

Leading with Purpose:

Leadership lessons from the front line of the not-for-profit sector



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Summary

This white paper brings together the collective wisdom of nine highly experienced and motivated senior leaders in the not-for-profit sector. Each member of the Community Directors Council (the Institute of Community Directors Australia's advisory body) shares their personal insights about what they have learned from their time spent on the front line of for-purpose organisations and offers advice on how their experience can help emerging leaders to perform at the highest level.

Introduction

Effective leadership is a vital but often misunderstood and underrated ingredient in the success – or otherwise – of any organisation.

For small community-based footy teams striving to win a premiership, for purpose-driven not-for-profit organisations advocating for the homeless, and for global corporations turning over millions of dollars in annual profit, having the right people in place to make the right decisions at the right time is crucial.

Yet getting this right can't be taken for granted.

Research by the United States career search company Zippia found that less than half (48%) of employees viewed their company's leadership as "high quality."

Further, just one tenth of people were judged to possess qualities that made them natural leaders. About 20% displayed qualities of basic managerial talent that could be nurtured toward high-quality leadership.

These statistics don't have to be predictive, however.

There is a wealth of research and data about what constitutes effective, ethical leadership and how to go about achieving it.

Just as important, though, is personal experience.

Who better to ask about the qualities of good leadership and its importance in any organisation than leaders themselves?

In this white paper, we canvas the diverse views of nine members of the Community Directors Council (the Institute of Community Directors Australia's advisory body).

Each member a highly experienced and respected leader willing to share what they have learned from their years on the front line of for-purpose organisations.

Their reflections cover six broad topics that collectively cover what it takes to be an effective leader in any organisation:

1. Leadership theory
2. Leadership and ethics
3. Leadership through change
4. Leadership and yourself
5. Leadership and management
6. Leading through strategy and culture.

From the importance of ethical leadership, to bringing employees along with you on the strategic journey, to what motivates good leaders, each contributor provides valuable tips, advice and points to ponder on all aspects of the leadership journey.

Leadership theory

Leaders come in many shapes and sizes.

The qualities they exhibit range from high levels of charisma that inspire those around them, to the ability to easily adapt to changing circumstances and keep things on track.

Then there are individuals adept at harnessing the power of authenticity to connect with and inspire employees and taking them on a strategic journey.

Some leaders tend to be transactional in nature, and others tend towards servant or follower characteristics.

Some of the most effective leaders display several of these qualities.

So why learn about different leadership styles at all?

Knowing a little about each of these styles – and being flexible enough to lean into or out of differing leadership approaches to suit the situation – can help us understand what we are likely to respond to in different situations and in what fashion – positive or negative.

Learning about the basics of leadership can help us to make bolder, more purposeful choices when faced with making decisions, informed by ethics and compassion.

Sonja Hood

“An impactful leader is not afraid of a decision, but equally is able to sit in the discomfort of no decision, if the time for a decision is not right.”

– Sonja Hood

For Community Hubs Australia CEO and North Melbourne Football Club president Sonja Hood, an impactful (or influential) leader is one who achieves cut-through.

“That means they can plot a path from where we are to where we need to be,” she explains.

“They might do that in consultation with others, they might draw on others for the answers or the directions, but in the end, they do what a leader must do to have impact, and that is to lead.

“They set a course and bring others along.”

Sonja said her ideal leader is one who consults and draws on others, engages, and connects, one who can lean in and lean on.

“An impactful leader is not afraid of a decision, but equally is able to sit in the discomfort of no decision if the time for a decision is not right.

“An impactful leader cares about the impact of the decision too, and recognises that not all impact is positive, and while sometimes that’s inevitable, you don’t just walk away from negative impact.”

Sonja believes an impactful leader doesn’t need to be popular – but must be compassionate.

Having leadership impact doesn’t always mean the results will be positive, however.

“There are leaders who have impact that is not positive – or which may achieve a particular goal, but with terrible broader consequences.

“Arguably, [former US president] Donald Trump is an impactful leader – but he’s not, in my opinion, a good one.”

Whether the result is desirable or not, in Sonja’s eyes the qualities inherent in a leader with impact are the same.

“An impactful leader needs to be able to make a big decision, forge a path, and have people who will come along for the journey because they are persuaded that the course is the right one.”

Myles McGregor Lowndes

“Perfect leaders and CEOs are rare, but those who understand what they are good at and what they need support on from other members of the team will succeed.” – Professor Myles McGregor-Lowndes

Emeritus Professor Myles McGregor Lowndes, of the Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, said research over the past two decades had been remarkably consistent in identifying the four qualities people expect in those who lead them:

Honesty: A leader is truthful, ethical, and principled, someone who knows right from wrong and does not mislead; someone who not only exhibits clear values but lives by them.

Future-oriented: A leader has a sense of direction, the ability to imagine where the organisation needs to be, and the ability to connect with the hopes and dreams of the organisation’s stakeholders.

Competent: A leader is someone with a good track record of being able to challenge, enable and encourage while not necessarily being the expert in the core skill niche of the organisation.

Inspiring: A leader is enthusiastic and passionate about their organisation's mission and imparts this to all, giving a sense of worth to the organisation and its people.

“Perfect leaders and CEOs are rare, but those who understand what they are good at and what they need support on from other members of the team will succeed.”

Professor McGregor-Lowndes advised being wary of people who lead for-purpose organisations for the wrong reasons.

“Beware the nonprofit leader that is motivated by extrinsic rewards such as remuneration, power, status or thrills, rather than intrinsic motivation such as influence, belonging, challenging, purposeful work, achievement and opportunities for personal growth.”

Jahna Cedar

“It’s about the collective, not the individual.” – Jahna Cedar

The director of policy, evaluation and Indigenous engagement at IPS Management, Jahna Cedar, said the definition of an impactful leader in her own organisation was someone who transcended personal ambition.

They instead prioritised values designed to generate tangible benefits for both the organisation and the broader community.

“This commitment has yielded economic and community advancements in regional and metropolitan Western Australia, notably through initiatives like the Construction Ready for Work trainee program, emphasising inclusivity and social equity in major infrastructure projects.”

Jahna said in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, the idea of impactful leadership resonated with the cultural ethos of community and interconnectedness.

“It’s about the collective, not the individual.

“Leaders acknowledge the interconnectedness of stakeholders, weaving cultural values into corporate practices, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural pride and promoting a holistic approach to decision-making with a broader community impact.”

For Jahna, impactful leadership merges authentic traits with a commitment to serving others, prioritising the well-being and development of both the team and the community.

It is an approach that creates a positive work environment that fosters collaboration and innovation.

“Emphasising diversity, an impactful leader appreciates the richness that varied skills, ages, races, perspectives and genders bring to the vision of the business and remains outcome-focused to benefit others.”

Jahna said a truly impactful leader acknowledges the importance of reflection and continual improvement.

“They will ask themselves how they can add value to increase the capability or capacity of another person, business or community.”

Leadership and ethics

Former US Supreme Court judge Potter Stewart once said, “Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.”

The skills and concepts that should be top of mind when pondering the qualities necessary to be considered an ethical leader include:

Communication

Practising what he preached, African-American slave rebellion leader Nat Turner famously described good communication as the bridge between confusion and clarity.

For leaders, central to crossing that bridge is not only deciding how much information to share with stakeholders and when, but whether to keep them in the loop at all.

Once the decision has been made to share information with others, it's important to apply equal weight to internal and external communication, with the clear understanding that they are often not the same thing.

Developing an ability to welcome constructive feedback – including criticism – will not only increase others' respect for you but allow you to grow and evolve as a confident decision maker.

Above all, be clear. Use plain language and make it accessible to those you are trying to communicate with.

Accountability

Former US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had obviously given this concept some thought.

“Do what you feel in your heart is right, for you'll be criticized anyway,” she said.

Delegating authority or a given task doesn't mean outsourcing accountability.

Nor should leaders assume they will be given the information they need to make informed decisions. Ask, then ask again until you are satisfied.

Top of mind should always be who you represent – your organisation, its beneficiaries, and the law.

Transparency

Transparency builds trust but always remember that there is confidentiality and there are secrets – an ethical leader will know the difference.

Mistakes are part of learning and should be treated as opportunities for growth.

As scientist Albert Einstein said, “Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.”

A commitment to transparency means owning your mistakes and learning from them.

Another way to view all of this is that a fish always rots from the head down.

If an ethical approach to governance is lacking at the highest leadership level of an organisation, that doesn't augur well for those below.

So, what does an ethical organisation look like?

One where the board and senior management own both the problem and the solution. An organisation led by individuals who embody the organisation's values. An operating environment where the end does not always justify the means and one that is governed by an awareness of, and respect for, the expertise in the room.

Susan Pascoe

“A positive ethical leader is one who consciously applies their principles and norms of behaviour to the culture and practice of the workplace.”

– Susan Pascoe

The chair of the Community Directors Council and an adjunct professor at the University of Western Australia, Susan Pascoe, believes leadership and ethics are inextricably linked.

“A positive ethical leader is one who consciously applies their principles and norms of behaviour to the culture and practice of the workplace,” she said.

“They then clearly communicate expectations of those with whom they work, and the consequences for not conforming to these expectations.”

An unethical leader, by contrast, is one who brings self-serving ambition but not positive practice to the workplace.

This is either because they lack an ethical framework, or because they consciously flout expected or required standards.

Susan said governments and professional bodies are increasingly mandating clear standards of practice through mechanisms such as the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Standards, which clearly set out what corporate entities and individuals are required to do to be compliant with regulation.

She said a good example of newly created compulsory standards is the positive duty to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace introduced in December 2022 under the Sex Discrimination Act.

“For those of us working in the community, for-purpose or charitable sectors, we should not need legal nudges to do the right thing,” said Susan.

“We should model and embrace positive, affirming, constructive and productive workplaces because it is the right thing to do.

“We should not need legislation to strive to mitigate the effects of climate change, or to avoid prejudice or inequity in the workplace.

“It should be in our DNA to be inclusive, values-based organisations working for the good of individuals and communities in which we operate, but also [with] an eye to the bottom line.”

Leaders in the community sector can contribute to the common good by being altruistic, pragmatic, and compassionate managers who motivate volunteers and employees to do good for others.

Leadership through change

When planning for change, it's important for not-for-profit leaders to remember that not everything is within their control.

Unforeseen events such as the covid pandemic, hybrid working, a volatile political landscape and the vagaries of the national economy may be unwelcome, but they demand a response, nonetheless.

If this seems overwhelming, focus on the things within the organisation that you, as a leader, can directly influence:

- Who your key stakeholders are
- What programs you deliver
- Where your office is located
- Your organisation's mission.

Equally important as planning for and responding to change is how you bring people with you on the journey.

Sheena Boughen

“Don't wait until there is a space to do this. Make the space!”

– Sheena Boughen

Culture strategist, community activist and arts leader Sheena Boughen believes being bold is beautiful when it comes to effective leadership.

“Let's just imagine that we make enough time to truly check in together and ask some challenging questions,” she said.

“Not what's on your mind or what have you been doing, but are we making a difference and how do we know?”

Sheena said it takes courage for a leader to get off the dance floor and ask themselves if they are doing things the way they are because it's truly enriching the business they are in, or because of organisational habit.

“Don't wait until there is a space to do this. Make the space!”

To chart a course to a prosperous future, it's necessary to establish an environment where a team feels safe to be bold, feels safe to question how they work, and is free to imagine there might be a better way to bring people along together.

“While this might seem logical and just common sense, let's reflect on when you last gathered the tribe and asked: What's working well for you? What's something you want to ask of the group that you think will enable us all? What's an example of where you struggle to feel confident and impactful in your role? What can I/we do about that? What might a better working way feel and look like?”

Catherine Brooks

“It’s crucial for people to feel like they’ve had the ability to reflect on what’s been and contribute to the next strategy as it directly impacts their work and mindset.” – Catherine Brooks

For Catherine Brooks, a senior advisor at Wendy Brooks and Partners, consultation is key.

“In our strategic planning work, we always consult with the broader management team and staff where possible,” she said.

“This is because it’s crucial for people to feel like they’ve had the ability to reflect on what’s been and contribute to the next strategy as it directly impacts their work and mindset.

“This then means that people will see themselves in and resonate with the final strategic plan, bringing alignment and commitment to organisation and job.

“I think this is the best way to help people plan for and respond to change.”

Susan Pascoe

“Ultimately, leading through change, like leading through other aspects of a senior role, involves being a person of integrity, consistency and motivation.” – Susan Pascoe

Susan Pascoe said leading a small team or an entire organisation through change requires a deft mix of EQ and IQ.

“Emotional intelligence equips the leader with an understanding that the environmental scan needs to take account of the likely responses of the change on those impacted both within and outside the organisation.”

Susan said the first reaction of most people was likely to be ‘How will this change affect me?’

It’s a response that is entirely reasonable.

“The leader is wise to assume a degree of self-interest by those impacted by the change and plan for it,” said Susan.

This should include formulating evidentiary, conceptual and organisational work in-house before releasing any proposal, to ensure the plan is clear and there is a strong rationale for it.

“If at all possible, it is helpful to put a draft before people for consultation and feedback as this helps to give a sense of ownership and avoid the contrary position of people feeling alienated and disempowered by the change.

“Authentic consultation is a powerful means of refining a proposal with practitioner or stakeholder input and improving its ultimate acceptability.”

Susan said one of the most important aspects of leading through change was communication – ensuring that those affected understand the rationale for the change and are kept apprised of developments as the change gets underway.

“Even with consultation and communication some people may not support the change, so the leader needs a communication plan to deal with every contingency.

“Ultimately, leading through change, like leading through other aspects of a senior role, involves being a person of integrity, consistency and motivation.”

Leadership and yourself

A good leader knows not only the characteristics and mindsets of those who follow them.

They also know themselves.

It’s an ethos that has served renowned primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall, famous for her groundbreaking research on chimpanzees, well.

“Children – and adults – who have a growth mindset are much more successful than those who have a fixed mindset about themselves and the world,” she wrote in *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times*.

From what motivates you to go above and beyond to how you handle stress, how you identify the signs of impending burnout, and how you challenge yourself to grow in capability and ambition, self-awareness is a powerful tool in a leader’s armoury.

Leaders can be divided into four categories based on their level of self-awareness:¹

Introspectors

Introspectors are clear on who they are but don’t challenge their own views or search for blind spots by getting feedback from others. This can harm their relationships and limit their success.

Seekers

They don’t yet know who they are, what they stand for, or how their teams see them. As a result, they might feel stuck or frustrated with their performance and relationships.

Pleasers

Pleasers can be so focused on appearing a certain way to others that they could be overlooking what matters to them. Over time, they tend to make choices that aren’t in service of their own success and fulfillment.

¹From “What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)” by Tasha Eurich, *Harvard Business Review*, January 4, 2018 (<https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it>)

Aware

This is the sweet spot. Leaders who fall into this category know who they are, know what they want to accomplish, and seek out and value others' opinions. This is where leaders begin to fully realise the true benefits of self-awareness.

While internal self-awareness equates to how well you know yourself, it's just as important to have a handle on external awareness – how well you understand how others see you.

And when it comes to stress, it's important to be able to recognise not only whether you are headed down the road to burnout, but how to take control and change direction.

It can be helpful to map the warning signs and coping strategies for stress and burnout against five broad indicators:

- Physical symptoms
- Emotional signs
- Cognitive indicators
- Behavioural changes
- Interpersonal issues

Burnout symptoms could include chronic fatigue, low energy (physical symptoms); decreased self-esteem (emotional sign); forgetfulness (cognitive indicator); insomnia (behavioural change); and lack of empathy or compassion (interpersonal issues).

The same template can be applied to identifying the first signs of stress, which can range from muscle tension and headaches to anxiety, indecision, loss of appetite and social withdrawal.

The flip side to self-awareness of these issues is adopting a self-care regimen to tackle the problem.

Exercise, listening to music, connecting with colleagues and friends or meditation can all help to alleviate the signs of stress or impending burnout before it is too late.

Sonja Hood

“A little bit of stress can be healthy, too much is disastrous.”
– Sonja Hood

The definition of motivation for Sonja Hood is knowing she can make a difference to something she cares about.

“If either of those things are missing, then I’m not motivated.

“There are plenty of things I care about that simply don’t need my skill set, and plenty of places I could drive change where actually I just don’t really care.”

For a senior leader with extensive experience of the concept, Sonja admits she is intrigued by the notion of stress.

“There’s plenty of real stress around – but I suspect there is also plenty of stress we don’t need to take on, or we could play an active role in mitigating,” she said.

“I’ve been through some highly stressful situations which I navigate beautifully – and I’ve had some frankly low-level tasks that have exacerbated my stress levels beyond reason.

“The former is probably about playing to my strengths; the latter is most likely masking for something else.”

A little bit of stress can be healthy, but too much is disastrous.

“Keeping hold of a sense of control is critical,” said Sonja.

She said central to achieving this state is to continuing asking yourself questions: Is there another way of looking at an issue you are dealing with? Is it a problem? Is a request made of you a reasonable one? Does it have to happen right now? What are the stakes and is walking away an option?

“Developing your ‘no’ muscle is also important. I think this is especially true in for-purpose organisations – not every problem is ours to fix.”

Sonja said her advice on avoiding burnout was to take breaks before you need them.

“Whether it’s little and often, or one big one a year, you should know the answer to that and implement it. Plan in advance, put it in the diary and turn your bloody phone off!”

According to Sonja, the “no” muscle matters here too, particularly the ability to push back on things that aren’t reasonable.

“‘Will the sky fall in if I don’t do this?’ is a question we should all ask more often. Spoiler: it won’t.”

“The most important thing I know took me years to work out, and that’s that all my life experiences matter in terms of my leadership qualities, not just the ones I’ve learned at work or on ‘leadership courses’.

“If you’ve ever had to persuade a group of parents at a school fundraiser onto the dishes when they want to be on the barbecue, or decide that you’re going to win the broccoli war with your toddler at the expense of the rest of dinner, or you’ve had to organise aged care for a relative or to balance parenting and working – you’ve developed a fair few of the muscles that make a good leader in my view.

“Not all learning happens in a suit or a classroom!” Sonja said.

Sheena Boughen

“Efficiencies and just getting things done can prohibit us ever seeing what lies beyond.” – Sheena Boughen

Sheena Boughen draws emotional and social empowerment from collaborating with others.

“In my experience, at every stage of life there is the potential to feel apprehensive, vulnerable, and doubtful you are truly making enough impact.

“We don’t think we don’t work hard enough, but to me, it’s dangerous to reflect too much on your personal impact in isolation.”

Sheena said she learned early in her working life the value of having ‘critical friends’ as wise guides, people who will support, admire and challenge in equal measure.

"I am a born collaborator and the emotional and social value of working in a world of 'we' or 'us' is so much more loving, satisfying and far less stressful than a 'me' or 'I' world."

Sheena said the root of the word "leadership" derived from "leith", meaning to cross a threshold.

"So then where do you get the courage to push beyond the known?"

"It's my belief that efficiencies get in the way of being creative and courageous, of using the imagination and love with the skills you acquire naturally in the course of your role."

"Efficiencies and just 'getting things done' can prohibit us ever seeing what lies beyond.

"It's a creative orientation that to me opens up the world, pulls you in and takes you on the wild ride towards the bright future world.

"That's what motivates me. Truly seeking the nugget of gold that will enrich lives, empower people, and bring courage and beauty to the world, together."

Jodi Kennedy

"I find energy and motivation in striving for positive change."

– Jodi Kennedy

Jodi Kennedy, general manager of charitable trusts and philanthropy at Equity Trustees, said that from an early age, she has been motivated by the will to do better.

"Whether that was from an individual perspective, or at a societal level, I've always been unhappy with maintaining the status quo where I see room for improvement.

"More recently, my leadership style drives me to find inefficiencies or inequities and to work towards shift or disruption for better outcomes."

Jodi's favourite quote is from American businesswoman, entrepreneur and inventor Martha Matilda Harper, who said, "Being satisfied with things the way they are is a sure sign of decline. Constructive discontent is, to me, a higher faculty of mind."

Jodi said she finds energy and motivation in striving for positive change.

"Raising daughters and working in philanthropy motivates me to find ways to promote greater equity in life," she said.

"I love the concepts of sharing power, empowering under-represented voices, the joy of practising kindness always, and basic, simple humanity for all people.

"To me, practising humanity and authenticity in everything we do is critical to being a strong and effective leader."

Jodi has always been drawn to roles with the responsibility of leading large teams.

"[But] with responsibility comes mental and physical load, so I've learnt to manage stress and burnout by constantly reminding myself that there are bigger things in life than just going to work."

That means, when things don't go according to plan at work or exhaustion sets in, trying to reprioritise by immersing herself in friends or family to recharge the battery and recalibrate.

“Putting myself in the shoes of those who deal with hardship and greater problems than mine helps me to stay focused and to reset when I lose perspective,” said Jodi.

“Protecting one’s inner self first is important, to sustain and protect my family and do my work. Spending time with those who bring me joy, even in small ways, ignites my passion.”

Working in the finance sector has necessitated building on her adaptive skills and developing her technical expertise.

“My leadership style has matured, and I’ve learnt that failure along the way is inevitable, self-doubt is unavoidable, and good leaders don’t have to be liked,” said Jodi.

“You just have to do hard work, with kindness and values and for the right reasons.”

Jahna Cedar

***“My ability to navigate challenges, has come from many failures.”
– Jahna Cedar***

Jahna Cedar said her leadership journey was propelled by a commitment to positive change and by embodying resilience, courage and the pursuit of inclusivity.

“As a leader, I draw motivation from my mother and grandmother’s inspiring examples and the legacy of our ancestors, emphasising the importance of family, cultural appreciation, and community commitment as foundational principles.

“My ability to navigate challenges, has come from many failures.

“It’s about taking every opportunity, learning as challenges arise and cultivating a strong support system. Sometimes we just need to say yes and learn as we go.”

Jahna said people sometimes lack confidence but not competence.

“Create a mindset where you learn from failures, show humility, adaptability, and a commitment to values.”

When it comes to managing stress and burnout and harnessing experience for leadership growth, Jahna said it was important to allow yourself to be vulnerable and transparent.

To that end, the act of sharing personal stories can inspire and assist others, creating a collective resilience.

“Together we rise, after each fall. Together we succeed, through shared learnings and resilience.

“Despite enduring instances of abuse, bias, racism, lateral violence and heartache, I have realised the power of internal validation,” said Jahna.

“My identity is self-defined, grounded in the decisions I make and fortified by an exceptional support network comprising family, friends and cultural Elders.”

Jahna said she leans on the wisdom of her cultural Elders who give her strength and guidance.

“I continue to pray for breakthroughs for all who are bound by limited thinking, unhealed generational traumas, and negative perceptions.

“Remember, you set the tone and narrative for your life, because you live with the consequences of your decisions.

“External perspectives merely reflect the attitudes and behaviours of others. The greatest learning is that we cannot give from an empty cup.”

Jahna believes though we may be motivated to help and serve others, unless we look after ourselves first, we are helping no one.

“By prioritising self-care, we replenish our energy, enhance resilience and cultivate the capacity to offer genuine and sustainable support to others.”

Gemma Purcell

“What many of these community leaders have in common is the capacity to raise our expectations of ourselves.” – Gemma Purcell

Gemma Purcell, the chair of Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc and a member of the Landcare NSW State Advisory Council, said perfection is a rare quality in potential leaders.

“We so often carry the idea that a true leader must be a walking aggregation of near perfect qualities – empathy, clarity, strategic thinking, vision, charisma, bravery, sprinkled with an endless fairy dusting of motivation and energy,” she said.

“Is it any wonder we often look in the wrong places for leaders?”

For Gemma, the leaders she sees around her in rural Australia are, in fact, ordinary people who step up and use the education, skills and tools they have to hand to do the job that needs doing in all manner of community benefit, from running football clubs to leading rural fire brigades, regenerating bushland and delivering meals.

“These people motivate me. They realise that they are the adults in the room and need to act.

“They have grit, courage, foresight, great good humour and are usually sprinkled with an endless fairy dusting of humility,” said Gemma.

“They accept that there will be failures and epic disappointments in the course of the work that they are doing but carry on regardless.”

What many of these community leaders have in common is the capacity to raise our expectations of ourselves.

“These leaders empower others to lead with them and around them,” said Gemma.

“They listen, they allow others to play to their strengths, they reflect qualities people are unaware that they possess, and they quietly and gently raise the standard of all around them.”

At a national level, Gemma believes we are seeing – and welcoming – more of this style of leadership with the community Independent movement.

This represents a fundamental shift in the political landscape that will enrich and deepen Australian democracy and the accountability of all in power.

When it comes to mitigating stress, Gemma likes to keep it simple.

“Journaling, bike riding, hanging out with my kids and being in nature in any way possible are my de-stressing tactics,” she said.

“They give me time to tap out from screens and to sometimes create some clear space between the various aspects of work and my inner life.”

And these activities bring other rewards too.

“Usually, leadership insights or ways to work through tricky situations are not forced but arrive with clarity in these times when I switch off.”

Catherine Brooks

“I’m motivated by results.”

– Catherine Brooks

Catherine Brooks has a clear idea of what gets her up and moving each day.

“I’m motivated by results – which equates to more money going into the hands of our charity partners, so that they can keep doing more for our communities,” she said.

Capacity building in the charity organisations she works with is also a high priority.

“I’m also really driven by ensuring our work is embedded into our clients’ organisations, so that the charities we work with can continue to see the results of their capacity building work for years to come.”

Catherine said she had learned three key lessons over the years to help manage stress:

- Dropping the pretence of perfection: Catherine said progress and movement was better than being stifled by unrealistic expectations.
- Work-life balance: “Merging my life so that I can pick my kids up at a reasonable hour and still get to that email later in the day.”
- Reading, reading, reading: “It’s relaxing, good for the mind, takes me off the [electronic] devices, plus the more I can learn from others (leaders or protagonists) the more I can grow my own leadership skills.”

Leadership and management

Effective leadership and management are essential elements for success in any organisation. However, it would be a mistake to view them as the same thing – each has its own distinct focuses and roles.

Leadership sets the vision and inspires people.

Management ensures that vision becomes reality through effective planning and organisation.

A useful analogy that illustrates the risks when one person takes on both of these important roles is the “dance floor and the balcony” metaphor coined by academics Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky at Harvard University.

Put simply, the view from the balcony means stepping back from the day-to-day running of an organisation and observing it from a strategic perspective.

Getting on the dancefloor, in contrast, is about gaining a more tactical view by interacting with employees or volunteers and the day-to-day work they are doing.

While there are certainly gains to be made by leaders leaving the balcony and scoping out the dance floor, care should be taken not to cross the line from empowering staff to get things done into short-sighted meddling that may hold them back.

The two sides to this leadership coin are micromanagement and scaffolding. Micromanagement can result in behaviour that employees see as controlling and demoralising, undermining their independence and wasting valuable time. Adopting a scaffolding approach, by contrast, allows leaders to mentor and coach their team members, provide guidance, share knowledge, and help them develop their skills. This in turn helps build a workforce that views itself as independent, empowered and supported by management, and that makes effective use of its time to get the job done.

The fact is, many leaders could get more done by doing less, delegating tasks, and having faith in those charged with executing the organisation's vision they themselves have helped create.

When leaders spend their time doing things, they cannot be:

- thinking strategically
- focusing on the sustainability and growth of the organisation
- recognising new options for the organisation
- considering fresh aspirations
- understanding the competition.
- Influence versus authority

Authority within an organisation is tied to a position in a hierarchy. Influence, however, is not tied to a job title.

While both attributes are related to power, an influential leader is one who makes use of their expertise, interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence to inspire, guide and persuade others in their organisation.

They build trust and foster open communication, encouraging employees to be active contributors rather than passive followers.

Remember: When you're on the dance floor, you can't see the view from the balcony!

Myles McGregor-Lowndes

“The trick is to ensure an appropriate mix of management and leadership for the organisation at any particular time in its life.”

– Professor Myles McGregor-Lowndes

For Professor Myles McGregor-Lowndes, the distinction between management and leadership in any for-purpose organisation is crystal clear.

“Management is concerned with the efficient administration of the not-for-profit organisation.

“It’s about the establishment of processes that make not-for-profits work with structures that link people together in an organised way with developed plans, budgets and the costing of services.”

Leadership, on the other hand, is a clarification of the organisation’s mission.

“It motivates people, seizes new opportunities and presents an organisation’s sense of purpose, focusing people on the tasks to achieve their purpose,” said Myles.

“The trick is to ensure an appropriate mix of management and leadership for the organisation at any particular time in its life.”

Myles said organisations that are top-heavy with management but lacking in leadership may be capable of doing their work but will eventually be overtaken by those with “sizzle” who are prepared to experiment with new approaches to achieving their purpose and motivating their people.

Organisations with too much leadership and not enough management, by contrast, are prone to roller coaster dips and highs but ultimately fail to deliver the goods.

“Often a leader will need to delegate management tasks so that they can create the space needed to be a leader,” said Myles.

“The mark of a good CEO is to know when to move the dial between the two alternatives.”

Cynthia Mitchell

“Since we can never know the future, our strategy will need to adapt as time unfurls” – Professor Cynthia Mitchell

A respected academic at the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney, Emeritus Professor Cynthia Mitchell believes leading and leadership span all areas of life, be they work, home or community.

“Leading and leadership have to do with how we show up, how often we are able to show up as our best selves, and how we go about helping others to do the same,” she said.

“Then there’s a separate question of what we are up to when we show up. That for me is the bit about setting direction – the strategy and visioning piece – and making it happen – the delivery piece.”

Cynthia said leaders needed to have an iterative orientation to both strategy and action.

“Since we can never know the future, our strategy will need to adapt as time unfurls. Sometimes, our actions don’t match the context, so they too need to iterate.”

Cynthia said two key characteristics of the not-for-profit sector could blur the boundaries between strategy and action.

“The first is that people in the NFP sector are, in my experience, more likely to have a deep sense of purpose and commitment to their cause.

“In other words, they have a high care factor. Rightly so.”

The second characteristic, she said, was the small size of most NFP entities, which can foster an “all hands-on deck” mentality.

“I think these two characteristics make it easier for those in governance roles to slip into delivery mode.”

Cynthia hastened to add that this may not be a problem – if the individuals concerned are aware of what is happening.

“To come full circle, I would say great leaders have a deep level of self-awareness.

“Self-awareness is a hard-won thing, and not as valued as I think it needs to be in our society.”

Cynthia said she had recently completed the ICDA Advanced Leadership for Community Chairs course as a refresher, which she found a useful and fascinating experience.

“Even in this group of well-qualified and richly experienced leaders, there was room to strengthen self-awareness, this most central of leadership traits.

“It’s something for all of us to continue to work on, I’d say.”

Leading through strategy and culture

The father of modern business management, Peter Drucker, is often reported to have said that the best way to predict the future is to create it.

For leaders lacking access to a crystal ball, the key elements required to do this are a balance of strategy and culture.

In simple terms, strategy is the blueprint outlining what you want to achieve. Culture underpins the way you go about the task.

A documented strategy – one that includes crucial elements such as your organisation’s mission, your vision on how to achieve that lofty goal and a clear articulation of what the organisation does – allows everyone (the board, employees, customers and so on) to know where you want to go and how you plan to get there.

Having the right values in place – such as ensuring that employees feel confident to speak up, share ideas and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences – is crucial to driving the necessary culture and behaviours that will help achieve your strategic goals.

Jodi Kennedy

“Having a greater goal than simply making money is always critical in my view.” – Jodi Kennedy

Jodi Kennedy, the general manager of charitable trusts and philanthropy at Equity Trustees, believes that implementing a sound business strategy while simultaneously fostering a values-driven culture that supports an organisation’s strategic vision is certainly possible.

Getting the balance right is the tricky part.

“What I’ve learnt over the years about myself is that fostering a values-driven culture within a team is a relatively instinctual and easy thing to do,” said Jodi.

“However, implementing strategy in practice takes far more work.”

Jodi said neither concept can thrive without the other.

“In order to be successful, a sound strategy and values-driven culture must align and support each other.

“This can be challenging to achieve!”

Jodi said her leadership style and approach to achieving this goal always started by creating a culture underpinned by a shared set of values.

“This means simply and effectively communicating and role-modelling my expectations as a leader of those in my team.

“In my case, that’s leading a team with respect, a sense of equity, authenticity and openness, which then promotes strong teamwork in my experience.”

Jodi said being an authentic and open leader was something she has always valued strongly.

The key elements to achieving this holy grail are excellent communication skills and at times courage.

Without setting these underlying expectations and principles, leading a team or an organisation in a cohesive and effective way is very difficult.

“I’ve learnt the hard way that unless individual team members have respectful relationships and demonstrate healthy behaviours, it’s challenging for them to move forward together in the same direction.

“They might be aiming for the same goal, but without an aligned culture underpinning behaviours, other complexities and factors tend to get in the way of execution.”

When it comes to the secret sauce for implementing a sound strategy, the recipe has many ingredients.

“Strategy is an ever-evolving process of setting direction and then implementing a carefully laid plan but doing so with the flexibility to adapt direction along the way,” said Jodi.

Successful implementation can rely on a huge combination of elements working together, from technical expertise and the right kind of capability to effective teamwork, lots of data and solid evidence.

“However, real success in delivering to strategic vision is only achieved by teams that can achieve and maintain their cultural alignment and desire to get there together,” said Jodi.

“Having a greater goal than simply making money is always critical in my view.”

Cynthia Mitchell

“Deep listening is the basis for high functioning relationships because we feel seen and heard” – Professor Cynthia Mitchell

Professor Cynthia Mitchell takes inspiration from the word dadirri – which means inner deep listening and quiet awareness and waiting in the language of the Ngan’gikurunggurr and Ngeri’giwumirri peoples of the Northern Territory – to explain what she believes is the central element of culture in relation to leadership.

“Deep listening is the basis for high functioning relationships because we feel seen and heard,” she said.

Coming a close second in a high functioning culture is enactment or follow-through – ensuring that what is done reflects and resonates with what is espoused.

“That means a sound strategy needs to include those charged with its delivery, and a leader needs to enact those values in their everyday interactions within the organisation,” said Cynthia.

“Taken together, these [deep listening and enactment] provide fertile ground for a sense of trust and affirmation to grow within the team, which ease delivery when things get sticky, as inevitably happens.”

Conclusion

Asked to define the essence of leadership, the American scholar and author Warren Bennis, a pioneering voice in leadership studies, eloquently replied, “Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.”

As the diverse range of personal reflections shared by the experienced NFP leaders in this paper show, there are many steps on the road to achieving that goal.

Chief among them is self-reflection.

While their life and work experiences differ from each other, a consistent theme expressed by the members of the Community Directors Council is the need to look inside yourself and decide not only what kind of leader you are, but what type of leader you aspire to be.

Only then can you truly lead others to the best of your ability.

When you look at yourself in the leadership mirror, do you see someone who inwardly doesn't know who they are, what they stand for, or how their teams see them? Are you reluctant to challenge your own views and seek feedback from others?

Do you have a strategy to manage stress and recognise the signs of impending burnout?

How well do you adapt to changed circumstances?

Are you adept at balancing the need to adopt a strategic perspective on your organisation (from the balcony) with the need to gain important tactical insights (on the dance floor)?

Do you know the difference between influence and authority?

Do you have a true appreciation of what an ethical organisation should be and how to be an ethical leader to achieve it?

Few leaders are born “great.” Rather, it takes work. Learning about the basics of leadership can help us to make more purposeful choices when faced with making decisions, informed by ethics and compassion.

It is possible to become a great leader through honest self-assessment and a willingness to have an open mind and learn from others who have already been down the road you now find yourself on.

Good decision making in any organisation doesn't happen by accident. It is built on a solid foundation of experience and learned leadership skills that enable you to articulate your vision and inspire colleagues to follow you on the journey to make it a reality.

To lead with purpose.



Institute of Community Directors Australia

The Institute of Community Directors Australia (ICDA) is the best-practice governance network for the members of Australian not-for-profit and government boards and committees, and the senior staff who work alongside them – providing ideas and advice for community leaders.

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