



Executive Education Programme,
Harvard Business School, October 2025

A special report commissioned by
the Chief of Staff Association

Navigating the Jagged Frontier



AI and the chief of staff
The principal relationship
The power of finding your tribe
From the track to the corner office

Contacts

Henry Martin, Editorial Manager
Ella Hirten, Senior Manager, Education
Nicholas Langford, Director of
Communications
Michaela Barnert, Graphic Designer

contact@csa.org
www.csa.org

4th Floor, 119 W 24th Street
New York, NY 10011, US

865 Albion Street,
Denver CO 80220, US

Level 4, 4 Lincoln's Inn Fields
London, WC2A 3AA, UK

Level 5, 121 Exhibition Street
Melbourne, Victoria 3000, AUS

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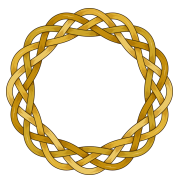
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Foreword

I want to start this report with an idea that has been sitting with me since I first came across it at the Chief of Staff Executive Education Programme at Harvard Business School. It speaks directly to what we do, who our members are, and why this programme matters.

In March 2026, a team of researchers from Harvard Business School, Wharton, MIT Sloan, and Boston Consulting Group published a paper in *Organization Science* that introduced the concept of the jagged technological frontier. Their study involved 758 management consultants performing realistic work tasks; some with AI assistance, some without. For tasks within AI's capability, those using AI completed 12% more work, moved 25% faster, and produced significantly better quality outputs. But for a task that required genuine human judgement and contextual reasoning, a task designed to sit outside what AI does well, those using AI were 19% less likely to reach the right outcome. The technology that helped them in one moment actively undermined them in another:

'Within this jagged frontier, AI can complement human work. However, outside the frontier, AI output is inaccurate, is less useful, and can degrade human performance.'

The researchers called this the jagged frontier. The line was not smooth, where AI is simply better or worse than humans, but jagged, where capabilities surged in some directions but fell away in others; in ways that do not always follow our assumptions about what should be easy or hard.

I find this idea compelling not just because of what it says about AI capabilities but because it places a premium on human expertise. The research on the jagged frontier suggests that professionals who navigate AI most effectively are those who know where their capabilities lie, bringing human judgement to bear precisely where it matters most. This is also, from observed experience, a key value of a great chief of staff to their principal.

The chief of staff role has its own jagged frontier. It is not a role that rewards being uniformly competent across a neat list of defined skills. It rewards being exceptional where it counts: in the difficult conversation, in the moment a principal needs a thought partner rather than an executor, in the synthesis that turns a week's worth of competing inputs into a clear decision. Chiefs of staff bring their own jagged profiles to the work: deep expertise in some directions, gaps in others. They are in the constant process of extending the frontier in the areas the role most demands.

That is what the Executive Education Programme is designed to support. Not to smooth out the jaggedness, which would be impossible and beside the point, but to help each participant understand the shape of their own capability, name where their frontier runs, and extend it in ways that make them more effective in the role.

This report captures both anticipated pedagogical learnings and unexpected shifts (also a concept in the jagged frontier). Some of what happens during a week like this is expected: frameworks land; sessions generate insights; and participants leave with sharper thinking on negotiation, change management or how to frame a decision for their principal. But some of what happens is not expected at all. A participant who arrived feeling isolated in their role leaves with a community of peers. Someone who had lost meaning in their career, finds it again. These shifts are unplanned for. They change people, help create tangible results for the organisations they come from, and give back to them their view of the frontier. They deepen the value of human expertise.

The CSA is proud to be part of the frontier journey, jagged or otherwise, with these exceptional leaders, and we deeply appreciate the talent and generosity of the Harvard Business School Faculty and guest speakers in this mission.

Trenth Smyth AM
Chief Executive Officer

Dell'Acqua, F., McFowland III, E., Mollick, E., Lifshitz, H., Kellogg, K.C., Rajendran, S., Kraymer, L., Candelon, F. & Lakhani, K.R. "Navigating the Jagged Technological Frontier: Field Experimental Evidence of the Effects of Artificial Intelligence on Knowledge Worker Productivity and Quality", *Organization Science* (2026), p. 2.

Introduction

The chief of staff (CoS) role has become one of the most strategically significant positions in modern organisations. Chiefs of staff are called upon to lead transformation, navigate complex stakeholder environments and balance strategic and operational priorities simultaneously.

Given the demands of the role, to adapt to growing pressures and new leadership responsibilities, executive education is proving one of the most important investments a CoS can make in their career. Research published by *Harvard Business Review* and Academy of Management Learning and Education found that action-learning programmes, like the CSA Executive Education Programme at Harvard Business School (HBS), significantly improve both individual and organisational outcomes compared to traditional lecture-based formats.

In Autumn 2025, over 70 chiefs of staff travelled to HBS for the 10th Chief of Staff Association Executive Education Programme. This report captures the themes, learning and participant insights that defined the week, drawing on session feedback, personal reflections and in-depth conversations with members of the cohort.

Diversity remains a core strength of the programme. While the five most represented countries were the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Singapore, participants also travelled from Thailand, Romania, UAE, Brazil, China, India, Ghana, Spain, Mexico and Australia. The top five industries included technology, financial services, manufacturing, education and the non-profit sector; though representatives also came from aerospace, energy, government, health, law, retail, media, tourism and entertainment backgrounds. While the majority held the title of chief of staff, the cohort also included Senior Business Managers, Executive Directors, Associate Vice Presidents, Strategic Project Managers, CEOs, COOs, Senior Directors, and Deputy Directors.

This diversity tells a story. The skills at the heart of this programme, including strategy, influence, decision-making, change leadership and collaboration, are not the exclusive property of a single title or sector. They are the skills that leadership, no matter the industry or region, increasingly demands.

The chief of staff role is still finding its full definition in many organisations and regions. However, this cohort made one thing clear: the people who hold it are not waiting for a rulebook to be written. They came to HBS with real problems, genuine curiosity, and a commitment to performing their roles better. They left with frameworks, friendships and a sharper sense of what good leadership looks like in practice. That is what this programme is for and that is what this report is about.

Henry Martin
Editorial Manager

Tushman, Michael L., et al. "Relevance and Rigor: Executive Education as a Lever in Shaping Practice and Research", *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (New York, September, 2007), pp. 345–362

AI and the chief of staff



2025 was the year AI went mainstream. It was no surprise then, when Time Magazine named ‘The Architects of AI’ their 2025 person of the year. Not a day goes by without an attention-grabbing headline – possibly run through AI in advance – signalling its value or threat.

The cohort came to Harvard Business School with mixed experiences and familiarities with AI systems and agents.

Some were already integrating AI tools into their daily workflows, others barely used them, and a minority were unsure where to start or which tools to use.

AI as a chief of staff thought partner

Participants had the advantage of tackling AI under the guidance of Mitchell B. Weiss. In addition to leading the seminar *Teaching with AI*, Weiss is a former chief of staff, ideally placed to understand exactly the challenges chiefs of staff face and how AI agents can help them organise and prioritise their time and workloads.

Weiss’s key ‘prompt’ for participants was ‘stop thinking about AI as a threat to your judgement, or a shortcut around it, and start thinking of it as a thought partner: something you can work with and not something that works for you.’

The concept of thought partner was familiar to those in the room, given they performed that role for their principal, challenging assumptions and generating options which had not previously been considered.

Weiss’s framing shifted the room. Participants who had approached the session cautiously began to see a different kind of question, not ‘*Will AI replace what I do?*’ but ‘*How do I use it to do what I do better?*’

Informed curiosity

With AI reframed as a thought partner, Weiss led the cohort through a practical exercise where they used generative AI tools to tackle real problems. On one hand, participants saw how AI could accelerate the kind of work chiefs of staff do constantly: synthesising information, generating options, stress-testing arguments and drafting communications at pace. On the other hand, the exercise was also designed to show where AI fails: where it confabulates, where it produces confident-sounding responses that are simply wrong and where uncritical use leads to poor output.

As one participant put it. *‘The exercise clearly demonstrated AI’s limitations.’*

Knowing when AI is correct and successful or incorrect and unsuccessful is part of the informed curiosity a CoS must bring to the table. Put another way, the capacity to use AI tools effectively also involves understanding how and where they fall short.

Where chiefs of staff are using AI

The session surfaced a candid picture of how the cohort was using AI in their roles. Usage ranged from basic drafting and summarisation to more considered applications in meeting preparation, stakeholder analysis and decision support. A number of participants were using AI to research before briefing their principals; to structure thinking on complex problems; and to save time on tasks that would otherwise consume hours of their week.

The appetite to do more was clear.

Several participants identified specific areas where they planned to act directly after the programme. *‘I will double down on AI implementation to create more structure and efficiency,’* said one, *‘helping us both save time and focus on higher-value priorities.’* Another was already planning to help their principal become proficient in at least one AI tool. A third spoke of using AI to generate ideas, then deploying different tools for different scenarios: a sign of a more mature and considered approach than treating AI as a single solution.

Chiefs of staff operate at the intersection of information, people and decisions. They are asked to synthesise fast, advise well and communicate clearly, often with incomplete information and limited time. Those are precisely the conditions where a well-used AI tool can bring value in filling the gaps and speeding up delivery.

The advantage goes to those who start

The chiefs of staff who will lead most effectively in the years ahead are not necessarily the ones with the most technical knowledge. They are the ones who combine curiosity with judgement; who know how to work with AI tools and question their outputs; and who apply these results to decisions that still require human insight and accountability.

Weiss frames this well. He uses AI the way he might work with a capable research assistant – with clear direction, genuine engagement and a healthy scepticism about what it produces.

AI adoption has real-term consequences for businesses, as well as for chiefs of staff in their careers. The 2025 PwC *Global AI Jobs Barometer*, based on analysis of close to one billion job advertisements across six continents, found that roles requiring AI skills now command a 56% wage premium, up from 25% the year before. As a result, it benefits chiefs of staff to develop their skills in this area.

The advantage, as this cohort understood, goes to those who start.

The principal relationship: partnership in practice

The chief of staff-principal relationship sits at the centre of everything a chief of staff does.

Every other priority, from strategy to operations and stakeholder management, are in service to this core tenet. At the outset, the statement may sound like a platitude, but it bears re-evaluation and interrogation, particularly for individual chiefs of staff, given that oftentimes the pace of the role leaves little space for ongoing reflection.

Unsurprisingly, most of the Harvard cohort arrived with assumptions about how their partnership functioned. However, the sessions, debrief groups and conversations, afforded attendees the rare opportunity to examine the quality of these partnerships in more detail, as well as the ways in which to improve them. Some discovered they had been operating too much in a reactive mode, responding to their principal's needs rather than anticipating these. Others recognised they had defaulted to execution over counsel, delivering answers when the more valuable contribution was a better question.

Solution-oriented

Time for deep reflection on the CoS-principal relationship offered those present the opportunity to put in place actions to improve their partnerships. One person described a direct change to the way they structure briefs, moving from presenting a recommendation to presenting the full risk landscape, while another realised they needed to create more space for their principal:

'I want to be more proactive in managing his time and priorities. Instead of only reacting to urgent matters, I will try to anticipate more and create space for strategic thinking.'

Who can you trust?

Trust is a widely discussed topic in the body of literature on the chief of staff role and a theme that recurred throughout the programme in sessions lead by Professors Raffaelli, McGinn and Seegars. Many participants identified a gap between the trust they believed existed and the trust they had actually built through consistent, measurable action.

'This session was a masterclass in understanding how identity, trust, and storytelling drive or derail organisational change. Professor Raffaelli's energy and clarity made the discussion both intellectually rigorous and highly relevant.'

As one participant observed, trust is not a fixed destination, but a constant practice and it applies to the relationships chiefs of staff have inside and outside of their organisations, not just with their principal. Trust is difficult to measure but has real effects on business and operations. By the end of the week, participants had identified the ways in which they could demonstrate trust and harness it to improve business out-comes, with one person noting:

'I will apply the change management frameworks to design and deliver effective transformation. This begins with building trust through understanding stakeholders and their motivations, identifying conflicting goals and interests, and communicating with clarity and empathy.'

The cohort left with an understanding that the trust between the chief of staff and principal is not a by-product of time in the role but evidenced through consistency and candour.

Trust is built through showing up as a genuine thought partner, rather than a capable executor.

It is sustained through a quality of relationship that, as Professor DeLong reminded the cohort in the final session of the week, is ultimately the measure of everything: the quality of your relationships with others and with yourself.



The power of finding your tribe

Ask a chief of staff whether the position can feel isolating and most will say yes.

The role sits at a busy intersection but oftentimes the chief of staff must walk down a path alone. Research on senior leadership published in *Forbes* found that half of CEOs and senior leaders have experienced loneliness and isolation in their roles and 61% believed it had a direct negative impact on their performance. For chiefs of staff, the structural conditions of the role amplify this further. The chief of staff position is, almost by its nature, lonely, where the usual outlets for peer support are rarely available.

One of the strongest sentiments that emerged in participant feedback from Harvard Business School was the value of meeting fellow chiefs of staff and establishing a new global network of peers.

A community of practice

Over seventy chiefs of staff gathered from sixteen countries and across more than a dozen sectors. They came from technology companies and government offices, financial services and education, non-profits and multinational corporations. Some had been in the role for years, while others had stepped into it recently.

What united them was not just a title or, in some cases, an industry; but a set of challenges unique to their position. These included, how to build trust with a principal, how to influence without authority, how to navigate the gap between the strategy and operations, and how to stay effective in a role that demands everything at once.

This shared experience is the foundation of a community of practice, a term used in management learning to describe groups whose value comes not from formal teaching, but from the collective knowledge that practitioners share with one another.

In participant feedback, the Harvard curriculum ranked high as the key value of the week, but participants consistently pointed to other benefits: the conversations in the corridors, the early-morning debrief groups, the dinners, and the moments of recognition when someone else described exactly the same challenge they had been sitting with for months.

‘Learning became connection,’ one participant noted. ‘Discussion became community.’

The debrief groups that ran each morning before sessions began were among the most valued elements of the programme. In these, participants worked through their personal case studies together, applying the previous day's frameworks to their individual organisational challenges. Peer learning allowed experience-based solutions to be shared in real time.

Case study A: from imposter syndrome to peer connection

A, a UK participant, arrived at Harvard at a moment of personal and professional transition. They had just moved from a corporate role into a start-up environment and their previous position had been marked by a toxic culture and difficult working conditions. A came to the programme feeling isolated in the chief of staff role, battling imposter syndrome.

Meeting other chiefs of staff at different levels and stages, some more experienced and others early in their careers, gave A a reference point they had not had before. They could see that the uncertainties they were carrying were not signs of inexperience, but part of how the role works. The feelings A had about getting things wrong were shared by people who, from the outside, looked entirely confident and capable.

A returned from the programme feeling ‘motivated and qualified’ and less isolated. The cohort network continued to support them through their first ninety days in the new role and several connections from the week became ongoing sources of counsel and encouragement as they navigated the early months of a challenging transition.

Case study B: trusting your instincts

The chief of staff role requires constant judgement calls made with incomplete information, in fast-moving environments without the benefit of a peer group inside the organisation. When you are new to the role, there is no easy way to know whether your read on a situation is right. You are operating on instinct and hoping it holds.

B came to the programme a month into their role at a Series B technology company, operating with a fully remote team across the US. They were new to the chief of staff position and looking for something specific: a community of practitioners who could offer guidance and confirm or challenge whether their instincts were sound.

Having a room full of experienced chiefs of staff confirmed to B that their initial plans and thinking were sound; validation they had not been able to access in their organisation itself. B’s peers gave them the confidence to trust their own leadership style and judgements. The role can feel lonely and isolating, they reflected. **Having a community say that their instincts were correct was supportive in a way that nothing inside their organisation could replicate.**

B left Harvard not just with new frameworks, but with the fortifying knowledge that their approach to the role was right, and with a network of people who would remain a resource long after the week was over.

Connections that continue

As the case studies on A and B demonstrate, the relationships built during the programme continued off campus. In the weeks and months following, participants stayed in contact, shared challenges, offered perspectives and continued the conversations that the week had started.

This ongoing connection is not incidental: it is one of the clearest measures of whether an executive education programme has delivered something real. When people maintain relationships built during a week of intensive learning, it signals that the experience created genuine trust not just intellectual engagement.



From the track to the corner office



‘A great afternoon spent with a real-life example of what a highly innovative leadership team looks like in practice.’

Complementing theory and classroom case-studies, the cohort examined leadership in practice at the New Balance headquarters.

The Track, a world-class performance facility in Brighton, Mass., provided a fitting setting for a masterclass and discussion on how to build and maintain a high-performing organisation.

The visit brought together Melissa Worth, Senior Vice President for the Americas and Colleen Hogan from the Corporate Strategy team, in a trackside conversation moderated by CSA Engagement Lead, Drew Davis. What followed was a candid, practitioner-level discussion on growth, alignment and the leadership decisions that sit behind a brand performing at the highest level.

Running the business and changing it

As a family-owned heritage brand that has grown into a global competitor without losing its identity, New Balance is rare in modern business. The tension between protecting what has made the company distinctive, and pursuing the

opportunities that will keep it relevant, ran through much of the afternoon’s conversation.

Worth and Hogan were direct about the discipline this balancing act requires. Sustainable growth, they argued, is not about chasing every opportunity; it is about managing today’s performance as carefully as you plan for tomorrow’s potential. New Balance has built its competitive position by making deliberate choices about where to win and then following through with consistency across wholesale, direct-to-consumer and digital channels.

For chiefs of staff in the room, this framing resonated immediately. The challenge of running the business, while simultaneously changing it, is one that many recognised in their own roles. The New Balance team prompted the audience to consider what it actually looks like to manage both at once, without losing coherence.

Alignment as a competitive advantage

The thread that connected most of the afternoon's conversation was alignment – not as a process or schedule cadence, but as a genuine organisational capability. New Balance's ability to move its people, strategy and operations in the same direction, even as the business grows in complexity and ambition, was one of the clearest takeaways from the afternoon.

Culture, the speakers argued, is not a statement of values. It is what happens when everyone in the organisation understands the direction of travel clearly enough to make good decisions without being instructed to do so. That kind of clarity does not emerge by accident. It is built through deliberate communication, consistent leadership behaviour and a shared accountability for outcomes.

For chiefs of staff, this is familiar territory. Much of the role is about creating and maintaining exactly this kind of alignment: between a principal and their leadership team, between strategy and execution, between what an organisation says it values and what it actually does.

The New Balance visit gave the cohort a real-world example of what alignment looks like when it works, and a useful lens for examining where it might be missing in their own organisations.

Complexity demands capability

As the conversation turned to growth and scale, a theme emerged that sits close to the heart of the chief of staff role: the more complex an organisation becomes, the more it needs someone who can hold the big picture without losing sight of the details.

Worth and Hogan spoke candidly about how the demands on leadership change as a business grows. The skills and systems that work at one scale do not automatically transfer to the next. **The chief of staff's ability to sustain alignment, enable focus, and translate strategic ambition into day-to-day execution, becomes more valuable as complexity increases.** This observation landed with the cohort and several participants reflected afterwards on how the visit had helped them articulate the value of their role in terms their own organisations would recognise.

Wearing the right shoes for the role

The New Balance team, including Lauren DiLoreto and Tyler Anderson, were generous hosts throughout, and the Track itself was a striking environment: a reminder that successful performance requires both the right conditions and the right discipline.

Participants left with new thinking on growth, strategy and leadership, as well as a pair of New Balance shoes. This memorable gesture sent the cohort back to campus with a tangible reminder that the lessons of the afternoon were meant to be carried forward.



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How to be an authentic leader

There is a distinction that runs quietly through almost every leadership conversation but rarely gets named directly.

It is the difference between managing your image and being genuine, between performing competence and actually leading, between presenting yourself as you want others to see you and showing up as you actually are.

Professor Thomas J. DeLong has spent more than four decades at Harvard Business School studying this distinction. Before joining the faculty, he served as Chief Development Officer and Managing Director at Morgan Stanley. He has spent his career at the intersection of human behaviour and organisational performance and his core argument has remained consistent: the quality of your leadership is inseparable from the quality of your relationship with yourself.

Image management versus authenticity

The pressure for a chief of staff to manage their image is not trivial. They work closely with powerful people and are visible across the organisation in a way that few roles are. They are expected to project confidence, maintain confidentiality and demonstrate judgement – often in public, often quickly and often in new and uncertain situations.

That pressure creates a temptation for a CoS to lead with their professional persona rather than their human and authentic convictions.

DeLong directly challenged this approach. Image management, he argued, is not a strategy: it is a drain.

The cognitive and emotional energy required to maintain a curated version of oneself in every interaction comes at the expense of the very things that make leadership effective: clear thinking, genuine connection and the courage to voice a difficult perspective.

Authenticity is not the same as transparency. One does not need to share everything. But the leaders who earn the deepest trust are those whose words and actions are consistent, whose behaviour in the room is the same as their behaviour outside it. Several participants reflected on how directly this applied to their work with their principals.

‘I want to show up as a more authentic chief of staff, one who communicates with honesty and courage. I believe that authenticity and trust are the foundations of true partnership.’

Gratitude, humility, and the quality of relationships

DeLong's teaching returns again and again to a single measure of a life well led. Not one's title. Not one's track record. Not the strategy or initiative one delivers, but the quality of the relationships built along the way and the degree to which the people in those relationships feel genuinely seen.

DeLong asks his students and executives to practise gratitude, not as a soft skill but as a discipline.

What participants took home

The session did not generate frameworks or models in the conventional sense. Instead, participants left with specific commitments. Several spoke of prioritising gratitude and expressing it more deliberately. Others focused on being more fully present in conversations and less distracted by what comes next. One committed to substance management over image management, and to developing a deeper quality of relationship with both themselves and the people they lead.

For chiefs of staff, these are not peripheral concerns. The role demands constant output: briefs, agendas, decisions, communications. It is easy for the human texture of the work – the relationships, the acknowledgements, the quiet acts of care – to be crowded out by the volume of everything else. This crowding out has a cost.

Clarity and humanity

The best chiefs of staff do not choose between being effective and being human. They understand that the two are inseparable: that clarity without humanity produces compliance, not commitment, and that humanity without clarity produces warmth without direction.

This balance is what the week at Harvard was quietly building towards. The strategy sessions, the negotiation frameworks, the risk models, and the collaboration simulations, all ultimately rest on the quality of the people doing the work and the quality of the relationships they bring to it.

It was fitting that the week ended here. Not with a tool or a takeaway, but with a question: who do you want to become?

Several participants carried this question home. One wrote that the programme had pushed them outside their comfort zone in ways that would change them permanently. Another said it had validated their confidence as a chief of staff in ways nothing else had managed. A third said they left not only sharper in skill but clearer in purpose.



Where are you going next?

A key challenge in an executive education programme is not the week itself, but the week after. Research on learning transfer - applying what you have learned in a new context - consistently finds that there is a significant gap between what people take from a training environment and what they practise in the workplace.

Several participants were aware of this before they left campus.

This reflection is a sign of a cohort that took their application of knowledge seriously, aware it would not be easy to implement everything they had learned the following Monday morning.

‘Do not underestimate how quickly things pick back up once you are back in your seat on Monday. The first Monday back hits pretty hard.’

From frameworks to implementation

To help mitigate this dilemma, the programme’s capstone method asked each participant to bring an organisational challenge with them to Harvard. Throughout the week they worked on it, tested it against new frameworks and left with practical steps on how to implement it upon returning to their organisation. Participants did not leave with vague commitments to ‘lead better’ or ‘communicate more clearly.’ They left with named actions, directed at specific relationships and problems in their own organisations.

One participant committed to creating a stakeholder management framework for their principal: a direct application of the influence and alignment work from the negotiation sessions. Another planned to introduce structured reflection rhythms into their leadership team, creating regular moments to test assumptions and clarify strategic priorities before execution rather than during it. A third was already using a framework from the change management sessions to design a transformation initiative that had been stalling for months. Others focused on the principal relationship. *‘I will shift from being primarily an executor to being a thought partner who actively shapes context and choices,’* said one.

‘I plan to introduce more structured pre-decision framing sessions with my principal, to ensure we are solving the right problems, not just the urgent ones.’

Several committed to integrating AI tools into their daily operations, not as a technology experiment, but as a practical response to the efficiency arguments made in the AI sessions.

‘I will double down on AI implementation to create more structure and efficiency, helping us both save time and focus on higher-value priorities.’

What these commitments share is specificity. They are not aspirations, but plans grounded in particular frameworks, directed at identifiable challenges and owned by people who had spent a week testing them against real-world complexity.



Advice for future cohorts

Marc Queralt Madrigal, chief of staff at TikTok, offered practical advice for future participants in the programme:

‘Come in with a clear sense of what you want to get out of the week. Not a rigid agenda, but a top three to five things that would genuinely move you forward – a challenge you are sitting with, a skill you want to build, a question about your role that you have not been able to answer. When those things surface in a session or a conversation, you will recognise them. And when you return to your role, you will know what to act on first.’

Marc also spoke honestly about the practical reality of stepping away for a week. He was thirteen hours behind his time zone. Managing the demands of a global role while being fully present in the classroom required deliberate preparation. He delegated to his team,

established a channel for urgent matters and built a support system before he arrived. He had moments during the week where something urgent came in and he lost the thread of the session. It is inevitable, he said. But the more you prepare for it, the less it costs you.

A career inflection point

For many participants, the programme was more than professional development. It was a moment of reorientation.

The chief of staff role does not follow a conventional career arc; there is no standard path in and no standard path out. Some chiefs of staff come from operations, others from strategy, communications, finance or government. Some will move into departmental leadership or the C-suite. Others will stay in the role for the long term, deepening and broadening their contribution as their principal grows. A few will use it as a lens through which to study what running an organisation actually requires and then go and do it themselves.

What the programme offered was not a career map but something more useful: a set of frameworks and a community of peers against which to test your own thinking about where you are going and why.

Several participants described the week as a turning point. One said it had pushed them outside their introverted comfort zone in ways that would change them permanently, and that they felt validated in their confidence as a chief of staff. Another said it had helped them articulate a professional ambition they had been carrying but not quite naming: to build high-performing teams where every individual has space to contribute their best, and where the collective output is better than the sum of its parts.

Omaar Singh, Chief of Staff to Lord Bilimoria (House of Lords, and President of the International Chamber of Commerce UK) reflected that the

programme had represented a transition point from a role rooted in government and parliamentary affairs toward a deeper engagement with business leadership. He had come to Harvard wanting to understand the chief of staff role in a business context and left with frameworks, a network and a clearer sense of how his skills translated across environments.

Maggie Munts from Truepic used the role as a lens for career thinking. She had been transparent with her principal about her longer-term ambition. The chief of staff position, she said, is powerful precisely because it gives you an unobstructed view of what running an organisation actually looks like – day by day, decision by decision.

The career journey is not linear

One of the programme's sessions with Prof. McGinn made a point that stayed with several participants long after the classroom discussion ended. Career growth does not happen in a straight line. It happens through choices made under uncertainty, through trade-offs that do not have clear answers and through a willingness to be honest about what you value and what you are willing to give up to pursue it.

For chiefs of staff, this resonates in a particular way. The role often sits at a hinge point between what you have done and what you might do next, between supporting someone else's leadership and developing your own. The programme did not wholly resolve that tension, but gave participants a better framework for understanding it, and better language for articulating it.

The cohort left Harvard at different points on their individual professional journeys. Some were at the beginning of the chief of staff role, still finding their footing. Others were mid-career, weighing-up what the next chapter looks like. A few were considering the transition out, whether into a more senior functional role, a different kind of leadership, or something they had not fully defined yet. Although not all participants shared the same destination, each left with the confidence to keep pushing forward on their own path.

Implementing learning

A week at Harvard Business School is a significant investment of time, energy, and the willingness to step out of a demanding role and be actively present in a learning environment for five days.

Survey feedback from this cohort suggests that the investment was sound, while the ongoing relationships between cohort members implies that the CoS network will continue to generate value long after the formal programme ended.

Implementation of learning, however, is individual. No programme can do it for you. It happens in the next conversation with your principal, the next decision or problem you frame differently, and the next moment you pause to ask a better question rather than reaching for the familiar answer.

This is a key provocation from the Harvard Business School faculty: ideas may be generated on campus but their implementation lives in day-to-day practice a hundred or a thousand miles away.



Conclusion

The Harvard Business School Executive Education Programme is impactful not solely because of its location and structure, but because of the calibre, commitment and humanity of the professionals leading it.

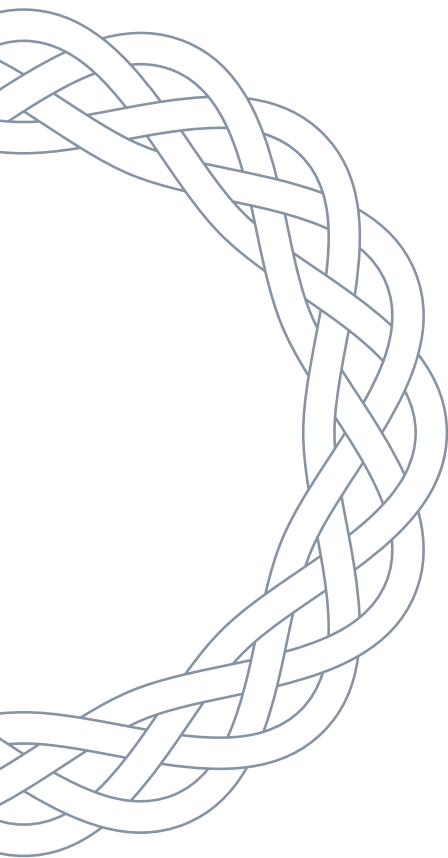
The participants in this cohort came from dozens of countries and sectors.

They brought different levels of experience, different organisational challenges and different expectations of what a week at Harvard Business School would deliver.

What they found, consistently, and in their own words, was something they did not always anticipate: that the best teaching is not primarily about information transfer. It is about the conditions a teacher creates, the questions they ask, the space they hold, the degree to which they make the people in the room feel capable of more than they thought they were when they first walked in. The CSA, the faculty, and guest speakers contributed to those conditions.

The result was a week that changed how these chiefs of staff think about their role, their relationships, and their own leadership style.

This does not happen by accident; it happens because of people who take the craft of teaching seriously and who bring their full selves to the work of developing others.






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The Chief of Staff Association is the world's largest membership organisation for chiefs of staff and the executives they serve. Its mission is to help organisations navigate complexity and lead with clarity, equipping chiefs of staff and their principals with the tools, knowledge and community to make better decisions at the highest levels. The Association delivers the industry-recognised Certified Chief of Staff® credential, executive education, research and a global peer network spanning more than 75 countries.