

LEADERSHIP Q+A with Ken Brinsden

Atlas Iron's new managing director tells **Kate Emery** that respect is a key driver for a successful manager



Ambitions for others: Ken Brinsden wants those who succeed at Atlas Iron to go on to their own success. Picture: Astrid Volzke

Q What does leadership mean to you?
A There's a lot of high-falutin' answers I could give but I guess in my experience the people that I've always looked up to... I always had respect for them and I think that ultimately respect is one of the key drivers in successful leadership. Leadership means getting people to do what you want them to do and they'll only do that if they respect you.

Q How has your leadership style changed?
A It's a little bit like my car — I've still got the same car that I owned 10 years ago and I feel that probably my leadership style is still the same. If there is one thing I could put my finger on I guess I've learned there are things you do genuinely need to get excited about and there are things you don't. If there's one thing I've learned it's not to sweat the small stuff too much.

Q Which business leader do you most admire?
A I did my formative years with WMC and got to know a lot of really good people, both from WMC at the time and, for that matter, people who have subsequently gone on to bigger and better things. And one of the guys I watched early in my career was a guy named Tony Palmer: he took over as managing director of Newcrest at a time when the gold price was absolutely dismal. He was running Newcrest and making some really bold decisions with a really strong mining focus. He was trying to repair Telfer and he started the Cadia underground mine that went on to become the lowest-cost underground gold mine in the world. It was a really bold decision because of the costs that were required to set it up but it was obviously the right decision. If you were to go back further in time how about C.Y. O'Connor?

He's a guy who basically bucked the conventional wisdom of the day, backed his judgment and engineering ability and said, no, we can make this work. There's a great example of a leader.

Q Best advice?
A I worked for an amazing guy in my time at WMC. His name was Chris Beigaj and he was a Polish immigrant to Australia. Chris said to me — this was when I started out as an underground manager at Norseman and the gold price was around \$US250/oz — and he said Ken, anybody can do more with more but it takes a good person to do more with less.

Q Your biggest business challenge?
A (Atlas Iron executive chairman) David (Flanagan) has done an amazing job setting up a platform for growth for Atlas. We have this amazing pipeline of opportunities in front of us and I would say my biggest challenge is delivering on the promise Atlas has for incredible growth.

Q Most important career event?
A Joining Atlas (six years ago). When you work for the major mining houses it's easy to be pigeonholed within your career. The benefit that Atlas brings to the table is that we are very young, energetic, dynamic and fast-growing and what that means is that when you join Atlas your scope of work grows not quite exponentially but immensely in terms of what you might have on offer at the majors.

Q What is your outlook for the Australian economy?
A I'm universally positive because Australia has these amazing natural competitive advantages. We have an incredible endowment of natural resources and our proximity to key Asian markets. I think when you overlay those two natural competitive advantages, let alone the innovation and energy and enthusiasm that Australians bring to the table, I'm confident. The challenge is that we don't leave people behind.

Q Does money motivate you?
A I think the honest answer is yes but only to a degree. Obviously you want to ensure that your family is well cared for but with money... there's

almost no amount of money that can compensate you for the role that you take on as managing director of an ASX 100 company — it's pretty difficult, whether it's the hours, the obligations, the commitments, they all contribute to a really significant impost. So I guess translated it means the money motivates me to a point but beyond that what motivates me is the challenge to succeed, to see our team develop. I can imagine that Atlas could be this amazing platform for so many successful careers in mining. If we can make Atlas an outstanding success then we should be able to populate the industry with people who succeed at Atlas and then go on in their own right to succeed so that motivates me.

Q How do you encourage work-life balance for your employees?

A I personally find it difficult and there are times when I do miss opportunities with my family and my wife and kids but I try not to make that the norm. So I do generally encourage people at Atlas to participate in events outside the office. I do like the idea that our company is flexible enough to make that idea work.

Q What gadget can you not do without?
A The first thing that pops into everyone's mind is the BlackBerry but I'm not going to say that. The next thing that popped into my head was the mitre drop saw, a renovating tool and that's the sort of thing I enjoy doing when I get the time, which is not all that frequently. That's my favourite gadget.

Q How do you relax?

A I enjoy time with the family. I have three lovely kids and of course they make me proud so I enjoy spending time with them. And on the renovation scene, we're doing a renovation now and it's a monster project. My wife is doing a fantastic job project managing and I'm sure I could learn a lot from her. Nevertheless I enjoy seeing that unfold.

Q What would you do to improve Perth or WA?
A The Pilbara is such an important part of Australia's future that I think we would be quite right in focusing our efforts on what we could do for liveability in the Pilbara. So if we're looking for things to improve WA I'd say there's more investment to go into those communities. We have to make those cities more liveable to sustain the sort of growth you can imagine coming to those areas.



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