

Shifting Into the Driver's Seat—Building the Leadership Capacity of Australia's Cattlewomen

By Sally Leigo

On the Ground

- Beef producers in Australia's Northern Territory are limited in their ability to represent their needs and viewpoints in decision-making processes that affect the beef industry.
- A collaborative approach was taken by the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association, the Northern Territory Dept of Primary Industry and Fisheries, and the Commonwealth Government of Australia to design and deliver a series of 1-day workshops that aimed to build the leadership capacity of Northern Territory cattlewomen.
- Workshops were held in 2009 and 2010 and focused on communication skills, goal setting, and personal health and fitness.
- Encouraging more cattlewomen to take leadership roles benefits the beef industry by doubling its talent pool and bringing different perspectives to industry issues.

Keywords: capacity building, cattlewomen, leadership, leadership development.

Tomando el mando—construcción de la capacidad de liderazgo de las ganaderas de Australia

Perspectiva desde el campo:

- Las productoras de carne de res del Territorio del Norte de Australia están limitadas en cuanto a su disponibilidad para representar sus necesidades y puntos de vista en los procesos de toma de decisiones que inciden sobre la industria de la carne de res.
- La NTCA, la NT DPIF y el Gobierno de la Mancomunidad de Australia adoptaron un enfoque de colaboración para diseñar e impartir una serie de talleres con duración de un día que tuvieron como objetivo construir la capacidad de liderazgo de las ganaderas del Territorio Norte (NT).
- Los talleres se llevaron a cabo en el 2009 y el 2010, enfocándose en las habilidades de comunicación, el establecimiento de metas y la salud y condición física personal.
- Alentar a más ganaderas a asumir roles de liderazgo beneficia a la industria cárnica bovina al duplicar su reserva de talentos y aportar perspectivas diferentes a la problemática de la industria.

For too long, Australian cattlewomen have been passengers, rather than the drivers, of the beef industry's future. In this article, I describe the experience of delivering a series of capacity-building workshops to Northern Territory, Australia, cattlewomen; reflect on how else cattlewomen can become leaders; and, through a case study, outline the importance of having Australian cattlewomen sharing the driver's seat of the industry's future.

The rangelands of Australia are characterized by their large scale (81% of Australia land mass),¹ low population

density (3% of Australia's population),² and production of much of Australia's wealth in mining and, to a lesser extent, agriculture. Production of beef is one of the major land uses of the Australian rangelands with a herd of 14.8 million head in the Northern Territory and Queensland,³ representing approximately 52% of the Australian beef herd.³

In the Northern Territory, beef producers reside on large cattle stations, averaging 3,122 km² (1,205 mi²),⁴ which are 2–8 hours drive (one-way) from their nearest town center. Most of the Northern Territory cattle stations contain be-

tween 2,000 head and 5,000 head of cattle, but larger stations contain more than 20,000 head of cattle.⁴ Ownership of cattle stations is by private family businesses, by corporate entities, or by Aboriginal-owned organizations. Management of cattle stations is usually by family members with one or two permanent staff, or for large, corporate-owned facilities, the cattle stations may have an average 22 staff during the mustering season.⁴ Operating such large-scale cattle stations with few staff, in such a remote and often harsh environment, challenges the ability of beef producers to increase profitability against rising operating costs.

Beef producers in the Northern Territory have, during the past 40 years, been reducing their reliance on labor because of its increased costs and decreased availability. Additionally, in the past 20 years, there has been increased focus by government and nongovernment organizations on engaging beef producers and other stakeholders in the decision-making processes for policy, research, and community activities. Northern Territory beef producers are constantly called on to represent their needs, experiences, and opinions on various boards, committees, and workshops but have less time for those roles because of limited staff assistance on the station. As a result, industry leadership is under great pressure.

Beef producers of both genders are involved in leadership of the beef industry but most leaders are male. The Northern Territory Cattleman's Association (NTCA) and the Northern Territory Government's Dept of Primary Industry and Fisheries (NTDPIF) recognized that more Northern Territory cattlemen could be leaders in their industry. In 2009, the Commonwealth Government of Australia initiated their "Recognizing Women Farmers" grants to encourage women to become leaders in agriculture. The NTCA, in partnership with the NTDPIF, was successful in obtaining grants to undertake training of Northern Territory cattlemen in leadership skills.

2009 and 2010 A Woman's Capacity Workshops

Two series of *A Woman's Capacity* workshops were run in 2009 and 2010. The workshops were aimed at building the mental and physical strength of women in the Northern Territory beef industry and at developing their capacity as leaders in their industry and community. Those workshops received only minimal promotion through a flyer circulated around the NTDPIF and NTCA e-mail networks and subsequent word of mouth.

The 2009 workshops, *A Woman's Capacity—Mental Toughness for Greatness*, contracted a facilitator from The Right Mind International Pty Ltd. A 1-day workshop was developed for delivery in remote locations without requiring a great deal of electronic equipment. In some cases, a mobile, early childhood service was available.

The 2009 workshop concentrated on personal growth, communication, and conflict and negotiation skills. Those

skills were a focus because they could be easily applied to the participants' personal, business, and community roles. Communications skills were explored by taking the women through personality and behavior-type profiling via the DiSC method. The facilitator used that method to highlight how people communicate differently and how easily conflict can occur. The women were given a number of tips and hints for avoiding the escalation of conflict, for making negotiations progress successfully, and for finding balance between their personal, business, and community roles. To inspire the participants, each workshop was taken through a variety of female leaders. Participants were also asked to give examples of women who had inspired and guided them in their own lives. The facilitator also challenged the women's fitness to demonstrate that physical fitness is critical for mental health and strength. The workshop content was able to lift the confidence of the attendees, inspire them to seek their goals, and provide them with the communications skills that a successful leader needs.

Participants evaluated the 2009 workshops by completing a survey form at the end of each of the workshop. Eight questions on the evaluation form asked participants to rate the effectiveness of the workshop on a scale of 1 to 5. An additional three questions asked participants how the workshop could be improved, what other topics they would like to see addressed in future, and how they would describe what they had learned. That information influenced the agenda for workshops the following year.

As a consequence of the 2009 evaluations, two locations were added to the 2010 workshops, personal fitness trainers were contracted to deliver fitness and health sessions, and a facilitator from RuralScope was contracted to deliver sessions focused on communication skills, goal setting, and achieving goals. The 2010 workshops were designed for Northern Territory cattlemen regardless of whether they had attended the 2009 workshops. The facilitator, before each workshop, called each of the registered attendees and explained to them what the day would involve. With the workshop to be focused on goal setting and achievement, each participant was asked to consider a goal that they were comfortable in sharing with the group. During the workshop, those goals were assessed as to whether they were Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Timely, and Yours (SMARTY). The workshop also discussed some of the common challenges to achieving goals with the participants providing their own examples. The facilitator was able to provide the cattlemen with a variety of techniques and tools that would break the large goals down into smaller, achievable chunks and help them identify the first and subsequent steps needed to achieve their goals. Postworkshop activities were also included; attendees received a weekly follow-up e-mail for 6 weeks and a one-on-one phone call. Those postworkshop activities provided individual mentoring to the cattlemen as they started to focus on achieving their goals.

Workshop participants evaluated the 2010 workshop at the end of the day, rating (again on a scale of 1 to 5) the ef-

fectiveness of the workshop and were invited to provide additional comments. The results presented here are based on both quantitative and qualitative assessments; only selected qualitative results from the 2009 and 2010 workshops are presented.

What Did the 2009 Workshops Accomplish?

In 2009, 107 women (at seven locations) participated in the first series of workshops. That attendance exceeded expectations because limited promotion was done and suggested that the workshops were perceived to be meeting an important need. Women came from numerous cattle stations across the Northern Territory, as shown in Figure 1. The participants found the workshop very beneficial in helping them to understand their capacity to lead or to influence, and they could easily relate the course to their life (Table 1). Most heartening was that participants indicated that they would apply what they had learned extensively to either their personal or professional lives. There was little difference between the attendees' scores by the regional locations of the workshops.

One of the qualitative questions for the 2009 participants was how participants would describe and assess the workshop to a friend or colleague. Most of the women outlined the communication skills they had learned and how easily they could apply them, not only to their professional but also to their personal lives. For example, a Top Springs participant said *“Interesting topics on behavior and communication that related directly back to me both professionally and in my private life.”* Another Top Springs participant also made the link between good communication skills and effective leadership: *“It’s [the workshop is] about learning to become an effective leader and communicator. Learning about yourself and how you relate and interact with others.”*

The 2009 workshops were the first of their kind to be held in the Northern Territory beef industry, and they revealed a real need for this type of training. This was evident from the repeated words found in the feedback of *“desperately needed,” “long overdue,”* and *“badly needed.”* To the organizers, the workshop highlighted just how isolated some of the women felt and how little they focused on themselves. For some attendees, the workshops went even deeper, touching on issues of self-esteem, confidence, and purpose in life. As one Alice Springs participant noted: *“The opening session was very confronting for me at this time in my life. I have been battling who I am, where am I going?”* There were also unintended outcomes, such as the decision by participants at the Daly Waters workshop to initiate and organize their own annual women’s day, which continues to this day.

How Were the 2010 Workshop Follow-ups?

In 2010, 79 women participated in the workshops. Some potential attendees were prevented from attending when rain made many of the unsealed roads impassable. In evaluating the workshop, the 2010 participants again scored the workshop highly and found it very relevant (Table 2). Participants found the focus on goal-setting challenging. One

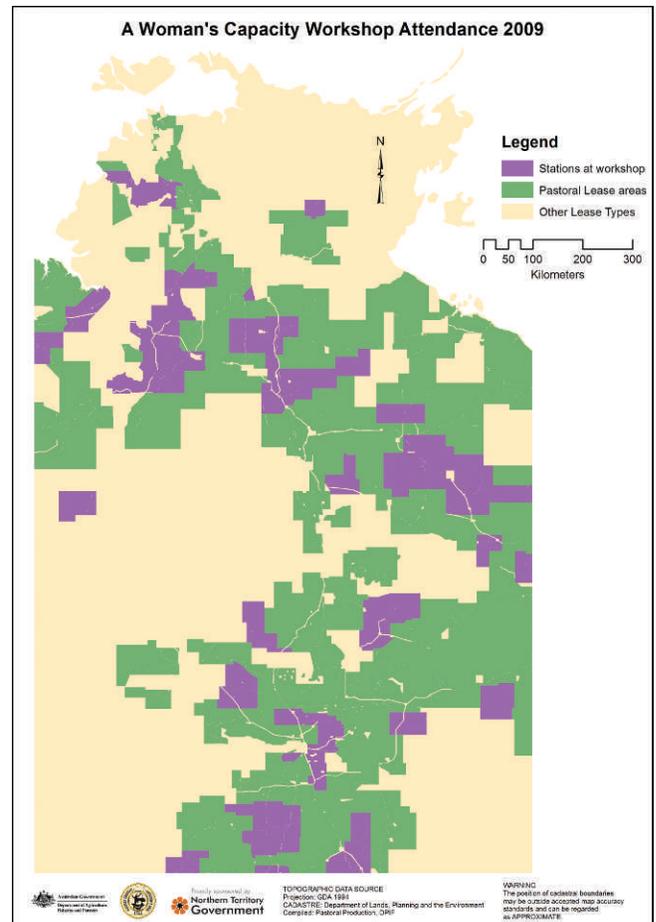


Figure 1. Cattle stations represented by women attending the 2009 workshops to enhance leadership ability. Map prepared by Dale Jenner, Dept of Primary Industry and Fisheries, Northern Territory, Australia.

Harts Range participant stated *“Goal setting was confronting and interesting,”* and one Erldunda participant went further *“Enjoyed last year’s workshop better but certainly got a lot out of it.”* Although they found the workshop challenging, the cattlemen also reported that the workshops were stimulating and that they learned a lot, e.g., a Tennant Creek participant said, *“I will take a lot of the ideas back with me and hope to implement them successfully!!! Both from the workshop and the health and fitness session”* and a Daly Waters participant said, *“It [the workshop] has given me a structured time frame and steps to achieve my goal. I’m inspired, confident and feel much more driven toward the achievement—Thank you!!”* These responses were pleasing, given the workshops’ aim of stimulating the women into action and into implementing what they were learning. Although the workshop content was stimulating, the facilitators ensured that participants learned via a variety of activities, including the group activity shown in Figure 2.

The 2010 workshops provided dedicated personal trainers to deliver health and fitness sessions. Those sessions were greatly appreciated by many of the women who wanted to improve their fitness but felt disempowered, either through

Table 1. 2009 workshops evaluation results

Workshop location	No. of attendees	Was the workshop content useful for understanding your capacity to leader or influence (e.g., within family, community, industry)?	How often did you relate course content to your own personal/professional life?	Will you apply what you have learned in this course to your personal/professional life?
Douglas Daly	16	4.6	4.3	4.1
Katherine	13	4.5	4.7	4.3
Top Springs	12	4.6	4.4	4.8
Daly Waters	21	4.6	4.5	4.1
Tennant Creek	15	4.7	4.7	4.5
Alice Springs	22	4.6	4.7	4.3
Erdunda	8	4.8	4.5	4.0
Average	15.3	4.6	4.5	4.3
Total	107	–	–	–

Score range, 1 indicates limited; 5, extensive.

a lack of expertise or a lack of equipment. As one Top Springs participant noted, “*Great to know you don’t need the equipment to do a workout,*” and a Daly Waters participant said, “*I did especially love the personal fitness—taking away the weight issue in exercise.*” The participants also enjoyed how the sessions fit into the day’s agenda, as a Top Springs participant observed “*Keep doing the Joy [personal trainer] thing—breaks throughout—keep everyone tuned in,*” and from a Daly Waters participant, “*Good to get up and move instead of sitting for ages.*”

What Worked Well?

The workshops conducted in 2009 and 2010 were the first workshops of their kind in the Northern Territory that targeted the needs of cattlemen as potential leaders. They reflected the immense support received for the rural women’s networks, established in other states during the 1990s,⁵ and the attention on engaging more rural women in agriculture. In summarizing the evaluation results, apart from the workshop content, the participants appreciated holding the workshops in regional locations, providing childcare, the 1-day length, the focus on their needs, learning about themselves,

the health and fitness sessions, keeping the day lively, and providing follow-up support.

The organizers of the workshops wanted to make the day easy to attend for the women living on cattle stations who have multiple responsibilities. It was important to keep the time spent away from the station to a minimum; hence, the workshops were limited to a day and held in regional locations. Where possible, mobile childcare providers attended, allowing women with young children to be able to attend. Women with babies were also welcome to bring their babies into the workshop, allowing them to hear the sessions and attend to their babies’ needs. These simple provisions made the workshops more accessible for women.

The participants of the 2009 workshops responded very well to the small fitness challenges thrown out by the facilitator. In 2010, that process was expanded into a session presented by a personal trainer. Beyond the obvious advantages of including health and fitness sessions was their use as an “icebreaker” at the start of the workshop and again later in the program to help lighten the mood from some of the more personally challenging sessions.

Table 2. 2010 workshop evaluation results

Location	No. of attendees	Relevance of content to you
Tipperary	9	4.6
Katherine	8	4.6
Top Springs	7	4.6
Daly Waters	26	4.4
Cape Crawford	0	0.0
Tennant Creek	14	4.8
Harts Range	3	5.0
Alice Springs	3	—*
Erdunda	9	4.0
Average	8.8	4.6
Total	79	
Score, 1 indicates not relevant; 5, highly relevant. * – indicates workshop evaluation forms were not completed.		

The final component, which was critical to ensuring that the women got the maximum benefit from the workshop was the follow-up program. Both workshops offered follow-up activities, but the 2010 workshop went further with individual follow-up. In hindsight, the follow-up activities could be described as the start of a mentoring process in encouraging the women to apply what they had learned in both their professional and personal lives.

What Could Have Been Done Differently?

To meet the needs of the Northern Territory cattlemen, any improvements or changes must be low cost and not require additional travel or large amounts of time. Although there were some follow-up activities provided by the facilitators, those could have been enhanced by a phone conference perhaps 3 months after the workshops. A phone conference might have acted as a reminder for the cattlemen of what they had learned and provided a space for them to share and learn from their subsequent experiences. An alternative could be an online forum or workshop that was held monthly for a year. Conflict resolution could probably have been explored



Figure 2. Participants at the Tennant Creek workshop take part in a group activity. Photo courtesy of Sally Leigo, Dept of Primary Industry and Fisheries, Northern Territory, Australia, and Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, Canberra, ACT, Australia.

further because it was a popular topic during discussions at the workshops.

An Industry in Crisis

The value of having diversity in leadership and advocacy in the beef industry is demonstrated by the example of Mrs Emily Brett, from a remote Northern Territory cattle station, who played a key role during the live export crisis, which struck the Northern Australian beef industry in 2011.

For beef producers in Northern Australia, the live export of cattle to Indonesia is the only, or main, market for their cattle. In June 2011, because of a damning story shown on national television about the standards for Australian cattle slaughtered in Indonesia and the subsequent public outcry, the Australian government banned all live export of Australian animals to Indonesia. The Northern Australian beef industry was put in the spotlight with the public asking the industry to explain itself. The public received most of its factual information from cattlemen, who, at times, spoke down to their audience in a frustrated manner. Rothwell⁹ explained the situation thus: “The pastoralists, staggeringly inept in their public relations, were caught on the back foot. They had little skill in conveying the human face of their industry.”

After a call by the NTCA for spokespeople, Emily Brett was invited to participate in a delegation to Canberra, ACT, Australia, to meet with government leaders. It was at a press conference at the end of a day of meetings that Emily Brett, holding the hands of her children (Fig. 3), spoke about how the ban was affecting her industry, her family’s business, and her children’s future. She was observed by Rothwell⁹ in this and many other media appearances as being “clear and forthright; you could read her emotions plainly in her eyes.” After Brett’s media appearances, the public conversation changed; there was empathy, perhaps, because 50% of the public could identify with Emily Brett. The media changed the focus of their stories from wealthy cattlemen making money from suffering animals to mum-and-dad cattle enterprises that might



Figure 3. Mrs Emily Brett addresses the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association press conference; Canberra, ACT, Australia; 21 June 2011. Photo courtesy of Andrew Meares, *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

go out of business. Following that shift in public opinion and the changes enacted in the live export industry, both in Australia and in Indonesia, the ban on exports was lifted a month later. That is a prime example of the power of women to influence and lead change and the benefits of encouraging more women to be spokespeople and leaders for their industry.

How Can More Cattlewomen Be Leaders?

Organizations within the beef industry seeking leaders may be asking themselves, “Why aren’t more women involved?” Although that is a valid and timely question, Alston⁶ flips that very question back around to the organization and asks, “Where is the evidence that they [the organizations] value gender inclusiveness?” This question goes to the heart of any organization in asking how it values and understands women. Alston⁶ points out how agricultural organizations can put up barriers that prevent women from being included because they are not inherently valued, specifically,

- In the decision-making process, only one vote is allocated per farm, virtually silencing women who may have opinions different from their spouse’s;
- Holding meetings in locations and at times that do not account for the needs of women who may have other responsibilities, such as off-farm work or children;
- Not believing potential female leaders have the skills or experience needed; and
- A lack of diversity in current leadership.

For more cattlewomen to become leaders, those issues need to be addressed.

Although organizations should take active steps to encourage women to become leaders, attitudes and expectations at home and in the community also need to change. Any leader, regardless of gender, requires support from his or her family and staff to carry out the station and family work while

he or she prepares for and attends meetings. A lack of confidence is often proposed as the reason why women do not take on leadership roles or are not offered them.^{6–8} Although the workshops undertaken in 2009 and 2010 addressed some of the needs of Northern Territory cattlewomen, further confidence building needs to come from peers and family. As Alston⁶ says, an environment of acceptance, encouragement, and valuing of women has to be created for more women to feel comfortable about becoming agricultural leaders.

Has There Been Progress?

Since 2012, the Commonwealth Government of Australia’s “Recognizing Women Farmers” grants have ceased, and no further *A Woman’s Capacity* workshops have been delivered. In the wake of those workshops, however, there have been new networks and empowered women; the women of the Daly Waters and Top Springs workshops now run their own “*Ladies Days*.” In addition, many of the workshop attendees have taken up the call for more beef producers to become social media “*Agvocates*” (agricultural advocates) and are active campaigners via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and their own blogs. Since late 2012, another workshop series (“*Influential Women*”) has been developed by Ms Catherine Marriott, which encourages more rural women to engage with all forms of media in promoting their rural life and industries. Although the ground swell continues, there appears to be little change in how Northern Territory organizations value and engage with cattlewomen. For more Northern Territory cattlewomen to be involved in industry boards and committees, changes are needed from the top-down that match what is already happening on the ground level.

Delivering workshops targeted at Northern Territory cattlewomen in 2009 and 2010 was a beneficial undertaking and, hopefully, the start of some overdue changes in the industry leadership. The cattlewomen who attended the workshops were exposed to, and educated on, the type of skills they need for influencing and leading change, and many were given the confidence to set and achieve goals not only for their professional but also for their personal lives. The organizations involved in the workshops are to be congratulated for investing in those women, but they need to continue supporting into the future the engagement of those women as leaders. As Joss,¹⁰ former chief executive officer of Westpac Banking Corporation, stated “to give up half the talent pool is competing with one hand tied behind your back. ... Being open and available to the entire range of talent in the Australian labor market and not just half of it is not just common sense, it is very good business.”

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