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Common Purpose brings together managers and leaders from all walks of life and its graduates form strong bonds. Those outside of the organisation are curious about just what goes on. Joanne Birtwistle finds out

You bring people together from the public and private sectors. You imbue them with a sense of humility and charity of spirit. You help them lead. But the meetings and the discussions remain secret and the participants are specially invited to join. What initially sounds like a high-powered business training course starts to feel more like some kind of secret society.

But this is actually Common Purpose, a registered charity organisation that runs programmes to improve leadership skills that reach out beyond business into communities. The campaigning leadership development organisation also wants to improve the effectiveness of leaders not just within their own organisations but also in their communities and society as a whole.

It also calls for active engagement with local communities, which they believe makes for more rounded, better informed and more understanding individuals who are therefore better equipped to make decisions as leaders - be they in the public, private or voluntary sector. It reads like the very holy grail of communitarian engagement that David Cameron seems to be warming to and to which Tony Blair often alludes.

"If you are in a position of authority, influence or power, then you have a responsibility, not just to lead your own organisation, but to feed that back into civil society," says Ken Pye, programme director for Merseyside. "To change the way that society works, to create greater opportunities for the community and to use your own skills and knowledge and empower your own community.

"That's a win, win situation. By doing that you are investing in your own employee base, your own customer base, your own community.

Those contributions that you make to society and the lessons you learn along the way you then feed back into your own organisation as well."

If you haven't heard of Common Purpose, that's because it relies entirely on referrals and word of mouth for people to sign up to its programmes. A tactic

that seems to have worked well to date given that since its inception in 1989 more than 60,000 people have been involved and over 17,000 have completed one or more programme.

The organisation, which has 45 offices across the UK and even some in Europe, has been operating in Greater Manchester and Merseyside for many years. At the end of 2004 it expanded into Lancashire, and is looking at the feasibility of moving into Cumbria too.

The main programmes are the two-day Profile programme and the year-long Matrix programme, which takes one day a month, costing £3950 and £33,950 respectively. Places on the programme have to be applied for, to ensure a mix from the public, private and voluntary sectors, and there are bursaries available for those unable to pay the full fee.

Joining the programme certainly helped Tracy Wood, the youngest partner at accountancy Ernst & Young in Manchester, who graduated from the Matrix programme in 2004. "One of my development needs was to see the world through other people's eyes," says Wood. "The private sector can be driven by exams and technical knowledge but in Common Purpose everyone has different drivers. My motives, for example, can be quite profit driven - not at all the same as people in the voluntary sector. "We visited different schools and community groups in some of the most deprived areas in Manchester. I'd never been round Moss Side before. You have no idea what is on your own doorstep - I found it quite shocking. It has helped me have an open heart and mind when going into or looking at problems."

But by relying on word of mouth recommendations from its graduates and then making a strong network of influential and powerful leaders available to its graduates, Common Purpose is vulnerable to accusations that there is a bit more going on. That there is a hidden agenda or something.

Although on programme days the organisation does adhere to Chatham House rules, which is vital if people are to get value out of meeting leaders "warts and all", there is, they say, no secret code, no funny handshake and no secret agenda.

Peter Wheatley is the senior programme director for the programme in Greater Manchester. "I can understand how someone from the outside can look at it slightly differently," he says. "I'll go into a meeting and there will be 12 people around the room and four of them will be graduates. By the end of the meeting that will have come out in some way, because they will know each other or they'll talk about Common Purpose. Our job is to reach those other people and make them aware of what we are doing; that it isn't some ivory tower or some special institution."

Pye is particularly keen to set the record straight. "This is not a membership organisation," he says. "This is not a club or society. The only reason that we ask people to apply for a place on the programmes is because demand is such that we have to limit our intake; we have got limited capacity. It's also to ensure the make-up of the group - I need to make sure I've got the broadest possible representation from religious, political, philosophical, cultural, sexual orientation."

But is there a danger that a network set up for altruistic reasons has been taken over by the graduates for their own ends? Power, remember, corrupts. "Yes, you do meet some incredibly influential people and some of them are people I would come across in my job, but that's not what it's about. The title and the day job don't matter. You shouldn't go for that reason," says Wood. Wheatley says that access to the network of other graduates was set up as an extra service, because people wanted to stay in touch after the programme. Common Purpose might hope that leaders are keeping in touch to help out on each other's community projects but how and why people actually meet up cannot be controlled. "The trust is that they will go and use it and use it for good," he says. "We will encourage people to utilise those networks and some people make more out of it than others do. But Common Purpose is just an organisation that brings people together, who are leaders."