

“Leadership in a political environment”

2004 National TAFE Congress – Sydney August 23

To me it seems a deliberately ambiguous title.

Is it as it applies to the leadership of GTA and getting it back in the main game?

Is it as it applies to the leadership of VET in the wider political environment?

Is it as it applies in the context of a leaderless sector – or conversely a sector with simply too many so called “leaders”; or

Is it as it applies to a sector that has had little genuine political endorsement over the years and one being overwhelmingly “lead” by bureaucrats?

So...it is the stuff of much food for thought and hopefully robust debate.

Leadership? What is it?

Of course it is many things to different people.

It is risk taking. It is vision. It is wisdom and foresight. It is bold, it is brave, it is taking a position. It is leading a debate, shaping opinion, thinking outside the square, a preparedness to state a position and hold firm – and equally a preparedness to show the capacity to change, a capacity to be out with the old and to be in with the new, to challenge and to question the status quo and the “prevailing wisdom”; and to deliver vision and a sense of urgency.

And a Political Environment?

Well, it is an environment like no other – where priorities are based as much on ego as anything else – where things are message driven – boiled down to what the punters want and / or think they understand – everything must be seen through this prism – and as far as the average politician is concerned, it must be able to be sold to the community through the media in 30 second bite sized chunks.

A political environment is slightly unreal and inhabited by people who seem to live on another planet. Everything has an “end” and there is never any question as to the means needed to achieving whatever “end” is desired. But at the end of the day – it is the environment that we, in sectors like VET must “fit” in with.

Those that successfully manage to do this are forever rewarded – they have succeeded in getting their issue on to the political radar screen – those that fail this task are forever struggling for attention, credibility and influence – change agents they are not.

In a general sense then – I would contend that while the “political environment” is the ongoing “given” and the “generic glue” – to me, it is the “leadership” factor that can change depending on the individual style and circumstances.

Political leadership has the potential to “mould” the political environment of the day into the shape of the particular leader of the time.

Take the leadership of both political parties of recent times. From the ego of Whitlam, to the Easter Island aloofness of Fraser, to the bloated blokey “ Love Me” ego of Hawke, to the

arrogant “Hate Me” ego of Keating to the “relaxed and comfortable leadership” style of Prime Minister Howard.

So towards the end of 2004 – we find ourselves operating in a political environment still very much shaped by the individual leadership style of our leaders.

A policy environment dominated by economic and taxation concerns and not often social policy considerations.

Is such an environment conducive to those of us in VET striving and struggling to get our issues onto the political radar screen?

On the face of it, the answer would be NO.

So – in an effort to turn things around – the challenge for us is to introduce our own brand of political leadership in an attempt to change and mould the political environment.

Before talking a little about how this would play out in the wider VET landscape – can I briefly advise how it has played out in the group training network these past few years.

GTA Ltd has been around for about 12 years – the national association for the 150 odd GTO’s – while always fulfilling an absolutely critical role in the training agenda as individual group training organisations – from my point of view, the association for a good many years basically played a non political role.

It saw it’s primary role as gently advocating on behalf of group training providers and little else. It chose not to play a wider aggressive role – and as such had little influence on stakeholders, decision-makers and bureaucrats. This was as much about GTA not having the capacity for leadership as it was not being able to understand how to operate in the prevailing “political environment”.

GTA now has that capacity – it has the confidence to put positions on a number of VET related matters, to play a far more aggressive political game and to engage with as many stakeholders as possible on political, policy and media matters.

The changed role of GTA and other like minded national VET associations in recent years has been bought into sharper focus due to the twin issues of “leadership” and “political environment”.

For many and varied reasons the national leadership role in the VET market has been somewhat vacated these past few years.

There is currently no single national voice – advocating a clear and concise national position on a range of critical VET factors. Instead – we have an overabundance of players and voices from the 8 different jurisdictions. National leadership in this particular federated political environment seems extremely difficult and nigh impossible for some and often undesirable in the eyes of others.

VET – more so than schools and universities – has been successfully “bureaucratised” to the point that it seems a political “no go” zone for most politicians – let alone “leaders”.

The so called political environment that confronts the “budding leader” is a complex bureaucratic puzzle – that MUST be navigated according to specific rules that have been in place for what seems like decades.

That process can often drag you down – the policy reality blunting any early desire to shake a few trees – you soon find yourself wading through molasses. It seems to many it shall always be thus under the Federation of VET. Yet if ever a sector demanded genuine national leadership – it is the one we call VET.

How are we to achieve it?

Put bluntly, political snobbery and short-sightedness has, up till now, often denied VET genuine political endorsement and leadership. Generations of politicians I contend, were always more willing and able to visit a local school or university than promote the VET option.

Second or third class status.

Dirty image.

The veggie vet option.

The preferred option from the local school did not include VET.

VET was TAFE and TAFE was VET – and in the minds of many – that was all they needed to know.

Many would say that TAFE is indeed the natural leader of the VET sector. Yet to me that is not necessarily so – is TAFE's position predominantly about genuine leadership or is it more akin to domination and monopolistic behaviour? In many instances – TAFE's position as preferred provider has been challenged, changed or under constant threat.

That is a good thing and that is why it is vital that TAFE Directors become an aggressive voice not just for modern day TAFE but also for those who look to the organisation to play a greater and more active role across a broad range of VET policy.

As much as leadership in VET requires the political snobbery to cease, so too does it require the blinkers to come off. This goes for the ideological advocates on both sides of the public versus private divide. Once the snobbery has been dealt with, the blinkers dropped – our leader then needs to move to “centralise” the issue on the government's radar screen and not have it marginalised as an “add on”.

Hot on the heels of this, will be our Leader seeking to change perception and culture – not only via increased investment but by a simple method called TALKING ABOUT IT....and talking it up...

If we can successfully do these things, then we bring genuine leadership to VET at the national level – and we have gone a long way towards fundamentally changing the political environment and the culture of VET.

To me, it **is** a “possible dream”.

I am encouraged by the fact that in this election campaign, finally, we are seeing the issue of VET, training and skills shortages placed firmly on the political radar screen.

Maybe we are close to seeing the dream turn into reality.