

THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP



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Caught In The Crossfire:
An Australian peacekeeper
beyond the front-line*



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It is up to the leaders of organisations to set the standard of behaviour for their employees, and it is this standard that will have a significant impact on the corporate personality or culture of an organisation.

LEADERSHIP IS NOT JUST DICTATING AND policing organisational policy and culture, leaders must also take an active interest in reviewing and developing their own skill set and decision making processes. No matter the industry, they need to be agile, brave and willing to tackle change—even if that change leads in an uncertain direction.

“What started out as normal and routine day as a peacekeeper for the United Nations for Israel and Lebanon, in a split second turned into the most dangerous leadership challenge of my entire life,” explained Matina Jewell at the GRC Conference in October last year.

Jewell had a 15 year military career and has had to take on the leadership role in some of the most trying circumstances. However, what her experience illustrates is that while the details and dynamics of every industry are different but the challenge of leadership is perennial.

Jewell connected her experience as a peacekeeper for the United Nations during the 2006 Lebanon war to challenges that leaders face in any industry where a crisis or breach can happen at any time.

Facing challenges: Jewell said the first experience that equipped her to survive the war was learning to fast-rope out of helicopters.

“It was not only a huge physical challenge in the sense that you had to have that strength and that endurance, but more importantly, this was a huge mental challenge because I am absolutely terrified of heights.” Jewell had to learn to conquer her fear so that she could take her position as leader of the team.

Jewell said this experience taught her that the best learning opportunities often arise out of situations when people are most challenged and pushed beyond their comfort zone. Despite trying circumstances, a leader has to learn to put their emotions on hold and manage the situation so that they can continue operating and continue making effective decisions.

The importance of flexibility: prior to her experience in 2006, Jewell was posted to Kuwait. One challenge she faced there was from soldiers who were unused to dealing with female soldiers, especially those in positions of superior authority. She faced a situation where her gender created limitations. Jewell learned she had to change the way she did things and delegated a male soldier to pass on her orders.

Leaders must realise that there may come a point when the objectives they are trying to achieve are more important than their personal objectives or accustomed processes.

Update your skills: in 2006, Jewell was selected to be part of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO). She was to be stationed at Patrol Base in Khiam, which sits at the juncture of Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

When Jewell learned that she was going to be posted in the Middle East again, she chose to learn Arabic, which ultimately helped to save her life. Every time the team went on patrols together, they were putting their lives in each other hands. That kind of high-risk situation creates strong bonds between people. After leaving Khiam, Jewell had to command a convoy of UN vehicles that included two

A hand-drawn word cloud on a chalkboard. The words 'LEARN' and 'LEAD' are the largest and most prominent, written in a bold, yellow, hand-drawn font with diagonal hatching. They are positioned in the center of the board. Surrounding them are numerous other words in various sizes and orientations, mostly in white and grey. These words include: 'technology', 'business', 'personal', 'system', 'career', 'vision', 'teamwork', 'knowledge', 'solution', 'manage', 'market', 'authority', 'position', 'share', 'innovation', 'lead', 'idea', 'job', 'ability', 'future', 'leadership', 'success', 'customer', 'capacity', 'service', 'executive', 'formal feedback', 'work', 'search', 'education', 'network', 'training', 'power', 'skill', 'commerce', 'appointed', and 'jointed'. A hand is visible on the right side of the board, holding a piece of white chalk, having just finished writing the word 'LEAD'. The background is a dark, textured chalkboard surface.

Leaders across all industries should communicate with employees—not only to navigate a crisis period but to ensure the team that comes out the other side is capable of moving forward.



Facing change: Jewell's injuries ended her career as a soldier, but it was then she told she was not eligible for health cover. After a long legal battle, she did eventually receive health cover. Since then, Jewell has been involved in various forms of advocacy for service personnel in a similar position.

Jewell said that having her career end because of her injuries taught her how to deal with change effectively, which is important since change can be a really difficult process. Positive change takes time, persistence and strong leadership.

No matter the industry, leaders need not only to be courageous but prepared to take on a situation where they may not be 100% certain of how things will look on the other side.

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Without change, an organisation can very quickly become irrelevant. Thus, in some ways, change is always inevitable. It takes leaders with the ability to invigorate the team that drives the change process, shifts mindsets, and encourages the organisation to embrace change at the cultural level.

Jewell said that the ability to change mindsets, even in large bureaucratic organisations like the United Nations and the Australian Government, is certainly possible. It does, however, take great leaders, and it also takes time and persistence. •••

Caught In The Crossfire: An Australian peacekeeper beyond the front-line is the memoir that covers this definitive point in Jewell's life.

