
The Three Professors

An Evening of Classical Leadership

- This is an adaptation of the event, edited by Lester Levy and Mark Bentley



Dr Brad Jackson, Professor of Leadership, The University of Auckland Business School
Jackson is the Fletcher Building Education Trust Professor of Leadership at The University of Auckland Business School. Prior to this he was the Director of the Centre for the Study of Leadership and Head of School of the Management School at Victoria University of Wellington. Brad has published three books: *Management Gurus and Management Fashions*, *The Hero Manager* and *Organisational Behaviour in New Zealand*.

Dr Lester Levy, Chief Executive of Excelerator and Adjunct Professor of Leadership, The University of Auckland Business School
Levy, who has an MBA as well as a medical degree, has extensive management and governance experience in the fields of healthcare, biotechnology and film and television production. Levy had his formative management experience in the multinational environment and is best known for leading a number of significant turnarounds in the performance of products and organisations. He is the author of *Leadership and the Whirlpool Effect*.



Dr Allan Lind, Visiting Professor of Leadership Studies, The University of Auckland Business School and Director, Duke Center on Leadership and Ethics, Duke University, USA
Lind is a Professor of Business Administration at The Fuqua School of Business at Duke University in the U.S., and is currently a Visiting Professor of Leadership Studies at The University of Auckland Business School. Lind has previously worked for the RAND Corporation (an American “think-tank”), the American Bar Foundation, and the Federal Judicial Center. He has published widely in the areas of leadership and organisational justice.

The Three Professors

An Evening of Classical Leadership

In July, *Excelerator: New Zealand Leadership Institute* at The University of Auckland Business School joined together with the Sir Peter Blake Trust, Leadership New Zealand and the New Zealand Institute of Management to initiate the inaugural “New Zealand Leadership Week” to highlight the strategic relevance and value of leadership for New Zealand.

The Business School’s contribution to the week was a “sold-out” debate on leadership with *Excelerator’s* three professors, Lester Levy, Allan Lind and Brad Jackson, who considered a series of challenging contemporary leadership questions, with classical interludes provided by the School of Music.

This is an adaptation of the event, edited by Lester Levy and Mark Bentley (chief executive and general manager of *Excelerator*, respectively.)

What is Leadership?

Lester: Leadership is more of a mindset than a skill set. Far too often people’s primary need seems to be to acquire leadership skills like filling a tool box with tools. I don’t wish to diminish the importance of skills, but I believe strongly that a leadership mindset recognises the critical importance of relationships and the interaction between leaders and followers. This is the essence of leadership.

It is important for us to realise that the study of leadership is in transition and is moving away from the concept of the hero leader, the individualistic notion of one person that can make all the difference. Contemporary thought suggests that leadership is a

relational concept where the multiplier effect comes from networked relationships based on trust, respect and reciprocity. Of course, one person can make a difference, but there is never one person that has all of the resources to make all of the decisions, to have all of the knowledge, to do everything by themselves.

Brad: Leaders need to possess many qualities but five are particularly vital in order to promote effective leadership: confidence, integrity, connection, vision and aspiration.

Confidence creates the essential sense of self worth and self efficacy.

Integrity keeps people consistent and allows them to be clear about what they stand for and believe in.

Connection is the ability to translate those values through a genuine and authentic link and is much more than communication alone.

Of course the “v word” vision is important, although increasingly I am seeing that as being much more of a collective process. The notion of the visionary that comes down from the hillside with all the answers is simply naïve in this very complex world.

The final quality – aspiration – doesn’t get talked about enough and it is something that really sets apart the people who have become successful and sustained their leadership. It is assumed that all individuals are aspiring, and aspiring for the right reasons. However, at the end of the day, true aspiration and desire is something that I observe as being the most vital quality.

Lester: I agree that aspiration is critical. Aspiration, which is a blend of hope and optimism, is inherent to the human condition. We all want to make a difference but the trouble is that less and less people seem to want to make that difference at work. That is because they are becoming more and more disengaged. It is up to senior executive leadership to set the tone and create the conditions for people to feel a sense of aspiration. Integral to leadership is the courage to create a sense of possibility. Courage is the foundation that gives reality to all the virtues of leadership. Of course, the word “courage” is derived from the same stem as the French

word “coeur” meaning heart. In the same way that you have a physical heart that pumps blood to your arms, legs and organs to make them function, you have a “psychological heart” that pumps your values, ethics and principles and forms your character.

Allan: Fairness is also a very important element of good leadership. Leaders have to be fair and supportive. The

behaviour of the leader impacts directly how people feel, and if they feel that they have been treated fairly, then their level of engagement and consequent performance will improve.

Lester: At the end of the day, leadership is about getting things done, so never underestimate the importance of execution capacity to leadership. It is about action and momentum.

Can you teach leadership or are people born with leadership qualities?

Lester: We know that leadership is a mix of the potential and the learned. Intrinsic motivation draws from both, providing the intense drive to want to

make a difference, but this is where potential gives way to learning opportunities which is what really makes the difference. Opportunities that are challenging, that you could fail at, that make you feel discomforted, are the opportunities that you should embrace. Leadership is learnt experientially and if you seek out situations where you have meaningful experiences and can make sense of those experiences, then you can definitely develop your leadership capacity.

Therefore, whilst some people start with more natural advantages and intrinsic motivation, those with most commitment to take development opportunities, reflect on them and learn, will in all likelihood become the most effective leaders. It is quite possible that the very great leaders are born very gifted but generally speaking leadership can be learnt. Those who work internationally at the intersection between leadership teaching and research support this view.

Brad: When we are looking for leadership, we are looking for a collective process where individuals are



willingly and consciously committed to achieving a mutually important goal. The notion that one person gets to become a leader while another person gets to become a follower is neither credible nor motivational. We need to develop aspiration for leadership in everyone. We need to encourage people to want to become a fully motivated part of a collective that is working towards a common goal, whether they are playing a leader role or a follower role at any one time.

One thing we do know from the little research that has been done in this area that the early childhood period is vital in fostering the desire to lead. Leaders often come from very supportive homes, particularly homes where they are encouraged, given confidence and aspiration and have positive role models to study and respect. At the other extreme, leaders also frequently emerge from very under-privileged homes where they are starved of support and attention but develop a profound desire to change the status quo. The literature claims that either end of the spectrum fosters more quality leaders. This is interesting area of research that is worthy of much deeper investigation.

Allan: Most of the qualities mentioned earlier, such as confidence, integrity, connection and aspiration, are things that people possess to differing extents. But they are also qualities that most people can learn. People differ in their levels of confidence, but people can improve their confidence. People differ with respect to their aspirations, but they can learn to aspire for more. People differ with respect to their capacity to have vision for their collective, but they can learn through reflection to have greater vision. So it is like most things in life. There is a component of individual difference, but we can learn to do better.

What is the difference between management and leadership?

Lester: Management and leadership are so distinct from each other that it is paradoxical that they are also so

dependent upon each other. They contrast and yet are absolutely complementary. I see them as Siamese twins that share common organs and can never be separated.

The problem is, when we describe the characteristics of management or leadership, the terminology that is used is so pejorative. It is often “just management”, it is “controlling”, it is “mundane”, it is “process”. On the other hand, the language of leadership is so romantic and fantastic – it is all about vision, courage and inspiration. We need to look through the language and realise that both are incredibly important. In each individual you need to have the mind of a manager and the soul of a leader.

One way to look at it is that you have leadership and management gas tanks, that both need to be filled. If it is only your management gas tank that is full, as is often the case, then you will be in an environment that is over-managed and under-led. That’s a recipe for disaster.

Brad: The separateness with which we view management and

leadership has generally been quite unhelpful. We frequently present a fantasy of leadership. If you think of the old cowboy movies, the white hat coming to defend the town is leadership. The outlaws in the black hats are management! In real life, I have seen the consequences where leaders have not supported their management and the companies have collapsed. It is important to see there are different emphases, but they need to be blended and intertwined to work effectively together. For good organisations you may need management and leadership in the same people or you may need them in different people, but you need them both to function well.

Allan: I see both management and leadership as necessary.

Management involves the every day motivation of people through the control of their self interest. You establish a motivation system to reward behaviour that you want enacted for the good of the organisation. You make sure that the system operates well so that when people do their work they get paid in the way that they



Looking for a risk management expert to help you to achieve your business goals?

Then look no further than Marsh.

Marsh provides insurance and risk management services to more than 50% of New Zealand's top companies, including The University of Auckland.

If you need specialist expertise backed by an international network in over 100 countries worldwide, then call us today on 0800 627 744 or visit www.marsh.co.nz

MARSH

The World's #1 Risk Specialist

expect to get paid. You make this system reliable, and people know that if they do what they are supposed to do, they go home at the end of the week with their pay cheque. That is good management.

Leadership is about inspiring something more – a desire to strive for the good of the collective – and about giving some greater vision and some greater excitement about the work.

Both are necessary. If you just have management, it is boring. If you just have leadership, it is exciting, but it is scary. If you do both together, then people feel safe but excited at the same time.

Can someone become a great leader if they are driven by self interest?

Lester: Self interest is inherent to a degree in almost everybody. However, if self interest is what dominates you, it might be very difficult to move beyond a transactional form of leadership and have real capacity to influence people.

We also have to be aware that there is a “dark side” of leadership. Sadly, not everybody who has positional power will exercise it with moral authority and ethics. In fact charisma is an interesting element in this regard, because in my view charisma sits on the cusp between the dark side and the light side of leadership. Not all people who turn bad in terms of how they use power, started off as destructive. Many of them began as constructive individuals. A charismatic person has an underlying narcissistic streak and can easily become disconnected with reality. This is why the notion of distributed leadership, where leadership is not held in a single person, is very good.

Jack Welch from General Electric did a phenomenal job.

On the face of it he could be seen to be a good example of a constructive narcissist, but his form of narcissism is entirely societal. By that I mean that his interests aligned with the interests of the shareholders, the employees and the customers. Other narcissists, however, have been known to go beyond the brink, and we have seen that in recent times in corporate USA and corporate Europe where good people have surprisingly become bad people. Those are often people who have lost touch with their own reality.

Allan: When we talk about leadership and when we teach leadership we have to recognise it is an extremely powerful force and not necessarily a force for good. Leadership is a power that needs to be coupled with ethics.

It is easy to lead to bad purpose. It is easy for leaders to use scape-goating and similar techniques to enhance their leadership. We have seen that often in history, and it is a dangerous road to go down. I think when followers sense that the leader is interested more in their personal gain than that undermines leadership.

What are the distinctive challenges in the New Zealand context?

Lester: One of the things leaders face in New Zealand, other than that we are a small country that is far away, is an issue of confidence. Confidence has been described as the sweet spot between arrogance and despair and I wonder if within New Zealand we might be a little bit too much on the despair side. We have a lot of doubt, and whilst doubt can be a healthy check against doing bad things, we need to build our confidence and stop focussing on what holds us back.

The leadership challenge for us is how we move forward



and how we capture the opportunities of the future. How can we be bolder? How do we become more audacious and not lose what we have got? We need to have a different mindset. We need to be less defensive. We need to, as leaders, understand who we are. If you do not truly understand something it will never be yours, not your country and not yourself.

Allan: As an outsider from the USA, I can reinforce that point with some very new research coming out of joint work between Duke University and Excelerator. In our research, we see that the New Zealand leaders don't recognise how much leadership potential they have. Their followers are saying "lead me, you have more leadership than you realise", but the New Zealand leaders themselves don't see it...or do they actually choose to avoid the challenge?

As a visitor, I see fantastic creativity in New Zealand;

creativity that bowls me over. Look at what is happening in the arts, in fashion, in technology – you have a great deal to be proud of. Use it – be yourselves and lead.

Brad: The "GLOBE Project", a large study of the leadership preferences of 17,000 managers in 62 countries, discovered that, in New Zealand, gaining the acceptance of followers is critical for leaders because the dominant culture possesses a very low power distance – the degree to which less powerful members accept unequal distribution of power.

As a country with one of the lowest power distances in the world, our tolerance for authority and hierarchy is incredibly low. That makes it difficult for leaders to maintain their position base purely on positional authority – the business card, and the title and so on. Acceptance requires openness, straightforward communication and willingness to subordinate ego for

the good of the group. Another reason that you need to be authentic in this country is because of the relatively few degrees of separation. Everybody knows almost everybody and so your ability to be able to manage the front stage of leadership performance versus the back stage, is very difficult. A little mistake can have a huge impact on your perceived credibility.

Lester: We have a motivation problem in New Zealand.

Many of us think that motivation is something you do to somebody else to make them feel good. But we are talking about being leaders, not cheerleaders. The motivation we need is for people to persevere, to not give up, to keep going and not stop going. And we have a point, particularly in our business sector, where people don't go any further. We need an environment which is uplifting and helps people build their own sense of motivation. The best way to motivate anybody is to stop demotivating them. We need to stop the negativity and the downward spiral conversations.

We need to create an environment that is still realistic, recognises constraints, but where people have the motivation to persevere. Perseverance is another form of genius and we need more of it.

Is leadership more important in times of great change?

Allan: I think leadership is especially necessary in times of change, because you are asking people to step outside their self interest and that is when leadership is especially important. It is a time when the leader needs to ensure that people have absolute clarity in their vision. You have to influence them to set aside their narrow interest for a period of time and work for the collective good. You need to give them a lot of support and encouragement along the way, much more than most people realise.

Brad: I think a true test of leadership and one of life's cruel ironies is that your most intense test of leadership occurs when you first join an organisation and when things go really bad. Unfortunately, that is when we are least prepared to have the answers and feel least capable

of exercising appropriate leadership.

One very important aspect of the leadership role in a crisis is the ability to define (or redefine) the situation. Shackleton is the classic example with his ability to redefine a disastrous, life-threatening context into one where there was hope, optimism and a way forward. He never lost sight of the ultimate goal although he paved the way by focussing the energy of his crew on short-term

objectives so that they could celebrate on the way to ultimate success and survival.

As the famous quote by Sir Raymond Priestley goes: *"For scientific leadership, give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when there seems to be no way out, get on your knees and pray for Shackleton."* Really good leaders like Shackleton find ways to emphasise the positive, to instil optimism and confidence in the team constantly, but inside they stay grounded in reality and never give up.

Lester: The reality of our contemporary context is that our organisations are in a state of great change all

of the time. If we are not an active process of change, we should be in a state of renewal, because if we are not in a state of renewal, we will find ourselves forced into a state of turbulent change.

The leader needs to recognise and be able to respond to a multitude of complexities in any situation of great change. First, there is dynamic complexity caused by the space and time between cause and effect. Second there is generative complexity with events unfolding in unpredictable and unfamiliar ways. In these situations, every question seems to spawn ten new questions rather than the one simple answer we desire. The third reason is social complexity because we are dealing with a group of diverse individuals who all have their own world view. So whilst crisis and transition is the great test for leadership, we face that test more often than we think and therefore great leadership is not something to be kept in reserve for some special circumstance.

We have to recognise that all progress is a result of change, but not all change results in progress.

