

University of Queensland Global Leaders Series

New Media and Leadership Scrutiny

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- Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen and thank you Professor for both the introduction and for the opportunity to speak to you today on a topic not many I would expect that you would think a Chief of Navy would engage in.
- Could I start though by acknowledging the Turrbal and Jagera people, the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to their elders past and present.
- Today is the 35th anniversary of me joining the permanent naval forces, it was on this day in 1979 I showed up to start my leadership journey on a 'short service' commission as a naval officer. No one that day, particularly me, thought that I would ever be sitting here in this role, no doubt there are still some who scratch their heads that I am.
- Regardless it has been an amazing journey, one that this University played an important role in by providing, back in the 80s, a valuable vehicle through its distance learning program, to allow me to get my BA under my belt while I was busy navigating a range of ships around different parts of the world. It was the flexibility that UQ showed back then in what were in some ways the early days of distance education delivery for universities that was crucial to my journey and I thank the enlightened leadership team of the day for providing that flexibility, there were a number of other universities who were less flexible.
- I will get to new media shortly but I would like to start by talking about leadership and in particular the scrutiny that goes with senior leadership positions.
- Today when I talk about leadership scrutiny I will of course focus very heavily on the domain that I know best. Leadership in the public sector and more particularly leadership in a military organisation. I would contend that militaries around the world are among

the most dependent of organisations on effective leadership. It literally is a life and death issue for us and it is why we spend so much time and effort in developing our leaders.

- I have long believed that anyone who will stand up and espouse a slick formula for leadership has never really led anyone in a difficult situation. Leadership is a messy thing, intensely personal and intensely contextual. It centres on people and relationships, not structures and processes and it involves a deep and critical understanding of self. How you project and how that projection is perceived is critical. Without understanding these issues, your ability to lead effectively is considerably reduced.
- This slide represents some of my thoughts on some of the key elements in leadership, it's deliberately presented as a messy slide to emphasise my underlying point.
- Public sector leadership and military leadership in particular has its own realities and challenges. In many ways while the objectives are the same, the way you lead is quite different from the private sector. Firstly, if you don't get the fact that you work for the Government of the Day then you are really in trouble, likewise if you don't get that your organisations role is to safely execute the lawful direction of Government you are also in trouble. This brings with it a unique set of issues to manage. For me the oft used analogy between answering to the board in the private sector and answering to the Government in the public sector is just a little too simplistic. Interestingly though there are many in our society who have little knowledge of the public sector, how it works and the way this impacts your leadership approach.
- If you happen to lead not only a public sector entity, but a national institution as well, like I do, there is an important aspect of stewardship that must govern your leadership approach. Its not your organisation, it is one that is owned by all and one that many have their own, often deeply held views, about how it should be run and what it should do. That is not to say there are not similarities in the private sector but when you are dealing with public institutions with over a century's history it presents a special challenge.
- I am not suggesting you must be inherently conservative but it does mean that history counts and change has to be worked just that little bit harder and with that comes additional scrutiny of your decisions.

- Scrutiny of senior leadership is important for a number of reasons. It's certainly important from an assessment of leadership performance and of course that is the traditional lens which most view it through.
- In the public sector there is not only ministerial scrutiny in day to day interactions but also through the parliament. The parliamentary process, particularly through Senate and Joint standing committees, is appropriately searching.
- Scrutiny occurs in other ways – like what happens everyday in every organisation as senior leaders are observed, analysed and discussed by their organisation's workforce. This is no different in the military context, it is a crucial process as it helps workers determine how serious senior leadership is, where their priorities and loyalties lie and plays an important part of determining how credible messages from senior leadership are.
- Senior leaders know this process is always in motion and it is critical that from time to time they have an accurate readout of it. New media can help here.
- The other angle of leadership scrutiny is the scrutiny by the broader external organisational constituency. This, in my case, includes the ex navy community, the parents and relatives of our people serving and those with a deep interest in the institution including the media. They all have a legitimate interest in how the organisation is being led and how change is being managed.
- Scrutiny and reputation are interlinked. For someone in my position the issues of organisational and personal reputation are difficult to separate. You have to live them as one and the same during your tenure. It effectively means that you become absorbed in the entity that you lead, and you must be totally engaged and absorbed to be effective.
- So how does new media (in particular, social media) impact on leadership behaviour and scrutiny?
- In its simplest form it clearly provides a number of avenues to allow both informed and uninformed comment, observation and analysis about your organisation. This will occur regardless of whether senior leaders, or indeed, their organisations are engaged in the use of new media, in particular, social media. If not managed this can drag leaders and

organisations into a reactive mindset. As always, picking the right issue to react to remains paramount.

- There is of course no general pattern regarding senior leadership use of social media. I think there is a fairly strongly held view that vehicles like Twitter are akin to a smoky bar in a seedy part of town and most would not want to be seen dead in such a place.
- Of course a lot of people's behaviour on social media translated to the real world would probably get you thrown out of those same bars so there is probably some validity to that view. In the public sector in Australia only a handful of senior leaders are personally active in their role in social media.
- Part of the reason for that is the traditional view of the role of senior Government officials and how much public discourse they should be engaged in. Part of it is the nature of the work of some of their organisations, some don't simply lend themselves to it, and it is also about the individual's own view of the medium and the optics of not wanting to get tangled up in 'a seedy part of town'. All of that is perfectly reasonable – many use their departmental accounts to get their key messages out so it is not as though there is no engagement.
- I think there is a real dilemma for senior leaders here. Leadership engagement in social media, like leadership itself, is a very personal thing. If it is not your thing do you really want to be forced into using it? A key question we might ask though is when do we get to the point that senior leaders need to be at least as competent in their use of social media (at both a personal and organisational level) as more traditional methods of leadership communication?
- So what are the benefits? If you do lead an organisation that has high levels of community interaction, then you can achieve much better reach for one thing as this slide clearly alludes to. You will be active in a medium that is seen as being contemporary. That is useful for perceptions of the senior leadership of the organisation in many circumstances – it helps offset the 'out of touch' syndrome to some extent.
- Being tuned into the social media currents about your organisation and its leadership is clearly helpful, particularly in a crisis.

- I certainly have found over the last couple of months that it was invaluable to have a read out of community sentiment over the border protection mis-treatment allegations. We can argue whether a Twitter stream or a Facebook frenzy is representative of society but it does provide raw feedback on reputational issues and on people's reactions to your organisational and leadership statements. In and of itself it is a form of scrutiny and is certainly a useful barometer.
- To ignore this source of information is I think perilous, even if sometimes you might not be in a position to respond directly to it. It is important to remember that our people are largely unable to respond, it is one of the constraints that comes with the uniform. A key factor is the speed at which these issues unfold in social media, thousands of tweets in a day for weeks on end was certainly new territory for us earlier this year (we normally live in a relatively quiet part of the digital universe). What it showed is that we were ill-equipped to be able to analyse the flow other than in the broadest of terms, something we are trying to remedy at present.
- The other key constraint we have, that is lost on many, is that we are not an autonomous organisation; we are a part of a larger Government department which in turn fits into the broader Whole of Government structure and communications process. This is just a simple fact of life that we need to work with.
- In terms of some of the personnel issues that we quite publicly confront and would like to be able to respond to, we also have the Privacy Act, military discipline and inquiry processes to manage and adhere to, these collectively act as a significant inhibitor to us being as agile as we would like. Dignified silence is sometimes hard going!
- Organisationally, our people have felt that for a long time Navy was very passive in its engagement in the public domain and very reluctant in defending itself. As I have just alluded to, Navy has been at times legitimately unable to respond, but overall I think it is a fair observation. My approach is less passive and certainly, on matters of fact, I will vigorously defend not only the organisation but its people. This has had a very positive internal impact. Each time you do that though you know that you will face more scrutiny.
- How an organisation embraces social media depends largely on its cultural outlook. Organisations like the Navy with a historically conservative predisposition and one that

uses a traditional linear chain of command communication system, a system that is in place for very good business reasons, works against the more diffuse mechanics at play in social media.

- That said our people use social media as much as anyone else, so if you want to maximise the chance of reaching the internal workforce we must embrace it. From a leadership perspective it provides another pathway to communicate. People will pull their information from whatever platform or mechanism they want. My aim at present in Navy is to try and provide maximum choice for our people to tap into our key messages. My use of social media at least gives me a platform to reinforce key organisational messages with a personal perspective. People understand that it is personal communication, that only I craft and send the messages – that is certainly appreciated and adds a very useful effect.
- This ability to communicate personally is crucial in times of organisational and cultural change. Getting the change message out effectively is very important. Our traditional chain of command is very useful for dissemination of direction and instructions but its effectiveness for getting nuanced messages through varies greatly.
- In Navy we, like many organisations have adopted a multi-pronged approach to communicating our cultural change message. There is no doubt that new media has a key role to play through mechanisms such as webisodes, various social media platforms through to our relatively new online news service Navy Daily.
- One of our biggest challenges in terms of online presence has been years of conditioning of our people in relation to security. As social media emerged the initial reaction to it was to discourage uniformed members in particular to use it. Security concerns were cited as the main reason.
- This drove our people to conceal their organisational allegiance but invariably that allegiance was able to be worked out as people posted photographs etc. We have adopted a distinctly different approach over the last couple of years where we have directly encouraged our people to be proud to have their membership of the Navy in their social media profile.

- In all of this if you as the leader are not leading by example then I think that weakens any efforts to insist on the right sorts of behaviour from your workforce. This is one of the reasons I use social media in the course of the job and am happy to be scrutinised for it.
- With this more liberal approach comes some responsibilities. First there is the real counter intelligence issue, foreign intelligence agencies will attempt to exploit anything that our people let slip, so individuals minimising that risk is critical. Second is accepting that identifying yourself as a member of the Navy means that the values and behaviours that we expect our people to live by in person apply online as well.
- There has been and will continue to be situations where our people get that piece wrong. We have been quite assiduous in rectifying that. Initially we have taken a gentle approach with this in asking people to explain why they think it has been okay to post or tweet inappropriately. The mere fact that they have to sit down and provide a written explanation has been useful.
- In cases where the transgressions have been more serious we have conducted inquiries and administrative action, including issuing notices for termination from the Navy, has followed.
- This approach will continue to cause us problems from time to time as we are dealing with a predominately young workforce, often people who have had no real moderation of their online behaviour before joining our organisation.
- Then there are those out there that over the last few months in particular watch eagle eyed looking for members of the ADF to get it wrong and they will either plaster it over social media or send it to the media for it to be exposed. In some cases they will quietly bring it to my attention, regardless of how it comes to our attention we do take action.
- Our response to this cannot be to walk back from our responsibilities based approach. This is as much about reinforcing other elements of our cultural change journey as anything else. We must continue down the educative path as it ties in neatly with our approach to ensuring that official information is used properly and that we reestablish the right mindset relating to operational security.
- Although only recently pricking the public consciousness, the issue of operational security is one of long standing and enduring significance to us. When I took over as Chief nearly 3

years ago I was quite concerned at how poor our operational security discipline had become and how free we seemed to be with official information – often to our detriment.

- Since then I have run a fairly uncompromising campaign to improve our discipline in this area and, it has in the last year or so, really started to pay dividends.
- Despite the views of some, operational security is a real issue for us, it really can lead to us not being able to do our job and it can threaten, even in non combat operations, the safety of our people. We still have a way to go but I have been very impressed with our progress when you consider the all the additional vehicles available to disseminate information that new media presents.
- One thing that I think as a society we must get on top of is the general behaviour of people on social media. Free speech does not mean criticism and disagreements need to be vile or defamatory, it is invariably more effective if it is not.
- I was pleased to see recent court cases where employee behaviour and online defamation have come to the fore. The first Australian Twitter defamation case will hopefully send a powerful message.
- Notwithstanding, my overall view of social media in particular remains positive because of its reach and power to get a personal leadership message out to your constituency and to those who influence views about your organisation quickly. It is of course laden with pitfalls, hence a very clear set of operating guidelines is crucial.
- From a scrutiny perspective though it certainly increases leadership accessibility and transparency. It is no place for the feint hearted but in my view it is one smoky bar you do need to be seen in.