

ON LEADERSHIP

Queensland-based Kirstin Ferguson spoke about her PhD research into health and safety governance at the 2015 Safeguard conference. Since then she has pursued a career as a professional director and co-wrote the book *Women Kind*. **PETER BATEMAN** spoke with her about her new book, *Head & Heart – The Art of Modern Leadership*. An extract from the book appears on page 40. The book is reviewed in the Community pages.

I've always wanted to write, but I got distracted for the last 30 years doing other things. Bizarrely, even when I was 20 and doing my honour's thesis – my first degree was in history – I was looking at the leadership of the WAAF in World War Two and comparing it to the leadership of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in the UK.

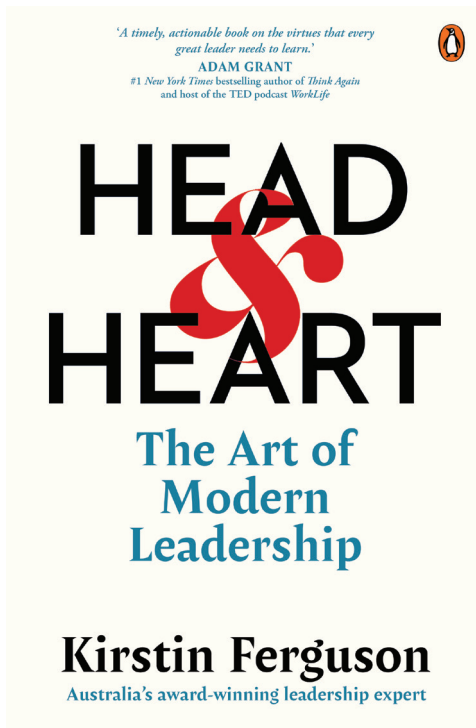
So leadership has been a thread I've always been interested in. Later, in my PhD, I really looked deeply at it in the context of health and safety.

I'm acutely aware there are thousands of books on leadership. I wanted to look at it with an evidence base beneath it, and see if I could combine that academic research with practical, lived experience as a leader.

Is care for people a pre-requisite for leadership success?

Absolutely, but health and safety professionals need to lead with both their head and their heart. I don't think you can just lead with your heart. You need to be capable at what you're doing. You need to have the wisdom to be able to make good decisions. You need to be curious about rethinking the way you might have always done things. And I think health and safety people really need to have good perspective, which I describe as the attribute about reading the room, including noticing who's





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But unless they also balance that with leading with the heart, they're not going to be effective. They have to be humble, and aware of the impact they're having on others. They have to be courageous to speak up about things even in the face of pressure not to do so.

We've got to put people at the centre, but my thesis around the art of modern leadership is about knowing what's needed when.

Of course, care for people sort of is a threshold issue here, of being a decent human!

H&S professionals need training in technical skills, but other essential skills – communication, persuasion, trust, empathy – have been downplayed and even called 'soft' skills.

I really dislike the term 'soft skills' because it denigrates a way of leading, as though it's 'less than', when often the most challenging part of being a leader is having the courage to bring empathy to work.

And in any case it's bullshit because it's not soft at all. It's hard work.

H&S professionals need to be modern leaders because they have to have the

technical skills, but they can't lead that way in isolation. You have to bring forward those heart-based attributes.

Mark Scott's response to the ABC Brisbane office breast cancer cluster, or what was perceived by staff to be a cluster, was a health and safety crisis in one sense. As he discovered, it was perhaps a crisis of perception over science. But nevertheless he chose to go with perception and he moved the office. That was a big call. What's the lesson there?

It's a perfect example of how any situation can be a balance of head and heart. That's what he did there. The head told you the data says there's no cluster here and it's just terrible luck. But the heart said this isn't a way to lead people. You know, we can't ask our people to work in this circumstance, whether it's perception or not. And so even at great cost he made that decision.

We confront situations where we might need to lay off staff or make other really difficult decisions. Health and safety people might need to hold someone accountable for being unsafe. And you balance that against, you know, what is the right thing to do in those

situations?

I think as long as you can draw on those attributes we're talking about, which is exactly what Mark did, you get to the right outcome. If he'd been a different kind of managing director and had said, look, this is what the data says, so everyone get back to work, you can imagine the different response that there would have been.

There would be people who lead who only consider the data. And I think that's a really good example for highlighting how disastrous that would have been in this situation.

In a mid-sized organisation, often there is only one person with a health & safety role. People come to that person when they have an issue, because they are viewed as the 'expert'. That's an ego trap to fall into. How to avoid it?

Even if you're the subject matter expert, when someone comes to you and says I've got a real challenge around X and you may know what the answer is, you don't need to solve it. In fact, it's not necessarily helpful to solve it for that person, but rather ask a series of questions that can help guide that person to the answer themselves.

HEAD & HEART

We can be a bit too quick to come up with an answer and yes, it can be an ego trap. Better to take that extra time and say, yeah, that's a really interesting problem. Have you thought about whether such-and-such would work?

When you're trying to help someone make an autonomous decision, you can have an entire conversation around questions. We don't do that nearly often enough. It takes a bit longer, but if you're serious about developing other leaders or developing non-health and safety professionals to own health and safety, then you do need to coach them to do that.

The chief executive of WorkSafe has advocated that regulators, while retaining a strong enforcement focus, need to look beyond compliance and seek to encourage employers to aim for better work. He has been criticised by those who view this as regulatory over-reach and think WorkSafe should stick to its knitting. Your thoughts?

It's brilliant! I'm supportive because he's showing real curiosity around rethinking the way we've always dealt with regulation. What he's inviting is this sense that we don't have all the answers. So there's a real humility – particularly as a regulator – to be willing to say, I think we need to do a better job of how we manage health and safety in its entirety.

Regulators too often are looking in the rear view mirror once an incident has happened. Hallelujah, he's trying to prevent those incidents from happening at all.

Some health & safety professionals find themselves in roles where they see a clear need for urgent change and advocate for it, only to be rebuffed by the leadership team. What would you advise?

If you try everything you can to change the culture or to change what is happening, and yet nothing changes, you need to leave. Because you either choose to be a bystander or you choose to go and make a different choice.

It's unfortunate that bad leaders put people in that position, but it does happen all too often.

When you are talking to leaders, does health and safety in any broad sense ever come up or is their focus elsewhere?

I think that's still a challenge. It doesn't come up. Putting my PhD research hat back on, I think health and safety is still seen as a discrete part of the business. It comes up if it's on the agenda, but when we're talking about mergers and acquisitions or layoffs or anything like that, I don't think there's nearly enough thought given to, well, what's going to be the impact on people's wellbeing?

As much as we might have hoped that would happen, I don't think it's happening nearly enough.

Thinking back on your career, can you think of times when you've led mainly by the head? And mainly by the heart?

When I went to work in a law firm, the culture was that you traded on your intellect. So in that role, where I was for almost a decade, I would have relied primarily on my head to make decisions and to interact with people, because intellect was the currency we all relied on.

Later I led a group of psychologists, and at times there was too much heart. There was a lot of focus on helping people have better lives and lots of really lovely stuff.

In both of those different instances, you need both. You can't just trade on your intellect in a law firm without thinking about how you engage with people. Likewise, you can't just have a beautiful free-for-all in a business, where everyone loves each other but you can't pay the bills.

It's only been in the latter part of my career where having both those experiences has really been beneficial. It's honed both sides of my leadership.

I'm not anti-analytical thinking because we absolutely have to have that. But I also know it will only get you so far. Now, I've got the benefit of being able to sit on boards or do other work where I can bring to bear both sides. ■

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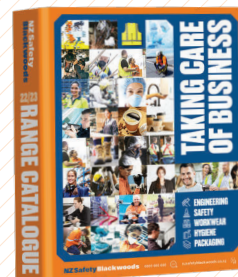
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Winter workplace safety - take the time to eliminate risks. Why is it important?

Under the Health & Safety at Work Act 2015 (HSWA), workplaces must manage all health and safety work risks. This includes slips, trips and falls, as well as general housekeeping to eliminate or minimise any hazards or risks that could exist in any workplace. By getting things right up front, companies can save themselves time and money without having to deal with injuries, absenteeism and reduced productivity.



Employers are responsible for:

- Selecting the most effective controls that are proportionate to the risk, and appropriate to the work situation. These could include non-slip matting & floor tape, handrails, signage and barriers. You must provide at least one first aid kit for each workplace and ensure workers know where it is.
- Providing and maintaining a safe workplace. Offering information, training and/or supervision to workers to reduce slips, trips and falls.

Slips, Trips & Falls

Slips, trips and falls in the workplace are commonplace and businesses should continually seek remedies to make the work environment safer. In the event of a slip, trip or fall, workers can experience musculoskeletal injuries (eg sprains, strains, fractures and soft tissue injuries). Serious injuries mostly below the waist can impact a worker for life or require a long rehabilitation period. Falls from a low level can cause an injury or death.

PROSAFE



Visual reminders and instructions like signs are essential to reinforce the safety message and reduce injury

Safety in the cold and in the dark

During winter, when the days are shorter and colder, it is even more important to ensure that your workplace environment is safe and healthy for your staff. Check areas (including the carpark) are well-lit and signposted to increase visibility and awareness. Keep your staff dry, warm and comfortable to reduce chances of winter sickness, which can lead to reduced productivity. Ensure company fleets carry a first aid vehicle kit to be prepared to deal with any unexpected events while on the road.

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