

## **Business Leadership in Australia**

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We all have key people in our lives who have exercised influence over our behaviour – sometimes in a positive way and sometimes in a negative manner. Our parents, siblings, teachers, employers, community leaders and even sporting and artistic heroes have very likely all played a part, whether consciously or unconsciously, in shaping our development. They have encouraged, advised and guided us in our growth; have, in fact, exercised a leadership role in our lives.

Being the youngest in one's family, as I am, often means being surrounded by a number of role models. At one stage I wanted to be like my sister – a creative leading fashion designer. At a later stage, I focused on my brother, a successful city-based businessman, and wanted to emulate him. If we are lucky, somewhere along the way we come to the realization that rather than traverse the career path of others, we must determine our own way. We may continue to admire others but it is no longer their lives that we want to live. This personal awakening leads to a clearer grasp of who we ourselves are and of the kind of impact that we wish to make upon the world. We draw an important distinction between the kind of leader we might want to become and the kind of leader that we are capable of becoming. Very often, the difference between the two is very considerable indeed.

Reflection on the role that other individuals have played in our lives might well find us contemplating what it was that enabled them to exert that influence over us? How did these people become leaders?

There are countless books and numerous magazine articles that define leadership and we can benefit from a careful examination of them. Here, however, our concern lies not so much with a definition of leadership as with a rediscovery of those leadership qualities which influenced us. Hopefully, through a recall of those qualities, we can begin to formulate our own personal leadership model.

Who was the first leader in your life who shaped your behaviour? When I ask this question of myself, my immediate thoughts drift back to my siblings whom I remember teaching me so many of the basic skills that life demands we acquire. My second eldest sister (eleven years older) taught me how to write my name. (I have a distinct memory of having difficulties with the letter 'e' and how initially I would write it back-to-front). My eldest sister (fifteen years older) was a primary care-giver. I can't recall specific events: I just have a strong inner feeling that she guided me in

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understanding the difference between right and wrong. Certainly, I remember that I experienced a strong sense of loss when she left home and married. I was only four at the time.

The sense of loss experienced when a key role-model moves on and out of our life is worth thinking about. For a little while, left on our own, we tend to flounder. Later on, however, as we adjust to their absence, we begin to experience their influence, seeing what they have taught us so well beginning to be expressed in our own behaviour.

Almost by accident, another leader in my life appeared in the corridors of my High School. This was my Year 10 Co-ordinator and English teacher. How grateful we should be that teachers can have such an important individual influence. This particular teacher introduced me to Shakespeare's sonnets and creative writing and greatly increased my self-awareness. At the vulnerable age of sixteen, I was fortunate that he appeared to pose many penetrating questions that forced me to consider my future vocation and life goals. During one of our lunch-time meetings in his small office, he asked me what I wanted to do with my life – the million dollar question. I blurted out something about 'helping people'. Subsequently, over a period of six months, he very patiently helped me to develop an awareness of the importance of personal choice. He helped me accept responsibility for my current and future situation and gave me tools to help make sense of my teenage existence. As a leader, he was patient, yet firm; questioning, encouraging and gently pushed me to seek, discover, learn and grow. At sixteen, I was not conscious of needing a Mentor but I now understand that I was fortunate to find someone who had a genuine interest in developing others. As he put it, he liked helping others "spread their wings and fly".

Flying away, from the rural area where I had lived and attended school, to a fast-paced city environment provided me with a very different insight into leadership. In a small country town everyone knows you – a fact that is at once both the best and the worst aspect of small town life. In the city you are anonymous - which is one of the best and worst aspects of city living. University introduced me to the theory of Management v Leadership. In my first year Management studies I was introduced to theory X and Y, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Situational Leadership, Reference Power etc.

Then, following the completion of my course I entered the business world, where I began to observe at first hand other dimensions of leadership. I became aware of various categories of leadership behaviour, including political leadership, leadership for personal gain and ego-driven leadership, with its attempt to satisfy the compulsion to make yourself look better by putting others down. These variations had not been dealt with at university.

Finally, I came across a model that had particular relevance to the exercise of leadership within an Australian context. In 1995, three companies - Shell, Sydney Electricity and Westpac - embarked on an Australian Leadership Cultural Imprint Study (ALCIS) which was an attempt to determine whether or not there was a uniquely Australian form of leadership. This study discovered that three clear groups could be identified, these groups being Leaders, Good Bosses and Bad Bosses.

According to ALCIS, leaders are committed to the welfare of their followers and are closely involved with them on a day-to-day basis. Leaders put the welfare of their team above themselves. They have a deep commitment to the whole and the achievement of group objectives. Similarly, a Good Boss tends to act as a Captain Coach. (S)he has similar values to the Leader but is more likely to be hands-on in the implementation of strategies. Leaders and Good Bosses are able to influence followers through their reference power. They have less recourse to coercion.

By contrast, Bad Bosses commonly care for themselves first, take the credit for others work, take advantage of their followers and influence followers through coercion.

ALCIS also uncovered another significant finding - that honesty and transparency are defining characteristics of good leadership. It found that Australians are adept at detecting insincerity. Australians have a need for building relationships with people and for a clear appreciation of their individual identities. They want to commit to a cause that has meaning. Insincerity in leadership is widely regarded as being an impediment to these important cultural drivers and where it is detected, it is likely to be rejected.

Research into leadership has produced numerous findings, many of which are extremely useful. Perhaps the most telling is that the development of efficient leadership continues to be a critical challenge to the contemporary Australian commercial and industrial sectors. Interestingly enough, when, in 2002, the *Australian Financial Review* set out to name the top thirty Australian leaders, it was forced to leave the last five places vacant. In a year characterized by corporate collapses and unethical Director behaviour among company directors, the question that forces itself upon us is - does Australian business have a Leadership void?

Perhaps a prior question that needs to be addressed is – to what extent is Leadership in Australian business really valued? Could it be that the old “tall poppy” syndrome, with its dictum that standing out too much contravenes accepted Australian standards, constitutes a threat to the emergence of good leadership? While it may be that Australia’s socialistic values of fairness and equity may in themselves be quite wholesome in nature, they may be responsible for a “dumbing down” effect which ensures that we all stay within the pack. All too many boardroom and business round-table discussions are preoccupied with negative questions such as What isn’t working? Who isn’t pulling their weight? Which business is over-capitalized? and Which politician made the last public blunder? Perhaps, in Australian business, it is easier to be a follower than a leader.

But let us return to the question of our personal development. My own sporting achievements provided only limited exposure to the development of leadership potential. I was Captain of the mixed Netball team, which worked its way towards winning two premierships. In E Grade, where we competed, leadership had as much to do with the recruitment of key players as with an individual’s ability to influence on-court strategy or play an ultimately winning role. Certainly, skill in recruitment of people with better or complimentary skills and the building up of a reservoir of exceptional talent is a major characteristic of a good leader. Dee Hock, who was pivotal in forming the Visa corporation and in designing a “chaordic” (chaos and order) organization, believed that surrounding yourself with more talented people was

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a key role of a leader. Hock also insisted that another key role was to the enunciation of a shared vision and aligned values. Much else that is characteristic of skilled leadership flow from these two major requirements.

The first Supervisor/Manager role into which I was placed provided me with a considerable personal challenge. My Manager told me that it was time for me to tackle a difficult management role that would provide me with character-building experience. The placement was presented to me as something that was good for me although it was made clear that it was going to be painful and unpleasant. I was naïve enough to accept this appointment and green enough to think I could successfully apply all my leadership and management skills in a practical situation. I was wrong.

The particular individual I was to manage had been diagnosed as having “performance issues” that gave rise to difficulty in working with others, embracing the values of the organisation and aligning herself with corporate strategies. She was a lot older than I. Let us just say that the six-month experience, which involved disciplinary action, realignment of her role and her eventual resignation, was *very* character building for me! My mental model of leadership at the time was based on providing positive reinforcement, clear direction, lots of encouragement and communication. But, again, I was wrong – or at least partially so.

The experience involved learning the hard way. I came to understand that assertive leadership, often producing rigorous consequences, also has its place. Sometimes, the focus has to shift from the more theoretical aspects of leadership to a hands-on performance management role. And performance management, while still a part of the broader issue of leadership, involves its own particular set of rules.

Some aspects of leadership might be compared to the activity of a gardener. Despite the exercise of the best skills and compliance with the most stringent requirements, a gardener soon comes to realize that some seeds sprout, fruit early and provide a bumper crop. Others have all stalk and no flowers or fruit; others die and wither almost before their productivity gets underway. A wise gardener comes to realize that there is no magic formula that will produce the desired results. The same is true in relation to leadership. Although there are conditions that can aid development, much is finally the result of personal choice.

After about six years in corporate Australia, I realised that possessing formal authority over people does not guarantee voluntary followers, nor respect. Managing people is tough. I learnt that my preferred style of positively influencing others was to work alongside, below or behind them. I discovered this leadership preference when I was studying ‘Leadership’ as part of my Graduate Diploma in 1998. We were conducting an experiential learning exercise called *Power Lab*. About fifty people were split into three groups designated “uppers”, “middles” and “lowers”. I was selected as an upper. It was the upper’s role to manage and lead a group of people. Five uppers had been selected and we agreed to meet to discuss our approach. In a corridor, where we had arranged to meet, I sat on the carpeted floor while others meandered around to find chairs. One of the other uppers told me that I shouldn’t be sitting on the floor. “That isn’t what uppers do’. My first reaction was to think that he was joking but I quickly realized that he was deadly serious. We continued with an interesting dialogue which

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resulted in my personal insight that I am more comfortable influencing others at the same level and even from below than I am influencing from above.

This doesn't make my leadership preference "right" or "wrong". It does, however, certainly help me understand what type of leader I prefer to be. The question of how leaders in business prefer to express their influence, or whether they in fact want to exert any influence at all, is an important one.

I have consciously worked on my leadership model for the last four years and have been constantly surprised at how much can be learnt from the adoption of different perspectives on the matter. I believe that helping others understand themselves is a fundamental part of the role of a leader. This is not a new concept: as Sun Tzu wrote, "So it is said that if you know others and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know others but know yourself, you win one and lose one; if you do not know others and do not know yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle".

I am not sure whether Australian business is a battleground but I do agree with Sun Tzu in that before we can think intelligently about leading or managing others, we need to know ourselves. Getting to know one's self is tough work; it is always easier to look at others, to find fault and lay blame elsewhere. Acquiring the ability to hold up the mirror to ones self and critically understand that self and its leadership qualities, involves a life-long discipline. Many Australian business leaders today would almost certainly have benefited from a careful reflection on their intentions and the consequences of their behaviour before they accepted the responsibility of leading their organizations.

Recently, Daniel Goleman has popularized the term *emotional intelligence* and in so doing has reminded us that self-knowledge, emotional awareness, self-management, empathy and highly developed social skills can also be regarded as important features of effective Leadership. Australian businesses are beginning to realise that adherence to the 'softer skills' cannot be ignored and that superficial definitions will not deliver quality leadership.

Two years ago, I worked with a multinational organization and helped develop a corporate-wide Leadership and Mentoring Program to support the acceleration of aligned excellent leadership behaviour. The organization wanted a deeper, more engaging process to lift the level of Leadership. Since then, there has been a proliferation of the coaching industry. I understand that now it is even possible to hire a House Renovating Coach! The question needs to be asked - do Australian business managers need coaches?

A good coach can hold up a mirror and invite a manager to examine him- or herself. They can prompt managers so that they ask themselves critical questions that they would otherwise be unlikely to address. But coaches are not a panacea and they are not for life. Their value lies in the fact that they are outside the world of the manager. They are impartial; not tied up in internal corporate politics and are thus able to provide a different perspective. Coaches remind managers how to take time out to reflect on their behaviour and develop more effective habits. They encourage managers to move forward more efficiently and in a more sustainable manner.

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My own self-discovery of the leader I prefer to be has led me to develop my own business. I get my creative experience through developing new tools and approaches through the Internet services my company provides. I am able to demonstrate expertise in its Management Consulting services. Through my coaching work I am able to influence others in developing their own unique leadership style. I am giving free expression to my own preferred leadership approach and am deriving great satisfaction in doing so. I am conscious of developing a transparent, ethical and sustainable form of leadership. I believe that it is a key responsibility of leaders that they be conscious of their 'intent' and to ensure that the consequences of their actions are best for the whole and not directed to the fulfilment of individual ego requirements. In this regard, it is instructive to compare Nelson Mandela and Adolf Hitler. Both displayed the capacity to rally people to a common vision but their underpinning values and their personal intent were very different.

It may be that Australian business will continue to have a dearth of talented, ethical, entrepreneurial and inspiring leaders. We cannot look to Government, universities, the community in general or business itself to remedy this. We need to start with ourselves. If we were to work on our own leadership and fully utilize our capabilities in a sustainable manner, a critical mass might begin to emerge. The SME community, composed as it is of a conglomerate of individuals who have common concerns, has a distinct opportunity to contribute to the positive reshaping of business leadership.

As Nelson Mandela has said, "Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others'.