

18th Challenge of Rural Leadership Course

Michael Chilvers
2014 CRL course participant

Introduction

Following the completion of my 2012 Nuffield Scholarship, the opportunity to apply for a position on the 18th Challenge of Rural Leadership (CRL) course presented itself. I was fortunate enough to be selected to attend the course run by Duchy College and The Worshipful company of Farmers, held at Dartington Hall near Totnes, in Devon. The generous sponsorship from the Bert Kelly Memorial Trust, Jetset Griffith, and the Worshipful Company of Farmers helped make it possible to participate in this unique learning experience. I must make special reference to the support and patience offered by my family, particularly Fiona, who again took the reins of our business during my absence at a crucial time of year.

For two weeks, 14 participants from the British Isles, a Romanian, a Polish, as well as a fellow Australian, shared the experience of learning from inspirational leaders from across the UK, whilst residing in the peaceful surrounds and grand buildings of Dartington Hall.

Course aims;

- **To provide high-potential managers with the capabilities to grow and thrive in continuously changing conditions**

Course Objectives;

- **to develop one's own business by having a better understanding and awareness of the strategic issues likely to occur over the next five years.**
- **to critically evaluate the alternative approaches to management and leadership among rural businesses.**^[1]^[SEP]
- **to increase one's ability to motivate and communicate not only with staff and colleagues but the outside world.**
- ^[1]^[SEP]**to increase the influence of the agricultural community both nationally and internationally.**

These aims and objectives were met using a combination of styles, including lectures and presentations by agri-business, education, and political leaders, a farm visit and an associated case study, as well as participants taking daily responsibility for running aspects of the course. Presenters included;

- Baroness Hazel Byford, current Master of the Worshipful Company of Farmers and Life Peer since 1996, relaying her experiences of parliamentary service and the discipline and organisation required to run a farming business whilst being a full time politician.
- Dr Bryan Watters, currently lecturing and researching leadership, strategic management and the leadership of change at Cranfield University. He discussed moral issues and strategy around highly complex problems and leadership, with particular reference to his time commanding British UN Peacekeepers in Kosovo in 2008. This was a very profound and memorable lecture, held late in the evening during the second week of the course. The entire audience was totally engaged and



deeply moved during his recount of various experiences and concepts around military leadership and decision-making processes directly affecting innocent civilians.

- Rob Sanderson, who, after growing up on a tenanted farm in Hampshire, attended Nottingham University, and is now head of Central Store Development with Openfield Agriculture discussing business growth and collaboration. They have developed 17 farmer owned grain storage sites across the UK, with a combined capacity of over one million tonnes.
- Dil Peeling, Compassion in World Farming's Director of Campaigns, explained the policies and aims an organisation committed to minimising large-scale food and fibre production and the impact it has on the social and environmental landscape. Addressing a group of passionate and articulate people from within agriculture could be viewed as challenging, however it is vital to gain understandings of the motivations and beliefs from differing perspectives.



Figure 1 Dartington Hall

Course Outcomes

The first week of the course was largely devoted to the case study conducted on Riverford Organics. From a humble beginning selling organic vegetables through small shops and supermarkets, Riverford, owned by Guy Watson, began packing their produce into boxes for direct delivery in 1993. Turnover is now close to £40 million per annum, a network of franchisees deliver the boxes to households, and the business employs around 400 people.

Our brief was to deliver a strategic plan to Guy, his sister, Rachel, and the managing director Rob Howard. Following a visit to the packing operations and farm restaurant, these three addressed the group, giving an outline of the history of Riverford, the current structures, challenges and opportunities, and some of their thoughts as to the possible future direction of the business.

Discussion was structured and supported over the following four days with the aid of thinking



tools. Techniques such as mind mapping, ‘think, pair, share’, and ‘plus, minus, interesting’ were used to engage all participants, develop and balance thinking and effectively draw-out ideas. Delivered by Peter Redstone (Barefoot Thinking Company), all participants had ample opportunity to practice and appreciate the benefits of the various techniques.

The engagement of a successful business as a case study rather than creating a hypothetical scenario enabled a greater sense of responsibility between the course participants. Individual contributions and skills were drawn together to in a final presentation at the end of the first week. The tight timeframe for reporting ensured added accountability for all participants with everyone fully engaged in the process.



Figure 2 engaging with the issues

Week two of the course developed deeper understanding of leadership and the traits associated with good leaders. Some of the major challenges faced by agriculture, from a UK, European and global perspective were also explored. Issues such as the Common Agricultural Policy in relation to UK production; genetically modified organisms; climate change and global population were discussed by speakers such as; Allan Buckwell, (Professor of Agricultural Economics, Imperial College at Wye, London, and president of the British Agricultural Economics Society), and Professor Mick Fuller, (a plant scientist and currently Head of Graduate School at the University of Plymouth).

Drawing on pre-course reading, in-course presentations an experience we endeavoured to define effective leadership, as well as examining the complexity and importance of matching different circumstance with skills, attitudes and traits for productive outcomes. It was agreed it is very difficult to define leadership in simple terms; indeed there are some 111,500 books devoted to the subject available on the amazon books site. Further, a clear distinction emerged between leadership and management within a business. It was suggested that management tends to be task oriented, while leadership deals more with people and ideas. Leaders develop direction and strategy, while their implementation is a function of management. This is an

important differentiation, particularly in small businesses where leaders may also have roles within management.

The importance for leaders to be able to analyse problems as they are encountered was discussed, and an understanding of how the nature of the challenge influences the specific approach to leadership was gained. Problems may be described as either wicked or tame, the latter, whilst being challenging has a limited degree of uncertainty, often has a solution that may be procedural or less complex, and can be executed by management. Its more singular nature makes it more manageable. Tame problems may range from the challenges of changing agricultural systems to the complexity of responding to seasonal variations on-farm.

Climate change, on the other hand, is a wicked problem due to the multi-layered causative factors, thus multi-layered resolutions are required. “A wicked problem is complex rather than just complicated – that is, it cannot be removed from its environment, solved, and returned without affecting the environment. Moreover, there is no clear relationship between cause and effect. Such problems are often intractable.” (Leadership. A very short introduction. Keith Grint, Oxford Press, 2010)

As a leader, evaluating problems and formulating strategies to deal with them, requires a holistic view of the situation or context in which the problem exists. Course director, Richard Soffe, explained the need to remove oneself from the situation and take a view from above such that the bigger picture can be seen. Dr Andrew Appelboam, an Emergency Consultant at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, stressed the necessity of avoiding becoming too drawn into critical situations. Delegation, sharing problems, supporting early decision-making, and not blaming the situation, were described as important factors in maintaining an overarching view. Further, remaining calm instills an air of confidence and keeps the focus on the important issues. By having the skills to analyse and understand the parameters and the environment, and avoiding becoming lost within the problem, the leader can plan and act.

Effective leaders need to have a good understanding of themselves, including their own strengths and weaknesses, and how these will influence their leadership style. While analysis of self is not a skill that can necessarily be learned, there are various programmes available to assist to classify and describe personalities. The CRL course used a psychometric analysis run by Elenchus Occupational Assessments. The methodology employed is an online questionnaire that included a time limited section, followed later by analysis of the responses. The results were felt by all participants to be highly accurate descriptions of their personalities and were used as a framework for discussion around individual leadership and management styles. In order to become more effective when working with others it is important to have a conscious understanding of how we as individuals respond in certain situations. Coupled with the ability to recognise traits in others, leaders can build and manage teams more productively.

People management was a common theme throughout the duration of the course and as a consequence sessions were devoted specifically to communication. Inevitably, difficult situations will be encountered and having techniques to deal with conversations which follow are essential if leaders are to gain and maintain respect. Various scenarios were played out and participants were given the freedom to try a range of different approaches in order to open, and ultimately conduct successful conversations around difficult circumstances. Understanding methods of constructing dialogue around conflicting views and negotiations is a valuable skill, and the opportunity to explore and practice strategies was greatly appreciated by all involved.



Conclusions

The diversity and number of participants is a strength of the course. The inclusion of participants from outside the UK and the global perspectives and experience this contributes to the course is a major benefit and provides an international integrity to the learning. The relatively small group ensured a sharing of tasks and responsibilities, with less experienced individuals gaining confidence through chairing sessions, daily opening and closing activities and introducing and thanking guests and presenters.

In small business many roles are performed by the same person, so a clear understanding of the delineation between these roles, and the importance of each is becoming more important as financial and regulatory burdens increase. Further, understanding leadership and the influence it has on organisational culture, combined with a greater understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the strengths and weaknesses within the organisation as a whole, can affect positive change.

Effective leadership comes from a combination of skills, traits and attitudes. Skills can be developed through application and experience and enhance the working environment, while the fostering of positive attitudes and personal traits contribute positively to workplace culture. The course explored examples of tools to help organise, expand and challenge thinking around issues, and provided opportunities to put these into practice. It reinforced many notions already held regarding leadership qualities, leading to a greater sense of confidence through a deeper understanding of self; how to utilise strengths and gain an awareness of weaknesses and strategies to manage these. Skills and techniques were provided to help organise thought processes, develop strategy and maintain perspective when encountering challenges.

The CRL course learnings will deliver many benefits to both our farming business and to my contribution to wider industry. Application of critical, creative and reflective thinking in the strategic analysis of our business will enhance our future decision-making, business development and engagement with agricultural opportunities as they arise. Continued participation with essential industry bodies such as GRDC and the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association will be strengthened as a result of greater self-confidence, strategic application of key leadership qualities, management of people and processes, and a greater understanding of the inter-dependence of global agricultural issues.

Recommendations

Nuffield Australia and associated sponsors of post-scholarship opportunities are to be congratulated and should continue to provide increased opportunities to participate in programmes such as the CRL course because:

- with the provision of further professional learning and growth for scholars both Nuffield and Australian agriculture benefit significantly from capacity building
- they are an effective way to strengthen scholar engagement with Nuffield
- they further enhance the well-respected reputation and perception of Nuffield.

