



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY EVENT

Wednesday 5 March 2025

Acknowledgments

This morning's panellists, Jenny Atta PSM, Secretary of the Department of Health, **Peta McCammon**, Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and moderator, **Brigid Monagle**, Commissioner of the Victorian Public Sector Commission

Distinguished guests

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands on which this House stands – the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Eastern Kulin Nation – and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

Just under 100 years ago, Frederic Thrasher, one of the founders of sociology, released a book that reviewed the nature of crime gangs in Chicago.

He pored over information and interviews from more than 1300 groups that had sprung up across the city.

His work was intended to dissect the social nature of these loosely organised and rapidly formed groups – and importantly, get to the heart of what sort of leader could convince, support and temper the gang.

While the book spoke directly to crime and what became criminology – understanding the types of leaders that tended to rise was a significant insight into leadership.

Gangs are informal organisations – and that, we might argue, is the hardest and the best test of leadership, because it is leadership that grows from, and is supported by, those being led.

That's important for all in leadership positions, because too often leadership is seen as the role to which we have been appointed, which has its own particular rules and responsibilities.

It's important to reflect on what it takes to grow from and with the culture you're in and be supported by it – that's what leadership is really about.

The leaders that Thrasher identified were ones we have all experienced – such as a leader who uses aggression to command, or one that relies on experience as their resource and credibility.

Within those boundaries, Thrasher came to describe the traits of a “natural” leader, telling us:

“The chief trait of the natural leader as revealed by the majority of the cases studied is “gameness.”

[They] lead. [They] go where others fear to go. [They are] brave in the face of danger. [They] go first-ahead of the gang and the rest feel secure in their presence.

Along with this quality usually goes the ability to think clearly in the excitement of a crisis.”

You might think from this description that the gang leader is the toughest, the most aggressive, the tallest, the biggest – it turned out to be none of those things.

While we tend to default to what we imagine are the key characteristics of a leader, his studies showed if you delve deeply into a group, you will often find that the informal leader does not conform to the way we typically describe leaders.

In essence, Thrasher reflected on the fact that successful leaders are those chosen from the team and by the team, and tend to be those that give more than they get.

Or, more accurately, they operate from the mindset that they should give more than they get.

You may be thinking at this point: *“But what does this have to with ‘women in leadership’?”*

I do not think it can be said there is only one set of effective leadership characteristics.

Gameness comes from and is defined by the situations in which it is exercised.

Leadership and its successfulness is not independent of context.

Nor is it exclusive to any one gender.

The behaviour and traits of a good leader change with context.

However, the opportunities available to demonstrate them are frequently less diverse than the distribution of capabilities in the population.

There has to be room to act, someone has to see what you're capable of doing, and they have to be attentive to the context when they evaluate the characteristics of effective leadership.

I do not believe that women bring intrinsically 'better' or 'softer' skills or key innate capacities to leadership roles.

My argument about women in leadership is not that women in leadership will bring, somehow, the 'caring' and 'sharing' behaviours that will make leadership better as a whole.

I don't believe men are born to lead either.

I think leadership varies by context, and we have to understand the context and look to shape the opportunities to see people and understand what they're capable of doing.

We have to look, for ourselves as leaders, for the opportunities for leadership to be shown.

The places where 'gameness' can be tested.

Often, there is an emphasis on the 'remarkable' achievement of women attaining leadership roles.

It is striking how many times you can find a 'first'.

It's now less so in the public sector, but there are a lot of 'firsts' out there – even 'seconds.'

However, it is this very notion of 'remarkability' that underscores how far we still have to go.

Encouraging women to take leadership roles moves us closer to a place where women representing their organisations is not an exception, but an expectation.

This shift is vital in moving beyond the 'remarkable' – where we as a society recognise that gender is not among the traits that define leadership.

It's not going to change the character of good and effective leadership, because it relies on a context and on finding people who speak to, and are drawn from – and therefore give back to – those whom they lead.

People bring different skills, capacities and experiences to the table.

They range from the tangible gaining of and distribution of resources, to the intangible boosting of morale and fostering of cohesion.

This is not to mention the formal leadership responsibilities of roles that manage teams or entire organisations.

These roles typically have defined accountabilities to other leaders or boards.

But, to put it bluntly – it's not about you. It's about them, always.

Here you need to carry the burdens of leadership lightly.

As poet Rudyard Kipling put it: “keep your head when all about you are losing theirs”.

This is particularly true for the sorts of roles you occupy, because there will be times when people are losing their heads above and below you.

From time to time, you will feel a sense of isolation in these roles due to the demands that your decisions will carry.

While these moments can weigh heavy, a good leader should count the costs of such difficulties in private.

And do so without the expectation of praise or recognition for these efforts.

In terms of caring for your organisation, this truly embodies the concept of ‘giving more than you get’.

And I should be clear I am not talking only about loyalty to a team.

I mean clearly understanding the value of the organisation and being able to dispassionately evaluate not only its circumstances and possibilities, but also what you might and should contribute.

To summarise these points; leadership must be viewed primarily through the lens of a responsibility to those led – not a title or prize gained.

It’s a responsibility not only to your team, but to leadership.

You can help others to opportunities that allow them to test and hone their capabilities.

It’s those experiences that distribute opportunities and this is key to developing leaders.

Giving more than you get, and evaluating your own contribution will have both a tangible and intangible impact on resources and morale for the entire organisation.

Moreover, carrying the burdens lightly and meeting difficulty with a sense of resilience is crucial to ensuring that you can continue to deliver for those that rely on your leadership.

No-one in this room has chosen an easy path, and fittingly, no good leaders base their journey on convenience.

But the responsibility that you bear allows you to effect great change – both for those you lead and for the broader community.

It's a responsibility defined not by gender, but by the behaviours you have worked to develop over many years.

Each woman taking on a leadership role is able to ensure greater opportunities for other women and for all people to take these responsibilities for the generations to come.

It never is, nor should it be, who you are – it's what you've done.

And it's what you've done for others that should, in the end, be the yardstick we should use when we choose leaders and when we give opportunities for others to lead.

That's what makes the gameness of a good leader.

Enjoy it as much as you can, and wherever possible, try to give it back.

Thank you.