

Australasia College of Health Service Management
Better Leadership. Healthier Communities

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Thank you, Neale, good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

I chose as my presentation Leadership – a lived experience. As you get older life's perspectives change. Frankly I'm surprised I am still here however at 71, I am closer to the end than I am to the beginning. I had long considered myself bullet-proof until pulled up sharp 3 years ago with first a pacemaker followed by a quadruple bypass. All very confronting for someone who did not have a GP and apart from an annual skin check-up avoided doctors and hospitals. As I age, I am suitably impressed by modern medicine - pace maker is a day procedure and my heart surgery had me in and out of the Brisbane Wesley in 7 days. I now know why I kept up my Bupa top cover for all those years. Recently my cardiac surgeon who follows my adventures on Face Book and the NRRRA website advised me that it was important that I don't stop otherwise I will drop so timely that I should be talking to you Neale and the Australasian College of Health Service Management.

In February 2019 at 69 I came out of retirement to answer the call from Prime Minister Morrison to oversee the recovery from the north QLD Monsoon event, from the Territory border to the QLD coast – if you don't remember an estimated \$6 billion damages, 14% of annual gross regional product (GRP) in the affected local government areas.”

including 500,000 dead cattle. Sadly, many Australians would still say “What flood?”.

In December that same year I became responsible for the national drought – in some places nudging 9 years. 18 months later following the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements I was handed bushfires and just about anything else that could go wrong. Cyclone Seroja in WA followed, floods in NSW and QLD, more bushfires and COVID. My Agency determines who gets what in Commonwealth support. For the record I am not responsible for the mouse plague or grasshoppers in central QLD. Moses of the Old Testament is my role model. Unlike Moses I have a land cruiser and 280 staff to aid my work.

All of my activity requires leadership at different levels. Much has been written, spoken about, and debated on what leadership entails. Degrees, MBA, and doctoral programs pour over what makes for leadership. Numerous textbooks, articles and opinion pieces regale us with the different leadership styles from visionary to autocratic. In my belief it’s a combination of styles adapted to the circumstances premised on certain personal qualities which I address further on. I never thought it that complicated, rather incremental based on experience. Importantly to be and act consistently. One way to better understand leadership and what it looks like is to delve into the stories of those who have excelled – examples in my library include Mother Mary McKillop, Lee Quan Yew, General John Monash, Margaret Thatcher, Abraham Lincoln, General Douglas McArthur, Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad, Kamel Ataturk and Angelo Roncalli (Pope John XXIII). You can also learn from poor, failed leadership. There are plenty of examples in history. Ask yourself the question – what would I do differently?

Today I will share with you some lived experiences and some tools you might consider in developing and honing your leadership skills – I will try to keep it simple as I understand you are all in leadership positions. My most immediate inspiration when it came to my evolving leadership was my late father Les Stone JP (last Shire President of Wodonga and first Mayor of the Rural City of Wodonga) and my mother Pam Stone OAM JP (first woman councillor and Mayor of the Rural City of Wodonga).

Children learn by example, and I paid close attention around the kitchen table growing up on the Housing Commission estate in Wodonga.

To lead is to be followed and to achieve objectives and goals you need followers. If people are following you out of curiosity you have a problem. A recurring mistake is to confuse popularity with competence. As a political leader at both state and federal level I knew I was not always popular but rather considered capable and competent (at least according to the polls as borne out by election results).

How has the foregoing translated to my current role as an Agency Head in the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet in the Australian Public Service?

As instructed by Prime Minister Morrison my job in the various disaster zones is to bring hope, to lead people out of their predicament and give them a sense that tomorrow is another day. Importantly they have not been forgotten. In executing such a plan, I must carry people with me including my management team, field workers and the Government of the day. I will never be able to put Humpty Dumpty back together again but through strategic hand up rather than handouts based on an approach of locally led, locally understood, and locally implemented we make a difference. That one can talk the talk and simultaneously walk the walk is evidenced by those of our fellow Australians who agree we have made

that essential difference in closing the gap between despair and hope. I will return to some of the specifics around disasters later in my presentation.

Are leaders born or do they evolve? I have known John Howard for decades from when he first was elected. It would have been a brave prediction that he would go on to become one of the Nations most revered and successful leaders. Based on Winston Churchills first outing in WWI it would have been equally courageous to predict his performance in WWII. There is something in the statement, "cometh the hour cometh the man" (or in the case of Thatcher the woman). Leadership can be learned, refined, and developed. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth is a standout example, most of it learned from her 14 Prime Ministers following a shaky start and a few missteps along the way. Some people never make it, overcome by their own hubris, self-importance, lack of insight, courage, and belief in what they stand for. Some miss the "moment" paralysed by indecision, fear and lack of confidence, they don't back themselves. When new members were elected to my government, they were obliged to stand in the party room and concisely answer the question – why am I here, what do I believe in?

Leadership requires courage, the ability and determination to step up. I was asked recently what was important to me reflecting on my life so far. My family is paramount but following close behind is my integrity and legacy. I have never allowed wealth, honours, and awards to define me. That said you would be entitled to ask have I ever been put to the test. Where have I stood up to be counted or have, I shirked it. I can offer 3 examples. The first as a Minister and Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. MP's often glide through parliament safe in the party room voting discipline – a conscience vote strips that anonymity away. When MP's

have to pick a side and show their colours this can be a tough call. For me the first occasion was the introduction of the Private Members bill by then Chief Minister Marshall Perron to legalise euthanasia, an enormously popular move. I was widely considered Perron's successor, but the catch was I didn't and still don't support euthanasia. Despite many direct and veiled threats (so much for the conscience vote) I would not bend. I led the opposition in the Territory parliament much against the views of my electorate but supported by the churches and many in the Labor Opposition. The legislation passed by 1 vote carried by an indigenous ALP member; my side lost. Perron retired and apart from a clumsy attempt to scuttle my leadership I was elected the Chief Minister unopposed. The churches including my own Catholic Church assumed I would repeal the legislation. I refused. I was then demonised and condemned by some. To this day I have no regrets – I don't support euthanasia and I respect the Westminster system. Thomas Moore is one of my heroes. As it turned out the Commonwealth disallowed the legislation notwithstanding I argued against federal intervention. The second occasion where I had the blow torch applied to my feet followed the Port Arthur shootings when I backed in Prime Minister Howards firearm reforms (in my view his finest moment of national leadership). I was beset from all sides, the firearm restrictions were enormously unpopular locally, yet I believed they were right. Petitions to the Legislative Assembly, rallies, media attacks did not deter me. I led from the front taking nervous rural based MPs with me. It was predicted having served 1 year as Chief Minister I was for the high jump electorally. One year later my Government, the CLP won the biggest victory in the electoral history of the NT. An example of leadership rewarded. The next occasion arose after retiring as Chief Minister and being elected as the Federal President of the Liberal Party. In the aftermath of the botched roll out of the new GST it fell to me to tell Prime

Minister John Howard that his government was seen as “mean and tricky” – courageous perhaps, showing leadership as the leader of the lay Party matched by a Prime Minister who took it on the chin (amidst some grumbles and upset) and did something about it. Again, leadership at its best by a PM under siege. You will recall the Howard Government were overwhelmingly re-elected in 2001 once we got our house in order.

I won't claim I am always right, but I remain guided by my integrity with an eye to the legacy I leave behind. I believe in the same way some have electoral nous, leadership instinct is a finely honed skill developed through experience.

There are certain tools that can help you develop your leadership. I set them out in the context of my new lived experience as a public servant dealing with natural disasters. They apply equally to your fields of endeavour.

First, learn to listen. You won't learn much by speaking so try listening. A leader knows when to speak up and when to shut up. As Stephen Covey said: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood”. I add to that advice sometimes it is as important as what you don't say as what you say.

In the aftermath of the QLD floods and my appointment I was on the ground in Cloncurry in 3 days. Thereafter I visited McKinlay, Hughenden, Richmond, Julia Creek, and other Western Queensland communities. I came to listen.

I wasn't there to say, “I'm from the Government and I'm here to help”, although that's what most had heard before.

The flood casualties had lost sleep, confidence, livestock, crops, fences, and other infrastructure. Many were left with the “clothes on their back”

as the saying goes. They weren't sure if they'd also lost their livelihoods. The local towns and shopkeepers were brought to their knees.

Having devised a \$75,000 non-taxable grant program to help the 'cockies' they told me the form was too complex, required information they couldn't find – in some cases because it had been washed away – and took energy they just didn't have after long hours in the paddock cleaning up.

I listened, then I acted in conjunction with our QLD agents QRIDA, an outstanding QLD Government organisation. I wasn't about to rush to failure, but I also wasn't going to let indecision and red tape bog things down. Mine is an Agency that 'gets stuff done'. Scott Morrison calls us his "congestion busters". We made the process simpler, and money was hitting bank accounts three days later.

The importance of being seen as a "doer" inspires confidence. It's a key tool in that leadership toolbox. Work out what you are going to say Yes to and what is a No, then do, get on with it. As a leader you will be judged by your actions and deliverables, not your rhetoric, media spin and endless meetings chasing your tail.

Next stay engaged. Keep the conversations going, remain agile and responsive to local feedback. We amended closing dates for Applications, further refined forms, ran Grant Application workshops. We are applying the same strategies in the bushfire zones notwithstanding COVID restrictions that are continually frustrating our efforts. We keep turning up, and we keep listening. The fear of being forgotten is real – floods, drought, bushfires, cyclones.

Our guiding principle, formed in those early days and that guides our work today is "Locally led, locally understood and locally implemented".

Next be flexible within the parameters of what you have decided. I was allocated a notional \$3.3 billion for the floods much of it for a prescribed purpose. Once on the ground it was evident that some of the funding didn't match reality. Nothing should be immutable. Scott Morrison supported our request to repurpose monies because that's what people said was needed. Importantly all Grants must be on merit and established need.

With the communities, we developed a plan for the region's long-term recovery and we're now working with them to implement it. We must never forget why we're here and who we're here for.

With the COVID-19 disaster payment, which I am responsible for, we're constantly monitoring and reviewing the situation and tweaking the Australian Government's support in recognition of the significant impact the new COVID-19 Delta strain is having on communities, employment, and businesses. Currently Commonwealth COVID payments are being delivered through Services Australia at record speed.

Staying engaged leads to another leadership tool. The ability to understand the community you are assisting. They are looking to you for leadership. Once they get past the hilarity around "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help" they realise you're the real deal. Confidence and hope build on the back of your performance. You become one with the community and trust builds. It's not always seamless. You will still cop plenty of grumbles around it's not enough and why them and not us, but a true leader can breach such disaffection by turning up and listening. Notwithstanding the Morrison Government have rolled out \$2.4 billion in bushfire support so far, the loss and damage is inestimable and it's going to take a very long time. A chronic shortage of materials and trades adds to the frustration. Long before he was appointed Governor General of Australia, General Peter Cosgrove led the Queensland

Government's response after Cyclone Larry in 2006; he talked of the importance of restoring the confidence of these shattered communities after the event. He said he saw this as one of his primary tasks, ensuring they knew the Australian public was aware and cared, that there would be help from all levels of government, and that out of the recovery they would emerge 'bigger, brighter and better than ever'. It's about giving people, communities hope

I'd never considered myself a bureaucrat, joining the Australian Public Service at this late stage of my life was unexpected and novel but that was the only way for me to be an 'accountable authority'. As a part of the Australian Government and responsible to taxpayers, the National Recovery and Resilience Agency must stick to government processes, rules, and codes of conduct. And that means assembling a team of people I trust who know how government processes work and understand and share my vision. And most importantly don't get too upset when I stray too far off script. I confess I am regularly off the reservation much to the annoyance of everyone from my colleagues to Senate Estimates. That said I am supported by a group of very dedicated and committed APS officers who work 24/7 in service of their country, they are outstanding. Dispersed around the country supported by offices in Canberra and Brisbane they are my eyes and ears on the ground.

That said as a leader I don't ask of my colleagues anything I am not prepared to do myself. I lead by example. If you fail that test of leadership, give it away. Also be accountable, take responsibility, own your decisions. If you don't stand by your decision making don't expect your followers to clean up after you. Of great import is the ability to communicate clearly in plain language. I have always underscored the importance of speaking plainly. My mantra is "I say what I mean, and I do what I say", followed

by. “do it”, or in the parlance of Captain Jean-Luc Picard of Starship Enterprise fame, “Make it so”. One of my greatest frustrations in the APS is the highly refined skill of ‘Public Service speak’ best exposed in the Crossman Diaries serialised in ‘Yes Minister’. Senate Estimates could double as its own episode of obfuscation, confusion, and denial. They even run workshops to prepare bureaucrats for Senate Estimates - you couldn’t make that up. Finally, authenticity is key to being a leader, if not the mob will work you out very quickly. We Australians call it being fair dinkum.

We all have people who inspire and mentor us. We have all observed and been led by poor leaders. We can learn from others and build our leadership skills in the process.

So, to recap some important tools and attributes to consider:

- Listen.
- Act (that includes having an informed plan, a road map)’
- Engage.
- Communicate clearly and concisely in plain language.
- Be as one with the community and people you lead.
- Authenticity, be fair dinkum.
- Lead by example.
- Accept you are accountable, own your decisions.

I can translate all 8 tools and attributes to your hospitals, clinics, and departments. As General Peter Cosgrove observed in his Boyer Lecture, Leading in Australia “...the trappings of good leadership are generic and widely applicable whether you are standing in a khaki queue with your mess tins or on an automobile production line”. In your case I will add administration centres, wards, medical practices and hospital theatres.

My final missive, above all be courageous, fearless in what you believe in and act accordingly. Never compromise your integrity and legacy.

I wish you all well in your leadership endeavours and aspirations. Your country and communities need you.