

UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
WINTER LECTURES 2011: NEW ZEALAND'S RUGBY WORLD
'LEARNING THE REAL RUGBY LESSONS IN NEW ZEALAND'

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1. BACKGROUND

There is a certain delicious irony that I am giving this lecture that would not be lost on my former school mates at the Duke of York's Royal Military School.

I am a confirmed soccer nut; I finally hung up my boots last year after 45 years. I arrived at the school in 1971 reasonably optimistic that I would be able to change the school's singular obsession with rugby as well as its deeply held suspicion of all things related to soccer. Needless to say I failed miserably.

At our school we had not just one but two hierarchies— the civilian one and the military one. A keen leadership observer even in those days, I was struck that most of the First XV always seemed to find their way into positions of authority within both hierarchies to the exclusion of non-rugby playing pupils. A leadership lesson I learned early on was that prowess on the rugby field was equated with leadership capability.

The same connection is widely recognised within Corporate Australasia—it was most dramatically symbolised by the appointment of David Kirk, the only All Blacks captain still to lift the William Webb Ellis trophy, to become the CEO of Fairfax media. I did find it interesting, however, that the one old boy of the school who was selected to pull on an England shirt, Maurice Colclough, possessed a rebellious streak which placed him at the bottom end of both hierarchies.

I did make one very token appearance for the School Third XV (or the 'Turds' as we were affectionately known). At the end of the game, I booted the match ball into oblivion vowing never to touch the wrong-shaped ball ever again.

Living in Canada for 19 years meant that there was little danger of coming into contact with that wrong-shaped ball although one notable exception was sitting in a cafe very early on a Sunday morning in Calgary along with 10 kiwis watching the one-man demolition of the English in South Africa in 1995 by one Jonah Luma; we were three tries down even before our breakfast arrived. I was clearly supporting the wrong team.

Thankfully, four years later I was able to rectify this by moving to New Zealand in July 1999. When people ask me when I first became a kiwi, I tell them it wasn't when I finally received my citizenship

last September but five weeks after landing. My immigrant family were ensconced in a cold and damp motel just by Lake Rotorua on our way to liberate our dog, Skippy, from quarantine. Taking in our first Bledisloe Cup, we witnessed the All Blacks defeat the Wallabies 34-15 at Eden Park. That was eleven years and one week ago—it's funny how things just don't seem to change!

It wasn't so much the win but the manner of winning. I had spent the past 20 years trying to be enthused by a stale diet of highly corporatized and soulless North American sport – the one notable exception being Canada's game, ice hockey, although that was rapidly losing its appeal due to commercial exploitation.

I was stunned by the speed, the immediacy, the flow, the ingenuity and the sheer thrill of this game which I barely recognised as rugby; I rediscovered the joy of watching sport again. What's more, my wife, Jacquie, loved it too – she worked out with several of the All Blacks players at the Body Works Gym in Wellington. We have never missed a game since.

Since that game, I have followed rugby very closely. I always turn to the sports page in the Dominion Post and the New Zealand Herald and love listening to Radio Sport when I garden. In fact, my rediscovery of rugby has coincided with my discovery of leadership as a field of study to which I am totally committed.

2. LECTURE OBJECTIVES

So how has my study of leadership shone light on my understanding and appreciation for the game of rugby and, just as significantly, how has rugby advanced my understanding and appreciation of leadership?

In this lecture I want to highlight the 'real lessons' of leadership that I believe can be derived by examining rugby, most especially when we apply leadership concepts. Today I will focus on three leadership frameworks that we regularly use in our research, development and education work at the New Zealand Leadership Institute.

The reason I have said that there are 'real lessons' to be learned is that I believe that there are lessons to be derived which are not normally derived in general discourse, most notably through the media. What I'd like suggest is that, with some notable exceptions, we tend to be fed largely two-dimensional 'heroic' interpretations of leadership in rugby when there are richer more nuanced and ultimately more useful lessons to be derived and learned.

Looking to sport to learn about leadership is neither novel nor rare. The public school ethos forged in the Victorian era emphasised the twin imperatives of scholarship and athleticism. In bequeathing the Rhodes Scholarship, Cecil Rhodes opined that 'the ability to lead and the energy needed to use talents to the full' was best tested through participation and success in sports and today the celebrity speaker's circuit is chockfull of former sporting greats plying their leadership lessons to corporate and community audiences.

A team of Waikato University management researchers that included Kevin Roberts wrote a best-selling book which endeavoured to capture the management secrets of the world's most successful

sporting clubs, including the All Blacks. In their book *Business Leadership and the Lessons from Sport*, Hans Westerbreek and Aaron Smith note that:

“Sport offers a unique metaphor for critically examining leadership in business. Starting with the need for comfort with the unpredictable nature of sport, to the importance of preparation and training and the key roles that those at the coal face perform, the best of sport can be found in the tension between chaos and control where a coaching approach offers new ways of thinking about followers.”

Among all of the sports that I have either played or watched, rugby is the sport that can provide a very powerful metaphor for leadership most especially for that which needs to be exercised in the increasingly complex and interconnected world in which we work. That’s one of the reasons why I agreed to give this lecture.

First, there is the simple but central matter of the shape of the ball. It is certainly not the wrong shape if you want to introduce uncertainty into a game. Second, while there are well established specialisations and divisions of duty, there is a remarkable degree of interdependency within the team. Every player needs to be ready and able to take on every function including kicking. Just look at Ali Williams. No one player can dominate. Third, the work that gets done *off* the ball is as important as the work that gets done on the ball. This is why it is so important to see games live as so much of the play is missed by TV coverage. Fourth, unlike most North American sports, the coaches become powerless once the game commences. The play has to be constantly created and improvised by all of the players with very little time for reflection and assessment. Finally, despite its hallowed traditions, the game is always changing with new rules, performance standards, business imperatives, geographies and technologies.

Given that rugby remains the premier sport in New Zealand (although its influence has waned considerably since the last World Cup), I want to argue, rather unfashionably I hazard, that we are fortunate to have such a singularly rich and salient sporting metaphor from which to draw leadership lessons from, recognising that sport is a highly specialised leadership context. Metaphors are always partial and can be dangerous if not worked with properly. But as noted in Dr Greg Ryan’s excellent scene setting opening lecture, the All Blacks have, and continue to exert, a deeply ingrained influence on how many of us see ourselves as a nation and how we judge our worth and standing. Why else were so many people I met so cheerful last Sunday morning?

Central to this is the role that the All Blacks play in the forging of our prototypes of ideal leadership. As Jock Phillips, in his influential book, *A Man’s Country*, notes:

“Superior physical toughness borne of an open-air life, ingenuity and mental adaptability, courage, teamwork and good fellowship, an egalitarian spirit, modest leadership from the front – these were the ‘attributes’ which white New Zealanders read into the success of the 1905 team and which came to define the ideal New Zealand male.”

Moreover, as we learned from Malcolm Mulholland’s lecture two weeks ago the All Blacks have served to promote an ethos of unifying teamwork that not only transcends but actively interweaves cultural differences. Chris Laidlaw has observed:

“In an odd way professionalism in sport removes class or race barriers by superimposing another culture – that of the team – over every other difference. Professional rugby has unquestionably served to strengthen the imagery of three cultures working in visible harmony. The All Blacks set an example that has no parallel in this respect.”

That being said, I take to heart the lecture that was given by Dr Jennifer Curtin and Melodie Robinson on Women and Rugby in New Zealand that there are probably even greater leadership lessons to be gleaned by studying the Back Ferns, who have shown the All Blacks the way by winning four successive Rugby World Cups; a unique achievement for a national team from any code, or the New Zealand Sevens whose remarkable alchemist coach, Gordon Titjens, patiently builds new winning teams from scratch season in and season out. However, these teams have neither received the levels of scrutiny that are placed upon the All Blacks nor the mythological status that has been ascribed to them.

Leadership scholars in general tend to be preoccupied with three primary questions which, despite all of our combined efforts, never seem to be completely and satisfactorily addressed:

1. What is Leadership?
2. What is Leadership For?
3. How do we create it?

3. WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Starting with the first question, one of the enduring problems for leadership scholars is that a common definition of what it is we are supposed to be studying continues to elude us in the manner of the mythical quest for the holy grail.

Keith Grint, the Merlin of leadership studies, has cleverly suggested that it is both natural and desirable that leadership should continue to remain an ‘essentially contested concept,’ a concept that should be at the centre of healthy debate and discussion. This debate should also recognise that leadership should be viewed from four different lenses of leadership, each of which are equally important if we wish to grasp the essence of leadership.

To illustrate this framework I ‘m going to take you back to a rugby pitch in Cardiff on October 26, 2007 on a rugby pitch in Cardiff. After so many brilliant victories, the All Blacks picked a bad time to lose a game. Why? Did the Coach and Captain failed to show leadership? Were the players too pampered (although that didn’t seem to bother the French team who stayed in even higher class accommodation)? Or was it the ‘Player Rotation’ policy? The Conditioning ‘Regime’ or the Players messing around with the ‘Haka’?

It was a very long week for all of us after that game but I did learn a lot from many people about what they thought leadership was. They told me quite categorically that the All Blacks didn’t have it, despite my pointing out that they seemed to have plenty of leadership in most of the previous 50 games that Graham Henry had coached prior to this game. As New Zealand’s first and only professor of leadership I felt almost partially responsible. I know I made myself very unpopular by publicly defending the coaching staff and the players, insisting that they all be contracted at once by the

NZRU for another four years so that they could put things right. Making people accountable does not always require firing them (however emotionally satisfying that might be for followers). I was very pleased to see the NZRU refused to bow to popular opinion most especially that expressed from the South Island.

There is nothing like the painful feeling of losing to spur an athlete on to perform at an even higher level and nothing like the experience of losing and yet still getting on with the everyday details of life to put everything into the right perspective. The French averaged 3.5 years more in age than the All Blacks team on that fateful day. Therefore, on Saturday (7th August), I was delighted to see the oldest and most experienced All Black team in history take to the field at Eden Park – their performance spoke for itself.

3. WHAT IS LEADERSHIP FOR?

Leadership is a great field to be working in because it is widely conceived as being the *cause* of most important problems whether it's the global financial crisis, climate change or world hunger as well as the *solution* to these problems.

While this might be seen as an enviable source of sustainable competitive advantage, ultimately these naïve and overblown expectations have presented a major problem for the field in terms of its focus and ambition. We are indebted once more to Keith Grint for providing us with another useful framework that helps us to distinguish between the functions of leadership, management and command processes. These critically distinct but inter-related processes have frequently become confused and conflated to the point that they have become meaningless.

Grint begins by distinguishing between the kinds of problems that organisations, communities and governments have to address:

Critical problems – The Christchurch Earthquake

Tame Problems – Assembling the annual budget

Wicked problems – Tackling youth unemployment

We'll illustrate this framework by referring to the Rugby World Cup.

Command – Referee – one of the great pleasures of rugby is that disputing the referee is still frowned upon –although private and public dissent after the game is widely practised!

Management – The Rugby World Cup has led by Martin Sneddon

Leadership – Graham Henry asking questions – the book

Note that the type of power that underpins command, management and Leadership power is different (from hard to calculative to soft power)

Applying this framework to the RUGBY WORLD CUP 2011 I am hopeful that the command processes will be left to the referee. There is some concern that the International Rugby Board have relied too heavily on Command as its primary *modus operandi* when perhaps leadership and management

might have been more appropriate. My overall sense is that the Rugby World Cup has been well managed; we've placed a great deal of emphasis on making sure that everything will work (as it should). However, I believe that too much of the focus for the World Cup has been exclusively on two things: Will the All Blacks win the cup? How much is it costing us? My main worry all along was that, having invited the world to come and join the 'Stadium of 4 million' would they come? And, if they did come, how enjoyable and memorable would that experience be for them?

The mission that underpinned the winning world cup bid in Dublin 2006, a bold leadership achievement in itself, seems to have been lost or transmuted over the past five years. Perhaps most worrying of all, would we New Zealanders come?

My observation thus far is that the Rugby World Cup may have been over-managed and under-led. We have been preoccupied with efficiency and effectiveness concerns and taken for granted that everyone implicitly grasps and embraces the purpose and the meaning of the event. This is vital leadership work.

Even though it is only five weeks it is not too late, however as we turn to the final leadership question.

4. HOW IS LEADERSHIP CREATED?

Let's start by looking at the relationship between leaders and followers. James Kouzes and Barry Posner helpfully elaborate in this relationship by noting that, "Leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who **choose** to lead and those who **decide** to follow." While leaders get all of the attention, the followers have an important and active role in creating leadership. Follower power is most obviously demonstrated when we turn our gaze to rugby fans, a constituency that we have yet to recognise but a critical part of the rugby leadership equation.

I spent my 50th birthday with 26,000 aficionados of the game and was struck by how vital the fans have been to the club's long and sustained success. Closer to home, I was inspired a recent visit to the Norths Rugby Football Club based in Porirua to help them celebrate their 21st anniversary by soundly defeating former stalwarts of the Jubilee Cup, Ponake. My wife and I were given a very warm welcome in the club house by volunteers and fans proudly garbed in their blue and white jackets. There is widespread concern with the current state of club rugby – something that Chris Laidlaw will be addressing directly in his lecture. A visit to Northern United gives some grounds for optimism.

With respect to thinking constructively about the future of the game of rugby in New Zealand beyond the World Cup in New Zealand I want to draw on one final leadership framework that has been developed by Mary Uhl-Bien who paid us a visit in October of last year. Mary's work was inspired by the pioneering work of Margaret Wheatley who transposed the science of complexity theory to the field of leadership theory noted that:

"Change results not from top-down, preconceived strategic plans or mandates of any single individual boss, but from local actions that occur simultaneously around the system linking up with one another to produce powerful emergent phenomena."

In her model of complexity leadership, Mary Uhl-Bien distinguishes between Administrative Leadership (Top-Down) and Adaptive Leadership (Bottom Up) and highlights how these processes frequently fail to connect in many organizations,

Turning to the field of rugby in New Zealand:

Administrative Leadership – The IRB, RWC and the Government

Adaptive Leadership - Fans, clubs, local community, businesses etc

Enabling Leadership – connection between these two leadership processes

We saw a brilliant display of enabling leadership in action on Saturday night on the pitch at Eden Park, most especially in the first half. In the week prior the media picked up on an initiative beyond the rugby initiative in which adaptive leadership connected to administrative leadership via the enabling leadership shown by John Morrissey, the president of the Wainuiomata Rugby Club. The club has produced a Rugby World Cup promotional video costing the princely sum of \$300 that touts Wainuiomata itself as the must-see tourist destination for those who prize real rugby and real New Zealand towns.

The NZRU has much to learn from complexity leadership as it faces a very difficult challenge of ensuring the game endures beyond the decade. It is trying to control the uncontrollable. The complex environment within which they operate required more than an old paradigm of leadership which is based exclusively on administrative leadership.

Graham Mourie, arguably one of the greatest All Black captains of all times, captures the essence of complexity leadership brilliantly when he articulates the captains' role in creating leadership:

“The small, infinite variations of day to organisation, the creation in all of the players of an acceptance of the philosophy which enabled them to motivate themselves to meet that aim, the liaison between players, between players and officials, between players and management, to provide an environment in which that motivation would not be twisted or perverted in any manner diverted away from *the aim*”

He certainly put his leadership philosophy to good effect as coach of the Hurricanes who made complexity a core feature of their brand with the slogan: 'Expect the Unexpected'! Those were the days.

5. CONCLUSION

Graham Mourie's quote brings to the fore the importance of *purpose* in leadership; in my view a worthy fifth lens to add to Keith Grint's four lenses that I discussed earlier.

In bookstores throughout the country rugby books are being prominently displayed in an effort to cash in on interest generated by the Rugby World Cup. Two books in particular have caught my eye

as, at first sight, they could be perceived to be focusing on two different leadership purposes for rugby that are diametrically opposed to each other.

In one corner stands the book by Sean Fitzpatrick, who is still many people's pick as the most effective rugby leader of all time. The title says it all – *Winning Matters*.

It also reinforces a powerful function of leadership that has been highlighted by the influential Harvard Scholar, Ron Heifetz who provocatively argues that:

“Leaders who truly care for their followers expose them to the painful reality of their condition and demand that they fashion a response. Instead of giving people false assurance that their best is good enough, leaders insist that people surpass themselves. And rather than smoothing over conflicts, leaders force disputes to the surface”

The other book that captured my attention presents a fine photographic essay of ‘heartland rugby’. It's entitled *For the Love of The Game*

The book beautifully illuminates the importance of the enduring passion for the game of rugby despite the widespread predictions of the demise of the game. It also shows how place and purpose can become powerfully fused in rugby leadership and leadership in general.

As Chris Laidlaw has observed in his very thoughtful book, *Someone Stole My Game*:

“One of rugby's most distinctive attributes its seemingly contrary capacity to unite and to divide, to provide a beacon for national aspirations and a stick for others to beat it with. Over a century and half it has had its full share of both and the scar tissue still remains.”

In the spirit of promoting unity rather than division, I would like to implore everybody not to lose sight of the fact that, ‘The Game's The Thing’! I know I am belying my English public school roots and will be charged with the most dreaded of contemporary crimes, ‘political correctness,’ with my in-bred tendency to endorse the view ‘that it is the playing, not the winning’ that matters most. However, after eleven years in New Zealand I'm becoming convinced that perhaps it is the ‘winning *and* the playing’ that matters most after all. In this regards we are very fortunate to have as the current All Black captain a leader who encapsulates and personifies to such authentic effect the combined love of playing and winning the game both on the field and off the field.

I wish Richie and his team mates as well as all rugby players who come to these shores in September much joy in playing this very special game and look forward to celebrating this wonderful sporting event along with all 4 million of our compatriots

I have my tickets -- do you have yours?

“Let the Games Begin!”