

10th
ANNIVERSARY



Evaluation Project

Undertaken by RMCG for the
Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program

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Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program

Program Evaluation

Final Report

October 2008



RMCG

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1 Introduction

The Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program (LMCLP) is a unique broad based community leadership program working to develop leadership in and beyond the North Central region of Victoria. Its aims are:

- To develop creative, courageous, confident community leaders;
- To build on existing personal and community leadership skills;
- To raise awareness and understanding of regional issues; and
- To foster a regional leadership network.

As part of the ten-year anniversary celebrations in 2008, the LMCLP Board of Management decided to evaluate and celebrate the program's performance.

The overall aim of the evaluation is to provide insight into the often intangible outcomes of the program. More specifically, the evaluation has six objectives:

- to document the diverse outcomes the program has had for, and through, its graduates;
- to encourage reflection on and re-engagement with the program among its graduates;
- to explore the extent to which different stakeholders (Graduates) feel the program has achieved its aims and objectives, as outlined in the Strategic Plan 2006-2008;
- to document key learnings that have arisen throughout the program's journey;
- to provide recommendations about the future evolution of the program; and
- to provide information for future marketing of the program.

2 Method

2.1 Approach

The approach to this evaluation project is unusual due to the multiple objectives described in Section 1. The evaluation was carried out by graduates of the program conducting in depth interviews with a random selection of graduates. The steps in the evaluation process were:

1. Briefing with LMCLP Coordinator and Chair
2. Training of interviewers
3. Sample selection
4. Interviews conducted
5. Meeting of interviewers to share experiences and gather messages
6. Brief report prepared
7. Final report prepared

This approach has been developed by RM Consulting Group where there is a need for both quantitative and qualitative data, the project has limited resources, and there is a benefit in involving people in the interviewing process. This approach has been used in a number of other RMCG projects and was evaluated in a large project carried out for Meat and Livestock Australia in 2008.

It is important to recognise the advantages and disadvantages of this approach and the potential impact on the project.

Advantages

- Opportunity for interviewers to gain experience and skills in social research.
- Opportunity to use people who have knowledge of this project and therefore can “ask the right questions”.
- Involvement of past participants in a collaborative project.
- Low project cost for in-depth responses.

Disadvantages

- Risk of either or both perceived and real bias in responses from interviewees or recording of responses by interviewers.
- Risk of interviewers influencing interviewees to respond more favourably because they are both past participants.

These risks were recognised and managed throughout the project.

This evaluation was limited in its scope and therefore didn't:

- Interview other stakeholders or community members who may be impacted by LMCLP graduates; or
- Carry out an extensive or detailed survey of graduates or stakeholders to collect quantitative data.

2.2 Sample

The sample to be interviewed was generated by randomly sampling from the list of all graduates of the program. Forty two graduates were interviewed of a total sample of 192 graduates from 1998 to 2008. The distribution of interviewees by shire and year is shown in figures 2-1 and 2-2.

Figure 2-1 Distribution of interviewees by Shire

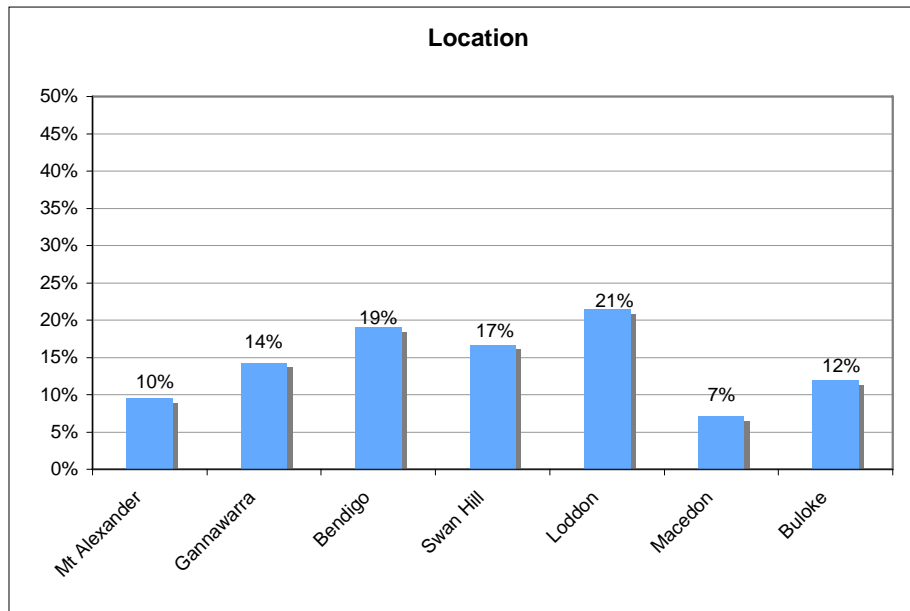
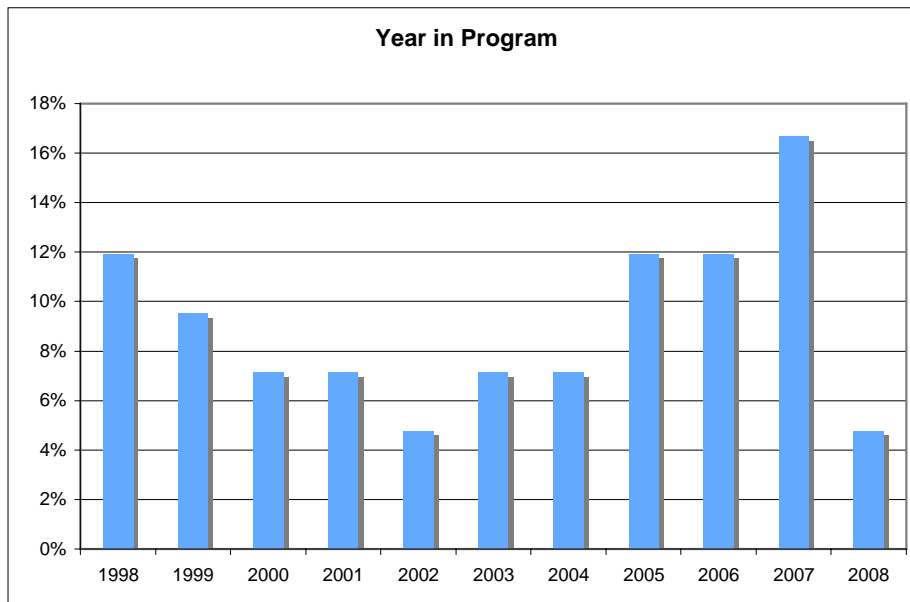


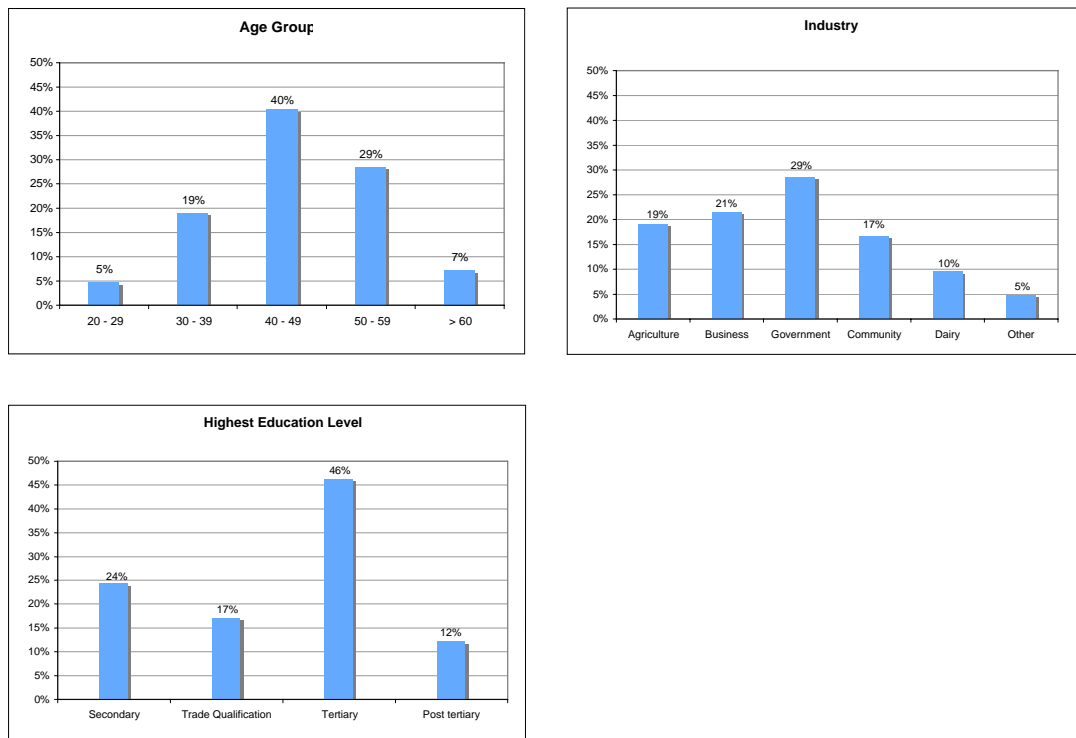
Figure 2-2 Distribution of interviewees by year participated



This shows the randomly selected sample of interviewees is not evenly distributed across Shires or years. This could influence the results of the project, however it is not possible or considered important given the objectives of the project to consider how the results may be affected.

2.3 Profile of interviewees

The sample chosen achieved a good mix of LMCLP program graduates representing all ages, industries and education levels. The following charts illustrate these demographic variables.



2.4 Interview process

Interviews were guided by an interview form (see Appendix 1). This form enabled collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data has allowed some clear data to be gathered on the performance of the program while the qualitative data gives insight into why results were achieved and lessons for the future. The interviewees were trained to encourage exploration of ideas and detailed notes were taken throughout the interviews. The qualitative data has been analysed by both discussing findings with interviewers and reviewing interview transcripts and reporting on themes and consistent responses.

Some interviewees agreed to record a video of a summary of their interview. Their video record has been edited for the program.

The broad approach taken in the interviews was:

- Prior experience of leadership
- Motivation to do the program
- Impressions of the program
- The impact on the person
- The impact on the community of the person doing the program

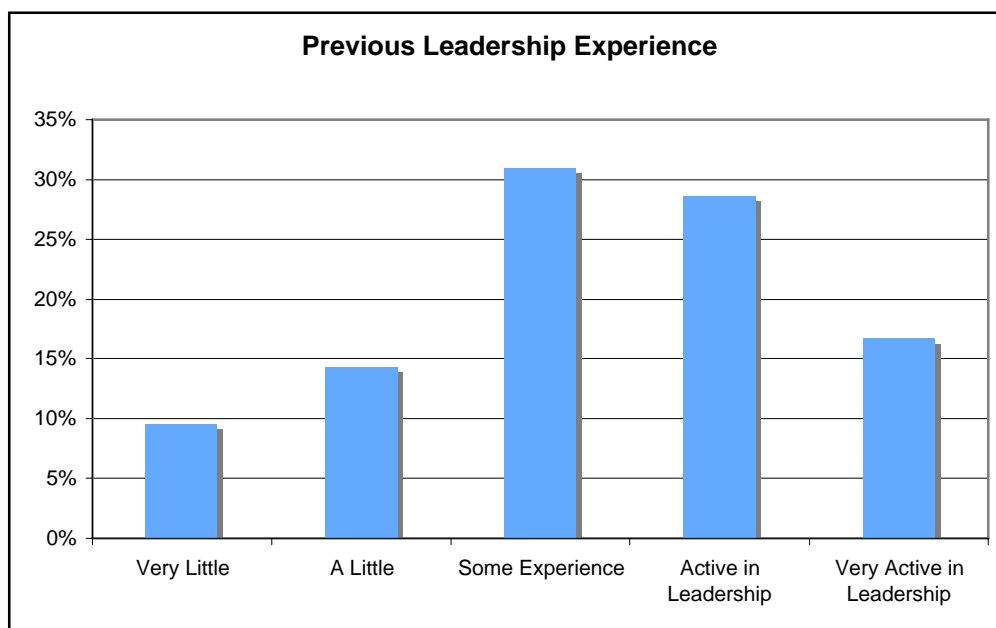
3 Results

3.1 Prior experience and attitudes to leadership

Chart 3-1 shows a profile of responses to the question:

- *How would you rate your leadership experience prior to LMCLP?*

Chart 3-1 Prior experience



The chart shows that around 20% of participants in the program had little or very little leadership experience prior to participating in the program compared with 50% being active in leadership and 30% having some experience. This is reflective of the “leadership load” in rural communities being high.

Following this question, people were asked the question:

- *What was your attitude to leadership prior to LMCLP?*

Where people rated their prior experience between very little and some experience, they commonly made comments which reflected an attitude of passivity or lack of awareness of the importance of leadership.

For example:

“I didn’t give it much thought”

“Lacked confidence – it was something everyone else did”

“Thought leaders were a cut above me”

“Never intended to be a leader”

Where people were active in leadership, they considered leadership a responsibility but a role which they filled without a lot of deliberate or conscious thought. For example:

“I didn’t know how to delegate”

“I just did what I needed to do”

“I did it because there was no-one else”

“I just jumped in and did it.”

3.2 Motivation to do the program

People were asked:

- *Can you describe what motivated you to do the program?*

Responses to this question reflected a mixture of who encouraged them to do the program, how they heard about the program and why they wanted to do the program. People weren't asked for each of these responses so in some cases people gave more than one response.

Responses were collated and results are shown in the following tables.

Table 3-1 Who encouraged them or how did they hear about it?

Who or how	No.	%
Graduate	6	29
Employer	3	14
Heard about it	4	19
Community Leader	3	14
Advertisement	4	19
Personally Invited	1	5
Total	21	

Table 3-2 Why did they want to do the program?

Why	No.	%
Skills acquisition	5	15
Wanting to increase community involvement/personal growth	13	41
Get to know more about the community	14	44
Total	32	

These results show personal referral is an important method of encouraging people to take part in the program. In particular graduates were a common source of referral. The most common reason for doing the program was wanting an increased community involvement or knowledge about the community.

3.3 The Program – recollections, highlights, lowlights, value and experience

3.3.1 Introduction

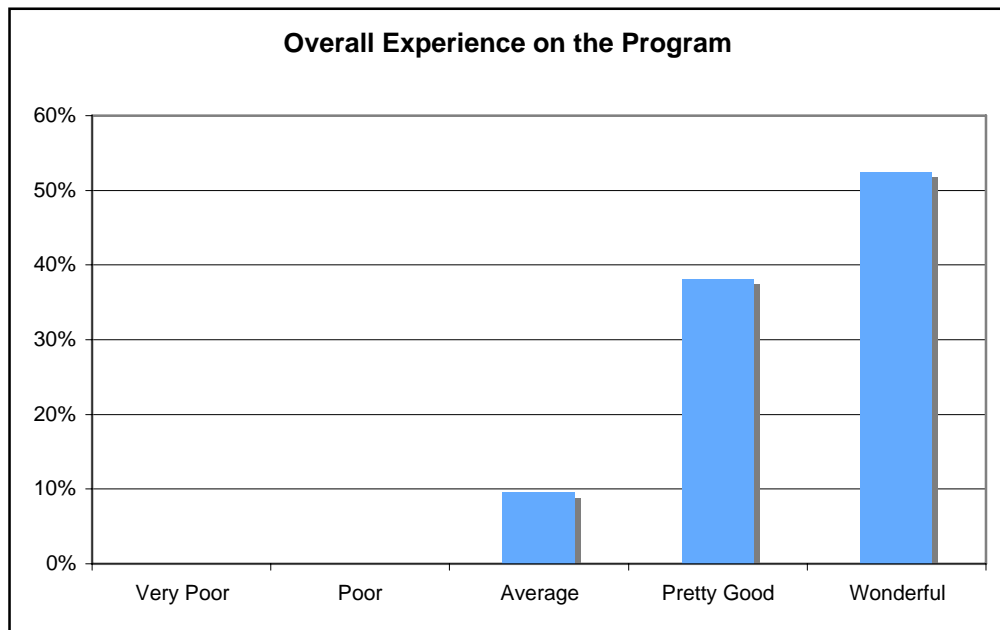
People were encouraged to reflect on their experience of the program in some depth. Some respondents had done the program 10 years ago while some had very recent experience of the program. The program has changed over its life in particular due to change in coordinators, speakers, tours and geographical spread of participants, however the broad format has remained quite stable. This section aims to describe the main issues which arose from the responses.

3.3.2 Rating of the experience

Chart 3.2 shows the rating given by participants in response to the question:

- *How would you rate your experience overall on the program?*

Chart 3-2 Rating of the experience



The overall experience was rated as pretty good or wonderful by 91% of respondents. It was rated as “average” by less than 10% of respondents and no-one rated it as poor or very poor. This is an excellent endorsement of the program.

3.3.3 Program highlights

People were asked a range of questions to encourage them to reflect on their experience of the program, the highlights, the lowlights and the elements of the program which were of most and least value.

The first important result to highlight is the responses to these questions are universally positive and of course reflect the rating of the experience shown in Chart 3-2.

The responses can be grouped into a number of themes which are instructive to program design.

People, places and experiences

The diverse range of people and experiences was highly valued by respondents.

“I loved the absolute diversity of people, places, skills and determination shown by self styled community leaders”.

The people who present to LMCLP participants during the program range from local community leaders, business managers, traditional land owners and politicians. They often have a wide diversity of views and views that differ from participants. This diversity is highly valued and participants learn to appreciate this diversity of views as they progress through the year.

This was expressed as:

- *“eye opening”*
- *“a broader appreciation of issues”*
- *“leaders are the same as us”*

The value of diversity of people was expressed in relation to the composition of the group. Some past participants found this difficult early in the program but found the most significant lesson of the program was learning to value the opinions of others and getting to know people who are different.

“(I had)...very little knowledge and I looked at them from a farmer view – us and them. Gave me a different perspective and I realised that we can all work together to reach a happy resolution”.

The diversity of places was also of significant value. The experience of travelling to Canberra, flying over the Murray Darling Basin, or visiting the Melbourne markets was recognised as a rare privilege. Participants expressed the lasting impression of the experience of being in interesting and important places.

These were often the recollections of the program.

Beyond people and places, real experiences were considered extremely valuable. For example:

Adventure weekend up on the river in the Sunset National Park.

Abseiling – “I never thought I could do it”.

“When I had to chair the day”.

The group

The experience of being part of a group was very important for many interviewees. The relationships with others, the challenges of working together, the camaraderie which built up were all important.

The group was also a source of frustration for some participants and formed part of their negative experience. This was often one participant in a given year.

The results of this study illustrate the importance of the group, and the importance of the process of group formation, induction and developing working relationships.

3.3.4 Program lowlights

The lowlights of the program also fell into a number of themes.

Distance and long days

The time, effort and subsequent tiredness from taking part in the program were expressed in a number of ways.

Tension within the group

As previously mentioned the most common lowlight was the tension between participants. This was sometimes balanced by participants recognising the tension was only caused from others having a different view. Some people perceived others as not putting in sufficient effort and viewed this as because there is a difference between people who are doing the program as a volunteer for example those who are running their own businesses and those being paid by their employer.

Program coordination

Some comments reflected the highly organised nature of the program and a frustration with this being at times too rigid.

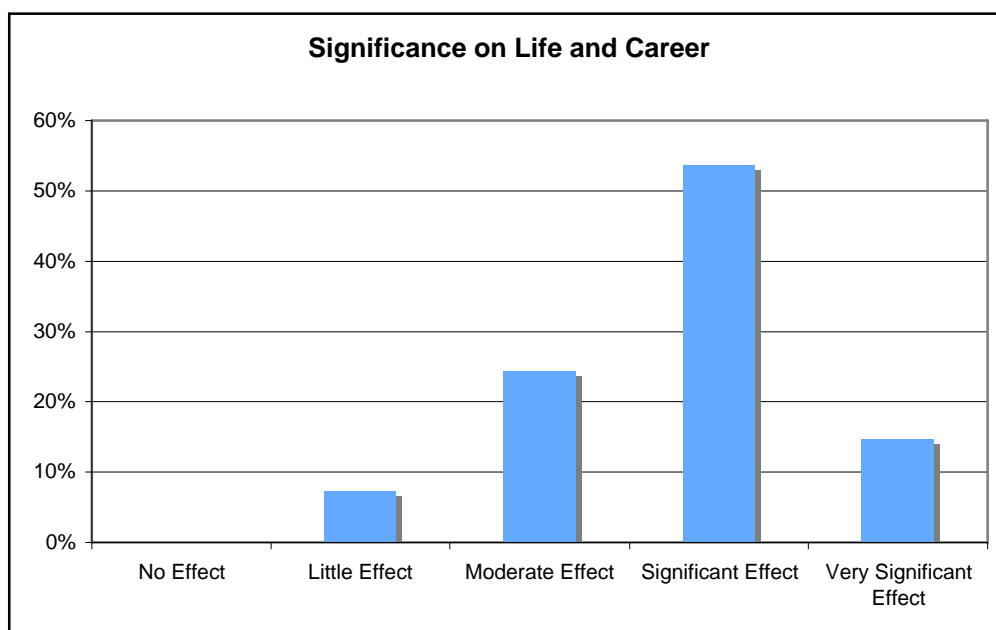
3.4 Personal impact

Interviewees were asked a number of questions in the interview:

- Describe your life and career since doing the program.
- What impact has LMCLP had on your life and career?
- Rate the significance on your life and career (1-5).

Chart 3-3 shows the responses to the final question.

Chart 3-3 Significance on life and career



This chart shows that the program had some effect on life and career for all participants and a significant or very significant effect for almost 70% or two thirds of participants.

The qualitative responses to the first two questions were assessed and grouped to produce table 3-3.

Table 3-3 Changes identified as a result of participation in LMCLP

Increased community activity	18
Increased confidence	12
Attitudinal or behavioural change (other than confidence)	15
Career change	15
Skills improvement	4
Total	74

Examples of responses are as follows:

"I have been quite successful in obtaining grants".

"I am standing for council in the November elections".

"She is the youngest member of the Lions Club and is president".

"It was the starting point for all of the above (7 examples of community involvement)".

"Now president pf the CWA club".

Clearly LMCLP has a significant effect on the majority of participants. The responses to the questions often described an action taken as a result of the program. This shows participants clearly link their participation in LMCLP to their actions.

Every person interviewed was able to describe or isolate a positive change to their life and career due to their participation.

The 42 interviewees identified 74 changes as a result of their participation in LMCLP.

The changes are described in more detail below:

Increased community activity

The qualitative responses provide a valuable body of testimonials of the increased engagement of LMCLP graduates with their communities. The roles which graduates have taken on range from election to local government, sporting clubs, community projects and community activism. This involvement is the most significant outcome of the leadership program as it represents behaviour change which makes a direct contribution to the community.

Increased confidence

Increased confidence was the most important attitudinal or behavioural change, it has been counted separately as it is the predominant response in this area.

“At a personal level it gave me the confidence to make some decisions that I wouldn’t have made otherwise and I realised there was a big world out there and I wanted to be part of it”.

“More confident, more self assured”.

“Starting point of stepping out of comfort zone”.

Other attitudinal or behaviour change

Other attitudinal or behavioural changes which were mentioned include:

“More willing to become involved”.

“Learning more and open to more”.

“Understanding the communities around them”.

“I realised I can do something different”.

“Total change – it changed my life”.

Career change

Change of career was a very common response (approximately a third of respondents). The type of career change generally involved more responsibility or taking more risk to achieve more.

Examples of career change include:

“Came off the farm and into employment”.

“A complete life change... The starting point of stepping out of my comfort zone”.

“New job as a CEO”.

“Four moves in work”.

Skills

References to skills improvement were significantly less common than attitudinal changes. Skills were important to people in the course content but not as commonly mentioned as an outcome or behavioural change.

Skills which were important were speaking, chairing, and prioritising.

Negative impacts

A small number of respondents (3 of 42) mentioned negative impacts. These responses were all part of a more positive response but it is important to acknowledge these responses.

The negative impacts of the program are a general fatigue resulting in a period of rest or inactivity for recovery.

The other significant negative impact is on relationships with participants' partners due either to being away from home or building self esteem and self confidence causing friction in the relationship.

Conclusion

The impact of LMCLP on people's lives and career are very significant. In many cases the depth of change could be described as profound. These changes are further described in the following quotes.

"From a trainee to a Bachelor of Business".

"Clearer about what leadership roles involve".

"Blossomed".

"Gave the opportunity to reflect and look forward (dream)".

*"If he was told this program would make such a big change in his life, he would have said "bull****" but on reflection it has".*

"I am more focused with these groups".

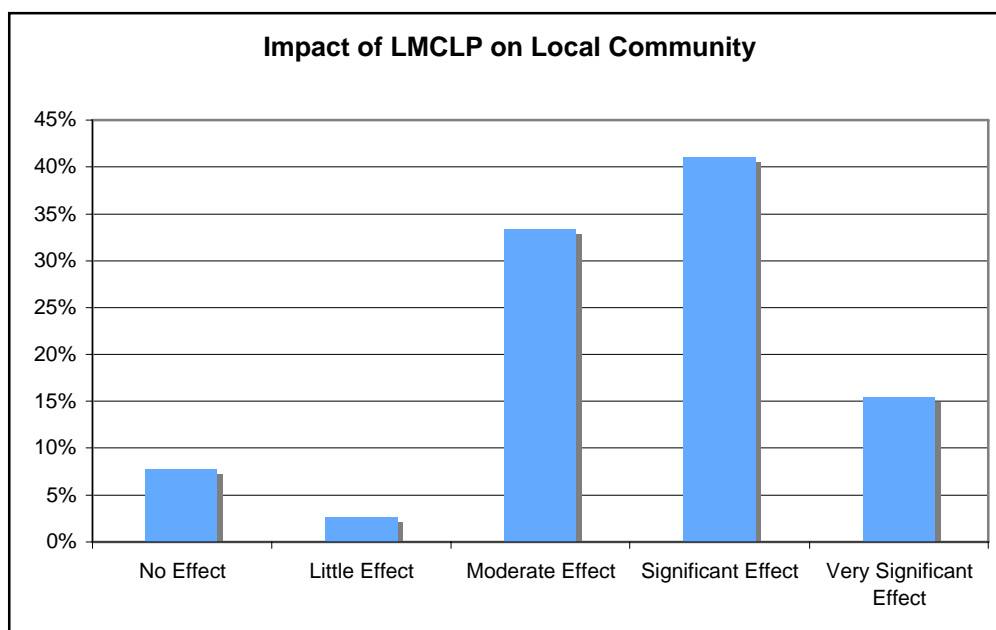
"Taken away my tunnel vision".

3.5 Impact on community

Chart 3-4 shows the responses to the question:

- *Rate the impact of LMCLP on your role in the community.*

Chart 3-4 Impact of LMCLP on local community



The impact on communities has been substantial, with over 90% reporting that the program had some effect on their community. More than 50% of participants reporting a significant (or very) significant effect.

Other questions asked in the interview were:

- *Describe your role in your community since LMCLP.*
- *What organisations have you been involved with since LMCLP?*
- *What roles do you play in these organisations? – Include past roles.*
- *How has LMCLP impacted on your role in the community?*
- *Can you identify a change/project/outcome which you can attribute to you having been a participant in LMCLP?*
- *What benefits have come from this?*

All respondents but 2 could identify a significant change/project/outcome as a result of the program. In most cases the projects they have taken on were significant leadership roles which made a real impact such as new community groups, new business ventures, or a significant increase in responsibility in employment.

Many organisations were mentioned as examples of increased involvement such as fire brigade, community planning and local government. The involvement with these groups was at a level of leader or committee member and the role was very often active.

“Transport is up and running in my community”.

The impact of LMCLP is diverse, significant and real and has led to direct community benefits.

“Pioneering in selling in international markets”.

“It has enabled me to open doors to opportunities for my community that I would never have expected or even looked at doing”.

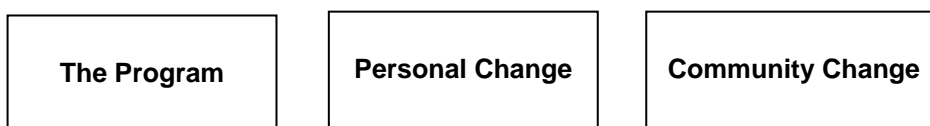
4 Discussion

4.1 Outcomes of LMCLP

Through an in depth process of reflection for graduates this project has developed a clearer picture of the outcome achieved by the program and the pathway which leads to the outcomes.

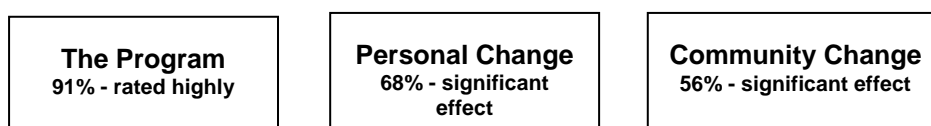
The interview guided participants through the steps shown in Figure 4-1

Figure 4-1 Steps of LMCLP process



This process was successful in understanding more about each step towards the objective of positive change in the community.

Overall the quantitative data shows:



This transition from being a participant (91% highly rating of the program) to experiencing personal change (61% significant effect) to a significant community impact (56% - significant) indicates LMCLP is very effective in achieving its objectives. It is important to note that the assessment of community impact is a self assessment and can be biased by the respondents either optimism or humility, however all the measures along each step of the process are self assessed.

This evaluation shows that each stage of the LMCLP process (Figure 4-1) has worked over the past ten years. Each of these steps is now discussed further.

The program

The process carried out in the program has been developed and refined through continual feedback from participants and guests over ten years. This project demonstrates the format of the program is successful. The important features highlighted by the project are:

- Opening and closing retreats
- Tours to key locations
- 2 seminar days per month
- Diverse experiences and interaction with guests
- Participants working together to assist with organisation or debating topics

The program is a very significant commitment for any individual due primarily to the time commitment and secondarily to the travelling required.

It is debatable, but worth considering whether benefits to community could be gained with a program requiring a lesser commitment of resources and time from participants. This could be done through running a pilot shorter program with most of the elements of the full program.

This project didn't enable this issue to be explored, however it may be possible for the board of LMCLP to consider at what stage throughout the year does the program achieve a significant impact, and therefore what scale of program is required for community benefit per unit of input to be maximized.

The role of the coordinator on the program is very significant. The coordinator has changed a number of times. A small number of participants mentioned the seminar dates are “overly managed” and don’t allow enough freedom or flexibility. This is clearly a difficult balancing act.

Another comment was made about a coordinator that an “agenda was being run”. This comment is important to note as the coordinator must be seen as promoting diversity of view and without an agenda.

The program format for LMCLP has been adapted, and other rural programs have shared their ideas over ten years. It has been proven to be highly successful however the Board of LMCLP must accept the responsibility to ask challenging questions such as:

- Is the commitment too large?
- Is the travelling too much?
- Are other formats worth trialling along side the existing program?
- Can costs be reduced without affecting the outcomes?

Personal change

The level of personal change is very significant for participants. Importantly the depth and significance of the personal changes are profound. The significance of these personal changes are commensurate with the level of commitment required to participate in the program.

It was reported in a ten year review of the Fairley Leadership Program (*Medistrat Pty Ltd, 2007*) that 34% of Australians are doing volunteer work. Graduates of LMCLP are all doing volunteer work of some type. At the beginning of the program, only 23% of LMCLP graduates considered themselves to have little or very little experience in leadership. It may be the case that people in rural communities do more volunteer work than the general population, however, it is clear that LMCLP graduates are extremely active in their community.

LMCLP graduates are also well equipped to play a role in their community. They are enthusiastic, informed, clear on their motives and aware of the issues affecting their community. They also appreciate the value of diversity of views and participation.

The interviews in this project provided graduates with the opportunity to reflect (sometimes deeply) on their experience and the implications for themselves, their family and community.

The community

Rogers and Barker (2000) discuss the role of community leadership programs in rural Australia. This paper extensively discusses the rationale for community leadership programs and their success and vital role in building capacity in rural communities. This report describes LMCLP in its early days and quotes examples of graduates running community projects. This report describes “the valuable role of existing community leadership programs and their growing cohort of voluntary horsepower, in building community capacity, creating learning communities, and assisting the government and its agencies to implement relevant and effective programs in rural Australia.”

This project builds on Rogers and Barker (2000) as it has provided a rich store of examples of graduates taking responsibility in their communities and clearly demonstrates the public good which comes from this community leadership program.

The extensive study of the Fairley Leadership Program mirrors the findings of this study. It states “In sum, Fairley Fellows have made a substantial contribution to the growth and maintenance of

the very fabric of the Goulburn Murray Community". This study clearly reinforces this finding by showing LMCLP graduates play a very significant role in community activities. These roles are commonly in small towns where there is a need for leaders who are well informed, focused and appreciate a diversity of views.

4.2 Achievement of objectives

The objectives of LMCLP stated in the introduction of this report were:

- To develop creative, courageous, confident community leaders;
- To build on existing personal and community leadership skills;
- To raise awareness and understanding of regional issues; and
- To foster a regional leadership network.

The first three dot points have clearly been shown to be achieved by this study.

Unfortunately, either due to the questioning process or by omission, there is little evidence of a regional leadership network, however, participants placed a very high value on the relationships made throughout the program and the lasting nature of these relationships.

4.3 Key lessons

Course content and design

The course content and design is highly effective and there is no case to make significant changes.

It is vital to recognise the very significant commitment required by participants and ensure participants are fully aware of this before committing to the program.

It is important prospective applicants, sponsors and employers expect significant outcomes from the program and to stress the fact that the significant input is rewarding.

A "mini" program could be explored to complement the current program. This should be run as a separate activity but benefit from the parts of the current program which have been successful.

The input of participants to the program could be increased. Currently participants take on chairing, briefing, and time keeping roles. The roles of participants could be expanded into organization, planning and evaluation.

Marketing

The impact of LMCLP is very significant. The most significant impact is at a community level. This is sometimes termed "community capacity building". These benefits are difficult for any individual or single organisation to capture as there is a mixture of private and public benefits. It is therefore an excellent program for government to invest in to achieve strong communities and subsequently strong economies. This report provides strong evidence for government support of LMCLP.

LMCLP graduates give back

This report provides the strongest argument for public support of the program. That is, graduates personally benefit AND make a contribution to their community. This is done without feeling an expectation but through a genuine desire to contribute because they recognise the personal growth they have experienced and desire to utilise their skills.

4.4 Recommendations

This study implies a range of recommendations. These are formulated from an in depth reading of responses and the authors' experiences from presenting to the program and working with the board throughout the life of the program.

- The program is thriving under the current model and management. There were more applications than places in 2008. There is no case to make significant changes to the existing program.
- Potential participants must be warned of the commitment of time and energy required and made aware the rewards from the program make this commitment worthwhile.
- A "mini" program should be considered by the LMCLP board to capitalise on a successful model and offer community leadership to a different market who cannot afford the time to do the full program.
- The results and findings in this report should be packaged into a format for marketing the program to sponsors and future participants.
- Policies should be developed by the board (If not already available) on "course culture and values" which stress the course is free of agendas, promotes diversity etc.
- The rich source of qualitative data collected in this project could be used in future by gathering the interviewees together to address issues in the future.

References

Medistrat (2007) *The Achievements of Fairley Leadership*

Rogers, M & Barker, J. *Community Leadership Program and the Government: A partnership for building learning communities.*

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Appendix 1: Interview Form

Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program Program Evaluation

In Depth Interview Form – Graduate Program

1 Graduate Background

Name: _____ Location/Shire: _____

Occupation: _____

Year in the program: _____

Industry (Tick one):

Agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dairy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Community	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Government	<input type="checkbox"/>		

1.1 Age

Age category: interviewee(s)	
< 20	
20 – 29	
30 – 39	
40 – 49	
50 – 59	
> 60	

1.2 Background Prior to LMCLP

How many years work prior to doing LMCLP?	
What was your previous highest education level?	
▪ Secondary	
▪ Trade qualification	
▪ Tertiary	
▪ Post Tertiary	

1.3 Previous Leadership Experience

Describe leadership roles prior to LMCLP

How would you rate your leadership experience prior to LMCLP? (Circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Little	A Little	Some Experience	Active in Leadership	Very Active in Leadership

1.4 What was your attitude to leadership prior to LMCLP?

Key words:

1.5 Can you describe what motivated you to do the program?

2 The Program

What do you recall of your year doing the program?

Key words:

Describe the 'highlight' for you.

Key words:

What experience do you remember most vividly?

Key words:

What was your 'low light'?

Key words:

Why was this?

What elements of the program did you most value?

Key words:

What elements of the program did you least value?

Key words:

How would you rate your experience overall on the program? (Circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Poor	Poor	Average	Pretty Good	Wonderful

3 Post LMCLP

3.1 General Impact

Years since completed: _____

Describe your life and career since doing the program.

Key words:

What impact has LMCLP had on your life and career?

Key words:

Rate the significance on your life and career. (Circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
No Effect	Little Effect	Moderate Effect	Significant Effect	Very Significant effect

3.2 Impact on Your Community

Describe your role in your community since LMCLP.

Key words:

What organisations have you been involved with since LMCLP?

Key words:

What role do you play in these organisations? – Include past roles.

Key words:

Rate the impact of LMCLP on your role in the community.

1	2	3	4	5

How has LMCLP impacted on your role in the community?

Key words:

Can you identify a change/project/outcome which you can attribute to you having been a participant in LMCLP?

Key words:

What benefits have come from this?

Key words:
