

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Matina Jewell

Australian Army officer Matina Jewell speaks to *Retail Pharmacy* about what it takes to be a great leader in the face of adversity.

Leadership in today's world is fraught with working under a great deal of stress. Can you tell us a bit about your time in the Middle East?

I was an Australian Army officer for 15 years and during that time served on five missions. During my last mission, in 2006, I was working as a peacekeeper with the United Nations [UN]. I was at a tiny patrol base right at the junction of Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

While there, war broke out between Israel and the Hezbollah operating in southern Lebanon. In a split second we went from monitoring truce agreements to being in the middle of full-scale war. There were so many times I should have died but had many lucky escapes. I once had a highly explosive artillery round land 20m in front of me that, thankfully, failed to detonate. Had it done so, it would have most likely been a fatal hit.

A methodical approach to decision-making is needed in many frontline professions. What is your approach?

During the war I was commanding a convoy of two armoured personnel carriers. The amount of bombings occurring meant many roads were impassable, so a trip to the UN headquarters that should have taken two hours had taken two days. I'd exhausted every road and still hadn't managed to make it into the city, when I received a call telling me Israel was about to conduct an air strike and the road we were on was going to be targeted. I was told to expect to see bombs fall around me at any moment. It was a split-second decision I had to make, to return to the patrol base I'd just left or continue on to the headquarters, but I still went through a process I use in longer, more methodical decision-making processes.

I looked at the pros and cons of



"Matina Jewell has cheated death, taken command and shown pure courage while leading teams around the globe and under fire during the Lebanon War. Learning from every experience on and off the battlefield, now her job is to motivate and inspire."

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my options. Obviously, with lives in the balance, a critical factor was the time it would take to get there. In my case, time to think was a luxury I just didn't have. I relied on my training, previous experiences and gut instinct. I knew I had to make a decision and, regardless of the decision I made, as long as I could show a logical, rational thought process, I'd have the full backing and support of my hierarchy. I think that's a really important point for leaders – if you want your staff to be decisive, it's the leadership group's responsibility to create a culture that supports people and

enables them to make decisions and manage the associated risks.

What happens when procedures fail? How do you get back on track?

I was injured in the process of getting to the headquarters, breaking five vertebrae in my back and receiving a number of internal injuries. The UN's medical evacuation processes all failed, so I spent two days lying on a tiled floor, without any morphine. The UN was scrambling to come up with a way to get me to a hospital.

This is an example of where a critical process has gone terribly wrong. One thing I took away from it was that it's important for organisations to not just have plans, but to practise and rehearse them. That sounds like common sense, but sometimes those very obvious things get overlooked until you're in the heat of the moment, and then it's too late. Secondly, if a process has failed, it's important to remain calm, communicate clearly and keep working to find alternative solutions.

How have you faced battles not only in a war zone, but in your personal life?

When I arrived back home, the Defence Force made the decision that I was no longer fit to serve. Losing my career had a massive

impact and then I found out I had two more battles to deal with, this time with the government. The first was over health cover, which I knew I'd need for the rest of my life, and the second was to do with war service recognition.

One of the criteria to qualify is to be carrying a weapon and, as an unarmed peacekeeper, I didn't automatically tick that bureaucratic box. These were two battles I had to face, on top of everything else going on at the time, and I hit absolute rock bottom. That's something I talk about during my presentations – the resilience it takes to turn things into positives after hitting rock bottom. I feel privileged to have gone on to serve in roles such as on the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council to effect positive changes to legislation to protect our wounded veterans into the future.

Do you believe leadership is learned or innate?

The underlying principles of military leadership are just as applicable on the corporate battlefield. Leadership is a skill we need in every organisation at every level. I think leadership is a combination of natural ability, training and experience. It's not just something that you're born with, it's something that can develop and be enhanced.

Often, the best learning environments are those times when we're pushed outside our comfort zone and challenged to try new things. Even out of periods of great adversity can come incredible opportunities if we have the courage to pursue them. ^{RP}

Want to hear more? Symbion will be presenting Matina Jewell at next year's APP Conference.

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