
From the President

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High Performance Leadership... It's all around us if you know where to look

In the fast paced, twenty-four hour, seven day a week media frenzy that dominates our world, courageous and transformative leadership appears to be in short supply. Too many of us seem to more often make short-term expedient decisions that deflect the spotlight rather than taking a less popular course of action that will ultimately bring about long-term success. Survival then transcends leadership and an organisational form of the 'Stockholm Syndrome' becomes the dominant culture. Subordinate capture results in followers or employees feeling like they have to behave according to expedient leadership expectation thereby being afraid to provide frank and fearless advice.

It's not always possible in an environment of instant gratification to plant policy or strategy 'seeds' and allow them to germinate, thrive, mature over time and then bear abundant fruit when leaders want to appease or avoid challenge. The fate of modern-day populist decision-makers is that they become a disposable commodity and rarely survive long enough to see if any of their decisions ever make a difference. Fortunately however, from time to time there are leaders who take the high road and demonstrate the courage and fortitude that reminds all of us that leadership rarely has easy answers. I recently came across one such leader and was privileged to hear her tell her inspirational story.

On Sunday June 21, I went to the Brisbane Entertainment Centre to watch the Queensland Firebirds play the NSW Swifts in the Tran Tasman Netball League Grand Final. Since moving to Queensland I have become a loyal supporter of the Firebirds, attending home games on a regular basis this season due to a mentoring role I have with the Netball Queensland CEO. The sport is electrifying and a spectators' delight. Watching the very best in the world is enthralling and amazing whether it is sport, entertainment or any other endeavour. In a country where male-dominated sport captures the bulk of sponsorship dollars, government support, spectators and media attention, netball is bucking the trend, attracting record crowds and providing a spectacle that is as good as it gets.

The Grand Final was an epic encounter televised nationally and played in front of a pulsating sell-out crowd of 8000 passionate devotees. The Firebirds, who never looked to be in the contest, came from five goals down in the final few minutes to snatch a last-second victory over a gallant Swifts team. It was the most amazing finish to a sporting event that I have ever seen. Like nearly everyone in the auditorium, I felt elated, however, my day rose to another level when, at the after-match function and celebration, the Captain of the Firebirds (and the national team) Laura Geitz was interviewed on the stage. Her story was an inspirational tale of authentic

leadership, commitment and hard work that could easily have come straight out of the wonderful Jim Collins leadership book, *Good to Great*.

Without the usual histrionics and platitudes that are often provided in victory speeches, Laura articulately and methodically explained that this championship had been borne out of the disappointment of losing the previous two Grand Finals. Despite the Firebirds being one of the top two teams in the competition over the past three years or more and establishing a benchmark across the league as a high performing team, they were dissatisfied that the next step was so close yet so far. She said that after another heartbreaking loss in 2014 the whole team had to make a choice to either accept that they were in the top echelon and had done their best or they had to take the harder option to do whatever it took to go one better and actually win the game that counted. She said that coaches and players then locked themselves in a room after the season and had a searching and very frank conversation about what they might have been doing (or not doing) that was holding them back from that final step and ultimate glory. They were honest in their feedback to each other and looked at every aspect of their performance and involvement to find areas for potential improvement. It was then that they decided that near enough was not good enough. Ultimately this meant making tough decisions which included changes to the personnel (both coaching and playing), rethinking the game plan, lifting the training intensity when it was already at full speed, improving game-day preparation and raising their personal commitment to another level. Everyone collaborated on developing the way forward and the team never deviated from it as they regrouped for the 2015 season where they promptly lost the very first game!

The most inspirational part of the speech for me was hearing Laura culminate her fascinating story by saying that when the Grand Final seemed lost the players regrouped on the court with three minutes to go and calmly talked about their off-season planning and drew on the fact that they knew they had done the work required and that they had planned for this very moment. Their belief and commitment to do whatever it took when it seemed impossible was therefore not luck or the Swifts' misfortune. You only get to be the best by planning to be the best you can be and removing all limits.

I am of the view that Laura's story is one that could apply to many of the schools I am fortunate to visit. I regularly find myself in great school environments where everyone is rowing in the same direction but where the 'game plan' could possibly use a little tweaking to create even better engagement by all players in order to build enhanced commitment and perseverance. Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do requires intelligence, innovation and most importantly, unflinching belief. Just ask the Firebirds!