ positive feedback from 94.8% of participants indicated it was a successful learning and development programme.

Facilitation rated Good or Excellent by 93.4% of participants.

The content was thought to be relevant because it was tailored to the Circle strategy. LBS facilitators and guest speakers were highly rated and contributed greatly to the programme’s success.

“I have been surprised at how good it was. Great questioning, lots of open questions and time to discuss and debate has helped me understand the topics discussed. I felt very safe to give feedback, challenge and share stories.”

Participants:

- Considered content to be relevant because it was tailored to the Circle Health Group strategy.

- Rated LBS facilitators and guest speakers highly for their knowledge, responsiveness to the group.

- Valued facilitators’ ability to provide safe learning environments to explore issues and concepts and let this contributed greatly to the programme’s success.

- Feel they will continue to apply their knowledge and have sustained benefit from theories and techniques to which they had been exposed.

- Perceive their self-efficacy as improved, their willingness to take on challenging assignments has increased and their tenacity to overcome obstacles to successful performance been enhanced.

- Report coaching sessions, aimed at building positive, supportive, yet challenging, working relationships across organisational networks, have generated new ways of thinking.
The most powerful resource to support a learning culture, identified by participants, was the opportunity to connect, including allowing leaders time and safe space to share experiences and collaborate. The Towards Outstanding programme gave participants time to think about the type of leader they wanted to be and explore the values and direction of internal and external partnerships.

“The programme cohort I was included within, formed a group of fellow colleagues that brought together their own experiences, expertise, knowledge and ideas.”

Neil, Senior Project Manager.
Appetite for change

Leaders left with ideas and enthusiasm for putting their knowledge into practice and an appetite for change. Importantly, leaders recognised their role in the change process. They valued:

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<td>...group cohesion and identity is important.</td>
<td>The opportunity to spend time with peers to exchange ideas, discuss similarities and differences, and encourage one another.</td>
<td>The opportunity to reflect on their practice and leadership style was invaluable and productive.</td>
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<td>...interactive learning with respected facilitators contributes to optimal outcomes.</td>
<td>Learning experiences through activities designed to discover or construct knowledge, serve as a sounding board, ask questions to stimulate deeper analysis.</td>
<td>This provided the support and encouragement needed to maximise the opportunities Towards Outstanding offered.</td>
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<td>...protected time-out from daily roles and responsibilities supports maximum impact.</td>
<td>Relevant, useful content, templates and frameworks to support rapid learning and reinforce value of time away from the 'day job'.</td>
<td>The use of coaching and action learning sets as opportunities to transfer learning, problem solve and reflect quickly reinforced the value of the time investment and potential of the learning.</td>
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“I have willingly put myself forward as a mentor/coach to help others.”

Debbie, Executive Director

New programmes for Aspiring Senior Leaders are being planned with LBS, as well as focused programmes on project management, commercialisation and lean practices. An appetite for learning has been stimulated by the unique nature of the senior leaders’ engagement.
A key factor in retention is positive work engagement of leaders. People who are engaged have an energetic connection to their work activities and believe they are capable of meeting the demands of their employment. Recruitment and retention are also boosted by opportunities for meaningful development. Leaders had high satisfaction with the programme:

A Net Promoter Score (NPS) indicates participant satisfaction with the programme and the likelihood participants would recommend (promote) it to their colleagues. The final NPS was 93.78% indicating leaders were very satisfied.
Leaders also felt **engaged and challenged** by the programme.

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<th>Which resulted in...</th>
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<td>Skills development</td>
<td>Created sessions which were thought provoking and constructively challenged participants’ assumptions and views.</td>
<td>Participants feeling their people management skills, together with innovation and change, were the most improved.</td>
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<td>Feeling valued</td>
<td>Increased investment in training and development of our senior leaders.</td>
<td>High participant satisfaction with the programme and a Net Promoter Score of 93.78%, indicating high likelihood of recommendation to their colleagues.</td>
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<td>Learning opportunities</td>
<td>Identified two leadership factors (leaders’ work engagement and perceived empowerment) and two social factors (social support and sense of community) as priorities for the SLP outcomes in terms of retention.</td>
<td>Higher senior leadership engagement and advocacy of constant development for their own teams.</td>
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The LBS/Circle Senior Leader Towards Outstanding Programme

20 The impact

Towards Outstanding, a product of close, constructive partnership between LBS and Circle, had a foundation of sound research, was bespoke to the needs of its participants, and focussed on delivering success and a legacy for individuals and their teams.

We have seen that the evaluation indicated participants valued the Towards Outstanding programme and their skills increased as well as leadership connections. Beyond this success, the dynamic impact on leaders, teams and the organisation, drive new initiatives, help to cascade learning and support leaders.
Challenge 1 is in part about defining what effective leadership looks like for us. The key areas are self-efficacy, work engagement and resilience. We asked participants in Phase 2, the impact of the programme. In brief they said:

- **Confidence increased**: The Programme had a significant influence on leaders’ rating of self-efficacy, engagement and resilience.
- **Skills improved**: Very positive increases in leadership skills especially in Managing People, Innovation and Change and Creating High Performance Teams.
- **Connections & Staff retention increased**: More and effective connections between parts of distributed business. These contribute to job satisfaction, staff retention and performance through teams.
- **Performance improved**: More collaboration, information sharing and quality improvements. This has led to reports of better individual, team and in particular organisational performance.
- **Learning investment up**: 94.8% of respondents said they were very satisfied with the programme. A Net Promoter Score of 93.7%.

The programme has had a positive influence on individual, team and organisational performance. Leaders can now see career growth for themselves and their team. For the organisation, we have established the capabilities we need in order to thrive.
What’s changed?

Participants report more responsibility for their own development. They are building closer working relationships and joint working between sites, whilst using data and decision-making techniques to inform what they do.

“I have been given the tools and techniques to go on to apply the theories and models in the workplace, allowing me to make a difference. This improved how I manage my reportee, when I coach and support members of the team I work in and other colleagues across the business on issues around wellbeing. I felt confident that I was taking an approach that I could rely on, which would go on and help develop my skills and performance, making a pivotal contribution to my personal development.”

Neil, Senior Project Manager

“This is still a work in progress, but the plan is to extend our Laminar Flow Operating capacity with the addition of Laminar Flow into a second theatre to improve our Orthopaedic offering.”

We listened, and launched a Managers’ Hub to ease access to information and resources. This came out of discussions in the Managing People session as an idea and was implemented in early 2022.

We have developed a Coaching platform – Guide and Grow - based on our experience from this programme and a hugely gratifying 125 senior leaders have recognised the benefits they experienced and signed up as Coaches.
23 Challenge 2
Establishing a leadership culture

How far has the leadership culture has been developed over the period of the programme?

Our leaders are energised and empowered, they tell us they want to take on challenging assignments and reach out for opportunities. They feel empowered to be innovative, brave and tenacious, they are more firmly connected to the Circle Philosophy and its principles and values are embedded within their thinking and approach to leadership.

Wellbeing and support

“The biggest take away for me was the opportunity to refresh my prior knowledge and learning. I have put myself forward as a mentor/coach to help others.” - Debbie, Executive Director

Align culture, priorities and objectives

“The Towards Outstanding programme was well crafted and was developed to align directly with Circle HealthCare’s strategy and development plans for the future, this incredible approach made all of the learning more real and relevant to our everyday work as leaders within this organisation.” - Nikki, Executive Director

Evidence of engaged staff

“The Towards Outstanding programme helped build my confidence and strengthen my understanding of, not only my own area of the business, but how every function works both independently and together to achieve the strategic aims of the business.”

“Engagement with staff across all functions has been something that I have become much more aware of;” - Simon, Head of Data Reporting
The impact

The future

We established the Towards Outstanding programme as part of a wider development landscape to provide sought after development pathways as shown here.

Large-scale reskilling is now firmly embedded alongside re-imagining on-boarding, our international focus and increased investment in L&D. In recognition of the impact of the Towards Outstanding programme the Head of L&D has been made Director of Learning and Circle Academy, giving investment in development a boost and a strategic profile.

The positivity around the programme informed us we could move the dial in key areas to extend leadership skills and culture change.

The new aspiring senior leaders programme, supported by LBS, has identified over 700 leaders who want to take part.
What’s changed?

Rapidly launched Learning to Lead for 400 team leaders:

The new programme focuses on team leader skills development, processes and again connected leadership. It reflects the high regard in which the senior leader programme was held and the importance for teams working at all levels.

Infrastructure to support leaders:

The high profile of this initiative has led to new infrastructure to support leaders. Ideas from the Dragons Den style pitches made to the National Finance Director of Investments have helped to crystallise new directions.

Managers’ Information Hub
launched for ease of access

9-box talent grid
to help define and signpost career pathways

Digital and process innovation
is creating new ‘access’ points to the range of care and facilities we offer

Rounded organisational performance against our priorities over the period

Positive impact on society:

Collaboration is at the heart of our new ability to build and facilitate better regional relationships in the health economy. This is a key part of our organisational performance which has been supported by leaders connecting on the programme.

Vacancies are down from 14% to 8% as a % of headcount over the period. Time to hire has fallen from 102 days down to 67 days.

Voluntary turnover reduced from 21% to 17%. Staff are feeling better managed and the data tells us that people are keen to stay in the organisation.
Improvements in patient outcomes and patient experience:

The outcomes achieved are reflected in our results and commitment to investing in our people.

Increased the number of hospitals with a good or outstanding rating form their regulator from 60% to 82%.

Two hospitals achieved overall ‘Outstanding’ CQC rating and others ‘Outstanding’ in the leadership domain:

“Cross-functional, hospital and corporate teams and their strong working relationships undoubtedly played a part in this success and position us well.” Paolo Pieri, Chief Executive Officer.
**Challenge 3**
**Recruitment and retention**

Our research told us providing learning opportunities is the primary way organisations are working to improve retention. We delved deeper. Leaders’ work engagement, empowerment, social support and sense of community were significant factors in retaining employees.

We are actively building on these best practices to improve retention:

- Supporting leaders’ engagement with their teams
- Empowering leaders and allowing them to take the initiative
- Creating a sense of community among leaders and providing them with additional social support
- Providing career and learning progression opportunities

**Increased connections**

Social network data showed better links between people and between hospitals. Exchange of innovative ideas and developing expertise across the business are the result as well as retention of engaged staff.

By highlighting information exchange between parts of the organisation, the aim is to increase build stronger connections between people, align strategy between hospitals, and learn through collaboration.