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TRANSCRIPT OF ADDRESS

2020 Williams Oration

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Thank you.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands upon which each of us are meeting. Here in Canberra I acknowledge the Ngunnawal (NUN-UH-WAHL) people who are the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to their Elders, past present and emerging, and to their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and region.

I also acknowledge those of us who have lived with the reality of mental health and suicide issues and pay my respects to you, your families, carers and friends.

Thank you to the Board and Council of the Institute of Public Administration Australia ACT for their invitation to join you today and to speak on that 'eternally fascinating' subject of leadership.

It is an honour to present the third Helen Williams Oration, following on from Ann Sherry AO in 2018 and Dr Megan Clark AC last year.

What a trailblazer each of these women has been. Helen as the first woman appointed as Secretary of a federal government department in 1985 with the Department of Education and her ongoing contribution to the public service; Ann in her role first in the public service and the many roles she now holds in corporate and philanthropic Australia, and Megan heading up the Australian Space Agency.

They inspire us to continue to believe not only that women have an integral role in the leadership of Australia, but that the experience gained in the APS is an invaluable tool in achieving that goal for any woman.

What is leadership?

Leadership has so many interpretations – and there are many theories as to what makes up so called 'good' leadership.

Rather than focus on a definition or theory, I thought I would talk to you tonight about how my experiences have shaped my understanding of how to be a leader. In particular what I have learned from being led by others, and what I believe is necessary to extract from the toolkit of leadership to make a difference in my current role in mental health.

I cut my teeth as a young lawyer in the corporate world at the big end of town. Being thrown in the deep end at a young age to take on the role of Company Secretary / General Counsel for an ASX listed company I was exposed to the leadership of the 1980's. It was male dominated, ego driven, status conscious and dependent on being able to 'hold your own' against anyone challenging your position.

As I transitioned across different ASX companies over the next 15 years, and worked in different countries including a stint in Indonesia, I continued to be led by men. Working in mergers and acquisitions was a very testosterone driven experience – and you never dared admit to a mistake or a weakness. Leadership was about being able to dominate.

Moving to Telstra in 2000 to work in strategy brought me into the orbit of perhaps my first inspirational leader. Bruce was a brilliant man – but he didn't feel the need to hog the limelight. In fact, his leadership style was to allow those in his team to 'shine'. He openly said he wanted the reflected glory!

It was also at Telstra that I worked with women who were close to the top of their field – those at the senior executive level and on the board. The culture was still competitive, but it was also more enabling. There was a spoken and demonstrated commitment to developing people's talents.

When I moved into the not for profit world I joined Wesley Mission – a large church based organisation working across the areas of community and employment services and aged care. A different culture. A different form of leadership – still male. A lot of talk about values.

In 2008 I stepped into the world of mental health taking on my first CEO role with Butterfly Foundation. I remember making the decision to move – I met with the then Chair for a drink and was struck by his sincerity, his commitment to the cause, and his genuine encouragement to stretch my wings and give it a go. Again – an enabler.

Although I had held senior management positions my appointment to Butterfly was the first time I had stepped into such leadership shoes. Butterfly was a tiny charity. It ran off cashflow – and that was hard to find! What took me into it was the exposure I had at Wesley Mission to the blackness of those experiencing eating disorders – how they were treated as if they were making a lifestyle choice, not suffering from a severe neuropsychiatric disorder.

Butterfly's mission was to bring awareness to their world – and to fight for them to have access to evidence based treatment.

One of the most challenging, and exciting, things about leading Butterfly was the opportunity to build a culture and a team from the ground up. We were so small there was only one of two options – fade away or grow. We chose the latter. In building our team, in developing our relationships with stakeholders, government and supporters, and in striving to achieve our goals, I discovered within my leadership style a desire to do things with integrity – in how we operated as a company, in how we represented the voices of those with eating disorders, and in how we related to each other.

Today I wear two different – but related - hats. Both allow me to continue to work in the area that has me 'well and truly caught': mental health and suicide prevention.

The role of CEO of the National Mental Health Commission was attractive in that it offered the opportunity to take its objective of being a catalyst for change and ensure that goal was being pursued solidly based on the lived experience of people with mental illness or mental health challenges. Having worked at Butterfly for 10 years it was clear to me that the system needs reform. What would it mean to participate as a leader in this reform agenda?

As National Suicide Prevention Advisor to the Prime Minister there is a real opportunity to help move the dial away from suicide intervention - when someone is in crisis or we have lost them - to true suicide prevention built around early distress intervention by the whole of government. What leadership skills or tools does this require?

So what makes us effective leaders? How can we use this position of trust – the trust of those who walk with us – to achieve our goals – to make a difference? Is the ability to influence based on the position itself, or something more?

None of us can claim to be responsible for giving ourselves our talents or skills – we were born with them. However, we are accountable for how we use them, how we build our expertise and experience and, most importantly, the purpose to which we apply them.

My inspiration has come not from those who are naturally brilliant or talented (although that does not exclude them from my admiration!) but rather from those who have been committed to developing their talents, to supporting others to develop their ‘place in the sun’, and who have sought to make what I call a ‘legacy difference’.

In and of itself, those attributes do not equate to leadership. What then has distinguished those I regard as true leaders from those who hold that title due to their position? The answer for me is the most important attribute is the ability to inspire, to make me want to put my professional or personal trust in them and walk in the pathway they are forging.

Let’s unbundle this ‘ability to inspire’. During my time at Butterfly I identified three core components.

Firstly, clarity of vision. A leader knows what they want to achieve and why.

Knowing why you are doing something is even more important than what you have set as your goal. If you know ‘why’ you want something you can change the ‘what’ if and when needed. But you need the ‘what’ as a starting point.

Secondly, passion for ‘the cause’ (in whatever form that takes). It needs to be more than a job. You need enthusiasm that is catching – so others want to join in.

Thirdly, and most importantly, authenticity. When you work with someone who puts their own values into action every day and across every situation then you unlock in yourself a willingness to trust them.

How did these ‘work’ in Butterfly?

Clarity of Vision – what we wanted to do was very simple but excruciatingly difficult to achieve – we wanted to convince policy makers and funders that eating disorders were serious mental disorders. Why – because people were dying, people were mortgaging their homes to seek treatment overseas, people were feeling ashamed to admit to having an illness that no-one would validate as such.

Passion – it really mattered. Knowing the devastating impact of eating disorders, that they change the neural pathways so you end up trying to fight your own head, it was a ‘true cause’ to seek a way to speak out for those so impacted. In the 21st century it was not ok that they couldn’t get the right treatment in Australia. The voices of those dealing with this horrible reality were a driving imperative.

Authenticity – leading is about inspiring people to walk with you – and for that you need to connect with their individual and collective values.

To establish that connection you first need to know what drives you – what are your core values, your red lines, your driving principles? I realised that what I valued and how I aligned it to our work and relationships was the basis of my leadership style.

How often have those who work with me heard me say: – ‘It’s not just what we do that counts but also the way in which we do it’.

My values? Integrity, honesty, respect, professionalism and compassion.

My operating principle? Collaboration.

We had to listen to what people really needed (compassion and respect); ensure that lived experience, research and clinical expertise were front and centre (integrity and respect); and engage in robust difficult discussions to come to a collective decision (honesty and professionalism).

Our advocacy needed to be one voice if we were to break through ‘into Canberra’. Trying to lead from the front was never going to work to achieve that goal. It was imperative that rather than use a top down ‘telling’ of what needed to be done, we shepherded the talent, experience and opinions of others and brought them with us.

Success came in 2018 – the federal government announced that eating disorders would receive specific recognition under our MBS system. Affordable, accessible care for anyone with this diagnosis is now rebated for up to 40 sessions per year of psychotherapy and 20 sessions of dietetics. The first mental disorder to receive separate recognition and treatment under MBS.

What an amazing moment that was to stand side by side with those with a lived experience of eating disorders, their families and carers, the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and the Minister for Health, Greg Hunt to make that announcement.

It was the culmination of ten years of work with others, ten years of advocacy, ten years of commitment.

As I move into reflecting on leadership in the mental health sector, I start with the value of compassion. Of all the values I hold dear, this is the one that is foundational.

I recently read this definition of compassion and it resonates:

“Compassion is that remarkable human quality that motivates us to act respectfully and kindly, not selectively but as a general rule.

It explains our kindness towards people in need, whether we know them or not, whether we like them or not, whether we agree with them or not.”

(Hugh Mackay “The Inner Self”)

Our mental health is an integral part of who we are – it is as much a part of us as our physical health.

For something so core to our being, it is remarkable (and not in a positive way) how difficult it is to talk about it, describe it and reach for help.

During 2019 we had the opportunity to travel to 26 different communities across Australia to talk to people about what they think is needed to bring about improvements to our mental health and suicide prevention system.

It was shocking – in the truest sense of that word – to hear of the level of stigma people experience around their mental health. Personal stigma - a belief that somehow it is weak to have mental health challenges, attitudinal stigma – how others treat us if we admit to mental illness; structural stigma embedded in the very system in which we live and work.

There is no doubt reform is needed in Australia – how we treat mental ill health, how we invest in mental health and wellbeing. There is no doubt that the commitment to this reform – across the sector and across governments – is real.

Having learned from our Butterfly days the importance of shaping reform to meet the real needs of people, one of the most urgent goals of leadership in this sector is to hear and understand that need and translate it into specific system changes and initiatives that will deliver tangible results.

The starting point in terms of skills is listening.

The power of words is critical in mental health. For anyone to engage with the system they need to find the words to express their thoughts, feelings, behaviours. They need to be able to do so in a safe way and in a safe space – where they do not feel judged. There is no other way – no quantitative silent test that will ‘speak’ for us.

The skill of listening must be exercised with compassion – if we are to truly hear and understand.

The second skill is in developing relationships. There are many needs, many opinions, many options for reform.

Relationships enable the exchange of robust, honest dialogue – they are the basis for building a consensus of what is required for effective change. Honesty, integrity and respect are the cornerstones for effective relationships.

What we are striving for will affect the lives of all Australians including when they are at their most vulnerable. It really matters that in determining and pursuing the mental health reform agenda we get it right. For this we need to seek to attain the highest levels of professionalism – from our health and allied health workers, from our researchers, from our policy experts, from our politicians, and from those with lived experience.

We need to be inquisitive, we need to instil in people a sense of trust that we know what we are talking about and why what we are recommending is needed, and we need to inspire people that real change is possible, and worth the effort.

The conversations we had with Australians across the country last year have been front and centre to the work we have done this year in responding firstly to the bushfires and their devastating impact on people, and then during the rest of the year the responses to the mental health needs of Australians impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic.

In our work to reduce suicide we are seeking to connect with and talk to people who have experienced suicide distress and crisis. They are the ones who can tell us about their journeys. They can say what has worked to keep them alive, and what has not been helpful. Research and clinical evidence are critical but even they cannot inform our response as accurately and as incisively as can the reality of lived experience.

Ending on a personal note. What is inspirational leadership, for me. It is about people who have faced life's challenges and have overcome them in a way that has brought good into their lives and others.

Helen, who I met when I worked at Wesley Mission, had a severe intellectual disability. Her whole vocabulary comprised three words. She lived in a group home – and, with the help of her carers, she lived! She took the hand dealt to her and turned it into one where she contributed. That is true inspiration.

People who are leaders in their sphere of influence; leaders in their personal experience, and leaders in their own life. When I am facing moments of doubt they are the ones I call to mind.

Core components of leadership – across all spectrums – are staying true to your values, leading from behind to make everyone in your team shine, and really listening.

“Compassion changes everything. It encourages us to build a better society by responding to bad behaviour with good behaviour....it encourages us to treat everyone we meet as if we truly are equals, in spite of all our differences’.

(Hugh Mackay “The Inner Self”)

I hold onto this value to keep my inspiration alight. I commit to the mantra that it is not just what we do that counts but the way in which we do it.

As said by a truly inspirational woman who has made an indelible mark on so many –Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

‘Fight for the things you care about – but do it in a way that will lead others to join you’.

Thank you.