

## **Australian Stream Management Conference 2021**

### **Now is the moment we need to elevate feminine leadership traits in river management**

**By Dr Siwan Lovett**

I have been working in river management since 1996, and over this time I have been involved in many river projects involving different organisations. My experiences lead me to believe that if we valued feminine leadership traits more, we would achieve more inclusive, diverse, collaborative and longer-lasting river management outcomes. I believe this because whilst each of us has a mix of both masculine and feminine traits, we tend to find that those with stereotypically strong masculine traits (competitive, analytical, self-assured, authoritative) often rise to the top of the hierarchy. These traits are associated with ‘strong’ leadership, whereas feminine traits (collaborative, relational, empathic and expressive) are typically not.

I have worked with many managers over the years, but only a few of them I would call leaders. A leader for me is someone who inspires confidence, is able to be wrong, has trusted relationships and seeks the very best for the people they work with. The leaders I have followed in my career have been both men and women – and in all cases they have, and do, lead holistically. By this, I mean that they embrace and draw upon both masculine and feminine traits. I have also been influenced by scientists and researchers Brene Brown, Simon Sinek, Margaret Heffernan, Jim Collins, Fiona Kerr and Frances Frei. What resonates with me about these researchers and the leaders I have followed is that, although quite different, they each land on the fundamentals of what successful leadership is about - engendering trust. Trust is defined as a:

firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something.  
(Cambridge Dictionary)

When I consider this definition, it really impresses upon me how often I hear ‘trust’ talked about in river management. What I don’t hear much about, however, is how we build, nurture and extend trust into the communities and organisations we work within. Intuitively I know that trust is embedded in relationships, but it was not until I came across Frances Frei’s work that the elements of trust were crystallised. She demonstrates how trust is based upon three things - logic, authenticity and empathy - and that you need all three to be a trusted leader (Frei 2018).

When I consider the elements of trust within the context of river management over the past twenty-five years, I believe that we have tended to pay greater attention to narrow ideas about ‘logic’ more than authenticity and empathy. In fact, authenticity and empathy are most commonly referred to as ‘warm and fuzzy’ and labelled ‘soft’. I have heard the term ‘warm and fuzzy’ used so often, but the more I hear it, the more I become sensitised to how derogatory and ill-informed it is. If we want to be leaders who people will follow, we need to cultivate and develop skills in all three ‘trust’ fundamentals - logic, authenticity and empathy. I believe that in river management we need to dial down our masculine leadership traits so that we can dial up the feminine leadership skills that will enable all three trust fundamentals to be valued, demonstrated and acted upon.

#### **Logic**

The definition of logic is:

a particular way of thinking, especially one that is reasonable and based on good judgement. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Logic then, according to this definition, is not something that is bound to specific scientific formulae or technical rationale, but to ‘reasonable and good judgement’. In my time working in river management, I have observed biophysical scientific ‘logic’ to be given considerably higher status and influence than any other kinds of logic. In fact, I have been in situations where the logic I bring to a conversation, one that is based on social science, experience and emotion, is dismissed as not being ‘logical’ enough. Another ‘logic’ that has been largely absent from our river management discussions is the deep, rich and compelling Aboriginal ‘logic’ of place, people and how our Australian ecological systems can be better managed.

When business expert and analyst Margaret Heffernan investigated female leadership, she found that many women started their own businesses after working for corporations that did not respect or listen to them (Heffernan 2015). In essence, their ‘logic’ was at odds with the institutional biases our organisations have toward masculine leadership traits and decision-making. Researcher Caroline Criado Perez, in her book ‘Invisible Women: exposing data bias in a world designed for men’ shows how from government policy and medical research, to technology, workplaces, and the media, even to the design of car seatbelts (!), our world is built for and by men (Perez 2020). As a result, she argues, we are systematically ignoring half of the population, often with disastrous consequences (masculine leadership in 2020/21 bears this out). Her book has an impressive range of case studies, stories and new research from across the world that illustrate the hidden ways in which women are forgotten, and the profound impact this has on our society.

Is river management affected by this masculine bias as well? Absolutely. What does it mean for women? Well, what I have observed is that for many of us we strike out on our own, as staying within the system becomes untenable due to male dominated hierarchies that make it difficult for women to do it ‘their way’.

When the organisation I had worked in for fifteen years, Land & Water Australia, was abolished, I was forced to make a decision about what I would do next. By this stage in my career, I had worked in many different government or quasi-government organisations, both as an employee and consultant. I knew people in the government, research and private sector, but none of these organisations appealed. The lack of appeal lay in my frustration with slow decision-making processes, the pandering to territorial disputes over science or jurisdictional boundaries, and the lack of faith I had that my leadership style would ever result in senior promotions. I had been what I described as an ‘under-cover social scientist’ for many years (my PhD opened doors but not many people knew that it was in public policy and not environmental science), and whilst well supported as a consultant at Land & Water Australia, with the loss of this organisation I could see no attraction in joining any other. I knew, however, that to have influence, I needed to have an organisational home.

It was for this reason that I established the Australian River Restoration Centre (ARRC), with the backing of Dr Phil Price, the former Director of Land & Water Australia, and my husband Tom. I was also awarded a Winston Churchill Trust Fellowship that enabled me to investigate how River Restoration Centres were being managed in other parts of the world, and this enabled me to sort through models that may or may not work in Australia. Without realising it, as the pieces gradually fell into place, the logic of me establishing the ARRC was being built.

Margaret Heffernan discovered that female entrepreneurs, when building their own businesses, are able to play to their strengths, unencumbered by institutions that are designed for men rather than women. She highlights the irony that the powerlessness of women in male focused institutions, forces them to innovate, adapt and influence in other ways. The way women do this is primarily

through building trusted relationships, facilitating collaboration, being prepared to ask for help and taking risks. Women, she asserts, cannot succeed by following the rules, rather, women design their own on the fly (Heffernan 2015).

This was certainly true for me as I began my leadership of the ARRC. What kept me focused was that I was ultimately responsible if the organisation succeeded or failed. No-one was telling me what to do, I could work with who I wanted to, and I was able to be true to my own values. I also had the stalwart support of Phil, Tom and colleague Lori Gould, who at this time worked at Greening Australia. Lori was also keen to be ‘running her own show’ and, like me, has gradually made the move out of organisations run by other people (mostly men), to being in charge of her own business. Lori is now the Manager of our burgeoning Rivers of Carbon Program, and we hope that soon this will become her full-time job. Over time, and together with the third strategist in our organisation, Pat Gudhka, we have nurtured clients, networks and colleagues by taking the time to build trusted relationships and networks. From this, new ideas like Rivers of Carbon, the Waterway Management Twinning Program and Finterest have arisen, and the ARRC continues to grow. We have been able to do what Margaret Heffernan describes as ‘orchestrate’ rather than ‘command and control’. When you ‘orchestrate’ you are bringing different people, ideas, and knowledge together to collaborate rather than compete (Heffernan 2015). Using this approach has meant that the ARRC has become resilient, with a wide range of stakeholders, clients and projects enabling the organisation to stay afloat when some funding sources run dry.

When I established the ARRC, another part of my logic for doing so, was that if I did not create the organisation all the work, networks and relationships I had built and nurtured during my time at Land & Water Australia would be lost. I knew this to be true, as no ‘legacy’ website could ever replace the thriving, interactive, innovative and fun programs I was leading at Land & Water Australia. It was sadness, frustration and anger that Land & Water Australia was abolished that were the motivating emotions propelling me to take the risk of establishing the ARRC. I think this is important to recognise, as it is emotions that underpin all our decisions – for me, early on, it was emotions that are generally viewed as negative that propelled me to think about establishing a new organisation. It took a long time for my anger at the loss of Land & Water Australia to subside and to gradually be replaced with hope and excitement that the ARRC could succeed.

The part of my logic that I got wrong, however, was that I thought everybody in the water industry felt the same way as me about the need for the ARRC – in retrospect this was a bold assumption! Phil and I both thought it would be easy to attract funding and support for the ARRC, as our belief was that the work we would be doing, and the knowledge we would be sharing, were necessary and valued. After many funding applications being rejected, and no \$100,000 donations arriving, I realised that I needed to change my expectations and adjust my logic so that the ARRC could still realise its purpose, but do so differently. By this time Phil had moved on to other projects, so I re-oriented the organisation to be one that played to my strengths of facilitation, trusted relationships and fostering connection – both virtual and face-to-face.

Through a process of ongoing reflection and revision the ARRC, over the twelve years it has been in operation, has been able to retain its original purpose of ‘inspiring, supporting and facilitating people to protect and restore our rivers’, but with changes to our business model and operations. We have created a strong on-ground river restoration program, with its own identity and clear messaging for landowners (Rivers of Carbon), while at the same time becoming experts at science communication, facilitation and mentoring. This diversification was necessary for us to survive. Additionally, we are a very lean machine. The ARRC does not employ anyone, or own any assets, not even a computer. Anyone working for the ARRC has their own company and is responsible for earning the income they need, with the ARRC only making up part of their employment. I made these choices because I know that funding is fickle, so we need to be nimble and adaptable to change.

In more recent times, as the ARRC team has grown, we have added underpinning values of optimism, empathy and connection, as these remind us of who we are, why we are here and the way we want to operate. This clarity of purpose and shared values is another of the leadership traits that Fiona Kerr notes as being evident in leaders who people follow.

Does this all sound ‘logical’? I hope so, but it is not necessarily a logic that is codified, static and rigid. Instead, it is a logic that enables me and my team to make sense of the world, and the place and role of the ARRC within it. Is it as legitimate as biophysical scientific logic? Yes - it is different - but it is equally as valid and worthy of the same respect and recognition. Biophysical scientific logic is vital for our work in river management, but it is even more effective when woven amongst a range of other ‘logics’ so that we can have a more holistic understanding of what we are trying to achieve in both ecological and human communities across Australia.

Logic is also about understanding the disciplinary lenses and skills you bring to your work. Fiona Kerr, the neuroscientist and leadership researcher previously mentioned, discovered that good leaders are those that can deal with complexity, and who don’t push for closure to simplify, but are able to deal with multiple aspects of a process (Kerr 2017). Women tend to be more adept at multi-channel processing, and this means it is smart to have women in a team to encourage and enable the taking of multiple perspectives and knowledge into account. Margaret Heffernan’s research backs this assertion, with her finding that successful teams need both men and women in order that the bonds of social connectedness can be strong enough for the group to disagree and engage in creative conflict. Conflict needs to be safe in order for it to be constructive - without trust people are unable to speak and think openly – getting women involved enables this to happen more quickly (Heffernan 2015).

## **Authenticity**

The definition of authenticity is:

the quality of being real or true. (Cambridge Dictionary)

To engender trust, people need to feel that they are interacting with someone who is being authentic. Authenticity is something I believe we need to develop further in river management as we still have a tendency to approach conversations with what Peter Rennie describes as an ‘I know, you don’t, my way’, rather than ‘I don’t know, you might, better together’ approach. Without being authentic, we can never reach ‘better together’ (Rennie 2007).

If we accept that river management involves bringing together multiple logics, why is it then, that we still tend to hide behind hydrographs and conceptual models to explain what we want to achieve along our waterways? I use the term ‘hide’ here because, although there has been a growing recognition of the need to try and connect more meaningfully with the people we want to influence, we still tend to drown them in details, rather than speaking from our hearts. Now I love a good hydrograph, they can be rich in detail and provide so much information – but the hydrograph only becomes meaningful to me if it is explained through story. Why story? Because it is only when we can hear or tell a story about something that both parts of our brain – emotion and reasoning – come together, and it is only when they come together, that we are able to remember and process what is being said. For a story to truly resonate with someone, both emotion and reasoning are required – then the story becomes authentic.

I remember a few years ago being at an Australian Society for Fish Biology conference. I was sitting next to my friend John Koehn and I said to him, ‘I dare you to get up and start your talk by telling us why fish are important to you’. John smiled at me quizzically, walked up to the lectern, looked out at

the assembled people (mostly men) and said 'I love fish'. The reaction was priceless, there was silence, and then rousing applause. That whole day, regardless of whether I was in the plenary or concurrent sessions, most speakers started out by saying 'I love fish too', or some other variant that spoke to the emotion underpinning the work they do. By sharing a bit of themselves, these people became instantly more trustworthy for everyone around them. No amount of fish population models and data could have created this connection on its own. The connection is made because when humans connect with a story, our emotions are engaged and each of us writes a new story about that experience – in this way the story becomes memorable, so it can be retold and shared countless times.

The reason John's 'I love fish' resonated with so many people, is because he 'started with why'. Those who know me, know that I refer to Simon Sinek's 'Start with Why' research over and over again. This is because his work shows how powerful it is to start with the 'why', rather than the 'how' and the 'what', which tend to be based on facts, figures and process, not emotion. In all my leadership and facilitation work, I emphasise the need for us to 'start with why' if we truly want to gain the trust and collaboration of the people we want to work with. As Simon Sinek says, people can take in vast amounts of detail, but this does not drive behaviour – behaviour is driven by emotion, and when we share our emotions, we are being 'real and true' (Sinek 2009).

We can all learn how to be more authentic, but to do so we need to be in organisational environments that will support us in bringing both our hearts and minds to what we do. Most of the organisations I am familiar with 'talk the talk' of authenticity, but often fail to 'walk the talk'. For example, I am often in meetings where I know people are feeling deeply uncomfortable about a recommended decision or approach by a senior manager, but despite assurances, are unable to speak freely about their concerns. Susan Scott in her book *Fierce Conversations*, says that "The conversation is the relationship." Her point is: If the conversation stops, as it often does when power without trust enters the room, all of the possibilities for the relationship become smaller. Smaller relationships are those in which we lower the standards about how often we talk, what we talk about and, most importantly, what degree of authenticity we bring to our conversations. Susan Scott argues that we should always strive to be ourselves, real and authentic. To do this we:

...need to own up to our mistakes, be transparent and get feedback from our peers. The fear of having a real conversation is that you will be known and you will be changed. You reach authenticity and individuality when you stop comparing yourself to others. (Scott 2006)

I really like this advice of not comparing ourselves to others – it's something I have become better at following as I have got older. I believe that for all of us to be our authentic selves we need to be able to embrace our core traits, both masculine and feminine. Jill Douka believes that many women have alienated themselves from their core traits, misthinking that they don't comply with modern organisational standards. She says:

As women, we have at times given up on our true values in the hope of attracting more attention from clients and gaining male respect. However, every time we opt to deny our authentic nature, we are doomed to fail and fall. Men may have let us in the game, but the rules didn't change. The greatest proof is that even today we aren't equally present in politics; we aren't equally present where all the important decisions are being made. (Douka 2019)

My experience in river management is one in which I set up my own organisation in order to be true to my authentic self. I don't know if the same would hold true today, but at the time, back in the mid-2000s, I could not find an organisation that would enable me to realise my true potential. Part of the reason for this is because I had grown in confidence as an independent consultant and knew that I would be unable to conform with what I perceived to be narrow organisational boundaries. My

feminine traits of working collaboratively, being kind, trusting others and seeing vulnerability as a strength, meant I needed an organisation that would optimise these capabilities. I also made the decision that I would not work with aggressive, dominating people – male or female – as I find this kind of behaviour triggers the post-traumatic stress disorder I live with. Today at the ARRC our team is made up of men and women, and we all use our masculine and feminine skills to work alongside lots of different organisations and people. We also model these behaviours in all that we do - our monthly newsletter, in the way we manage projects, and most importantly in how we work with each other.

As I reflect on how far we have come in river management over the past twenty-five years, I can see that our science, shared knowledge and practices are significantly expanded. When it comes to authenticity though, I think we have gone backwards. There are some organisations, generally those that are grass-roots and local, who are able to be ‘real and true’ and, as a result, inspire trust in those communities they work within. For larger organisations, however, particularly those in government, authenticity remains an issue. I believe that over the past decade there has been an increasing aversion to risk, along with overly crafted messages, a failure to acknowledge the past, and a lack of transparency about the politics underpinning decisions. This has meant trust in the wider community is low, and for some it has resulted in the building of barricades and consequent defensive and derisive behaviour towards government. This behaviour is borne out of frustration and an inability to adapt to the changes we need to make if our rivers and the biodiversity they support are to survive. These sorts of reactions thrive in situations where trust is in short supply.

I believe that within our river management sector we need to be ‘real and true’ – authentic - if we are to inspire confidence within communities living along our waterways. They need to know that we care as much about their rivers, creeks, wetlands and billabongs as they do, and that ‘we don’t know everything, they might know more, and that we can do better together’ (Rennie 2007).

## **Empathy**

The definition of empathy is:

The ability to understand and share the feelings of another by imagining what it would be like to be in that person’s situation. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Empathy is often confused with sympathy, and it is important to understand the difference. Empathy is a term we use for the ability to understand other people’s feelings as if we were having them ourselves. Sympathy refers to the ability to take part in someone else’s feelings, mostly by feeling sorrowful about their misfortune. The distinction is important because we can empathise with someone, but not get involved in the expression of their feelings by claiming them as our own. Empathy refers more generally to our ability to take the perspective of, and feel the emotions of another person, sympathy is when we take part in those feelings, and compassion is when those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help.

So, what are the benefits of being an empathic leader? Fiona Kerr (2017) says that empathy not only engenders trust and sparks curiosity, but is critical to the process of long range, strategic problem solving and decision making. This is because empathy can expand your horizons and extend your thinking. As Forbes Business writer Tracy Brower says:

... by understanding an unfamiliar point of view, you can stretch and test new perspectives and ideas—a process that is key for successful innovation, as well as being important in ensuring your thinking doesn’t stagnate (Brower 2019).

Empathy in action is understanding the struggles a landowner might be facing following a fire and offering to help (as we are doing in the Upper Murrumbidgee River). It is considering a team member's perspectives, actively listening even when you might disagree, and being committed to co-developing a way forward that the whole team feels good about. As Tracy Brower goes on to state:

As the popular saying goes, people may not remember your actions, but they will remember how you made them feel. Through empathy, you can ensure your actions—which may be forgotten—contribute to positive feelings and experiences that are memorable in the long term. In addition, by building strong relationships you'll create positive outcomes for yourself as well. (Brower 2019)

Fiona Kerr addresses the 'warm and fuzzy' descriptor that is often used to describe being empathic by asserting that in terms of our leadership development this is the 'hard stuff', there is absolutely nothing 'soft' about the skills needed to connect with people, engender trust and enable transformative change. Leaders who are empathic create safe environments that then enable adaptive behaviours, including higher risk taking, faster ideation, more personal connectivity and candour, to thrive (Kerr 2017).

In my experience, I have found that being open and empathic results in relationships and opportunities that would not exist otherwise. Is it riskier, could that empathy and trust be abused? This is a question business analyst Jim Collins asked his mentor Bill Lazier who responded by talking about the 'trust wager'. The trust wager is one in which when meeting someone for the first time we need to consider the upside and downside of having an opening bid of trust, or an opening bid of mistrust. Bill believed that if you assume people are not trustworthy, you will demotivate and potentially drive away good people. For Bill then, there is more upside and less downside to an opening bid of trust than an opening bid of mistrust. Jim writes that Bill's opening bid of trust and belief in others acted like a magnet, pulling people up to a higher standard of performance and character simply because they did not want to let him down (Collins 2020). I share this view, and although I have been hurt and my trust abused a few times, on balance the benefits far outweigh the costs. I also know that when we use our empathic and relational skills, and take the time to get to know someone, we can get a feel for whether or not they are being authentic and trustworthy.

If we were to be more empathic, would we be more effective? After surveying more than 60,000 people in 25 countries, researcher of 'The Athena Doctrine', John Gerzema, discovered that people want a change from the hyper masculine type leadership that exerts control over teams through aggression, manipulation and authoritarianism. Masculine leadership styles like these are not only used by males, female leaders also recur to this management style, suppressing their feminine qualities in order to be 'taken seriously'. Eighty percent of people in the study said that relationships and respect are more important than money, with loyalty, empathy and selflessness highly valued moral traits. John Gerzema found that women inspire more trust because they listen more carefully and empathise with others (Gerzema 2013). So, in answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, yes, research indicates that leaders with more empathy are more effective at inspiring and achieving the best work out of their employees.

When Frances Frei described her stint working at Uber, she said that trust was at an all-time low and all three trust fundamentals – logic, authenticity and empathy – were on life support. One of her first strategies was to ban mobile phones and computers in meetings. She recounts an experience of someone texting her to ask a question when they were sitting across the table from her in a face-to-face meeting (Frei 2018). Wow! I have also been in meetings where this is the case, and I know from personal experience that if computers are present the quality of the discussion and commitment to shared outcomes is significantly reduced. How can you have genuine connection if you are checking emails while someone is presenting? I have a rule that when in online meetings we have the camera on, and in face-to-face meetings we try and keep phones and computer out of sight. This is because

we cannot be empathic and build trust unless we look at other people, face-to-face and make eye contact, whether in a meeting room or on-line.

Establishing trust is critical if we want people to work alongside us. In our Rivers of Carbon program we start with the relationship we want to have with landowners and local communities. We made the decision that we would not work anywhere we were not invited, we prioritise local connections, and city slickers like me are sidekicks to our on-ground project coordinators. When we go out into a community to run a workshop it is always an Aboriginal person who opens proceedings, followed by a landowner, and then someone from Rivers of Carbon. We explain why we are there, who invited us, our connection to that community or place, and our intention. This is an approach that has worked well and is built upon many years of experience. Back in the late 1990s when I was working on the Land Water and Wool Program, I became acutely aware of how often we went out on to properties and talked about an eroding stream or gully using scientific language and dissecting the ‘problem’ we were there to solve. I noticed that the more we pontificated, the more the landowner retreated and became silent. Researcher Grace Pretty explains that when we are on someone’s land we are standing on their identity – so when we start pointing out all the problems, we are trampling all over that identity (Pretty 2010). Where is our empathy in such a scenario? Why would anyone invite us back to their property after this kind of an experience?

My experiences in Land Water and Wool led me to develop the Five P Framework which guides all of our Rivers of Carbon and on-ground activities. The Five Ps stands for People (listen, respect), Place (connection, identity), Proof (science, knowledge), Profit (economic, social, environmental) and Promise (expectations, joint agreement). For a project to be successful we need all Five Ps to be present – without knowing at the time, this approach brings together empathy, authenticity and logic – the fundamentals of trust.

In a river management context, as the above example shows, I believe that many of us do try and empathise with the communities we work within. Where it gets difficult, however, is when we show empathy, but due to organisational constraints or a particular leadership style, we fail to be authentic. I think that much of the debate and unease that has come to characterise the roll out of, for example, the Basin Plan, is because whilst some organisations have tried in their messaging and actions to empathise, the politicisation of the process has meant that they have been unable to be authentic. In this situation empathy can come across as disingenuous and false, which unfortunately erodes trust further. It saddens me that jurisdictional bickering, territorial disputes, narrow single interest activism, academic conjecture and political short sightedness now characterises much of our river management work. Currently, community trust in government and science is low, and whilst some of this is due to wider contextual factors such as the pandemic, bushfires and climate change scepticism, we in river management have to look at how we are behaving and engaging, and really consider how we can do better.

### **So what?**

If as leaders we want to strive for ambitious river management outcomes, we need to enable our ‘trust’ muscles of logic, authenticity and empathy to be valued, built and used. I have provided examples of how we have tried to embed these traits within our work at the ARRC, as well as at a personal level by embracing both our masculine and feminine capabilities so that we lead holistically. As Brene Brown says:

It turns out that trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. It is earned not through heroic deeds, or even highly visible actions, but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection. (Brown 2018)

I believe that, man or woman, everyone can benefit from the power of embracing the feminine. In river management we need to pay more attention to promoting and facilitating feminine leadership qualities so that we can have trusting relationships, brave organisations and inspired people walking alongside us as we protect, nurture and restore the rivers we all care so much about.

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