



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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*The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. **Leadership Insights** are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate in the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership.*

## The Army Needs More Feminists

By Major Tim Towler (SCOTS)

Last year the Army was in the *Times* newspaper's Top 50 Employers for Women and won a Workplace Gender Equality Award from Business in the Community. And yet, a few weeks ago, I had an eye-opening, embarrassing, and worrying discussion on the challenges still being faced by women in the Army. Eye-opening, as I was not aware how unpleasant and discriminatory we can be; embarrassing, as I had naively hoped that our Army might be better; and, worrying, as we have a long way to go. The final remark, 'there's not much we can do', irritated me, and spurred me to write this *Insight*. I felt ashamed, and I wholeheartedly disagreed. There are many things we can do to improve the Army, not just for women, but for us all. I recommend that everyone starts by reading Helena Morrissey's book, *A Good Time To Be A Girl*; an inspiring and thought-provoking call to arms to leading more successfully through change and making society better.

*A Good Time To Be A Girl* is not a title that will immediately draw soldiers to grab this book off the shelf. Ashamedly, I would not have read it a couple of years ago. Perhaps it is this shame that is forcing me to write now, or, the shame that previously I might not have acted when I should have done; a guilt knowing that I have let objectifying and discriminatory comments go by unchallenged in the past. As an infantry officer, my experience of working with women is limited, a poor excuse, but my recent roles alongside diplomats and business leaders have been a turning point. They have opened my eyes to some of the challenges and biases that still exist and have made me feel empowered and duty bound to act. I had not considered feminism a leadership issue before, but if

leadership is truly about enabling others to succeed, then feminism (and diversity more broadly) is critical. Embracing diversity, standing up for what is right, and maximising everyone's potential is vital to leading at all levels, and especially to leading through change.

Morrissey's book is not just for women, it is for everyone, for all genders. It argues for the betterment of all, not just women, and not at the expense of men. It calls on everyone to work towards a truly inclusive modern society. Morrissey draws on her own professional and personal experiences, as well as numerous studies, to demonstrate the value of diversity and the benefits that fresh approaches to work, our families, and life in general can bring. As the Army strives to keep pace in a rapidly modernising, competitive and digital world, we need to embrace diversity and reinvent our approach. As Morrissey says, 'why should anyone "lean in" to a patriarchal system that is out of date? Why not change it entirely for the good of us all?'

When it comes to change, our role as leaders is to face uncertainty and to recognise where we can improve. Fully embracing diversity and reinventing our approach will of course take time, but there are things that we all can do now. In my opinion, the following steps will improve our leadership and make our team, our military family, a better and more successful organisation along the way.

### **Recognise and celebrate the differences between genders**

*'People think you're sexist if you argue that there are biological sex differences. Sex differences have nothing to do with gender equality.'*

Men and women are different. Emotionally, physically, and chemically. Refreshingly Morrissey argues that 'acknowledging and appreciating our innate or biological differences is critical to moving on from so many years of frustrating lack of progress towards gender equality in the workplace.' One of Morrissey's examples, highlights that women produce roughly a tenth of the testosterone produced by men, making their decision-making process less susceptible to the 'Winner Effect'.<sup>1</sup> This means that men and women often tend to have a different approach to risk. That is a good thing, and something that we should make the most of. Objective thought and decision making, especially under pressure, is vital in our organisation. But diversity in our teams is about so much more than improving our decision-making processes, it is also about playing to each other's strengths and recognising where weaknesses exist. This is reflected in our *Army Leadership Code*. It means giving as many of our people the chance to work where their talents can flourish, not forcing people to work in teams in order to meet spurious diversity targets. As leaders

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<sup>1</sup> The means through which heightened testosterone levels following a success affect our ability to engage in rational choice.

we must embrace this. It will make our teams more flexible, more resilient, and better at navigating change.

### **Change the narrative: This is not a war of the sexes**

*'We are trying to move on from the past oppression of one sex, not repeat it.'*

Feminism is *not* a war of the sexes, nor is it a quest to steal men's jobs. It is a fight for equality and it can make all of our lives better.<sup>2</sup> For too long, it has been seen by many as a threat, rather than an opportunity. One example of this opportunity is shared parental leave which was introduced in the UK in April 2015. Sadly, Morrissey highlights that 'just 3,000 couples took shared leave in the first three months of 2016, compared with 155,000 mothers taking old-style maternity leave (and 52,000 fathers opting for shorter paternity leave)'. Men and women both want to play an active role in their children's lives, but is taking parental leave for a few months seen as consistent with having a great career? How many women's careers currently suffer from taking maternity leave? As leaders we can change this. But this goes beyond just career progression. UK childcare is the most expensive in the world.<sup>3</sup> The Army needs to help its people meet these challenges. Changing our appraisals and career management, and adapting our approach to work and parental leave, can benefit us all, make work life integration (it's never a balance!) easier, and the Army more attractive and better at retaining its people. First and foremost, though, we all need to change the narrative and ensure that feminism is no longer feared.

### **Accept responsibility**

*'Male champions of change are important if we are to see real progress.'*

In 2010 Helena Morrissey founded The 30% Club, a UK business initiative aimed at achieving better gender-balanced company boards. Its goal was to reach 30% women on UK company boards. Ambitious noting that in 2008, 'fewer than 12% of the directors at the UK's top 100 listed companies were women.' At the start, they struggled, acknowledging 'that leaving those in the diverse or under-represented groups in charge of solving the problem of their own under-representation is an impossible task.' They needed to 'involve men with the ability to change things'. Noting that women make up 9.2% of our Army (and only 6.4% of the General Staff), men need to step forward. Men of all ranks, and all capbadges. It is in our interest: greater diversity of thought, increased collaboration, greater personal and professional flexibility, and the encouragement to attain a better system that will enable us all to succeed both in and out of work. Diversity is wider than gender, but as leaders we can start to accept responsibility by reflecting on our own approach and leading by example.

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<sup>2</sup> "Gender inequality is a global phenomenon: McKinsey estimates that US\$28 trillion could be added to the workplace economy by 2025 if women were to be equal participants in the labour force with men".

<sup>3</sup> According to Opportunity Project 28-40, "one in five mothers in the UK had left work because childcare costs were too high".

## Challenge Poor Behaviour and Champion for Change

*'The idea that men in positions of influence can be highly effective champions of gender equality is nothing new.'*

The biggest short-term effect we can all have is through challenging everyday sexism. At its worst this includes objectification and discrimination, and at its most innocent includes naively undermining a colleague. Both are unacceptable and contravene the Army's Values and Standards and Leadership Doctrine. 'Changing mindsets takes concerted effort', Morrissey says, and discussing what is right and wrong in our teams, and the emotional reactions our comments and actions can cause – whilst remembering the dangers of overt political correctness – are all important steps to prevent these sorts of behaviours from happening in the workplace and more broadly.

The idea that we cannot do anything to tackle gender inequality, sexism, and bad behaviour is cowardly and defeatist. We can, and we must. Helena Morrissey's book shows that it is possible and provides the inspiration for us to lead change from within. Organisational change will take time, but at the lowest level action, however small, can be immediate. By recognising and celebrating the difference between genders, changing the narrative, accepting responsibility, challenging poor behaviour and championing for change we can make genuine progress for the benefit of us all.

### Questions:

- Reflect individually on your strengths and weaknesses before discussing collectively your differences. Consider how to make the most of this within your team.
- What is your team narrative? What examples of diversity can you use to positively reinforce your message? What is your responsibility in promoting diversity in all its guises?
- Are your initiatives aimed at changing the whole workplace or are they based in the hope that a few more women will be encouraged to fit into existing working practices? Are you prepared to innovate, experiment, even revolutionise?

### Further Reading:

- Helena Morrissey, *A Good Time To Be A Girl*, William Collins, London (2018)
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, *We Should All Be Feminists*, Harper Collins, London (2014) - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU\\_qWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc)

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