

My Experiences of Leadership

Being Lead

As a young research assistant at a Brisbane University, I was asked one day to conduct an experiment on behalf of the Head of School. When I went to his office to get the scope of work the Professor sat me down and took me through what he wanted the experiment to be.

This sounds fairly straight forward, however the way he explained and wrote out the experiment that he wanted me to carry out, I thought was demeaning, belittling and micromanaging me to the umpteenth degree. The Professor wrote out everything in front of me like I was a Year 10 Science student...and not a very high achieving student at that. He prescriptively wrote down his hypothesis, aims, methods including the exact layout of how I was to setup the samples, I was one very unhappy little vegemite!

Didn't he know how good an RA I was? Didn't he know that what he was asking me to do was perhaps one of the simplest experiments I had done? Didn't he know that I was well experienced in running complicated and successful experiments?

Begrudgingly, I stepped out of his office and back in to the lab where I set about doing the experiment in a withdrawn, stewing and discontented manner.

When I had the results, I walked down to the Professor's office to hand him his results and get back to my more challenging and meaningful work.

After passing him the results and prescriptive methodology notes he asked me to take a seat and go through them with him.

As I sat there and listened, at first with little interest or enthusiasm I then started to realise that what the Professor had prescriptively written was for him! It allowed him to know what exactly had gone on with the experiment, without having been there. It allowed him to see what the results were and with his methodology, understand why they were the results they were. And then, from these results he knew exactly what the next steps were to either prove or disprove his hypothesis. It was FANTASTIC!

Watching this person conduct an experiment, using me as his hands, was like watching and being a part of his mastery at the same time.

I had learned that despite how masterful you maybe (or think you are) at something, going back to basics and keeping things simple are cornerstone elements. The Professor respected and thought enough of me as a person and RA to ask me for help, it was my judgements that were at play, if I had done the experiment my way, it wouldn't have been as insightful an experiment.

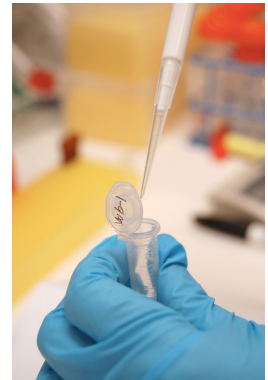
I think that the Professor knew how I was reacting to his approach, but with consideration, respect and a gentle hand, he led me through it. The Professor's leadership in that moment, taught me a great deal through the best experiment I have ever done!

Observing Leadership

During my Executive MBA, we heard from a range of industry executives talking about their experiences as executives and leaders, the lessons they have learned along their career pathway and hints and tips for us as we progress our own career pathways, interesting stories in their own right with some elements of inspiration.

There was one executive however that I found to be a truly admirable leader. They came to spoke to the cohort, introducing themselves as a part of an executive coaching program. The Executive started by explaining their career, which in itself was impressive and then following an entertaining story of their career path, began to talk of their current position.

The Executive had, at that time been in a new Chief Operating Officer's role for 3 months, for a well-known and recently troubled Australian company. As they talked of the new role, the challenges they faced and as they shared their vision for what they could do in the role, I noticed something about how they were speaking..... they talked in terms of 'we' and 'us' as if they had always been a part of the company. There was no sign of blame towards predecessors, there was no hero type grandeur where they thought they were going to save the day, this person was demonstrating simple, honest and respectful leadership. This Executive was taking on the



responsibility of where the company had come from, the mistakes the company had made and what the collective, including themselves, needed to do to turn things around for the company.



I'm not sure if too many of my peers noticed this aspect of the Executive's speech, moving away from the commonly used 'they' when something has gone wrong and 'I' when there was praise to be received. This person stood squarely in their leadership role, took full ownership of the role (including its past), and acknowledging that he and his followership were all needed to play their part to get the company operating to its best.

I walked away from hearing this Executive speak, thinking that from now on this is how I want to speak as a leader. I was wondering what our community would look like if our 'leaders' took a similar approach and took on the full responsibility of leadership and then just got on with what was needed to be done.

I left thinking that I would be a part of this person's followership any day!

Leading

Throughout my career I have found myself in leadership roles both through formal senior management positions and informally through decisions made by a group of people that they would follow me and nominate me to lead them through a certain circumstance. I would like to share an example of the latter.

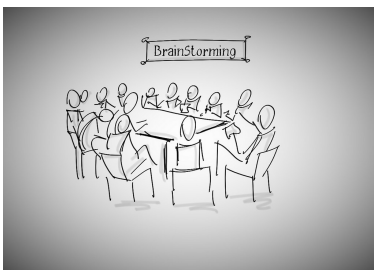
I once worked for a large Australian Agriculture Industry, providing oversight, advice and reporting on industry funded Research and Development. During this time, I worked closely with all aspects of the industry, diligently looking for ways I could serve, support and lead. It wasn't until the industry came to a point of crisis that I realized the level of comfort, trust and belief I had created within the relationships I had developed within the industry.

Two regions within the industry were experiencing an unknown phenomenon that was damaging the crop with little evidence to its cause. I was called upon by representatives from these two regions to meet with them and other industry representatives to investigate and come up with a way forward to remedy the situation. I was standing beside life-long industry professionals, scientists, advisors and farmers and was wondering why I had been called.... I was a person who had access to funds, that was why I was here.... Or so I thought.

During discussion it became apparent that no-one within the group knew what to do with an 'unknown'. There was some bickering over possibilities and responsibilities, demonstrating the group was at a loss.

So, I asked, "What do you need?", "If I can mount a case to get funds to get investigations underway, what activities would you undertake and how much would you need to do those activities?". To my astonishment, no-one had an answer.

I then proposed that we had an industry of people, expertise and knowledge at our disposal, let's bring that all together to create a systematic approach to this investigation, a 'all hands on deck' approach. The group thought on it for a moment, it was almost like they took the time to shake themselves out of the cloud of confusion and agreed that a multidisciplinary approach was needed. At this point the two representatives that had asked me to come along took me aside and said "that is why we asked you to come along".



The following week I happened to be conducting a roadshow with a panel of researchers, who were sharing their R&D findings with the industry. While we were travelling I told them of what was going on and what I had suggested. I then asked if they were interested in being a part of this multidisciplinary team. Not one researcher declined to be involved, in fact many offered to start some preliminary investigations using their own funds and other offered to get other colleagues involved. By the end of the roadshow, with the help of these researchers, farmers and key industry players we had created a project plan

that had buy-in from all industry stakeholders which resulted in a proposal that was funded by my organisation and further supported by the State Government.

This was such a rewarding experience, firstly to be called upon by the industry acknowledging the trusted relationships we had developed. But then to have so much buy-in from all stakeholders and for them to feel that they had all come together to play their part to help our industry come through the crisis that was upon us, was amazing.

Sometimes I find that as a leader, my role is minimal but still has impact and allows the right people to shine at the right moment and watching that unfold is one of the best aspects of leadership.... to me.