

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE UK FARMING INDUSTRY: OUTCOMES OF A LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

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### Abstract

*Among the changes that the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy is demanding from the UK farm industry, is the urgent need for a different style of leadership. The economic support to farmers has been decoupled from production and moved toward environmental practices, creating a totally different economic environment where farmers are more exposed to market forces and public assessment (Curry, 2002) Previous research e.g. Alliston (1998) has shown that the new reality requires a cultural change in the farming industry where leaders should be very conscious of the importance of alliances to add political strength and financial viability instead of the traditional charismatic leader from the front and top of organizations. The objectives of the paper are: a) to review recent research findings about the dynamics of leadership in the context of rapidly changing agricultural industry; b) to describe the Leadership Course of the Institute of Farm Management, and analyse it's development over the last six years regarding the pursuit of its two main objectives, the development of individuals and opportunities for networking. The paper presents the results and analysis of a survey conducted in 2006 among 20 former participants, concerning which are the most important benefits that they have gained after the completion of the course, and how it has affected their career progression and individual achievements. The results confirm the findings of Mintzberg and Collinson. Mintzberg (2004) found that to develop good leaders, programmes like this should focus on encouraging active discussions and challenging interactions among participants, guest speakers and experts. Collinson (2005, 2006) concluded that studies of leadership need to develop a much deeper understanding of the complex interaction between leaders and followers, and also highlighted the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that typically characterize the dynamics of leaderships. Additionally, the results show a significant increase in self-confidence, and stress the importance of networking. The paper concludes that the course has a positive effect on the participants, encouraging a more involving attitude and preparing them for demanding and challenging positions of high responsibilities.*

**Key words:** *leadership, personal-development, networking, course-planning*

### Introduction

Agricultural Leaders now have to articulate the new policies as they evolve on an almost daily basis. The need is for clear and informed leaders who engage widely across society. (Alliston & Gonzalez-Diaz, 2005). Leadership is about having the right personal attitudes and attributes, motivating and engaging the commitments of others, building and maintaining a team that shares a common vision and has similar

values, standards, expectations and directions (Watts, 2001). Leadership potential can be developed, but it does have to be evident in an individual in the first place (Adair, 1989).

Mintzberg (2004) stated that “to be a leader means to think for yourself. Leaders don’t imitate people. It is about energising other people to make good decisions and do better things”.

“There is nothing wrong with achievers and achievement; organisations owe much to those who have the courage and commitment to extend themselves.” (Pascale, 1990).

It has been recognised that individuals are complex, knowledgeable and creative and therefore can shape the organisations and societies in which they exist. (Collinson, 2003). It is therefore worth taking effort to help this process by adding to individuals development.

## **The Institute of Agricultural Management Leadership Development Programme**

### ***Background***

One of the outcomes of the Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust Jubilee Scholarship report was the recommendation that the UK agricultural industry develop a leadership training course for those who have already demonstrated some leadership qualities and are clearly going on to contribute to the industry in a significant way (Alliston, 1998). As a result, the Institute of Agricultural Management Leadership programme was developed to take twelve delegates every other year for three weeks and to promote the qualities in the individuals, the knowledge of the current agricultural issues and networking development.

### ***Selection***

Part of the selection process involves the delegates reflecting on their own personal qualities before they apply. So only after they have considered the following characteristics and experience: business awareness, adaptability, patience, reliability, knowledge, pragmatism, charisma, forcefulness, energy and drive, should they apply. Having applied then twenty candidates are interviewed by a panel of four. This interview explores their careers to date, the leadership qualities already demonstrated and also tests the ambitions and contribution that a person might make to the industry in the future. Twelve candidates are then selected and have to confirm attendance over the full three weeks of the course.

### ***Course Structure***

This commitment is important because much of the learning is through group activities and interactive sessions where all twelve are involved. The course is then designed over three weeks with the first week designed to develop the individuals with lectures and activities revolving around total groups of 12, - 2 x 6 or 3 x 4. Also mentoring is set up with delegates paired off to explore both their own businesses and also their plans for the future.

The second week is designed to give a greater understanding of the importance of the European Union and specifically the politics of the Commission in Brussels. Lobbying and the influencing of the policy formulation are important facets of effective leadership. The final week is spent in London and the delegates are exposed to a series of interviews and lectures with existing agricultural leaders. The course is facilitated by two tutors who work together so as to keep their time with the delegates from becoming dull because of over exposure. The two tutors also perform some team teaching which uses their different strengths to make the maximum impact.

**Research**

Thirty-six delegates have attended these Leadership courses over the last six years and research was conducted to assess the effectiveness of their experience. Specifically, they were asked to identify how the course had contributed to their futures.

The results are as follows:-

Most common answer:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Networking</li> <li>Career development</li> <li>Camaraderie</li> <li>Self-confidence</li> <li>To do more things</li> <li>Happier</li> <li>Encourage to change</li> <li>Access to leaders</li> <li>Thinking</li> <li>Rising profile</li> <li>New management skills</li> <li>People skills</li> </ul>
Least common answer:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reassess my skills</li> </ul>

There were also a number of personal comments some of which are listed:

“I have been increasingly confident and happier in my role”.

“I fully endorse the aims and objectives of the course. . . . .because farming needs people with a way of thinking to help lead it into the future. The course has certainly been of benefit both in terms of raising my profile and broadening my horizons”.

“The Leadership course gave me confidence in my thoughts and provided me with a better vision of the agricultural industry.”

“I feel better equipped to do my daily work, interact with others and am better focussed on some of the issues I want changed both personally and in the agrifood sector”.

“I found it extremely rewarding and am already putting some of the theory into practice”.

“In the last three months many things have happened in my life that I wasn’t expecting. I think most of these achievements were due to the course that gave me more confidence and provided me with a better vision of the agricultural industry”.

“I haven’t changed the world or my place within it but generally feel better equipped in my daily work, interact with others and better focussed on some of the issues I wanted changed both personally and in the agri-food sector”.

“The course helped me feel that I am quite suited to this position and since the course I have used the contacts I met and the skills that I learnt to our advantage.”

The endorsements confirm the positive effect the course has on the participants, encouraging a more involving attitude, and preparing them for demanding and challenging positions of high responsibilities.

The delegates have demonstrated that their subsequent careers have taken a number of specific routes that have required active personal decision making.

The activities have been:-

1. The involvement in a number of committees or industry representative bodies i.e. the taking on of some industry responsibilities.
2. The reorientation or reorganisation of a business. i.e. the active management of change and the taking of risks (financial and entrepreneurial).
3. The promotion of self profile by public speaking, honorary positions in important organisations or charities, governance of educational or research establishments.
4. The creation of a personal knowledge base in a specific area of the industry that then makes the individual an “expert”.
5. Far more interaction with the media in a way that assists the industry or influences policy formulation.

In a static environment (such as agriculture in the subsidised era) controlling and organising might seem more important than leadership. However, in the current dynamic circumstances confronting the rural industries leaders must look forward to anticipate change and must decide where to go.

Alliston and Gonzalez-Diaz (2005) concluded that the problem for the agricultural industry at present is that so many changes are occurring that a consistent future policy is very hard to define. The exchange of ideas amongst the delegates on this course go some way to helping to define the future industry. The power of brainstorming using many minds is so much stronger than an individual’s experience and expertise.

The agricultural production industry has come from a structure of individual businesses selling to a wholesaler or processor. In order to negotiate more successfully on price, these individual businesses now need to form into co-operative or larger ventures. Gonzalez-Diaz, Newton Alliston (2006) have identified the role of leadership in this co-operation, as specified in the barriers and ideal characteristics involved in business co-operation.

The barriers were identified as

Lack of good leadership  
 No clear division of roles  
 Not enough training and education

The ideal characteristics:

Leaders with the right vision and attitude  
 Professionalism /clear roles  
 Education training and support

The results confirm the findings of Mintzberg and Collinson. Mintzberg (2004) found that to develop good leaders, programmes like this should focus on encouraging active discussions and challenging interactions among participants, guest speakers and experts. Collinson (2005, 2006) concluded that studies of leadership need to develop a much deeper understanding of the complex interaction between leaders and followers, and also highlighted the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that typically characterize the dynamics of leaderships. Additionally, the results show a significant increase in self-confidence, and stress the importance of networking.

Feedback from delegates has constantly highlighted the importance of the discussions amongst the delegates and the learning that takes place when pooling information. The difficulty is allocating enough time in the programme for this to happen.

## Conclusion

The Institute of Agricultural Management Leadership Programme addresses the issues of changing leadership objectives in a changing agricultural industry. The research shows that the mixture of participating activities, discussion sessions, formal lectures and debates does give delegates a number of enhanced characteristics that enable them to further their own careers successfully to the benefit of the industry.

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