

The Australian Defence Force Academy “Skype sex scandal”: lessons on leadership and ethics

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Synopsis:

At Easter time 2011 the Australian Defence Force Academy was drawn into obloquy through student sexual misconduct. In the wake of damaging national media coverage, various committee of enquiries were established to consider and address cultural issues at ADFA and across wider Australian Defence Force. Damian Powell served as member of the expert panel assisting Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner Liz Broderick's reviews into the treatment of women at ADFA, and into the treatment of women across the ADF. He explores these events with an eye to these questions: What are the lessons to be learned for those of us who attempt to provide leadership in a university setting? What are the challenges around values, and practices, in terms of our engagement with student culture?

Thank you very much to organisers for giving me time to speak today, and thanks also to all of you for coming along to listen to me. I note that we meet on Kurna land today, and acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and their elders, past and present.

The events I'm going to talk about undoubtedly well known to colleagues among the Heads of Colleges, as our own residential culture has also borne some scrutiny in recent times. A search of Google for the words 'ADFA/ Skype/ Scandal' before I got on the plane to attend the conference generated well over 10,000 'hits', as part of an eternal circle by which media commentary feeds social comment. We know that some university colleges in Australia have received unfavourable treatment in the media for similar reasons, although most people haven't yet joined the dots between the two institutions – which is that this is really a story about the kind of leadership that needs to be in place when we have young women and men in our care.

This afternoon, I'm going to talk a little about leadership and cultural change from my own perspective on Australia's residential colleges, but mainly with an eye to two reviews into the treatment of women in the Australian Defence Force. And I'll do this by talking about three people who from my perspective are heroes in this review process. I should also

mention the former Australian Minister of Defence, Stephen Smith, something of an unsung hero in this story, because he named the unspeakable truth that Defence Force might have a cultural issue that was bigger than anyone really wanted to acknowledge or address. The context for the Broderick Reviews was a public falling out between the Minister of Defence and the military over the treatment of a female officer cadet who had 'blown the whistle' on sexual misconduct at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

This leads to my first thought about leadership. Ethical leadership requires one, from time to time, to stand against the crowd when there is enormous pressure to stay silent. I don't really think it matters how large or small an organization is: there are always vested interests that make it difficult to challenge the status quo. People never welcome the messenger who tells them there is something fundamentally wrong with the things they have all been unwilling to challenge themselves. So *moral courage of the first order* is part of the calling to leadership – and in Australia I don't think we take that calling at all seriously enough, either in praising those who call out unethical behavior, or in condemning those who fail to seek a higher standard in those they profess to lead.

So here are my three heroes: Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick; Chief of the Australian Army General David Morrison, and the young cadet – known by her alias 'Kate' – who blew the whistle on her own treatment by male cadets at ADFA.

Let me start with the leadership shown by Elizabeth Broderick, who chaired the reviews that considered the treatment of women at ADFA, and across the Australian Defence Force. Although the Australian Human Rights Commission does not report to the Government of the day such, it would be naïve to believe that it stands beyond the tide, of public opinion, the judgment of the press, or to say that that Australia's politicians have no interest in its activities and focus. It is a highly public institution, and it *needs to be seen* to be politically impartial and fair in exercising influence on the national conversation around discrimination and human rights. While Australia is a progressive nation in terms of women's rights, it is not true to say that all Australian are receptive to equality for women, or even understand what that might look like. And while Australia is not a militaristic society *per se*, our abiding national myth is of Australian men displaying heroic virtues as soldiers – we call this the Anzac legend, which relates our national character back to Australia's enormous and in

some ways devastating experiences in the First World War. The Anzac legend is not about women, and the contribution they have made to Australia society is largely absent from the story.

Commissioner Broderick's first decision was to what extent she could gain the trust and cooperation of the Defence Force and its senior leaders. In an environment in which six separate enquiries had been launched simultaneously, threatening this proud organization with disrepute, it would have been easy - or at least easier - to work in superficial cooperation, without the deeper engagement needed to build respect. Lesson two about leadership – in even the hardest times, good leaders show respect and empathy for *everyone*, even those with vastly different view points. But this does not mean that good leaders back down when confronted with poor behavior or casual self-deceit.

To be a champion of change, the Broderick Review Team had to build a case to show that we were not set against the Defence Force. Rather we had to show that we were trying to help the institution improve not just its reputation, but its military capability and indeed war fighting ability. The case had to be made that in marginalizing a large section of 50% of the Australian population who are women – *and those men* who support equal and dignified opportunity for women to serve our nation in uniform, Defence could only be doing harm to itself. We had to build a case that we could help, not hinder, Defence to achieve its aims of building a high-functioning, culturally relevant organization which mirrors the better aspects of Australian society. In order to do this, we had to *engage*.

At the Australian Defence Force Academy, some understandably angry cadets and staff made it clear that, in their mind, the military was being unfairly targeted because of the actions of a young woman, who had shown disloyalty to the military by going to the media, and a Minister of Defence who had not stood by them as he should. The phrase they used again and again – not one you actually hear that often in Australia any more – is that the whole organization was being unfairly judged by the actions of a 'few bad apples'. These 'few bad apples' were *not*, we were told, the symptom of a wider cultural problem around the treatment of women. These 'bad apples' – not bad people, really, but not thinking clearly about their actions – could easily be disciplined and the whole thing would go away.

Liz Broderick could easily have accommodated this line of argument. As a strong leader, she did not accept the argument without a proper and full interrogation. Instead, she and her team spent hundreds of hours listening to women and men from across every branch of the Australian Defence Force, in every conceivable location. Her team found, over time, that there were often things that would not be said in a formal setting. Some reflections could only be given outside the formal setting, when people felt safe enough to tell their stories in confidence. By committing time and energy to listening to men and women in their own workplaces, stories opening up the subtle and often hidden ways in which women are discriminated against, sometimes bullied, sometimes harassed, and sadly sometimes assaulted – these stories were given time and space to be heard. Commissioner Broderick made a point of listening to these stories *in person*, in many if not most cases. Beyond this, she made a point of ensuring practical support was available for women, and in some cases men, who felt deeply vulnerable, having spoken out about abusive behavior and its effects upon them.

These were valuable steps, but it was her next act of leadership that I found the most impressive, and the most powerful, in terms of transformative practice. It was to invite some of these women, sometimes accompanied by their parents, to meet with the most senior leaders of our Army, Navy and Air Force, to talk openly about their treatment within the culture of Defence. This allowed our national military leaders to be confronted by the stories of women who had entered their service full of pride and hope, and had seen their hopes dashed and degraded by the treatment of other service personnel – including sometimes by those in direct positions of power over them.

How many times have difficult issues of organizational culture, often triggered by public failings in leadership, resulted in written reports, full of well-meaning recommendations and admonitions? Redacted, re-interpreted and diluted, such articles of leadership serve the purpose of showing that serious thought has been given, and that things are being done. The life span of such reviews is often as not as ephemeral as the lessons that are learned. But good leadership brings people together in a way that is truly life-changing.

Big organisations and oftentimes small ones as well use endlessly euphemistic language to fudge, to hide, or soften the hard edges around poor ethical practice and bad behavior. They build rafts of policies on which to float a sense of security around their behavior and

their public conscience. They construct mission statements telling the world about their aspirations, as if such statements somehow underwrite a reality of experience, simply by existing. In the end this 'administration by incantation' is not in itself proper leadership, but rather merely provides a template upon which real leadership can be judged. Real leadership requires us to confront the truth, however uncomfortable, face to face – and to allow the weak to be protected by the strong, they must be allowed a voice recognized as equally valuable to the strongest voice.

I believe that Elizabeth Broderick did what she knew was right. She enabled and ensured those real conversations to occur between those with the most power, and those who felt the most vulnerable. This is real leadership. And real leadership has a chance of inspiring others to lead the way in their own settings.

So I turn to my second hero, General David Morrison. David Morrison was appointed Chief of the Australian Army in 2011, just a few months after the ADFA scandal threatened his service with obloquy. In Australia, the Army is historically perhaps the most trusted, respected institution in public life. It is, to use modern jargon, a 'trusted brand' which from time to time receives some public criticism around culture, but for whom the overwhelming majority of Australians is seen to reflect positive aspects of Australian identity. Not since the 1980s have Australians felt comfortable criticizing the military, as sections of our community did during the Vietnam War. With Australian soldiers serving in Afghanistan, there would be an even greater sentiment to support the Army, and to trust its people. I say this by way of suggesting that David Morrison had an easy choice he could have made upon taking up his leadership role. He could have carefully, or more aggressively, defended the Army's reputation, in the face of criticism of its treatment of women. He could have taken the 'few bad apple' position, and suggested that the Broderick and other reviews were massively unfair, and distorted, in their attack on his institution.

Instead, General Morrison decided to do things that were most unusual for someone in his position. Having expressed pride in the Army and its people, he decided to speak out publicly against its worst behaviours. By admitting that there was a problem, he made it clear that he was going to lead the institution into better cultural practice, tackling the issue head on. This is courageous leadership. This is what he said:

Ref: YouTube - Message from the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General David Morrison, AO, to the Australian Army following the announcement on Thursday, 13 June 2013 of civilian police and Defence investigations into allegations of unacceptable behaviour by Army members.

I can't really add to his words.

It is interesting to compare this courageous leadership with the discussions that I have encountered, in various civilian settings, around comparable cultural failings in residential colleges. I have to say that, sadly, what I have seen by way of comparison is a deep fear around potential reputational risk, if Australia's residential colleges were subject to forensic interrogation of their cultures and practices. This is not to say that these practices are uniformly bad – rather that we seem to be afraid for anyone external to us to look into our world. This fuels another reflection about leadership. It takes courage to speak out. It is genuinely difficult to identify the vested interests, the collusion of interests, which make it hard to be honest about our own institutional cultures and practices. In celebrating what we do well, we should be honest about where we let ourselves down. Sadly, David Morrison is extraordinary rather than typical in this aspect of his leadership.

Australia's residential university colleges and the Australian Defence Force Academy are explicit in their claims to offer leadership to the young women and young men in their care. Of course *the students themselves* may not feel powerful. They may not be able to relate this public rhetoric to their personal behavior and their personal experiences in their institutions. Often, I hear people in positions of leadership encouraging their students as 'the leaders of tomorrow', exhorting them to aim high in their aspirations as they prepare themselves for their professional lives. Perhaps as a result of the Broderick Review, I've become less interested in *where* our students are going to end up professionally. The reality is that in Australia, most students in our colleges will prosper economically, as they are at the absolute peak of professional and educational advantage. Rather than where they are going to be, instead, I've become more interested in *who* they are going to be. What values will inform their professional lives? Will they stand by in the face of hypocrisy, sexism, injustice?

So my last hero – and perhaps the most controversial of all in Australian military circles – is the young officer cadet, Kate, who didn't keep quiet, and didn't accept that it was ok for a

couple of young men to film and watch her having sex without her consent. I've never met her, and I don't know her. But I know that she didn't join the Australian Defence Force seeking public fame, or to become a figure of hatred, or to become a symbol of this view or of that. I suspect she joined up hoping for a successful military career, as did so many other women who have been let down by the sexist treatment they have received while serving in uniform. But she was prepared to call a spade a spade around issues of sexual power and sexual consent. I certainly wouldn't have had the courage that she has shown to stand up to a culture in which some will pity her, and many will hate her.

Can I finish with a few things I have learned from these heroes of mine, and then a few thoughts about cultural settings and ethical practice?

Ethical leadership requires courage, and without it nothing much will change. Liz Broderick showed me that good leaders *listen*. They enable a range of voices to be heard. This requires time, and the ability to move carefully and respectfully within a range of cultural settings, formal and informal. Liz Broderick and David Morrison showed me that good leaders *engage* with others, respectfully, with an eye to their different perspectives. They *engage* with everyone they can, whenever they can, to reach a deeper understanding of institutional culture and its potential. They understand that everyone plays their part in institutional cultural settings. In our university settings, and in particular in university residences, the cultural practices are influenced by everyone ranging from the Deans of Faculty to the cleaners: in this setting, one might well ask, who is more engaged, and more powerful, in determining the cultural outcomes?

Engagement requires *time*, for formal *and informal* discussion. It requires a leader to be inquisitive about 'unstructured' spaces, outside and beyond the constructed spaces - which from my experience tend to offer 'constructed' truths. If you think you can judge an institution's cultural settings through the conversations in its boardroom, I would suggest that you are not thinking about transformative leadership.

Good leaders *assess* institutional culture on the basis of real data – data drawn from every relevant aspect of an organization. To change culture, one needs strong data to inform the conversation. Good leaders use real data to refine their questions, and to defend their need to question further.

Good leaders **declare** themselves. They speak plainly. They give voice to the uncomfortable truths, while showing respect. Good leadership requires honesty that is not always well received. Be clear and open in your thinking. Don't 'fudge' things. Be prepared for debate, and for argument if the facts demand a correction in institutional thinking.

Good leaders **revise** their thinking in light of deeper understanding. David Morrison did not believe that the Australian Army had major cultural issues around women. Because of Liz Broderick, and those courageous service personnel who risked telling him the truth about their own treatment in the Army, he changed his mind. Remember, you never have all the data, or the whole truth. Continually refresh your thinking in light of what you know. Don't seek to 'solve' complex problems too quickly – keep learning and thinking.

So, from leaders to institutions. It seems to me that we rely too much upon careful ethical statements as a litmus test of cultural practice. Our words hover above the darker realities that sometimes undermine institutional culture and practice. They can be used to hide from or avoid the truth for some of those within our care. We who lead institutions oftentimes assume that culture is relative static, can be read and interpreted merely on the basis of 'motherhood statements', and that it follows 'logical' patterns.

In Australia, social and personal assumptions are now so varied across the community, that traditional notions of 'shared culture' really don't reflect our reality any more. In addition, students and staff are well able to use an appropriate 'public' or 'institutional' language of culture and values – but they can readily hold language this tension with a vastly different set of assumptions and values around personal conduct. At the same time, the rise of social media means that there are less and less meaningful ways to disconnecting or dissociate what used to be called 'public' and 'private' behavior'. We are still struggling to catch on to this changed reality.

In Australia many institutions - including, sadly, the church - have been damaged, as a source of credible moral authority, through their own hypocrisy in attempting to manage scandal while avoiding external interrogation. Unfortunately, in an age of lawyers and risk management, straight and honest talk is often missing in institutional narrative. We have to be brave, and we have to open to external interrogation of our culture. If we are worried

about this honest talk, why are we worried? I find it interesting that so many institutions in Australia spend so much time worrying about their financial parameters and success, while all the time paying little or no thought to the damage caused to the institution by poor behavior.

This leads me to my final thought. I used to think a lot about cultural values and role of institutional narrative in shaping shared values. I still think that institutional narrative has an important role to play. Reflecting on ADFA though, I have tempered my focus on 'shared values' in my understanding of institutional leadership. The Australian military has rafts of statements about shared values – ADFA values, Army values, Navy values, Air Force values, Defence Values. They're all pretty good. But in the end, they're just words – and they certainly don't ensure a highly ethical or cultural standard. Rather, ethical leadership has to come through the example of leaders engaging with students, day after day, into the night, in all manner of ways both formal and informal. This leadership needs to be grounded in a deep respect for the duty of care that comes in a residential, educational setting such as ADFA. Beyond the idea of shared values, but I am increasingly interested in the idea of 'shared practices', as these shared practices – from the top to the bottom, from the strongest to the weakest – inform and build institutional culture.

For any leader, personal example and engagement with all aspects of one's institution must become central. It must transcend any rhetoric. It is perhaps the only plausible way of showing leadership around ethical practices and values. Dissonance between stated values, and practice on the ground, merely feeds the sense of 'disconnect'. Whatever the size of your organization, whatever your role, whatever your influence, if you're going to lead with integrity, you need to be right in the middle of these shared practices, showing the way.

Thanks very much for your time.

