

“ATTFLUENCE” OR DOING LEADERSHIP DIFFERENTLY – MT ELIZA SENIOR LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AND OTHERS

By Richard Searle

- THE IMPACT?

This is what Kirsten McMahon Cook, Oceania Marketing Manager for Shell Australia has to say about the impact of her participation on the most recent Mt Eliza Senior Leadership Program.



Kirsten McMahon-Cook credits the [Mt Eliza Leadership Program](#) with being one of the most confronting and insightful experiences of her professional development to date.

The program had such a profound impact, she says, it helped her to reach a recent life-changing decision to temporarily exit corporate life and complete her Executive MBA full-time at MBS.

It was a bold move for the mother-of-two to resign from her role as Oceania Fuels Marketing Manager for Shell Australia and commence full-time study. But she sees it as an essential step in her professional journey from a manager to leader and an investment in her future career.

"The Mt Eliza Leadership Program is a very individual program in which everyone gains their own experience of growth and insight," she explains. "It has certainly made a considerable difference to how I view myself and how I perceive leadership."

She says the learning has made her more confident. And with that confidence comes the courage to make the moment of truth choices - both in business and in life - that lead to new opportunities.

A defining feature of the Mt Eliza Leadership Program is the way in which the directors facilitate group dynamics to create the chemistry and energy for powerful individual and shared learning experiences.

Their approach, says Kirsten, emphasises the need for leaders to involve their people - asking insightful questions, encouraging debate and importantly, listening to the contributions. In this way, she says, you maximise the value of team members in tackling new challenges and issues, while also ensuring the agenda covers all concerns and issues. "There were periods of silence, which allowed for individual reflection and times of group tension as we dug deeper into all the issues," says Kirsten.

As the program unfolds over five days the group-led discussion and debate can sometimes be confronting and uncomfortable, mirroring the real life tension of business.

According to Kirsten this is why the program is so effective.

"Leadership is uncomfortable: you can feel vulnerable and you do face an unknown path ... There is no script for the successful executive to follow," she says.

"As a group, however, we saw that it's ok to be vulnerable - it can build trust among your people, and that as the leader you don't always have to control situations. Instead you can learn to trust that your team will pull together with solutions.

"I was extremely impressed with the program overall and especially the approach and support given by program directors [Richard Searle](#) and [Dr Robert Burke](#).

"I was also impressed by the willingness of each participant to contribute to the learning experience as it underscored how we need to learn from each other and that you learn to lead."

Kirsten is currently in the final phase of her EMBA completing the research papers with support from her Academic Supervisor.

- **WE HAVE A PARTICULAR VIEW OF LEADERSHIP** – that leadership is not so much about styles or qualities or capabilities or behaviours or positions or authority or technical solutions (although valid these can be misleading), but rather it is about work. And that the work of leadership is to diagnose our adaptive challenges and to mobilize ourselves and others to respond successfully to adaptive challenges in order to thrive and survive. These leadership challenges are commonly about getting people to work well together, to create a preferred future together and to make appropriate and significant changes together to respond to reality and to realize that future. That for this work to be most effective and fulfilling for everybody involved requires us to bring our whole selves to the task and to be working on the whole system. This is why managers and corporations approach us to assist them with their leadership work. The individuals want to be more effective and fulfilled, and the organizations want their people to work really well together, to be creative and innovative about the future and to be willing to make appropriate changes so the business thrives and survives!

- **WE HAVE A PARTICULAR VIEW OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT** – that the adaptive challenge facing the group of participants and facilitators is together to learn something significantly new about leadership. Learning something new, like leadership and change themselves, is hard not easy and requires the participants to accept responsibility – work avoidance is common and there is no guarantee of a successful outcome. That leadership and learning about leadership occurs in relationships, in

groups, in organizations and that the focus for learning is to notice and impact (ie attention and influence, which I give the gimmicky name of **attfluence**, which rhymes with flatulence if you are having trouble remembering it) the thinking, conversing, connecting and creating processes occurring in the group. That the participants learn most and the facilitators can be most influential, if we drop our masks, make ourselves vulnerable, and put ourselves at risk in the group. That part of the learning process is identifying all those things which we have called leadership but which are largely substitutes in order to avoid exercising true leadership.

- Our approach to leadership and leadership development has been influenced by a range of major sources, but how we have brought these various strands together and what we have added to them means that what is evolving is uniquely our own. **SOME OF THE MAJOR INFLUENCES ON US** are Ron Heifetz at the Kennedy School Harvard and his theory of adaptive leadership and the group-as-case learning methodology; the leadership group at MIT such as Isaacs, Scharmer, Schein, Senge and their work on group dialogue, appreciative cultures and systems change; futures thinking, including the work of Sohail and Rob Burke; mindfulness, reflective processes and identity work, shaped by Amanda Sinclair, Richard Searle, Harvard Negotiation Insight Initiative, Jon Kabat Zinn and the Gawler Foundation; Robert Bales work on Group Field Theory, Group Leadership and Symlog; stages of consciousness and integral theory by educationalist Robert Kagan and philosopher Ken Wilbur; group decision making and facilitation processes based on the Program on Negotiation at Harvard; Irvin Yalom from Stanford and his rule-breaking activist client/counselor relational focus for psychotherapy.
- **OUR LEARNING METHODS** include group facilitation, group-as-case method, group dialogue and inquiry processes, group reflection and insight sessions, group consultations on leadership challenges, personal transformational exercises, a cultural role play, a group decision making simulation, theory and content sessions, meditation, and a group leadership feedback instrument and individual feedback. Critical to the success of our methods is the learning and leadership space created by the facilitators and the leadership interventions they make in the group – “who the facilitators are being” and “how the facilitators are relating to each other” are the key elements of this method.
- **WHERE ARE WE USING THIS APPROACH?** Our approach has been refined on the Mt Eliza Senior Leadership Program over a three year period. In the past eighteen months the approach has been incorporated as the basis of the Strategic Leadership Program where we also explore more fully Futures and Strategic Thinking and Implementation. The approach has also been incorporated as the basis of the Mindful Leadership Program which explores more fully the personal and meditative dimensions of leadership. Over the past twelve months we have also been conducting programs for the Executive and Senior Managers at Transurban, and Senior Leaders at AXA, which have incorporated this approach to leadership development.

- Here are **SEVEN OF MY INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS** in no particular order from our experience so far:
 1. Managers initially resist but also regularly confirm the power and relevance of the distinction between “leadership to work through adaptive challenges”, and “management/authority to work through technical solutions”. Managers regularly confirm that they have been avoiding the real leadership work and trying to solve adaptive challenges by use of authority and technical solutions. When managers start to get honest with themselves and us they report overwhelmingly that it is fear, riskiness and a lack of courage which has led them to operate this way.
 2. Managers regularly report that they know that they are nowhere near as effective and fulfilled as they could be or would like to be with their leadership, and that there is a certain amount of “surviving” going on in their role rather than “thriving”. There are a whole range of reasons why this seems to take place. Many managers start to identify too much with their role and put on a mask when they come to work, and they have not realized how much this is costing them in terms of effectiveness and fulfillment (not to mention the experience of those around them). Many managers are not engaging in rich conversations and connecting deeply with the people with whom they work – reactivity and coercion have replaced dialogue and relationship.
 3. Many managers report that they spend very little time being reflective – in fact it appears that many are afraid of what will come up if they stop to actually reflect too much. For many it is the quietness and stillness which occurs on our programs which allows them to have the greatest insights. Initially this is achieved through slowing the action down and being more reflective and by the facilitators “naming” what is being passed over, missed or avoided in the group conversation and relational dynamics. It is deepened over time by supporting the group to engage in real dialogue and to improve the quality of their listening and their sharing. The slowing down is aided by the groups engaging in deep thinking about the future. It deepens even further when participants create more trust with each other by allowing themselves to be more vulnerable and emotional and authentic. The stillness deepens even further as the group and individuals reach a “mindful” state where they are paying attention to everything without the intermediation of judgment. This level of quietness allows for an incredible honesty but it is also the precursor for the group and individuals becoming far more intuitive, creative and innovative – a new energy is released in the individuals and the group. Ironically, the quality of thinking, creating, contributing and problem solving actually speeds up significantly at this stage.
 4. Many managers report that they have not created anywhere near the level of collaboration and teamwork in their workplace that they create with the other participants on the program. There is a lot of resignation among managers about workplace collaboration and teamwork, despite the rhetoric and espoused values in many corporations. The short explanation for this appears to be that we tend to think of ourselves as individual, autonomous agents (especially when we are the “boss”), and we pay

- scant attention to our relationship to the whole (other than to complain about it or blame it or try to shape it) and to how the whole is continually limiting and/or licensing our own thinking, behaviour and action. The way we talk about this on the program is to argue that managers typically and mistakenly locate ourselves in relation to others as being separate – usually above them or in front of them. On the program participants usually transform their relationship to the whole or the group, and they begin to appreciate the need for leaders, as part of the whole, to influence the thinking, dialogue, relating and creating of the whole if they are to solve their toughest and most intractable leadership challenges.
5. With one corporate client we have had the opportunity to work with intact teams and to follow up with the teams after the program. I conducted a one day facilitation with the COO and his Operational Leadership Group six months after the initial program intervention. One of the obvious changes six months later was the “tightness” of the team and the quality of the interactions between the team and the COO. The team had adopted a range of methods which we had used on the program – they would meet from time to time and consult each other over current leadership challenges in order to provide each other with support but more importantly with “diagnostic breakthroughs”, and they had even started to meet in circles without tables because they wanted to emulate the quality of the dialogue they had created on the program. Each of the managers reported that at a personal level they considered they had made major changes as a result of the course (with another corporate client we do follow up three months later with the senior managers and the executive, and the managers regularly report dramatic personal changes while the executive regularly have the highest praise for their new strategy work). A new CEO had arrived at the company in the interim between the program and follow-up day, and we were able to use the group-as-case method and the adaptive challenges’ diagnostic to provide real insight into the weaknesses in how the OLG was relating to the new CEO and to strategize a whole new plan of action.
 6. The words transformation and journey are bandied around very lightly these days. However, participants regularly report that what occurs on the program has been a transformational experience and a journey. Initially, this surprised us because so much of the focus of the program is on the group as much as the individual and the individual psychology – again the focus is on the work of leadership. What participants regularly report is that they acquire a whole new appreciation of their capacity for leadership and that they are thinking about themselves in fundamentally different ways. The new thinking applies to many aspects of the manager’s life and not just the workplace. This transformation, of individuals and the program group, does not come cheaply. Many participants find aspects of the course to be confronting, anxiety-laden and hard work. For the facilitators the programs are exhausting and raw in ways that other executive education programs are not. It is typically the case that the program group will reach a point, often provoked by the observations and interventions of the facilitators, where they experience a great deal of resignation (a bit like “hitting the wall” in marathon running) , and this is often the precursor for a major breakthrough in how the participants think, converse, relate and

create together. Occasionally, some individual participants don't make the transition that the group as a whole makes.

7. I have coined the term **attfluence** to capture what I believe are the two major foci of leadership work – attention and influence. Many managers are attempting to be influential leaders but are not paying attention – they are not paying sufficient attention to themselves and others and to the quality of thinking, conversing, connecting and creating which is occurring and which is possible or needed. It is difficult to influence what you cannot see! Trying to influence without sufficient attention is ineffective and unfulfilling, and it leads to coercion, prescription, reactivity, manipulation and stress. For instance, when we consult managers over their leadership challenges, the biggest breakthrough results from actually clarifying the real adaptive challenge inherent in the issue and figuring out who needs to take responsibility, learn something new or change. The deepest or purest form of this attention is when we can pay attention without the intermediation of judgment. Without sufficient attention our leader managers cannot tune into their own and others' intuition and creativity, and cannot sense the emerging future which is unfolding before their eyes, and so are limited in how much influence they can exercise.