

## JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN



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As I am coming to the end of the perfect role, it is time to reflect over the time I have spent in the management ranks. I have been with Imparja for five years and I know in my heart that there will be no other position which will compare. Don't ask me why I chose management. I think one emerges into it. A good friend of mine once said to me, "Corallie, you've always been a manager!"

Many people are fearful of entering the field as they are not sure what managers really do (and sometimes managers don't know what they are doing). Then there is the fear associated with some of the things that managers must do, like discipline, terminations, public speaking, networking. Or there may be fear associated with what we have all experienced — the really bad manager. It is a sad reality that even today, bad management exists. It is my belief that fear is the single most important impediment to choosing management as a career. I know — it stopped me (but not for long).

I commenced my MBA with USQ in 1992. At this time, I was in television sales. During the five years I mostly studied on weekends. The family was really supportive over this long haul. My work hours hardly allowed any study during the week. At orientation, I met two other students, Lenore who is a medical scientist, and Michelle, a teacher. We became firm friends and created the tightest study group known to man. Nothing could tear us apart. When one of us wanted to pull out of the study, the other two would reinforce the original objective and this kept us going. Our student liaison person, Beryl, was wonderful too. She talked about our group to other students because our methods worked. Our study group was instrumental to the success we each shared when we graduated.

We would meet every Tuesday night at the station to go over our work. If we had assignments due, we never discussed the contents of these until they had been sent off for marking. We took turns in supplying interesting foods to eat while studying and this became one of our many rituals. Our News Director of the time used to join us for dinner and there began a long

relationship. Ross has been with Michelle ever since! They just announced their engagement this year, eight years after their first meeting.

Some of the other rituals we practised were having a celebratory dinner after exams, and getting together even now for weekends. There was a special one on the weekend we graduated at the university in Toowoomba. Our friendships continue despite us being separated by thousands of kilometres and the fact that we graduated in 1999. It struck me then too that I had completed my MBA completely externally, from Cairns, and had never attended the University in those five years, mainly due to time and distance constraints.

I still keep in touch with Bruce Millett, my (favourite) lecturer for Strategic Management, and Organisational Development and Change. He keeps trying to convince me to do the DBA, which I'm still considering.

After some years of sales management followed by station management with the Seven Network, I took a huge leap and applied for the CEO position with Imparja Television, now Australia's last independent commercial television company, and wholly owned by Aboriginal interests.

The early brief from my Board was to instil professionalism, ensure commercial viability, whilst at the same time, share the important social objectives of Imparja as a wholly owned Aboriginal television station. There also needed to be a major attitudinal change in the way the staff saw the objectives of the company and Board. This required open clear communications, fairness, and a total commitment to removing any old power structures which had built up during a difficult period of instability and distrust.

On my first day I met with the large ATSIC Regional Board, was given a thorough description of the senior management team by the interim general manager, had an extremely complex negotiation with Optus for our digital satellite capacity, met with all the staff and cut a cake (it was my birthday). That evening I went over the financials, which were not encouraging.

My resolve grew, and within five weeks I had put down a mind map of where I saw Imparja, both internally and externally in a strategic sense. This model has been worked up many times. I still refer to this document today as we move forward in the ever-changing digital environment, which is fast, fast, fast. Add to this a cross cultural twist where we are attempting and achieving things for the first time and, you can be sure, every day is different and challenging. I have an extremely talented senior management group and we share our challenges and successes.

I like to work within and from beside, coaching and rewarding. Of course, if a difficult decision needs to be made, then I make it. I like to deal with conflict at the earliest when it is easier to solve. And we often have cross-functional teams to work on particular problems.

Our most successful and loved cross-functional group is the capital expenditure team, 'The Dodecahedron of Dissention', made up of five technical people, including the chief engineer. This group has robust debates about future capital asset decisions and, as I am not technical, we have meetings where the group uses contention, and then make agreed recommendations to me

for purchase. They also consult with end users in the process (for example, the camera person who uses the equipment).

There are the old cliches about management and, of course, I like to use some of them. 'Lead by example': my role is simply to achieve the corporate objectives through others. I like the quote 'Management is about interruptions, interrupted by interruptions'. Yes, it is a science, but it is also a simple construct. 'Open door policy' — true, except when it's closed! Obviously there are times when a work colleague needs privacy. Otherwise the door is open. One time my workmates took my office door off its hinges and hid it. I pretended not to notice and it was wonderful seeing each of them try to make me aware that there was no door.

My Myers Briggs Type Indicator is INTJ and I'm told that introverts make great managers because they can focus for long periods. Funny thing, being in sales for many years, I always thought I was an extrovert until my sales manager (a very intuitive introvert) suggested that I wasn't. I think I was forty years old at the time. Talk about identity crisis!

Sometimes, the best thing for a manager to do is nothing. Having the control to do nothing takes a lot of effort. But the more you do it, the better your judgment becomes as to when it is appropriate, and when not. Once, while working in Cairns, there were two brothers who worked in our commercial production area. The older brother was the manager and they had a disagreement. The manager called me and asked if I would see them. I agreed. They came into my office, shut the door, sat down, and commenced arguing. This went on for about ten minutes. They eventually cooled down, resolved their conflict, got up, shook hands and left my office. I didn't say a word during the whole process.

I love the television business. Hunter S Thompson who wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has recently been quoted as saying, "The TV business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway, where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side." Of course, I'm a good (wo)man and I won't die like a dog, but I love the quote.

Coming to the end of this wonderful role, I am now mentoring my talented indigenous successor. He has two degrees (commerce and law), but little management experience. One thing is for sure, he is enthusiastic, lateral and he must be OK as his birthday is the same day as mine!

I have always been a practical person who relies on solid experience, even through my nursing years, but I have to say that the MBA has given me much more confidence, and it has become a tremendous reinforcer to my practical general management skills. It has also given me discipline and demonstrates that as a young sixteen year old who finished school at grade 10, I wasn't lost to the world of academia. And it proves that it is possible that I could be a nuclear physicist if I want to be (no, not likely!).

The world of academia has opened my eyes and now I want to study Latin, Greek mythology, music, horticulture, English, ancient history — just everything really. There will never be enough time. It has stimulated my intellect to the point that even if I die at 101 like the Queen Mum, my epitaph will read "But I haven't finished yet!"