



Australian  
**Rural Leadership**  
Foundation

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Leading the Nation

# COURSE 17 FINAL REPORT

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BY

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and

**Cotton Research and Development Corporation**





## Australian Rural Leadership Program: Course 17 Final Report

### Introduction

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Who I am;

- I am married to Sophie and we have two children – Darcy 3.5 and Daisy 1.5. We live in Kingsford in Sydney's eastern suburbs.
- Sophie is from Mungindi in North West New South Wales and we enjoy going to Mungindi as often as we can to see her family and spend some time out of the city.
- I completed my schooling in Sydney before going to Sydney University and completing a Bachelor of Agricultural Commerce. Since then I have completed a Post Graduate Certificate – Applied Science (Cotton Production) and an MBA majoring in International Business.
- After leaving University in 1994 I worked on a cotton farm near Warren in Central West New South Wales before moving to Goondiwindi where I worked for Cotton Trading Corporation (CTC) as a Grower Services Representative. In 1996 I moved to CTC's Wee Waa office in a similar role. In November 1998 I started work with Auscott Limited in Moree as Marketing Manager for their Gwydir Valley operations. In 2003 I moved to Auscott's Sydney office in the role of Assistant Marketing Manager.
- My career focus has been on marketing but more recently I have worked closely on logistics and business development. My most recent role has been focused on developing Auscott's warehousing and logistics business at Narrabri and Warren but I have started to transition back into an export marketing role.
- Over the years I have been heavily involved in cotton industry bodies and have just finished a 1 year term as Chairman of the Australian Cotton Shippers Association.

### Highlights of the program

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The program was full of significant experiences but the Kimberley was the most significant for me. The Kimberley session laid the foundations for the rest of the course. In isolation the Kimberley would have been fantastic but once combined with the other sessions it reached its full potential as a learning experience.

It is very rare that one gets the opportunity for continuity in a self-development course; they are usually 1-2 day intensive programs that are largely forgotten within months of attendance. ARLP provides the opportunity for learning in the Kimberley to be built upon through the other sessions. The constant reinforcement of lessons learnt from session to session is a great strength of the ARLP and this is made largely possible by the group structure and the diversity within the group.

It is the interaction within the group and the facilitation of group discussion that eventually makes the "penny drop" on what leadership is really about and what the Kimberley session taught us. India was beautiful and interesting but learning came from the group interaction, not from seeing the Taj Mahal.

## Learning on the program

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### **Providing a Safe Place – the most important Learning**

Everybody is different. We have;

- different family backgrounds
- different life experiences that have shaped us
- different educations
- different beliefs
- different intelligence levels
- different ideals, or different ideas about what is important and what is not
- different skills

The natural tendency is for us to align ourselves with people who are the most like us. It is with these people that we feel like we can be ourselves without being judged and be accepted for what/who we are, feeling safe. The reality however is that within our lives we have to associate and work with people who are different to us in fundamental ways. Here lies the challenge...

We need to work with people who are different to us. We need to learn to respect those people for what and who they are, drawing on people's differences rather than judging them. This becomes especially important once we are in a leadership role.

As leaders we need the people within our team to perform their role to the best of their ability. Those people need to be able to perform that role without being scared that they are not accepted for who they are. Leaders need to provide an environment in which team members feel safe, where they can express themselves and be themselves without fear of being judged.

This overriding principle of "Providing a Safe Place" can be applied to all areas of our lives; work, family and social. It is the foundation of establishing relationships with the people around us. This is easy with people with whom we have a lot in common but not so easy with people with whom we have less in common.

### **Negotiation Skills**

The negotiation skills workshop was excellent. The work on Respond v's React was very valuable for me as I have a tendency to react rather than respond at times. The workshop was very good for me in that it backed up some ideas that I had, making them more formal for me in terms of the way I look at negotiation.

### **MDB case Study**

Through my work in the cotton industry I have been exposed to the MDB debate but have never been along the Murray River itself. It was good to get exposure to the issues along the Murray and especially to hear from some of the stakeholders who are facing similar challenges to us in the cotton Industry.

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From a leadership perspective the case study was a very good week. The MDB is a contentious issue that sparks a lot of emotion. Leadership and emotion are a very challenging mix and I am learning that controlling emotions is very important when in a leadership role. To everybody, their issues are usually the most important ones and are therefore their priority.

One of the challenges in leadership is to get people to have an appreciation of the other side of the argument, “to walk in other people’s shoes” and get an appreciation for the impact of their decisions. The case study was a very good example of this when you consider the environment v’s industry/communities debate.

This is an area that I need to work on. I need to get better at considering how my actions impact on others and make others feel. Once I do this I will become a much more effective leader.

### **Applying the learning**

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Below in italics is an extract from my mid-term report. It is interesting for me to read this now and think back over the past 9 months. Something that I am aware of is how easy it is to slip back into old habits and I am guilty of that to a certain extent. This is an area I am going to have to focus on once the course is finished.

It is interesting that the first three dot points I have listed below all relate to “providing a safe place”. I did not refer to it as that in my mid-term report but essentially I was saying the same thing. Since then I believe I have made some small improvements in this area but I still have a long way to go. It is still these areas that I need to focus on in applying my learning from ARLP.

*After returning from the Kimberley there were a few particular areas that I committed to work on in both my work and personal life. They were;*

- *Being more empathetic*
- *Being less judgmental*
- *Considering other people’s thoughts and opinions.*

*The above points all relate to how I treat people within my team and work towards more inclusive leadership and I have been giving this particular attention since the Kimberly session. Some strategies I have employed in achieving this include;*

- *Conference calls and meetings with team members inviting open discussion and feedback*
- *Delegation of tasks and acceptance of team members approach to carrying out the task*
- *Consideration of the personalities of other team members and acceptance of their approach.*

### **Feedback**

The ARLP has given me a heightened appreciation for feedback – both positive and negative. Going forward I will be looking to put more formal structures in place to ensure I get feedback on my progress as a leader as well as giving feedback to the people

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in my team. I believe mentoring is an important part of this and is a method that I am going to look to use going forward.

Dave and Bruce,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you both personally for giving me the opportunity to participate in the ARLP. It has been a truly invaluable experience, which I am extremely appreciative of, and value very highly. I am determined to make sure I make the most of what I have learnt and continue to improve as a leader within this great industry of ours.

Thank you both again and please let me know if I can assist in any way in delivering additional value to the industry as a result of my completion of the ARLP.

Arthur Spellson  
September 2011