

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF FARMERS AND DUCHY COLLEGE

# 24TH 'CHALLENGE OF RURAL LEADERSHIP' COURSE

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12TH – 24TH JANUARY, 2020

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HELD AT DARTINGTON HALL, TOTNES, DEVON, UK

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks also to Richard Soffe, Geoff Kerr, Ali Bunkum and all their hard working team at Duchy College for the dedication and time you all put into making this experience one I will always remember.

And to the other 14 participants – thanks for being so open, caring and forthright, and welcoming me into your fold. You are my inspiration, and will keep ensuring I am always looking for the steps to the balcony.



**Figure 1: Course participants with Richard Soffe, Geoff Kerr and members of the Worshipful Company of Farmers**

## COURSE OVERVIEW

Having attended a number of leadership courses over the years, it was a bit hard to know what to expect from the “Challenge of Rural Leadership’ course run by Duchy College. At first I was a bit perplexed that before I left from Australia I had been given very little information on the course content, and no information on the other course participants. Thinking initially this had been an oversight, I learnt quickly it was intentional, and all a strategic and integral part of building the group and the direction of the two weeks.

Set in the 800 year old Dartington Hall Estate, CRL2020 was 13 days of intense personal reflection and growth, including a case study, training in use of leadership and communication tools, inspirational speakers and group bonding. In many ways, I feel we were pulled apart, and put back together again – but in a way which allowed us to better see and react to the world around us. All up there were 15 course participants, 13 from the UK, and fellow Nuffield Scholar Paul Bethune and I from Australia.

Leadership was not just preached and taught; it was enacted within all of us. From the first night when we were ‘forced’ within an hour to know each other by name (along with some intimate details!), we each took turns to chair the daily sessions, provide morning ‘warm up’ sessions for the whole group – and lead from the front when presenting to companies and other invited guests to our sessions.

One of the unique aspects of the course was that over the first week all 15 participants were given the opportunity to share their ‘Joys and Challenges’. This was an experience I believe we will always treasure, as everyone shared openly about their lives (with Chatham House rules firmly in place), our dreams, aspirations, challenges and frustrations. This created a remarkable bond between what was 15 complete strangers, who I now in many ways feel I know better than many of my close friends, business associates and even some family. It was an experience in relationships and understanding which had a profound impact on all of us, and one which many of us will look to explore further within our other relationship circles.



**Figure 2: Presenting to board of WH Bond and Co on behalf of the group during our case study**

## CASE STUDY – WH BOND AND SONS

One of the integral parts of the course was a comprehensive case study of a local business, with a presentation to their board of our findings and recommendations. We were introduced to WH Bond and Sons, a large diversified business in Cornwall, including a farming operation, timber sales and contracting. Our brief was to analyse all aspects of the business, create an understanding around its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and strengths – and make a presentation back to its board with potential strategies to maximise opportunities over the next few years.

Over the course of the five days we had to complete the case study and presentation, we were introduced to many tools by Peter Redstone from Barefoot Thinking Company, including mind mapping, PMI's and OPV's (lots of acronyms on this course!). We were then left to our own devices to utilise these tools, and let our natural leadership abilities come to the fore to develop a professional plan and presentation with suggested strategies and direction for the WH Bond group. The pleasing thing was to see how everyone worked together, utilising the strengths of the whole group – and the resulting presentation was very well received by the directors. Some aspects seem to really hit a chord, and the partners commented during and in feedback following the presentation that it had given them much to contemplate which will be discussed further at their board level. It was certainly an excellent learning experience which gave me greater confidence in my own ability to not only contribute and lead, but also to be able to articulate a case knowing I had the full support of the group behind me.



**Figure 3: Members of the group presenting to individual directors of WH Bond and Son**

## MEDIA TRAINING

As someone who has had some experience in dealing with the media prior to this course, this was quite an eye opening and valuable experience for me. All of us were required to write a 200 word press release on a subject on which we were quite knowledgeable and comfortable with. We were then subjected to two recorded television and one radio interview by media professionals on our topics, which showed us the full extent of how the media can manipulate and channel even the most adept and hardened public performer. One of these was an extreme 'gotcha' style of television interview, which attempted to push an agenda outside of your related topic, and requiring great skill in bringing it back to the points and agenda the interviewee wished to portray.

In my radio interview on the 10 year anniversary of our collaborative farm "Bulla Burra", all the interviewer wanted to focus on was the perceived inequities between Australian and British farmers, and my views on why Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's was on holiday in Hawaii during the Dec 2019 bushfire crisis! It was a very valuable session for me, and one I will always reflect on when working with the media in the future – and I certainly feel I have more tools and a greater level of confidence in taking on those opportunities.



**Figure 4: Media Training with Jeff Welch**

## WEEK 2 – WHO AM I?

While much of the first week was focussed on the group project and the tools required to lead, the second week was more focussed on personal development, personalities and personal leadership styles. Sessions included:

- Creative Thinking
- Uncomfortable conversations
- Developing Opportunities
- Effective communication

- Succession
- Leadership
- Change management
- Reflective learning
- Creating a culture of success

A feature of the program is based around intense learning sessions, followed by ample time to put these new skills into practice. Many of these were led by Peter Redstone, who led us through partner and group sessions in which group members challenged, encouraged and supported each other as we sought to stretch our boundaries and thinking.

A session on Psychometrics was also held, which helped us to look at what makes us the people we are, understanding the make up of others – and how people with different personalities and traits can work with each other and bring out the best in each other.

## SPEAKERS

Over the course of the two weeks we had the opportunity to be inspired by many quality speakers on a range of subjects and experiences all related to leadership and life journeys. These included:

- Bill Clarke – Trewithen Dairy
- Professor Allan Buckwell - Economist
- Dr Bryan Watters OBE - Military leadership
- Dr Andrew Appelboom – Leadership in high stress environments (Royal Devon and Exeter hospital)
- Lindsay Sinclair – NFU Mutual
- Minette Batters – NFU President
- Adam Bedford – NFU Regional Director
- Jane King – CEO of AHDB
- Caroline Drummond – CEO of Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF)
- Howard Petch CBE – Leadership (Agricultural economist)
- Rachel Vowles – Uncomfortable conversations (Actor)

A few standouts for me were the following:

**Dr Bryan Watters** was a Brigadier General who commanded the British UN Peacekeepers in Kosovo in 2008. Over the course of a couple of hours he led us through an extraordinary life journey based around making tough decisions under incredible pressure in impossible situations. He spoke about different types of problems:

- Tame problems – which always have an answer and requires strong management to put in place the appropriate processes to solve them (*“it’s tame, and therefore we must manage”*)
- Wicked Problems – which are complex, have no easy solutions and may not have been seen before. They require leadership to ensure people are engaged, the right questions are asked, and decisions are made. Those decisions may not necessarily be seen as correct in hindsight, but need to be made. (*“it’s wicked – and therefore we must lead”*)
- Critical Problems – which are generally related to a crisis and the need for someone to immediately command and create decisive action. (*“it’s critical – and therefore we must command”*)

The stories Dr Watters told were highly emotional, and gave us all much to think about in the way we look at and manage the tame, wicked and critical problems in our own lives. But more so – how we respond and react to the consequences of those decisions, many of which require decisive management, leadership or command at the time, but which we may analyse differently retrospectively. There are sometimes right decisions for the right reason, wrong decisions for the right reason, right decision for the wrong reason – or even the wrong decision for the wrong reason. It was an enlightening but sobering session which we will likely all carry with us for life.

**Minette Batters** is the current President of the National Farmers Union. It was an extreme honour to have an agricultural leader and advocate of Minette's standing take the time to come and address a group of 15 people, especially at such a critical point in UK agriculture being a week away from formal BREXIT.

Minette showed what it is to be a statesperson and true advocate in agriculture. She spoke with passion and with clear and insightful thoughts. It struck me how the 13 UK participants in the course all looked up to her and she was seen as a unifying figure in UK Ag. The general feeling was that 'Minette has our backs' – the quality of a true leader. She shared openly about leading through the maze of Brexit, the aim of NFU for UK agriculture to be Net Zero Emissions by 2040 (as opposed to the govt target of 2050) – and her passion for UK agriculture to use BREXIT and the Climate Change Summit in Glasgow in November to make a stand on the presence and leadership of the farmers she represents in the new world.

Misogyny and imposter syndrome were also addressed by Minette, but with positive messages on the road to success. A couple of quotes which stuck in my mind were:

*"Be grateful to the people who push and stretch you"*

*"Anger delivers nothing – always rationalise your thoughts"*



**Figure 5: With Minette Batters, President of National Farmers Union (NFU)**

**Lindsay Sinclair** is the CEO of NFU Mutual, which began as an insurance mutual in 1910 with 7 farmers, and is now the UK's 9<sup>th</sup> largest insurer, and the majority insurer of UK farmers. Lindsay was brought into NFU Mutual in 2010 from outside the industry to bring change. In his first 3 months of his new position he visited 80 separate NFUM agencies and asked the following four questions:

1. What do you like about NFUM?
2. What don't you like about NFUM?
3. What are you afraid I'll change?
4. What are you afraid I won't change?

It was the people approach, the sincerity of the questions and the honesty of the answers which led to the revitalisation of NFU into the strong business it is today. The third and fourth questions are ones which have struck a chord with me in the way I view leadership in a number of my current capacities.

Lindsay also spoke about having 5 areas of focus within a business but knowing that you cannot excel in all of them. These should include:

- 1 x that you excel in
- 1 x that you differentiate in
- 3 x that you hold your own in.

He said you need to focus on where you are winning and differentiating, then put extra resources into where you are holding your ground – and finally into where you are losing. But – you cannot afford to stop winning.

His long term objectives for NFUM could be the template for all companies:

- We want to be a great company to deal with
- We want to be a great place to work

## FAVOURITE QUOTES

In looking back, it is usually the quotes which stick in my mind – and which I now pull out to make a point (and to try and impress!) at poignant moments. These are a few which impacted me which I'll take from CRL2020:

*"Management is doing things right. Leadership is doing the right things"*

*"The definition of a successful business is "terrifying delight" "*

*"Price is what you pay. Value is what you get"*

*"Attitude is altitude"*

*"Life can only be delivered forward, but must be understood backwards"*

*"The problem with the present is that the future is not what is used to be"*

*"Managers are necessary, but leaders are essential"*

*"Some people spend their lives climbing the ladder of success, and only when they get there do they realise they are leaning against the wrong wall"*

*“A diamond is just a piece of coal which performs well under pressure”*

*“If you have creative thinkers in your business, DON’T expect them NOT to make mistakes”*

*“The optimist sees the opportunity in every danger. The pessimist sees the danger in every opportunity”*

*“Some people have something to say, others want to say something”*

*“You will do some foolish things – so do them with enthusiasm”*

*“If you don’t make mistakes, you won’t make a difference”*

*“It’s not what you know, its what you do with what you know”*

*“You can do nothing, or you can do something. If you do something you will be told you are doing it imperfectly. Do it anyway”*

## THE OUTSIDE VIEW

While we spent most of our days confined in a room in sessions together, we were given the opportunity to release some energy in an active day organised by ‘Dynamic Adventures’. Encouraging teamwork and group building activities, we were fortunate to spend a valuable day canoeing, ziplining, doing archery and rock climbing – all while carrying a dozen raw eggs which needed to be kept safe, warm and transported to a ‘nest’ in a elevated location.



**Figure 6: Outdoor teambuilding activities with ‘Dynamic Adventures’.**

## THE VIEW FROM THE BALCONY – FINAL REFLECTIONS

On the first night of the course Richard Soffe took us into the Grand Hall of Dartington Estate, and spoke to us from the balcony. It became a metaphor for the time we had together, the challenge to get up on the balcony rather than spending our lives on the dancefloor. While we will all ultimately spend a large part of our business, community and personal lives on the dancefloor involved in doing the transactional, the mundane and the compliance – it is only by stepping up onto the balcony that we can see where everything fits, where everyone is involved, the gaps, the congestion and the opportunities. This metaphor was the covering theme of the “Challenge of Rural Leadership Course”.

Through the journey of the two weeks we learnt about ourselves, and how we interact with each other. We focussed on the differences between leadership and management, being transformative vs transactional. Good managers are very important, but generally work within the bounds of authority, whereby good leaders can influence outside of the authority they have been given.

Over the course of the two weeks we didn't just learn about leadership, we lived, breathed and practiced it. From taking it in turns chairing each day, presenting daily 'openings', doing major presentations, being ambushed in media interviews and having to make late night (early morning!) leadership decisions on how to get the group home from the Totnes pub when all the taxis had quit for the night!

It was a very different course for me, especially as one who has been involved in quite a few in my lifetime. Not only was it very intense in nature, but we as a group bonded in a way I had rarely experienced in this type of setting. This created not only a level of trust, but also an environment in which we openly challenged, nurtured and mentored each other - in order to encourage each other to become the best people and leaders we could be.

An interesting observation for me being in a group of 13 UK participants, and one other from Australia – was how we view the world through the prism of our own experiences. It was fascinating for me to listen to the passionate discussions around such things as BREXIT, climate change, animal activism and government policy which were moulded and shaped by the environment in which they were farming. Which made me realise even more how my own views are also similarly shaped by the prism of Australian agriculture. Once again – we all need to get up onto the balcony to see where we all fit, where the congestion is, where the gaps are, and where we can find the opportunities.

I was really unsure what benefits I would gain from doing CRL2020, but I was looking for some leadership direction and clarity in my approach to thinking. What the course provided was structural thought, effective tools - and a focus on people as mentors, confidants, support and encouragement. It has made me rethink the way I look at my business, the value I add to community and industry groups – and the way I use the passions which 'get me out of bed in the morning' to make a difference in the world.

I would highly recommend the Worshipful Company of Farmers 'Challenge of Rural Leadership' course to others, and hope the lessons learnt and the friendships made help make me a better leader, community member, husband, father and friend. And I have 14 new friends who I will cherish for a lifetime.

Thanks again for the opportunity.

