

Community Leadership PDF Resource

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Chris Milne – Case Study

"I tend to get involved in things that make a useful difference." Chris Milne 2003

Chris Milne, a teacher at a Brisbane state high school, thrives on opportunities to "make a difference" in her school, the local environment, her community and her city.

Chris has been involved in initiating a bushcare group that operates within her school as well as in the community and through a partnership with Brisbane City Council will be helping establish a frog habitat in land adjacent to the school. Chris also coordinates a peer mediation program at her school.

Chris's experience and enthusiasm are integral to the success of the groups with which she has been involved. Chris was happy to discuss some of her learnings and reflections on characteristics of successful community leaders and some of Chris's thoughts are shared here.

Asked what she believed most important to being a successful community leader, Chris stated "It is essential to believe in what you do." According to Chris an essential leadership quality is the belief

"this is something that needs doing, these are skills I can bring to bear, and I really believe in what I'm doing. So that baseline of actually believing in what you're doing first is really, really important and I think that's probably why I've gone towards the environment and things like peer mediation at school and youth coordinating because I do believe in those {issues} I couldn't be a leader leading in things I didn't believe in".

Chris notes that the goals and expectations of the group need to be kept in perspective. When initially offered a bushcare site, Chris imagined a ten year process to clear and then replant the site. Students working with her, however, expressed their disappointment when at the end of the year the site was not "complete".

Chris also seeks to ensure there is a range of ways people can be involved. Introducing a variety of projects provides current students, past students and members of the community many opportunities to become involved in different ways. Chris reiterated that it is important to encourage people to use their abilities to their best.

Build on small successes to achieve greater success is Chris's advice. Chris notes, "You actually begin to see yourself achieve ... and it's that achievement that actually builds on the next one".

When group members and others see what your group has achieved they build trust in what you will be able to achieve in the future, Chris notes. In practical terms for Chris's groups this has resulted in successful grant submissions and in local business approaching the group to provide financial and practical support and sponsorship with projects.

Chris describes the progress of the bushcare group:

"we went from doing a little bit of work in the park, then we built it into our course as an alternative for some of the students who like practical work so they are actually doing the theory and the practical. Through doing quite a bit of practical work on the park there's ownership for the kids. From there we went to doing four community days a year. Some of our students come, and it can vary sometimes from one person to about 25. And then we applied for the Arbour Day Award for the school last year and won it".



Chris maintains that one of the biggest jobs of a leader is to encourage individuals to become more confident. She says that encouragement of individuals is vital *"to set goals, and achieve the way they want rather than the way the world sometimes sees they should achieve."*

As a leader it is important to clearly identify what the group is about and to get that message into the community says Chris. *"When people actually know what you're about, and word's got out, you have extra people contacting you"* Chris relates.

Chris believes that it is important for community leaders to be able to concentrate on the positive when things are going bad. She also notes the importance of celebrating when you actually achieve and believes that's what drives your project.

A key words associated with projects is – *"flexibility"* according to Chris. As she says *"you have to be flexible enough with the people you're working with, and with your plans as well, because they change, all sorts of things change. And then we've had really amazing things happen"*.

Chris now spends a significant amount of time showing other bushcare groups how her group works and what it has achieved. Chris sees networking as important not so much so that others can see what you have done and copy it but so they can see where the major problems were and how to avoid them.

Chris believes the idea of *"start small and manage it"* is fundamental to getting most projects up and running.

Chris notes:

"you see so many people go really big with something, and they want to go in there and make it enormous, and all of a sudden they can't cope. And that's the worst thing because then the whole thing folds and then you lose everything. You lose your confidence, you lose that baseline believing in it if you're not careful, and that's what you can't afford to lose. That's the bit that actually drives you, the bit you believe in, and what you're doing what you're achieving."