



The critical factors of excellence

Chief Ombudsman Peter Boshier's address to the Sir Paul Callaghan *Eureka!* Awards dinner

7 September 2017

Thank you for the privilege of being your guest speaker tonight in honour of a great New Zealander, Sir Paul Callaghan.

As aspiring entrepreneurs in science and innovation, you will be leading New Zealand to new frontiers. I'm humbled by the opportunity to speak to you about the process of turning great ideas into reality.

I'm going to talk about the journey from concept right through to presenting your idea in such a way that it gets traction.

But be warned -- my message is also about the importance of being prepared to change direction, even when that hurts. About being prepared to abandon an idea you may have worked on for days, weeks or even years in favour of a better one that may have come from someone else.

In the end it is about being prepared to make the right decision based on the best evidence.

I think this is one of the most important things to learn in life.

The power of innovation

Some years ago I witnessed Sir Paul Callaghan emphasising the same principles in a very important speech at the old town hall here in Wellington.

Victoria University was hosting a lecture in his honour and the place was packed.

Sir Paul must have been quite ill by this time but he was clearly energised by his subject.

He was up on stage complete with PowerPoint and speech notes presenting his thesis on the economic direction he felt New Zealand should take.

Sir Paul was a great believer in the power of innovation and saw this as one of New Zealand's competitive advantages.

He pointed out that he was a physician not an economist, but he believed as long as you applied yourself with integrity and used your natural intelligence you could win an argument on anything.

Sir Paul spoke about how New Zealand was making less and less money from its primary produce and that we could be doing so much better if we only harnessed our talent in innovation, information technology and creativity.

He carried his audience, including me, on a wave of inspiration, purpose and logic.

It is fair to say after a lengthy career in the judiciary I've heard many arguments over the years and Sir Paul's speech is one of the more memorable ones.

The 'NZ edge'

To me, it is amazing just how many innovators come from this country of four and a half million souls; from knights of science like Sir Paul and Sir Ernest Rutherford, to business leaders like Theresa Gattung and Don Braid to fashion designers like Karen Walker.

How can such a small country produce so much talent?

I believe we are products of our environment. And I am not just talking about all that is clean and green in our great country.

I believe innovators do their best work in an open society.

In this respect, New Zealand is recognised as a world leader.

We live in one of the least corrupt countries in the world.

A country where it is possible to build a road without setting aside millions of dollars destined for the Swiss bank accounts of corrupt officials.

A country where you can secure a place at a university without including an envelope full of cash along with your application form.

As New Zealand's Chief Ombudsman, I like to think my work, and the work of my team contributes to the preservation of this critical aspect of our way of life.

We make life-changing recommendations for many, many New Zealanders, whether these recommendations are about the process for school closures and mergers or the humane treatment of a prisoner held in an At-Risk Unit in jail.

I say 'we' because the Office is made up of close to a hundred dedicated staff from investigators to IT professionals.

Our motto is 'fairness for all.' When I say all, I mean that – every New Zealander has equal human rights under the law, and every New Zealander will get an equally fair hearing from our Office.

We've developed some very clear values with these objectives in mind. We have a strong **purpose**, which is to achieve fairness for all. We have **passion** and believe we can and do make a difference. We know that as people **we all matter**; we are open and respectful of each other and the people we work with.

People come to us for help because they find us approachable, because they are not comfortable about going elsewhere, or because every other avenue has been exhausted.

The four critical factors

My goal has been to adopt the Sir Paul Callaghan approach to our work. Use evidence. Be open to new and competing ideas. And of course, follow a process of full integrity.

I want to set out four critical factors that I depend on to take us from the beginning to the end of the road to excellence. I hope they inspire you to develop the talents that clearly you have, and to achieve the Callaghan sense of vision and purpose.

- The first is of course is **thinking**; the germination of an idea or a concept.

We must be bold. We need to be constantly looking for new ideas and ways to improve things.

This can require courage. It might mean putting forward something that isn't main stream and may have come slightly out of left field.

This might be the beginning of a thesis or merely floating an idea for further examination.

- The second critical factor is **preparation**.

When my Office decides to investigate an issue, either because we have received a complaint or we have decided to do it ourselves, we create a project plan.

We start with what we know already, work out who we need to talk to, and where we can find the relevant facts. In other words, we prepare and do the research.

Implicit in this step is fairness. We ask ourselves at this early stage whether the execution of our project plan will give us sufficient information to make a fair decision.

Once we've assembled all the information, we debate the pros and cons, the maybes and the maybe nots.

The ideas are debated. I call this the New Zealand way. It involves being willing to listen and not talk over other people.

- My third critical factor is **integrity of process**. This is the stage where your values can be put to the test.

As we develop an idea, our enthusiasm for it can actually prevent us from thinking clearly, it can stop us from adopting better proposals or worse still may lead us to stray from where the facts are actually leading.

To discover you are wrong after having such passion for an idea can be a very disarming exercise indeed. It can be very tough on the ego.

You may not have necessarily been wrong; it is just that when balanced against all other factors, you need to alter your point of view.

This can be a difficult conclusion for anyone to reach. Naturally, you ask yourself whether you should be staunch and stand your ground.

To the single minded or bigoted, the acceptance of any new idea is impossible.

I know people of your calibre are open-minded but you need to remain conscious of the need to be so. Even the best must be vigilant.

- My fourth and final critical factor is about the **integrity of the decision** itself and the way we convey that decision to the people affected by it.

Our decisions reflect our values, our integrity and reflect what we stand for both as a country and as people.

We aim to be a country free of corruption and undue influence. Our core belief is that honesty of purpose and integrity and behaviour are as important as the decision itself.

Empathy is essential

What makes a good decision maker? All of our values come into play but it is maintaining purity of purpose, free of any influence that might corrupt the process, that most matters.

A decision must be made in logical relation to everything that has preceded it, including the potency of the case and the assembly of the facts.

For me, as a decision maker, I might not always necessarily like the findings I reach. I might think it would be nice if the evidence and analysis had led to a different conclusion. However, my responsibility is to get it right. Fairness for all is not the same as pleasing everyone all the time.

Having said this, I am very conscious that the way we convey a decision can be as important as the decision itself. Empathy is essential. We need to acknowledge where needed that a decision may not please someone, and we must use language that is as warm and personal as possible.

I think people are far more accepting of a decision when they understand how it was made; they want to know whether all points of view were carefully considered before an opinion was formed. In short, was the decision robust?

You will be able to answer that question from a position of great strength if you have taken my four critical factors into account.

You will be able to show that you put a lot of thought into it, that you were well prepared, that your process had integrity and that you made your decision based on the evidence.

Some of the most satisfying decisions you will ever make will be on those occasions when you have been open minded enough to admit you were wrong, that you need to look at things again after considering all the facts.

It is those decisions that show your strength of character and will mark you out as a truly great person.

As young champions of science and innovation, you know the value of empirical research, using logic or experience to reach a decision rather than just basing it on a particular theory or preconceived idea.

Great New Zealanders like Sir Paul Callaghan have led the way. You should follow in their foot steps.

I wish all of the finalists the best of luck for tomorrow.

My warm congratulations for your achievements to date, and my very best wishes for the future, for attaining excellence and for doing the right thing by yourselves, your families and for our country, New Zealand.