Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation

COURSE 23
FINAL REPORT

BY

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Introduction

My current role as operations manager of the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council, is, essentially, seafood industry advocacy and representation through WA's seafood industry peak body. As our membership extends across the 13,000-km coastline, a significant component of our work occurs at the regional community level, centring around the interface between regional fisheries, government, the recreational fishing industry and other users of the marine/estuarine environments.

I am also involved in a range of other committees, steering and reference groups, advisory councils and taskforces, at community, state and national level.

My desire to participate in the ARLP was driven by a genuine aspiration to improve my personal utility to, and value for, rural and regional industry within the seafood sector. From a personal perspective, this entailed placing a few key building blocks (or enablers) amongst the structure of skills and experience I've gained over the course of my varied career path – a catalyst to help me reach my true potential.

As I near completion of the program, I'm in a position to reflect on the challenges and rewards presented by the opportunity to participate in ARLP, and to assess its overall value in relation to my expectations.

I acknowledge, with gratitude, being sponsored on the ARLP Course 23 by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, and also owe a big thanks to my employer organisation, WAFIC, for encouraging my application and for allowing me the time to attend.

Highlights of and lessons from the program

The ARLP has had greatest impact on my global outlook across rural and regional sectors, particularly in terms of my personal leadership maturity. While, at times, the program has seemed to be somewhat unfocused and incongruous, it has been valuable for me to reflect on the components of the ARLP as a whole. Taking a holistic view has allowed me to see the long-term benefits on my psyche, attitudes and approach to problem solving in the rural context.

The more immediate impacts present in my recognition of the typical assumptions made previously, and my emerging ability to self-question these assumptions and assume a much broader view. This, in turn, facilitates the listening to and understanding of issues on a deeper level, and the conscious development of my ability to make wise decisions and foster positive change in the expanding number of communities that I engage with.

This process became noticeably evident during our visit to Indonesia, an environment rich with contradictions, in the contexts of relationships, business, primary production, governance and religion. My pre-conceptions were challenged on each of these fronts, and the Indonesian leaders we were exposed to on this trip provided context and their 'inside view', which allowed me to develop a much deeper level of understanding across the issues facing our neighbouring country. Our visit to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta reinforced

the need to second guess my naive assumptions and seek alternate ways of thinking, both through the eyes of an Indonesian native and via the experience of senior embassy officials.

The Kimberly segment of the program was an enjoyable and useful component – though perhaps not as 'life changing' as for some of my younger teammates. I have had the good fortune to experience a great deal of varied outdoor experiential work as part of my career path and personal interests, a good chapter of which took place in the West Kimberley. My learnings from this ARLP component involved developing a greater empathy for those within our group who struggled, and realisation of my capacity to assist, guide and mentor other members of my group (and other groups) through periods of high stress, anxiety and self-doubt. As a self-confessed introvert, my natural tendency is to avoid putting myself in the path of others' adversity. Our session in the Kimberley put me well outside my comfort zone in this area, as well as providing me with a greater appreciation of my own strengths and weaknesses under challenge.

Another key takeaway for me from the Kimberley was the realisation of how little I really know about the Aboriginal values and societal norms, in particular the indigenous history following European settlement. I had conveniently excused my ignorance by having been raised in a different society, but soon discovered that this relative ignorance extends across a broad demographic of native, non-indigenous Australians. I have developed a new respect and concern for the plight of contemporary indigenous issues, and witnessed some inspiring models of transformational community thinking being applied in the Kimberley. I'll reflect on these experiences as I seek better ways of engaging our indigenous seafood producers in the future.

The program, as a whole, has shown tangible impact on my approach to work, and, although to a lesser extent, influenced my family dynamic. The skill set of critical thinking is one I've made a conscious effort to improve, and this will remain a continuous process. I saw good examples of this in play in our time in eastern Victoria – in dialogue with the Voices for Indi group, and in particular with Cathy McGowan – a poster child for creative and critical thinking in political leadership. We also witnessed the antithesis of this dynamic in our dinner meeting with the local Labor MP member for Ovens Valley – in my view an outdated and misogynistic approach to regional representation. This contrast in mindset was a lesson worthy of future study and reflection. How best to role model transformational change?

Other instructive insights were provided in the Vic segment include: Kate Auty, on her approach to improving legal representation for indigenous people in Kalgoorlie (using terrific rural context in examples of her personal journey, spanning numerous career paths); inspirational models for family leadership and generational change demonstrated by the Brown Brothers in Milawa; memorable and useful demonstrations of social entrepreneurship with Matt Pfahlert at the Old Beechworth Gaol; and core practical negotiation techniques and methodologies from David Cromwell at Wang Central.

In Melbourne Paul Porteous influenced my perception of what it means to be a leader, and the utility of 'unlearning leadership' and the advantages of 'broad/critical thinking'. The Media Training session was also a useful refresher, reinforcing my previous training in this area.

On the family side, the MBTI component led by David Devlin offered great perspective to my wife and I on our diverse personality types, answered a few long-standing questions, and continues to provide interesting topics for discussion! The insights within self-awareness, self-regulation and awareness of others approach provides a good framework for working with others, harnessing strengths and complimenting weaknesses, to form productive teams in professional, social and family environments.

Leadership Contributions – now and in the future

Quite simply, it's fair to say that I've broadened my view and made incremental change in my way of gathering and processing information, which in my opinion, leads to better decisions, more effective work habits, and improved outcomes for our organisation, related stakeholders and the industry we represent. These learnings are not confined to the professional environment, and extend through my social and community relationships.

On a personal level, I believe the course has helped me to unlock more of my inner potential. A number of years ago I held a very high-level position in a dynamic business of my own design. A workaholic stage was leading to a crash and burn in the not too distant future; detracting from my role as a father and social creature. By some good fortune I recognised this and made a dramatic change in my work/lifestyle balance before any irreparable damage was done. As a product of this, I find myself currently in a job which, while interesting and enjoyable, leaves me feeling that I am punching below my weight. I supplement this through creation and development of new aspects and projects within my role – to ignite that challenge that I require to be continually self-fulfilled.

The ARLP course, through the sum of its various components, has re-awakened my self-realisation and knowledge that to make any noticeable impact on my current or future roles in business and personal interests, I need to extend my influence as a thought leader, and find avenues where I can work effectively for the greater good - in whatever pursuit I find myself. This new or reawakening realisation has opened my eyes of late, and I'm actively pursuing methods of engagement on a larger scale, within my present position, and/or potentially to opportunities presenting elsewhere in this industry.

As an example, I recently had an instrumental role in breathing life into the new national representative body, Seafood Industry Australia, as deputy chair of the implementation working group. I applied for a directorship within the new entity, and reached the interview stage, but was unsuccessful in obtaining an appointment. I'm not deterred. That is an indication of the level at which I'd like to play in the future, and my eyes are open for like prospects.

Most recently I have applied new found skills in contextual leadership, in the creation of a new regional representative body in WA, the Southern Seafood Producers Association. The members of the new sector body have long standing grievance with my employer organisation, yet I have been able to win the trust and respect of the individuals involved in the formation of the association, and assist them along the path in turning their wishes for direct representation into a reality. This nexus was achieved by my listening to, and understanding the values behind their position, and helping them articulate their vision to a broader stakeholder group without undue confrontation.

Our industry is due for a shake-up, and the socio-political environment across rural and regional WA presents opportunity for transformational change - in the way our states resources are defined, allocated and managed into the future. I'd like to be one of the key change agents in this process, developing a leadership role that will see positive shift to the way seafood producers operate in future generations, encourage and mentor young leaders, stimulate indigenous businesses across the regions, and promote a mindset across our industry and supply chain that allows for innovation, growth and prosperity within our sector.

That should keep me busy for a few years.

As I near the concluding session of ARLP C23 in Canberra next month, the value of this program to myself and to the rural, regional and remote demographic of seafood producers, processors and distributors is slowly shifting into focus. The value of the ARLP to rural Australia, using myself as an example, is the gradual shift in mindset. A mindset to grow and adapt critical thinking to the contemporary issues facing regional Australia (and our rural neighbours); the ability to use networks to increase the reach and capability of our remote decision makers, and the continual building of skills, experience and resilience to make todays rural leaders more effective, and to develop and build confidence within the thought leaders of tomorrow.

Thank you again, for providing the opportunity to participate in this valuable program. I hope that we can assist each other in converting this experience into meaningful outcomes for our industry, as the journey continues.

-Alex Ogg

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