

# “It’s Not My Problem, Mate!” –Leading in Uncertainty

*Authorities are expected to provide answers; leadership in contrast asks the difficult questions. Leadership is something you do – it is an action, not something you are. We need to get beyond the idea of someone being a “leader” and look instead to the issues to which they are drawing attention.* Paul Porteous



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*Our doubts are traitors  
And make us lose the good we oft might win  
By fearing to attempt.*

Shakespeare, Measure for Measure  
(Lucio, Act I Scene 4)

Rural communities in crisis, businesses closing, threats to people’s livelihoods, uncertainty and fear. Like the pounding surf, globalisation swept back and forth onto the stormy beaches of a radically changing Australia, as both a symbol and cause of political, economic and social change. Each retreating wave seemed to lay the basis for the next surge. It tossed up some strange driftwood, created numerous undercurrents, but was clearly making its mark—ignorant of the alliances, coalitions, friends and enemies that it churned up and then swept away. This paper looks at one point in the turning of the tide—an initiative to redefine the relationships between players in the agrifood export industry—and how leading with a question in this stormy sea of cultural change helped us engage with industry and government.

## LEADERSHIP

Leadership is probably one of the most misused words in public affairs today. A quick glance through the media on any day finds numerous references to “leadership” or lack of it, with endless opinion on whether it is good, bad, calculated, strategic or just plain confused. On one hand we ask for leaders who have the answer, the statesman exuding confidence who can provide clarity in troubled times. On the other hand, we know in our hearts that the image is flawed, and there are no simple answers for some of our most complex issues like child abuse, youth suicide, poverty and race relations.

Unfortunately, waiting for a hero to emerge has become something of a national pastime, especially for our political parties. On many critical issues facing Australia, we have been content as a population to allow “someone else” (usually the government or some other authority) to take “ownership” of the problem and consequently take the blame when it is not fixed. In that sense, we sit back in judgment, deciding whether a politician, head of department or corporation has actually “performed” sufficiently well. In most cases, we judge that they have not—and support and perpetuate a system that ensures that they cannot. Bad outcomes are someone else’s fault—our adversarial system of parliament, law and industrial relations demands it. We like to personalise the problem then sacrifice the individual in the hope that the problem will go away. Child abuse has been a good example where someone is ritually sacrificed (for example, former Governor General Hollingworth), giving the community a sense that something

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has been achieved – but really only buying us a few more years of avoiding the real issues. Child abuse in Australia at present is estimated at one formal notification to authorities every two and a half minutes (IAHW 2003-04) a true crisis—but we are unable to even discuss it openly. Instead we get distracted with arguing over whether the figures are sufficiently accurate. The idea that “we” as a community might be jointly responsible for “our” problems opens a Pandora’s Box—witness the frustrations over refugee policy and the Iraq war. A community that takes up that responsibility acts differently in its day-to-day living. Imagine if we actively supported our representatives in fulfilling their “role” of challenging us about these most difficult problems, instead of the usual reaction which is for us to attack them from their first day in office.

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Ronald A. Heifetz in his seminal work *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Heifetz 1994) helps clarify some of these dynamics by making a crucial distinction between authority and leadership. Authorities are expected to provide answers; leadership in contrast asks the difficult questions. Leadership is something you do—it is an action, not something you are. We need to get beyond the idea of someone being a “leader” and look instead to the issues to which they are drawing attention. This is inherently risky when you challenge strongly held beliefs and values of a community or organisation, but essential if communities are to be free to deal with their most difficult underlying problems. With the emergence of an increasingly blame-based ethos, it is not surprising that politicians and the bureaucracy are risk-averse. This was best summed up a couple of years ago by a senior Federal Departmental official who told me simply, “We don’t do risk.” Risk is associated with potential failure which brings with it potential blame—and no one wants to read negative stories about themselves in the press or be hounded out of office. Leadership in this climate is contorted to become an extension of “managerialism”—a focus on increased efficiency, performance management, mission statements, strategic planning methodologies and ten point plans and processes. But we know that none of these programs will make you into a leader – they may make you more efficient, but not improve your ability to exercise leadership. The real test is how you prevent something like “children overboard” occurring again—and that requires a degree of moral courage and ethics that goes well beyond anything a rationalist approach can offer. It also requires a broader engagement with community.

Sadly, many people in organisations actively resist a broader engagement, seeing their ability to act confined within the parameters of their job position. They tend to self-censor more effectively than any external barriers or political pressure which might be placed on them. In that sense, they create walls around themselves that are rarely tested, and these walls become reinforced over time, as does the bitterness associated with this lack of freedom. Organisationally, this creates a reactive instead of proactive approach to a broader purpose—in fact, their purpose sometimes gets lost altogether as activity becomes a substitute for achievement. The popularity of Dilbert cartoons around offices reflects this sense of corporate hopelessness and helplessness. At the same time, people’s reactions are almost immediately to blame authority—surely someone must be controlling such an environment—rather than taking responsibility themselves. And if the organisation is dysfunctional and does not deliver on its purpose, then we rationalise that it is the organisation’s fault and it might be time to change jobs and find another organisation. Instead, organisation should be viewed as simply a means to an end—it is there to be used, even if ingrained corporate cultures suggest otherwise. This is the role of leadership: challenging that culture, motivating people to take a “proactive approach”; risk taking, pushing the limits of responsibilities, promoting achievement over bureaucratic process, and innovation and creativity against a “business as usual” attitude. Most importantly, leadership is not coming to people with answers but inspiring them to take action themselves.

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Instead of fleeing from risk and uncertainty, we need to embrace it as an opportunity to find out what is really going on. What we are lacking is not “how” to do things but more importantly the question “why” we are doing it, and that involves exploring issues around purpose and the values gap between what we say and do. We have to give up waiting for a hero who can make the right call in a difficult situation. That is not leadership. Instead it is about how we undertake our daily lives in our own spheres of influence. It is about working in uncertainty, challenging the trend towards control, letting go of sacred cows and engaging with people in an honest way that poses the difficult questions rather than proclaiming the easy solutions. The leadership challenge then is not about developing leaders with a vision but developing communities with a vision. This is the environment in which new ideas may flourish.

## THE “INFANT IDEA”

Most people have had experience with trying to introduce a new idea or concept. It tends to go two ways—either seen as the latest “answer” or fad, or it is opposed. Opposition might be because it is seen as “stupid” or seen as a “threat.” For the former, it is always worth remaining open to the possibility that your idea is stupid – at worst it will at least help you refine it into something that might be worthwhile. Conversely, your idea may be considered a “threat” and opposed because it is worthwhile. In this sense, it fundamentally challenges the existing order—to the extent that, to use Thomas Kuhn’s famous expression—a paradigm shift occurs (Kuhn 1962). Leadership tends to be exercised in situations such as these. It is a difficult space often characterised by confusion and chaos as people are pressed to swap the known status quo for an uncertain potential future with no guarantee of success.

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Faced with the challenge of an “infant idea,” organisations have to decide: Do we nurture it or strangle it at birth? Do we provide material resources to help it succeed and flourish? Or do we take Darwin’s advice and create difficult conditions, certain in the knowledge that only the fittest will survive? The level of support for a new idea may often be determined by the political context (whose child it is). Many Ministerial ideas can be treated royally, regardless of merit. However, in the absence of a crisis or defined problem there is a general reluctance to put resources into “infant ideas.” This is a pity as Loehle (1996: 19), addressing the same point, asks us to consider whether two of the greatest ideas of modern times would receive support under our current system of thinking. Would Einstein really get a lifetime grant to “study the nature of space and time through conducting thought experiments in an armchair, supported by abstract mathematics” or Darwin, as a geologist, receive a 20 year grant to develop an all inclusive theory of speciation by collecting every possible fact?

It seems that generally, with limited resources, our institutions are more tolerant of manageable ideas and purposes, but averse to longer term commitments even though the rewards may be greater. We like little purposes and mild reform, but more challenging purposes are a bit too hot and spicy. This presents us with a problem. Some of our greatest ideas simply would not have come to fruition under this system.

Additionally, using the “infant” metaphor, the problem with separating our needs from those of our children does not make sense for the overall survival of the family. If we, as a society, lack respect for new ideas, then this must translate as a lack of respect for our members who come up with those ideas. Or, more accurately, come up with ideas or observations different to what we want to hear (think of the poor whistleblower, who now even needs special legislation to be protected, similar to an endangered species). The danger here is what I term “human muzak,” where we succumb to the lowest common denominator of acceptability. This is the greatest threat to new ideas and the environment in which they thrive.

Posing questions becomes the main tool of trade and the following case study looks at how strategic questioning can move groups forward. In talking about leadership I will try not to use the “L” word too much—perhaps that can give us some better insight into what leading with a question might look like in practice. The study is simply a snapshot in time and does not in any way purport to be definitive. Whether it is “leadership” by someone’s definition is perhaps the wrong question to ask and probably falls into the trap of looking for an answer. But in the interests of exploring what might or might not work, it is worth a casual reflection.

## GLOBALISATION, STORMY SEAS AND NEW IDEAS

“Do we need a crisis in order for change to occur?” This is a fascinating question. It has enormous implications for those wanting to engage in large scale change across society. In the following case study on agrifood exports, a potential major crisis loomed but its initial impact was quite isolated, leading people into a false sense of security. How do you move people when no sense of crisis or serious problem exists? This was the question we faced during my time working across a range of Federal government initiatives on exports in the mid to late 1990s, where increased competition through globalisation became a clear threat to the Australian agricultural export sector as rural communities declined, farms closed, and Australia’s share of world agricultural markets decreased. Both a social and political crisis emerged outside of the major cities. Agrifood exports represented a critical part of the Australian economy, worth around \$20 billion per year and supported by a logistics industry in total worth \$60 billion annually. As people began to sense all was not well, there was the inevitable rush towards a solution, a rescue package or something similar, preferably provided by a hero (preferably a politician). The challenge for us was to avoid this temptation and instead engage people around the harder underlying issues rather than just simply throw a lifeline or a quick fix. Central to this was posing the right questions.

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In the absence of a “crisis,” problems were interpreted as one-off events—not part of a broader trend. For example, in the citrus industry, farmers began bulldozing orchards as it was no longer economically feasible to produce oranges in the face of competition from South America. It was cheaper to import orange concentrate from Brazil than to pick fresh oranges from Australian orchards. The industry had been warned of this problem many years earlier but failed to act and were now paying the price. This was a typical industry consisting of around 3,000 small to medium producers. The fragmentation was obvious—twenty six different producer organisations claimed to represent the industry. Understandably, some of the farmers we spoke with could see the problems at a rational level but were unable to divorce the emotional bond of the family farm, business and heritage to transfer to a new product in the face of global competition. It was clear that the challenge was not just about “economic efficiency” of particular products—it went to the heart of their image as a farmer and the history and loyalty to family which had built up across generations. It signalled a much broader trend, but people were feeling powerless so ignored the warning signals.

In situations like these, many leadership initiatives fail because people are unable to sustain engagement, become overwhelmed by competing priorities or give up in the face of opposition. To stay in the game you need to nurture “infant ideas.” That means having real clarity around purpose, understanding the reality of the situation, getting the issues out on the table so they can be discussed and then working together with other stakeholders to explore what is really possible.

### Purpose And New Ideas: Why Bother?

One day, working as a community mediator, I am suddenly struck by the effort we invest in broadening the agenda during the conflict resolution process because we almost always find that the real problem is rarely the one originally presented by the parties. The parties find proxy vehicles, Trojan horses, in which to sneak in their true concerns (often unaware of what they are doing). Something seemed wrong in the agrifood industry, people seem too confident, too comfortable. And I wondered aloud to my co-mediator—is it possible to have a dispute without those involved realising they are in conflict/crisis? And if so, how do you mobilise people to address it? And more importantly, how do you ask, “why is nothing happening?” when there is no expectation that something should happen. Applying this to the agrifood industry, in the absence of any agreement on doing something we asked, “What would we lose if we did nothing?” Answer: potentially one of our largest industries in the country. There was an imperative for action—but by whom?

## ENGAGING INDUSTRY

### “What Is Really Going On?”

Perhaps the best way of finding out what is going on is to ask people to tell their story. In this case, we asked, “What is really happening on the ground? Who are you producing this for? Where is your product going to?” The story we heard from an Australian farmer’s perspective was a constant complaint of low agricultural and resource prices, a focus on undercutting your neighbour’s price, suspicion about new ways of doing things and rarely any understanding about the end destination of their product. The story from an overseas perspective looked quite different. Dutch buyers confessed with a smile that they found working with Australian exporters a delight – Australian exporters continually competed with each other on price, so it was simply a matter of sitting back until they reached rock bottom. For the Dutch, this was quite incomprehensible (remember, they invented the cartel around 400 years ago), but a wonderful opportunity to act as middle agents and make large profits. Perception has a way of becoming reality. At least asking questions and getting people to tell us their story had motivated many farmers and exporters to begin taking an interest in their own supply chain. Importantly, we also established our reputation as an inclusive group that was willing to “listen” rather than “lecture.”

### “It’s Not My Problem, Mate!”

Something strange became apparent as we kept listening to Australian stories. In musical terms it is called a “chorus.” The farmer grows and packs the product and pushes it outside the farm gate – after which “It’s not my problem, mate!” The truck driver transports it to the market – after which “It’s not my problem, mate!” The Freight Forwarder delivers it to the airport – after which “It’s not my problem, mate!” The airline delivers it to another airport and, guess what? - “It’s not my problem, mate!” And so the opera goes on, for up to fifteen steps in this transport “chain” – but by the end of the evening, the product had a problem, arriving on consumers’ plates in poor condition. Everyone was playing their piece but the whole production was not coming together in harmony. This level of denial is typical in a situation where direct pressure is not being brought to bear on individual parts of the system. In a sense, the failure of the system as a whole can conveniently be blamed on “someone else.” It was a real clue to underlying unresolved issues – people were not listening, relating to or working with each other.

## Engaging The Industry

With so many people convinced it was “someone else’s” problem or fault there was a need to raise awareness and build ownership and responsibility, before motivating people to action. We gathered all these people together in each state and simply asked “What’s going on? Tell us about how you all work together in the chain from farmer to consumer?” This chain typically had about fifteen steps. As expected, everyone at the meetings was convinced they were experts. After all, they had worked in these industries for decades—but we could rarely pass the second or third step in the chain without disputes breaking out. Imagine a farmer, confidently stating how his broccoli leaves the farm by truck and goes into cool storage, immediately being contradicted by the truck driver who says he never puts it into cool storage—“Why not?,” “You never told me to!,” “You never asked!”—red faces, looks of disbelief and so on. This was repeated in every state across Australia and the story was consistently the same. It became one of the most effective ways of mobilising people—getting them to see first hand their communication problems. We learnt that there was no point lecturing people about lack of communication—they had to experience it for themselves. Bluntly highlighting these weaknesses gave them a focus—these were all areas over which they had the power to do something straight away. It limited the number of excuses they had for doing nothing.

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### What If .....?

So, we took it one step further and more broadly posed the simple question “What if transport is about getting people and things from one place to another?” The implications were huge in terms of our whole national structure. Government departments were based on silos—the different modes of transport represented by road, rail, sea and air. The industry was proud of its specialisation and competed between modes—road versus rail, air versus sea. Even within modes, we already had sad experiences with competition—after all, we had only just, after a hundred years, achieved a common rail gauge across Australia.

Posing this question required thinking differently—a paradigm shift. We were delighted to find that overseas, this was beginning to catch on. In Europe, they had begun to talk of “mobility” as a general idea of getting things around, rather than the mode by which it got there. In some countries the majority of air freight actually travelled by road because of airport congestion

—people were paying extra for it to get there on time, not just because they wanted their product to have a nice plane ride.

Working across modes was even a greater challenge—the humble Australian pallet (known to most consumers as the wooden trays their trolleys crash into at supermarkets) epitomised the inconsistencies. The Australian pallet size is different to the rest of the world. Products are made and packed to fit perfectly on a pallet. As a result, products produced for the Australian market will not fit on international supermarket shelves—even the size of your tissue box is different. Our entire racking and distribution system is based on the Australian size. Our trucks are designed to fit two Australian pallets side by side perfectly – and our roads are designed for our trucks. This problem has been obvious for several decades and one study suggested the national costs of rectifying this problem will now exceed \$2 billion. These were serious structural issues which were not going to be simply fixed by any one player.

We thought posing the “What if ...?” question might help, freeing people up to consider, hypothetically at least, what the alternative could be. It did not. Instead we had touched on some “sacred-cows” in the industry and the push back was substantial. Everyone knew what the problems were but they were only ever spoken about in hushed tones. We thought bringing everyone on board to roll up their sleeves and work together on these issues would be easy – one large happy family. I learnt quickly that the family was indeed large—however, some members were not happy. Jealousy, envy, intolerance reigned in some quarters and we soon had the scars to prove it. In many organisations the mood swung from amusement, to derision, to disbelief, to fighting for ownership and control. We tried to engage people in the traditional formats—meetings, consultation groups, forums – but people were not interested. They did not want partnerships, they wanted ownership—“so is it your issue or mine?” “It’s ours” was not an acceptable answer—it was outside the unwritten boundaries and the rules of competition. Control in an organisational structure represented full “ownership” as an end in itself—with no real accountability for the results that should flow from that ownership. This meant we needed to engage differently—and to find the right people who could work in uncertainty.

## Engaging Industry On Underlying Issues

With ownership had to come responsibility. The industry had to do its own hard work—only they could come up with solutions that were both practical and sustainable. Our role became one of helping them to have real conversations, challenging them to focus on contradictions, provoking and then refusing to provide a lifeline—no heroes, no quick fixes. At forums, people still wanted answers—demanding to know what the government was going to do about it, what solution we

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had. And my answer? “Nothing. I don’t export. I don’t use shipping containers in my office, I’ve never used containers in my office and I never intend to. You use hundreds of containers everyday. And you think it’s my problem—I’ve got news for you. Now, what are you going to do about it?” Their context, their solutions. However, we also needed to soften this by maintaining “hope”—hope has to be handed out in small parcels as a means of relieving feelings of despair. Too much despondency and people will not take up the work, will not reach a stage of forcing themselves to confront reality – too little, and they will feel there is no benefit in engagement and leave altogether.

What emerged from this engagement was surprisingly straight forward. The industry was looking for a space where they could come together in a non-competitive environment to really thrash out the issues. We were able to provide some limited resources to help them establish industry based councils but resisted calls for us to define a solution, specify a structure or become involved as referee, umpire or mediator. It was a bit wild and unwieldy at times as every council was structured differently and even called something different (we encouraged them to “Structure it as something you will turn up to”). They had to organise themselves (“If you can’t organise yourselves in your own backyard then how are you going to compete internationally?”). In some cases it took over a year to build momentum and while on the surface we refused to be involved in their meetings or processes, we were always a friend in the background, giving advice and encouragement. We came under criticism at the Federal level—our approach was in contrast to many other initiatives supported by government which always maintained “control” and “consistency” or at a minimum, representation. Our rationale was to give full ownership to the Councils—if they were not happy with the way their Council ran or what they called it, then it was their responsibility to act. On the other hand, this also prevented the Federal Government becoming a large slow moving target—if we were the centre-piece then the focus of the forum would be totally about what we (“someone else”) should be doing, rather than what action they needed to take. Overall, it worked.

## ENGAGING THE STATES/TERRITORIES

### Finding The Right People

A second key partner who needed to be engaged was the states/territories. We wanted to steer away from traditional relationships between the Federal and State governments based on power and resources and instead engage those people who really cared about the issues. We sent out a letter from the Minister to all State Premiers saying that we had a really good idea (industry freight councils) but there was no money attached to it.

The result was instructive—the absence of funds meant that the letters landed on the desk of someone who was genuinely interested in the issue, rather than the power play. Virtually every person was from a different Department (from business development to agriculture to transport to regional development) and most had never met each other before. We asked “What if we just came together informally to ensure consistent policy and support one another?” We were able to form unique partnerships because no one saw it as a threat.

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The massive internal contradictions of such a group ensured constant tension—the group represented an extraordinary political risk for the participants (their formal roles were to compete with each other) but it was also a safe environment where they could share their true concerns about the future. Instead of the usual path of trying to resolve tensions, we allowed tensions to emerge and promoted robust conversations. The whole group process became intensely personal, and threats to opt out, withhold information, undermine, or not cooperate became personalised as well. Paradoxically, this became one of the greatest strengths of the group—calling on their personal commitment to a greater purpose often allowed us to break through the barriers to cooperation. We asked them to leave their “State/Territory” hats at the door and focus on a common national purpose—we wanted their views, not their organisation’s view—whether it was achievable or not could be the next step. We had done our homework, we knew the facts and the absurdities—and the group’s purpose became developing the courage to bring these issues to wider government and industry. In fact, the group went on to achieve great outcomes of mutual benefit, especially in formulating a national strategy—coming under threat itself when it was clear we were achieving far more than many other formal forums. The constant question was “Who are these people, and how are they doing it?”

## REFLECTION

If you want to rock the boat with an “infant idea,” expect some turbulence. Throughout this endeavour there were many attacks—that we were “out of control,” threats “not to pursue these issues.” We constantly reviewed our position, always asking: What is our purpose? What is happening right now? What question needs to be asked right now? Who can we partner with? What could we

achieve within six months? Why aren't we doing it? What if we are wrong? How would we know? This constant reflection kept us one step ahead of our critics but also refined our purpose and kept us in touch with the bigger picture. We shared issues broadly as "joint problems," neither rescuing with an answer nor walking away.

We ran parallel processes for three years, engaging the states/territories, industry, CEOs and other countries separately. In the end we had to pose the question "Can so many different interests agree on a single national direction, on a single purpose without real structure, on cooperation without existing relationships?" The tensions ran deep—real progress meant real underlying work, not just changing positions but changing perceptions; not seeing an enemy but seeing a partner; not seeing a threat but rather an opportunity; and most of all admitting our vulnerabilities, our fear of globalisation, our fear of competition and our fear of survival. In the end, this "infant idea" bore fruit in the form of a Summit which adopted a National Strategy across all stakeholders. It secured a different way of thinking about this whole industry, marrying the technical requirements with people's attitudes and relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Successful leadership in the stormy seas of cultural change often means acting against the grain, not doing what you are told, taking up individual responsibility, being unstructured, refusing to plan, embracing controversy, having little formal authority, refusing to go away, building unrealistic expectations, failing expectations, creating new ways of working, being inefficient, partnering with a new crowd and creating unexpected alliances and networks. Clarity of purpose is essential in beginning this journey, but the lessons from the agrifood study is to allow for uncertainty, ask basic questions and let stories flow, bring people together, listen not lecture and let people's behaviours speak for themselves. To build a community with vision is to "let go" and take risks. Be lean with structures—people have to design what they will turn up to, avoid the corporate tendency to dominate and control (you will just be left with the blame anyway), build a safe environment and to keep questioning everything. Finally, in the realm of leadership, "our doubts are traitors" only if we allow them to be—otherwise they are a rich resource, a signpost for where some of the best opportunities might dwell.

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