



## **Bernie Shankshaft**

*When I see a kid crumpled and busted and missing some of the basic ingredients of life, it breaks your heart. It breaks your soul. You have to put your life on hold for a minute and do what needs to be done.*

Bernie Shankshaft is one of those rare individuals who does not believe in formalities. He embodies the notion of Australian mateship, a term that underscores the essence of equality and the unconditional support for those close to the individual, including those that are in partnership for wanting to “have a go” and make a difference. While leadership may not be a word that he would typically use to define his actions, he embodies leadership as an act in practice. In Bernie’s case study, leadership is never static. It is ever-changing. Leadership is the act of practicing...and...keeping it simple.

Bernie was awarded Australian Hero of the Year in 2020 by the Australian government. He is currently Founder/CEO of BackTrack Youth Works in Armidale (NSW), working over 25 years to reach out to marginalised youth. Armidale is a city of only 23,000, and known as serving regional, rural and remote Australia. Understanding local context and individual-specific interpretations of inclusivity or the lack thereof have been implicit by virtue of students on the periphery who, as individuals, have elected to choose to seek change and opportunity at BackTrack. BackTrack serves as the means to help marginalised youth move from disadvantage to advantage. His achievements---along with his devoted team of staff---in the establishment and contributions BackTrack has made over the years are an inspiration for all, giving youth a “fair go” to realise their place in the world and to help them identify their potential.

The following are excerpts of key questions raised during the interview with Bernie Shankshaft:

Q1: How would you describe your leadership approach to improving quality teaching and learning?

A1: Bernie:

- Getting along side and doing
- Putting opportunities to people
- Setting an example
- If it works, do it

Q2: How would you best describe the Australian education environment in accepting radical change in your position of authority?

A2: Bernie:

- “Click with the shit;” recognise traditional approaches as “old school”
- Simplicity is key
- Change the position to give students the permission to shine

Q3: What evidence do you collect to make informed decisions on quality teaching and learning (e.g. training content, assessment, delivery)

A3: Bernie:

- Do the students show up? (Foot Theory)
- Is what you teach put into use?
- Practice ‘real life’ application. Education for life

Q4: In your own words, how would you describe personalised learning?

A4: Bernie:

- Work on a person’s strengths, not weaknesses
- Look for the gold in a person
- Take inches, not miles (incremental change)

Q5: How would you respond to the following: Education should not be about how much you learn but what you learn?

A5: Bernie:

- Use of peers
- Give permission to have a go
- Ask questions instead of telling