



FEATURE

Jude Alexander, HR Advisor,
Scottish Woodlands

EMERGING LEADER PROGRAMME A LOOK BACK

Following the conclusion of the Institute's Emerging Leader Programme, Jude Alexander looks back on some of the key highlights of this first-of-its-kind initiative.

I joined Scottish Woodlands as a Human Resources (HR) Advisor in August 2018 following a period working in the HR team at the Forestry Commission. I didn't specifically choose to work in the forestry sector – however, with an MSc in a climate change-related discipline, I enjoyed being part of an industry which was pivotal to economic and global climate concerns and so, my career has naturally progressed within it.

Ian Robinson MICFor (Managing Director of Scottish Woodlands) suggested I apply for the Institute's Emerging Leaders Programme, which was developed in partnership with Clore Social Leadership. The purpose of the programme was to help emerging leaders in the sector build their leadership potential, strengthen their networks and drive both social and organisational change.



Me (Jude Alexander) in a tree!

I might not have been seen as the most obvious candidate for a programme such as this, since I am not a forester, and I did question why I was put forward. However, being nominated by my employer gave me a sense of being valued within the company and that they saw my potential as a leader in the sector.

The six-month course began in January 2023. Although I was the only one coming into the programme with a HR background, I have made professional connections with many others within the sector, from across the UK, whom I would not have met otherwise.

The course allowed me to appreciate the challenges the sector currently faces and quickly brought into sharp focus that people are central to forestry. Many of the challenges faced are in relation to resourcing issues and I understood how my role in HR is crucial to bringing about vital change. Key issues such as equality, diversion, inclusivity, attracting and retaining talent and addressing skills shortages all fall within the remit of HR.

One of the many challenges the Emerging Leader group was tasked with was the Peer Innovation Challenge. This involved splitting into small groups with peers from other organisations and selecting a topic of interest – for example, how to increase equality, diversion and inclusivity in the forestry sector, which is of particular interest to me.

It can be said that forestry has always been male-dominated – however, in recent years, this has generally improved, and there are more women coming into the sector. If we use the Emerging Leader cohort as an example, the gender balance was very good, in fact, there was a roughly equal split of men and women on the course. I am particularly interested in how we can attract a wider pool of diversity into the sector, for example, more ethnicity and cultural diversity. By attracting a more diverse group of individuals, the industry is likely to tap into new and innovative skills which can drive the sector in the UK forward. The challenge is how do we do this, and all the Peer Innovation Challenge groups are working on making recommendations to the Institute on their topics to tackle these challenges. All the challenges are people-focused, and it will be interesting to see the subsequent recommendations as all of them can be interlinked.

Another part of the course involved completing the Lumina Spark Analysis, which highlights the three personas we all possess. My key strengths are centered around working with people, and it has been a useful experience to understand how I react in different situations while gaining insight into the various different personality types of others and how I can adapt my working style to accommodate theirs.

I was nervous at first prior to meeting my peers and felt a bit of imposter syndrome. However, I found everyone to be very welcoming and accepting, which truly put me at ease and allowed me to be myself. This is how I had them all playing the 'Box Game' as the evening entertainment (but that is a story for another day).

As a result of undertaking the programme, I have had an awakening that has really sparked my interest in the key people issues our sector faces and I am motivated to drive these challenges forward. I have become more confident and more assertive in my role and learnt various skills I can take away with me – for example, coaching and making use of action learning in groups to resolve internal issues, thinking of new ideas and making changes. It has been a really enjoyable experience, and I am grateful for the network I have built as a result. Our cohort will continue to work together on various challenges within the sector.

If there is one trend I have noticed, it is that time is an issue for everyone. There is a real culture of overworking and a lack of work-life balance. This has always been a concern in many businesses and the sector needs to work together to address and remedy this culture. I think it is essential that forestry organisations have skilled HR professionals in place who can deliver policy agendas to attract new staff and ensure we have the right people in the right place, while having the support mechanisms internally for colleagues and the business.

As an HR professional, I believe this course has been extremely relevant to my role and will benefit both my career and the business. For future courses and for organisations who intend to have their staff apply, I would highly encourage more HR professionals, and others who do not work directly in operational or technical roles, to apply.



The Emerging Leader cohort

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