

Getting the right people on the bus.

New Zealand Merino Company CEO John Brakenridge discusses the role leadership and collaboration have played in helping transform the traditional, production-led merino industry into a market-orientated culture that can deliver, create and capture value.



John Brakenridge

My take on leadership is that it's about making things happen that don't happen naturally. In the New Zealand Merino industry, this has meant constantly challenging the status quo to flip a very traditional, production-led industry on its head and bring about a market-orientated culture that can deliver, create and capture value.

It required firing up a collaborative spirit in the merino growing community and the processing sector. Among retail brands that was far more about growing a premium category than fighting for an inch. I think the role of leadership is critical because people want a clear vision, which I say is an aspiration.

But the role of leadership doesn't rest on one person. It's about getting the right people on the bus that can lead in their areas of expertise, and also providing the scope for them to excel. Never underestimate the power of a great team culture.

We're a medium sized company (in 2010 we had a turnover of \$115 million, today it's \$165 million) with big aspirations for how a paradigm shift in New Zealand's primary sector can revolutionise the value it delivers to New Zealand and the world.

Winning the 2010 Outstanding International Business Leader Award as part of the New Zealand International Business Awards provided a launchpad for new thinking on how more value could be added to our industry and beyond. We had to have a certain amount of confidence that the aspiration we had for our industry could be achieved, but having the recognition of the award sparked the next step.

At the time, we were seeing large portions of New Zealand's sheep land being cannibalised by dairy and we got a little feisty. Someone needed to fight for the future of the sheep industry. It didn't take long to figure out it had to be us. In 2010 the New Zealand Merino company (NZM) pitched a plan for transformation to the Ministry for Primary Industry's Primary Growth Partnership. The big idea? Amplify demand for New Zealand's fine wool, meat, leather, lanolin and any other products that may present latent value for New Zealand's fine wool sheep farms.

Joining forces with Silver Fern Farms in 2011 was a big move. We applied what we'd learnt in fibre marketing and forward supply contracts to merino meat and established the Alpine Origin Merino joint venture. The qualities of merino meat had long been a secret of high country kitchens - it was time to unleash it on the world by pairing the meat prowess of Silver Fern Farms and the consumer led convictions of NZM.

In Keith Cooper, Silver Fern Farm's CEO, I found a co-conspirator; someone else who believed in our primary sector and in unlocking its potential. A year later Keith and I headed to Stanford University to spend time with



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Professor Baba Shiv who is an inspiration in thinking beyond the here and now by understanding how the consumer mind works. This seeded the next idea.

'Could a coalition of willing primary sector leaders power up our collective opportunity?' We were targeting the same consumers, in the same markets, so why weren't we collaborating? The first call I made was to NZTE's CEO Peter Chrisp. He saw the potential and in August last year, 25 of us were locked in a boot camp at Stanford University, crafting a strategy to take on the world. It doesn't happen naturally, but there's enough conviction around the table to really make a difference. Baba Shiv refers to two types of people when it comes to making a difference: type one has a fear of making a mistake, type two has a fear of missing out on an opportunity. This is definitely a type two environment and we're seeing the momentum build for both NZM and New Zealand.