

A leadership epiphany: true experience

by Martin Lind*

Our team optimistically called ourselves the 'Epiphanies'. My feeling about such things — revelations, 'light-bulb moments' — is that they are often like New Years' resolutions: well intentioned, heartfelt and really, really, really sincere ... for about a month. The pain of inertia needs to be greater than the pain of change for anything to truly happen.

As a group of Leadership Program veterans we Fellows have a kinship, like that of people who have survived train-wrecks or cyclones or wars together: 'Only those who were in 'Nam understand, man!'. As with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the triggers that bring the flashbacks become less intense with time, and like New Years' resolutions the good intentions we made in the immediate post-program comedown can get diluted in the tide of weeks and months, let alone years.

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Paul examined me over his drink, his 'D-personality' eyes giving me a D-type 'I mean business' going-over. 'So. How has the Peter Cullen leadership program changed your practices, Martin?'

My pint turned in my 'S-personality' fingers. How to answer this honestly, without the interplay of uncomfortable emotions and indecision?

I waited for the pang of anger that usually came when I felt put on the spot like this, especially without a week's notice or 'questions in writing, please, numbered in order of importance'. The strange thing is, the anger didn't happen; hadn't happened for some time. The feelings of discomfort that had normally accompanied my finely matured inferiority complex have failed to rear themselves much since 2012 (my 'PCT' year).

'You know Paul, it's weird. I feel more comfortable in places and with people that I used to find really hard to be around. It's affected everything.'

I had generally felt unworthy, grubby and unwelcome. I couldn't deal with 'suits' — the people that I somehow saw as having inherently greater worth. Mine was the well rehearsed narrative of the 'damaged goods' person, the 'outsider', more comfortable in the community hall than the conference room, rightly — or, more often, wrongly.

As with PTSD, it is mostly the little things from my leadership-program experience that come back with vivid detail.



'Disarmed by the setting' of the 2012 Leadership Program.

'NO Martin. Don't run off looking for whiteboard markers. I NEED You Here!!'.

We were in the middle of preparation for our major project, grabbing scarce moments between meetings and forums in a mind-numbingly sleep-deprived week. The team member who sternly told me off probably doesn't even recall this fleeting incident. I do. I can see her expression and hear her voice even now.

She had 'called' me on many parts of my attitude during our 'tour of duty', but somehow the brush-off and resentment that would normally have been my *modus operandi* were disarmed by the setting. Our team leader also had an uncanny knack of getting through to me.

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Learning leadership on the 2012 Leadership Program.

I shook hands with the minister.

'I'm glad you could make the meeting. Is there anything you think we can do *right now* to make a difference to the water-quality of the lake?' (True event).

I sipped my water and pondered this gentleman's conundrum in being cornered by a vociferous community group and needing a bone to throw, *now*, please. The realisation I arrived at came not from a reactionary Martin, feeling dragged, yet again, into the principal's office. It came with clarity, and compassion for this fellow human who was at a particular stage in his own journey, as was I.

It may sound annoyingly trite and simple, but it's not what the Peter Cullen Trust leadership training added but rather what it took away that has made the biggest difference to me personally and professionally.

Special thanks to the 'Epiphanies' and every one of the Peter Cullen Trust 2012 Fellows (not so) Quiet Achievers; and to our leaders.

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Since becoming a Fellow he has actively campaigned to recover good water quality in one of Canberra's major suburban stormwater lakes. In February 2014 the ACT and Federal Governments released funding for an \$85 million plan to restore the conditions needed for good water quality in Canberra's urban lakes. (Canberra Times 26.02.14)