**Chapter 4**

**The influence of experience and culture on leadership**

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In this chapter I tell my story of developing leadership using narrative inquiry methodology because of how it offers the participant opportunity to express him or herself and to convey deep and insightful understanding of human experience. I was encouraged by my experience of working on a study that inquired into the journeys of Indigenous Australian athletes to the AFL (Australian Football League) and the NRL (National Rugby League). The stories the participants told my colleague and me, and our telling of their stories in print (see Light and Evans, 2018), allowed me to develop empathy with them and gain the deep subjective understanding that I have searched for in so much of my research.

The timing of the invitation to write this chapter was perfect due to its alignment with my plan to leave academia behind and run a family business in my hometown of Byron Bay, Australia in the near future. When invited to write a chapter, I thought back to relevant experiences and contexts that contributed to developing a positive disposition toward leading and a way, or style, of leading. I also thought of how they interacted with other experiences and cultures on my life journey that predated, but influenced, my academic career. Reflecting on my academic career as part of an ongoing journey of learning to lead, and my development of a desire to lead, I decided to adopt a personal experience narrative approach to tell my story. The academic leadership experiences I tell of were not just administrative roles such as Head of School but also short term research leadership roles such as being coordinator of a research group and convening an international conference.

The narrative I present here identifies a sequence of experiences from well before I became an academic to suggest how they shaped my academic leadership approach. Focused on the influence of socio-cultural context on experiences I reflect on leadership experiences in Australia, Japan, England and New Zealand. It tells my story in chronological order to link my past experience to the present in the form of lessons learned by the narrator and identify these links by analysing and evaluating sections of the narrative (Akinsanya and Bach, 2014). My story is divided into the three stages of:

(1) The emergence of leadership inclination and early learning prior to entering academia

(2) Learning to lead within academic contexts

(3) My experiences of leadership in senior academic positions.

**1. The emergence of leadership ability**

*Martial arts in Australia*

As a child and teenager I avoided the responsibility of leadership. I didn’t want to be class captain in primary school or to be captain of any of the many sporting teams I was in. It might have been because it was not ‘cool’ or due to a lack of confidence but I can’t really remember. However, I do remember finding myself in a leadership role that I thoroughly enjoyed. It was one that changed my life trajectory and was pivotal to my career development in academia.

My first appointment as a teacher was at one of the last one-teacher schools in NSW in an isolated area west of Sydney. At this school I taught 33 children from the age of five to fourteen as well as driving the school bus to pick them up every morning and drop them off every afternoon. Soon after my appointment, I joined a karate club in the nearest large town which was about a thirty minute drive from where I lived on a farm with two house mates who were in the same karate club. I soon developed a real passion for karate and worked my way up through the different levels to the last grade before black belt over three years. I then resigned as a teacher to train in Hong Kong, earn a black belt and return to make my living teaching karate in my hometown of Byron Bay. This was an adventure that my two housemates and I had excitedly discussed many times sitting at the kitchen table over a two year period but one that I eventually had to embark on alone. I loved teaching (and still do) and came from a teaching family but had a dream I was committed to realising and was willing to take the risks involved. Three years of setting and achieving goals in karate had contributed to developing belief in my ability to succeed and my inclination to set and achieve ambitious goals.

I was awarded my black belt in Hong Kong and returned to my home town of Byron Bay to set up a martial arts business that grew to include four clubs in four different towns. Teaching so many students from five year old children to competitive karateka and adult kickboxers who won state and national titles, and organising a range of large and complicated events, saw my leadership inclination and ability begin to emerge. I organised large annual karate camps, club and regional karate and kickboxing tournaments in northern NSW and Queensland that included state title bouts for NSW and Queensland titles over an eight year period. Reflecting on this from where I am now, I see how I had become a mentor and leader.

This was my first taste of substantial leadership and I enjoyed it. As a boy and teenager I had often disappointed my father who was the English master at Mullumbimby High School (my school). This included being temporarily expelled from school in year twelve for throwing stones on the science teacher’s (corrugated iron) roof with a couple of schoolmates and failing my first semester at Teachers College. Several years later, after I had established myself as a competitor and *sensei* (teacher), I overheard my father boasting to a friend of his about my coaching and leadership as head of a chain of martial arts schools and remember very well how good it made me feel. My experience as a leader in martial arts encouraged me to run other major sporting events in the Byron Bay area such as the first two Cape Byron triathlons to be held in the town, and set up a security business using my more suitable martial arts students to work at music concerts. All the events I staged required a great deal of help from my students, their friends and their families, all of which required good relationships, management and mutual respect. I learned how to treat people well and create a strong sense of belonging and loyalty, instead of just using them or telling them because I was *sensei.*

*Rugby coaching in Japan*

After eight years I left my martial arts business and moved to Sydney to qualify as a physical education teacher and was lucky enough to get a position back in in Byron Bay at the local high school. This had been my dream while living and studying in Sydney but after almost a year I had an opportunity to work as a professional rugby coach in Japan and could not turn it down. A Japanese university flew me to Osaka for an interview and offered me the position during the interview. This university competed in the Kansai (West Japan) A-League, which is a high level of competition. The Japanese sport system is modelled after that of the US with pathways into professional sport via junior and senior high school and then university sport with the university I was coach of in the top dozen rugby universities in Japan. When I arrived I was a little short on high level rugby coaching experience, could not speak Japanese and did not have an interpreter but was able to clumsily communicate. The confidence generated by my belief in my leadership ability helped me face an immensely challenging task. I had to coach over 100 players, *en masse*, learn to communicate in Japanese, learn how to lead as a coach in a very foreign country and learn how decisions were made in Japanese organisations.

I continued karate training in Osaka, which helped me understand how leadership was enacted and how influential language and the vertical hierarchical structure of relationships (*joge kanke*) in all interactions. I learned the pivotal importance of *tatemae* (a social façade used to maintain harmony and agreement) and not be selfish by allowing *hone* (your real feelings) to disturb social harmony. I also read a great deal of anthropological, sociological and historical literature in my quest to understand the cultural environment I was working in. As my language skills improved, I was able to engage in more meaningful exchanges as rugby coach of the university. I learned to be patient, listen intently and try to understand what the speaker’s real feelings were instead of focusing on finding opportunities to speak. In Japanese conversation the onus is on the listener to understand more than on the speaker making him/herself understood. My success in gaining agreement to take a large squad of about 60 players to Australia for the University’s first international tour suggested to me that I had begun to adapt to my environment. I worked in the background and avoided claiming any major part in the organisation. I also respected the ‘old boys’ who largely funded the trip and tried to work as a collective instead of as an individual. Over the next few years I organised similar overseas trips for two Osaka high schools, for both schools, the team tour was first trip overseas by any sports club.

One of the biggest challenges I faced as coach was related to the vertical hierarchy in Japanese society (*joge kanke*). As players enter a junior high school (3 years), senior high school (3 years) and then university (4 years) rugby club, they experience and embody *joge kankei* as they enter at the bottom and work their way up to the top in each setting. At my university rugby club, the 4th years had always actually run training under the eye of the coach as part of learning how to collectively lead before I arrived. They also had selected the teams, in agreement with the coach, which meant that the A team was always dominated by *yonensei* (4th years) because they had earned the right to be in the top team through their seniority – as opposed to selection on performance only. They had developed the cultural traits seen to be necessary for success in competition through working their way up from *ichinensei* (first years) to fourth years. In this traditional approach, the coach appears to be in charge but takes a broader role of offering more general advice and focusing on the development of appropriate moral development and cultural learning than actually coaching for performance. This presented a significant problem for me in wanting to make changes training methods and approaches to play because of how it operated to reproduce and conserve what had long been done (see Light, 2003, 1999).

My first year as coach generated the best results that anyone involved in the team could remember. Ironically, this was largely due to my lack of language skills, which forced me to collaborate with the fourth years in designing and implementing our daily training sessions and to change things slowly, without challenging their seniority and power. Enthused by my success and improving ability to communicate in Japanese I decided to adopt a much more ‘Australian’ approach to coaching but the team’s performance dropped. This was because I disrupted a culture and sets of relationships that had been in place for a very long time. The significant changes I implemented in my second year met with some resistance from the seniors who felt they were unfairly denied the status and power that they had expected as seniors. I should have been more patient and satisfied with slow but steady progress and ensuring I was familiar enough with my work context to know what was possible, and what was not. This is what former head rugby coach of Australia, Japan and now England, Eddie Jones, suggested coaches have to do in cultural environments they are unfamiliar with, in one of our conversation many years later. With the knowledge of Japan and Japanese rugby I now have I would not have made such mistakes but, over time, I learned from the experience. It was also what motivated me to undertake a PhD on high school rugby in Japan and Australia.

**2. Learning to lead in universities**

*Convening an international conference at the University of Melbourne, Australia*

My first appointment, at The University of Melbourne in 2000, provided me with my first significant academic leadership experience. While doing my PhD at The University of Queensland my supervisor, Professor David Kirk, asked me to teach undergraduate pedagogy classes with a focus on Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) and to attend a seminar in Brisbane by Rod Thorpe. This changed my thinking about coaching and teaching team sports and despite not being related to my PhD, led me to develop a passion for TGfU and later, Game Sense. In 2001, I attended the first International TGfU Conference in Plymouth, New Hampshire and absolutely loved it. During the ‘town meeting’ at the end of the conference the convenor, Joy Butler, asked if anyone was interested in organising a second conference but I was only a lecturer at the time so, despite my interest, did not put my hand up. Upon returning to Melbourne, I asked around and then contacted Joy to tell her I would like to convene the second International conference.

I knew convening the conference would be a big challenge for a novice who had only attended half a dozen conferences but with my previous experiences of leadership success I was confident I could do it. Anyone reading this chapter that has convened an international conference, or been involved in one, would know how much work goes into it and how many people need to work as a team to make it a success. Although an academic conference has its own unique aspects and peculiarities, I feel that my experiences of leadership in Japanese university rugby and in martial arts in Australia enabled me to make it a success.

There were many problems I had to deal with and no shortage of anxiety for me, but deep down I did not ever doubt that it would be a success. The patience I had learned in Japan and an ability to do develop productive relationships with people important for the convening of the conference, made significant contributions to the successful organisation and running it. This included people ranging from those in senior positions across The University of Melbourne, international keynotes (including Rod Thorpe) and local invited speakers, to the staff in the physical education area and our students who helped. The university had a good conference support team at that time which was very helpful but it was the first physical education or sport coaching conference convened at the university. It was also very complicated to conceptualise and then, to attend to all the details required, and I have come to recognise that my strength is in conceptualisation rather than in paying attention to detail.

Attracting 250 attendees, the conference was successful beyond my most optimistic expectations and give me immense confidence in my ability to take on and succeed in academic leadership. I later organised TGfU one-day symposia at AIESEP conferences in Finland and Japan and set up a series of international conferences on Game Sense that began with me convening the first two at Sydney University. They followed a simple two-day model of having all oral presentations on day one and invited experts demonstrate how to teach/coach using Game Sense on day 2. This was aimed at convening small and warm conferences of fifty to one hundred participants that were less stressful to host. From 2013 in Sydney they were convened every two years in Christchurch (2015), Adelaide (2017) and Tokyo (2019) with me guiding the convening of them all. In addition to convening conferences at Sydney University I took on minor leadership positions that included coordinating the honours program, a research cluster and a network as well as setting up a program of four courses designed for the study abroad market that boosting international students in the faculty from 8 to 200 within two years.

**3. Senior academic leadership positions**

*Director of Research at Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

In 2009 I was appointed as Professor in Sport and Physical Education Pedagogy at Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK (now Leeds Beckett). The new VC had decided to distinguish what was a former polytechnic from others like it by specialising in sport. He had attracted David Kirk and wanted to recruit high profile and emerging researchers on sport, which made me excited about my future at the university. Unfortunately, the VC was removed before I arrived, and David left not too long after but, I still enjoyed the strength and importance of research in and on sport from sport and exercise science to sport pedagogy. Indeed, in my first year there, the Centre of Coaching Excellence, headed by the late Professor Pat Duffy, was established in the university. I was director of the Centre for Studies in Sport and Physical Education pedagogy and when the Director of Research in my faculty was seconded, I volunteered to take over.

Stepping up so quickly as a newcomer to the UK and the university into a role that was totally new to me was a challenge that I was looking forward to but not without some anxiety and a little self-doubt. The challenge was intensified by a university restructure under a new VC saw the student population in our Faculty of Sport and Education grow to 6000 with 150 PhDs, 400 staff and fourteen full professors. I was suddenly director of the Sport and Physical Education Pedagogy Research Centre, Director of the Carnegie Research Institute, Chair of Readers and Professors, Chair of the Research Committee and a member of the Faculty Leadership Team. I did have doubts about my ability to meet the administrative challenges of this position but the excellent administrative support really helped.

The challenge of stepping up into a senior leadership role at a time of such major changes across the university was made more difficult by my lack of institutional and cultural knowledge. With such a confronting task in front of me I took more of a management position than a leadership position aimed at reducing staff anxiety and integrating a diverse range of small research centres in languages, events, tourism and hospitality, into and existing and very successful research institute. I talked with a range of different people in leadership positions from directors of research centres to the dean of the faculty and the other members of the leadership team to develop an understanding of the university culture and how things worked as well the culture of the faculty and the relationship between sport and education.

I did more listening and watching than talking and doing in the early stages of this position. This included seeing how the dean, Gareth Davies, who had extensive leadership experience in business and sport, led so successfully with no prior academic leadership experience. The way in which he led also made me think about how effective leadership tends to have common features, whether in sport, business, schools or universities. Now, as I reflect to write this chapter, I think there were also similar elements of my own leadership experiences in Australia and Japan, in and outside universities. In 2014 Gareth was appointed Chairman of Welsh Rugby and from my experiences of working under him I think his most effective skills or strengths in leadership were:

1. His calmness (while being firm), honesty and integrity

2. His ability to communicate clearly and concisely, and to listen

3. His empowerment of staff (particularly senior staff) through delegation

4. His being accountable and, while empowering staff, holding them accountable as well.

Gareth had a significant influence on my approach to leadership, along with two of my Japanese karate *sensei* when I was in Japan. I had a few ‘scary’ *sensei* but Hamaguchi *sensei*, who was runner up the final of the World Championships one year was always calm, cared about his students as people, and offered wonderful advice on life in Japan for me. Hashimoto *sensei* was a fabulous teacher of *kata* (set forms of movement) who trained quite a few world champions but only taught children’s classes and reminded me of the *sensei* in the movie, Karate Kid. When I asked him to teach me he laughed at my kata and asked a ten year old girl to show me exercises, which I saw as being aimed at gently humiliating me before he would teach me anything. I kept coming back and not only improved my kata a great deal but also learned about myself and lessons about how to live my life. I liked Gareth’s approach to leadership and tried to work aspects of it into my senior leadership position at Leeds Met but also drew on what I had learned through my experiences of leadership in martial arts, coaching rugby in Japan and at Melbourne University and Sydney University.

I also learned from the mistakes I made as Director of Research. I was new to everything and realised I should sit back watch, listen and learn before I decided on trying to implement any changes, but my enthusiasm got the better of me, as it has a few times over my career. While I recognised my lack of institutional knowledge and the need to keep things calm I could also see opportunities to initiate change for the future. For example, I wanted to reduce the number of research centres in the Carnegie Institute to increase the efficiency of each one and get better value for our investment. There was a similar issue in the College I am in at my current university in New Zealand with the need to make our labs more efficient through integration but reluctance to undertake this significant change because of expected objections from those who would see it as losing something. After discussions with different research centre directors at Leeds Met I called a meeting of all involved and including the Dean for discussion and was confident I would get agreement but I had misread my discussions with many of the directors and the mood of those involved. I felt frustrated but learned a little lesson about how things worked in my faculty and about being more thorough and careful when some people feel they are losing something.

*Head of School in New Zealand*

At the end of 2014 was appointed as Head of School: Sport and Physical Education at the University of Canterbury, in New Zealand. When deciding to apply for the job I could see that it was an underperforming school and particularly in research, which actually made me more interested in the job because I could see possibilities for making a dramatic difference.

My family and I were made very welcome and I was excited about making a start and initiating the ideas and strategies I had thought about before arriving in New Zealand.

Culture had already played a significant part in shaping my leadership by the time I took up this position. Culture in Japan and in Yorkshire, and of the institution at Leeds Met, complicated my experiences there but, I had anticipated that. However, when I moved from Australia to New Zealand as Head of School I was not prepared for the cultural difference because of how similar I thought Australian and New Zealand culture were. These differences were amplified by me wanting to make quick and significant changes, having a clear vision for the future of the school and being very goal oriented.

I took my time at first to get a feel for my new environment, interviewed every member of staff on a one-on-one basis to get to know them and listen to their experiences and aspirations, and expectations of me. I then formed an advisory group of three to four people that met once a week to discuss relevant issues and formulate ideas and possible solutions. I then discussed these solutions and ideas with all staff at our monthly staff meetings and emailed ‘The Head’s Blog’ out every Friday. I recognised some very capable and promising staff prepared to embrace change but also others with a far more conservative outlook and who were to become very active in opposing the changes I wanted to implement. From my experience as an outsider, within the culture in the School and College there was a great deal of talking aimed at reaching consensus (or the appearance of consensus) among all involved when making decisions with decision-making avoided and passed upward in the school and college. There is also a ‘tall poppy syndrome’ aspect of New Zealand culture and cultural expectation to be, or at least appear humble. In a small and isolated country there is also a tendency to look inward. There is immense pride in the country and for what are seen as the unique characteristics of Kiwis (New Zealanders) with some dislike of the ways in which they see their neighbours on the ‘West Island’ as being overly confident, pushy, arrogant and blunt.

I worked with a very capable program coordinator to implement a wide range of changes that boosted enrolments by 150% in one year while doubling research output and PhD enrolments but, as my PVC suggested, it was too much, too soon. I had let the heady experience of undertaking rapid change mix with my enthusiasm to blind me to the unease of half the school that wanted to hang on to a comfortable past. It was also made difficult by my lack of knowledge of the history of the school, the power of networks and connections in Christchurch and the powerful, behind-the-scene influence of a former HoS.

Eventually, the union became involved and I stepped down as HoS with the school being integrated into a bigger school in the College, as I suggested. I saw my stint as HoS as a failure that left me with negative feelings about myself and my environment but, after a healing period, reflected on my experience. As I suggest in my development of *Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching* (see Light and Harvey, 2019) mistakes are essential for learning and from this perspective, my experience as HoS was not a failure. Over time, I learned from my mistakes of letting my passion and enthusiasm that developed from such rapid and initially positive progress overpower my inclination to be more careful and recognise the danger signs that were there. A year later, the PVC asked me to chair the College Research Committee and I accepted on the proviso that I would not just baby sit and maintain the status quo, but would look to improve its operation. She replied by telling me that is why she was asking me to be chair.

*Chair of the College Research Committee in New Zealand*

In my first year as Chair of the Research Committee I worked with the members of the committee to design and implement a radical change in how we funded conference attendance to help improve research culture and performance as a College. It involved paying staff for published outputs and making these funds available for them to attend conferences. I don’t have the space here to go into detail, but this was initially quite confronting for less research active staff in a college that had previously been a teachers’ college and retained much of its culture. It initially created anxiety and opposition for many but this time I was more careful and controlled the pace of change while ensuring that all staff in the College understood that it was a very fair and supportive model.

School representatives on the committee explained the model to their schools and I addressed all schools and the College executive to appease any anxiety and to emphasise its transparency fairness, and how simple it was to apply. As a committee, we also dealt with a number of small issues as they arose with me developing my skill in delegating fairly and appropriately, and as I developed positive relationships with all on the committee. I have enjoyed seeing staff on the committee developing as academics and have thoroughly enjoyed working with them. My experience as Chair of the Research Committee was radically different to my experience as Head of School due to a number of reasons among which is how I improved my leadership and adapted to my environment. The funding model was accepted by all staff and had positive effects on the research culture of the school, the development of individual research careers, and on College output.

**Finding leadership**

After adapting to life and work in Japan from 1990 to 1996, and enjoying it, I was well disposed toward being globally mobile, which was strengthened by attending international conference from beginning my PhD. This did not mean I was consciously looking for career moves overseas but, meant that a move overseas to work and live was not confronting. Mt wife, Chiho is Japanese and has not lived back in Japan for more than six weeks since 1996 and she has enjoyed getting to know other countries and cultures. The attraction of the job at Leeds was promotion to professor and it was only after I arrived there that I applied for the role of faculty Director of Research. I moved back to Australia because of my sister’s death and need to look after my father and, after working in Japan and England a move from Melbourne to Christchurch did not seem like a move overseas and it still does not feel like going overseas moving between Australia and New Zealand. The position of leadership at UC was the main motivation and my belief in how successful I would be like taking a position to coach a team at the bottom of the ladder but with some potential to climb the ladder.

Moving overseas with a family is a very big challenge and especially when your child or children are of school age. My daughter Amy moved from the final year of primary school in Sydney to the end of first year in a private secondary school and failed most of her subjects like British History and Latin. The biggest problem for me and my family was my wife’s visa. It was in fact a nightmare for all of us and made me regret takin g the job. I submitted our marriage certificate from the church when I should have submitted the one from the government and it was not possible to communicate with the British consulate. To cut a long story short, I lived alone in Leeds with my poor wife and daughter moving from place to place and changing the departure dates for their flights for months. The education system was also different to what I understood it to be fore I arrived and really had no choice but to put my daughter in an elite independent school.

For anyone reading this with an eye toward taking a leadership position overseas I suggest checking taking the time to check on all visa requirements. There is a limit to how much you can come to understand cultural issues and how the institution you are thinking about working at before you get there but I do suggest you take your time to understand the situation you are in in terms of the workplace and the culture of the region, city or country you have moved to before making any significant changes.

What did you learn from those experiences?

Would you recommend others move countries/institutions in search of leadership responsibility?

**Reflection**

My story I a reflection on experience shaped by the interaction of the external and objective environment and my internalised experiences as a learner (Dewey, 1938/63). Formal learning experiences of leadership seminars or formal study in tertiary institutions can contribute toward developing into a good academic leader but prior experiences of leadership will shape and influence this formal learning and the sense we make of it in ways that are both conscious and non-conscious. Dewey (1916/97) suggests that the experiences we learn through are neither isolated nor restricted to formal education settings such as schools or universities but, instead, part of an experiential continuum. What we have learned and the inclinations developed through this learning, shape current learning experiences that in turn, shape our future experiences and learning. That is to say that all learning is shaped by prior experiences and shapes future experiences as part of a continuum that promotes the continuing human growth of the individual. All individuals move through different situations, but some learning is always ‘carried over’ as an ‘instrument of understanding’ (Dewey, 1938/63, p.44) that enables dealing with following situations and experiences in a process that continues as long as life and learning do. Accepting we are different and in different situations but, with is, and the globalisation of the world in mind, I encourage readers to give consideration to applying for overseas leadership positions.

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