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RURAL LEADERSHIP
PROGRAMME



Leadership Qualities Needed for First Time Managers

Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme

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I wish to thank the Kellogg Programme Investing Partners for their continued support.



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Executive Summary

Leadership in New Zealand Agriculture, with a focus on people management has only become a widespread discussion topic in recent years. There is a need for effective people management as the sector relies heavily on manual labour to achieve business success. Managers in the sector have historically been promoted from within the sector based on good technical capabilities. What may not be well understood is that the knowledge capability associated with being technically proficient, does not necessarily correspond with being an effective manager.

This report aims to describe a small qualitative study conducted on a group of farm owners, managers and leaders. It will also describe the qualities and attributes identified in these leaders and how the learnings can be utilized and applied by novice or first-time managers.

The research show that good managers prioritise the care and welfare of their employees. They ensure that good communication about work and home life is enacted to better understand how their employees are feeling. This leads to a relationship of increased trust, which helps the leader to engage with staff about the business and its operations. Leaders ensure they behave consistently with all of their staff to role model good behaviour and understand conflict. The leaders interviewed have all grown in their leadership skills and have come to value reflection and introspection. This has been used to improve further on their leadership traits.

The leaders interviewed have largely learnt and refined the skills, knowledge and tools they use to lead well through trial and error. Finding out what works and what doesn't has been an individualistic progression for them. On top of trial-and-error learning, some of the interviewees had attended short form courses, as well as using their respective industries for support. All of the interviewees have over the course of their leadership journey, relied heavily on trusted mentors to help guide them. The ability for a leader to utilize the knowledge and advice of a more experienced leader has helped all interviewees grow.

The leaders interviewed in this study all displayed transformational leadership qualities. These qualities revolved around empowerment through trust in their employees. They recognized that they needed to understand each employee as individuals to get the best out of them, and once they truly appreciated them individually, it was easier to empower them. The leaders interviewed all dealt with conflict management as part of their role, however, most admitted to being non-confrontational people. They understood the need to display positive leadership traits during conflict management in order to have a functioning business. They had learnt to put more effort in to doing it better as they moved through their leadership journey.

The leaders interviewed recognized that good leadership was not always the easy choice when managing people, but the long-term gain made it worth it. They recognized that time, effort and focus had to be implemented on a daily basis in order to achieve good

management practices. The structure and financial constraints of a business might also impact a manager's capabilities to practice good leadership. They also warned that a manager's ego would quickly ruin hopes of good leadership, as it restricted individualism and ingenuity of employees.

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1.0 Introduction

New Zealand's agricultural sector relies heavily on manual labour and human resources. This is likely to continue for the foreseeable future due to geographical, biological and cost barriers for automated technology, compounded with the increase in size and scale of average farm businesses. Part of requiring a human workforce in the agricultural sector is the need for effective leadership and people management. This is an important aspect of creating a successful, sustainable and profitable business. Agricultural leaders must be proficient in this skill. The capability of those who manage people will directly drive performance and profitability of a farming business, which in-turn has a large impact on the export earnings of New Zealand's economy (Apatov, 2015).

Leaders in the agricultural sector have historically been generated from within the farming industry. Generally, managers and leaders have proven themselves as being proficient from a technical standpoint, and get promoted into higher positions of management. However, being proficient in a practical sense does not necessarily equate to having the skills and attributes required to manage people.

Leadership has been described as a continuum spectrum (Fojt, 2004) that people find themselves on and back and forth throughout life. As we come onto the continuum it can be a daunting task to tackle the unknown of progressing and improving (Watson, 2001). Often good leadership feels like an unattainable goal as knowledge of how to improve is limited and hard to find without plentiful resources and time, as is often the case in the agricultural sector.

This report aims to describe a small qualitative study conducted on a group of farm owners, managers and leaders. It will also describe the qualities and attributes identified in these leaders and how the learnings can be utilized and applied by novice or first-time managers within the agribusiness sector.

2.0 Aim

Aim: To describe the attributes and behaviours required for first-time farm managers to lead people well

Objectives

- Assess the qualities and attributes good farming leaders have and where they learnt, grew and developed these.
- Assess how current great rural leaders cultivate their staff to grow and develop their leadership skills.
- Offer firsthand solutions and guidance to first time people managers that is not already common or easily accessible knowledge.

3.0 Literature Review

A literature review was undertaken to explore leadership qualities, skills and tools effective leaders use to manage people. Then, literature on the journey of becoming a leader was reviewed, information was then extrapolated into the context of agriculture. This review looked across sectors as agriculturally based leadership information, particularly New Zealand focused was limited.

3.1 Leadership in agriculture

Historically, industry bodies and government have invested funds into science based physical improvements for on-farm (Peden, 2008). While there has been less investment in the agricultural sector with regards to leadership training, this is an area not freely accessible to all New Zealand farmers.

The Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme has been active since 1979 in developing leaders for the rural and agri-foods sector (Leaders, 2025). The Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme provides leadership training opportunities to all sectors of New Zealand's primary industries. It appeals to a seasoned manager or leader who wishes to build on their current skills and capabilities (Parsons, 2023). To date, the course has been delivered to over 1200 people.

HortNZ is an industry body that is actively promoting and supporting leadership development (HortNZ, 2025). Since 2002, the Horticulture New Zealand Leadership Programme has supported over 300 people to improve their leadership skills and capabilities. HortNZ have focused efforts into growing leadership within their industry. This follows a recent review of the HortNZ program which showed that governance capabilities needed to improve to grow the industry sustainably and to optimize the value of crops grown. Aswell, staff recruitment and retention needed to be improved through better leadership qualities to manage a diverse workforce that can differ in culture, age and/or language base (Scarlatti, 2024). There are also a number of other sector groups which offer leadership development programmes, including the Dairy Women's Network, Rural Coach, New Zealand Young Farmers and DairyNZ. Parsons (2023) reported into the state of leader development gave a snapshot of what is currently available within the rural leadership development space in New Zealand, however, this information could be better promoted to achieve further reach into the community. There is evidence that public knowledge of leadership education opportunities is changing with recent promotions by industry funded groups such as Beef and Lamb New Zealand and DairyNZ (Weatherburn, 2025).

3.2 Transformational Leadership Traits

Great leaders use leadership skills and tools effectively to motivate, inspire, challenge and reward individuals in their team. These skills were summarized by Burns (1978) as aspects of Transformational Leadership, as opposed to Transactional Leadership which can result in coercive power and direct reward capability (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leadership is outlined by four parts; Idealised Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Individual Consideration and Intellectual Stimulation (Bass & Bass Bernard, 1985). Transformational

leadership moves the follower to care about the organization and societal interests, through displaying charisma, care, a high standard of professionalism and performance, confidence and determination for a goal or task (Bass, 1999).

Transactional leadership is only as strong as the individual's interest in the reward the leader has to offer; physical, financial or agenda based relative to the desires of the subject. The leader in this situation has limited ability to affect change in any organization (Kegan, 1982).

Transformational leaders use their personal values and beliefs to gain team member buy-in to shared goals, however, there is no single perfect personality style or trait for a leader (Sousa, 2024). Great leaders work to improve on their ability to use different leadership styles for different situations, contexts, and follower beliefs and demands. Great leaders assist team members to get along and get ahead through facilitating conflict management, encouraging and highlighting trust and responsibility within a team, and communication channels which aid feedback and openness to all members of the team (Dionne et al., 2004).

Collins (2009) described an important task of a great leader as getting the right people 'on the bus' and the wrong ones off. In agriculture with a relatively small employee pool, farmers often need to rely on team members that may not have all the required expertise for a proper, efficient and successful operations, however, the skill gap can be overcome with time and training (Curphy, 2012). On top of teaching skills and mentoring team members, leaders must set out clear expectations and rules for all members to follow and be prepared to work with team members not meeting the leaders expectations (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). This task of a leader sets the tone for what the culture of an organization will be. Conflict can occur in teams due to differences in opinion, interests and values; therefore, leaders must be prepared to understand and support resolutions within the team as conflict arises. The five types of conflict management (avoid, accommodate, compromise, competitive and collaborative) all have positive and negative connotations and have different situations where each become of higher or lower value to the leader (Rahim, 1983). Not all conflict is necessarily harmful, but how it is dealt with can be (Raines, 2013).

Leaders must have trust in their team and vice-versa. A relationship with trust allows the leader access to knowledge and cooperation, as trust leads to empowerment and engagement where team members feel motivated, satisfied and confident (Zand, 1997) by their achievements of both farm and personal goals. Leaders need to have trust in their employees, as they drive the productivity and performance of the business more than the leader singlehandedly could (Browning, 2020). Leaders rely on interpersonal trust to know that employees are going to be honest, try their best and deliver a good result. Equally, employees rely on leaders to deliver on their word, ultimately ensuring their physical and emotional safety (Evans, 2020). The opposite of a trusting team environment is often seen as micromanagement from a leader (Stack, 2013).

3.3 Journey to Leadership

Watson (2001) asserts that one never finishes becoming a leader, only, continues along the in journey over time. A novice leader has expectations of performing at a previously unknown, higher level while also learning a range of new skills to get the best out of others in the team (Parsons, 2023). The change from a team member to team leader can add stress and complexity to a person's life. They often need to redevelop their own identity as they find inward and outward meaning in personal value, often to negate imposter syndrome.

Often, first-hand experience of trial and error in people management leads to strongly ingrained management ideals and values (Hay, 2014). This route to leadership has the potential to lead to poor managers being developed if negative outcomes of trial and error are sustained. Professional leadership courses have the potential to vastly improve management skills and outcomes (Sturdy et al., 2006) provided the skills are practiced and used repeatedly in the real world (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2010). Over the course of a progressive farming career, leaders need to change how they think about what their role in an organization looks like and how they interact with those around them (Parsons et al., 2024). Parsons et al. (2024), describes the pathway of leadership as non-linear (Figure 1). This journey can follow a technically specialized route with the leader becoming an expert in a particular field. Alternatively, the leader can gain broader knowledge and experience in management and governance while participating in higher levels of an organization. Both routes are important to have for overall industry success and are equally valuable pathways to an individual's leadership goal.

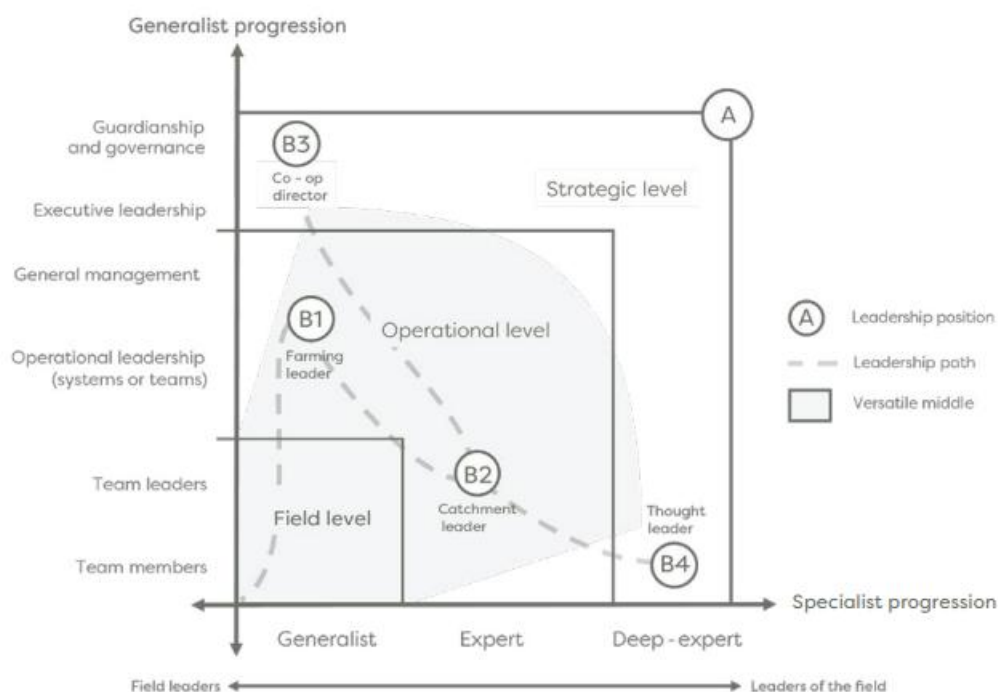


Figure 1. Food and Fibre Leadership Pathways. Sourced from Parsons et al. (2024).

Bolander et al. (2019) described the journey into people management as a turbulent time where managerial identity is found, adopted, abandoned and struggled with continuously in the first 12 to 18 months of stepping into a leadership position. This leads to some people

realizing they are not destined to be a leader, while others need to find what works for them at their own speed.

Tuckman (1965) also describes this process via the four stages of group development (forming, storming, norming and performing) which new managers need to navigate as they create a new team. Leaders need to assist new teams through these stages to ensure functional team development. Better understanding of these stages could lead to enhanced team effectiveness and function (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

The forming process can be negatively or positively influenced by employees from the last team present on the farm, causing pre-existing relationships, ideas and cultures to carry over into a new team culture. Leaders need to be able to decide if all team members are right for the team or if people need to leave, join or be replaced (Collins, 2009). This process can be complicated when faced with compliance with employment laws and contracts. Therefore benevolence, conviction and bravery are needed to best develop a new team.

As previously mentioned, interpersonal skills are important for leaders creating and maintaining the relationships needed for healthy teams (Denney et al., 2020; Marbun, 2021). These skills include communication, emotional intelligence, conflict management and trust development. The basis of these skills are simple, but require genuine care and effort to sustain. Inward traits form the bases of intrapersonal relationships, as people inherently trust and respond to people that are comfortable 'in their own skin' and who have emotional intelligence (Jordan et al., 2002). Self-control, self-esteem, personal values and an individual's view toward authority all start and end with the individual's own beliefs and how they want to interact with the world (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003). Outward traits deliver more towards interpersonal relationships, such as empathy, awareness, social behavior and consistency in expectations, delivery and feedback (Fulmore et al., 2023). Leaders that are genuine in their beliefs and values towards both organization goals and the personal goals of their team members use these skills help employees to feel connected to the workplace and aim of the organization (George, 2000).

3.4 Summary of literature

The literature that is available on agricultural leadership development reveals it as a relatively new area of investment for the sector when compared with land-based performance developments. Although there has been significant research done in leadership worldwide in the past century, there is limited information that has feed through into New Zealand agribusiness until recently. Work is required to demonstrate how these traits, skills and tools can be best utilized by New Zealand's agricultural leaders to maximize labour performance in the sector. The literature reviewed speaks to leaders engaging with team members to motivate deeply, facilitating the flow of ideas and trust without micromanagement. The literature showcases that a team culture is driven by leaders, and they must deliver positive leadership traits with charisma to ensure a positive team environment isn't undermined.

Similarly, there is a gap in implementation of how people become successful leaders in the agricultural industry, although there has been much work done on it outside the sector.

While there has been some recent work produced on progression of New Zealand agricultural leaders that has promise. The available literature calls for better guidance for individuals growing in their leadership journey, this gives reason and sets the objective for this report.

4.0 Method

4.1 Selection Criteria

This qualitative study was conducted using a semi-structured interview format, with questions relating to characteristics of leadership and experiences. The study cohort consisted of five experienced farming leaders. Interviewees were selected based on meeting all the criteria displayed in Figure 2. Interviewees were selected based subjectively, due to inherent difficulties with determination of objective qualifications of genuine leadership qualities, held by potential leaders.

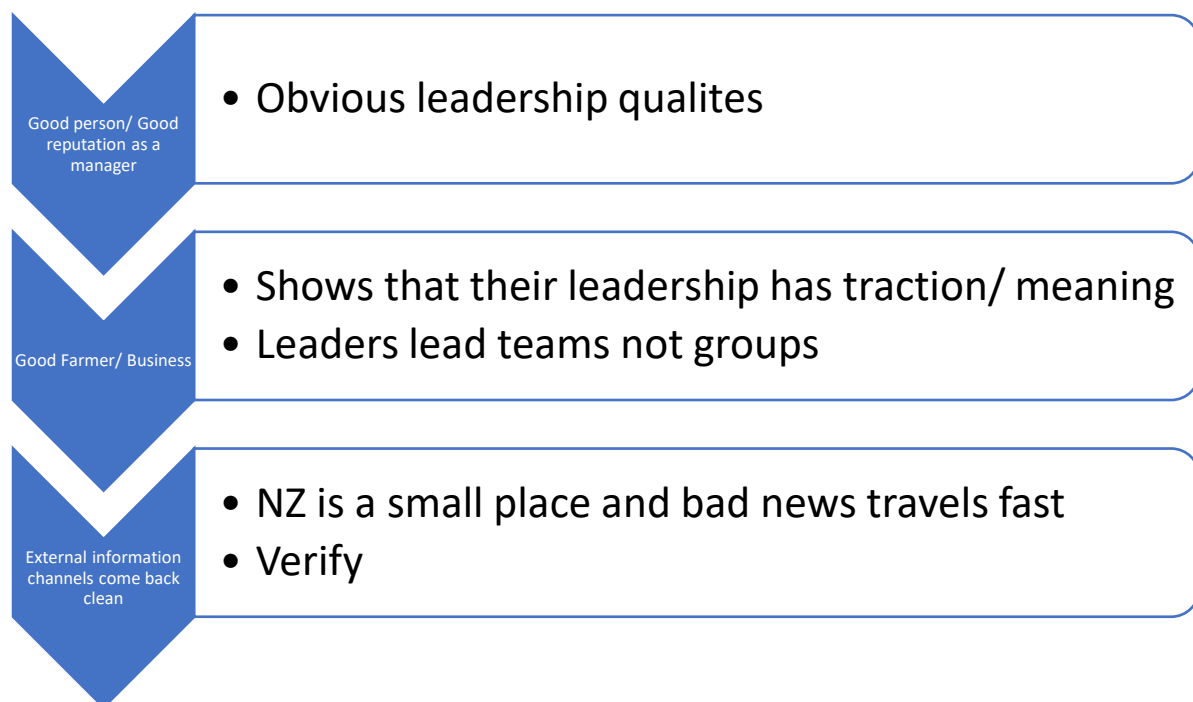


Figure 2. Criteria for a great leader.

The first criteria to meet was to have a reputation as a good person and a good farm owner/ manager. Potential leaders needed to have direct reports in their business.

To determine at the first stage whether an employer was a good leader, simple questions were asked of current or past employees, neighbors and/or friends/acquaintances. Those with negative feedback to the first question were eliminated from selection process.

Questions included:

- What are they like to work for?
- Do they keep highly motivated staff?

The second criteria used was to determine if the potential participants operated a robust business. Great leaders often have robust business practices on which to build quality teams.

Without a good business operation, great leadership from the outside could be a façade for poor management. This criteria was mainly looking from an external position outside their business.

Questions used to remove leaders that did not fit were as follows:

- Do they have a tidy farm? Stock quality, farm infrastructure quality and general repair
- Do they have an history of high staff turnover? Are they constantly advertising for staff?
- Do they have staff that would recommend them as an employer? Do they have a 'personal brand' of good working conditions?

The final criteria that was employed was simply finding out if there was anything that the first two criteria had missed when assessing if a leader was in fact good. This was done by asking multiple sources outside the leader's business about what their reputation in the community and what they knew of the leader. This was to verify the information gathered and confirm their participation in the study.

4.2 Interviews

Once selected, leaders were interviewed either in person or via a web-based video call depending on geographical location. In-person interviews were favored and when possible conducted. These semi-structured interviews, lasting 30-120 minutes explored each participants leadership journey, and the skills, tools and traits they have to be great people managers. Interviewees were asked the following questions.

1. What do you think differentiates you from a poor leader/people manager?
- 2a. Where did you learn the skills to manage people effectively?
- 2b. How long did it take to do them well?
- 2c. What did support look like for you during this time?
- 3a. How do you describe your leadership style?
4. What leadership traits do you think you need to improve on?
5. What do you think is important for new leaders to do/master?
6. What do you see as the barriers to good agricultural leadership?
7. What things are you doing in your business to help new leaders thrive?
8. How do you handle conflict in your team?

Interviewees signed the Kellogg interview consent form prior to the interview, ensuring all information was kept secure, confidential and anonymized. Audio dialogue from interviews

was recorded then transcribed from audio to written form using the application Transkriptor. Manuscripts from each interview were then used by the A.I. tool ChatGPT to find the main themes interviewees gave for each question. Using Inductive Thematic Analysis, themes for each objective of the research were collated. Key quotes were extracted from the manuscripts to illustrate these themes.

4.3 Findings

The five interviewees were from different industries in New Zealand agriculture, including Sheep, Beef, Dairy and Pork. The farmers interviewed came from different backgrounds and career paths to end up as a leader of their farming businesses. Most had been in roles of leadership from relatively young ages, and at the time of interviewing, some had decades of leadership experience to draw on.

From the interviews several themes were found in response to each question asked. Each theme having its own role to play in their success in leadership, with most themes overlapping between leaders. Four out of the five interviews were conducted in person, and one was conducted over MS Teams.

5.0 Results and Discussion

5.1 Attributes of Good Leaders

The interview data was gathered and analysed. A number of themes were identified from the data relative to the objectives of this study and are set below in Figure 3.

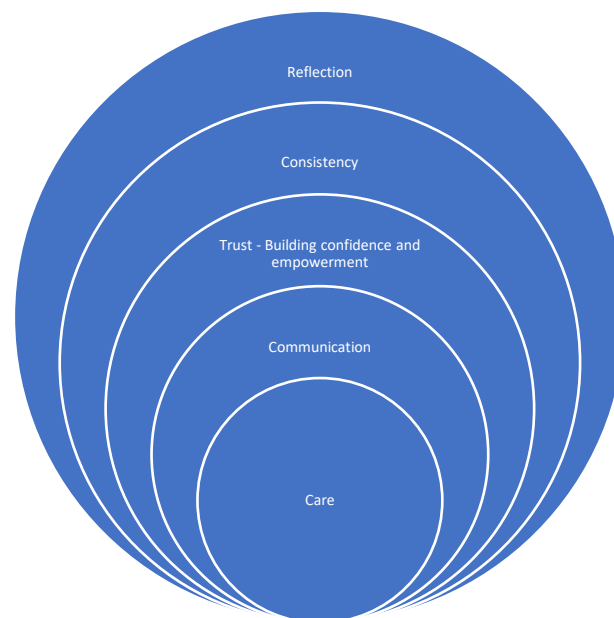


Figure 3. Attributes of a Good Leader

5.1.1 Care

“People first”

The biggest theme from all interviewees was the genuine care they had for the people working with them. Many described their team like extended family, some that had been part of the organizations for over two decades.

“I look at my staff as part of my family”

The team members that leaders had around them were considered good friends who they cared for deeply, and they were not willing to forgo the intra-personal relationship they had with them. The time leaders spent with team members, individually, investing in building the emotional connection, prioritizing health and well-being was a key theme that came through from all interviewees.

Similarly, Keo (2021) described the place for compassion and empathy in functional leadership. Showing that without deep care for people, leaders will not be as effective in achieving goals. Shuck et al. (2019) described compassion, as understanding a person and their history, mental and emotional state, and actively behaving while taking these things into account. This study agreed with this prior literature and found that leaders who led with compassion resulted in, high level of integrity of the leader as seen by employees; the emotional and mental presence the leader brought to communications with employee; and the employees getting treated with dignity. All these traits drove the leader’s perceived authenticity from employees, which in turn helped the employees feel closer to the leader.

5.1.2 Communication

Time spent one-on-one, between leaders and team members had led to better communication, as trust was built and rapport created and sustained. Leaders spent time checking in on issues that the team members are facing on and off the farm. Some of these meetings were formal and focused more towards business performance. One interviewee reported on people in a formal monthly report, with the section focused towards holistic wellbeing of the team members. Regular informal discussions were as important for making sure they understood how their employees were feeling, and what they were dealing with that could be influencing their life. Therefore, the leaders were better positioned to meet the needs of their staff and to meet the team members *“where they are”*.

The leaders interviewed all indicated that working on their intra-personal relationships with employees is vital to their business success. The leaders have displayed transformational leadership qualities as they have the ability to cause significant change in the lives of those that they lead (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019). They have this potential because they have spent time working on intra-personal relationships, which in turn has the potential to improve business success through motivated employees.

5.1.3 Trust – Building confidence and empowerment

The farming leaders interviewed shared that they felt trust is the first and most important value in any relationship. Through trust, confidence can be grown and delegation and empowerment can take place. This allows the team members to make decisions that will benefit the business and relationship. Allowing team members to be autonomous in their decision making is something that was stated as being slow and small scale at the beginning of a relationship by all interviewees. Small low-cost decisions at the beginning of

employment created opportunities for trust and competency to develop. Over time with regular feedback opportunities, leaders allowed team members to make larger, more influential decisions that would have a greater impact on the business.

“Leadership isn’t about decision making, it’s about getting the best out of everyone”

The leaders interviewed had all made conscious decisions to step back from the day-to-day farm operations. This was due to having recruited the right people who they trusted and had given greater autonomy to run their businesses. The leaders all described their roles in their organizations as less about decision making, and more about talking with team members, ensuring they had the resources, knowledge and capabilities to do their job well. One leader interviewed stated that nowadays he did not have any farming boots, as his presence on-farm would interfere too much with his team’s ability to make decisions autonomously. Instead, he had sports shoes to ensure he could only do activities off farm or in the office.

The leaders interviewed in this study demonstrated that they used a subconscious internal risk matrix for allocating decisions (Figure 4). With new staff given low risk and less responsibilities, and as trust is built, more impactful decisions were allocated.

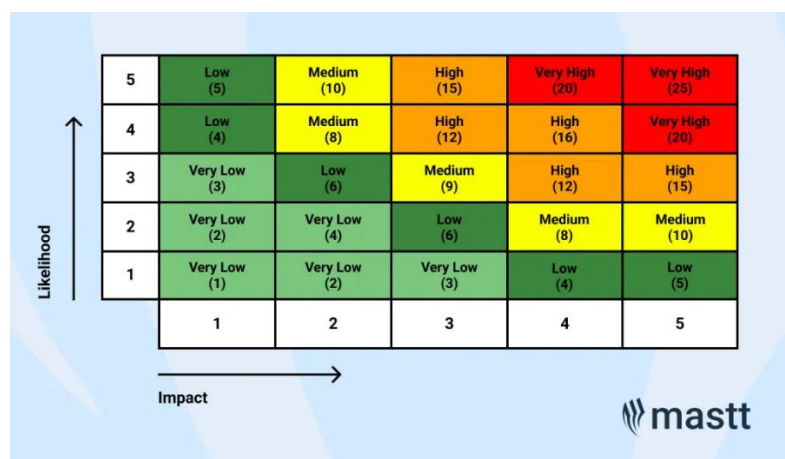


Figure 4. Risk Matrix. Sourced from Mastt (2025)

5.1.4 Consistency

“Integrity gets eroded if standards aren’t held up for all team members”

All of the interviewees touched on the theme of delivering leadership consistently towards their team as an important function of their success. The leaders knew that trust is eroded if there are inconsistent expectations throughout the team, and that the leader is not exempt from these (often unspoken) rules. Leaders often have to have the hard conversations that maintain team culture, disciplining and reprimanding when values are not upheld. Conversely, leaders must take time and opportunity to champion good behavior as its seen, in a timely manner. This is almost more important, to uplift team culture, rewarding great performance and productivity.

This trait of being consistent with employees links to the integrity of the leader. Cohen (2010) described integrity as adhering to a set of values that is free from deception. The loss of leader integrity leads to loss of employee commitment and effort (Salicru, 2017).

5.1.5 Reflection, Self-awareness and Introspection

“You’ve got to know yourself to lead others”

All the leaders interviewed showed that they spent time reflecting on their leadership encounters. To varying levels, they were aware of how their influence impacted their business and those around them. They knew their strengths and weaknesses and how and when to use them to avoid negative outcomes and promote positive relationships with their staff. Two of the leaders used the same formal training opportunities to refresh leadership skills every few years. This was to assess and refine what they were practicing daily, ensuring it was in-line with best practice, and make sure they were improving where they could.

Over half the leaders shared that they purposefully used reflection time and gained feedback from others. This feedback was used to make sure they were in control of their emotions and thought patterns. This behavior aligns with findings from Ashford and DeRue (2012) who suggested that reflection plays a large part of leadership development. Those businesses where leaders actively reflected on experiences, were more likely to thrive. This gives some support to this research’s interviewees, being good leaders. Reflecting on goals, methods and relationships helps leaders engage with the needs of the team and the functional capabilities of the leader, which in turn leads to a more effective leader and a high functioning team environment (Ong et al., 2023).

5.2 Learning and Support

The leaders interviewed described three different areas that they recognized as being the main drivers for their leadership development. These three areas are trial and error, industry support and formal training and receiving mentorship from others (Figure 5).

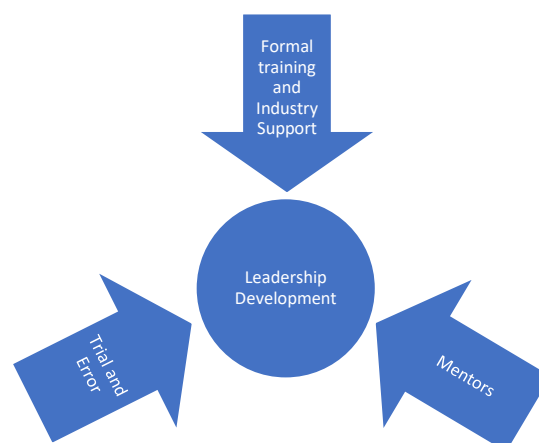


Figure 5. Influences on Leadership Development

5.2.1 Trial and error

Leaders interviewed generally lacked formal training in leadership especially at the start of their people management journey. As is often the case with the beginning of a leadership journey, growth and learning comes from trial and error. Some leaders used negative experiences to shape what they wanted to look like as a leader, creating a bottom line of values that they were not prepared to compromise on.

"The best way to develop your leadership style is by experiencing different management styles and deciding what fits you."

The findings from the leaders interviewed aligns with findings of Hay (2014), who interviewed managers about the process of transitioning to a manager. The findings highlighted the emotional struggles of managers who found they had less options for learning good leadership through formal training and had to put large amounts of energy into figuring it out themselves.

5.2.2 Mentors

All the leaders found people who they considered to be mentors that they could speak to about issues that arose. Mentorship, mostly informal, became an important theme found in all interviews, with mentors varying from spouses, past workmates, good friends and experienced farmers or industry workers who were in the area at the time. These relationships became vital to the leaders as they worked to improve their leadership qualities. Being able to turn to expert advice from a trusted source was an important part of the leader's abilities to develop, reflect and bounce ideas off.

Previous research has shown that there is a positive relationship between transformational leadership characteristics of leaders who had mentors (Gong & Li, 2022). Historically, research into mentorship as a component of leadership development has been focused towards healthcare, most likely due to the imperative nature of employee success. However, these findings are transferable to any leadership setting. Sinha and Cullen (2015) suggested that to avoid shooting blindly with leadership development, mentorship programmes offer a far more successful method of leadership growth and the ability to improve the emotional intelligence of a leader, compared with a trial-and-error method of development.

5.2.3 Formal training and Industry support

Several of the interviewed leaders completed formal training in leadership, to varying degrees. Some had completed multiple in-depth training programs, while others had done fewer, less intensive workshops; targeting leadership tools, skills and traits that the leaders used to better manage people. For one leader this formal training was a catalyst for realizing the importance of investing in improved personal and professional development and their ability to be a better leader. Leaders had completed short leadership development courses through DairyNZ, Agri-Women's Development trust and Beef and Lamb New Zealand. As mentioned previously, formal training has the potential to be a powerful tool to quickly improve leadership skills (Sturdy et al., 2006).

Only two of the five interviewees were aware that their respective industries offered support to leaders, and had used that support to improve their leadership capabilities. This alludes to a disconnect between what is available and what people ‘on-the-ground’ know exists in this space. Of the interviewees, those with experience being directly involved with industry bodies had better knowledge of options for leaders.

5.3 Leadership style and conflict management

5.3.1 Management style

As the leaders described their relationships with several of their team members it was obvious that each leader knew their staff well. They were able to ascertain where those people were at mentally and emotionally and targeted their communication, influence and job demands accordingly.

“People are just so different. You need to learn how to manage them all differently”

The leaders interviewed all had different leadership styles, to varying degrees. What became transparent during the interviews was that they all employed different styles to handle different situations in their business. For example, if a leader tended to be more non- confrontational or more assertive, they were aware of this trait and made a conscious decision to mediate their personality to ensure one style did not dominate conversations and relationships. All the leaders knew that exhibiting one management style in the extreme could do far more damage to a relationship than benefit.

Some leaders used a more systems approach to structuring their business and others had a more lateral structure. Generally, it was found that each leader knew what their personality could work with and subsequently implemented that structure.

“I don’t micromanage people, I trust people”

All the leaders interviewed had trust in their staff, so much so that they did not micromanage them. Instead, they trusted their staff and delegated tasks and responsibilities. This was combined with open and regular communication and good planning.

One leader suggested that finding the right person was not always easy, and that if the wrong person appeared after onboarding, they were comfortable having a difficult and tough conversation with the person to come up with alternative solutions. This suggested that buy-in from each individual in the team and to have the drive to want to be a part of a high-functioning team, makes the process of creating and leading a team easier and more rewarding.

The leadership traits described in this section showcase that the leaders interviewed display transformational leadership qualities. They have a desire to delegate and motivate employees to work autonomously. As described by Bass (1999), transformational leaders motivate followers to care for about the organization’s performance without relying on transactional power. This transformational leadership stimulates employee engagement and personal initiative, and is strongest when leaders use individual consideration and intellectual stimulation to motivate (Bakker et al., 2023).

5.3.2 Empowering trust

“When you empower people, they tend to grow”

The leaders interviewed all relied heavily on their teams to make good decisions for the benefit of their businesses. All leaders had trust in their team that they had built up over days, weeks, month and years of working, training and communicating with each other. The ability to delegate created empowerment and confidence, which meant that they trusted their team to make good decisions without the leaders present. All the leaders recognized that this trust didn't happen to the full extent overnight and that it was built up over time, starting off with small decisions that generally didn't have a financial tie, leading to larger and larger decisions, some carrying significant financial obligations with more trusted staff.

“Poor decisions are only poor if you don't reflect, change and get the next one right”

The leaders all acknowledged that things don't always go to plan in life and work, and when things didn't go right, the leaders trusted themselves, their systems and their employees to rectify issues and learn from their mistakes. Their systems all allowed for ingenuity, while having accountability for decisions made by anyone. One leader went on to say that not learning from a mistake is a bigger failure than the mistake itself, showing that reflection and honesty are more important to great leaders than some financial costs.

5.3.3 Conflict management

Most of the leaders interviewed described themselves as non-confrontational. They felt more comfortable delaying confrontation until feelings had a chance to settle down before dealing with serious problems. One leader shared that they needed to improve on dealing with conflict faster, and another shared that they had worked hard to restrain themselves and give things a chance to settle down before dealing with conflict. Both leaders had good reasons they made this conscious decision. Each was coming from a different background, and knew that a more balanced approach to conflict was healthier than their natural instinct.

“I'm quite a direct person... but I know better now to ask questions”

When dealing with conflict, three of the leaders explained that they used humor to try to make light of the situation to diffuse tensions at the start of a conversation. They would then go on to try and have an honest, frank discussion when the time was right, and aimed to give constructive advice if and when needed. These three leaders described how they tried to make a connection between themselves and their staff, where they made the playing field even, to not belittle them.

Allowing time to manage emotions and self-analyse behaviour before proactively managing conflict is the first step in conflict management as described by Watson (2011). Following on from this, the skills required for conflict management, as described by Algert (2021), of active listening to clarify and understand; and showcasing a neutral and nonthreatening impartiality to the situation are needed for leaders to engage and resolve conflict successfully. The leaders interviewed here have all shown that they have the skills necessary to work through conflict to be able to maintain healthy relationships with employees.

5.4 Barriers to good leadership

The leaders interviewed all recognized that being a great leader was challenging and not always easy to maintain. It took time, effort, energy and genuine interest to model good behaviour. However, they all felt that in the long term it was satisfying and better for their business, financially and productively, to work at it.

5.4.1 Time, effort and focus

“If 99% of your time is spent doing the cows and the grass, then you won’t become a great leader”

The leaders appreciated that they had to make time to be a great people manager. Most of them had observed that if time wasn’t put into working on intra- and inter-personal relationships, they would struggle to see long lasting effects on farm. All the leaders interviewed prioritized working on the relationships between team members. They noted that the content of conversations had smaller portion targeted towards farm operations, with the remainder of communications focused towards personal wellbeing and connectedness.

The agribusiness industry requires more good leaders for the future; however, the barriers of time, organizational structure and ego raise complexities that will need attention in alleviating. These barriers to good leadership are generally the responsibility of an individual business, person or team. They will require a paradigm shift in how leadership is viewed, and that the outcome of good leadership is worth the additional cost of time and organizational change.

5.4.2 Organisational Structure

In reviewing the themes, all the leaders talked about structures that limited people managers being great leaders, in different ways. Firstly, the leaders worried that if a business did not have the labour required to cover all farm jobs, staff would be stretched and have little to no time for proper communication. The business operations needed to allow for overlap and therefore time for non-essential farm operations. Secondly, if a business did not have the systems within their respective structure for leaders at middle or low level in the business to have independence, accountability, responsibility, empowerment, then those emerging leaders would struggle to come forward and excel. The leaders suggested that businesses must have a supportive structure to allow less experienced people to have the opportunity to experience leadership roles before being thrust into direct responsibility.

Novice leaders generally do not get the luxury of determining business structure. In respect of novice managers, the good leaders interviewed cautioned that an unhealthy business structure should be avoided rather than fought. These unhealthy business structures often have top down management approaches, with people at the top determining how business practices are carried out by employees lower down the hierarchy They could also involve. Unhealthy organizations might also have managers who are surrounded by ‘Yes Men’ which lead to only one opinion being heard and followed, the managers. Drotter (2011) speculated

that managers who install a 'concrete layer' which hinder and/or stop the flow of communication, ideas or issues are a red flag to an organizations capability to be successful.

5.4.3 Ego

"There are some really bad egos in New Zealand's ag sector... Farmers are so bad at 'this is how we do it, this is the only way to do it.'"

The leaders interviewed worried that egos in the sector limited great leadership and new leaders coming through from grassroots. One leader acknowledged that an ego can be a useful tool for working in harsh environments when resilience is needed over long stressful periods that farmers are often faced with, however they stressed egos more often than not led to close mindedness. Closemindedness was observed to be limiting to people coming forward with new ideas as they are 'shut down' and are not given opportunity to explore new innovative ways of doing things. Part of being a great leader is being flexible and give people the permission to think and act freely if the desired outcome can be met.

From an industry that requires more good leaders for the future, the barrier of time, organizational structure and ego raise complexities to aid in overcoming these challenges. These barriers of good leadership are generally the responsibility of an individual business, person or team. They will require a paradigm shift in how leadership is viewed, and that the outcome of good leadership is worth the additional cost of time and organizational change.

The ability to make dispassionate decisions can be difficult for farmers to do, as there is a strong emotional link to the land and stock. There is romanticized connection between a person and the heroic sense of leader identity (Collinson et al., 2018) which in farming is generally seen through a layer of competency and lack of trust to those around us. This causes issues when others in the team shut off from collaborating or sharing ideas (Schweiger et al., 2020), which causes more negative pressure to be put on the leader to have all the ideas, leading to burnout and fatigue (Tourish, 2019). Drotter (2011) suggested that leaders should aim to not have all the answers or power in organizations and should avoid making emotional decisions. This is important for leaders to be able to empower the team without an emotional connection to a task, to be able to get the best ideas and engagement from employees. Leaders should focus their energy on removing barriers to performance and championing employees (Drotter, 2011).

5.4.4 Lack of Resources and Training Opportunities

"We'll spend \$500 on the vet but not \$500 on a personality profile."

One leader pushed for the use of personality trait data to be collected and shared between staff in their team. The practice had been implemented in the last few years for all workers, and new employees as they started, and information was shared and discussed openly between everyone in the business. The leader noted it was extremely valuable information for everyone to understand 'how each other's brain worked' to lead to better workplace relationships, particularly when there was stress or crisis to deal with.

All the leaders valued formal and non-formal training, from field days and discussion groups to industry courses to improve on their own and employee relationship skills.

All of the leaders recognized that training and development in leadership skills and tools was limited by financial, time, location and labour constraints. In their own businesses, all the leaders stated that they were providing development opportunities for their team, through professional courses and/or mentorship through people inside and/or experts outside their organization; as well as opportunities to go to industry events and field days to gain a deeper knowledge of the industry.

6.0 Conclusion

People management is a key part of leadership. Agriculture has a strong demand for good leaders that is not currently being matched with supply. The leaders interviewed in this small study agreed that the soft skills involved with people management and leadership were only just becoming front of mind in the agricultural sector at the grass roots level.

Good leaders engage team members to achieve business objectives without micromanagement, and while upholding intra and interpersonal relationships. Businesses with good leaders have a steady flow of communication, trust, autonomy and perform at a high level.

Good people managers focus on four things in their relationships with team members, care, communication, empowerment, consistency, and are acutely aware of how their actions impact their team through reflection time. The leaders interviewed had grown their skills and knowledge largely through trial and error, but found support through trusted mentors, some industry support and some formal training.

The leaders recognized that there were genuine limitations that resulted in poor people management in agriculture. Time, structure and egos were generally on-farm limitations to good people management, and lack of resources and training opportunities being results of both on and off farm limitations.

The leaders interviewed had varying leadership styles, but all could shift between different styles as needed. The leaders focused on giving confidence for their staff to make decisions and when problems arose, they took opportunities to see genuine growth in their team members. Conflict management was an uncomfortable task for most of the leaders, however, they all recognised the importance to do it well so their business was successful. The leaders interviewed gave a sense of ease to management, in part due to the genuine care for each team member that allowed genuine connection.

7.0 Recommendations

The themes generated from this research provided some guidance for first time people managers (Figure 6). Developing good leaders is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach. This small study provides a starting point for people managers to understand the complexities of leadership, and provide some guidance on what attributes and behaviours are required to develop into a great leader.

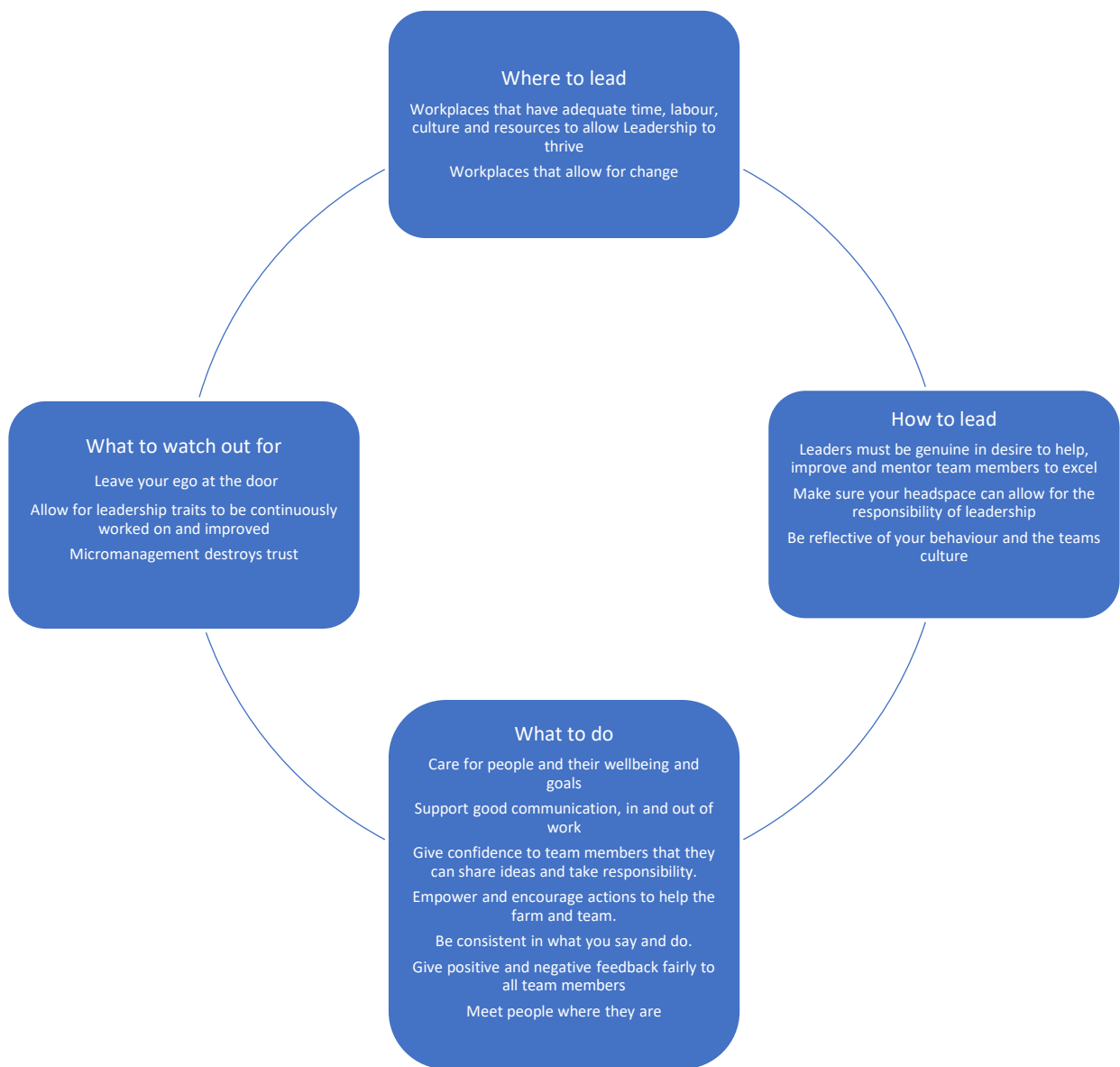


Figure 6. Leadership series

7.1 Where to find more information

There is a plethora of information surrounding leadership, however, in New Zealand agriculture this list is small but improving often. Below are some useful links for first time people managers to explore in order to learn more about leadership development, programs, skills and tools.

<https://mylead.co.nz/>

<https://www.employertoolkitnz.org/>

<https://ruralleaders.co.nz/state-of-leadership-development/>

<https://beeflambnz.com/knowledge-hub/employment-hub>

<https://www.dairynz.co.nz/people/>

<https://www.dairynz.co.nz/people/building-a-great-team/insights-and-trends-for-building-a-great-team/>

<https://www.awdt.org.nz/programmes/>

Along with the recommendations for first time managers to lead well, as seen in Figure 5, there are also areas I believe the wider sector could benefit from the following things that I believe should be driven by levy-funded organisations.

1. Bridge the knowledge gap for new leaders, through industry funded courses and workshops.
2. Create mentorships where new people managers can find support for their journey to becoming great leaders.

8.0 Limitations

During this research it became evident that good leaders in the general farming population were scarce, especially to interview for this study. This isn't hard to believe, as, if good leaders were common place, then programs like the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme would not be as successful or renowned.

It is recognized that finding good farming leaders who manage people well is hard to define and hard to find. The reality faced is that most knowledge of whether a person is a good people manager is word of mouth, and there are limitations generally verifying this. The more information about a person's capability that can be gathered is best however this may lead to false positives.

A greater sample size would add further validity to the findings from this study and potentially offer greater depth of understanding for first time farm managers.

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