



Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation



Leading the Nation

COURSE 20 FINAL REPORT

BY

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Introduction

My name is Brooke Summers and I have been communicating with and for agriculture and regional communities for over 20 years. Since setting up a small communication consultancy ten years ago, I've worked with the cotton, vegetable and rice industries, Landcare Australia and Catchment Management Authorities to devise and implement communication strategies. My main industry of focus has been the Australian cotton industry.

My roles vary greatly as do their purpose, from strategic communication planning, message and brand development through to copywriting and the development of education materials, social media and web-based resources. A new area of interest is in the field of international marketing. I've been leading a new Cotton Australia project (called Cotton to Market) to position Australian cotton in the world marketplace and this opportunity has opened up another dimension to my work.

I live in Bondi New South Wales with my partner and two small children. This report is a personal account of what I have learned, the challenges I've faced, how I've applied all of this to both my personal and professional life and how I hope to give back to the cotton industry in the future.

I would like to sincerely thank my sponsors Auscott and CRDC for their generous investment in my leadership journey.

Highlights of the program

The program itself has been a major highlight in my life, a journey that has taken me through some very difficult personal places and learning and one that I know will continue beyond graduation (this is just the beginning!). There are too many significant experiences and challenges to name all of them here, and so I've chosen a few that deserve special attention.

The Kimberley Experience

The Kimberley session provided a unique learning environment where you're put under immense pressure to perform in difficult circumstances. The Kimberley trip was a once in a lifetime experience and one that I'm incredibly grateful for. I believe I had relatively high levels of self-awareness going into the Kimberley, and many of the things that happened there helped solidify this, and give me new things to think about. One significant experience here was, late at night around a campfire, being given permission to feel okay about being white by the aboriginal community there. Until that point I had felt incredible shame at the plight of our aboriginal people and somehow partly responsible just by the virtue of being white. The deep understanding and history that was imparted to me by the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley has given me far greater understanding of the importance of their connections to land and place and what happens when that's disrupted. This has changed the way I think about the places I visit and where I live—and I have implemented this in my work.

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Meeting 'Leena'

During our Sydney session we were given the task of getting out onto the streets to observe (and if we chose, interact) with homelessness. The brief was to investigate this social issue, to understand it through a homeless person's eyes, to look at any leadership interventions and to observe our own personal reactions and responses. My journal entry from that night had me feeling "apprehensive, worried about my extreme empathic responses (that have in the past included vomiting at the sight of people in pain) and unsure about how to approach the task AND ready for the learning experience AND confident in the ability to connect with people, and chat."

In a group of three, we set out to see what we could find and to cut a long story short ended up having dinner with a girl, "Leena", who was a recovering alcoholic, a young mum whose child had been removed from her care and who had been in and out of homelessness for all of her adult life (and some of her childhood). Leena's story was harrowing, and hopeful. I was able to look upon it with empathy and compassion, and at the same time stay far enough removed to keep myself safe. My group ended up raising the funds for Leena to complete a course in social work that she'd been wanting to do (and that she's since completed), and although I don't know the end of her story, I do know that our small and chance intervention made a difference in her life. What did this teach me? Not to judge, seek to understand, that we're all human, that homelessness could happen to anyone, to be grateful for my life's circumstances.

Seeing An Animal Killed for Food for the First Time

Unlike many of my rural counterparts, until the Tamworth session I had never seen an animal killed, other than the odd mozzie or spider. When the time came for our abattoir visit I was wracked with apprehension and nervousness and found myself asking the question of whether or not I wanted to see this, what was the purpose? A friend on the course made my mind up for me when he said "if you eat meat, you participate in the process" and so I resolved to participate in the whole tour. The first thing that struck me was the kindness and respect the stock-people had for the animals (in this case cows). The cynic in me argued that this was because relaxed meat is tender meat and commands a better price, and what I was really seeing were people who loved animals. The killing box was also operated with calmness and respect and it wasn't the dying that upset me the most. It was the speed with which a living thing could become a commodity in the space of minutes. All of a sudden a beautiful animal that was calmly walking along was being "dismantled" for our benefit. I cried the whole time, and spent a long time reflecting on the experience afterwards. And now, when I eat, I am grateful.

Start with What You've Got

Dr Kerin Bedi, of the Navyoti Foundation, spoke to us one night. She is recognised as a world leader in helping women out of poverty through her work at the Foundation she established. Her soft, quiet approach left everyone in the room spellbound. Rather than deliver a prepared speech, Dr Bedi humbly asked us what we thought of the work of the Foundation, she listened with great intensity, and this then sparked a number of individual conversations that we were all witness to. One of the major struggles I've faced in terms of my leadership journey has been the feeling that there's something much bigger in me, but not being able to pin point what it is or how to get it going. Dr Kerin Bedi during her talk with us responded to a question from the group with "You Start

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With What You've Got"—and I will take this with me through my life. In a similar way, one of the women we met in the Self Help Groups also said "we put in how much our pocket could afford" ... again, this thinking may well be the seed that I needed to discover why I was put on this earth!

Learning as a result of the program

In the interests of my learning ("throw out the rule book and see what happens"), I have collected my learning into a group of thoughts, feelings and observations that I've had along the way and that I continue to reflect upon in my continued leadership journey.

Some of these were reported mid-term and hold as much weight now as they did then—in fact some have grown in importance, namely:

- The importance of reflection—making time for it, and using this time wisely
- Getting up on the balcony, rather than being on the dance floor – seeing yourself as a player and being able to rise above what's happening to see the bigger picture, practicing this always
- Seeking feedback
- Having mentors
- Being well read—ability to read trends, know what's coming, understand the beat and temperature of society
- Personal Values—understanding what they are and living by them, checking in with yourself regularly to make sure this is happening
- Volcanoes—noticing when they happen, pausing to understand why and adjusting accordingly
- The importance of silence—allowing introverts the space to think and contribute, and the importance of sitting in silence to let the ideas come
- Empathy versus Compassion—understanding that empathy is far less useful than compassion
- Critical Conversations—the conversation is the relationship and any one conversation in your life could be a game changer, be mindful and present in all conversations that you have
- Myers Briggs—understanding personality types including your own and your family's to get the best from people in a leadership environment
- Networking
- Social Responsibility
- Shared Vision

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Since mid-term there has been considerable additional learning—some coming from the program itself and many from the people in the group.

It's Not About Me

Who would have thought! Leadership is about a purpose bigger than yourself! It's about being in the service of something far greater and it's a duty to do something for the greater good, not for selfish reasons. You can't be a leader for leadership's sake—you need to have your heart and soul in it. Good leadership requires patience and dedicated effort, sometimes over a very long period of time—beyond your own lifetime.

Compelling Storytelling

The importance of connecting with emotion and human-ness, rather than reporting facts. The knowledge that all communication is story-telling and that compelling stories have far greater influence.

Complex Leadership

The complexity in leadership assignment was both very difficult and also very liberating. It helped me understand why my head was grappling with the concepts of leadership as a complex web of interactions with its own life force and complicated machinations that I was struggling to define. This is an area for further study and reflection.

Embrace Diversity

Seeking and embracing diversity is one of my personal values and so this lesson came easy to me. A greater understanding of why diversity is great for leadership has led me to intentionally and deliberately seek broad views, international perspectives, new horizons, diversity of opinion and thought. At a practical level, I find myself asking: What are all the views in the room? What are the motivations and filters? Have I taken the time to truly understand these views. What are we not seeing? Humans have a great capacity to be blinded, to seek out information that cements our own bias and ignore that with which we don't agree. I am far more aware of this now.

Ethical Decision Making

What ought one do? What's good? What's the right thing to do? What is the purpose, the higher purpose for this? What are the ethics of the people or groups in the room? Is there common ground? Apparently humans think they're far more ethical than they really are, so it's good to do the ethical decision test when making a decision:

- Golden Rule
- Front page of paper test
- Other person's shoes
- Can I sleep at night

Finding the Common Ground

The negotiation training was invaluable and held many lessons in itself. One of the greatest ones for me was about how to influence by finding the common ground. So often we don't take the time to understand this, acknowledge it and discuss it and since the training I have tried to critically think about areas of common ground in the many and varied negotiations I have with family and work colleagues.

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Finding Your Tribe

This sounds a “bit hippy” and perhaps it is. However, my leadership journey has led me to seek out and recognise the big and powerful thinkers and leaders that cross my path, to be brave enough to have the conversations with them, and to tap into their wisdom. Four such people have revealed themselves to me so far (or I have recognised them) and I have taken the step to find out more, ask lots of questions, seek to understand—and to get a piece of their action! This has been incredibly rewarding and may lead to bigger things in the future.

Introspection & Mindfulness

A great personal understanding for me has been that my high levels of enthusiasm and energy for projects/people/life can actually be quite intimidating and over bearing, and can push some people away—creating certain barriers to good leadership.

I am also an off-the-chart extravert and so finding a quiet place to be mindful and introspective doesn't come easy! This is something I am still working on, with not so much success so far. I am aware of it, and I understand how important it is and I guess that's the first step. Actually doing something about it will require more pushing and bravery on my part.

Bravery & Courage

Great leadership requires great bravery and courage, all the time, every day. This is a significant understanding for me in the program and when I see it, I am amazed and overwhelmed with admiration for the person showing it! There have been a few examples of where this has happened in the course, where one person has stood up and stayed true to their values when the entire course cohort was against them. Wow! What power there was in that, and also what pain. It's not easy to be brave—it means putting yourself right out there, even when the repercussions might be bad. Our Course Coordinator said at one stage “Are you brave enough to grow bigger than you thought you could be?” – I wrote this down. I hope I am.

Speaking Your Truth

In order to speak your truth you have to be brave, you have to be authentic and you have to live with integrity (I know who I am. I say who I am. I live who I am.) A lot of the time people don't want to hear your truth or may find it hard or confronting and it may change things for you entirely. Good and ethical leaders have the bravery to speak their truth with integrity and without fear of the consequences.

Compassion

I believe that I've always been a compassionate person, and one that feels deep empathy for people, especially those in pain. Through the course I have learned a deeper understanding of compassion and how it can be made effective in terms of leadership. To me compassion is the ability to think and feel at the same time, and this is something that I'm working on. I 'feel' very well and sometimes my “F” gets in the way of clear thinking. My leadership experience has put me on a path to spiritual intelligence.

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Life Is a Journey, Not a Destination

This lesson started in the Kimberley with some feedback I received about “enjoying the ride, rather than being focussed on the outcome”. I took this away with me and it’s something I continue to work on. I will continue to seek further opportunities for leadership development and change – you can’t move to the next stage unless you’re pushed there or you push yourself there – I will find new ways to challenge myself and my thinking and be mindful of this as the journey continues.

“Throw away the rules and see what happens” —this was delivered to us during one of the sessions – and it can be incredibly liberating to do this. Control (rules-based regulation and supervision) VERSUS Trust (individual authority and responsibility). Good leadership is finding the right balance. Time does not seem as important to me anymore. I have changed the way I think about deadlines and outcomes – I am far more focussed on the purpose, the bigger picture and the processes than the steps required to get there and I trust that things will happen when a good leader puts the right ingredients into play.

Applying the learning

All of the lessons that I have shared with you here are being applied to many aspects of my life, in varying degrees and with different levels of application. I cannot give a succinct summation of how and when and why the program learning will be applied because leadership is incredibly complex and my leadership journey is a work in progress. I am already doing things differently, and those changes have been occurring incrementally from the start of the program. I see things differently. I am thinking differently. I am understanding more. I am seeing more. I am operating in a different way to before. I feel different. I am different.

The one thing I do know is that I haven’t worked it all out and that I’m certainly not done. This course has provided a great spring board for future learning. I intend to use all that I’ve learned as best I can at the moment, to build on it, to challenge myself and to continue to change for the rest of my life.

What the next chapters hold are unknown. I hope to one day inspire others to something greater, to build a tribe around something really important, to plant a seed that could change the world.

Imagine that. Imagine a program that allows that kind of thinking to develop and flourish. Imagine an agricultural industry that gives people the chance to be better. I cannot express how grateful I am for this opportunity. To the Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Auscott, my Course Coordinators and the Foundation itself, all I can say is thankyou from the bottom of my heart ... and stay tuned.

Brooke Summers
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