

Delegate Martha Harley at the 17th Challenge of Rural Leadership course. January 2013

We stand at the dawn of the 3rd Agricultural revolution. The world's population is increasing and needs feeding, costs of living are going up at every stage of the food chain, energy is running out and new forms of power are needed. The weather is increasingly problematic, pollinating insects are in crisis and many of the 'next generation' are either looking to 'opt out' of farming or make significant changes. Farming has become an integral part of providing a sustainable solution to some of the biggest challenges the world faces and the opportunities are abundant. However, it is a world that is changing at an increasing rate and therefore needs a constant flow of specialists, leaders, influencers and entrepreneurs with the capabilities and networks to help it develop and flourish.

The Challenge of Rural Leadership course promotes itself as '*providing high-potential managers with the capabilities to grow and thrive in continuously changing conditions*'. Each year the Worshipful Company of Farmers hand pick 18 individuals from a variety of vocations across the world to come together and equip them with advanced tools to enable them to become advocates and active ambassadors for agriculture. Attendees this year included those from government and agricultural related organisations and farmers from every corner of the UK as well as Australia, Poland, Belgium and the Isle of Man, of all whom were already leaders with forward thinking attitudes.

A major objective of the course is to provide the group with an increased understanding and awareness of the strategic issues likely to occur over the next five years. Therefore a wide range of topics were covered including GM Foods, Climate Change, EU CAP, Politics and Finance, as well as mind mapping, dealing with challenging situations and people, social media, psychometrics and media training, amongst others.

A diverse range of speakers were involved including Peter Kendall, Lord Don Curry, Jane King and Baroness Byford, as well as entrepreneurial farmers, to name but a few. The attendance of such high profile individuals who were without exception incredibly generous with their time, knowledge and honesty, further demonstrated the esteem the course is held in.

A speaker who deserves a particular mention is James Small, a farmer from Somerset, who having been on the course last year, had gone away and put many of his newly acquired skills into practice alongside his natural entrepreneurialism. He had consequently seen a significant difference to himself and his business in just one year, so for the group to meet and listen to someone who was a living breathing case study was inspirational.

The mirror was very much turned in on oneself in the second week and the focus was on learning how to implement and manage change, the importance of working as a team as much as on your own and understanding how we come across to others. Furthermore the ability to motivate, inspire and communicate with colleagues and those you wish to influence in the outside world are all vital skills to become an effective ambassador in the industry.

One of the analogies Richard Softe introduced to the group near the end of the course was 'getting up on the balcony to look down at oneself on the dance floor', the idea being it allows one to see the bigger picture. A powerful tool once you get the hang of it!

Undoubtedly one of the key things gained on the course were the friendships and contacts made. The group walked away with a lifelong group of friends and mentors they could implicitly trust.

The course was a cleverly and beautifully crafted beast created to carry one forward equipped with saddlebags bulging with tools, ideas, motivation and confidence to make a difference to the future. In the words of Lord Curry "if your vision doesn't scare you, it's not big enough!"

(650 words)