

The Worshipful Company of Farmers and Duchy College

Challenge of Rural Leadership

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Dr Kelly Manton-Pearce

Manton Farming Co

Bullaring rd.

Yealering, 6372

Western Australia

Mobile- +61 417964473

Email: pearcekelly@bigpond.com

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Course overview

The two-week course took place at the very delightful Dartington Hall in Devon and was coordinated by the Richard Soffe and Geoff Kerr his team from Duchy College. The course participants came from a variety of backgrounds and professional associations. There was myself and James Walker (2012 Nuffield Scholar) from Australia with the majority from the UK, as well as the Isle of Mann and Slovakia. The backgrounds included agro-politics, PR and communication, agricultural accountancy, sales and marketing. It was a long and very tiring two weeks but an incredibly rewarding experience.



Figure 1. The 2015 Challenge for Rural Leadership Participants with Meurig Raymond, NFU President.

The course aims and objectives were achieved in three different ways. We heard from a variety of speakers from different leadership backgrounds, undertook a farm visit and real-life case study and participated in a number of different personal development activities.

The quality of the speakers was outstanding and I gained an incredible insight from all. Many talks were very moving and inspirational. The speakers came from a variety of backgrounds and offered their insights into what is leadership to them and how they achieve it in their professional and personal lives. Some of the speakers, their role and what they spoke on included:

- Professor Allan Buckwell- Economist - CAP and EU policy and reform.
- Phillip Lymbery – Director for Compassion in World Farming- Animal Welfare into the future
- Meurig Raymond- NFU President and Welsh farmer – Leadership and Agri-politics
- Rob Sanderson- Openfield grain- Co-operative grain marketing
- Baroness Hazel Byford- Politician, Master of the Worshipful Company of Farmers- Her leadership journey
- Dr Andrew Appelboom - Emergency Medicine- Leadership under high stress situations
- Professor Mick Fuller- Agricultural Scientist- Genetic modification into the future
- Dr Byran Watters- Ex military, Leadership specialist- Leadership under high stress situations.
- Howard Petch- Retired Agricultural Educator.



Figure 2. Listening to Phillip Lymbery from Compassion in World Farming giving a very controversial talk on animal welfare.

The first week of the course was largely devoted to the case study conducted on Alvis Bros Cheeses (See: <http://www.lyecrossfarm.co.uk/>). From a humble beginning as a dairy this highly successful company is now producing and selling high quality cheeses throughout the UK and internationally. Our brief was to critique the business and develop a strategic plan in the form of a presentation given to the proprietors of Lye Cross Farms. Following a visit to the operations, the group had a week to work together on this task. The groups divided up into sub-groups and we assessed the current structures, challenges and opportunities, and the possible future direction of the business. This was quite a task when the room is full of ‘chiefs’ but we harnessed individual skills and strengths to deliver an excellent

presentation and from all accounts have significantly helped the business we worked with. I thought the task of working on a real-life case study for a successful and highly respected business was an excellent learning experience and forced a greater sense of accountability between the course participants and ensured that everyone was fully engaged in the task.



Figure 3. Group work preparing the strategy for the Alvis Bros case study.



Figure 4. Working on the Alvis Bros Case study.

The personal development activities included doing a psychometric test of 200 questions, which gave me a greater understanding of myself and my capabilities. We had the opportunity then to analyse ourselves to build upon our capabilities and focus on areas to develop. We were also introduced to very valuable thinking tool aids such as mind mapping and PMI which help to 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. We also participated in media training and I came away with some very useful skills.

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, mostly from a UK, European and global perspective were also explored. Speakers discussed issues such as the Common Agricultural Policy in relation to UK production; genetically modified organisms; animal welfare and global population. There was a strong focus on EU issues but the presence of international participants did allow some balance and the opportunity for reflection. I didn't see any negatives to being immersed in the EU issues as I learnt a lot and could certainly apply these learning's to Australian Agriculture. Many of the issues were similar.

James Walker and I were also invited to present on Australian Agriculture and the challenges and opportunities for our businesses.



Figure 5. Team building activities

Conclusions- Personal reflection and outcomes

Participating in the CRL course has changed my way of thinking, the way I interact with my colleagues and others professionally and to think with clarity about the bigger picture issues in relation to my involvement in industry. The course was very motivating and I found it a tremendous opportunity to gain knowledge from a diverse range of industries, people and management skills. The opportunity during the course to both reflect and critically analyse my business and professional life has already strengthened my leadership ability, confidence, people management skills. The constructive criticism from my new friends' was invaluable.

Taking the time to understand the big picture was a key breakthrough for me personally from the course. We were encouraged to remove ourselves from the busy 'dance floor' and onto the 'balcony'. This valuable metaphor to reflect and maintain focus was constantly reiterated throughout the course. The task sounds so simple, but takes strong leadership and resolve to continually take time for reflection as well as to implement change. After returning it has been a challenge to pin down a clear direction, due to the hectic nature of our lives but I am forever grateful for this life lesson to help myself deal with the challenging situations I find myself in.

Dealing with difficult situations and people management was a common theme throughout the course and participants were able to enact various scenarios with the support of their colleagues. 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. I now see that to gain and maintain respect as a leader I will need to develop personal techniques to deal with these difficult situations.

The course certainly highlighted to me that there is no perfect model or strategy to become a great leader. However, the course was an excellent opportunity to personally critique ones leadership journey and understand more about who we are and how we deal with certain situations thus improving ourselves. Personally I found the course to be a very refreshing, character building opportunity.

I would highly recommend the Challenges of Rural Leadership course. Again I am very grateful for the opportunity to attend and also to my fellow participants for their support and encouragement during the course.