Australian Rural Leadership Foundation

ARLP Course 29 Participant Final Report

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engage · challenge · collaborate

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

By the time anyone is fortunate enough to be chosen for the programme they will certainly have already lived a life full of experiences. I was born in England, educated in Scotland and I've travelled the world playing rugby. I have now worked in the fishing industry in Australia for over 20 years. What contact sport and commercial fishing hadn’t taught me about leadership was the need for reflection and vulnerability.

The program takes reflective practice through carefully curated experiences that compound learning both during and following the program. A safe space to experience, reflect, make changes and act again. Combine this with an immersion in indigenous culture and a cohort of amazing rural leaders and the result for me has been an incredible and life changing learning experience. Importantly, that space is safe because a mistake won't cost you your job or credibility (well maybe a bit), it doesn’t mean the leadership challenges won't stretch you to your limits. The experiences could not be more real.

This lack of vulnerability and reflection is not limited to commercial fishing in our rural industries. We actively practised guided reflection and vulnerability through 14 days in the Kimberley’s, a practice I have maintained in my home and work life. Yes, it was uncomfortable, and yes, we cried, but I also learnt more about myself in 14 days than I had in 50 years. In our team, the practice soon moved from uncomfortable to a time we looked forward to each day and was key to building such a strong connection and belonging amongst the team.

We learnt about our personality profiles and how to work better with those different to ourselves. Our leadership profiles provided a pathway to improve. Of note my execution is so poor the suggestion was to hire appropriate staff; I might keep that one off my CV.

We have much to learn from indigenous cultures about who we are and perhaps a lot less from LinkedIn coaches. Turns out our job titles are not a route to connection.

I am the first-born son of Ivy and David Fish, who were fierce, humble, and kind. I could not have had leadership modelled better. Grandfather Stan may well have been a war hero, we didn’t talk about those things; now I only have photos. Our elder was my Grandmother Clarice. She built our family defences, including a roast dinner Sunday, every Sunday. I used to whine about going, now what I'd give for the chance to sit with them all one more time.

I am now lucky to live near the beach in northern NSW Australia, Bundjalung Country. I advise commercial fishers on improving the management and viability of their fisheries. And the surname, you’d almost think it was a cultural thing.

My first leadership mistake was early in the program. Well, of course, not so much mine as definitely someone else's. If you were in any doubt my Disc profile is a D. I used every decision-making tool, applied boundaries, and communicated my decisions well to the team.

Against all my instincts the program forced time for reflection instead of further action. The mistake was mine; I’d done a lot of telling and not much listening. The importance and impact of ethical decision learnt not from a book, but action and reflection are a very deep learning experience.

As I explained to our indigenous hosts how strong our team had become through the adversity travelling through the Kimberley’s I realised how this must sound to peoples whose culture had been forged in that crucible for over 40000 years.

I soon discovered I was avoiding risks like I was 100 years old. Filling in stories like a conspiracy theorist to keep me safe. Imagine being given enough gear to waterproof all our kit and directions through water-filled caves only to tell my team not to worry as I wouldn’t get them wet. Not exactly the man in the arena.

After what seemed like weeks without food, having swum my team through freezing caves dropped them over ledges and climbed through a maze of rock walls we reached our destination; it was 3 am. We had to swim again twice to get home, still, something very special had been achieved.

That was perhaps Team Kite's red pill moment, and we had chosen enlightenment. It turns out Neo's red pill is a single red frog 3 am. under the brightest of stars. We were now 48hrs into the program.

Immersing in indigenous culture taught me so much about true resilience and the strength of community. From the world's oldest continuous culture in the Kimberlys to seeing family and community practices in NZ, building incredible resilience and strength across the community. These practices were openly described as family defences NZ and highlighted that resilience is built in advance and not through adversity.

The importance in Māori and Islander culture of helping others was seen across New Zealand and something I think we used to do much better in Australia. I know I have made a career out of helping those the system already benefits. For me, it's time to help more with those that it fails.

I am perhaps a little misanthropic, especially after the lockdowns and the quiet of the pandemic. A surprise to me was how genuinely keen I was to see the cohort at the start of session two, especially my team from the Kimberley. An early start and a very pleasant train journey into east Gippsland. Catching up with the cohort and interviewing strangers on the train, was way outside my comfort zone or so I thought.

In stark contrast to the Kimberley, the stressors of the second session were the experiences, vulnerability, and courage of unexpected leaders: past and current residents at the Hope Restart Rehabilitation Centre, the young program manager of the Healthy Equal Youth Program, the volunteers of the RSL and the dairy producers making a difference in the awareness and acceptance of mental health issues. A discussion with elders on the importance of truth-telling about a more than troubled past.

Following drought, bushfire, COVID-19 and now issues associated with the phasing out of brown coal, Gippsland has its fair share of challenges. The leaders' stories of trauma, despite their courage and recovery, took an enormous toll on the cohort. Far from a uniting force like the physical challenges of the Kimberley's, it was hard to experience the same teams falling apart. I have little doubt this was amplified by the impacts of the Covid pandemic of the previous two years.

And again, that reflection – if the challenges in the Kimberley built a team why did my leadership there fail? Not only had I not listened we had not adequately considered the possibility of trauma amongst our team members. I am acutely aware of similar issues across my own industry and now recognise that this may be why so many in the industry find collaboration difficult.

Watching the strength and resilience of teams built in days from the physical challenges in the Kimberley's, to the divisive and destructive impact on our teams from stories of trauma and community crisis in East Gippsland raised some exciting conflicts for me about how teams and resilience are developed and maintained.

Lakes Entrance was the perfect location for an introduction to systems thinking; with a company vessel tied up outside the venue, why would I ever have seen past Lakes as a fishing port? Establishing the vast and interdependent networks and the mechanisms that limit system change has provided some of the most impactful learning on my leadership journey. The stability of our systems despite the need for change is a light bulb moment for me. Especially the role I have played in maintaining systems that I know need to change.

For someone who thought leadership was providing the answers and getting things done, the design thinking process has certainly flipped the script a little. I'm sure that half the time we don't have the right question never mind the right answer. The process of effectively engaging with such a broad range of stakeholders and listening not telling was a challenge at the start of our community initiative. We had all the answers; we just needed our natural resources managed with better accountability and integrity.

We had the technical fix that was going to change the way the whole system operated. Through experience, reflection, and revision we are now looking at behavioural and cultural change, forming a regional learning impact network. Nothing to do with accountability or integrity. We didn't have the right question and certainly no answers.

Our current resource management systems are so far from promoting the innovation they were designed for, and we now so desperately need. I still see amazing potential for commercial fishing and aquaculture and my experience on the course has highlighted the importance of developing our rural leaders.

Back to the issue of scripts, I was about to find out quite how uncomfortable things can get. We were putting on a play in no less a named place than Stratford. A play we were to write, produce, market, and deliver in 24 hrs. Also, feed 100 people. For someone who struggles with execution, this was an amazing experience in mobilisation, reminding me what can be achieved through commitment and some amazing team members. I may not be about to join the local theatre but being a crab for 5 minutes didn't kill me either!

By the end of session two, learnings were not just being practised at home but used at work. Planned fierce conversations had delivered some incredible outcomes in an industry generally held back by an unwillingness to share information. I was having the conversations we needed to have and avoiding the ones we don't.

Hard to express the gratitude and privilege I feel from spending another 2 weeks with an incredible bunch of leaders from across rural Australia. Session 3 of the Australian Rural Leadership Program Course 29 involved two weeks in New Zealand, immersed in Māori culture. While I am aware parts of New Zealand are doing it tough, it was impossible not to notice how inviting and friendly everyone was, even at the Rugby (Brumbies were getting a lesson from the Crusaders!).

Building incredible resilience through strong networks and allegiances. It was hard not to see this as the positive influence from Māori culture, especially in relation to family and community networks; success and standing measured in your ability (and willingness) to lift others.

I was expecting a talk on work health and safety from our first speakers. Instead, I got the most inspiring story of building resilience in a family unit and community. Not after a crisis or because of one, but because real connection and communication builds real resilience. If anyone is looking for a keynote speaker on workplace culture Wiiramu and Marcella Edmonds are the team for you. Don't listen when he suggests he's not a keynote speaker, they are amazing. One day this family will have a lasting impact in any workplace.

This was bookended with a day spent with ultra successful CEO of Christchurch YMCA. I guess we could have heard about how the YMCAs in Christchurch had transitioned to hotels or how the government had committed $54m to new facilities or even just focused on the amazing 4C youth centre. No, we heard about a planned intervention, at this stage a failed one. I don't think this story is mine to tell, but it demonstrated how difficult it can be to change our systems, even when we agree they are broken. I am also not certain the intervention has failed. Sometimes walking away from the issue is exactly the fierce leadership required.

I would like now to work with rural stakeholders to provide suitable practices and tools to support the social structures required for personal and community resilience, a platform for emergent thinking and innovation. I believe we are going to see a once in a lifetime change to land and water use in the next ten years which can only succeed through community engagement.

The program runs through connection, adaptive management, design, and systems thinking and is carefully curated to build compounding understanding, no doubt well into the future. The simple practice of reflection and vulnerability has been life changing for me. Experience, reflect, take action, repeat. Have the fierce conversations that you need and drop the conflict that you don't. I cannot express my gratitude for such an amazing opportunity.