



## The Community Leadership Oration:

What has Community Leadership Achieved and What do we need for the Future?

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Kevin Sheedy speech, Communities in Control conference, June 2006. Visit <a href="https://www.ourcommunity.com.au">www.ourcommunity.com.au</a> for more details. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

I would like this session to touch base. I would love a few questions at the end of it, because I would like to have a sort of two-way communication.

To me this is an opportunity to express some of the things we've been able to do in my time in and around our game of footy. And I say "our game of footy" because there are six football codes in the world, that I know of.

I'm coaching Australia against Ireland later on this year and that is going to be a huge task, because there are going to be 35,000 down in Galway and another 85,000 in Dublin. (And I only got to know the rules last year, and that's the only time I coached them. Isn't that so Irish? Isn't it beautiful?)

And then of course there is the great game of soccer which the world most plays. I always say, "Gee they get those goals late." They really make you sit up; they really make you wait and then all of a sudden the goals come in the last 10 minutes. That's a long, patient, tolerant game, that game.

Then you've got rugby, and of course rugby's all about physicality and physicality is something men love, but women are just not sure about. It's body on body, confrontational. Rugby League is the same, and of course AFL - where we're going that fast we're doing our hamstrings at the moment.

All of the codes are sensational. And they're sensational for lots of different reasons. And of course most sports are.

One of the greatest peacekeepers in the world is the Olympic Games. Remember the Olympic Games 2000, six years ago? We got off the plane, walked down, got on a train, got to Sydney and met happy people everywhere, didn't we?

They were all volunteers – all people who had shown leadership to other countries. That's the power of sport, and how sport can be of benefit for us all. It doesn't matter if you play it or not.

I was speaking to a group yesterday, a group of 15-year-old boys down from the Wimmera. I explained to them that it's not always about playing the sport; it's about the involvement.

And I tried to highlight that bit about having a great involvement in your own area, the Wimmera, and what it means to be able to travel around your own country when you get involved in sports or organisations.

Some of the areas I'm going to discuss today are areas that you work in. The best area that I first come across in my life was at a youth club, something that we don't have much of any more. I cannot see a youth club within my vicinity other than that of, say, a sports club. That is a huge change in my lifetime. I've spoken to the AFL about eventually having our own youth club and leadership organisation, that's something that was discussed in the last three months.

Kevin Bartlett and I went to a youth club, him being a very famous footballer in his playing days. We were not a terrific little footy team, but we did judo, we did boxing, we learned to swim in this youth club, we learned woodwork and we actually looked at the role models in front of us, the people that were organising the youth club, and every person was a fantastic role model.

When I look back at my own life, that was the first step at nine years of age. When your mother said to you, "Get home early. Your tea will be on the table and you have youth club on Mondays and Wednesdays. But you must be home at 9.00 after that."

So we always had to get home to be allowed to go to youth club, because that's where you got to meet kids from other schools, other organisations. It was really pleasing to have that as a 10-year-old kid, to have the opportunity to meet people from the other side of the suburbs.

Where I lived took in suburbs called Prahran, Toorak, South Yarra and Hawkesburn, just a little inner-suburban area in the 1950s.

You got to meet kids from all over that area, not just the ones that you went to school with. There was always that headache of Catholics and Protestants in those days, and discrimination. Well, haven't we learned; cleaned that up over the last 50 years, thank God. But it's taken a long time, hasn't it?

So I've always looked at people with the view that we're all the same, I enjoy my life because of that attitude.

Let's talk about the Essendon Footy Club. What does a football club contain? People.

Here are the names of the Essendon Footy Club, right here in the Essendon manual. Neil McKissock, obviously not Italian but Scottish I'd say with a 'Mc'. Ray Horsburgh. McCaskie, another Scottish name. Pisano, Misitano, Cato, Birney from Ireland, gee whiz.

My recruiting officer, Adrian Dodoro. My weights power coach, Valeri Stoimenov - what about that one, hey? And Ady Schwegler. It's real "Smith, Harris and Brown" this footy club, isn't it?

Michelle Ferrari is our sponsorship co-ordinator. McKelvie, Kristina Vouros, obviously from Greece. Marika Pizzey and Romany Kuipers. I'll tell you what, I'm feeling pretty uncomfortable at Essendon at the moment, with a name like Sheedy.

And then we go over to Eugene Hawrysko, one of the Ukrainians that found his way to Australia. And these are our trainers, the guys that really spend a lot of time with these little joeys, called Matthew Lloyd, James Hird, Dustin Fletcher.

And I think to myself, if you took a little microcosm of a football unit or a soccer unit or a nursing unit or a teacher's unit, anywhere, you'll find it at a football club.

People from all walks of life, all nations, all nations.

I love that part of our club, because in the end I've always encouraged it.

My number one recruiting officer Adrian Dodoro is a passionate Italian who was proudly walking around with his Italian soccer scarf on today. I'm saying, "Mate, give us a break. We're trying to win a game". You build a sort of camaraderie, which you have in society.

I know at the moment the Bombers are where we haven't been for a long time, particularly in my lifetime. I've never been last, to be quite honest. Ever since that little youth club, Kevin Bartlett and I, you know, we ran out there every week and we dreamt that we were going to win. But we never won.

Kevin Bartlett won five best and fairests for the mighty Tigers. And he played in five premiership sides, and he had five hand passes. Three of them were up against a brick wall one night so they bounced back in his arms.

But the one thing that little youth club gave us was an opportunity and a chance. Never lose sight of the fact that you people here in leadership can give other people just a little opening, a chance.

The last two years of our recruiting programs, the AFL has allowed us to sign up international recruits. So we can now go and sign up a young player who might have landed on the shores of Australia from Sudan two years ago, we can sign that kid up at 15 or 16 years of age, if we think he's got the talent.

So there's a little keyhole that has opened up there for people who have just come into this nation. Never been done before. This is the power of sport. An opportunity.

Remember the blonde headed woman, in the Olympic Games, over the pole vault (Tatiana Grigorieva)? I'm pretty sure she hadn't lived in Australia that long. That's the opportunity I'm talking about.

I think that young lady actually came out because her husband was a top athlete. So after his opportunity, she got an opportunity too. Marvellous.

And you look at the Australian soccer team right now. It's not exactly Guus Sheedy is it? It's Guus Hiddink. And in that side you've got Mark Schwartzer, you've got Kalac, you've got Ante Covic, you've got Bresciano, you've got Popovich, you've got Culina, Skoko, you've got Aloisi. And you've also got Cahill, Kennedy, Archie Thompson, Scott Chipperfield, so here's a classic case of what is representing our nation.

You people here today present the programs for what our nation's going to be in the next 30 years, the thinking of our nation – because you are the people that spend the time with the youth of the day and the people in the workforce.

And so when I get an opportunity to develop ideas, which is very unusual for an AFL coach, because all they want to do is win games, and then get sacked (at the moment I'm not winning games and I've still got my job so it's working all right. Don't tell anybody!)

But I try to get a little bit of value as a coach, other than being a footy coach. I like to look at what we can do in a couple of other zones.

I spoke recently to a group of people about missing opportunities. Missing opportunities generally happens when people cannot see or struggle to see, or are under pressure, and lack the vision of opportunities.

I told them to use a little suitcase on wheels as their motto – because it took 2000 years to get wheels on suitcases. That's a hell of a long time to think of that idea. So obviously sometimes we miss things. Personally I try not to miss talent, try not to miss a person when they need help (and we've had a lot of them in footy), because I believe that what's happened, as I mentioned earlier, is that football clubs are now youth clubs. And netball clubs are youth clubs. And hockey clubs, and athletic clubs, have actually taken over.

These are the mainstream places that are developing youth processes, that are trying to get the best out of their talent and their energies.

Even in the workforce when you're working with somebody, offer them an idea on a way through their life, and it might be the best idea that's ever presented to them. A genuine idea, one that you care and feel about.

When I started coaching in this position 26 years ago we were a little footy club up the road, in a different competition called the VFL. Prior to that I worked and played footy in a competition called the VFA. So it was the VFA, VFL and AFL.

My job is actually to try to keep footy and sport and young people and our fans really motivated towards enjoying their life. I often write on an autograph, "Enjoy your life, we only have one". Bang. Just leave the thought there. Or "Keep smiling". I always sign an autograph with a smile. Why? Because I can give a smile for nothing.

And every time I sign an autograph with a smile, it's amazing, a little kid looks up to you and what do you reckon he does? He smiles. He just smiles or she just smiles. It is amazing.

I've got no doubt he or she will go home to Mum or Dad and say, "Gee, I only see Mr Sheedy when he's angry at quarter time and three quarter time on the television. And he's stupidly waving his jackets and scratching his throat".

The first time I got into trouble, we won the match, I was 47 years of age, and I got home and my mother rang up, who was 77 years of age. I said, "Well Mum what did you think?" She said, "You're an embarrassment". How is that for leadership from 77 to 47? Straight down the barrel, right down the phone. "Just knock it off and behave yourself."

Leadership comes in lots of ways, even from a person like myself racing to mid-life when your mother picks the phone up and says, "Stop it! That's not the right thing to do, and you know that".

"OK Mum". All of these things happen in our wonderful world of sport.

Let's have a look at some of the things that happen across the board, because when I grew up we never had a footy. Kids have got a basketball or football, a baseball bat, a cricket bat, they've got everything. But does anybody give them the time to actually execute the skill of life and the skill of sport?

I always say to my teams that I've had over the years, "What do you want to do after you leave, because we've only got you for about 10 years?"

And I don't want to make it as if it's jail for them. I want them to come into me and say, at 35, "I tell you what, what a great institution that place was, Essendon." Because it's not just a footy club. And it's not only a footy team. It's an organisation that has an aura. No matter where it is on the ladder, it has an aura of development, you can approach and you can learn.

At 58 years of age, I want to keep developing. So leadership is about developing no matter what your birthdate was.

We only get about three weeks off, and I'm going to take all the kids to Ireland and they're going to find out where grandpa and grandma came from. That's their essay, their assignment.

There are a lot of them there, down in Cork and Kerry somewhere, down the south of Ireland. My kids will have a little assignment. And that's leadership. I know where they came from but I'm not going to tell them.

I say that to my players. "Find out what you can do with the ball. There you are, there's a footy. And because you didn't kick it as much as you could have when you were 12, go and kick it a bit more now, without missing goals or I'm not happy."

I've been moving around this big island of ours. And my wife sometimes says to me, "Kevin, why are you going to Tasmania?" (I went last week.) I said, "Because I want to thank the people. Somebody's got to thank them." If you say no, no can be hurtful. I go down and fly back in a day.

And she said, "Are you coming back on the 5.00 flight?" I said, "No I'm going to talk to another twenty people at 5.00. I'm coming back on the 7.00 flight". So my wife is a very, very good wife, is a pretty inspirational person. She says, "Do you have to?" And I said, "Of course I don't have to, but whilst I'm there I just might see 20 more people that need that message, just need a little message." I'll never most likely ever see them again in my life. But that's not the point. The point in the end is if you give them three good messages, that's enough, that's enough.

Do you know what a person said to me when I was 16 years of age? They said, "You're too short". And they gave me a message. They never measured my brain. That's the message they gave me, they didn't measure my thinking capacity, the development of my thinking, what I could do. They just looked at me and said, "You are 5 foot 10½ and we've got too many of you". I said, "Right. OK. I'd better grow up for a start. I'm going to have to get smarter".

So I went home and I studied how many there was in a team. And there were 20 in a team in those days. We've changed that since.

But back then there were 20 players, and down the middle of that team there's a tall bloke at full back, and a tall bloke at centre half back, and another tall one at centre half forward, a tall one in the goals like Lockett. Another tall 6 foot 5 bloke in the ruck.

And they always have one on the bench in case one of those five got injured. So there are six tall people out of 20, and that left 14 my size.

Multiply that by 12, that's 168. So I thought (I knew maths would come in handy), I had 168 opportunities to make it. That's what leadership is. If you're 5 foot 10½ you can make it, because you have more opportunities. If you're tall, you have less. Is that fair enough?

Getting back to the old AFL days when we said, "What is the problem with more on the bench? We're hurting our players with injuries, players out for 12 months, less opportunities."

We found out that the biggest problem in AFL at that stage was the number 20. "You can't change the amount of players in the team! It's always been 20" – (said) a guy that was 35 years of age. He didn't realise that before he was born it used to be 19. They just make statements like that. So I went back in the history books, and we got it to 22.

Now if you have 16 teams, and another two in each, you multiply that by 22 matches a year. That is 704 more selections for kids. Are you with me? That's 704 more opportunities of selection we got, just by changing the figure from 20 to 22. Plus the finals, which is big stuff, the big finals, where you go out and be a star, that's about 30 games, or 30 more positions available. And that's fantastic.

For every 1000 athletes we had selected at the 2000 Olympics, we had three times miss out.

After the Olympic selections were over, I was asked to talk to the people that missed out. You know when you've got to go and talk to a young rower and he's missed out on one position, just missed.

Or a young woman yachtsman after '96 when she got up and won a medal, and missed the next Olympics. "I'd feel pretty good about that, you know. Don't worry about missing out this year, this Olympics. Get ready for the next one." Always leave a positive. Always leave a positive. It's the best present you can ever give anybody is a positive.

We lost last week by six goals. It could have been 10. It should've been three, but anyway. They said, "Kevin, where do you see the team?" I said I'd put a bit of humour into what is going to be a tough media conference.

Always end up with a positive message. That's what footy's taught me. It's also taught me that if you don't have compressed air, you can never pump up a footy and you'll never have a bloody game. So how important is compressed air? When I was a kid, we finally got a footy when I was 15, about eight years later. It was like television, we used to go down to Chapel Street and watch it in the window.

But you'd go to get your footy and it's gone down. The little things are important, aren't they? Yes indeed, the little things are important. Because I had a pump, and I had a footy, but one of my mates had never given me back the attachment (to the pump).

So it's important that we get the little things right, otherwise there's mayhem.

Let's have a look at winning and losing. I've lost over 220 games in my life. That's 220 times I've driven down the highway not exactly happy. My assistant coach Gary Ayres said, "I've never coached 220 games, let alone lost 220". Pretty embarrassing.

But to stay on top of that you've got to remain positive. Because we've got 38,000 fans who buy (Essendon) memberships and we've probably got about 850,000 in Australia that get let down and feel flat.

Happiness is very, very important in leadership. Everybody thinks leadership is about being a dictator. Many people think it's about telling people what to do. It's not necessarily. Sometimes it's showing them, or showing them a way that will assist them to do what they want to do. So show them four or five ways.

But happiness is a very important skill to have. And you can practice happiness. I practice it a lot. I have to – 220 games is a lot of bloody losses. It's all right for you guys. I'm a coach. I'm getting into trouble at the moment.

You remind yourself how lucky you are. Do you ever remind the people that you work with how lucky we are? In this country – write this down – we have won Tattslotto living here. We've won Tattslotto already. That's how lucky we are. So far away there's such a great opportunity. Let's not miss it, the opportunity.

Want to go down to Tasmania, have some peace and quiet? Beautiful. Want to go and get sunburned and have a suntan? Want to go and have a walkabout? Just drive up into the middle of Australia. Surrounded by ocean, plenty of water. Go into the middle of Europe, wouldn't know what an ocean was. Hardly ever seen it. Go to London, clouds; traffic.

We have so much. The only thing we've got to be aware of is water. We've got to get that right within the next 10 years, otherwise we'll struggle. So that's one great ambition of mine is how can we get that water from the north to the south. I think that's a very important leadership issue in this nation. And they should have a huge think tank about it. Really put the whole 20 million Australians right behind them.

Because I always love seeing how our country fights and works for each other when people are under stress and people are in great danger. Amazing. Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane all reckon they've got the greatest city. Argue, harass each other, I see them walk out of rugby, footy grounds and sporting events. But when there's a forest fire on, isn't it amazing what happens. Where does the fire brigade go? Well they come from everywhere don't they. South Australia, Victoria, straight into NSW, wherever, and they help. That's sensational leadership.

The only thing that triggers off annoyance is sport, isn't it? I fly into Adelaide quite often and I feel uncomfortable. I get in and the plane goes right over the Adelaide hills. They get me on radio, or I ring the radio stations up and say, "I'm here, I'm in town, you're in trouble — I'm going to steal your players". I love saying that. It annoys them. "Where is he? Find out where he is. Follow him." Get them on edge.

And they said, "You Victorians..." and I said, "Oh hold on, hold on." The one good thing about flying into South Australia is that you don't see any state boundary lines, do you? "You are passing into South Australia" – you don't see that floating around the air do you? I have this map of Australia without boundary lines. It's a ripper map. My mates in Darwin, my neighbours in Sydney. That's what I say.

I go to Sydney I see a lot of good people. I go to Queensland and have a great time. Except when Leigh Matthews is coaching the

Brisbane Lions, I don't have a great time there then. But that's only six hours. Always look at the positive.

Because we're people with no lines; we don't have any boundaries. So boundaries should be dismissed out of the argument if you want to try and get the right answer, whether it's in sport, health, economy. That is the most important thing.

I think this country over the last 25 to 30 years has made some marvellous decisions. We are such a much better country now than when I grew up. I think we're a better country now than what we were 25 years ago.

The big point of today's meeting is how can you actually make this country better? Write that down. How can you make your immediate life better, this city and this state? Because you can, you can. It's called people power. And that's the issue of being a leader. Being a leader is about making a difference, showing a way.

I always get asked by the press, they knew I grew up a Catholic, "Do you believe in Jesus?" I wasn't around then but I tell you what every time I read in the books that had been written about that period of time 2000 years ago, I always read pretty nice things about that fellow. And I'm happy about that. That's what I say – don't know who the bloke really was, but every time I read a book about Jesus I think to myself, "He must've been a pretty good bloke." I haven't read one bad thing about the bloke.

And that's how I feel about people I meet.

Sometimes you actually build young people into great men; great young women into great women of knowledge, maturity and experience. When does that start? Obviously when they start listening and they start acting on advice.

That's what the AFL's taught me. Footy was the easiest part I ever played in the game. They paid me! They paid me to do something I loved! What about that!

Anzac Day's been a good day for footy hasn't it? Anzac Day's great. I thought, "Who can we play on Anzac Day?" And I go to ring up Collingwood. And you go, "No, no. I'm not going to ring up Collingwood".

But if you want to get a great match, you've got to ring up a club that wants to try and be great. (There are only two guys that helped Collingwood win the last premiership, and that was Leigh Matthews and myself. 1990 and I lost. Not one Collingwood fan ever wrote and said thanks. Anyway, that's another story.)

And you finally ring Collingwood and you say, "Look, I'd like to have a meeting with Ruxton" (Mr Ruxton is the president of the RSL). So we go and see Mr Ruxton and we tell him we want to play on Anzac Day and we want to play for the RSL and we want to make some money and help the RSL and we want to bring the RSL march up to the level of greatness that this country needs, that this state needs, and we want to play for the defence forces.

"Is this serious?" "Yes we are serious". Then we had to ring the AFL.

So we've got to get the AFL, the RSL, and Collingwood and Essendon all in the one little room to agree upon a game that no-one really, really believed would happen. And they all agreed.

And so therefore the last 13 years we've had not quite 100,000, but in the end it's probably been \$1 million match. Two clubs and the RSL get to divide it up. And more importantly the RSL believes it is the most exciting period in many decades, that they have the best marches now, the best attendances they've had for many decades, so that's more important and more exciting than the match on the day. So here we have leadership, a group of people getting together.

We have lots of ideas. I put up 100 ideas every few years, I just keep putting them up. And I go home absolutely in tears, believe it or not, shattered that I can't get an idea through that I believe will be great.

But you don't get depressed about it. If you get one idea up in every 30, you've got a great idea.

'Dreamtime at the G' was about Richmond and Essendon and the indigenous people of our nation – and Richmond and Essendon feature the colours of the indigenous flag on their guernseys.

As a matter of fact, last year when I was coaching Australia I named two indigenous players as captains of the Australian side.

Andrew McLeod from Adelaide and that little fellow up there in Brisbane – can't keep his hands down to himself – Chris Johnston. Andrew McLeod was captain of the Australian team for the game over in the west, and Chrissy Johnson was captain for the game over in the east - because that's where they come from; or Andrew came from Darwin at least.

And in the end we actually celebrated with our Australian flag and our indigenous flag and I thought it was fantastic. It was the first time we ever had six indigenous players in the Australian team. And mate, were they fantastic, could they play!

So we actually changed the rules of selection. We changed the rule about selection. We actually decided not to pick the best players that play AFL. I want you to write this down because this is one of those little 'suitcase on wheels' deals.

The one you can't see because you're blind. This is what leadership is. This is what we're not doing. We kept picking the all-Australian team that were good at playing Australian football. But we were actually playing the Irish at Irish football. That's how dumb the Australians were.

So we're there for the selection round to pick the best team to play Ireland at their game, not worrying about who was good at playing AFL.

It took the AFL a long time to think about this one (but) we could be persuasive. Leaders can be persuasive, can't we? Are you persuasive, ladies and gentleman? You'd better be. Because that's what leaders have got to be, they're very good at being persuasive. They don't walk away from a challenge. You've got to be persuasive. Make the change quietly, or sometimes bloody loudly.

You've got to be challenging. Don't walk away from the white line when it's there, and make sure have a very good powerful base for your debate because you've done the homework.

So we actually picked the Australian team to play Ireland at the Irish game and we had picked three rookies, not even on the AFL list. Three rookies. Never played much AFL at all.

So we were walking past guys that have played 200 games and we picked guys that had played 10.

And they said, "Are you sure about this?" I said, "No. I tell you what, but it might be exciting."

We won by the greatest ever margin in the history of 40 years, ladies and gentlemen. The greatest ever margin we won by over 40 years – wit ha bunch of kids. They had great ball skills, moved the ball so differently than the players that played the AFL brand of footy. So we changed the rules and won.

And I'm telling you now the Irish are really ready for next time around. They've got a whole new squad, they've got new coaches over in Ireland and we're going back and we're going to be in real trouble this year. I played all my cards last year. I'm in real trouble. I need your help. Write to me.

So, and of course, Women's Day in footy, Mother's Day, the Bombers played on Mother's Day this year. I'd love to see mothers go to the footy, come into the ground, bunches of chocolates and some flowers, how would that be?

We've got some educational programs in place. Because we've actually really taken the opportunity to see the talent all around Australia.

We seek the talent all around Australia and bring them here from all around Australia - and take away the opportunity to play in their home and near their mum and dad.

I recruited a player from Western Australia a couple of years back and his mum was in tears. And she had a right to be, because she knew that her son at 17 wasn't going to be around home with her much longer.

And I say to my wife, "How would you like Sam or Jessica to leave home at 17 right now?" My wife would not like that.

So there is a hell of a lot of welfare there. And there's a lot of development's got to be done, so we have these development programs.

And it's amazing where some of the footballers out there at the present time would have ended up – whether they have been successful or not – because they got into their development early.

They could become leaders in the community. The head of the AFL, Ron Evans, probably played 68 games. He was not a megastar. But here he is now running basically as head of the AFL Commission.

That's an amazing job for a kid in the 1950s that lived out basically between Essendon and Footscray. Marvellous achievement.

If you want to know how tough the game is, look at a club like Geelong. In the middle of next year, Geelong will have played 1000 games since they last won a premiership. That's how tough sport is.

So 1963 – Geelong's last premiership year - right until the middle of 2007, it will be 1000 games without a premiership.

Is that tough? Exactly. And that Mark Thompson, my former captain, he's got one of the toughest gigs as Geelong coach, along with Melbourne coach Neil Daniher, because Melbourne won in 1964 so they're on about 980 matches since their last premiership.

I think they're a big chance for the flag this year, I think Adelaide and West Coast are going to bouncing around somewhere too.

And I'm sitting back behind the field like Kiwi in the Melbourne Cup looking for a way through. And I might just come over the top, but not this year.