

LEADERSHIP

*Address of The Hon. the Chief Justice to Leadership Victoria's Williamson
Community Leadership Programme Presentation Dinner
2 December 2004*

This evening we celebrate the graduation of thirty-six new
Williamson Fellows.

It is an important and significant occasion and I address my
remarks specifically to them.

In so doing, I have been requested by the organisers to confine my
remarks to eight minutes. I feel a little bit daunted in doing so,
perhaps a bit like Chopin when he composed "The Minute Waltz"
except I must tell you my reflections on leadership in eight
minutes.

The conferral of your fellowships mean that you join a select, even
elite group of 440 Williamson Fellows. In so doing you embrace a
continuing commitment to support each other in your future work
and contribution to the community.

Your focus has been on and about leadership. From my perspective, the concept of leadership should be seen in context and that context is essentially the human experience.

As I reflect upon leadership and my human experience, one of my first thoughts is that leadership has to be for something; it has to be about going somewhere. It must have direction. It is not a goal in itself, it needs to be seen as an instrument, a quality or a set of qualities that enables a goal to be achieved.

So, in a way, this view of seeing leadership as being instrumental takes you initially away from the task of identifying the key qualities of leadership and directs your attention to what you want to achieve.

Focusing on what you want to achieve eventually takes you into a greater landscape – how do your goals fit into a broader vision of the human experience, individual and community welfare and social good?

This raises the question of whether leadership is ethically neutral? Can a leader of a criminal gang display real leadership? Can a

leader of a group hell-bent on ethnic cleansing be properly described as a great leader? Because he or she is a highly successful agent for change, is results driven, possesses outstanding organisational skills, is a great communicator and has a clear vision?

Our immediate instinctive response is to say: NO! We are repulsed by the notion that such a person could correctly and finally be described as a “great leader”.

So the leadership we see in a positive light, the concept of leadership we are drawn to is not going to be described or discovered by simply listing the qualities we normally associate with great leaders.

I suggest that there is an ethical or moral core that resides deep within the heart of the concept we so much like to talk about, dissect and appropriate.

The other thought that readily comes to mind when we think about leadership and our lives is that leadership describes a human

relationship. It is perhaps in the nature of this relationship that we find the moral and ethical connection.

So what is the nature of this relationship and is it as simple as describing the reality of one person leading and other people being led?

Again our immediate instinct is to say: No, it is far more complex. There has to be a process of enlightenment, understanding, engagement, acceptance and approval for real leadership to have been exercised. Being led by the collar is not what we call leadership. The question is: *is it a relationship between equals or by definition a relationship between people who are not equals?*

The teacher exhibiting clear leadership in the classroom will be a teacher who sees her students as young people with all the same rights to education, opportunity and happiness that she has and has had. The parents who lead their children successfully will do so because they see their children as entitled to everything they could aspire to. The manager who successfully leads her group, department or organisation will inevitably do so because her view of where the group is going is clear and is shared by the group.

Perhaps most importantly her success as a manager will be built upon a clear perception by those she manages that each of them are entitled to the same human dignity, work satisfaction and feelings of success to which she aspires.

National and international figures will ultimately be judged as leaders on the basis of what they have contributed to the quality of the lives of all the people they have been elected or appointed to represent.

So what I am suggesting here is something which initially counter-intuitive. Our initial thought about leadership is that it is a relationship between people who are not equals. The leader is the one who is ahead, the one who is wiser, stronger, faster, more knowledgeable, more creative, more innovative, braver, charismatic or just simply better.

What I suggest is that as important as all these qualities might be to particular leaders; it is a necessary condition of real leadership that it has been exercised in ways which reflect the fundamental value that as human beings we are all equal.

Would we really say of someone that he was a real leader if his leadership displayed that he did not think that people had equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, equal rights to justice, education and good health, equal rights to live in a civil and humane society?

Of course we cannot all be equally tall, strong, fast, clever or rich but we call all look at each other as equals, equals in our humanity and what that entails.

Now if this view of leadership is valid, what follows about the way in which a leader relates to those on the other side of the relationship. A new set of challenges emerges. If leadership functions within relationships that are actually built upon a notion of equality, the following might be key issues to explore:

- How do leaders ensure that all members of their group or organisation understand and embrace the purpose or product of their joint labours?
- How do leaders relate to those over whom they exercise their authority and leadership? Where does this view of leadership

sit with notions of trust, engagement, participation, vesting and delegation?

- What obligations does this view of leadership entail in relation to information, communication and education?
- And finally, what does this view entail about the relationship between leadership and the identification and pursuit of values which are at the heart of our society, a civil, just and free society?

And as a post script, if I had a little longer I would like to explore the notion that leadership is not a quality of the few, but an obligation of all as we pursue in our various ways and in our various roles, a better world.

Now the “Minute Waltz” is about to end and I am ending with a lot of questions.

However, I suggest that if my analysis so far is correct, then, we have at least two key pointers or guides for further analysis and understanding of this most sought after and admired quality.

First, a real leader will always act, always lead, in the ways which are consistent with the notion that real leadership is exercised between people who see themselves (and others) as equal.

Secondly, real leadership is not exercised in a moral vacuum. It is exercised in the pursuit of values that are aimed at adding to and improving the quality of the human experience.

Finally, my warmest congratulations and best wishes to all of the Williamson fellows.