

Leaders in Australia

***The Australian Cultural
Imprint for Leadership***

Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd

PO Box 9234, Brighton, Victoria 3186

ph. 0416 186 832

john@culturalimprint.com.au

The following report is an edited version of the report prepared by Bruce Curtis of the Australian Quality Council in 1995.

It is a report based on some of the findings of a study into 'Leader' in Australia conducted by Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd for a consortium of Shell, Westpac, Sydney Electricity and Cultural Imprint.

For further clarification, questions, or information on the study, report, or methods of implementing the findings, please contact:

Dr John Evans
Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd
0416 186 832
john@culturalimprint.com.au

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What makes us different?

Why do people who come from one country seem different in some way from people who come from another country? Why is it that we sometimes sense that difference, even between people who come from different countries that shared similar cultural roots in times past? Why do we assign distinctive characteristics to particular nationalities, and tell jokes about them?

Most people are prepared to concede that there simply **are** differences. But little has been done to check them out in any systematic way. In fact, in Australia in recent years we have concentrated, with good reason, more on understanding the ways in which people from a range of cultures may be similar. As a result, the differences remain merely an untested part of our folklore. More importantly, perhaps, it has also meant that we have not yet come to understand if there is a distinctive 'Australian' culture, or consider what it might mean for the way in which we deal with things today, and plan for the future.

Nevertheless, there has been growing interest in business in the possibility that cultural differences may be at the heart of much of the failure of change strategies imported from abroad. We have accepted, without question, and often without qualification, practices that have proved popular or successful overseas, only to find that they fail in Australia. We assume that the success of Japanese team activities and quality management techniques, or the dictates of U.S. gurus, can be introduced without making allowances for differences between the environment where they were initially devised and the Australian marketplace.

This easy acceptance of a culture-free transfer has widespread ramifications. Some of the advanced computer-controlled equipment imported today from Germany, for example, was designed for use in an environment where knowledge of the technology, hardware and process software for such equipment, and the development of the appropriate work organisation and skill formation for it, are a fact of life. Maintenance of such equipment is accepted as an integral part of an operator's responsibility and the operator is fully trained and prepared to carry it out.

In Australia, by comparison, there has not been the same insistence on the operator servicing and maintaining his or her equipment. As a result there are few with a range of skills in operating and maintaining equipment comparable to those of their German counterparts. Thus assumptions on which German-built equipment relies may not be met in Australia, and ultimately the system will pay the price.

On the other hand, there are plenty of instances where concepts and innovations have transferred successfully from one culture to another. That successful translation generally requires an understanding of the part cultural differences play in the transfer.

In the field of leadership and management this understanding is beginning to emerge as a key determinant of success in the introduction of any change strategy introduced from abroad. Moreover, this has been supplemented by a growing interest in the different institutional cultures being encountered within, and between, organisations and the recognition that they need to be considered when implementing any significant change.

Cultural Imprints

Each culture has its own unique underlying system of beliefs, values, structures, languages and symbols that determine how the members of that culture see the world and react to it. Newcomers to that culture have to learn the 'rules' of the culture to be accepted into it.

Culture is transmitted by an 'Imprinting' process that begins at birth, operating below the level of conscious awareness. We see it in the response of new-born ducklings to the first object they see, but a similar process takes place with people. When a neural transmitter passes a nervous impulse from one neuron to another a neural pathway is created. As the process is repeated the pathway is progressively more deeply imprinted, or etched. Over time it becomes firmly established and remains fundamentally unaffected by opinion, whims, or fads. While culture is dynamic, many cultural imprints - passed on from generation to generation - seem to change very slowly, if at all.

Imprinting is always associated with emotion. The sharper the emotion the stronger the imprint. Events and experiences imprinted at a very

early age, in situations involving strong emotion are usually retained below the level of consciousness, but never-the-less influence our behaviour, for ever.

Cultural imprints are the means by which the members of a particular culture are preorganised to survive. They shape our perceptions when, as children, we begin to learn the language, and they are necessarily language-based. The associations are strengthened as we test them for ourselves. They are unspoken and generally unrecognised rules we live by. They are neither right nor wrong - they are simply there. Being aware that we have them is a first step to understanding why we feel and act the way we do.

Background to the Study

Following similar successful overseas studies, the first cultural imprints study in Australia was carried out in 1993 by Cristina Afors and John Evans, for Telstra. It examined the Australian imprint for "Quality".

The Telstra study created immediate interest when introduced to Australian audiences. For many it explained what had happened during the introduction of Quality initiatives in their own organisations. It also gave new meaning to their own behaviour and the behaviour of others that they had observed in different situations from time to time. It had implications for many areas of corporate life and led to an interest in further studies that could address particular aspects of management within Australian organisations.

The one that attracted most immediate interest was the subject of Leadership. Today there is general agreement that while some people seem to be better leaders than others in particular situations, and have been successful in a number of different fields, there is no one style of leadership that best fits all conditions. Cultural imprint studies conducted overseas also suggested that what might be appropriate approaches to leadership in Germany, Japan, and the USA. may be quite inappropriate in Australia.

To explore the cultural imprint for Leadership in Australia, three organisations - Shell, Sydney Electricity, Westpac, and Cultural Imprint - combined to sponsor a new cultural imprints Study on that theme. This

is a review of that Study and some of its findings.

The Leadership Study

The Study commenced in February, 1995 and continued through to August. It closely followed the approach taken with the earlier Telstra study, but the involvement of three organisations required considerably more coordination, communication and logistical support.

While a small core group of executives from the three sponsors played a major role in arranging their organisation's involvement, many other people from different areas of their organisations, and at various levels within them, participated in awareness sessions and in reviewing and analysing the findings.

The in-depth Study was conducted primarily with three groups of staff members, each of approximately 25 employees, from each organisation. The groups came from three States and a variety of locations.

In addition, a further four groups were drawn to represent specific sub-groups within the early 20's age group in the population - University students in their final year, Australian-born males generally, Australian-born females generally, and first generation Australians.

Because of the importance of childhood in the fashioning of cultural imprints the research in all cases, including the last-mentioned group of first generation Australians, was conducted among people who had spent the first 15 years of their lives in Australia.

The material gathered from these sessions was analysed by Cristina Afors and John Evans. From this process were also derived the various 'Quaternities' - diagrams representing, in simple form, the significant interrelationships between concepts - that appear later throughout this report.

The analysis was presented to, and reviewed by, various groups within the organisations involved. Significant cross-referencing of the Study's findings to the experience of the participants emerged in these

sessions and there has been strong support for them from the organisations.

Additionally, the findings from this study reinforce, and build on, some of the results of the earlier Telstra Study, while providing a wide range of new findings relating specifically to leadership. The two in combination have added considerably to our knowledge of the impact that our cultural imprints have on perception and behaviour in the Australian workplace.

The Telstra Study

Some key findings from the Telstra Quality Study deserve to be mentioned at this point. They serve as an important introduction to the conclusions from the Leadership Study, and indeed to any future cultural imprints study in Australia. While a few of the Telstra findings remain confidential, the following is an overview of the available findings that have implications for this study:

- o For Australians, the perception that something is of high 'Quality' is closely linked to one's feeling of whether or not they have a secure relationship with others in which there is an awareness and appreciation of their own identity, and self-worth. It is difficult to dissociate Quality from one's relationship with those providing the product or service if that relationship is not seen as satisfactory. Appreciating the significance of this finding is fundamental for managers in Australian organisations and is critical for our understanding of the role of a 'leader' (as distinct from a 'manager').
- o Building on our identity as we move through life is desirable and fulfilling. On the other hand, shedding layers of identity e.g., through retirement, redundancy, death or divorce, can create insecurity and a perceived diminution of self-worth. Change of this kind breaks established relationships: it is painful and accompanied by its own form of grieving.
- o A key to 'Quality' lies in the ability to attract the willing participation of people i.e., to have them involved as "volunteers" who are happy or content to undertake a task. The alternatives to

"volunteers" are the disgruntled "whingers", who feel insecure, threatened, and are actively critical, the "survivor/conscripts" who are detached but content to do just enough to avoid attracting attention, and the "prisoners" who are totally stuck, do little or nothing, and feel hopeless. At any time, depending on the way they relate to a particular task, Australians fall into one of these four modes.

Australians also reveal a marked tendency to quickly become emotionally detached from situations where they feel their identity is threatened. This underscores the need for people to first work at building relationships with others to get their cooperation in change situations, wherever possible.

- o Recognition is important for Australians as for other cultures, but it should be sincere, perceived as well-deserved, and low-key. The effusive praise and recognition acceptable in the USA, Latin America, or Italy is seen as generally inappropriate and embarrassing for Australians.
- o Communication is highly important, and receiving information is a reflection of trust. Conversely, being kept in ignorance damages self-identity and creates uncertainty and fear.

However, the Study found that "feedback" for Australians, in the context of communication between managers and employees, is linked to bad news - as though the true intent is initially deliberately concealed, but will surface as criticism or blame as the conversation proceeds.

- o Australians expect to be told the truth and are generally prepared to face it, but they also have well-developed sensors for detecting when someone is trying to pull the wool over their eyes. They have finely tuned "bullshit detectors".
- o The most powerful way to motivate Australians to participate in change is to offer them a 'cause' - something that transcends being the 'biggest' or the 'best', and has desirable social, moral, national or community associations.

(A fuller summary of the Telstra Quality Study is available on application

to the Australian Quality Council in Sydney. Copies of this paper are also available from Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd).

The Leadership Study Findings

The findings from the Study that follow are arranged around the Quaternities that evolved from the researchers' analysis, each addressing particular aspects of a leader's role. An exception to this arrangement is the inclusion of some opening observations on the different imprints Australians have for 'leaders' and 'bosses' that are of a more general nature and borrow from the work undertaken in both this Study and the Telstra Study.

In introducing these findings it is also important to note that the analyses and observations will contain no reference to the effect of gender or age on the cultural imprint for a 'leader'. Though these issues were specifically addressed in the Study no discernible differences emerged, reinforcing the power of the cultural influence, and its persistence over time.

Leaders and Bosses

A simple definition of a 'leader', for the purposes of this Study, is someone who "is followed without coercion, and without favours being offered". The findings from the Study will help elaborate on, and allow us to better understand, what this means in practice. As a general rule the term 'would-be leader' is used to identify those in positions of authority who have to resort to coercion or favours to get their people to undertake tasks for them.

From this Study and the Telstra Study we can observe that Australians make important distinctions between the terms 'leader' and 'boss', and between 'good boss' and 'bad boss'.

As we will see in this Study leaders are committed to the welfare of their followers, and closely involved with them, at all times. 'Bosses', on the other hand, characteristically remain somewhat distant from their people, their interest and concern for them tending to disappear on completion of the task. Their commitment to them is not as deep or consistent as that shown by leaders and even among 'good bosses'

betrays a somewhat cynical and pragmatic concern for their own welfare, and the achievement of their own objectives, at the others' expense.

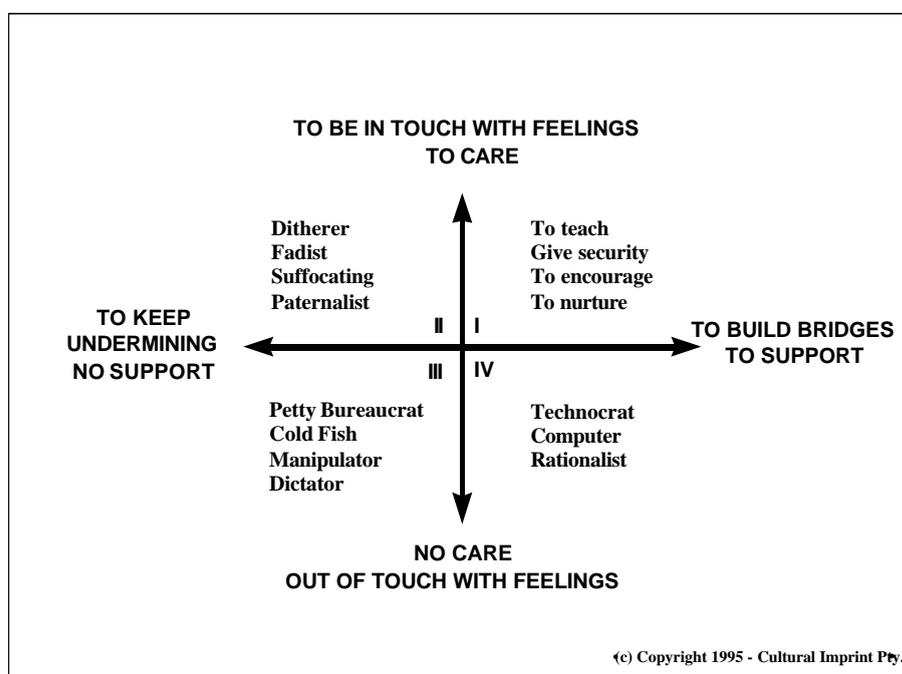
'Good bosses' tend to do many of the things leaders do, and claim to have many of the same kinds of values that 'leaders' hold. Many act as 'captain coaches' - people who both determine strategy and participate in the field of play - identified in the Telstra Study as an appropriate model for Australian managers (and somewhat different from the 'coach' preferred in similar American studies). They try to avoid the sorts of actions that might drive a wedge between them and their followers.

On the other hand 'bad bosses' - commonly referred to, without affection, as 'bastards' - are unlikely to develop as 'leaders'. 'Bad bosses' preserve themselves, take the credit due to others, and are prepared to sacrifice others in their own interests. They focus on results and ignore the needs of their people. They use their followers for their own advantage, commonly communicate badly with them, and often leave them isolated and alone to face the music. The Telstra Study showed a tendency among them to act as taskmasters, creating instability, specialising in negative feedback, assigning blame, and communicating crisis as a weapon to get things done, without providing the guidelines and emotional support their followers need. They trade in fear.

The 'good boss' is generally well accepted in Australia - indeed, for some tasks it is possible that some followers may prefer a 'good boss' to a 'leader'. Good bosses who retain trust can become leaders, provided they are also prepared to assume, among other things, the caring and sacrificial concern, the emotional drain, and the willingness to distance themselves from their followers when occasion demands, that are part of the leader's role. On the other hand, bad bosses are unlikely to ever make the transition.

A leader cares.

Perhaps the most significant single observation from the study is that leaders care for their followers. Within that context the leader's role is to build bridges between now and the future - bridges that allow followers to move from their present identity, within comfortable and familiar relationships, to a new identity in a different situation that initially threatens insecurity and a need to establish new relationships. The leader provides a vision that helps a follower to envisage, in comparatively concrete terms, what the future holds for them personally, and a plan to get the follower safely across the gap between now and that future state. A leader is truly a 'bridge-builder'.



Success in building these 'bridges' for the transition is heavily dependent on a leader's capacity to be seen to identify with, and respond to, the emotional needs of his or her followers. To do this leaders must be prepared to show something of their own emotions and the depth of the care they have for their followers' well-being. Followers learn more readily, accept directions, and at the same time feel more secure, when their leader displays this concern and commitment. (I).

Some would-be leaders may work at building the bridge but unless they

are able to show real care and concern for their followers, and are able to understand their perceptions of the situation and the emotions they feel, they will find it very difficult to get the followers to travel across it. They may use logic, encourage people to 'be rational' and expect them to see the wisdom of moving across, only to find them staying effectively stuck where they are.

Their next recourse tends to be to direct and shove the followers across. In the process they are likely to be perceived as technocrats rather than leaders, concerned only with the procedural and mechanical aspects of work, and out of touch with the deep personal needs of their people. (IV). They inhibit the development of their followers and prejudice their chances of getting them to participate willingly in making similar moves in future.

Some would-be leaders who fail to understand their followers' needs, lack the capacity to show they care for them, and fail to provide them with emotional support, making no real attempt to provide bridges. They fail as leaders, and instead are seen as 'cold fish' and manipulative, with a petty bureaucrat's concerns - distant from their followers and concerned only with their own agenda or with 'observing the rules'. They undermine the process of bridge building, and their peoples' feelings of security and self-worth. As a result their followers remain unprepared to challenge the status quo or to seize the opportunity to develop and acquire new skills or new knowledge. (III).

Would-be leaders who display their emotions, or show their concern for their followers, in inappropriate ways also undermine the bridge-building process. If they are torn between alternative demands from their followers, unable to resolve them or provide coherent direction, they will be seen as 'ditherers'. If they provide emotional support but fail to recognise when to allow their followers to take risks they will be regarded as paternalistic. If the emotions they show betray a commitment to their own agenda, rather than care for their followers, they will be viewed as 'spoilt brats', 'dictators', or 'political animals', (revealing concern for their people only for as long as it's convenient). (II).

In summary, if leaders in Australia wish to develop the capabilities of their followers, achieve significantly improved performance from them, or lead them through organisational change, they need to build bridges

for them - from now to the future, and from their present self-image to a new, secure identity. As well, they need to show that they really care for their people and understand their concerns ... and then respond appropriately to them. The attainment of the task, the achievement of the desired future, their followers' personal growth, and their willingness to participate in further development, all hinge on the outcome.

Leaders support their followers.

In encouraging the development of their followers, leaders need to establish an appropriate level of personal involvement and support to determine how that support should be given. To what extent should the leader be around providing direction and control, and when and to what extent should the leader be absent?

The study suggests the leader's responsibility for the development of their followers requires direct involvement and support, particularly in the early stages of that development. (This links in with the role of Captain-Coach that the Telstra study identified as a key management or supervisory function in the Australian environment). In this initial phase the leader coaches the followers, provides them with guidelines and explains procedures, outlines the ways in which the future is likely to evolve, listens carefully to their questions and concerns, encourages and acknowledges individual and group efforts, and generally conveys a sense of order and security. (I).

On the other hand, 'being there' but failing to provide this kind of support for the followers destroys their bridges and undermines their development. Particularly inappropriate behaviour from the leader at this stage includes the tendency to belittle or humiliate them, or to harangue and bully them. The follower, in response, switches quickly from 'volunteer' to 'conscript'. Other inappropriate but less obvious measures, however, can also damage the bridge-building process. Rhetoric that is not matched by reality, and questions that betray a leader's concern for figures rather than any real understanding of the situation or the follower's contribution, are other common examples of inappropriate leader behaviour that can undermine the process at the outset. (II).

Provided the appropriate initial steps have been taken and the followers show they are developing their capacity to make decisions and take

memory of what the leader did at that time and will be nervous about making further decisions in his or her absence. The follower's development stalls. (III).

Leaders should recognise the need to work closely with their followers - not just with those who clearly need immediate help, and those in the early stages of their development, but with all followers, ensuring that nobody is left to their own devices for extended periods. (Frequently the needs of senior executives for leadership are ignored on the basis that 'that's what they're paid for' with serious consequences.)

At the same time, leaders must also appreciate the need for them to withdraw at appropriate times to allow followers to stretch their wings. Even then it is important to still provide support, even at a distance, or discreetly, when the followers need help. Once they have achieved the capacity to look after themselves, and have the knowledge and confidence to make decisions and take action, the leader needs only to monitor and support their performance and prepare them for further development. (IV).

Leaders are consistent and stick to their principles.

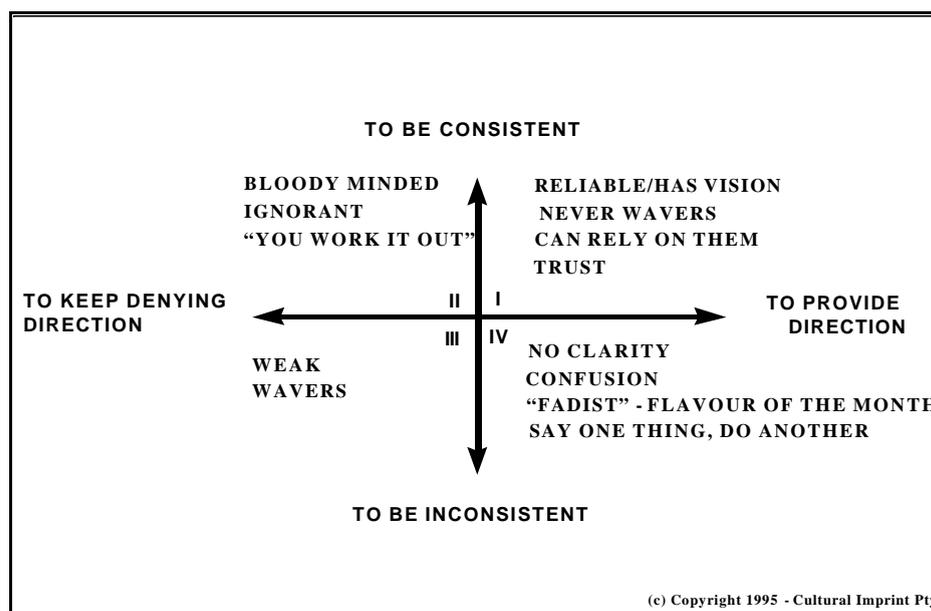
A key responsibility for leaders is to provide direction and guidance for their followers. The Telstra study on 'Quality' suggested that Australians need guidelines to help them work through periods of change and uncertainty, and this study has reinforced that earlier finding. It has also established the importance not only of determining direction, but of being consistent in pursuing it, and has emphasised the need for leaders to be seen to be people of principle and to be constant in their adherence to their principles.

The study draws a sharp distinction between consistent and inconsistent leaders. The leader who firmly sets a direction for the organisation and whose actions are consistent with the goals he or she sets is seen as a person with vision and, at the same time, as someone who is reliable and trustworthy. (I).

Leaders who ostensibly set a direction, then waver in their behaviour - who say one thing and do another - create confusion. Their inconsistent behaviour makes the goals they have espoused less credible, encourages followers to 'hedge their bets', and saps energy and

commitment. The followers tend to see their leader as one who is simply driven by the latest 'flavour of the month', rather than by any determined plan or deep conviction. (IV).

Those who have been assigned a leadership role but consistently decline to give directions to their followers will also fail as leaders in an Australian organisation. (There is a variety of ways in which would-be leaders can avoid giving directions - some excuse themselves by maintaining that "it's best to throw people in at the deep end", or expect people to "work it out themselves", some ask their staff to provide reports but don't outline what they're expecting to get from them, and others ask for work to be done but fail to convey any sense of urgency or importance until it's too late to recover.) This group differs from the 'waverers' referred to previously in that the would-be leader may have a clear idea of where to go and how to get there but withholds the information from the people who need it.



Though their behaviour might be predictable, the inability or unwillingness of these would-be leaders to shape a vision for the future, or to provide guidelines for their followers requiring some assistance is seen by those followers as lack of foresight, ignorance, incompetence, or sheer 'bloody-mindedness'. From their perspective the group suffers, and they suffer, because they see themselves being denied

direction and being made rudderless and ineffective. (II).

A third group of would-be leaders offer neither direction nor consistency, acting in reactive mode or making decisions and taking action like a 'headless chook'. The followers see them as weak and wavering, and particularly damaging when they are seeking guidance and support. (III).

This continuing evidence of Australians' desire for some structure to their future plans and activities also underscores the importance of careful preparation and informed leadership for the wider involvement of followers in decision-making, and empowerment.

A leader thinks of others.

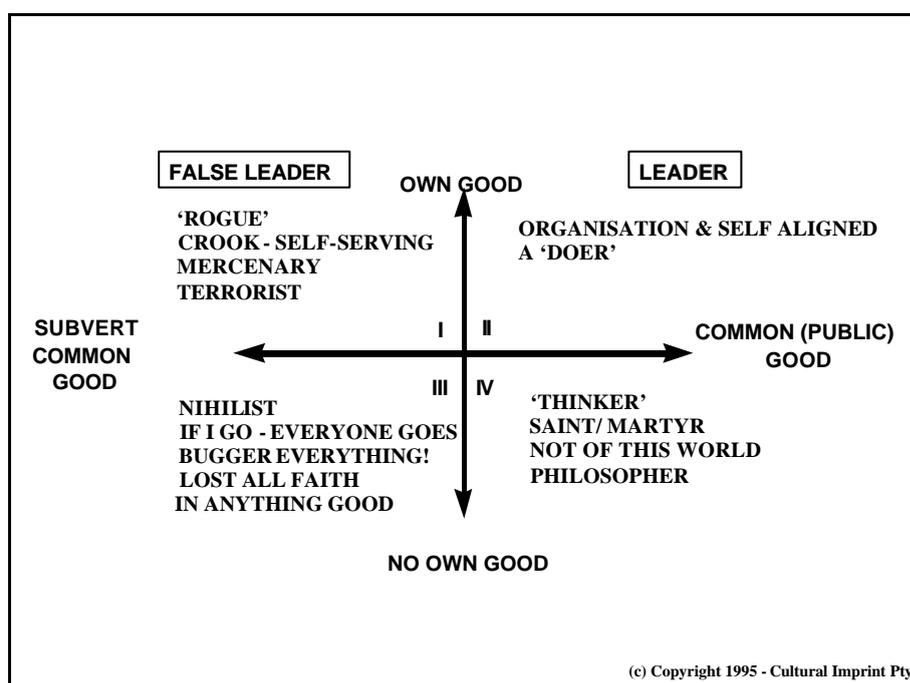
The Study recognises that leaders, while they have their own beliefs, interests and concerns, also identify with their organisation's interests **and** the common good (which may or may not be seen as one and the same thing), and are prepared to align their personal concerns with them. Because of this they are able to evoke from their followers the kind of enthusiastic support, identified in the Telstra Study, that Australians customarily reserve for 'causes'.

The most appropriate balance is between the leader's own welfare, the common good and that of the organisation - a close alignment of the three. Leaders have little sense of sacrifice in that situation because they feel that what is good for the organisation and in the common interest is ultimately going to be good for them. That kind of alignment gives leaders a clear focus for their effort, planning and decision-making and tends to lead to more effective action. Leaders in this group are not only generally recognised and esteemed for their commitment by their followers, but are also commonly seen as "doers". (I).

Some would-be leaders have such a slight regard for themselves that they are prepared to make considerable personal sacrifices for the organisation or cause. This situation is more prevalent in the Church and academia than in business, although there are also occasional instances of people in research and other discipline areas where creative thinking is prized. (IV). It should be noted that people tend initially to be suspicious of the person seen to be making the sacrifice

until they have had the opportunity to see that commitment tested.

The Study also recognises another category - would-be leaders who pursue their own interests at the expense of the organisation and/or the common good. They are commonly seen by their followers as either 'mavericks' (pursuing a separate agenda to the rest of the organisation - sometimes because of poor leadership from above, lack of alignment, or misunderstanding, or because it best serves their own interests) or, in the more extreme instances, 'bounty hunters', 'mercenaries' and 'crooks'- they are in it for what they can get out of it. Their own commitment is conditional on the extent to which the organisation's goals and activities align with their own agenda and the support they have from their followers is generally heavily qualified. They are, in many respects 'false leaders' - ones who rationalise their private agenda and behaviour, or the organisation's agenda, as being for the common good - and often their area of responsibility needs a cleanup after they have departed. (II).



Finally there are some who have no real concern for the organisation itself, and no strong allegiances. They are anarchist, nihilist, and sceptical of anything good. Fortunately, very few are given the opportunity to take leadership roles. (III).

Conclusion

The Study has presented a picture of a leader in the Australian context - someone Australians would follow voluntarily, without coercion or favour.

Some of the individual characteristics that emerge we may also share with people from other cultures, but together they describe an imprint that is unique to Australians. It reinforces earlier work that showed the importance to Australians of establishing good relationships and feelings of self-worth in the workplace, but shows what that means for leaders who have to build bridges to the future for their followers - bridges that they can cross without the fear of failure. Most of all, it stresses the need for leaders to care for their followers and to share their pain.

At the end, it must leave unanswered the question of why, given the heavy demands placed upon them, people still seek and undertake the role of a leader. Whatever the reason we should be glad they do.

Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd

PO Box 9243
Brighton Victoria 3186

ph. 0416 186 832

john@culturalimprint.com.au