Defining Leadership

The recent announcement of a bold new "Vision 2020" programme to expand Australia's plantation forest estate by 2 million hectares over the next 25 years would likely fit many people's idea of leadership (see the Vision 2020 article in this issue). It has a grand vision, a bold plan of action and mobilises the energy and talent of a large number of people. In many ways, this type of leadership is what many would also nostalgically associate with the New Zealand Forest Service. The extent to which the current shape of the forest industry is based on past leadership provided by the Forest Service and individuals within it, in areas as diverse as forest establishment, wood processing and research, may be debated, but it is obvious that it had an important part in shaping where the industry is today.

With the passing of the Forest Service and the reduction of the Government's forestry involvement to that of policy advice (see the politicians' views in this issue), this version of leadership has largely been forgone in New Zealand. What is interesting now though, is the extent that this change has had on where and how leadership is manifested today. While the Forest Service, and to some extent the major corporates, provided a focus for leadership via their sheer size, privatisation has meant that there is no longer a platform for this type of leadership. To some, this has the appearance of the industry being leaderless and unable to find a common direction. This is perhaps a poignant feeling since the industry is facing a number of challenges, not the least of which is how to harvest and market a growing wood supply.

I would view the situation somewhat differently than the industry being leaderless. While a strong and focused leadership can be an effective means of creating change, it does not necessarily follow that the leadership must be centralised or dominant. What we see today is not a reduction in leadership, but rather the emergence of a great number of leadership fora. Rather than channeling leadership through a single organisation, it is spread throughout a number of organisations, in my mind adding depth and variety that would otherwise be stifled. In saying this, it must also be pointed out that my definition of leadership is not confined to individuals, but rather, includes organisations.

The important factor is that leadership emerges from action, not a designation of being a leader as such. While there are many organisations that have been nominated by a large part of the sector to be a leader, such as the Forest Owners' Association or the Forest Industries Council, these are not what I would denote as the industry's 'leaders'.