

Chapter 11

Women Driving Change in the Navy

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My talk reflects my thoughts and opinions alone and cannot be construed in any way to necessarily reflect department of Defence or Navy policy. Mind you the last time I made that disclaimer was 14 years ago, and I had to make it because I was talking about the forbidden topic of women serving in submarines. I am delighted to say that women are already training at sea in submarines and this year our first fully qualified women submariners will graduate and form the first mixed submarine crews in Australian/U.S. or U.K. history.

My talk is about workforce diversity — the challenge it presents to leaders of organisations and the new initiatives and vision we require across both industry and institutions if we are going to capitalise on it.

I thought I'd begin with a great illustration of what impact a diverse workforce can have on traditional occupations — on the visual level alone it challenges the accepted stereotype.

The video you have just seen post dates by four years that very sad video of the crossing of the line ceremony shown on television recently. In perhaps an unintentional acknowledgment of the difference women are making, the sad ex-sailor said on television that if it had been a woman involved instead of him then corrective action would have been taken straight away. So it is recognised that women are changing behaviour in the Navy for the better.

Challenge

Workforce diversity is challenging. In particular, it challenges our leaders to think differently about the organisations they lead. But to do that, some have to fundamentally change the traditional way they think.

The traditional approach was brought home to me afresh in March this year at the commemoration of the battle of the Coral Sea in which the U.S. and Australian Navies defeated a Japanese invasion force. At the reception, after the ceremony, I was talking to three of the old retired sailors who had been at the battle. The American among the three leant forward and pointed to the four gold rings on the arm of my jacket, which designate my rank as captain, and said: "In my Navy to get those you need to have done at least 20 years." I smiled at the old chap and said, "Well, actually, I've done 27 years this June." "Oh," he said and lapsed into silence. Shortly after he interrupted again and said, "In the U.S. Navy to get to that rank you have to have

commanded a ship." "Well," I said, "In fact, as Commander of the Australian Mine Warfare Forces, I effectively commanded 14 ships." Silence. Then finally a few minutes later, his last gambit, "In our Navy to be a captain you have to be at least 50 years old." "Good guess," I said, "I'll be 50 next year!" Later, I met him in the corridor as I was leaving and although he looked confused his parting shot was, "Good on you Captain!"

But really that old sailor was thinking like the traditional leaders who cannot slough off the old stereotypes. Despite all their protestations they cannot see leadership except in a male form with male biases, in particular, elitism, exclusion and a chronic aversion to difference. But this aversion to difference has always stumped me, these are our people — they are not the enemy — or are they? Perhaps as Amanda Sinclair has referred to, we need to understand who wins and who loses in organisations by accepting change.

If we are going to capitalise on all the talent that a diverse workforce brings it is up to the remaining traditional leaders to reinvent themselves. If they don't, well, certainly in the private sector, we see clear evidence among those private-sector institutions of the price they pay when they ignore their changing workforce. It was interesting this week that the chief executive officer of the Commonwealth Bank had to speak publicly about the Banking Association agreement with radio entertainer John Laws because of unrest in his own workforce over the issue.

But, perhaps, if we can't hope to change the way all the traditional male leaders think, then perhaps there is another way we can change the environment in which they operate and make their thoughts and their modus operandi increasingly irrelevant.

Initiative

So what is the other way we can go to change the environment at senior levels.

Well, first, let's look at what we are changing it for — the new diverse workforce. What are the quanta of diversity?

The most significant factors are probably the talent of these young people who are among our best and brightest and by their significant presence in terms of numbers. Presently in the Navy, 47 percent of our seaman officers under training are female. On one of our frigates the crew is reportedly approaching 60 percent female.

But in the Navy, at least, these numbers are restricted to the more junior ranks in officers and sailors. In the more senior ranks, we are still not retaining our numbers and we dwindle to less than 2 percent in the

senior leadership ranks in the Navy and are somewhere in the order of 0.2 percent across the ADF. Nor in the middle ranks do we represent a sufficient proportion to be assured of a suitable percentage reaching senior rank.

This profile would appear to be mirrored throughout our institutions and in industry, where the drop-out rate among women who reach senior management is high.

The conundrum is, of course, how, with so few women at senior levels, are we going to change the culture to provide an environment which is not male-stereotypical but which values the different contributions of all our young people irrespective of gender?

So, how can we help the younger members survive the system long enough to change it? The answer is probably beyond any single institution or industry to resolve by itself. Nor do I think that we should simply wait for these organisations to change and waste young lives or careers in the process.

There may not be a critical mass of women at senior level in any one institution or industry, but, taken as a whole across organisations, there is a magnificent depth of talent and experience in both the active and retired community both male and female. This valuable reservoir of talent could provide the mentoring so often lacking for the developing young careerist, and could be used to provide a sense of college, a virtual overarching framework to provide that sense of belonging and therefore a sense of self worth in their own particular organisation.

There already exists one group of senior executive women who have organised themselves into an association to mentor especially talented younger women particularly in industry. Perhaps it would be possible to form a similar association among the public and private sector, the uniformed and academic institutions. This initiative might allow us to retain the critical mass long enough to make the numbers and strike the balance at senior leadership levels.

Cross-mentoring by enhancing the survivability of the diverse workforce must inevitably lead on to even more badly needed change in our institutions.

Vision

To capitalise on the new diversity in our workforce we need:

- Leaders who think differently.
- Initiatives to foster the workforce so that they continue to want to belong.
- We need a new vision for our institutions.

Institutions after all were invented to prevent change or at least to control change in society. Some, which are government funded, are still slow to acknowledge the effect of "market forces". In their considerations, if not in their actions, they still assume that the public is supportive and attribute bad press to a hostile media. They expect that when they open their doors there will be thousands of the nations' young (preferably male) from which they can make their choice — and, as in the church of old, they will be theirs for life.

Publicly funded institutions crumble slowly and seem incapable of acting unilaterally to adapt to change. How could it be different when they are effectively mono-cultural. As Amanda Sinclair describes in her paper they practise "group think", that consensus-seeking collusion and sense of omnipotence that sends teams down disastrous decision-making paths.

So we need a new vision for these old institutions and organisations.

A vision of matricing, of sharing, of learning not just from each other but from new industries and organisations and by coming into touch again with the Australian community. A vision that will actually be translated into action to either transform the organisations or sweep them away, a vision to inspire our young people.

Everyone in this room, I believe, has a major stake in this because what we are talking about is nothing less than Australia's future, and we can all do something to create it.