



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

BIO MTP CONNECT WOMEN IN LIFE SCIENCES LEADERSHIP PANEL Monday 3 June 2024

Thank you for this invitation to speak on this Women in Life Sciences Leadership Panel.

The distinguished researchers on this panel will have more direct and salient experience than I of working in the life sciences. I hope you will make allowances for the fact that I was educated in the science often referred to as ‘dismal’ or ‘miserable’ – economics.

For this panel I have been asked to reflect on and from my experience is leadership in academia, including for research. I will comment on two aspects of leadership – the responsibilities of leadership and the journey to leadership.

Before I address these two areas let me quickly note that, in response to concerns about women’s representation in the sciences the Victorian government has made general plans and specific programs to support gender equality and diversity in research and in start-ups. These range from prioritising gender equality in its health and medical research strategy to LaunchVic’s Alice Anderson fund that co-invests in women-led start-ups.

Let me begin with the responsibilities of leadership and how these might intersect with those involved in research.

Research, particularly life sciences, is often experienced in and through teams. Teams have leaders – but are usually understood to be, or aspire to be, collegial relationships

and endeavours among a group of peers; people bringing a shared passion and expertise to their individual and team roles.

First among equals (as we might characterise these leadership roles in research teams) have their challenges, but they are different challenges from those of many other leadership roles.

One defining characteristic for leadership of research teams and one that is, I believe, shared and necessary in other leadership roles is key.

Successful leaders (chosen by and from the team) give more than they get – or more accurately must operate from the mindset that they should give more than they get. This goes from the tangible gaining of and distribution of resources to the intangible boosting of morale and fostering cohesion.

To successfully do both you, as a leader, must be able to effectively scan the horizon for opportunities and threats and also build a clear and deep understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of those in the team.

The second responsibility of leadership is one that becomes very clear in leadership roles that have management requirements in relation to many teams or a whole of organisation role, including as CEO. These roles typically have defined accountabilities to other leaders or boards.

Here you need to carry the burdens of leadership lightly – you do need to “keep your head when all about you are losing theirs” and you should not, except in the dark of night, count the costs for you of the issues with which you may have to deal or the decisions that must be made.

This aspect of leadership is why you so often hear people say of the roles of CEO or President that they are lonely roles. In this Presidential election year in the USA, it is perhaps apposite to quote the phrase attributed (perhaps incorrectly) to Harry Truman - "If you want a friend in Washington, buy a dog".

Unlike the presumed collegiality of the research team, the world of the organisation can seem to be waiting and judging – and it often is.

The third is caring or valuing the organisation. This flows from the first responsibility of 'giving more than you get'. And I should be clear I am not talking about what is often described as loyalty to a team. I mean clearly understanding the value of the organisation and being able to dispassionately evaluate not only its circumstances and possibilities, but also what you might and should contribute.

Your fit at this time and in this place needs to be considered by you – what you bring, not what this role will add to your resume.

Like most observations distilled from evidence and experience, they are much easier to say or write than to do and do effectively and consistently.

You may be thinking at this point but what does this have to do with 'women in leadership'? First, that I don't think the broad responsibilities change with gender – what changes is the opportunities to undertake leadership positions, less diverse than the distribution of capabilities in the population. Second, that I do not believe that women bring intrinsically 'better' skills or key innate capacities to leadership roles – just as I do not believe men were born to lead – people bring different capacities and experiences to the role and different strengths and experiences are needed depending on the time and the organisation.

What is important is the journey to leadership and how it is shaped.

There are those who have a long-term plan and plot a career path towards leadership roles - I cannot give useful advice for those seeking a blueprint. I did not plan for my first leadership roles.

I began my academic career wanting to be good at what I did and caring passionately about the field in which I initially researched and taught, labour or industrial relations. As with many early or initial leadership roles in universities, they grew from being deeply involved in my School and Faculty.

But there were many different roles in a number of different universities that ended as President and Vice-Chancellor of Monash University in Melbourne Australia in August 2023. My first full-time senior leadership position reporting (beyond faculty or school) to a President of a university was some 27 years ago.

Looking back, I think two general and one personal matter were critical to what I believe was a very fortunate life in universities (institutions that teach and research). And it was a life not just a career journey.

The first was mentors – not that they ever described themselves that way. People who gave advice, directly and indirectly, and also gave me unexpected opportunities. In my career as you might have guessed those mentors were men – because there were very few women in leadership or senior academic positions.

The second critical factor I have already mentioned – unexpected opportunities. The unexpected opportunities that came to me might have been seen as having potential pitfalls; they required me to ‘step aside’ for a time from my current research or position – but they brought new perspectives and experiences and caused me to see the world differently.

I cannot thank enough those who took the time to suggest something new or give me an opportunity to stretch, not up but out. Those of us who hold or have held leadership positions must, in exercising the responsibilities I discussed earlier, give particular time to looking carefully at those around us and take the time to give advice or assistance so that leaders are built from and in a diverse group.

I said earlier that there was one personal factor that made doing what I have done possible. I was blessed with a good education and parents who encouraged education even though they had not had schooling beyond age 15. My children proved to be resilient, well balanced, tolerant people from an early age. Most important I have a partner who more than shared all the load and the enthusiasms. There's a deal of luck in all these matters.

And thus, even more reason to recognise your own good fortune and pay attention to the responsibilities of leadership for the journeys of others and for the good of the organisations.

Thank you.