

Spreading her wings

Australian director Dr Kirstin Ferguson is an expert in safety leadership in the boardroom and for senior executives. She tells Amy Williams how her experience in the military and mining industry shaped her career path.



The Air Force is where Dr Kirstin Ferguson first spread her wings as a leader.

Talking to boardroom from Brisbane, she laughs when she recalls telling her high school careers counsellor she wanted to join the military. It was the first time a student from her all-girls' school had ever expressed such an aspiration.

Not easily deterred, Dr Ferguson thought it would be a good challenge, and joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as a 17 year old in the early 1990s.

She was one of very few female cadets at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) at that time.

"I really loved the time I spent in the military – I think it teaches you a lot about resilience, adaptability and leadership, and not being afraid of making brave decisions," Dr Ferguson says.

She graduated as the most senior female cadet in the academy and Dux of her RAAF class.

When she was 21 years old the RAAF posted her to Queensland, and

within two days on the base she met her husband in true Top Gun style – he was flying the fighter jets.

It's a story their two teenage daughters never tire of hearing.

Fast forward to 2015, and Dr Ferguson has a PhD from the QUT Business School, where she is also an Adjunct Professor, and has earned many accolades – including being named one of Australia's 100 Women of Influence 2014 by the Australian Financial Review.

She is five years into a full-time non-executive director career, and already has a portfolio of directorships on ASX100, ASX200, private company, government enterprise and not-for-profit boards.

SAFETY MATTERS

Dr Kirstin Ferguson would have a successful governance career without putting on a safety leadership hat.

But it's an area she is passionate about, having seen first-hand the difference effective safety leadership and safety governance makes when she was the

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global chief executive of the safety and wellbeing consultancy Sentis.

“Travelling the world, going to mining sites and underground platinum mines was really formative in my understanding of how a company can be effective, or not, in managing safety,” Dr Ferguson says.

“Those experiences, combined with my legal background and now PhD research, were critical in making me a better director when thinking about the role of the board in workplace health and safety.”

She had gained an Honours degree in Arts while at the academy and later an Honours degree in Law, also becoming admitted as a solicitor. Her first career move off the Air Force base was at an

Australian law firm (where she spent eight years in senior executive roles).

While Dr Ferguson was at Sentis, she was invited to join her first board, and within two years another board came knocking.

It was then, at the end of 2010, that she decided to pursue a full-time governance career.

Not one to bite an apple and leave the core, Dr Ferguson began her PhD at the same time, focusing on the role of boards and senior executives in workplace health and safety.

“I was interested because there isn’t nearly enough recognition of the role a board plays beyond ensuring that a company complies with the law,” she says.

“In the boardroom we do set the safety culture of an organisation, either by the questions we’re asking or through not asking questions at all.

“I wanted to understand what effective safety governance looked like, and how concepts like safety leadership could apply to a board that is generally not involved in the day-to-day operations of the business. This is an area that had not been considered before.”

She set out the steps directors can take to ensure they are creating a culture of health and safety from the boardroom to the ground floor.

One of the most important elements is the relationship between the board members and senior executives.

Safety governance means directors need to look beyond mere compliance to consider the organisation’s vision and commitment to safety, agree on how to attain safety objectives, establish a framework for monitoring performance, and also ensure the organisation complies with the relevant safety legislation.

Her message has been popular, and she has been inundated with speaking engagements and opportunities to contribute her writing to industry journals.

CLOSE TO HOME

Workplace safety has certainly been a topic particularly close to New Zealanders’ hearts since 29 miners lost their lives in the Pike River Mine disaster in 2010.

In response, the country’s health and safety legislation came under the spotlight and in April 2016 the Health and Safety Reform Act will come into effect.

“New Zealand is where Australia was a few years ago. There’s a burning platform for change with the new legislation, and there is a huge level of awareness that boards need to be focused on safety.”

Dr Ferguson says boards tend to be compliance-driven when there’s a change in law, and safety leadership needs to go beyond that in order to be effective.

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Dr Ferguson says that companies’ maturity in health and safety can also vary greatly and it is important to recognise the stage of safety governance maturity each company may be at to effectively influence change.

“Directors can sit on boards at different stages of health and safety maturity and that’s okay because it’s a change process and it takes time.”

LEADERSHIP

Diversity in the workplace is another change process Dr Ferguson is devoting time to.

She has always worked in male-dominated environments, but says she has never considered her gender to be a barrier. She has trail-blazed in areas she is proud of, including as the first female director of the Queensland Rugby Union.

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Dr Ferguson also has an active presence on Twitter (@kirstinferguson).

“As directors, you need to be scanning online because conversations are happening whether you choose to listen or not.”

She says directors need to understand how Twitter operates in order to ask questions of management, and respond to crises as they occur.

“Unless you have witnessed a Twitter storm, it’s very difficult for you to make good decisions around how a crisis is handled. It becomes an issue of risk, branding and strategy. It may be management’s responsibility but strategy comes through the board.”

Not surprisingly, Dr Ferguson has more than 3000 followers on Twitter and more than 2000 on Linked In – just another avenue to spread her wings.

IoD LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Dr Kirstin Ferguson will be giving a keynote address on ‘Beyond Compliance – Safety Leadership in the Boardroom’ at the IoD Leadership Conference, to be held at the Langham, 12-13 April, 2016.