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Helping you align your people with your vision



Lessons from Down Under:

What Will You Do to Be Transformed?

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

I am recently returned from a trip to Australia and New Zealand. I have never been to this part of the world before and so it was an adventure in all respects. From attending a performance at the Sydney Opera House to exploring the wondrous Milford Sound emptying into the Tasman Sea, I certainly fulfilled one of my top 5 personal intentions—seek out beautiful vistas.

Sometimes, as you know, we can take advantage of a different perspective to change our perspective. Perhaps I didn't need to go to a time zone 21 hours different from my own, but hey, who says I do things the easy way? I highly recommend travel to do this—talk about getting out of your proverbial comfort zone!

When you fly Down Under from the west coast of the U.S., you lose a day completely. *Poof!* Monday's gone. Yet on your way back, you get a sort of do-over—I had Saturday twice! I love this metaphor: on the one hand, one day that could've happened doesn't (so you can just let it go) and on the other hand, you get a great opportunity to make one particular day the best version ever. Granted, most of these Saturdays were spent in airports, airplanes and other modes of transportation and marveling at how the human body can adjust to 21 hours difference.

I found the DownUnders really refreshing, actually, and it's tough to make generalizations because the people I met were from all over the world, often other Commonwealth countries with ties to Great Britain, and often holding dual citizenship. So, to say this-and-such about Australians or New Zealanders would be

a bit ignorant and shortsighted. I was only there for 2 weeks! However, the learner and listener that I am, I was delighted to walk away with lots of lessons learned, and some to share with regards to leading your organizations, teams and self.

1. Don't be a Grumpy Bastard. Now, to be fair, I've got to recognize all the great folks gathered together at Rob Nixon's annual Coaching Club Conference in Queenstown, New Zealand. (130+ accounting partners and owners of firms throughout Australia and New Zealand.) I showed up in Queenstown because, *well*, I was invited, and I wanted to check out fellow Million Dollar Hall of Famer Rob's conference. On the first day, participants were presented with some "leadership essentials" by one of Australia's leading business coaches Micheal Sheargold. Michael posed a great question to the leaders of these firms by asking, "would you like to be lead by you?" and allowing owners and partners to discuss their leadership effectiveness in small groups. At one point, he stressed the importance of attitudes and behaviors, mentioning what happens when "you show up at work like a Grumpy Bastard." (I've not yet perfected my Australian accent, but you simply must pronounce this something like groompy bAAs-turd. It doesn't sound the same with the flat vowels of an American accent.) I leaned over to Rob and said, "you know, I could never get away with saying 'grumpy bastard' in a speech or workshop with 130 people . . ." and he laughed and said, "it's because you guys are too uptight!" Perhaps. And I don't want to get all wrangled up in a discussion about political correctness, which seems to have either bypassed these DownUnders all together or barely made a blip. They are refreshingly frank and honest with one another, regardless of the mythology surrounding the Tall

Poppy Syndrome. This all reminded me of something incredibly important to remember from the Influencing Options model for communication: *it is our behaviors that influence, not our intentions*. How are you entering your workplace? How are you messaging to your team or organization? As the leader, you've got to set the tone, and let it be one of honesty, optimism and problem solving for results. Don't be a Grumpy Bastard!

2. Be willing to be surprised by thinking BIG!

My primary reason for venturing to Sydney was to attend a workshop for independent consultants titled "From Six Figures to Seven"—an opportunity to examine current business practices and shift paradigms in order to facilitate dramatic business growth. All of us could use a little of this, frankly, regardless of your position or profession. 6 to 7 (Alan Weiss's workshop) is a creative metaphor for moving from wherever you are now to the next level. I think it's no accident that on my way to attend, I actually lost that Monday. Whatever I might normally do on that day I had to let go of and move on. Part of growth and development also includes a letting go of what once was, even if it's worked for you before! I spent much of the three-day workshop feeling uncomfortable, not knowing the answers to my own questions, not feeling sure of what I should do next or where I should go. I'm sure my clients sometimes feel like this when we work together in the messy trenches. Often, we get sucked into looking for the *one answer* or the *right thing* and we doggedly pursue this silver bullet that's going help us feel secure about venturing into the unknown. It's the unknown for a reason . . . we have to grow into the knowing and understanding. The process can be quick or not-so-quick, but it is a process nonetheless. What have you not been able to do because you've been thinking small? What have you been holding yourself back from because you don't yet have a clear map? You don't have to know everything or have all the answers to begin: just begin. If you adopt the attitude of 'willingness to be surprised' then you can start to take those simple steps toward actually manifesting them to happen.

3. Talk to the Kiwi. Those who know me know I'm typically not afraid to be silly, corny or laugh at myself. (You should see the birthday cards my family exchanges—we love corny!) Thus, when my new mates

from Down Under suggested that I take an aggressive look at what was working/not working for me in fulfilling my own mission of helping leaders *create great places to work that increase the bottom line*, I was willing to listen and consider. I was willing to be both surprised and uncomfortable. I was willing to imagine that I might take my own advice for how to increase effectiveness, efficiency, profitability, balance and happiness. I've learned some important lessons in the past few years in business: first, you often need outsiders to ask you questions, regardless of how smart you are; second, as someone who spends most of her time working as an outsider, one of my greatest talents is asking what I call "the new girl" questions. The tricky part is that by the nature of being involved in your own situation, you cannot naturally ask the "new girl" questions of yourself—no matter how smart you are or how many business books you've read or seminars you've attended. This is why a coach, a consultant and a group of discerning peers are essential. What does this have to do with 'talking to the kiwi'—you're expecting some fuzzy oracle? Sort of. After I thought my brain might burst from my pushing at it for days, I walked downtown Queenstown to the gift shop and bought a small kiwi toy (the bird, not the fruit!). It's a visual reminder of my transformative experience but it's also a corny way to remember to ask myself the 'new girl' questions—why are you doing this? Does this support your vision/mission? How will this help you achieve your goals and dreams? I do have my own coaches and mentors, my own dynamic support group of peers. But sometimes, I need to talk to the kiwi—to keep myself on track, as well.

You know, I think all experiences are transformative, truly. I highly recommend Australia and New Zealand but you don't have to travel faraway to reinvent yourself as a leader or a business professional. What about checking out your own hometown art museum, concert of unfamiliar music, a book you might not normally read? Doing something out of the ordinary can afford you the perspective of an entirely new vista. Years ago, when I participated in my first Danskin Women's Triathlon, I clipped out their motto that is pinned still to my bulletin board above my desk: "The woman who starts the race is not the same woman who finishes the race." Substitute the words as you see fit—but it's true, isn't it? No matter what the experience, if we enter it fully and are prepared to be surprised *and* uncomfortable, we will be transformed. ❖

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