A TALE OF TWO MAYORS AND ONE CITY:
Contrasting approaches to leadership and communication in a local government setting

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Abstract
This paper examines the contrasting communication styles of two mayors. Each has been leader of the same provincial New Zealand city, one during the current three-year term and the other during the preceding term. Their approaches to leadership and communication are diametrically opposed. In terms of leadership theory, Jill White, mayor from 1998 to 2001, presents a transformational approach. She was a very experienced politician in both local and central government with a consultative, teambuilding approach to being the first citizen. Her emphasis as a leader was on the community and its well-being, improving the city's image and creating unity within the divided political factions on council. However, her public image was of someone who was nice but weak.

Mark Bell-Booth, mayor from 2001 onwards, represents a transactional pattern of leadership. He brought to the mayoralty his experience in business, including the challenge of rebuilding after a business catastrophe. With little experience of local government, he has chosen to run the council as a board of directors, with himself as leader with the power of veto. Soon after his election, on his own initiative, he chose to put a building project on hold that the previous council had already approved. He has relied on spontaneous reactions and his own personal opinions to guide his behaviour. His public image is of someone who is strong-willed and decisive.

This paper examines newsprint media coverage of key incidents during each mayor's time in office. This coverage is analysed in terms of transactional and transformational leadership factors. The possible salience of gender will be discussed.

Introduction
Local government may seem an unlikely site for exploring the finer points of leadership. Local government's image tends to be one of grey conservatism rather than leadership innovation. Yet mayors face challenges and tensions in their role which provide an ideal perspective for examining leadership theory in action. Unlike leaders in business or organisational settings who have the power to reward and punish those working under them, a mayor can only use influence and must depend on personal communication skills. At the council table, mayors have only one vote on an issue, just like any other councillor. This difference, that a mayor can only influence or persuade without having a manager's power to reward or punish, closely mirrors Burns' (1978) distinction between transactional and transforming leadership. For Burns, transactional leadership is an exchange motivated by mutual self-interest. A political leader might offer a senior ranking to a junior colleague in return for support

on an issue, or a manager might give a salary increase to a subordinate for improving their Department's profile.

By comparison, Burns sees transforming leadership as a more selfless, ennobling experience. The transforming leader is able to communicate a vision of a possible, better future which inspires others to work towards its achievement. Burns argues that women are more likely to practise transforming (later writers used the term 'transformational') leadership than men. He considers the assumption that leaders are more likely to be men as a mistaken emphasis in leadership study:

> *The male bias is reflected in the false conception of leadership as mere command and control. As leadership becomes properly to be seen as a process of leaders engaging and mobilizing the human needs and aspirations of followers, women will be more easily recognized as leaders and men will change their own leadership styles.* (Burns, 1978, p. 50)

This paper uses Burns's conceptual framework to explore two different approaches to leadership by comparing a male and a female mayor to see whether these two case studies support Burns' contention that men are more likely to be transactional leaders and women transforming leaders. First, the two mayors are introduced, then their approaches to establishing their leadership and communicating about leadership goals are examined by analysing newspaper stories published during their terms of office. Finally, their leadership and communication styles will be assessed along with the relevance of gender.

Background – Meet the Mayors
In October 1998, in Palmerston North, a provincial city in the lower part of New Zealand's North Island, a woman was voted into office as mayor. Jill White, the new mayor, was the first woman to hold the position of city leader. Her political credentials were impeccable. She had served on both city and regional councils. She had been an MP in the Labour party in government, first as an electorate MP and later as a list MP. She had worked in Palmerston North as a public health nurse and had an in-depth knowledge of the community. In the mayoral election she managed to gain the largest share of the votes in competition with 14 other mayoral candidates, all attracted by the opportunity when the former mayor of 13 years decided to stand down.

Nevertheless, in the first major decision of her term, her proposals for committee chairpersons, she was soundly defeated. A group of six councillors, who disagreed with her decisions, managed to persuade others on the 15 member council to vote with them against her recommendations. After this episode, despite attempts to manage dissension within council, Jill White was not able to create a united team. However, she was successful in a bold new move to create a city identity and also managed to improve many city amenities. During her term, the council decided to sell the civic building to developers who wanted to turn it into a hotel. The mayor was against the sale, but accepted the outcome when the majority of councillors voted for it. Later, when the deal fell through, the council was left with the building along with other newly refitted premises they had leased. Voters blamed the mayor, and Jill White lost the mayoralty after a single three-year term.

Jill White's mayoral successor, Mark Bell-Booth, had no experience in local government. In 1997, he had led a protest against the council's decision to fell trees in one of the city's main streets (Gerbich, 1997). His other experience of gaining national publicity had been when his business firm's main product, a liquid fertiliser called Maxicrop, was shown by a television consumer programme to have no nutrients contributing to plant growth (Morgan, 2001). The consequent business failure, and the impact on his reputation of having manufactured a discredited product, required long-term re-building of his business.

Once elected, Mark Bell-Booth began putting his own individual stamp on the mayoralty. Compared with Jill White's cautious, consultative approach, he made decisions quickly and often without consultation. Uninhibited by knowledge about the statutory limitations of a mayor's authority and the need to respect the democratic process of decision-making, he tended to behave like a businessperson running his own business within the mayoralty. Mark Bell-Booth also seemed to have a natural aptitude for capturing media headlines by doing things like being caught speeding in the mayoral car. His approach to political matters caused even more headlines than his personal style. He reversed a decision of the previous council, that upgrading should be carried out on Arena One, the showgrounds, because he wanted to assure himself that it was a sensible use of resources. And when gang tensions meant that a local gang, whose car had been impounded by police, could not go to the nearest supermarket for fear of running into their rivals, Mark Bell-Booth lent them his wife's car, so they could shop further afield.

Comparing the Mayors

In using newspaper stories to compare the two mayors, the first area to be explored is the way the mayors established their leadership when first elected. Comparisons will also be made between the main achievements of their terms, their communication styles and their relationships with council and with the community. For Jill White, the first priority was to establish her leadership as the city's first woman mayor, in a council which had gained a reputation for being very fractious and divided in the previous term. Jill White had gained the mayoralty from a field of 15 contenders, including several sitting councillors, and polled over 2000 votes more than her nearest rival. The local newspaper, the *Evening Standard,* heralded her win with congratulations, but also went on to sound a note of warning:

> *The new mayor is talking of leading a "united team", but, unless some councillors change their spots, she will find it a huge challenge creating that unity. Perhaps now the mayoral race is over, and councillors are no longer jockeying to succeed long-serving Paul Rieger,* (the former mayor) *the mood may become more conciliatory.* (White clearly wins the race, 1998, p. 8)

In spite of these warnings, initially, relationships within the new council seemed cordial and co-operative. For Jill White it was "her honeymoon period in office, a delightful time . . .when she did not have to make any hard decisions and when everyone seemed positive and happy to work together," (Tremaine, 2001). However, in the *Evening Standard,* the City Eye column criticised Jill White's delay in selecting her choices for deputy mayor and council chairpeople:

> *It's now just over four weeks since the local body elections and Palmerston*
> *North still doesn't have a deputy mayor or any formal committee structure . . .*
> *none of the working parties or advisory groups set up in the last term of*
> *council can be formally recognised . . . things are grinding to a halt . . .* (City
> Eye, 1998, p.1.)

Jill White's strategy was to take the time to listen to everyone's concerns and priorities. Finally, she formulated recommendations to take to the formal meeting where chairpersons would be appointed. In an interview with the researcher, she said that she knew there would be disappointed ambitions and did not expect her choices to be accepted without debate, but made her decisions on the basis agreed by councillors – the need to select the best person for each position (J. White, personal communication, December 18, 1998). The council meeting, when it came, brought more than a debate. There was a sustained and orchestrated attack on the mayor's recommendations. Six councillors working together (some of whom had been unsuccessful mayoral candidates) overturned all but two of the mayor's recommendations and substituted members of their group. The *Evening Standard* reported:

> *Mayor Jill White took a key package of recommendations to a committee of*
> *council meeting last night but came away badly burned. . . three of the four*
> *committee chairpeople she recommended were rejected and their deputies*
> *appointed instead.* (Myers, 1998a, p. 1.)

One of the tactics used by the group opposed to the recommendations, was to put forward a motion that the deputy mayor should not also chair a committee. As the newspaper story explained:

> *As part of the package of recommendations put forward by Ms White, Cr*
> *Jeffries* (a qualified accountant) *would have chaired the finance and review*
> *committee. Cr Heather Allan said she believed that the key issue to come out*
> *of the recent workshop was that councillors wanted chairpeople with the best*
> *skills for the job. "Is there anyone else with the skills Cr Jeffries has to pick*
> *up the chair of finance?"* (Myers, 1998a, p. 1.)

The next day, the newspaper included an editorial opinion supporting the mayor and rebuking some of the councillors for their behaviour. Jill White was buoyed by the support of the *Evening Standard*, but still had to manage a council where disgruntled councillors who had voted against her recommendations could undermine her leadership and make her vulnerable. In a research interview (J. White, personal communication, December 18, 1988), she explained that her first priority was to build council unity. She did not want the public to see her mayoralty mired in the problems of the past with a divided, dysfunctional council unable to achieve the city's goals. The previous mayor, Paul Rieger, had dealt with this problem by having an 'A' team (those who supported him) and a 'B' team (those he ignored). But in the interests of healing the rift in council, Jill White was determined to treat everyone fairly, whether they had supported or opposed her.

In an interview with the *Evening Standard* after the difficult meeting, Jill White said she would make the same choices again if she were in the same position, despite the

knockbacks. She said that she thought she had put forward "a bold and adventurous package making use of the very best we had to offer. I had expected there would be some debate and challenge, but I thought it would be accepted in the interests of the city. I'm disappointed, but that's democracy" (Myers, 1998b, p. 1.) She added, "my real concern is that it does not lead to the development of two teams within council . . . it is the responsibility of every councillor, myself included, to make sure this is not the beginning of divisiveness" (Myers, 1998b, p. 1.)

By contrast, Mark Bell-Booth's approach to selecting the leadership team to chair council committees was quite different. He approached the task pragmatically. He held one-on-one talks with councillors and had them all rank those they would like to see in particular positions and used this information to make his decisions and give councillors the leadership that they wanted (Nash, 2001a). He also differed from Jill White in his approach to consultation, giving a media briefing a few days after being elected and telling reporters how the council would operate in his term based on decisions he had made after visiting other councils, rather than by consulting Palmerston North councillors and council staff.

In the briefing, Mark Bell-Booth said that he would change the meeting cycles to six weeks rather than continue with monthly meetings, because the extra two weeks would allow more time for reports to be sent out and improve quality standards. He said that:

> *in local bodies where the extra two-week period has been introduced, the quality of work has improved remarkably. The city is looking for a team whose performance will lift the city and get it going. Growth is not about doing what we did yesterday – to grow you've got to do something different . . . Mr Bell-Booth said that it was important to adopt the best practices. 'No matter what activity or business you're in, if you adopt the best practice, it provides you with a model to work to.* (Williams, 2001, p. 6)

Within his first three weeks as mayor, Mark Bell-Booth captured headlines by lending his wife's Saab to a gang. As the *Dominion* newspaper describes the incident, which took place when police impounded the cars of gangs involved after two driveby shootings, *"Police were surprised to learn of the mayor's generosity after stopping the Saab in Palmerston North at 3am and 7.30 am yesterday"* (Mayor: Why I lent car to gang, 2001, p. 3.). Mark Bell-Booth defended his action by explaining that, without a car, the Mongrel Mob would have had to shop at the same supermarket as Black Power. He lent the Mongrel Mob his wife's car for 24 hours so that they wouldn't have to associate with Black Power. He said, *"*It was about giving these guys space to cool their heels" (Mayor: Why I lent car to gang, 2001, p. 3). According to the mayor, his intervention had resolved gang tensions in the city.

The mayor's action gained a lot of publicity. The *Evening Standard's* editorial, the following day, said that the decision to lend the car was a novel approach, which might prove to have been wise and forward-thinking, or fruitless and risky. However, it was at odds with law enforcement agencies "who have a lot more experience in this area" and some in the community would "view his move as foolhardy and naïve" (Was mayor taken for a ride?, 2001, p. 3).

When the mayor suggested a physical space as a way of catering for the multi-faceted requirements of ethnic groups in the city, the *Evening Standard* pointed out the need for broader consultation on what was needed:

> *An international cultural centre as proposed by Mayor Mark Bell-Booth may be just the sort of thing Palmerston North needs, but we risk trying to be all things to all people. . . In some cities the mayoralty is something of a one-man band, but that can lead to confrontation and disharmony in the ranks. The council must work as a team and that's not just councillors and staff. It also means working as a team with the community, for the benefit of the city.* (Passion may be fine, but at what cost, 2001, p. 4.)

But the action that distinguishes his way of operating, and stands out clearly as having happened purely because of the mayor's intervention, is Mark Bell-Booth's instruction to the Arena Manawatu Board (the showgrounds) to defer design work already approved and under way. He shows himself to be strongly in the transactional 'command and control' mould as a leader. The Arena Board's chairman, Bernard Forde, said the board was following a programme approved by the council and as yet there had been no change by way of a council resolution. But the mayor's comment had been *"We don't want anyone just going off and doing what they want,"* (Nash, 2001, p. 1).

The *Evening Standard* was moved to explicit criticism:

> *Delays to Arena One's redevelopment imposed by Palmerston North mayor Mark Bell-Booth are a huge disappointment, and a worry. With the astoundingly dismissive comment that he doesn't want anyone "just going off and doing what they want", Mr Bell-Booth has, himself, made a unilateral decision to stop work on the plans without his council's formal backing. Arena Manawatu supporters and its board members who have acted on council instructions at each step have every reason to feel insulted. Mr Bell-Booth is on a personal crusade . . . He has not given his councillors an opportunity to debate his approach in public, around the table, as local government protocols and ratepayer expectations require.* (Arena delay huge worry for region, 2000, p. 4.)

As two further examples of Mr Bell-Booth's communication style, when the mayor was caught speeding in the ratepayer-funded mayoral car, driving at 72km/h in a 50km/h zone at 5.30 pm, he said that he had been at a function and was running late for another council meeting. He had three functions that night "and was more interested in the schedule than watching the speedo." (Mayor cops fine for speeding, 2002, p. 12.)

Further actions demonstrating his leadership style included telling the media that, in the council's by-election, only candidates who were prepared to follow the council's current direction should stand (Wallis, 2002). He also visited and angrily berated a pensioner who had complained about the state of the council unit she was living in. According to the pensioner's friend who was also present, the mayor was shouting and saying that the council had been set up. She said his manner was disgusting and

overbearing and that he acted unlawfully in harassing the tenant and not giving the required 48 hours notice of his visit. In return, Mr Bell-Booth said the council had been portrayed as a bad landlord and he wouldn't stand for that (Nash, 2002).

In contrast to Bell-Booth's reluctance to let diverse voices and perspectives be heard, Jill White's approach to leadership centred on having other people contributing and encouraging them to find ways to reach a shared vision. Using this ability to involve others in the leadership process, Jill White set up a community 'think tank' in April 2000 for the advancement of Palmerston North (Morgan, 2000). One outcome that developed was the group's recognition of the need for the city to celebrate itself. This project culminated in a new city branding exercise, which would not have happened without Jill White's ability to be a catalyst for the process and bring everybody in the community on board including the media. Although the brand was ready to be unveiled before the election at the end of her three-year term, the mayor insisted that it should be delayed. In conversation with a group, which included the researcher, she explained that having the brand launched just before the election might give her an unfair advantage.

When the brand was unveiled in public a month later, after she had lost the mayoralty, Jill White was acknowledged as having championed the process. She spoke about the whole exercise as being bold and visionary and said that achieving the 'Young heart, easy living' brand had been remarkable because, "[t]he enthusiasm and commitment from the people involved had been magnificent and it was great to see the project being led by the community rather than the council" (Nash, 2001b) This project began as just a vague idea. Jill White's ability to build on the idea and enthuse others to find a way of expressing the essence of the city was an example of transforming leadership.

Leadership Successes and Failures

Mark Bell-Booth's main achievement must be seen as having created a more united council. Although some councillors have spoken out against his actions in stopping work on the Arena One project, he does have a far less dysfunctional council than was the case for the two previous mayors. The main reason seems to be that, at the very beginning of the life of the new council, councillors had a chance to express their desires and preferences in one-to-one meetings with him. These meetings seem to have worked as leadership transactions. Mark Bell-Booth has given councillors what they want as much as possible in return for their acquiescence and support for him as mayor. Although Jill White canvassed councillors' opinions in group meetings and believed that everyone was committed to the 'best person for the job' rubric, some councillors must have felt pressure to agree with other councillors, or they may have had different ideas about what constituted the best person and how experience as a councillor should be set against relevant expertise. Councillors might have felt freer to express minority viewpoints and give more information about their personal choices in private meetings with the mayor. However, letting councillors 'vote' on their preferences may not have seemed like an option for Jill White, if she believed that it was her responsibility to choose the best person for each job.

Jill White's main achievement was in harnessing community energy and expertise by establishing the think tank which led to the development of the city's new brand identity. Enthusing people about something abstract, maintaining the impetus over

time and getting a wide range of people involved is always a challenge. In this case, even the *Evening Standard* newspaper became involved, running a campaign to get readers and local identities to say what was important to them about the city. Finally, the brand was launched and has since been widely used and acknowledged. Developing the city identity was an example of transformational leadership, influencing others to reach a goal with more far-reaching outcomes for the community than the self-interest of the individuals involved.

Jill White's main failure was her inability to communicate about the sale of the council building during the election campaign in a way that made it clear to voters that although she was personally against the sale, as mayor she had to accept the democratic process and did not have the power to reverse a council decision which the majority of councillors had supported. Mark Bell-Booth's main failure seems to be a lack of clarity about his direction. Although he has lots of ideas and expresses them, they seem to be followed by more new ideas without building on his previous notions. In fairness, Mark Bell-Booth has a year in office still to run and as someone with no previous council background, may need more time to adapt to the new environment. However, he does present as someone who expects his environment to adapt to him.

Transformational vs transactional styles

Transactional leadership, seeing everything in terms of your own benefit and being prepared to reward or punish to achieve those outcomes, links in to Mark Bell-Booth's leadership approach. He wishes to drive his mayoral car as fast as he likes, to punish and intimidate the pensioner who criticises the council and to reverse council decisions he doesn't like. He seems to see the position of mayor as giving him the power of command and control. He speaks of himself as being a "strong chairman of the board" and says that getting people to agree is about "what I want and what they want, being melded together into what we want" (Morgan, 2001, p.7).

Jill White looks towards what she would like to achieve for the city in a transformational way as shown in her city identity work with the think tank. Her leadership is collaborative and some of her problems as mayor seem to stem from not being able to work in a transactional way in appointing chairpersons or in distancing herself from the council decision to sell the civic administration building. She has shown more concern for unity on council than her own political future. Comparing the mayors shows the importance of recognising the difference between transactional and transformational leadership. Jill White needed to recognise this difference and to see the way that some of her councillors operated. Her example demonstrates that although one may achieve transforming outcomes with transformational leadership, political survival operates on a different level. She was still focussing on the community during the election when she needed to concentrate more narrowly on her campaign and communicate about her part in trying to prevent the sale of the council building. Mark Bell-Booth, on the other hand, shows that a transactional leader can be very effective at gaining support from followers, but may not achieve anything of the same significance that a transformational leader can achieve through harnessing a depth of commitment to a goal that reaches far beyond personal self-interest.

Relevance of gender

So what of Burns' (1978) contention that the notion of men as superior leaders stems from a false conception of leadership as command and control whereas women are

more likely to demonstrate transforming leadership? Other researchers, as well as Burns, claim that women are more likely to be democratic, participative and transformational as leaders and men more autocratic, directive and transactional (Rosener, 1990; Helgesen, 1990; Eagly and Johnson, 1990). The two case studies in this paper demonstrate why the gender difference that researchers report is likely to be found. Mark Bell-Booth's influences and models of leadership come from business culture where profit and personal gain is the motivation. Jill White's influences come from working with the community to achieve public health goals. The difference is not by virtue of being male or female in itself, but stems from the likelihood that males and females will have experienced different cultural influences, seen different models of leadership, and have different perceptions of what a leader should be.

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