

AN ADDRESS TO THE COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE, MELBOURNE TOWN HALL, WEDNESDAY 26TH MAY 2010.

Vision, Leadership, Growth

I don't know how many of you realise, but we're related. VicRelief Foodbank and the CWA. You see, Helen Christie is my boss too! When the Victorian Relief Committee and Foodbank Victoria merged a few years ago, one of the four founding organisations was the CWA. And, ever since, we've been lucky enough to have your President as one of our Board members. And that's the Board I report too. So when Helen Christie rings up and asks me to jump, I ask how high on the way up.

And not only are we related, we're about the same age. Not you and me. I can see that most of you are much younger than me! No, I mean the CWA and VicRelief Foodbank are the same age. Well almost. You're 82 and we're 80 this year. I know, I know, I don't look a day over 75.

And all through these 8 decades the paths of CWA and VicRelief Foodbank have constantly intersected; intersections that have been to the very great benefit of struggling Victorians.

These days, VicRelief Foodbank concentrates on getting food out to the emergency relief agencies of Victoria. We get food from everywhere. Fresh from the farm, nearly fresh from the fruit and vegetable markets. We get food from producers. A load of freshly baked bread arrives in our Yarraville warehouse every morning. We get canned goods, pasta, rice, cereals, chocolates, ... everything. And most of it donated free.

And then we give it away. Agencies order from the country areas and we ship it out (all paid for by the Government – isn't it nice to see our taxes being used for something useful?). In Melbourne, the agencies come right into the warehouse and pick up what they need. Every week, if they need to.

This year we'll ship out around 2,500 tonnes of food. Next year, we're aiming to give away over 4,000 tonnes. 4 million kilos of free food. And it goes to agencies who give it away to people who need it. And I know there's more than a few people in this room today who volunteer their time in those very agencies that get our food.

So, it's lovely to be with my sisters, and brothers, in the CWA. And to thank you for being part of our work in trying to fix hunger in Victoria.

I see your conference theme is "Vision, Leadership, Growth." Wow. Big topic. And I have 15 minutes! So, five minutes on each then.

Let me begin with the middle one – Leadership.

I joined World Vision Australia in 1976. I was 28 years old. And I knew almost everything. Unlike when I was 18 years old, when I knew absolutely everything.

Despite knowing almost everything, I actually learned something in that very first week. World Vision, being a Christian organisation, had a weekly staff meeting that we called "Staff Devotions." Every week some luminary would come and give us the benefit of their illumination. The amount of illumination tended to vary quite a bit week to week.

Anyway, this very first week at World Vision turned out to be particularly illuminating because the guest speaker told us the story of Nehemiah. At 28 years of age, despite knowing almost everything, I had never read the story of Nehemiah.

Now, some of you will know that Nehemiah's story is in Bible. His story is told in a book that has a surprising name – Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was the guy that got the people of Jerusalem together and rebuilt the destroyed city. He put together a ragtag army of labourers, created a vision of what the rebuilt city might look like, faced down opposition from inside and outside, and led the organisation on to success. The walls were rebuilt.

This visiting luminary happened to be the CEO of Myer Shopping Centres, and he knew something himself about leadership. He inspired in me the immediate desire to read some more of Nehemiah's story.

Today, there's talk about Level Five leaders. The idea of Level 5 leaders comes from a book called "Good to Great". It's been very popular in business circles in the last decade or so as a description of the kind of leader who can turn good organisations into great organisations. And in some ways, this idea of Level 5 leaders turned our popular ideas about what makes a great leader upside down.

Because we tend to think great leaders have to be celebrities. But the research behind the book "Good to Great" showed that great leaders are not like that at all. They best leaders are not celebrities.

Instead great leaders are women and men who have both "personal humility" and "professional will". They are not rock star leaders. Companies with rock star leaders tend to survive only as long as the rock star survives. Great leaders are diligent and hard working. They have more bite than bark.

Nehemiah was a great leader. Hard working, but not full of himself. When it came to lunch, he had it in the lunch room with everyone else. That's not quite the way it says it in the King James Version, but that's what it means.

I learned early that joining the colleagues playing cards at lunch time was, not only fun, but good for my leadership. I learned that rewarding people for doing well, was much more powerful than criticising them for doing wrong. I learned that celebrating the everyday things was just as important as celebrating the exceptional.

We used to make a big song and dance about service awards. People got a reward just for hanging around for 5, ten, fifteen years. When they hit ten years, I would personally write a poem about them and frame it up as a certificate. It was very bad poetry, but colleagues valued those poems SO much. They would take them home and proudly show their families. They would display them prominently on their work stations as if they had received a Nobel prize.

One time someone told me that Sir Marcus Loane, when he was Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, would arrive at the office each day and routinely go around the entire office, saying hello to everyone at their desk. Such a simple act, so greatly appreciated by the staff. And think how much you might learn about your organisation if you took time to do that every day. You discover what people are working on. You discover who's off sick, or on holidays, or just joined, or who missed the bus this morning.

I've come to the conclusion that great leaders are the women and men who care most of all about the organisation. They're not working for the money. They're not working for the corner office with the big desk. They're not working for the key to the executive toilet. Their central passion is working to make the organisation great.

So, that's leadership in a few words.

Let's talk about Vision. Since I started in the Bible, let me quote a Proverb. "Where there is no vision, the people perish."¹

Now I am not talking about a Vision Statement. Nor am I talking about a Mission Statement. I am not talking about words written on paper.

A real vision is something you see. And we see them in our minds. Whether or not we can write words that represent the vision isn't very important. The real work of creating and communicating a vision is done with the mouth and with our actions. What we say and what we do communicate a person's vision more than written words ever can.

I know there's a fashion these days for organisations to have Vision Statements. And that's OK. We have a vision statement at VicRelief Foodbank. An Australia Without Hunger. And that's good as far as it goes. It is something we can ENVISAGE. We can see it in our mind. How wonderful it would be if we lived in an Australia without hunger. We know it can be done, by the way. And not just in Australia. We have had the know-how and the resources to eliminate hunger in the world for at least five decades. What we lack is the political will. We know how to do it: We just don't seem to want to do it.

So that kind of Vision Statement has its uses. But its main use is to remind us of all the spoken and acted out words that keep us talking about, and living out our visions.

And great leaders live out their visions. They demonstrate the vision in their own lives. Great leaders get stuck in to show that the job can be done. Great leaders are passionate about what the organisation does. I really love the sight of those big trucks going out to agencies loaded up with good food. I enjoy it so much that the smell of diesel fumes in the morning traffic reminds me of VicRelief Foodbank. I love the smell of diesel in the morning!

"It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."

This was said by one of the great women of the 20th Century, Eleanor Roosevelt. *It isn't enough to talk about peace. You must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it.*

Eleanor Roosevelt knew that great leaders had a vision. A vision of a peaceful world, isn't a bad vision. This is the woman whose leadership created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And Eleanor knew that as a leader she couldn't be half-hearted about her vision. You have to believe it whole-heartedly. And you have to work at it.

I'm convinced that people can see fakeness. People watch their leaders all the time. We know if they are fair dinkum or not. If only our politicians knew this, eh?

I guess the bottom line is that you can't be a great leader, if you don't really believe in what you're doing. We see leaders come and go. Maybe some of the ones that go, didn't have their heart in it.

I am not an expert on all the famous things Eleanor Roosevelt said. Truth be told I wanted to check exactly how she had said that bit about "it's not enough to talk about peace". I didn't want to misquote her. So I googled *Eleanor Roosevelt quotes*, and while I was there I saw some other quotes that sounded pretty good too. In the Google Age, any speaker can sound better informed than they really are.

Here's another of Eleanor Roosevelt's quotes: "A woman is like a tea bag. You never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water."

¹ Proverbs 29:18

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So Vision. Leadership. And now growth.

I reckon that growth is a by-product of Vision and Leadership. Growth isn't, or at least I don't think it should be, a goal in its own right.

It's like happiness. I reckon it's no good saying that our goal in life is to be happy. It sounds reasonable, but it's not reasonable. Happiness is a by-product of what we do with our lives. As a matter of fact, Eleanor Roosevelt said that too. *Happiness is not a goal: it's a by-product.*

Anyway, back to growth. I reckon it's a by-product of leadership and vision.

At VicRelief Foodbank we are growing at an enormous rate. Last year we shipped food with a retail value of about \$20 million. This year we'll deliver about \$27 million worth. And next year we aiming to get out \$44 million. Now that's serious growth.

I reckon it comes about because of leadership and vision. Do I mean that it's all happening because I'm the leader at VicRelief Foodbank? Well, no I don't.

Leadership is about what we know and what we do. And what good leaders know is that the first thing to DO in great leadership is to recruit a great team. The first thing a great leader DOES is hire the right people. The right people with the right vision can bring success. And, if growth is one our measures of success, then that will be a by-product.

Finally, I want to share with you a poem. No, not one of the poems I wrote for a ten year service award. This poem is in Chinese. It is quite ancient. In 1982 I was working for World Vision Hong Kong and I mentioned to a colleague that I had come across this amazing poem about leadership. When I read her the English version, she recognised it and brought me a copy of the original Chinese. When I left Hong Kong after working with the team there for four years, they presented me with a scroll with this poem beautifully hand-written on it. I've treasured it ever since.

I only ever spoke enough Chinese to get into trouble with shop-keepers and tradesmen, so I'll read you the English version. I think this tells us a lot about great leadership. And it also says more than a little about the way the CWA works too. Here it is...

Go to the people.

Live with them.

Study together.

Share in their ups and downs.

Be in the same boat,

and help them build themselves according to their understanding.

Guide them in Truth,

So they will practise what they have learned and not just become empty vessels.

In doing this, you will become their true friend.

Don't upset laws and orders,

but discern the priorities of life.

Then you'll have no regrets.

Be kind to all and gently lead the young

until they accomplish their tasks and enjoy their maturity.

And, when it is done, of the best leaders, the people will say,

“We have achieved it ourselves.”

Thank you.