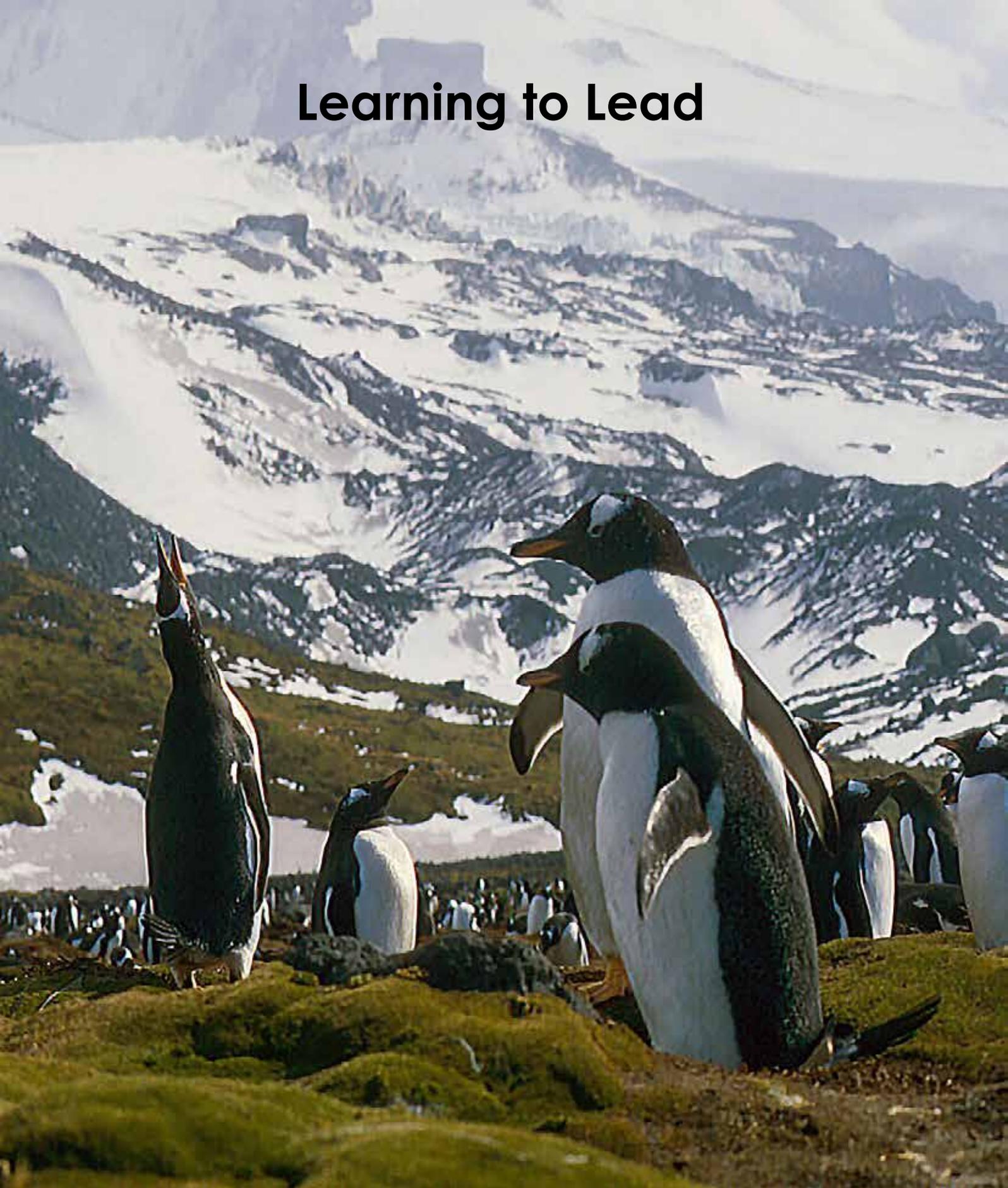


# Learning to Lead



Jill Tideman



## Learning to Lead



### Leaders - born or bred?

The question, are leaders born or bred, is common in formal debating circles, it is a question faced by schools and learning institutions, and it is something that many people in organizations ask us. At one level, general wisdom suggests it is both; attributes that you are born with and skills and experience that you develop. This is true, but the research has come down on one side. Research by psychologists over nearly 50 years suggests that, in the main, leaders are 'mostly made'. The estimates offered by research are that leadership is at least one-third born and two-thirds made.

All leaders require some foundational personality traits and genes that pre-dispose them for leadership: pro-activity, intelligence, an innate social intelligence, and empathy. This is not an exhaustive list but research estimates innate abilities contribute only about 30% to leadership. The majority (70%) of leadership competence comes from experience and learning the skills of leadership (self-awareness, listening, seeking feedback, paying attention to the context etc).

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### What makes for good leadership development?

Quality leadership development in recent years has taken a much more integrated and comprehensive approach than just teaching a range of frameworks and concepts about leadership. Now teaching specific behavioral skills and practical strategies, providing individual feedback and meaning-filled experiences that focus on enhancing self-awareness are essential in addition to theory and concepts.

In a famous research study, Jay Conger and his associates (*Learning to Lead: the art of transforming managers into leaders*, 1992) reviewed the best of leadership development offerings across North America and found that effective leadership development had equal contributions of what he termed, 4 planks,

1. Teaching frameworks and concepts
2. Skilling
3. Receiving personal feedback
4. Experiences of high personal valence (they place high importance and meaning on the experience)

He suggests that unless the program actually touches the individual in some personal and meaningful way, it will not be as successful. In other words, one can design a program with any or all of the first three elements but unless it includes the fourth it will not be as successful as it might otherwise be.

In the years since Conger identified these core elements, research has shown there are an additional 4 planks that provide strong foundations to achieve quality leadership development. These include,

5. A psychologically and physically safe environment
6. A leadership group that practices what it preaches and models the perspectives and behaviors they wish to engender in those being developed

7. An informed and sensitive use of group dynamics to foster individual development
8. A way of turning insight into action, both individually and collectively

### A documentary: The Leadership

So, my attention was attracted when a documentary released in June 2020 focused on a leadership development program for women, was listed for showing at the recent Adelaide Film Festival. The film, *The Leadership*, directed by Ili Baré, was one of the first showings on the big screen, though it had been screened 'virtually' at both the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals in previous months.

The documentary follows 76 women from STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) who in 2016 were the first cohort taking part in a leadership program, **Homeward Bound** (<http://homewardboundprojects.com.au/>) conceived and led by Australian CEO, and entrepreneur, Fabian Dattner.

***“Homeward Bound was created to increase the influence and impact of women leading with a STEM background in making decisions that shape the future of our planet.***

***Its goal is to give 1000 women, within 10 years,***



Jill, Heard Island, 1987



***the skill and will to lead with impact and influence for the greater good. By connecting influential women in STEMM and putting them through this leadership initiative and creating global collaboration, Homeward Bound will ensure that there is greater diversity at the global leadership table.***" (from Homeward Bound website)

It attracted my attention because both Antarctica (the focus of the initiative and film), and practically helping people to lead more effectively, are both passions of mine. Thirty-five years ago, I was an 'expeditioner and field biologist' on an Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) to sub-Antarctic Heard Island. I had a life-changing five months in what is one of the most beautiful wilderness areas of the world, teeming with magnificent wildlife – Heard Island.

I, too, have been a professional woman in STEMM and worked my entire career in male dominated organizations or settings. I know how it feels to be less visible in such

organizations; to feel one needs to achieve 110% at least 110% of the time to be regarded as equal; to have no access to maternity leave entitlements and prove I was still up to the job as a part-timer, caring for children as well.

So, I attended the documentary with high expectations – expectations of beautiful scenery, worthwhile endeavor, and women having a fabulous opportunity through a well-designed and professionally delivered program, to learn how to increase their influence and impact, build strong networks and position themselves to lead the whole world in positively shaping the future of our planet.

My reactions and comments below are based primarily on what is shown in the film about the experiential 20-day voyage to Antarctica. This voyage was seemingly the most significant part of the development program. There was a brief reference in the film to the fact that the Homeward Bound program was conducted over 12 months, but I have not been able to

consider other aspects of the Homeward Bound Program as they were not depicted in the film.

A reasonable portion of the documentary was dedicated to outlining and noting the challenges and issues women face in STEMM careers, particularly related to gender inequality and institutional and systemic barriers. Overall, these were not explicitly addressed in the film except for either the use of titles or general statements (often without evidence); an opportunity seemingly missed for using the collective experience and expertise of those most affected to work out how they might mobilize to address the significant system issues.

### **A personal reaction**

Overall, I was profoundly disappointed, and mostly for the 76 women themselves who took part in this first “expedition”, at least as it was depicted in the documentary. I walked away thinking, “*what a lost opportunity for those women*”. It seemed, at its core, to have ignored some of the core elements that Conger outlined, as well as some fundamental levers, such as creation of a social fabric and positively using the power of group dynamics, modeling of good leadership behavior and actively caring for the psychological safety of the participants.

Of course, the scenery was wonderful and evocative. Even this however was tinged with anxiety for me. Antarctica looked so ‘warm’ compared to the many images and footage of Antarctica with which we are familiar. There were melting ice flows, not great swathes of pack-ice. There were many scenes of calving ice sheets and melting icebergs. Comments made by people at the US Palmer Base in the film confirmed large areas of bare land and exposed rocks that in past times, even in summer, would have been covered with snow and ice. I know it was summertime, and the

ship likely went to the more ‘accessible’ areas, but this narrow snapshot epitomized for me the huge impact that global warming is having on this most critical polar region.

But, why so disappointed? Time and again the film explicitly presented to the participants a paradigm of leadership development which implied that by understanding and knowing oneself better (one’s strengths and weaknesses, one’s leadership styles, etc) one will become a more effective leader. At one point the organizer states quite explicitly that leadership is not possible without heightened self-awareness. Whilst this is true it is not nearly enough!

The young women were encouraged to develop personal plans for their individual futures and get this clear for themselves. Again, this is not enough. There seemed to be, at least as depicted in the documentary, no practical skills, behavioral approaches, or provision of ways of thinking that could help these young women become the influential leaders they wanted to be.

### **Eight planks**

Looking back on the development portrayed in the film I can’t help but think they relied heavily on two of the eight key elements only, viz: high experiential component (4) and reflection/ planning for future action (8), and had some limited exposure to frameworks and concepts (1) and personal feedback (3).

All in all, it was a psychological model of development – a throwback to the inside-out model of personal change that dominated the 1960s and 1970s. The truth is that what was depicted in the film was not leadership development, by any stretch of the imagination. It was an attempt to increase the personal effectiveness and capacity of the individuals to act, personally, socially and politically, but it was not leadership

development and it seems disingenuous to label it as such. It was conducted, using really only one of Conger's planks providing an experiential event (4).

What teaching of frameworks and concepts (1) was portrayed consisted of intimidatory personal expositions by the organizer focused on the poor individual concerned, in a large group setting, with seemingly little concern for her psychological safety.

In my experience the absence of behavioral skilling (2) is a significant gap preventing, for example, the participants learning how to be perceived as credible and taken more seriously, something that is easy to fix yet is a common complaint of professional women (the struggle to be seen as credible). Moreover, there are many helpful frameworks and models (1) with their origins in systems thinking, neuroscience, cognitive psychology and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) which, in my opinion, should be included in quality leadership development initiatives. They can provide individuals with new ways of perceiving and re-conceiving the role and effectiveness of their own leadership and of their self.

One of my favorite quotes relates to change, which from my perspective is what all leaders are primarily called to do. It is from Dee Hock of Visa International,

***“Change is not about understanding new things or having new ideas; it's about seeing old things with new eyes-from different perspectives.***

***Change is not about re-organizing, reengineering, re-inventing, re-capitalizing.***

***It's about re-conceiving!***

***When you re-conceive something- a thought, a situation, a corporation, a product- you create a whole new order.***

***Do that, and creativity will flood your mind.***

***Do that and you will release fundamentally new ways of working and being”***

This notion is at the heart of the stated reason for the program and I imagine the organizer herself would have fundamentally agreed with Dee Hock. Yet the experience depicted in the film for several people, by their own self-reports, did not achieve this.

Personally, and as a professional in leadership development, I saw no evidence of either practical skills (2) or new models and frameworks (1) to help these women re-conceive their approach to leadership or their identity as individuals. This was sad.

With an obvious bias to the internal individual's journey of getting to know oneself, often in a confrontational way, it was hardly surprising to see several instances in the film where the raw, emotional, and psychologically challenging place in which some of the participants found themselves were on show. There appeared to be no psychological support (5) or safety net on board for the women - 20 days at sea in remote Antarctica. This was truly gob-smacking!

It also led to the shocking revelation that one of the participants was subject to sexual harassment (assault?) during the voyage, but this did not emerge until a full year after the trip! I hasten to add that in the film they take pains to document how this deficiency along with many other deficiencies were addressed by 61 recommendations for change. The first related to the provision of psychological support for participants. From reading the material on current expeditions, this deficiency has been addressed, for subsequent voyages. Whether it is enough to guarantee psychological safety (5) is another matter altogether.

### **Modelling the type of leadership behavior desired**

There is no doubt that modeling by people conducting a leadership development program (6) has a major impact on the degree of personal valence generated in participants



in this type of learning design.

In a program designed to teach, empower and fit individuals for leadership, participants deserve to see in action a leader who can exhibit influential, elegant, compassionate and, dare I say, humble leadership. Sadly, this was not the case in *The Leadership*.

Many times, the organizer said she was an expert in leadership, at one point citing the number of certifications she had in various models, instruments and processes; at least twice she referred to her years of experience as the basis of her expertise. But age and pieces of paper do not guarantee competence nor effectiveness.

In terms of the oft-cited work of Argyris and Schon (Argyris, C. 1990: *Overcoming organizational defenses: Facilitating organizational learning*.) the leader / organizer displayed obvious and typical Model One (I) behavior: it was clearly her dominant

approach. In brief, Model I is described as “competitive and having a defensive stance towards the world” often adversarial and unilateral and Model Two (II) as “more collaborative and less defensive” and thus problem-solving and consensual in approach.

Whilst it is true that Model I behavior has often exhibited by men in the past it is just as likely to be exhibited by women. In fact the organizer, in her candid reflections near the end of the documentary, said (when she viewed the footage of herself) – she was “so *male*” in her behavior. Many men could rightly take offence at this, as this style of leadership is widely acknowledged these days to be ineffective in generating lasting outcomes desired for any leader, no matter what one’s gender.

The leader of the expedition and initiative was purportedly part of a team – “the faculty”, each with specialist expertise in areas such as communication, visibility or strategy. Unfortunately, again the documentary did not



portray them as a strong, supportive, cohesive team. They seemed there to just do their bit, and at least in the film there was little evidence of an overall framework and shared philosophy holding them together.

### **Importance of building social fabric in a group**

The core failing, in my view, was that the importance of the group as a social construct was ignored or underplayed (7). Moreover, this omission probably contributed to psychological risk for individuals. The focus, as I have illustrated thus far, was on building individual self-awareness, a psychological approach to leadership development reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s.

To apparently ignore the powerful forces at work in groups seemed both naïve and inept. Nor was there any evidence of appreciation of the fundamental difference in dynamics at play in groups less than 20 in number versus those over 20. The psychological risk to the individual in large groups is both much larger and of a different type to that in small groups. If, as depicted in the film, there was no appreciation or strategy to account for this, then the organization and conduct of this experience seemingly ran a high risk of ignoring

their duty of care.

Focused and active creation of the social fabric in any personal development initiative done within, or at least partially within, a group setting is vital. In the absence of this deliberate building of a social fabric, norms and patterns emerge that may not be helpful or supportive to the overall objectives and clearly not supportive of the participants. Put simply, it is a recipe for risk of psychological harm. Clearly and sadly, this was the case on this first voyage. The sexual harassment incident was evidence that at least one individual paid a high price for this.

It is only when group dynamics are skillfully and respectfully managed (7) that there is a good chance the overall outcomes sought by an intervention like this will be achieved. If the outcomes require high levels of group functionality (eg supporting one other, building a network of leaders, working collaboratively for the good of the planet) this becomes critically important.

### **Final reflections and hopes**

To reiterate .... effective high quality leadership training should

1. Provide frameworks and concepts
2. Skill individuals to increase the range and effectiveness of their behaviors
3. Provide them with individual feedback
4. Involve some high valence experiential component
5. Provide a psychologically and physically safe environment
6. Be led and managed by a group that models the perspectives and behaviors they wish to engender
7. Be facilitated by an informed and sensitive use of group dynamics
8. Have built in an effective way of turning insight into action

The film portrayed some of these to varying degrees, but did not display evidence of others. In realizing this, I am led to a dilemma: were the missing components present but the film producers and editors chose not to show them, or were they never there at all?

As a leadership development practitioner, a woman, and a former Antarctic expeditioner I had a huge interest in, and expectation of this documentary. My hopes for those women in the first cohort of Homeward Bound were not met, but I must emphasize that this is primarily based on what I learned in the film.

Investigating the program's website and other information on the internet paints a more positive picture.

***In fact, one of the best things about the documentary itself was that the leaders and organization were brave enough to release it publicly – warts and all. This takes real courage and for this they are to be commended.***

It seems many lessons were learned, and actions taken to address shortcomings. What is particularly poignant is the fact that the viewer does not get to see what actual improvements have emerged: in this regard the film is an incomplete project for the viewer.

I understand the fifth cohort is underway (although COVID-19 has impacted plans) and future cohorts are in the planning stages. One feature of the Homeward Bound initiative not obvious in the documentary is that actually it is a one year commitment by the participant, during which there are other requirements to be fulfilled, albeit at a distance.

Whilst the film showed clips of some of the women scientists sharing their knowledge and expertise with their fellow participants, it was not at all clear how they were going to achieve concerted and collaborative effort to help address these planetary threats. On October 20, 2020 the ABC published a news release announcing that an international





A section of the Long Beach, Heard island, Macaroni Penguin breeding site - before penguin arrival

coalition of 280 female scientists is lobbying for greater action by the global body responsible for protecting marine life in Antarctica (Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, CCAMLR). These women came from the Homeward Bound participants.

When I step back from the experience depicted in the film (which is essentially all I have to go on) it strikes me that **to have a passion to redress the obvious social and structural impediments to a sub-group of society (in this case STEMM females) is a praiseworthy motive.** To provide groups of these people with a meaning-filled, experiential,

collective adventure that fosters heightened self-awareness, triggers impacts and change in one's core identity as a person and builds relationships and connections among the group is really important as Conger and others have argued. For many, Homeward Bound will be life changing and, in some cases, will lead to inspired action, as it has already. To wish to turn this into a social and political movement to redress the social impediments the target group faces is also a legitimate aspiration. And to assume that this target group has some distinctive characteristics that suit them to make a positive contribution is also legitimate. But to do all this in the manner depicted and



Macaroni Penguins in residence at the same location at the height of breeding session

to call it leadership development is misleading. It maybe better characterized as a process designed to enhance an individual's personal effectiveness and their ability to influence social and political outcomes. Leadership, by whoever's definition, is far more than this.

And to do this all based on the fundamental premise that if I know myself better, I will be more effective as a leader. Whilst this obviously is true it is also simplistic.

But far more concerning is the inadequacy of the developmental process in which the staff operated, their lack of functionality as a team, their obvious ignorance of large group dynamics and the consequent harm they so

clearly did to some individuals. Then there is the absence of a proactive and positive psychological caretaking system as part of the daily experience of the program.

Like myself, many of these women will regard this experience as life changing and positive, and they will tell great and positive stories to their children and grandchildren about their adventure. Yet, it is a well-known phenomenon that where individuals are together for extended periods of time in large groups in close confinement, they will tend to reconstruct the event as a positive experience, no matter what actually happened. This is a common pattern, yet it also masks individuals

who experienced bullying, intimidation, and isolation during the experience and who live with the consequences of this for years to come.

Women's processes are different in many ways to men's processes. They tend to be more self-organizing by nature, and this is sorely needed at this time in both the planet's history and human history. Women actively participating in this type of experience is an absolute requirement. STEMM women are a sub-group who can make valuable contributions.

There is strong evidence that, in the time-honoured way of self-organizing by women that their leadership on global environmental and social issues is growing. Long may it continue! And I truly hope that the organizers of Homeward Bound can foster this far more effectively and safely than was depicted in this film.

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Many thanks to Tim Dalmau for his helpful comments which improved this paper.  
(All photos from my personal collection - Heard Island 1987-88)



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