

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION IN AN UNEXPECTED SETTING

BY JANE WEBER



A rural local council might not be the first place that many of us would think of looking for a vibrant and forward-thinking leadership culture. Add levels of employee engagement that many larger businesses would envy and you know that something out of the ordinary is going on.

No wonder that new director, Sharon Hutch, was surprised when she first arrived at Singleton Council in rural New South Wales. She described finding senior leaders, ‘working at a level that is not common,’ and, ‘managers really looking at the big picture, strategy, coming up with great ideas outside their patch’.

‘That doesn’t happen in other places I’ve worked. It’s so different to what other councils are achieving. Singleton Council is just streets ahead’, she said.

MOVING FROM HIERARCHICAL TO COLLECTIVE

The leadership culture at the council was once far from being as dynamic as it is now, as general manager, Jason Linnane, recounts.



As a keen systems thinker, I wanted a team that could take a collective approach to leadership.

When he walked into his first executive meeting with the senior leadership team on joining the council in 2016, the energy was very different. Linnane was greeted with an empty seat at the head of a boardroom table and sixteen expectant faces waiting for instruction.

‘I’ve always known that wisdom is not up to me,’ said Linnane, ‘it lives in the collective. As a keen systems thinker, I wanted a team that could take a collective approach to leadership.’

His first move was, therefore, to ask his HR leader to find a collective leadership program that could shift the culture towards systems thinking.

LEADERS WITH A FOCUS ON HUMAN SYSTEMS

Singleton Council’s leadership development began with the first of four offsite workshops that would take place progressively over eighteen months.

The intervals between the workshops were carefully designed to allow individual and team coaching to support the actions and behaviours that the team had committed to implement on return to the workplace.

As well as benefitting from executive coaching from the facilitators, the leadership team also introduced their own peer-to-peer coaching program to maintain the momentum.



The collective leadership program focused on ‘systems thinking’: having greater awareness that one is part of a larger whole (or system) and taking ownership for that whole. This model does not dilute individual accountability. Business leaders are fully accountable for delivering to commitments in their own units and they are also 100% accountable for the results of the whole organisation.

FAREWELL TO THE ‘HERO LEADER ON THE ROCK’

Collective leadership is an approach that demands new capabilities and a significant mindset change. Sometimes called ‘systems leadership’, it shifts leaders from the traditional ‘hero on the rock’ to engaging in systems thinking and drawing on the collective intelligence to solve complex problems.

For many leaders, this doesn’t come naturally – especially those who have grown up with entrenched ‘command and control’ practices.

The advanced capabilities of systems leadership involve being aware of and interpreting systemic patterns, dynamics and ripple effects in the organisation, and making nuanced leadership interventions to keep the human system healthy and performing. In today’s increasingly volatile and challenging world, these capabilities are critical.

The team’s first collective leadership workshop focused on self-awareness, awareness of others and expressing oneself fully and authentically. ‘We couldn’t believe it when the team returned,’ HR manager, Alison Bodiam, said. ‘We noticed a huge shift in how they were behaving and working together: how connected they were; seeking opinions, exploring strategies, bouncing ideas.’

Their development in this first workshop was made possible by a powerful experiential learning approach underpinned by high levels of psychological safety. As the team continued to learn in this way, the following workshops deepened their connection, insight, awareness and cohesion. As a result, collaboration today across the senior leadership team and, in turn, across the organisation as a whole, is significantly different.

EMBODIED LEADERSHIP: ALIGNING HEAD, HEART AND GUT

One of the most significant aspects of the collective leadership model embraced by Singleton Council is a focus on ‘embodied leadership’. This enables individuals and teams to understand themselves, each other and their team dynamics experientially, leveraging their whole-body intelligence.

‘We have three intelligence centres in our body,’ explained facilitator, Maggie Lawlor. ‘We are all highly aware of our brain, but we also have a considerable network of neurones in our chest and torso areas. When people become aware of their whole-body intelligence and know how to access it, they have greater insight and are better able to lead through complexity.’

Embodied leadership supported enhanced awareness and mutual appreciation among the leaders at Singleton Council. ‘It helps us to understand our team dynamics, our pace and how to balance it’ said integrated risk manager, Deborah McDonald.

MAKING SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP PERVASIVE

When the senior leadership team completed their program, they knew that collective and embodied leadership were too important to be a well-kept secret in the top team.



The focus became how to develop collective leadership at all levels in the organisation. Senior leaders played a key facilitation and coaching role in a structured employee program that continues today.

A NEW ENERGY AND MEASURED INCREASE IN ENGAGEMENT

At Singleton Council, the impact of discovering systems leadership on the senior team has been significant. ‘Three years ago, we were a group of individuals each leading our own patches,’ commented Jason Linnane. ‘Now people put on the broader hat, take a one-council approach and look for the optimal solution with the greater good in mind.’

The engagement in the council’s senior leadership team meetings is striking, with every member committed to discussions about all areas, whether directly implicating their own business unit or not. ‘The budget process, traditionally fraught with personal interest, is handled with a maturity that integrated everyone’s needs and the broader strategy,’ commented another senior member.

The council measured results carefully throughout their organisational transformation. Employee engagement,

particularly around leadership, increased significantly, with the employee engagement score increasing from 42% in 2018 to 72.5% in 2020. The percentage of employees who saw strong evidence of effective leadership from senior leaders increased by 70% in the same timeframe. There was also a 74% increase in employees who said that their senior leadership provided clear direction for the future.



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LEADING THE FUTURE

One of Jason Linnane’s major concerns was the imperative to lead a traditional mining and agricultural community into a future, expanding into diverse new economic opportunities. He held the strong belief that his leadership team needed to engage together to ensure the future success of the community.

The third workshop in the collective leadership program, ‘Leading from the Emerging Future’, took a systems lens on leading the community towards where it needed to be in 2-5 years’ time. With indicators of employee engagement and customer satisfaction continuing to trend upwards, Linnane and his leadership team are confident in their ability to fulfil their vision to ‘create community’ into the future.



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