THROWN IN THE DEEP END

Interviews with Experienced Leaders on What They Wish They’d Known

Interviewed by Glen Sharkey
THROWN
IN THE
DEEP END
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the leaders of tomorrow, and specifically my own three children, Jeshua, Sam, and Gracie - because of your unique personalities and skill sets, I have no doubt you will all make stunning leaders in your own right.
THROWN IN THE DEEP END

Interviews with Experienced Leaders on What They Wish They’d Known

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Flip this book over to read People Leadership 101 for answers to questions emerging leaders don’t know to ask.
I knew when I was working on the manuscript for People Leadership 101 that I wanted to intersperse the theory with the personal accounts of people looking back on their first leadership role. I didn’t realise at the time that there’d be so many people willing to be interviewed and that the content would be extensive enough to become a book in its own right.

Initially I began to interview any workplace leader - those with decades of experience, but also those in their first 2-4 years of their leadership journey. My aim with the latter was to get a feel for those whose experience of being “dropped in the deep end” was still very fresh, and to pass on those fresh learnings to others about to be dropped in the similar end of the pool.

I discovered two things when interviewing emerging leaders:

1. Their ability to demonstrate the same level of vulnerability (compared with those with decades of experience) was limited because some of the scenarios were either current and ongoing, or too recent for the sting to have left. A number of these stories were still too fresh to put into print.

2. Emerging leaders ‘don’t know what they don’t know’ and so their ability to objectively view their own leadership journey was still very limited.

On the other hand, senior leaders with years and years of experience were very open (and secure) about the mistakes that they’d made early on. The pain of those events was long gone, but the memories were intact, and more importantly, significant learning had been gleaned from those mistakes.
Also, with years of experience comes a lens with which to view those early days of people leadership practice. This makes for highly informative and incredibly relevant stories and advice for emerging leaders.

To the senior leaders I interviewed, thank you for your time, your experience, your wisdom, and most of all your vulnerability in talking about mistakes and failings early on in your career for the benefit of those coming after you.

And to the emerging leaders, to those who feel like you’ve been thrown in the deep end (or to those who are about to be thrown into an unknown depth of water) - the cheapest lesson you can ever have is someone else’s.

GLEN SHARKEY
“The cheapest lesson you can ever have is someone else’s.”
ANDREW SONNENBERG

Head of People and Performance for Brian Perry Civil, Buildings, South Pacific

FLETCHER CONSTRUCTION
Describe your very first workplace leadership role. Where was that? Who was that with? And what was your role?

My first leadership role was HR manager for Woolworths South Africa, at Woolworths Blue Ridge store. It was a flagship store in a multi-million-dollar turnover business. The Blue Ridge store was a very successful store. We had approximately 200 staff members and a senior leadership team of about eight members. I had two direct reports, and as the HR partner, my job was to provide support for both leadership as well as staff members.

Often people involved in HR don’t have a large team themselves, but the leadership mandate is still really significant. It gives you influence in the organization. So, how were you prepared for that role of leadership, that role of influence? What advice did you get either beneficial or counterproductive?

Many of us study at university and, as you know, I studied for a number of years, but often moving into the workplace is very different. So, the preparation I received didn’t totally equip me to perform in a leadership role. Some of the advice I received - certainly on reflection - was beneficial. I was advised to get close to the business, understand what makes it tick, and learn the key profit drivers of the business. Also, to get close to people, and not just the formal leaders in the business, but the informal leaders too, and connect with them. These people will help you to understand the heartbeat of the business, what the real issues are, and perhaps the most valuable piece of advice that stayed with me was “be true to your own personal values”.

Why was that piece of advice so valuable for you, Andrew?

I’ve been working in corporate businesses now for 26 years. As you grow in your career, as you become more senior, you
experience more pressure, there’s more responsibility that’s placed on your shoulders. Often there are competing forces in terms of what the business wants, what the business expects, what employees want, and what you stand for. It’s really important to have a personal compass around what you’re prepared to do versus what you’re not prepared to do. And you will be tested; you will be pushed because people have different agendas. And so that internal compass is critical to keep you focused.

**GS**

Looking back on your first workplace leadership role, what did you find surprising or challenging about leadership?

**AS**

Just understanding the rhythm of the business, the pace of the business, understanding the annual events. Also, around organisational politics; I had no idea of organisational politics and in any corporate business organisational politics are sometimes rife. I found it challenging to understand that sometimes factors beyond my own performance are at play. I found that tough. And it may be a minor thing, but it’s real, and that’s business language - acronyms, and the unique language that any organisation speaks. Basically - just getting used to what people are saying.

**GS**

I remember saying to my daughter: “There’s a lot of business vernacular out there that may not seem naturally intuitive. For instance, some people will talk about a business or a business unit being able to “wash its own face”. What on earth does that mean to emerging leaders?” I really concur with you Andrew around your point of having to get your head around business vocabulary. Looking back, what would you consider one or two mistakes that you made earlier on in your leadership journey?

**AS**

There were a few. Firstly, strongly aligning to individuals I think can be the wrong thing to do because change is constant, and
people move on. So, if you become too dependent or too aligned to people and they move, it kind of leaves you hanging a bit. Secondly, one of the big learnings for me, and linking back to the previous point I made around principles, is being true to your principles and taking a balanced perspective. And so, I have a big drive around anti-bullying. When I experience bullying in any form, I generally respond really strongly to it.

I’ve had a couple of times when I’ve had to stand up for what I believe to be inappropriate autocratic behaviour. I had one experience where a regional manager had behaved in a particular way, and I challenged her in an open forum. Although I think that the challenge was correct, in hindsight I wouldn’t necessarily have stepped away from challenging her, but perhaps I could have done it differently. So, I suppose just taking a measured approach to when and how you choose to challenge, what you go to war for, and what you just let go.

GS

There are a couple of sayings, sayings for life, but they relate to business as well. One is: “Choose your crosses (to die on)”- And another: “You don’t have to die on every cross on every hill”.

AS

Yes. I’ve had some great advice from a chief executive who said to me that his own experience was like a dog with a bone. He said that the best advice he received was: “Be like grass”. Because when the wind blows, the grass bends. Just be flexible rather than actually dying, as you say.

Praise in Public, Rebuke in Private

GS

I certainly know you have to pick your battles. The other piece of advice that I’ve heard a lot is: “Praise in public, rebuke in
“ANDREW SONNENBERG

“ANDREW SONNENBERG private” which is not always commonly practiced, but it is generally the case that if you do need to challenge someone, you’re probably going to get a better outcome by challenging them, or having that difficult conversation one-on-one, in a private forum. Andrew, if you were able to jump in a time machine and go back and give some advice to your younger self in that first leadership role, what kind of advice would you give?

A couple of things. The first one is probably that: “Life is short”. So, use your time deliberately on more important things, spend more time with family and be focused on work-life balance. When you start out there’s a strong drive to prove yourself and you tend to put in massive hours. In my case, I got that balance wrong. The other key piece of advice I’d love to have given myself is around managing your boundaries carefully and deliberately, similar to the first point where it can be all consuming. If we don’t have deliberate strategies around switching off, you never will. Then thirdly, don’t become too dependent on, or align yourself strongly to individuals. As I said before, people move on, things change, and with change in leadership, more often than not comes change in structure, people, and direction. So just be flexible.

Don’t Align Yourself Strongly to Individuals

Andrew, you’ve got a couple of kids at university at the moment. Let’s imagine they are about to step into their first workplace leadership role this year; obviously we’re dealing with the rigors of a pandemic (2021). There’s a lot of work from home, a lot of remote working, which means that there’s
THROWN IN THE DEEP END

a lot more remote leadership also. What advice would you give to your own children if they were about to step into their first leadership roles?

Building a core skills-set is really important. Focus on growing your competence and your confidence. Ahead of chasing promotion too fast, become confident in what you do. It’s not a hundred-meter sprint, it’s a long journey. Another thing (that I’m not particularly good at) is talk less and listen more. They say we’ve been given two ears and one mouth - take more time to smell the roses- have fun, laugh and just be yourself, because there’s nobody like you!
“The most valuable piece of advice that’s stayed with me was ‘Be true to your own personal values.’”
ANNA MORRIS

General Manager of People and Culture

STEEL AND TUBE
Being the General Manager of People and Culture is a huge role, Anna, but take us back to your first workplace leadership role. Describe who it was with and what was involved?

I’m actually going to describe it, Sharkey, in two phases. So, the correct answer is actually when I was a lawyer at a relatively early age. As all lawyers do, you start out supervising junior staff members that come into the organisation. It’s not really leadership, it’s just checking over their work with a red pen. After a couple of years in the law firm I started to be familiar with what I understood to be the role of leadership (which was checking over and correcting other people’s work).

I then moved into an organisation I’d been seconded to (from the law firm), to work as an HR manager. This HR manager role came with the privilege of having one direct report (and the direct report was a man who was probably 20 years older than I was). He was responsible for what we call ‘technical training’.

It was in a manufacturing organisation, and I knew nothing about technical training. It involved units of competency, frameworks, funding arrangements and applications. My role, as part of looking after the HR facilities for that company, was also to oversee this man who became my direct report. That was what I would call my first proper experience in leadership - being responsible for someone who looks after a technical area which is not your own skillset.

HR management is an interesting leadership role because your team might be small, but your influence is generally organisationally wide. What advice did you get early on that proved beneficial or counterproductive? Did you get any preparation at all for those initial leadership roles?

The early advice I had wasn’t particularly helpful, but as I got
a little way through my career, I came across a great leader who I was fortunate to spend time with. They gave me advice that I found transformational. It was really simple: “The best leaders have character”.

What he meant by that, and how I interpreted that, was the same thing that you now hear described as “authentic leadership”. But at that stage, the way he described it was “having character”, just having licence to be yourself. I had been trying the whole early stages of my leadership to be what I imagined a leader needed to be. I tried to have all of the answers, and to be right all of the time. In the interests of achieving this I was a terrible, terrible leader with no real personality. I was so reluctant to engage with the one report I had for fear that he would see immediately that I couldn’t answer all his questions around the technical competency framework he was responsible for. I used to do things like get him to write report after report, to give me information that I would then take away and ponder over for such a long amount of time, trying to find the answer myself. Having character and being ‘myself’ would have caused me to have taken a very different approach. Also, to simply sit down and have a really good conversation and be open about the fact that this was my first role leading a function like this, and that I was looking to him for advice. The type of conversations that I would have had would have been so different if I had actually been myself and relaxed; that advice came later and is still so important for me right now. I still look around and think, the best leaders have character. But I didn’t learn that fast enough and my first report left 12 months after starting with me.

GS

It’s really interesting you talking about authenticity - I guess that’s why Brené Brown’s TED talk on vulnerability struck
such a chord with the business world. For so long we viewed vulnerability as weakness, but people actually respect honesty, and often they can see through inauthenticity anyway.

AM

Absolutely. I think people just want to work for someone who’s human. They want to connect with you and unless you can actually be yourself, it’s really, really hard to connect personally.

The Best Leaders Have Character

GS

Anna, what did you find particularly challenging or even surprising about those early people leadership roles?

AM

My biggest challenge had been around leading functions. Maybe it was to do with coming from a legal background where you’re trained on things being right but my challenge right from the start was around being comfortable leading subject matters that are not your own technical background. The learnings that I have valued most have been to appreciate the skill that you have in the people who actually take on those roles, the teams that you have, and to use it as a chance to learn yourself.

You learn a lot more about judgment, and that you don’t need to know all of the technical details to develop judgment around when things don’t feel right. Really good logic and learning to rely so much more on your judgment, as opposed to all of the technical kinds of information, goes such a long way. It becomes easier to understand that having a requirement for your people to provide you with report after report is not going to get the best out of them.

GS

It’s such an interesting example. I can’t remember when we last had an outstanding All Black that became an outstanding
All Black coach, because the skills of being a great All Black are very different to those of being a great coach who can get the best out of his players. Obviously, we have to have a minimum level of capability in terms of technical acumen when leading a team, but people leadership is a whole different skillset compared to the technical skills. Anna, what mistakes did you make in those early days?

Oh there are so many! The obvious one that I mentioned before was trying to be someone that I wasn’t. Trying to pretend that I had all the answers. Avoiding decisions and engaging in proper conversations was definitely a pain point for me. And then later, as I got a bit older, probably some of the learnings changed more to things around people, appointments, some of those decisions around skills that you need in the team. I learned the hard way about the need to make sure that you surround yourself with people who come with all different perspectives and skills in order to make sure that you’ve got a really balanced approach. When you don’t make those right appointments to begin with, things can get really, really difficult as a leader.

Anna, if you could jump in a time machine with all your years of experience now, not just leadership, but people experience, and go back and talk to your younger self on the eve of that first leadership role, what advice would you give to your younger self?

It’s advice that I know I wouldn’t have listened to, Sharkey;
that I would have given myself. To enjoy it— it’s such a neat experience to enjoy. Don’t worry. And don’t overanalyse it. Actually, get to know your people on a personal level. And, as I said before, just be yourself.

What advice would you give to someone stepping into their first emerging leadership role?

Look for leadership within your team at every single layer that you have. Gone are the days when you used to surround yourself with a couple of your most senior leaders for your vision and your planning. Now it’s such a neat environment where some of the younger people that come through your organisation are well equipped to be dealing with business issues that you have, and they are so much more relevant to some of the challenges.

It’s such an enjoyable time now that I class myself as heading towards the geriatric age, and I get to spend this time with these really great people coming through. They can help you with your solutions, and they expect that they are able to share with you, and for you to connect directly with them.

As a new leader in the workplace, the fact that you get the opportunity to be able to draw on all of that kind of great thinking is fantastic. It’s such a different way to how, as leaders, we used to operate 10 years ago. So, make the most of it.
“Get to know your people
at a personal level.”

—Anna Morris