

LEADING LIGHT

Jo Eady has the awareness and the skill set to transcend the classroom and nurture future leaders in Australian agriculture.

STORY + PHOTOS RICKY FRENCH

It's a balmy evening in the NSW Riverina, and Jo Eady has just fired up the barbecue. The low-slung sun glints off an ornamental lake outside the Whitton Malt House, a multi-purpose events centre in the heart of one of Australia's most productive agricultural regions. It's a fitting venue for the first day of the 2024 Australian Grain Leaders Program, a 10-month-long leadership course delivered by an organisation called RuralScope, on behalf of GrainGrowers, the peak body for the Australian grains industry. Jo is the facilitator of both the program and the welcome barbecue, although the latter requires a team effort.

"Grab those snags and we'll get going," Jo says, as the 10 participants roll in, having just arrived from all corners of the country. It's the first time any of the young grain professionals have met each other or Jo, and no one knows quite what to expect.

There are no formal introductions, just the sizzle of snags, the dicing of salads and the hum of happy chatter. Jo's casual approach puts the participants immediately at ease. But behind the slightly shambolic demeanour, she's observing intently, noting who takes charge and who does their own thing, gathering subtle insights into each person's character, so that she can nurture a personal connection. "Humans are wired for connection," she says. "That's what brings us through adversity, and that's the level leadership has to go."

Jo has dedicated the past 24 years of her life to nurturing the future leaders of Australian agriculture. As founder and director of RuralScope, she's helped thousands of emerging leaders unlock their potential by running leadership programs, workshops and mentoring partnerships tailored to different sectors of agriculture.

At the heart of Jo's leadership philosophy lies a deep belief in self-awareness and personal reflection – growing yourself so that you can grow others around you.

"Who you are is how you lead," Jo says, at her home office, tacked onto an old tractor shed on her country property in South Gippsland, Victoria. Her 19-year-old cat Meeks jumps up on the table and rubs her chin against the corner of the laptop, where Jo is typing up her fortnightly newsletter: 5 Ways to Lead with Heart, which goes out to thousands of subscribers. Above Jo's desk hang lightshades fashioned from her father's old farm fencing wire. She says her father was a major inspiration, having come from nothing to build a successful farming business. "Dad understood farming and had tremendous business acumen," she says. "But the biggest thing he taught me was non-judgement. Dad treated everybody the same. He taught me to always leave people in a better way than you found them."

The youngest of 5 children, Jo grew up on her parents' dairy farm in Stony Creek, 10 minutes from where she lives now in Foster. The primary school she went to no longer exists, nor does the general store or the bank. It's one of the reasons she's so passionate about ensuring rural communities have rich stocks of future leaders. Jo studied education, psychology, management and behavioural counselling, and rose through the corporate ranks to become senior executive officer of TAFE Queensland, before leaving in 1999 to take up a project management role as part of dairy deregulation. It was during this time that a career-defining revelation hit.

"I noticed that farmers were great at knowing their animals and their crops, but there was an opportunity >

Jo Eady, founder and director of RuralScope, at home on her property in South Gippsland, Vic.





JAKE SEWLER

GrainGrowers' Australian Grain Leaders Program participants (from left) Jack Langley, Mikaela Jericho and Jock Binnie go over course materials with Jo at the Malt House in Whitton, NSW.

for them to take better control of their businesses," she says. "They didn't have business plans, weren't having regular team meetings within their farm enterprises. There was a need for non-technical skills development. And nobody was addressing that."

She founded RuralScope the following year and got to work facilitating workshops to help farmers better understand the implications of dairy deregulation, a project known as Dairying Beyond 2000. "It was a fabulous project," Jo says. "It really brought me back into agriculture."

In 2007 Cotton Australia challenged Jo to develop a leadership program that would help futureproof their industry, which was transitioning from first to second generation cotton growers and grappling with issues such as succession and sustainability. "Having an industry sector place such trust in me was a defining moment," she says. "I remember thinking, 'this is huge, could I really do that?'"

The course she designed, the Australian Future Cotton Leaders Program, was an instant success and demonstrated a revolutionary approach to learning that transcended classrooms. Because the participants were so diverse, Jo came up with the idea of getting them to work on a major individual project within the program, tailored to their interests and experience. The group would then come together to learn generic leadership skills, such as self-awareness, collaboration, making connections and engendering spirit in others. The template became standard across Jo's leadership programs.

"It would be hard to think of another person who's had the impact Jo's had on leadership within agriculture," says Nigel Burnett, an alumni of that inaugural program, and now chair of Cotton Australia. Nigel says the program shifted the trajectory of not only his career but the whole cotton industry. It was so successful they've held one every second year since, with dozens of graduates going on to fill major leadership roles in the industry.

"I learned that pathways in Australian agriculture are accessible for someone like me," says Nigel, who's just returned from a trade mission to India, lobbying for an increase in Australian cotton's tariff-free quota. "People have grown the confidence to step up and take on roles in the industry and in the community, which is really important."

The year 2007 was also pivotal personally for Jo, when she returned to Victoria to adopt an 8-year-old girl named Taylor, who had been removed from her biological family and placed in the care of the state. Jo says this was a chance to achieve her dream of becoming a mum, after almost 18 years of miscarriages, an ectopic pregnancy and numerous failed attempts at IVF.

Taylor is now a thriving 22-year-old, who shares Jo's values of justice, equality and empathy. "There's a lot of mum in me, especially around developing trust in relationships," Taylor says, as she watches their Labradors Ralph and Nessie run around the garden. She aspires to work in child protection and be a

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Jo with her daughter Taylor and their dogs Ralph and Nessie.



Jo preparing to facilitate a leadership training program helping to nurture young people in agriculture.

leader in that sphere. “I love working with people and helping people,” she says. “I can relate to the struggles they’re going through, without them knowing what I’ve been through.”

For Jo, adopting Taylor was never about rescuing anyone, it was about social and community responsibility, and living her values. Ultimately, it was about leadership. “One of the things about leadership is you can’t walk past hard things,” she says.

Drilling down into what real leadership looks like has become Jo’s life work. Leadership shouldn’t be confused with management. People in positions of power are not necessarily leaders. The mark of true leadership, according to Jo, is developing the potential in someone else. “Leadership is about transforming your world, and the world of others,” she says.

Like the world of Veronica Terry, a graduate of the 2018 Australian Grain Leaders Program. At the time, Veronica was juggling duties on the family farm, near Burnie in north-western Tasmania, with working as a financial planner and bringing up 2 young children. “I walked in basically referring to myself as a farmer’s wife,” she says. “That was soon knocked out of me!”

The program provided her with clarity in her career, allowing her to leverage her expertise in both finance and farming to address challenges within the agricultural sector. Veronica’s individual project examined superannuation investment in agriculture. “There were overseas pension funds that saw value in

our agricultural land,” Veronica says. “I wanted to tap into what lay beneath that, to try to understand why we weren’t harnessing it.”

In 2023 Veronica took up a role as regional development manager with Cradle Coast Authority and is currently working on a place-based capital program to attract capital to the community and develop a pathway for young people to purchase land and become established in agriculture. She says leading a project like this wouldn’t have been possible without Jo identifying and developing her leadership capabilities, the benefits of which now flow through the wider community. “Jo is great at meeting people where they’re at,” Veronica says. “She asks people the right questions and gives them the right tools. She embodies the kind of leadership that agriculture is benefitting from.”

Kaitlin Leonard, general manager of major projects with GrainGrowers, says the best investment the grain industry can make in their future generation is to give them time with Jo. “She’s a phenomenon,” Kaitlin says. “I’ve never seen her fail to connect with someone. She has genuine care, compassion and curiosity about what makes you tick, what your ambitions are and what drives you to succeed.”

Jo’s advice to anyone with big ambitions is to work backwards. Start with where you want to end up. “What we do today counts towards that,” she says. “You’ve got to go for the spot on the horizon. You might sway a little along the way, but you’ll get there.”