

The Worshipful Company of Farmers and Duchy College

17th Challenge of Rural Leadership Course

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Introduction

Late in 2012, I was fortunate enough to be approached by Jim Geltch of Nuffield Australia asking if I was interested in attending the 17th Challenge of Rural Leadership Course in the United Kingdom (UK). It was relatively short notice, and a busy time of year for our business. However, opportunities like this do not come along every day. Before I knew it, I was bound for the UK on what was to be the next chapter of my Nuffield journey. This is the amazing experience of the Challenge of Rural Leadership Course which accepts one Nuffield Scholar each year from Australia, to participate in the program.

There were seventeen other people in the course. Two were from Poland, one from the Isle of Mann and the rest from the UK. The course was very intensive. Every day we had course requirements on and often we did not finish until approximately 10:00 pm.

Very early in the program I was chatting to one of the presenters. I was told to not hold back, tell them how I saw things, and I did exactly this. Having spent some time in the UK on my 2010 Nuffield trip, I quickly realised there were many differences between agriculture in the UK and Australia. There were also many similarities. Having spent 16 weeks overseas during my Nuffield scholarship in 2010 certainly made my contribution to the group so much more productive and positive.

I must also thank Richard Soffe and the Duchy College for their assistance and hospitality during the course.

Presentations

Throughout the course there were a series of presenters that gave us a different prospective on leadership. These came from both agricultural fields and many from outside of agriculture. There are many lessons to be learnt from within agriculture and externally.

The Speakers included:

Richard Soffe, Course Director

Geoff Kerr, Assistant Course Director

Associate Professor Robert Williams, Senior Tutor

Martin Redfearn, National Head of Agriculture, Barclays Bank

Peter Redstone, Management Consultant

Peter Kendall, (National Farmers Union) NFU President

Geoff Harding, Bank of England

Bill Clark, Trewithen Dairy

Professor Allan Buckwell, Professor of Agricultural Economics at Wye College

Jeff Beer OBE, Agronomist and Magistrate

Professor Mick Fuller, Head of Graduate School at University of Plymouth

Philip Lymbery, previous Campaigns Director for Compassion in World Farming

Graham Ronan, Chair of Cornwall Ramblers Association

Baroness Hazel Byford, Patron of The Women Food & Farming Union

Neil Parish, Member of Parliament

Rachel Vowles, Associate Director of Northcott Theatre

Jack Russell, Personal Development Coach

Dr Andrew Appelboam, Emergency Consultant, Accident and Emergency Medicine

Dr Brian Watters OBE, Lecturer and Researcher on Leadership and Strategic

Management at Cranfield University

James Small, Course Participant in 2012 and farmer from Bristol

Jeff Welch, Television and Radio presenter

Jane King, Editor of Farmers Weekly

Lord Donald Curry, Member of the House of Lords, Member of Various Bodies

Matt Loble, Senior Research Fellow and Assistant Director for the Centre of Rural

Policy Research and Politics Department at University of Exeter

I found these presentations to be very useful. In many cases, the time was taken by course facilitators after the talk to reflect and draw out the positive messages. This was also a powerful learning tool. Many of their principles are quite simple, but also very powerful. Some of these still resonate with me on a daily basis.



Figure 1: 17th Challenge of Rural Leadership Course, Class of 2013 (in the snow at Dartmore)

Case Study

A portion of the business section of the program involved undertaking a review of a business. The business we examined was Lye Cross Farms, owned by the Alvis Family. This is a large, vertically integrated family operation that has several dairy herds, large areas of cropping to support the dairy, a cheese making operation and a piggery that utilises the waste from the dairy. Our charter was to develop a strategy that would create a sustainable business that can efficiently meet the needs of all of the stakeholders in the business.

We spent one day being briefed and touring the operations. Three generations of family were involved in the various aspects of production. The business showed a strong sense of social responsibility. Their corporate objective was 'profit with integrity'. Turnover for the business last year was approximately 21 million pounds (approx A\$35 million).

Several time slots were allocated during the rest of that week to work on the project. The group collectively decided to work on four areas to review the business. We split up into smaller groups to work on these specific areas. Various people in the group had skills in different areas and applied these accordingly.



Figure 2: A sample of the cheese range from Lye Cross Farms and three generations of the Alvis family.

Several novel ideas were produced by the group. These included integrating renewal energy; utilising dairy waste instead of feeding it to pigs; revamping the local sales shop; improving the web site; changing the corporate structure to incorporate a non executive director, increasing the export side of the business, buying in more milk, or using more supply agreements to increase the cheese making business instead of purchasing more land to increase milk supply.

Feedback was provided in the form of an official presentation. This was meant to be presented to the business owners, however, excessive snow fall during much of the course time made driving very difficult. After several failed attempts to meet, a slide show was developed and sent to the business owners. We presented via a telephone conference call and the slide show.

Many of the ideas presented had been explored by the business previously, but not pursued for various reasons, which were explained to us. Some concepts were new to the business owners, and they were going to examine these more closely.

Overall, the exercise was quite good. We had the opportunity to look at a large, diverse business in some detail. The owners had eighteen keen minds dissecting and providing feedback on their business.

Practical Tools

Mind Mapping

This tool was introduced early on in the program. It is a simple way to put ideas down, in no particular order, to be considered at a later point in time. In my opinion, I found it similar to what I loosely call ‘brainstorming’. It allows a person to spend time considering all possibilities to a situation and documenting them. These can then be revisited at a later point in time.

PMI

Plus, Minus and Interesting (PMI) was another tool introduced to us. It is a simple table with the headings ‘Plus’ ‘Minus’ and ‘Interesting’. A problem or situation is considered; all possible outcomes are listed in the relevant columns. It is similar to a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, but I found it easier and simpler. Upon completion of the table, points are prioritised, harvested and addressed with whatever action is required.

Plus	Minus	Interesting
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fill in each column in turn – starting with Plus• Frame and repeat questions like – ‘what would be good about...’ ‘and what else?’• Accept all ideas, they can be prioritized later• Stay with this column as long as you can! Typically we find it harder to identify ‘P’s than ‘M’s!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only move onto ‘Minus’ when you have really finished with the ‘Plus’• Again, accept and write up all ideas! It rapidly reduces creativity if ideas are criticized as soon as they are aired.• Use OPV to help generate more ideas (mind map – ‘who has an interest here?’ ‘what might be their point of view?’)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Add ‘Interesting’ points whenever they arise• Often they contain really valuable ideas which you can develop further.

Figure 3: ‘Plus’ ‘Minus’ and ‘Interesting’ Table

Communication

Several presenters spoke about this topic from different viewpoints.

Jack Russell spoke about the influence of positive focus. Most people respond much better to positive language than to negative language. He also discussed how leadership was the process of unlocking potential in individuals. The Myer Briggs system was explored. A brief evaluation of all individuals in the group was conducted and the strengths and weaknesses of each type of person discussed. More importantly, how to use the strengths of these different personalities was explored.

Jeff Welch shared some of his experience with over twenty years in the television and radio industry with us. Two television interviews were conducted; one before we had much coaching; this was used as an educational tool. The second, on a media release we had to prepare and be interviewed on.

Social Media was discussed. James Small, a previous course participant shared his experiences with the adoption of social media into his daily farming routine.

Jane King also discussed the challenges of the print media in an ever increasing electronic age.

Rachel Vowles and her team held several sessions involving the course participants over the two weeks. She started with an ice breaker session where she used several tools to enable us to get to know each other. Other aspects of communication were also explored, such as 'tone of speech' and 'non verbal' eg body language.

How we communicate obviously plays a big part in how leadership is achieved. Each of these presenters contributed positively to this experience.

Balance

One of the last sessions we undertook was with Richard Soffe. He spoke about the need for balance in our lives and used the wellness wheel to demonstrate this.



Figure 4: Wellness Wheel

If any one of these sections is not in balance it is difficult for the wheel to turn. It is important to keep all of these areas in perspective. Often, this is overlooked as people get wound up in business and careers. After such an intense week of leadership skills building, I found it refreshing to stop and consider what was really important, and the need to maintain balance.

Team Building / Comfort Stretch

On the Sunday, in the middle weekend of the course, the group were involved in outside activities. We travelled to Dartmore, where we engaged in several team building exercises. One of these involved the group being split into two groups. The task involved building a flying fox with ropes over a river and ferrying team members across and back. This proved to be a challenging experience, as heavy snow had been falling for some time in the district. For someone from tropical North Queensland, Australia, this was something quite different. The mission was accomplished with no one being dumped in the freezing water.

Conclusion

During the course, we were provided with many different leadership tools and styles from the various presenters. Leadership is a very complex thing. There is no right or wrong answer in many situations. It is up to the individual to apply what they think is the best course of action under the circumstances.

A few of the quotes that have resonated with me from the course are: ‘If your goals don’t scare you, you are not aiming high enough’ (Lord Curry). “You can only make a decision with the information you have at the time’ (Dr Watters).

I am still coming to terms with many of the other lessons we have learnt. I will be keen to apply them in my daily operations, and hopefully achieve better outcomes in all aspects of my life going forward.

Overall, I found the Challenge of Rural Leadership Course to be very beneficial and would highly recommend it to anyone considering undertaking it.

I would also like to thank everyone who made this experience possible. This includes Tony and Dawn Kelly who are custodians for “Lorna & Bert Kelly” Memorial Fund, the Worshipful Company of Farmers, Jetset Travel in Griffith, NSW, Australia, and Nuffield Australia. I’d also like to thank Jeff and his team for their hospitality while I was in the UK. The seventeen other participants I shared this experience with I now consider good friends. And last but not least, my family, who selflessly encouraged me to attend these courses and staff who kept the business running in my absence.



Figure 5: Group photo out the front of Darlington Hall with Lord Curry



Figure 6: Class room at Darlington Hall