



# Australian Rural Leadership Foundation Evaluation Case Study: Collective Impact



Australian  
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*Leadership* (noun): the action of leading a group of people or an organisation. See also: guidance, direction, authority, management.

*Region* (noun): an area, especially part of a country or the world having definable characteristics but not always fixed boundaries.

Two seemingly simple nouns. Meanings offered in black and white. But as anyone who has ever tried to be a leader in their own region knows, the layers of intrinsically held beliefs about who can do what – and why – and when – and with whom – are not always black and white.

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To support those looking to lead in their own communities, the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation delivered the Leadership for our Regions pilot program in Queensland's Wide Bay Burnett region in 2019 in partnership with the Regional Australia Institute.

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communities, the eight-day, two-session intensive program brought together more than 20 locals from different industries and walks of life – but with the same driving ambition to make their region the best it can be through developing their own skills, and learning how to lead as part of a network.

*Individual* (noun): a single human being as distinct from a group.







## Darren the Deputy Mayor

“Personally, I can’t put too fine a point on it to be honest. Being part of the Leadership for our Regions course completely changed the way I think. My tolerance is somewhere it simply didn’t exist before. That has an exponential flow on impact to the people around me, how I lead, how I choose to work alongside other leaders. It’s remarkable.”

Darren Everard is the Deputy Mayor of the Fraser Coast Council. Originally from Victoria, he moved to Hervey Bay more than 30 years ago and ran a successful butcher shop for 13 years. Now serving his third term in local government he applied to take part in the Leadership for our Regions program with an interest in seeing leadership in a new way.

“I’ve always been interested in leadership and I like to think I’m the sort of person who won’t ask anyone to do something I wouldn’t do,” Darren said.

“No one is an expert and I think it’s important to acknowledge that everyone has a story and something to offer.

“I love learning and was dubious about the impact this delivery format would have, but the intensive nature of it helped me to pick up things really quickly and have to evaluate that worth on the spot – which meant the key learnings have stuck with me quite profoundly.”

Darren said the program helped him craft his

personal ability to organise and prioritise.

“In my position, meeting expectations is difficult when there’s a population of people relying on you, so quick and simple problem solving is vital,” he said.

“Thanks to what I learnt, I am never going to rush into an emergency again. Now, when there’s a problem I try to triage it. If someone tells me a problem, I can sort the jigsaw out, think quick – the experience from the program helped me with that.”



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## Tanya the local Neighbourhood Centre CEO

"I am incredibly confident in my own sector but have always felt a little inferior in the business space. Especially working in not for profit, I'm acutely aware that I am usually the person with my hand out asking for something. That's difficult sometimes and it's made me over conscious about how people might perceive me. It was really nice to be part of the Leadership for our Regions program as an equal, not asking for anything and have the time to get to know the business community on a level playing field."

A true Hervey Bay local (minus the first four years of her life) Tanya Stevenson lives and breathes community development as the CEO of the Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre. She's been working in human services for nearly 20 years and has made a career out of supporting the neediest in her region.

"It's a very rewarding profession but it's easy to get into a habit of putting others first – that's the very definition of human services jobs," Tanya said.

"When I saw the program advertised on Facebook I applied there and then on my phone, thinking it was more a professional development opportunity. I didn't expect it to have an impact on me as an individual and didn't expect to make friends.

"I have some incredible friendships now with people I already had a relationship with within the Wide Bay region, but I had probably pigeon-holed them, and they me. And that realisation that every person doing that course were attempting to solve the exact same problem, just from a different angle, was huge for me.

"It has changed the way I view a lot of fellow leaders and I've allowed myself to now model my own leadership on theirs. Previously I didn't have the confidence to do that, or the knowledge of how to be a practical leader for the young people I work with every day."







## May the Psychologist

“Even though I’d started my business and I sit on local health committees, I was still seeking the skills and connections to know what leadership was. I guess I was really searching for something to help me test my own skills and connect with other people that were also thinking that way – and I absolutely found it with the Leadership for our Regions program.”

Psychologist, small business owner and married mother of one – May Chi has called Hervey Bay home for six years after growing up on the Gold Coast and studying in Brisbane.

Signing up to the intensive course made sense to her from a business perspective but unravelled a deep sense of connection to her community she hadn’t expected.

“When I walked into the Maryborough RSL for the very first meeting, the first person I met was a bloke who grew cucumbers and I was thinking what have I done?” May laughed.

“Then I saw that the local Deputy Mayor was there too, and I felt incredibly curious about how it was going to all work and how we would ever actually work together,” she said.

“It didn’t take too long to feel that sense of shared identity and purpose to make it all much less daunting.

“Even the people I might have not liked in that room or people I wouldn’t have chosen to spend time with ordinarily, I know now that I would still be supported if I needed something from them, and vice versa. It so important to have that to build a community up – but also your own self-worth and self-confidence too.”



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## Scott the Director

"I didn't expect the program to be life altering at all. I saw it as a good networking opportunity more than anything. My opinion has obviously changed significantly since being part of it. This program gave me a greater tolerance as a manager and a person. I have changed and adapted and catch myself now when I see I'm becoming impatient for outcomes – both at work and at home."

Scott Rowe is the Director of Regional Development Australia (Wide Bay Burnett) and originally found out about the Leadership for our Regions program when he was asked to sit on the selection panel.

"I asked my Board for approval to take time off to be part of the panel and one of the members suggested I should actually withdraw from that role and apply to do the course myself," Scott said.

"I valued that person's advice and decided they must see something in the program – and myself – that I didn't see.

"When I was accepted in to the program I automatically decided there were particular elements of it that just wouldn't apply to me because I already had a decent grasp on certain topics, like producing evidence based data sets or sourcing grants funding. But despite that initial thought process I was quickly offered a different take on these subjects I'd not considered before.

"It's worth noting also that a whole session making 'wearable art' seemed silly to me, too. I would rather cut an acre of grass with scissors than make a piece of wearable art. But the group work expectation around that activity made me push out of my comfort zone, accept the confrontation and challenges because we all had a common end goal.

"It showed us how to lead and unite immediately because we already knew we didn't have to find common ground. The passion for our region was evident just by being there.

"As community leaders we've got something that is enduring now, and I didn't think I would be part of something like that. I've gained so much personally from that bond and knowing that if it's work related or community related – I can call them and have a conversation."



## Collective (adjective): done by people acting as a group

The coach of the Chicago Bulls six-time championship team, Phil Jackson, is quoted as saying, 'Good teams become great when the members trust each other enough to surrender the Me for the We'.

It might have been a comment based on a 1990s American basketball team, but the sentiment underlies the very essence of the Leadership for our Regions program.

The pilot program rolled out in the Wide Bay Burnett not only created individual breakthroughs for the participants, it united them in a way that's already enacted collective, ongoing impacts for good for the entire region.

Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre CEO Tanya Stevenson started a conversation during the program focused on the extreme youth disadvantage crisis facing the community.

"That conversation has manifested in the Neighbourhood Centre winning a \$95-thousand grant from the Queensland Government to put 60 young people through a program I've written, to help local youth become better decision makers, cope with stress and ultimately get a house and a job," Tanya said.

"I started writing the program just after our ARLF program finished up because I was full of ideas and confidence and knew I had the support of the local business community and Council behind me too. I felt inspired," she said.

"We live in a region where nearly 25% of our youth don't live with their family and 14% of those kids say they feel unsafe at home. 2% of local young people are homeless on any given night of the week. These stats shine a light on the disadvantage that exists in our local area and for a long time I've felt like I've only been able to put out fires – not actually stop them from starting."

Darren Everard has a similar outlook.

"Groups within the program were created and I think our group really got "it" and that's where the ideas around transformational programs for our kids in the region started," he said.

"If we weren't all in that place at that time, that's a conversation that wouldn't have happened. Now the work is being done, we're refining the idea and it's giving hope and support to kids that really need it – that's an incredible thing for one leadership program to birth.

"There's a legacy for our region out of this program from the energy generated by the people in that course. Open minds, an acceptance to take on the learnings and a renewed sense of duty and worth – what a legacy, eh?"

May Chi says she too has been inspired with a renewed sense of duty thanks to the Leadership for our Regions program.

"I didn't expect the depth of commitment it would evoke," she said.

"I knew I'd be committing to a few days of intensive training, but now I'm at a point where I've essentially made a lifetime commitment to my community, and I'm ok with that!

"I think the program really helped me to double down on my dedication to the region. Whatever was there before has been multiplied infinitely."

For May, doubling down first manifested during Queensland's Covid-19 lockdown in April 2020.

"During that time, my workload increased to an incredible level. I could acknowledge the pressure I was under and figured others in my field would be feeling it too – so I started holding a weekly Zoom meeting for other psychologists in regional areas" she said.

"Out of that experience, I could see the need to better connect early career psychologists and check in with them more often to make sure they were ok."

Based on the feedback from those impromptu Zoom sessions, May felt a responsibility to start a second business to specifically offer training to psychologists in her region with the long-term view to retain them.

"There are hundreds of undergraduates but not many convert to registered psychologists and the more rural you go the more pronounced that deficit becomes," she said.

"My husband and I are now looking at a private practice model of training and we're actively sharing that with other private practices so they can benefit from these learnings as well.

"I have never been busier but also, I've never been happier.

"Thanks to what I learned during the leadership program and the support network that has given me, I have this clear direction and focus on community that helps me prioritise – my community is my priority.

"Simply put, regional Australia is worth investing in. I've had more opportunities here than in Brisbane or the Gold Coast and it's accelerated my learning and experience.

"I can really see the growth and capacity for regional Australia to lead."

It's a sentiment that's music to Scott Rowe's ears, both as a Director of Regional Development Australia, and as a proud Hervey Bay local.

"Collectively, the region now has a group of leaders connected to each other, and these are connections that simply didn't exist prior to this program bringing us together in a really intensive way.

"Despite having common goals and living in the same region, we'd never had the time – or made the time – to seek each other out in a meaningful way.

"Now, we are all betrothed to shaking out the absolute best opportunities for not just our region – but for each other and ourselves.

"Having that support offers clarity and purpose and that's a benefit to us as individuals and as a collective.

"The course was something I wouldn't have considered ordinarily but I'm glad I was given the push. I got so much more out of it than I could have expected and drove home the old saying, 'you don't know what you don't know'."

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