

A TRIBUTE TO ROBIN CLARK

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Recipient of the Robin Clark Memorial Award 2002 for inspirational leadership in the field

I met Robin Clark in first year Social Work at Melbourne University in 1971 and had the pleasure of knowing and working with her for thirty years. Being a recipient of the inaugural Robin Clark Memorial Award 2002 for Inspirational Leadership in the Field was indeed an honour both professionally and personally due to my longstanding association with Robin.

Kouzes and Posner (1987) attributed five leadership practices common to successful leaders. Robin Clark comes to mind when reading these attributes:

- challenge the process
- inspire a shared vision
- enable others to act
- model the way
- encourage the heart.

Robin Clark was a successful leader and epitomised *inspirational leadership* that touched many of us who worked with her in the Australian child and family welfare sector in her numerous roles. Robin loved a challenge and was at her best when she was challenging practice, child protection systems and processes to impact on outcomes for families and their children. Robin encouraged and supported good ideas and invited us to reflect on our practice and contribute to the development of ideas and services to improve outcomes for families, young people and children.

Leaders inspire a shared vision. Robin had a vision of the child protection system being far greater than a system of apprehension and out-of-home care placement. Her vision was that of a child protection system within a framework of family supports, advocacy and social justice to support the most disadvantaged families in our community. The Victorian child protection system was challenged not to net-widen but instead to focus on strengths and wider systems supports to protect and promote the healthy development of children. Her vision was shared by many and continues today through existing services and some of the new possibilities in recent early intervention initiatives, plus a renewed focus on community capacity building.

Leaders do not achieve success by themselves. Exemplary leaders enable others to act and enlist the support and collaboration of many to make the service or the project a success. Achieving collaboration in our sector is a challenge, particularly in the area of child protection. Robin constantly emphasised the need for a collective responsibility regarding the care and protection of children in our community. Robin had the ability to conceptualise and pull together system stakeholders to work alongside each other to problem solve and plan solutions to improve the overall system. I remember her use of data as a primary tool to explore challenging issues, examination of trends, inviting participation and involvement in solutions to bring about change, thus being owned by the sector.

Another of my memories of Robin was her capacity to model the way or walking the talk. I remember her stories of going out in the field and accompanying protective workers on visits, meeting staff in regions to hear their experiences. Robin talked about the importance of workers in the front line and paid attention to what she believed was important – she behaved in ways that were consistent with her values. She was a credible and compassionate leader.

Finally, encouraging the heart. Robin had a passion for her work, improving child protection systems, services to families and children and supports to workers. This passion underpinned her work throughout her career. She acknowledged and celebrated best practice; she recognised contributions and was generous in her praise. She encouraged those who worked with or alongside her to stay in for the long haul. Above all, she was optimistic and confident that our child and family welfare services could enhance child, youth and family wellbeing.

Robin was an inspirational leader who motivated those of us who had the privilege to know and work with her, to reflect on our efforts, and to strive for best practice and service reform. Her legacy lives on.

REFERENCE

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (1987) *The leadership challenge: How to get extraordinary things done in organizations*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The Robin Clark Memorial Awards are offered by the Victorian Government in the memory of Robin Clark (1936-2001), a widely respected, inspirational leader and role model in the field of child, youth and family welfare, to recognise and promote the continuing contribution of Victorians who work to improve the lives of vulnerable children and families.

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