

OUT THERE DOING IT

STORY JANE BRADLEY AND JUDY WILFORD

The most important “take home” message for Dr Nathaniel Wilson from the 2014 Leadership Mindset Programme was how to segment problems in order to solve them, taking into account the views and needs of the different people involved.

At the core of this is gaining an understanding that management and leadership are not the same thing.

Says Nathaniel: “Most people assume, as I did in the past, that to solve a problem what you need is technical expertise – provided by professionals such as scientists or engineers – combined with good management skills coming in on top of that.

“However, I now understand that this leaves ‘a void’ in the decision-making process. Leadership is needed as well. And the purpose of leadership is to solve the really difficult problems that sometimes can’t be solved simply with technical skills and good management techniques.

“I realise now you can be a good manager without being a brilliant leader and that the same applies in reverse.”

Nathaniel was the winner of a scholarship jointly awarded by Alumni Relations and the New Zealand Leadership Institute (NZLI) at the University of Auckland to create an opportunity for an alumnus to participate in the NZLI’s 2014 March to May Leadership Mindset Programme.

They were looking for a mid-career graduate who was “out there doing it”, already building professional expertise and keen to develop leadership thinking and practices.

The selection panel chose Nathaniel from 300 applicants as they thought he was at the right stage of his career to grapple with the leadership programme’s concepts and to experiment with them in his everyday work.

Fiona Kennedy, NZLI lead programme facilitator says: “The Leadership Mindset Programme, like other NZLI programmes, is not primarily focused on personal development for people in formal leadership roles. It’s about

live leadership issues and questions, and about engaging people in the shared leadership work that affects them and their organisations.”

Nathaniel is an environmental scientist with Golder Associates, an environmental and engineering consultancy, which recruited him immediately after he gained his PhD in Environmental Science from the University of Auckland in 2009. Since then he has also completed 18 months’ postdoctoral research at the Universität Bayreuth in Germany as the recipient of a generous Alexander Humboldt Fellowship from the German Government.

At Golder Associates Nathaniel helps clients to reduce their environmental impact. He has recently been part of a managed aquifer recharge feasibility study for Gisborne District Council, to assist in enhancing the quality and quantity of a heavily-used aquifer. His role was to determine what might go wrong when waters of differing chemistry are mixed, so that any potential problems could be identified and solved at the pilot study stage.

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Throughout his career Nathaniel has been keen to “take advantage of chance opportunities” – and he does seem to be a person who attracts them. He has been taken by helicopter to the Rena shipwreck; has gathered samples of water hotter than 300 degrees from geothermal power stations; has assisted the team of GNS scientists who rediscovered the submerged pink and white terraces; and has even met the German President.

However, one of “the greatest thrills of his life” was camping beside an extinct volcano in the middle of the Ross Sea in Antarctica – thrilling “because it’s so different and terrifying. You feel the amazing power of nature. It’s totally alien. People are not meant to live there. You’re uncomfortable throughout the time you’re there, but then when you return to New Zealand, you’d go back there in a heartbeat.”

Nathaniel believes the qualities required for good leadership are also needed for successful

scientific research, especially in his own field of environmental science. “You have to have an ecologist, perhaps a chemist, maybe an anthropologist, a social geographer, even an economist. And if you’re pulling all that together, insights need to come from several places. That’s where leadership comes in.”

Participating in the leadership programme has changed Nathaniel’s mindset in a productive way.

“Leadership means being able to give up power, to accept that you don’t and can’t have all the answers. It has to be a collaborative process in which you learn, listen and bring together different perspectives. It’s about making sure that everyone’s on board before moving forward with an idea.

“A leader is a person who can help bring about change without antagonising people.

“I now know you can lead anywhere and in many ways, even if it’s just by ‘inspecting the foundations’. The course reminded me that even seemingly solid ideas are worth challenging, so I challenge things.”

The next Leadership Mindset Programme is March to June 2015. For more information go to www.nzli.co.nz or contact ann.moore@auckland.ac.nz

The University of Auckland Alumni Leadership Fellowship will be offered again next year. The closing date for applications is 11 February, 2015.

