

## **Edition 4 of Junior Officer PME: Fifty Shades of Grey: Officer Culture in the Australian Army**

*There is no 'right answer' to these questions. The points provided below are only prompts to help the facilitator foster conversation.*

- 1. What kind of culture do you think exists in the officer corps? Do you agree that Australian officer culture is “bland” and “grey”? Think about leadership outside of Defence. Would a CEO want to be ‘grey’?**
  - Do you agree with Brown when he says Australian officer culture “*does not value excellence as much as other militaries*”? Consider the number of times you have been told to be a ‘grey man’ versus being told to strive for excellence. Brown writes: “*the Australian Army has often been criticised for being anti-intellectual. This is wrong; intellectualism is there to be found. What the Australian Army has is an anti-excellence culture.*”
  - Does Army reward you for going ‘above and beyond’ or for blending in with the pack?
  
- 2. Think about officers you know who allow themselves to be called ‘boss’ by their soldiers. What reasons are there for eschewing being called ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’? Should a junior officer measure their success on whether they are called ‘boss’? Brown writes: “*the cultural cringe at setting boundaries between the ranks may be undermining military discipline. Soldiers might be excessively indulged by officers who are reluctant to criticise or discipline because of their need to be accepted by the [team] — and to be called ‘boss’ rather than ‘sir’. Egalitarianism works two ways in the officer-soldier relationship. While junior officers in particular may be earnestly trying to shape their role and appear as non-elite and unofficer-like as possible, soldiers may be conditioned not to respect junior officers. The cultural cringe against elitism in the military might in fact be undermining the value of being an officer*”. Assuming Brown’s assertions are correct, how can we counter this?**
  - Some officers demean themselves in their eagerness to be called ‘Boss’, over-value being ‘accepted’ by their team and undermine their command position.
  - Does our training put too much focus on ‘what your diggers will think of you’ that has unintended consequences?
  - Where should a junior officer’s loyalties lie? Up to superior/organisation, down to subordinates or to their peers?
  
- 3. Do you see being called ‘boss’ a good or bad thing?**
  - Encourage discussion on this subject.
  - Boss can encourage over-familiarity.
  - What’s wrong with ‘Sir / Ma’am’?
  
- 4. What do you think of “*the myth of the ‘natural Australian soldier’*” and the idea that “*Australian soldiers require little training or leadership and officers are a bumbling nuisance who are tolerated rather than required*”? Brown writes: “*the annals of Australian military history are stacked high with tales of personal acts of tactical heroism, and the majority of Australia’s military heroes are soldiers. Strategy, logistical excellence, and the professional leadership of Army officers do not appear to be highly respected commodities.... It makes sense that in an army in which the officer is not respected, higher end professional warfighting skills such as strategy are not respected either*”.**

- From Major General Andrew Hocking’s study *Preparing for the Future: Key Organisational Lessons from the Afghanistan Campaign*: “There is a predominant cultural focus in the ADF (as in many militaries) on the tactical level. This has been driven by a number of factors, from our ANZAC cultural heritage and past support of larger coalition partners (who have by default dominated operational and strategic approaches), to the fact that the tactical level is where battles are fought and ADF personnel face the greatest risk.”
  - Is Brown correct about history? Think about officers who were VC winners or officers who were popular in Australian society like Monash, Blamey, Cosgrove and Hurley.
- 5. Brown writes: “performance reporting throughout the officer corps is inflated and masks both mediocrity and excellence”. Review your performance critically, have you ever received over-inflated performance reporting? Did it help? Do you agree or disagree with Brown’s assertion?**
- Some commanders give inflated PARs to avoid having a difficult conversation with their subordinates. This then pressures other commanders to give inflated PARs so that their subordinates are not disadvantaged and remain competitive for postings and promotion.
  - Constructive feedback is more useful for self-development than meaningless platitudes.
  - Career management agencies have said that they’re ‘spoilt for talent’: could over-reporting create a misconception of the organisation’s capabilities.
  - How do you view the ‘Fight to get’, ‘Prefer to most’ and ‘happy to have’ PAR rankings?
- 6. Think about all-corps promotion courses which place infantry officers alongside dentists, lawyers, and chaplains to learn battalion tactics. Does this generalist approach to training help? Do you agree with Brown when he writes: “promotion courses are set to the lowest common denominator and failures are rare”? Assuming Brown’s assertions are correct, is there any advantage to such an approach?**
- Do you think your attitude/approach on course is different when you know you can’t fail?
  - Does this approach draw us out of our silos and build our understanding of different corps?
  - It may be frustrating not being an expert in anything, but the skills you learn from being a generalist are really valuable (the book *Range* by David Epstein speaks to this in more detail).
  - Being a generalist allows us to see the big picture and not get stove-piped which is important for a small military, but specialists are also vitally important.
  - Lowering standards isn’t necessarily a problem if our demographic can’t rise to meet the standard we’ve set, but have we set our standards too low?
  - Should courses really be the ‘gate-keepers’ for standards? Are our leaders failing us within the Brigades? Are our Career Managers being provided all of the right data to make the correct decisions for postings and promotions?
  - Does the Air Force do it better where every officer is a specialist?
- 7. Do you see any advantages to the generalist officer posting approach in our Army? Or does Brown expose all its flaws? Brown writes: “cultural bias requires the career officer to move ‘through a succession of increasingly senior staff appointments ... like a sportsman whose primary sport is rugby, but who is then required to captain a soccer team, followed by coaching in hockey’... Increasing bureaucracy in Army is deadening the skills of many of our officers, pushing them into postings where they perform**

*largely menial and clerical tasks and forget their core professional skills of risk assessment and action.”*

- The higher you promote in the organisation, the more you are required to understand the organisation. As you assume command positions with responsibility for hundreds of subordinates, you need to understand a broad range of topics: career management, dispute resolution, personal administration, subject matter expertise, etc.
- Think about breadth and depth of knowledge. Often, we have to decide whether we invest in depth of knowledge in a particular subject or breadth of knowledge across multiple subjects.