

**ADDRESS BY CHIEF OF AIR FORCE
AIR MARSHAL GEOFFREY BROWN, AO
TO THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP FORUM
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I welcome this opportunity to reflect on leadership, to share some of my thoughts and experience as a leader and to hear the perspectives of others. Any leader worth their salt should be engaged in a life-long learning exercise. The day you think that you have no more to learn is probably the day to walk away because you will have been complacent and forgotten how much you can learn from your people.

I have learned a lot from people I have led over the years by asking one question ‘What do you think?’ You stop asking that question when you think you already have all the answers.

At the outset, I would like to endorse CDF’s introduction to this activity. We should not over-think leadership. Inspiring and authentic leadership is simple. Note my choice of words—I said it is simple; I did not say it is easy. There is a world of difference between those terms in the context of ADF leadership. It is important that we devote time to studying leadership and reflecting deeply on it. The safety and well-being of our people demands that. But I have watched the fads come and go and the language and acronyms change over my career.

Yet the essentials of effective leadership have remained constant.

According to President John F Kennedy, to lead is to choose. And choices can be difficult. Choices can create winners and losers. To choose takes moral courage. And that is probably the foremost quality that a military or naval leader requires.

Without it, you will be incapable of making the tough but necessary calls. And it is the foundation of physical courage. We all draw on physical bravery at crucial times during our careers. But our moral fibre is tested much more often. Indeed in senior leadership roles, it is tested nearly every day. Without it, a leader will be indecisive, evasive and inconsistent. And as CDF has noted, inconsistency can undermine every other element of your leadership style.

As I reflect on a long career in the Air Force, I have the benefit of the ultimate high ground—long experience. The leaders I have admired have been authentic. No amount of theoretical study can equip you with that quality. Our people are terrific. They are not cynical. No one who is willing to lay down their life for others in an age of consumerism and ephemeral trends, is a cynic.

But they are discerning. They know whether you are fair dinkum. If they suspect that you are not, it is really hard, if not impossible, to earn their trust and respect.

Trust is the glue that binds together our teams especially on operations. It underpins the Air Force safety culture at all times including during the most routine missions at home. Trust is vital in a highly specialised workforce like ours. Often the most senior person does not possess the most vital specialist skill that is critical to the mission.

Right through my flying career, my life was literally in the hands of junior airmen and airwomen whose skills were essential to the safety of aircrew. The bonds of trust and respect forged by that mutual reliance were very special.

I think it is the most distinctive feature of leadership of Air Force teams that defines our unique culture. It taught me to value every individual not by what was on their sleeve but by their ability to do their job. That gives you the humility to seek advice and teaches you early that you are not the root of all wisdom. It is a really formative lesson for young leaders.

Again Air Force values specialist skills very highly. That demands competence which underpins professional mastery, the

pursuit of which is a lifetime career goal. You simply have to be competent and capable of setting an example. As CDF has pointed out, rules are meaningless if those responsible for enforcing them simply cannot live up to them. And, in a safety conscious environment, that is indispensable to earning the trust of your team-mates.

It does also breed one really beneficial side effect. In my experience, Air Force people, indeed all ADF people, value competence and collegiality very highly. If you are able to do your job and do it willingly to help your mates, then you are fine regardless of your gender, your skin colour, your religion or your sexual preference. Our people are pragmatic, which in turn makes them pretty tolerant.

None of this is to gloss over the fact that we have had to take a really hard look at ourselves in recent times—especially in relation to how we treated women in overwhelmingly male environments. In the case of Air Force, we took a long look at whether our values were relevant and whether we were living up to them. In some instances we had failed.

Our New Horizons initiative has been central to ensuring that our primary values of respect and integrity informed everything we did. Everything that we have pursued through our cultural

change initiatives and the emphasis on Air Force values has been directed at enhancing capability and safety. We drew a line in the sand and explained that diverse teams are better teams and that without respect for one another, corners could be cut on crucial safety.

Our people already instinctively got this. But we needed to draw the explicit link between improving how we look after one another and some of the entrenched behaviour that had masqueraded as tradition. I think we have come a very long way since the Broderick Review and we are the better for it.

However, the internal self-examination which that often confronting process forced upon us, made all of us review our leadership styles. In my case, it forced me to look at Air Force from an outsider's perspective and in turn I hope that perspective enhance my empathy for the 'other'.

While it would be unwise to say that issues of abuse can never happen again, I firmly believe that the momentum for a more diverse workforce and deeper respect for one another is unstoppable. I know that this process has given me new and, I think, expanded horizons and improved my leadership style. Our values *were* and *remain* the right values. But we had not always lived up to them or understood how to adapt them to the

changing character of our work force, particularly the greater involvement of women across all of our trades and specialisations.

If I had to single out the quality that I have come to value the most in other leaders and which I work hardest to exhibit, it is 'honesty'. From that precious quality flows authenticity, integrity and congruence with your stated values—all those buzz words which the leadership gurus make money from explaining in their books or on stage. The short hand term for authentic leadership is captured by the current pithy phrase 'walking the talk'. In my early career, it used to be 'setting the right example' or being 'fair, firm and friendly but not familiar'.

As I look back on a long career in the ADF, I am humbled at the trust a lot of fantastic Australians from all three services have placed in me at various times. They have been my best tutors. I continue to learn from them and hope I never stop doing so.