

## **Hell yeah I can't pronounce words or spell: My personal journey into leadership**

*Acknowledgements: Being dyslexic this paper would not be complete if it was not for the support I receive from my husband, Simon Sheward, my Mother and my lecturer Sandy Thompson whose encouragement of alternative learning process, editing skills and understand of what I want to communicate is spot on.*

*I thank you. 2015*

**ROCHANA SHEWARD**

Recently I participated in a course at UNITEC, Auckland on exploring leadership, where photographs of different leaders were displayed. What struck me about these leaders was that they were all dyslexic: Richard Branson, Bill Gates, and Winston Churchill. I sat there feeling proud of being part of that group. I instantly felt a connection through dyslexia and that even with difficulties great success can come. It also got me thinking about all those people in the world who are dyslexic and have not been successful as a result of the systems that have eaten them up. In that moment, I questioned why is it that some dyslexic people successful when the vast majority are not? How had some survived the institutionalised -nonsensical education system (from a dyslexic viewpoint)? What drives the dyslexic leader and how can we support the development of leaders who happen to have dyslexia? I also asked myself how am I going to support my son to have positive experiences at school and in the work place which could then help other dyslexic future leaders? I was to go on a mission to get to the bottom of this.

In my own small world, despite the odds against me of failing at school, I scraped by with resit exam after exam, with an average IQ (not all dyslexic are geniuses) I had failed in maths. I am however very successful in my work where I develop and manage large budgets and financials. I have a job I love and I have accomplished a lot in a short time. I work with a great team and I am in a leadership position, which I also love. The words of Warren Bennis (2009) resonate with my experience: “...becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It's precisely that simple and it's also that difficult.”

Since April 2007 Dyslexia has been officially recognised in New Zealand, while in the 1950s the United States recognized dyslexia, so we have a few years of catching up to do. The awareness campaign on dyslexia has been great, with positive messages and a volume of work being done through Dyslexia Foundation and others. While I have noticed that some authors, groups of people, teachers, refer to Dyslexia as a gift, “So, you are not good at reading, spelling, they don't get the other difficulties e.g. learning other languages, pronouncing words, etc. and assume the person with dyslexia must have a gift in maths, or sport or music. The positive spin is great for highlighting that we are not 'dumb', however, I think it distracts from the fact large numbers of people with Dyslexia struggle every day.

*“Just because Will Smith is D doesn't mean I am going to be a singer and actor, Mum”,* my eight year old son shouted at me one morning when I was trying to highlight positive attributes to having

dyslexia and that you can make a success of your life. He stood in front of the car and would not let me drive away because *“I hate the teachers telling me that I could be good at cross country running if I’m not so good at other school work – I hate running.”* Being dyslexic myself and hearing about every hurdle with my son's learning, being in a school environment, brought up such raw emotion from 40 years ago. It is still the same rubbish given out to young people today.

The evidence is very clear: The vast majority of dyslexics are not gifted, as are non-dyslexics. And the vast majority of dyslexics are more prone to failing, in no small part due to their disability which also predisposes them to a vast array of secondary emotional and behavioural complications, including mood, anxiety and impulse disorders, addiction, crime and punishment, etc. However, a dyslexic's disability and overwhelming desire to prove they're not as dumb as they often inwardly feel, is often an amazing catalyst for success.

Harold Levinson, M.D. October 2013

For me to understand the relationship between dyslexia and leadership and how some leaders in a community context who have dyslexia became successful, I needed to find out a bit more about the context of dyslexia in New Zealand.

Anne Gaze (CEO of NCEA Campus) was interviewed on 'Nine to Noon' , (30/10/13), and said that *“in New Zealand D is a relatively new term and has only been recognised during the last 6-7 years. However if we look at America, which has recognised dyslexia since the 1950s, The ministry of education data acknowledges that 17% of those students sitting NCEA level 1,2,3 require support”* That means a at least 17% have an alternative way of processing information of learning and preferred method of communicating. This begs the question: so at what percentage does it become different and when does it become the norm? Currently our education system does not cater for Dyslexia and therefore, I believe, sets young people up to fail.

According to the Dyslexia Foundation 10% of New Zealand 's workforce is dyslexic, so if we have 17% of our students with dyslexia what has happened to the 7% of dyslexics , who have dropped out?

“Overseas, a wealth of government-funded and private research has proven a high correlation between learning difficulties and behaviour problems, often culminating in crime. British, American and Swedish studies all estimate that 30-50% of prisoners are dyslexic and there is no reason to think that New Zealand incidence would be any different” Dyslexic Foundation

“Overall, 53% (of 2,029) prisoners at Chelmsford during the project were diagnosed as having dyslexia, compared to 10% of the UK population” (Jackie Hewitt – Mains, 2012) To my knowledge no study in New Zealand has been carried out with our prison population and dyslexia, however I am going to make an assumption that there are similar statistics. Surely if we can support the earlier lives of people living with Dyslexia, and acknowledge and support the difference, New Zealand could have a different make up of prisons and leadership at all levels.

There is not an even playing field within the systems that has been created over the past 100 years. Not only are our young people from low decile schools already dealing with multitude of issues, but adding the compounding effect of failure at school is another layer of failure on that person who is surviving. The parents of these young people probably have no idea why their child is failing and put it down to being naughty or 'thick' or “it's just our family.” Dyslexia runs in families, so if you are a dyslexic parent there is 50% chance your child will be, too.

How can we grow, develop and support leaders who have Dyslexia, when their early beginnings are of inequality? I surprised myself by agreeing with a statement by John Major, British conservative MP (ex-prime minister (1990–1997)).

In every single sphere of British influence, the upper echelons of power in 2013 are held overwhelmingly by the privately educated or the affluent middle class. To me from my background, I find that truly shocking...Our education system should help children out of the circumstances in which they were born, not lock them into the circumstances in which they were born. "We need them to fly as high as their luck, their ability and their sheer hard graft can actually take them. And it isn't going to happen magically.

The Guardian 11/11/13

John Major refers to the British ‘classes’. New Zealand however seems in denial about any class system existing yet the latest census confirms that New Zealand’s gap between the rich and the

poor is growing. I believe the longer we let the inequalities fester in our education systems the bigger the divide will be in New Zealand and the more disadvantaged children with dyslexia will be.

Recently the media has reported decile 1-3 (i.e. low socio-economic area) schools are not accessing support for students participating in NCEA.

There has been increasing concern within the education sector about ongoing inequity of access to SAC (Special Assessment Conditions), and on the lack of take up of SAC in our low decile schools. This year's (SAC) figures, released by NZQA under the Official Information Act, show only eight decile 1 candidates (1.2% of the total sitting NCEA in Schools of that decile) will receive support this year compared with 1080 (5%) from decile 10 schools.

Otago Daily Times (2013).

Why aren't we letting our children '.... fly as high as their luck,...?'. The cost of SAC is a barrier for families in the decile 1 -3. The cost for an educational psychologist's report is approx. \$900 and that is more than a week's wage for a lot of families who are already living within a tight budget. Not only that, but according to the interview with Dr Trevor Crosby on 'Nine to Noon', (30/10/13) to be able to access SAC you used to need to meet only **1 out of 3** of the criteria, now you have to meet **2 out of 3** criteria to qualify, which makes it even harder. Another point the interview made, which I whole heartily agreed with, especially living with D. Test and exams undertaken on one day, might very well show mild dyslexia, but on another day it can look very different.

The educational systems aren't happy with just one test. As you grow up and have "learning" you have to **re take the test** at your next age appropriate level. I remember thinking "They think we will be "CURED". It's the mentality of Prince Philip who, when meeting a member of England's Rugby team for the second time who had dyslexia said " Oh I remember you ... your brain disease gone yet?"

In the USA there is strong group of people who have made presentations to the Senate to remove the need for second and third assessments for people with dyslexia.

I believe we don't "over-come" dyslexia and shine like the stars – it's a case of learning to side step, to find different routes to get to our goals, which for some helps focus the mind to achieve great

results. “The one trait in a lot of dyslexic people I know is that by the time we got out of college, our ability to deal with failure was very highly developed. And so we look at most situations and see much more of the upside than the downside. It doesn’t faze us.” Gary Cohn (president of Goldman Sachs.) interviewed in *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants* by Malcolm Gladwell. “Dyslexia – in the best of cases – forces you to develop skills that might otherwise have lain dormant; It forces you to do things that you might otherwise never have considered.”

### **Developing leadership**

“Leadership is lifting a person’s vision to high sights, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.” Peter Drucker 1993

In search of how some dyslexic's are successful in their careers I came across research by Professor Julie Logan “Unusual Talent: a Study of Successful Leadership and Delegation in Dyslexic Entrepreneurs”, looking at success in adult dyslexics in the work place. Logan supports my experience that there is little research that has been carried out on adults with dyslexia or on “negative impacts of dyslexia in adulthood and struggling in the work place.” (Julie Logan 2009)

This raises the question: until we can identify some of the key positive differences in successful adults with dyslexia then how can we support the development of others?

Prof. Julie Logan's literature review highlights: “dyslexics have developed skills or strategies to help them overcome some of the problems associated with dyslexia and these abilities may have become transferable skills, giving them an edge in business” (Everatt, Steffert & Smythe, 1999)

I see this business edge translating into similarities between entrepreneurial leadership and leadership in the not for profit sector where leaders develop a charity from having an idea that benefits communities and carrying it out. There are many small one or two employee organisations supported by volunteers that model an enterprise set up.

Logan discovered that the incidence of dyslexia among entrepreneurs in the UK is 19%. Subsequent research in the USA found the proportion to be more than 30% (Logan, 2009). That is double and

treble, respectively, the rate of dyslexia found in the general adult population (British Dyslexic Association, 2009 cited in Logan report). Logan (2009) discovered that only 3% of corporate managers in the UK are dyslexic, and a mere 1% in the US. She proposes the explanation that, because dyslexics are more comfortable managing a situation in which they feel they have a degree of control over their situation, this leads to a preference for starting new ventures.

entrepreneurs with dyslexia were more likely to say they were very good at delegation than entrepreneurs who were not dyslexic. This research ascertained that delegation is a skill which many non-dyslexic entrepreneurs have difficulty mastering. Logan also found that dyslexic entrepreneurs tend to grow their companies more quickly than non-dyslexic entrepreneurs a finding statistically significant at the 90% confidence level and proposed that this is a consequence of their ability to delegate (Logan, 2009).

I have personally experienced rapid organisation growth in leading an organisation over a six year period from 0.5 staff to a head count of 35. People have commented on the growth rate and asked how have I done it. To be honest, I don't know, I just do what needs to be done. I don't expect the situation to last so I ensure we get busy thinking and planning, making sure that what we take on is for good for us. As a leader I am willing to delegate and take a risk so I can focus on negotiations of contracts and looking at implementing the next idea.

This resonates with one of the interviewees in Logan's study who commented on delegation, and suggests for a start up to grow there has to be the ability to delegate. "What's typical with many entrepreneur types is they end up trying to do everything themselves. So they put in forty hours a day to do everything; then they explode in a pile on the floor. I delegate on a daily basis. I always have to find somebody else to do it and I'm sure that is one of my business strengths." (MB cited J Logan p16 2010)

I interviewed four community leaders and reflected on myself and found similar themes to those that Prof. Julie Logan found in her research. I really wanted to know how they succeeded, despite having dyslexia. CR, AM and KC are three women I have either worked with or observed their work within the community sector.

I first was told about CR when I arrived in New Zealand and all the work she had done for getting a new network service off the ground for under five year olds and she was in the process of moving to a new job set up and launch the local community law centre. Since then I have watched her bring people together to look at addressing major social issues including housing, democracy, equality, justice in both paid and as a volunteer. I see in her a clear passion and vision of social justice in her world. Some of the qualities and skills I have observed is her ability to bring people together to start a movement yet at all times just be herself. She has the knack to network and bring people together to create change and celebrate communities.

AM I met at a community workshop and was intrigued how she had pioneered, created, developed and started a trust for young parents, not just focusing on the young mums but taking family approach which was the first of its kind in New Zealand. I also noticed she has a great ability to bring people together to identify people's strengths and develop their capability to achieve the goals that benefit the community. She has knowledge and skills to engage in conversations that encourage people to look deeper into their ways of their practice and build capacity for the other person to bring their own identity to the surface forefront and by doing so building the individuals strengths and improving their practice that underpins their work.

The third person I wanted to interview was a woman (KC) whom I kept hearing about, who had done some fantastic work with families in the Wellington area. People I knew kept speaking about this creative women who gets right into the heart of the community and works alongside the grass roots encouraging local residents to lead and participate in projects that can have a positive impact on their lives. I heard that she walked to the beat of her drum, her values and the people's values she works with. This meant at times going against what some statutory authority thinks best at the time. She really made the bottom up instead of top down approach to create change.

Then there is me, myself. From dropping out of school to being recognized with prizes and certificates for my innovative approach to new working practice when I worked in London and Business awards 2011 successfully winning pilot bids /projects, when the organisation had never done so before. Then in the past eight years developing building an organisation from a broom cupboard (literately) in a high depravation area with a head count of .5 to 35 staff that have started



off as volunteers and been coached along the way so together we can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of approximately 8000 local people per year.

A key themes that emerged from the interviewees were we all struggled at school, had challenges at work, did not think we could make it to management /advancement, and were faced with too much writing reports. What made a difference was discovering that there was a person (s) around us that believed and supported them to find their way and become community leaders.

*“Nothing in school allowed me to get a reflection of myself, the caring creative young girl.”*

Community Leader AM

The commonality of the success of leadership that each dyslexic person has had key supporters in their lives is a huge point for me. These are in the form of parents, school teachers, polytechnic teachers, higher education lecturers, and people in work teams. *“...I met two great women who ignored the spelling and focused on the content and didn't care about spelling its content – it meant I didn't feel ashamed that I can't spell – getting phrases mixed. And I succeeded.”* CR.

The interviewees typically had someone close at hand willing to do the writing and admin tasks within their business. If you work for yourself it is easier to bring in other people to compensate for your weaknesses leaving you free to maximise your strengths. Corporations are unlikely to be willing to hire a dyslexic person, plus an assistant to write for them, when they can hire a single non-dyslexic person to do the same job. Dyslexics who do secure employment with corporations may have to work much harder or even take work home in order to complete administrative tasks. (Logan 2009)

Another common theme I have identified is the ability to use intuition, which I think is about quickly sizing up the situation, following your gut, making some decisions, taking a leap of faith and taking action.

*“I size people up quickly, read them, I need face to face time with them. I need the right team around me to work. I check in if they understand what I mean, on a regular basis, I check in with how they are perceiving a situation or a piece of work - dialogue, open door. I admit when I am wrong. I say I haven't got it all worked out I admit when I have f----d up and try to make fun and learn and move on”. RS*

I experienced this first hand recently when I had an “agreed learning goal” meeting with my son's teacher to see how he is progressing and to check what the school is putting in place to support his learning.

During the meeting my son’s teacher informed me of the remarkable progress he has made in reading and how he is often the first to discuss the books they have been reading in their small groups. I was startled and impressed; maybe he will make it through his early education all right. When I said to him, “Wow I couldn’t do that till I was 14-15 years old and you are only 9.” He whispered in my ear, *“I don’t read mum, I just listen to what my friends say in the small group and I get an idea of what it’s about and then make the rest up and it seems to work.”*

Being an active listener and sizing up the situations at a rapid pace certainly enables a person with dyslexia to keep one step ahead of the pack and develop leadership skills. This is made clear by Harold Hillman who has recently written a book called “The Impostor Syndrome: Becoming an Authentic Leader.” I admit I have not read the book, I have however listened to him being interviewed on the Kim Hill show on Radio New Zealand, (09/12/13)\_where he talked about many leaders feeling they\_are not being themselves, covering up their true selves for fear of not fitting in. “If most of our energy is inward – trying to contain who you are, don’t want people to see who you really are, our uniqueness – its going to be hard to connect with people.” He then went on to say “not focusing so much on what other people think allows me to give a bit more to you.” The authentic leader sits somewhere between perfection and making mistakes. People want their leaders to be human to have flaws.

I strongly believe that if a person with dyslexia is given the right support they can be great leaders. I asked the women I interviewed what being dyslexic added to their leadership style. Their responses were powerful:

“My initial (feeling emotional) I feel like I am always apologising – always trying to make up some great big difference –now I have chosen to be quite defiant – I will stand up and say I can’t spell. Seek out peers who can help me read. I try and cultivate a close relationship– so I don’t lose my voice.” CR

“I never give up, from an early age I have had one obstacle after another, told I can’t do that because I don’t have that exam or you can’t make up words, this is the way it has to be done. I know from experience there are many, many ways to find a solution, a way out of the mind prison the ropes of authority of education tie on me, and maybe that's what leadership is getting in a new disguise to suit the occasion, having empathy, really understand the inequality of the label of not being understood helps me stand up for others.” RS

“I have had a whole life experience of living with barriers in a man-made world. The self-doubt still creeps – maybe it's a shadow side in all leaders.” AM

It appears it takes years for some of us Ds to realise our potential. No-one I interviewed experienced it in childhood, it was later in life, late teens, 20’s and mid 30’s. A feeling of not being who we are leads in later life, to just doing it. Taking on more challenges and trying to be our authentic self. One of the other women I interviewed, when asked about communicating with others and building relationships said: “Time has hurried up, I am vulnerable, you get all of me, I haven’t got time to sift and sort, for many many years I wasn’t me.” KC

This statement rings true for myself and the other Ds I have spoken to. I am just getting to the space she is in, to stop being the imposter and be me.

So how can we support young people with D to lead purposeful lives and have a positive educational experiences, instead of waiting years and the chance that a couple of people will see you for who you truly are? We need a society that supports diversity in learning, in learning in the workplace. There are some very basic ways to help: taking the monetary barriers down for the education psychological testing, being supportive and looking for the person behind the mask.

How did they become successful	Constraints	Benefits
Support people  People who trusted in them  Kept going saw different paths,	Dyslexic glass ceiling in largish organisations unable to move up if report writing require.	Delegation, will control but able to delegate, develop relationships to benefit and

not always the traditional one and took a risk.  Talked their way into situations that led to success	having to make up the missing pieces if too much written work - takes a guess at meaning (normally works) and then talks and asks questions to clarify	complement skills of D.  Empathy  Vision, active listener  Able to quickly find alternatives to reach goal not always traditional path
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Key ingredients for developing leadership

“ 'Go to the edge' the Voice said,  
'No,' they replied, 'we shall fall.'  
'Go to the edge' the Voice said,  
'No,' they replied, 'we shall fall.'  
'Go to the edge.' the Voice said,  
So they went, and they flew.”.

Poem attributed to Rilke

*“You might think – how is he going to do that? He has D. But people can flip it when they get older to make some invention. Even though I struggle now, I will be able to use the disadvantage to an advantage when I am older, by flipping it. As long as I get the support now.”*

Fredrik Sheward 2013 (speech yr5 finals age 9). END.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
Bolmna & Deal	2008	Reframing organisations	San Francisco Jossey - Bass
Hesselbein, Goldsmith Somerville	1999	Leading Beyond the Walls - From the Drucker Foundation for Non- profit Management	San Francisco Jossey - Bass
Logan J	2010	"Unusual Talent: a Study of Successful Leadership and Delegation in Dyslexic Entrepreneurs"	London Cass Business School City University London
Owen H	2000	In Search of leaders	UK Wades & Sons
Wickman P	2006	Strategic Enterprunraulship	England Pearsons Education Ltd
<b>Podcasts</b>			
Hill L	2013	Kim Hill on Saturday Morning	NZ Radio NZ
Ryan C	2013	Nine to Noon	NZ Radio NZ
<b>Web bases articles</b>			
Dyslexia online		<a href="http://www.dyslexiaonline.com/articles/What-about-Dyslexics-vs.-Non-dyslexics,-asks-Levinson.html">http://www.dyslexiaonline.com/articles/What-about-Dyslexics-vs.-Non-dyslexics,-asks-Levinson.html</a>	

Dyslexic Foundation in NZ		<a href="http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz/taking_charge_of_dyslexia.html">http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz/taking_charge_of_dyslexia.html</a>
Levinson H		Dyslexia Learning <a href="http://dyslexia.learninginfo.org/gift.htm">http://dyslexia.learninginfo.org/gift.htm</a>
Otago Daily Times	2013	<a href="http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/282661/rich-kids-get-most-exam-help">http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/282661/rich-kids-get-most-exam-help</a>
The Guardian	2013	<a href="http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/11/john-major-shocked-elite-social-mobility">http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/11/john-major-shocked-elite-social-mobility</a>
The Yale Centre for Dyslexia & Creativity		<a href="http://dyslexia.yale.edu/DYS_massprosupportgroup.html">http://dyslexia.yale.edu/DYS_massprosupportgroup.html</a>

[\(<http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz>\)](http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz)

