

The Worshipful Company of Farmers and Duchy College

Challenge of Rural Leadership

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The Challenge of Rural Leadership

I was all packed and ready to leave in November 2008 when a serious hand injury resulted in me having to withdraw at the last minute for my trip to “The Challenge of Rural Leadership” course in the UK. Sitting in hospital the day I was due to fly out to the UK after the third operation in a week I was pretty down that this once in a lifetime opportunity had slipped away. Fast forward 13 months on the final night at the 2009 course dinner and when asked to say a few words I observed that fate, karma or maybe just good luck had been kind as the 2009 course and its participants had turned out to be the perfect fit for me.

I would like to thank Duchy College particularly Richard Soffe for holding a place open for me after my late withdrawal from the 2008 course and Nuffield Australia for inviting me to attend the 2009 Challenge of Rural Leadership, Jetset Griffith for assisting with travel costs, The Worshipful Company of Farmers and Fairport Farm Software for assisting with the costs of attending the course. Thank you.



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Introduction

In November last year I had the great privilege to participate in the “Challenge of Rural Leadership” course run by the Duchy College in conjunction with the UK worshipful company of Farmers. The course was held in Devon in the UK and was a very intensive two weeks in which I was exposed to many inspirational and thought provoking presenters and challenging situations.

The course focused on identifying the skills and attributes required for effective leadership and why going forward strong leadership will be vital for Agriculture’s future and success. While the attributes of good leadership were interesting it was the time spent looking at “the big picture” for agriculture and why strong leadership will be required that I aquired most of my take home messages from.

Personally it was an incredible opportunity to step out of the day to day issues of owner/managing a mixed farm through what has virtually become a decade of drought in Southern NSW and obtain a global big picture perspective on agriculture. The story was very positive.

The underlying theme running through the course as presented by many of the specialist speakers was that Agriculture is potentially heading into a long period of prosperity and growth. Peter Kendall the President of the UK National Farmers Union referred to the “rebirth” of agriculture back into a central role with regards to the economy and society. A position held up until the industrial revolution where a large percentage of people’s income was spent on securing food and fibre. He cited the 2007 record wheat prices as a glimpse into the future as world stocks ran low and prices tripled as importing countries competed for limited supply to ensure their peoples food security.

Initially, I was a little sceptical when the reasons behind this boom were things like world population growing to 9 billion in the next 30 years, loss of arable land, food security and global warming as it seems we have been hearing the farming will be good because people have to eat theory for the last 30 years. However, when it was highlighted that for the first time the countries predicted to experience the largest population growth are also experiencing major economic growth and will have the resources to purchase the food required the message became clearer.

At the same time consumers in wealthy industrial countries are becoming a lot more discerning on the health, traceability, source and quality of their food and are starting to pay to get these boxes ticked. The rejection of GM food by consumers regardless of how ill informed this decision makes the likelihood of them embracing real Frankinfood like test tube grown chicken very unlikely.

The problem lies in the fact that consumers paying more for food as farmers are already well aware doesn’t necessarily equate to improved prices at farm gate. There is no doubt that a lot of money is being made in the Agriculture sector at the moment.

Unfortunately, farmers have found themselves in most cases at the bottom of the food chain with suppliers of inputs (fertiliser, chemical, advice, finance and machinery companies) and post farm gate supply chain industry such as grain storage and handling, supermarkets, grain marketers and middle men taking the lion's share of the agricultural sectors pie.

In conclusion if this situation is going to change and grass root farmers are going to benefit from the forecasted increase in agricultural commodity prices then strong and organised leadership will be required. I encourage all farmers to get behind and fully support the passionate individuals and organisations that take on these leadership roles. Rural Australia's political influence has declined and many of the grower controlled companies such as Graincorp and AWB have been privatised. It's never been more important that farmers from all industries become unified behind strong leadership with the simple message that agriculture is the solution to many of our perceived modern day problems such as food security, the environment, carbon reduction and water and land management not the cause.

I do not intended in this report to give a detailed account of each speaker or activity working through the course agenda but rather an overview of my take home messages, cherry picking appropriate parts of the course to highlight these

Course Overview

The 13th Challenge of Rural Leadership (CRL) ran from November the 8th 2009, as an intensive residential course at Dartinton Hall, South Devon near Newton Abbot. It was originally developed by the Seale Hayne Faculty, University of Plymouth and is run by the Rural Business School at Duchy College, Cornwall which is sponsored by the Worshipful Company of Farmers. All of the UK participants went through an application process which included an interview.

The course content was a mixture of interesting, challenging and motivational lectures blended with both inside and outside hands on activities. The interesting point to note is that there wasn't a single lecture or session where the speaker ran us through a definitive lecture on what are the fundamentals of good leadership and these are the attributes of good leaders. Rather each presenter provided insight and building blocks in which the participants could use to form their own conclusions. We learnt that the answers to these questions are not defined but dynamic and changing. There was always an underlying theme of agricultural leadership and what are some of the unique issues in this industry which would influence what would constitute good leadership.

The course agenda was set with three sessions each day with only the middle Saturday afternoon allocated as free time. The day sessions went from 9.00am to 6.00 pm with 1 hour for lunch and a couple of short breaks for morning and afternoon tea. After the evening meal we had the night session which generally didn't finish until 10.00pm followed usually by the days overview and wind down session at the Dartington Hall bar. There was a allocated Chairperson each day who's responsibilities included making sure the time table was kept to and a vote of thanks was organised for each speaker or guest.

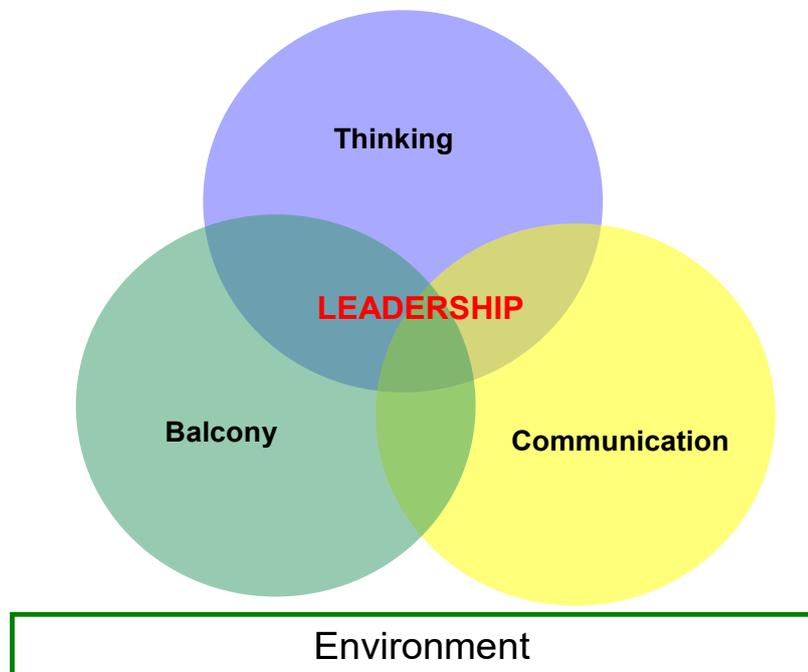
The course taught the group many skills and it is now up to the participants to apply this knowledge. I would highly recommend this course to anyone who would like to be challenged and further their personal development.

Contained in this report is a brief summary of what I learnt are the key elements of effective rural leadership with reference throughout to the speakers and activities which helped high light each component.

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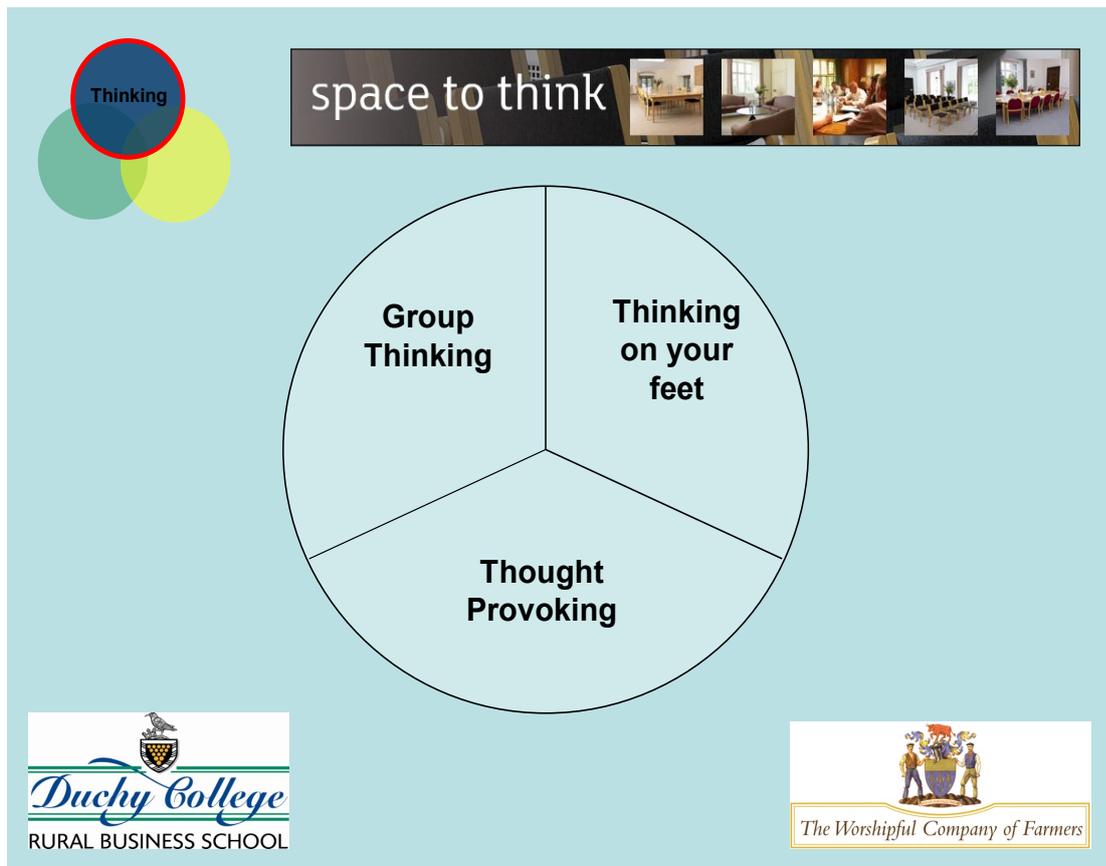
The Components of Effective Leadership,

What is Leadership?



Leadership is really more of a concept than a definitive set of rules. When breaking it down based on what I learnt during the Challenge of Rural Leadership course I concluded that while this is not an exhaustive list there were three components that are always present when defining good leadership. While the emphasise on each will vary depending on the actual industry or circumstances (the environment) it is virtually impossible to have good, let alone inspiring leadership without all three ingredients. These are the ability to think, communicate and to rise up above a situation so you are able to get a bird's eye or helicopter view of things (Balcony). Clearly the leadership required to Chair the local CWA branch is very different to the commanding officer taking his troops into battle but in both cases if these three key components are not present then the result or outcome is more than likely destined to fail.

Thinking



Of all the attributes of leadership that were raised during the course the most emphasis was that a good leader must be able to think. On the surface this seems fairly obvious but the reality is with people leading such busy lives our thinking time usually is spent on what we are doing at the moment or what needs to be done next. While this is important good leadership also requires the allocation of time for reflecting, planning and most importantly dreaming.

Group Thinking: A good leader doesn't have to be the smartest person in the organisation. While a slightly higher than average IQ is often an attribute of good leadership it is more important that they realise that they don't know everything and surround themselves and listen to other people with broader and different knowledge bases.

The importance of group thinking was highlighted during the course by challenging the participants with a problem solving case study. Early in the first week we visited Alvis Bros Ltd. which is a family owned and managed company which has developed from being a primary producing dairy operation into a multi million pound Agri food business. The businesses "Lye Cross Farm" cheese is one of the UK's biggest and most recognised cheese brands. Alvis Bros Ltd. business structure had four independent units including the dairy, the cheese manufacturing, contract machinery and a farm shop. The board of directors had identified that the underperforming part of the whole business was the farm shop and had requested our group to provide recommendations about its future.

The challenge for our group was that not only did we have to brainstorm to develop a strategy to address the problem we also had to do it in an environment where we had only meet each other 48 hours previously. With 17 highly motivated and successful individuals with in their own fields with greatly varying skill sets it was a very interesting process as initially we virtually tried to solve the problem from 17 different angles. The initial 2 hours spent on the case study seemed chaotic and quiet unproductive as ideas and potential solutions flew around the room like confetti. The initiative however of one participant to get things written down on butcher paper and another to take a leadership role towards the end of the session actually resulted in us gathering everything that was required to finish the project. Once we had the problem broken down it was simply a matter of forming 5 sub groups consisting of people with skills and strengths in each specific area. Each group worked independently of each other before finally bringing it all together in what proved to be a highly praised presentation back to Alvis Bros Ltd.

The dynamics of group thinking was highlighted in a completely different way through music. We had Martyn Warren who was the conductor for the Buckfast Abbey choir conduct a session on how we communicate by sound and if we work as a group following instruction we can create a harmony. For many of us including myself singing in public is way out of my normal comfort zone. As the session progressed we acknowledged the confidence that can be gained by functioning in a group that can provide relationships, comfort and diversity as it soon became apparent that in our group of 17 we had some strong singers whom the others could gather support from. The conclusion to this session was we sang with the choir in the beautiful Buckfast Abbey which was certainly something I personally thought I would never do. Afterwards we sat in the dark and listened to the incredible chants of the Abbeys monks.

Thinking on your Feet: The modern world we work and play in is clearly a dynamic quickly changing place. Leadership requires being able to acknowledge that things don't always go to plan and that change and problems is actually the normal way of things. A quote from the course which I have used often is "survival isn't about being the fittest it's more about being the quickest to adapt".

The thinking on your feet concept was addressed often throughout the course but high lighted by the numerous sessions we had with Rachel Vowels from the Northcott Theatre Company. Rachel and her team are very accomplished actors who have developed a business/leadership learning focused arm to her organisation. Whether it was the light hearted opening night games Rachel ran us through to quickly help us learn everyone's names and break the ice, the more serious role playing sessions or the very entertaining murder mystery night it was always about acting and reacting quickly to the situation presented. The half day role playing session was one of the most interesting, challenging and enlightening parts of the entire course. We were broken down into small groups of 6 and sent to three different actors who presented us with real life situations which we in turn had to immerse ourselves in and try and resolve. There was a elder gentleman who had worked at a dairy for 30 years who was becoming very forgetful and cursing major stuff ups who needed to be retired, a very threatened young man who's half brother had just

returned to the family farm business causing major issues and a young lady in an office situation with a real attitude problem with regards to procedure and other staff members.

Putting myself in the shoes of the person in charge of resolving these problems was challenging and confronting however, the real benefit came from watching other's deal with the same problem and the group discussions which followed. The whole session really showed that there are many different styles of leadership and problem solving and that the desired outcome can be obtained from very different approaches and the one style doesn't fit all situations so you need to be able to adapt confidently and quickly.

The day spent at Dartmoor National Park rock climbing and abseiling also illustrated quiet literally the importance of thinking on your feet. Whether half way up or half way down a rock face the importance of making good decisions quickly became very apparent.

Thought Provoking: If there was one single take home message for me from the course is it's this ability to find the time to reflect and think about the "big picture" or take a bird's eye view on things which really defines exceptional leadership qualities. The ability to question whether the way things have always been done in the past is still the best option without bias or preconceived ideas is a rare quality. To acknowledge that new methods or technologies and/or the next generation provide a better way, requires the ability to find the time required to invest in something as simple as big picture thinking. The modern world with all its time saving devices for some reason has developed into a situation where our most valuable asset is spare time. With the demand of work, family and play it seems to be becoming increasingly difficult to allocate time to think, dream and reflect.

Sir Don Curry, Peter Kendall and Mick Fuller were three speakers which really evoked some big picture thinking amongst the group. Sir Don Curry chaired the Policy Commission on the 'Future of Farming and Food' which reported to Government in January 2002. Government policy is now based on the report's recommendations. He chaired a group that oversaw delivery of the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy until 2009. He is chair of a High Level Group of farming and environmental stakeholders which formed to address issues around the demise of compulsory set-aside (the Group was asked by the Secretary of State, in January 2009, to look at wider environmental issues beyond set-aside).

He was appointed to the Council of Food Policy Advisors in 2009. He was awarded a CBE for his services to Agriculture in the 1997 New Year's Honours list and a Knighthood in the Birthday Honours in 2001. Sir Don spoke in detail about the challenges facing the planet as world population growth is estimated to climb to 9 billion in the next fifty years. Issues like food security, global warming and a decrease in the planets arable land were covered. Having been farming during a period of prolonged drought in Southern NSW and questioning the wisdom of continuing farming as a career choice the picture painted by Sir Don added to my resolve to ride the drought through. That was that food production will be a very profitable business to be involved in.

Peter Kendall the president of the British National Farmers Union followed a similar theme to Sir Don with the general theme of this presentation being that farmers will have to "produce more, impact less". As farmers prepare to enter the second decade of the 21st

century, we are in what the Government Chief Scientist John Beddington famously called 'the perfect storm': farmers have to grow their crops and livestock in a way that achieves bigger yields and better quality. But we can't massively increase our use of fertiliser, pesticides, water, and energy. Using these inputs certainly has an impact on the farm balance sheet but it also has an impact on soils, air, water courses and biodiversity.

Peter also spoke in depth about the power of perception. He was scathing that farmers often portray themselves badly which is enhanced by advertising and the media. He had a fantastic basic philosophy in that regardless of the issue farmers are and have to be part of the solution not the problem.

Mick Fuller a Professor of plant physiology specialising in genetically modified plant breeding was another thought provoking speaker. Genetic modification currently appears to be a dirty word as far as the consumer is concerned with most people using moral judgement to reject the technology. Mick spoke at length about the role genetically modified plants could play with regards to issues such as growing global population and its increasing food requirements, multinational company's control of agriculture and food safety concerns. Mick explained the science and the strict regulations surrounding GM and that the technology could realistically deliver salt, drought and frost tolerant plants in the near future which would increase yields with dramatically lower input requirements. However the choice will always come back to the consumer most of whom are unsure about what is truth and myth with regards to the technology. What really struck me about Mick's presentation was not only the content but how the presentation of the facts about GM's without all the emotional noise made other participants in the course who were anti GM question their stance. A great quote given by Mick which really gets to the heart of the GM debate was "a well fed man has a thousand worries, a hungry man has one".

Communication:

A large amount of the total course was spent on the importance of communication for good leadership. It was highlighted that great communication skills are on inherent in a few lucky people and it is a skill that can be worked on and improved. Good communication is vital if desired outcomes are to be obtained whether it's educating the new worker in the mail room or Peter Kendall influencing society's perception of farmers and agriculture via the media.

Steve Fisher from the University of Plymouth took us for a number of sessions aimed at given us a better understanding of management structures and the importance of communication. He stressed that it is impossible to be a good leader and communicate if you didn't have a good understanding of your own make-up and leadership style. Steve ran us through a series of self analysis workshops aimed at identifying our personal leadership styles, strengths and weaknesses. This was a thought provoking and revealing process particularly with identifying some of your own weaknesses and character flaws.

The course then focused more on actual communication tools and how to milk full benefit from a media opportunity. Andrew Parkinson focused on the printed press particularly the importance and power of press releases. A press release is how to engage the newspapers

with your stories instead of waiting for them to come to you. A good press release is short, informative and relevant. It's important to think of the audience, message and response when constructing a press release. You are hoping to tease the reader so that they will carry the story forward. We all had to complete a press release which was later critically evaluated.

Jeff Welsh from ITV Westcountry ran sessions focusing on public speaking and Television and Radio interviews. Jeff was very interactive and engaging presenter with great communication skills. Jeff had a very simple message in that good media = simple message + confident presenter.

You should always be prepared, responsive and available when dealing with the media and think about what I can get out of this opportunity. Linking a story to the bigger picture is a simple and effective way to make your message more attractive but understand that most reporters already know what type of story it will be and how it will be told before they do the interview. It's important to stay on your message and not let the questions drift in the interviewer's direction. Be reasonable and passionate about the message but don't whinge or lose your temper!

When dealing with television you should always know where to look and where you need to deliver your lines. Little things like leg movements, hand positioning and sitting in the seat properly are all important because most people will judge you upon your actions within 3 -5 seconds and are easily distracted. Make your point with a smile, nodding and facial expressions help you warm to the presenter, never look annoyed, never raise your voice, if you don't agree with the point just smile, use the presenters name only in tough interviews and make the assumption that the reporter will not help you. The main thing to remember is know what you want out of it, convey your interesting point then repeat it. Politicians are experts at this as they rarely answer the question directly but rather repeat their message.

To test out our acquired skills we had three interviews, two simulated television (which one was a very short, sharp and pushy and the other as a satellite link with just a cameraman with a ear piece questions) and a radio interview experience.

Balcony:

In what is becoming an ever more complex and busy world we seem to allocate our resources with a very short time frame in mind. Once the most immediate priority is identified we focus our attention on dealing with that before moving on to the next issue. Having the luxury of spending two weeks in the UK doing this course and being placed in an environment which allowed the time and encouraged thinking away from the stresses and demands of my day to day life I quickly identified I was guilty of this. The immediate demands of family life and getting the required operational work completed in my business had resulted in my big picture plans and visions being left on the back burner.

Richard Soffe who was the coordinator of the course highlighted the importance of getting a big picture view on things. He gave us all a copy of the book "Who Moved My Cheese" by Dr

Spencer Johnson which is a very simple parable that reveals many profound truths. The main message is change is inevitable in life and the real challenge lies in getting above a situation to anticipate, identify, adapt and even enjoy the process. A quote given by Richard which has probably become the biggest take home message I got out of the course was

“Survival isn’t about being the fittest it’s about being the quickest to adapt”.

This quote becomes very relevant when I consider it in context of my own farming business where we have been operating in a prolonged 10 year period of less than half average rainfall. It has certainly made me question the wisdom of continuing the same cropping program and enterprise mix because if this trend of lower rainfall is actually the new norm then the business without significant change will fail due to high input and operational costs.

Talking with other course participants a couple of months on the challenge now facing us all is to actually implement many of the skills and insight’s gained during the course as we settle back into the pressures and demands of our busy lives. The real challenge is to find the time to “get up on the **balcony** to reflect and think”.

Conclusion

I would strongly recommend the “Challenges of Rural leadership” course to anybody who is presented the opportunity to participate in the future. It was challenging, thought provoking and has helped develop in me many personal and business skills. It allowed me opportunity and luxury of stepping out of my day to day life to find what I now realise to be a rare jewel in “time to think and reflect on the big picture”. Most of all I made 16 wonderful new friends each of whom contributed in their own way to making the course so fulfilling and rounded.

Course Contacts

Organisers

Richard Soffe	Rural Business and Agriculture	richard.soffe@duchy.ac.uk
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Participants

There were seventeen participants who attended the course from England, Isle of Man, Romania and Australia.

