

Women's Leadership in VET

**Ideas, models and strategies of women leaders in
the Australian vocational education and training
sector**

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Available from <http://www.ibsa.org.au/jma>

Cover design by *Campus Review*

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First published: October 2007

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Title: Women's Leadership in VET: ideas, models and strategies for the Australian vocational education and training sector

ISBN 978-0-9775168-3-4

Published by J. G. Mitchell & Associates Pty Ltd
ABN 26 641 968 007

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Purposes

The initial purpose of the book was to inform and enrich a VET Women Leaders Forum held in Victoria in late October 2007.

The long term purpose of this book is to influence positively the leadership in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Origin of forum and book

This forum for which this book was produced was the result of an accident. By chance, in early 2007, some women at the top of training organisations on two sides of the continent asked me who were the outstanding RTO leaders in Australia. Off the cuff, I replied that most of the best VET leaders were women; that most of the new ideas about how to lead RTOs were coming from women.

The women asking the question then challenged me to bring this group of women together. So I tested the idea on several others, and found they supported it. Subsequently a planning group was formed and the forum conducted from a Sunday-Tuesday in regional Victoria.

The book is based around:

- 9 think pieces prepared by participants at the forum
- 27 articles that I wrote for my 'Inside VET' column for *Campus Review*, the national Australian weekly publication for VET and higher education. A small number of the articles have been published in previous books I have authored.

Target users

While the book is relevant to all VET personnel, some individuals who could use this book include:

- people who are currently in leadership positions in VET organisations or practitioners preparing for promotion and who wish to know more about leadership in VET
- people undertaking study programs in vocational, adult or further education.

Other intended user groups for this book include:

- leadership and management teams who are seeking fresh ideas
- project groups undertaking structured professional development activities
- groups of staff within Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) who wish to understand the changes moving through the sector.

While individuals are encouraged to use the book, you will also benefit significantly by participating in groups examining the articles. With the assistance of a group facilitator, you can use the book to generate even more ideas.

Thanks

My thanks are extended to:

- the planning group for the forum, especially for supporting the production of this book
- the participants at the forum, particularly for submitting think pieces or for being willing to be interviewed
- Julie Hare, editor of *Campus Review*, for her support in editing and publishing the original articles
- *Campus Review* and Victoria University for their sponsorship of the forum.

John Mitchell

Introduction: Authentic women leaders

This publication responds to a number of themes raised in the VET literature in recent years and breaks some new ground. First, the publication responds to the lack of research into VET leaders by providing nine think pieces and twenty seven articles which show the breadth and richness of ideas and strategies of contemporary VET leaders. The publication also responds to and reinforces the point made in the literature about the crucial importance of leadership in VET.

Second, the publication breaks new ground by displaying in one publication the thinking and approaches of some thirty or so outstanding women leaders in the sector. This publication goes part the way to interpreting that thinking and those approaches, but more interpretation could be undertaken later, to further clarify what is distinctive about the leadership approaches developed by the group of women leaders described in this publication. Aspects of their leadership – such as their motivations, beliefs and methods – deserve further interpretation, as their leadership emerges from this publication as both effective in and appropriate for our times. Better understanding of them as leaders is of high value to the future of the sector.

Common characteristic

A start is made in the discussion below on interpreting this group of women leaders by identifying a common characteristic which emanates from the think pieces and articles in this publication, the authenticity of these leaders.

In modelling authentic leadership, the women described in this book have achieved the highest challenge for contemporary organisational leaders, according to some recent researchers (e.g. Goffee & Jones 2005; Kets de Vries 2006; Roberts 2007). However, there is no time for these Australian leaders to rest on their laurels: being authentic is not a fixed state; there are new challenges every day. Goffee and Jones (2005, in Roberts 2007, p.333) encourage leaders to “painstakingly earn and carefully manage their reputation for authenticity”.

Authentic leadership is a topic worthy of ongoing analysis by researchers. Developing and sustaining authenticity is a life’s work for both existing and aspiring leaders.

Lack of research on VET leaders

To highlight the complete lack of research on VET leaders and managers earlier this decade, Falk and Smith (2003) quote from a government research body:

As the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC 2000) project brief for VET leadership states, there ‘... has been no work undertaken on management and leadership in VET institutes/private providers’. (p.15)

Similarly, Mulcahy (2003) noted that “very little is known about management and leadership in registered training organisations within the vocational education and training sector” (p.10).

The fragmentary VET research on leaders which has emerged over the last 4-5 years mostly focuses on the knowledge and skills needed by them to function as business managers and strategists (for example, TAFE Directors Association 2001, 2003; Callan 2001; Smith, A., Oczkowski; Mulcahy 2003; Falk and Smith 2003; Foley & Conole 2003; Mitchell 2003; Callan, Mitchell, Clayton & Smith 2007). However, even this body of work, over a seven year period, is small and arguably inadequate, given the importance of leadership for a sector which actively caters for nearly one in ten Australians

who undertake accredited VET courses each year and many others who undertake informal or non-accredited training.

Importance of leadership to VET

Despite the continuing lack of research on VET leadership, Falk and Smith (2003) are adamant about the importance of leadership in VET and suggest that the future of VET will be affected by how well its leaders understand and operate across different areas:

... success in the VET sector in this decade at the start of the new millennium will depend on how well VET leaders understand and operate across different areas, areas such as their organisational roles and functions, the leadership processes in which they are engaged and their own, their organisations', their local communities' and their regions' shared values and visions. (Falk & Smith 2003, p.15)

What complicates leadership in VET is that the environment for leaders is constantly changing. Falk and Smith (2003) find that the conditions under which VET managers and leaders are required to operate are something of "a moving feast, being dictated in part by the forces of change" (p.14). They describe these changing conditions as follows:

Conditions relating to institutional roles, VET professionals' roles, markets and demand factors seem to change almost every year, as policy strategies, institutional responses and pressures to respond to commercial and community imperatives change. (p.14)

These changing conditions make it all the more important for researchers and leaders to be more conscious of what leadership approaches and capabilities are currently needed and work well. At least then leaders can decide what they might need to change when conditions do alter.

Authentic leaders

This book illustrates a range of capabilities of VET women leaders. For instance, the think pieces demonstrate their capacity for fresh thinking and the articles show their substantial abilities as strategists, change agents and innovators, as well as their ability to function effectively in the midst of complexity. However, the overriding characteristic which emerges from this publication is the authenticity of these women leaders, so the term deserves defining and further discussion.

The term authentic is commonly used to describe people who are open, transparent and honest and whose word can be trusted. They are not fake or insincere. They don't wear masks. They know their limitations. Authentic people are true to their values and their word; they have integrity and they stick to their principles.

Authentic leaders 'walk the talk': their actions match their words. They take responsibility for their emotions and actions and don't try to blame others for their own moods or mistakes. Nobody is perfect, but it is possible to consciously make the pursuit of authenticity a powerful component of one's life and leadership. Laura Morgan Roberts (2007) says that "leaders must be intentional about bringing their whole selves to work as a source of strength" (p.333).

Nine authentic aspects

The discussion below identifies nine different authentic aspects of women's leadership in VET and suggests that authenticity is the primary characteristic of these leaders. Readers are invited to use this framework of authentic aspects when they read through the think pieces and articles following.

The first authentic aspect of the women leaders portrayed in this book is they are able to present their **true selves**: they don't pretend to be someone they're not; their unique, individual voices and views come through these pages. Many of them openly and comfortably talk about their personal and professional stories in terms of the good and useful things they have learnt along the way. Such authentic people are to be prized: management theorist, author and psychotherapist Manfred Kets de

Vries (2007) finds that people who are authentic tend to be “more centred, balanced, compassionate, forgiving, sensitive, peaceful, secure, and self-confident” (p.371).

The second authentic aspect of these women leaders is their **humility**, their willingness to admit they do not know it all. They say repeatedly, in the think pieces in section one and in the interviews in section two of this book, that they are always learning, from their staff, their industries, their communities, and their students. Kets de Vries (2006) finds that, to be successful, organisations need leaders who are able to “present themselves as they are, who have confidence in combination with humility, and who are viewed by others as having integrity and being worthy of trust” (p.375). These leaders “recognise their strengths and weaknesses” (p.375).

The third authentic aspect of these women leaders is their **compassion**: they are very willing to talk about their values and how values such as a commitment to their industry or their communities or their learners motivate and fuel them. Kets de Vries notes that authentic leaders “are aware of (and trust in) their motives, feelings, and desires” (p.375).

The fourth authentic aspect of these women leaders is their **positive outlook**; the glass is half full; they know about the difficulties, but they see the many possibilities provided by VET. Kets de Vries (2006) says that authentic people “have a more optimistic outlook on life, report a higher level of self esteem, and feel a greater sense of life satisfaction” (p.371). Roberts (2007) notes that authentic leadership has numerous positive connotations including “self-confidence, genuineness, reliability, worthwhileness, a deep sense of one’s values and beliefs, a focus on building followers’ strengths, and an ability to create a positive and engaging organisational context” (pp.332-333).

The fifth authentic aspect is their **determination**. None of them espouse or look for simple solutions: they are willing to accept the challenges of their positions and to persevere. Kets de Vries (2006) says that authentic people demonstrate behaviour that reflects “self-determination, autonomy, and choice, as opposed to behaviour that’s been imposed on them by others” (p.372). They are willing to “face reality as it is, not as they wish it were” (p.375). Roberts (2007) notes that authentic leadership “requires more than just doing what comes naturally” (p.333).

The sixth authentic aspect of these women leaders is their **sense of community**. They help create a sense of community by expressing respect for the people they work with and by appreciating that people need to be heard. By creating a sense of community, employees feel trusted and the conditions are set for distributed, shared leadership and active mentoring of aspiring leaders, says Kets de Vries (2006, p.377). Kets de Vries also observes how authentic leaders create a framework “for the kind of values that make an organisation a great place to work” (p.377).

The seventh authentic aspect of these women leaders is their ability to form and **sustain relationships**, both within and outside their organisations. Kets de Vries (2006) notes that effective leadership in this century will depend heavily on networking, which requires a focus on relationships (p.375). Authenticity also helps underpin “the new psychological contract” between employers and employees, providing “common ground by strategically engaging the unique strengths that individuals bring to their diverse workforce and customer base” (Roberts 2007, p.332).

The eighth authentic aspect of these women leaders is their ability to **cater for the individual needs** of a variety of staff. Kets de Vries (2006) finds that because authentic leaders are in tune with themselves and their inner lives, they are “more equipped to ‘read’ and articulate what lies unspoken in the hearts and minds of their employees” (p.376). Roberts (2007) suggests that authentic leaders can accommodate the range of needs of their staff for self-expression and self-fulfilment, which results not only in employees’ increased self-expression but in employees’ increased strategic contribution (p.352).

The ninth authentic aspect of these women leaders is their understanding that staff want a workplace that is **enjoyable**, where exploration is encouraged. Kets de Vries (2006) finds that “exploration, enjoyment, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation are all closely linked” (p.378). The benefits of creating an enjoyable workplace are profound, finds Roberts (2007):

...bringing one’s ‘whole self’ to a welcoming work environment enables individuals to reach maximal effectiveness, productivity and performance (p.330).

Primacy of authenticity

This book on VET women leaders suggests that authenticity is, overwhelmingly, their most shared characteristic, but how significant is authenticity? Kets de Vries (2006) argues that the overall challenge for twenty-first-century leadership is to develop authentic leaders and employees and to create authentic organisations (p.379). Goffee and Jones (2005; quoted in Roberts 2007, p.329) claim that authenticity is the attribute that uniquely defines great leaders. Roberts (2007, p.331-332) describes the “premium on authenticity” in the twenty first century. This book provides insights into the minds and hearts of a group of VET women leaders who are actively taking up the challenge from Kets de Vries of developing authenticity and modelling the leadership attribute of authenticity prioritised by Goffee and Jones and Roberts.

Acknowledging the primacy of authenticity does not diminish the importance of the other capabilities identified in this book, such as women leaders’ capabilities as strategists, change agents, innovators and creative thinkers. Acknowledging the primacy of authenticity provides a new way of appreciating and learning from the VET women leaders profiled in this book. It also provides a powerful and new lens through which to view and appreciate their capabilities.

Implications for leadership development

If authenticity is the primary challenge for leaders, then some rethinking will be needed in VET and around Australia about the undifferentiated lists of leadership capabilities that have dominated the field of leadership development in recent years. Perhaps authenticity is more important than other leadership capabilities such as the five promoted by the Australian Public Service as part of the Senior Executive Leadership Capability (SELC) Framework: shapes strategic thinking; achieves results; communicates with influence; cultivates productive working relationships; and exemplifies personal drive and integrity. A question which deserves further public discussion and research is whether authenticity sits above these five capabilities as the primary capability or, alternatively, whether authenticity provides a new way of ordering or integrating other well-known leadership capabilities.

If authenticity is the primary capability for twenty first century leaders, this will have significant impacts on existing professional development programs on leadership. Currently leadership programs are characterised by a consistent formula of self-analysis – for example the 360 degree survey and then the MBTI questionnaire – followed by an analysis of the external environment, an analysis of the organisation and the development of new strategies. Perhaps this prevailing formula needs to be refurbished and given a sharper edge, with future leadership programs examining authentic leadership and organisations as the central focus.

Finally and hopefully, this book will assist with the development of more authentic leaders and organisations:

By looking at the experiences of women leaders who have carefully and deliberately carved a space for their whole selves to thrive within their work environment, we can learn how to become more authentic – and how to create systems in which identity is a source of strength that fosters growth and flourishing. (Roberts 2007, p.352)

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