

Re-action stations

Scandals that rocked the army back in 2013 led to some deep soul-searching and fundamental cultural change. Peter Daniel, director of HR at the time, talks to Amanda Woodard about that journey.

You may recall the headlines: in late 2013, a group within the army calling themselves 'The Jedi Council' had been swapping footage of sex acts without the knowledge of the women involved, and the media had found out. In response, then Lieutenant-General and eventual Australian of the Year, David Morrison gave a speech decrying the behaviour and calling for an army that took a stand against discrimination in all its forms – but particularly sexism. It was a notable speech, and the video of it went viral.

But as anyone in HR knows, between announcing an organisational goal and implementing it there's a long, difficult journey. So while Morrison set the targets, it was director general personnel, Peter Daniel, who was on the ground making policy.

AMANDA WOODARD: After becoming director general personnel in 2014, how soon was it apparent there were cultural problems?

PETER DANIEL: The chief's speech, which had happened about six months before I arrived, was actually a bit of a cathartic experience.

A lot of us were so frustrated with constantly hearing negative news about the army, much of it through our own goals.

AW: How did you start taking a close look at what was happening on the ground?

PD: Once we'd opened that Pandora's box, we had to see what was inside.

The interesting thing is that it wasn't as catastrophic as people would assume. Like most organisations in Australia, we had moved into the 21st century. We were open to a lot more change than we had given ourselves credit for.

What we did find were varying standards between varying age groups, varying personality types and varying institutions within the army itself. >

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People being held to standards that were different, and expectations being different as a result.

We set about putting everyone on the same level. It didn't matter if you were an army officer graduating from the Royal Military College in Duntroon today, or someone who marched out of Kapooka [the army's recruit training centre] 25 to 30 years ago as a soldier. You needed to be on the same level.

AW: How was that conversation started?

PD: We spoke in small groups and had conversations about what the army was about. Everyone assumes it was [exclusively] about gender. It wasn't, it was about basic principles. We were genuinely concerned about a number of activities that we had had, such as legal substance abuse. Another was domestic violence where there was a high incidence. No higher than the Australian average, but nonetheless how did we deal with both the perpetrator and

the victim, particularly if both were serving? The final one was how do we broach the subject of mental wellbeing? Those are the nuggets we tried to target for cultural change.

AW: And then what happened?

PD: If we had just laid down the law, nothing would have happened.

So while we had ideas, we knew if we tried to implement them from the top, they would go nowhere. They had to be discussed regionally and then those areas given the opportunity to implement changes. We deliberately grouped people at different levels. One of the things you learn in the army is that a private soldier will cross 50 roads before talking to a brigadier.

AW: Was anyone surprised that you were going through this process? Were people resistant or were they genuinely glad to have the opportunity to talk?

PD: Inside the army it wasn't seen as being

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anything untoward or earth shattering. To the wider Australian community it was seen as exactly that. What are they doing, this whole social engineering experiment?

Interestingly, for the media it very quickly became a discussion about diversity. That was never our intent and it certainly became a distraction.

The conversation that we were having was about inclusivity. We don't care where you come from, or what your makeup is, providing that you are capable of doing the job that you're assigned, and you can do that in a way that has everybody around you feeling comfortable. That was the army's journey.

As a virtue of that, it increased our gender participation. It increased our interest from people from a non-English speaking background, and it certainly made us more attractive to LGBTQIA communities.

AW: You have talked about getting a critical mass of people on your side. How do you achieve that?

PD: Everyone has a natural bias due partly to your education, upbringing and partly your life experience. You've got the group that will accept what you're trying to do because they share the same mindset as you. On the other end is a group that, quite frankly, will not listen. It doesn't matter what you do, for them the sky is actually green, not blue. Then there's a large proportion sitting in the middle that don't think about it. It's never been part of their conversation, so you need to talk with that group. You need to move enough of them to >

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INTERVIEW

the side where they're accepting and wanting to change, so the balance tips.

So we focused on that middle group. We spoke in a really simple language. We used examples that they could understand. We provided evidence to prove our point of view. After that you can turn to the doomsayer group, identify them, and see if they actually have the skills you want, or are they the sort of people that we should be saying, 'It's time for you to move on'.

AW: Education seems to be key here. If a new recruit is coming into the army today, what will they experience in the culture that they wouldn't have done before David Morrison made that speech?

PD: David actually threw the question down to his senior soldiers. He dragged them all together and said, "Soldiers aspire to be a Regimental Sergeant Major, so tell us what we need to do. What are we missing?" They came up with a simple statement about respect. It was about respecting yourself, your mates, respecting the army, respecting the nation. It's a really simple set of values that immediately, when you arrive at Kapooka, you get. That tool has fundamentally changed a soldier's behaviour, almost overnight. Using that as the basis for the education, we then were able to have conversations about predatory behaviour and how to identify if you're being verbally or sexually harassed.

Probably the biggest point we had to make was calling out bullies. If you see somebody being berated and you know they are constantly getting that and don't know why, then you have to act. Talking about bullying and saying that if you walk past it, you're accepting that standard was a very powerful message.

AW: It's clear leadership is crucial in any kind of cultural change. Is the current leadership completely on board?

PD: The current chief, Angus Campbell, is absolutely 100 per cent committed to cultural knowledge and cultural change. The journey hasn't stopped with changeover of the chiefs. In fact, it has become more focused internally.

AW: What's happening here has put Australia ahead of the game. Has your experience been sought overseas?

PD: The UK and the US Marines both came to look at what we're doing and how we're doing it. The biggest factor that people have to get over in this environment is transparency. You can't hide a sexual activity in a barracks from prying eyes because ultimately it becomes so much worse as a consequence. It has to be reported, it has to be open, and people have to say that something is being done about it as a result. •••

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