

# QWEEKEND



**PIA MIRANDA**  
WHY I FEEL  
GOOD ABOUT  
TURNING 50

**AT HOME**  
BRIGHTEN UP  
YOUR HOME  
OFFICE SPACE

## FOLLOW *the* LEADER

She's been billed as Australia's version of global guru Brene Brown, and now Sunshine Coast leadership expert Kirstin Ferguson is about to export her own life lessons to the world

FRANCES WHITING

Story FRANCES WHITING

# LESSONS FROM THE HEART

Kirstin Ferguson is a world leader in leadership. Her mission is to slay the 'dinosaurs and dickheads' in senior roles, change the culture and coach others to lead with empathy so good people don't quit their jobs

**T**hirty years ago, Kirstin Ferguson was a cadet in the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). She had gone through the rigours of training, which looked – in the early '90s – exactly how you might imagine (drills, obstacle courses, lots of yelling) and she had excelled at every turn. She would ultimately graduate as dux of her air force class for both academic and military performance.

But first, Ferguson was in the running for cadet captain, the person in charge of guiding young recruits from civilian into military life, a position she was widely considered to be perfect for. The Senior Selection Committee thought so too, with one of its members informing the-then 20 year old that everyone thought she would be wonderful in the role. There was just one problem. She was a woman. And, as he told her, “We just don't think the academy is ready for a female cadet captain yet.”

Her response? Gratitude. Ferguson, now 50, shakes her head. “I remember my response was, “Thanks for thinking of me, for considering me.”

What would she say now? Ferguson raises her eyebrows, and grins: “I think I'd say, “And that's exactly why you need one.”

That day would be the last time Ferguson would allow her gender to thwart her path. It was also the beginning of finding her voice, which she's been raising to effect change – in gender equality, in leadership, in workplace culture – ever since.

Today, Ferguson is a world leader in leadership, a best selling author (2018's *Women Kind*, and 2023's *Head and Heart*), a company director, former acting chair and deputy chair of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC),



former CEO of a global consulting firm, in-demand speaker on the world's stages, and a newspaper columnist. She also holds honours degrees in history and law, and a PhD in leadership. *Head and Heart* has just been named one of the 10 best new management books in the world by London-based, global leadership specialists Thinkers50. The book debuted in the top 10 non-fiction lists, at times edging ahead of a little book called *Spare*, Prince Harry's non-fiction, depth charger.

**Ferguson says 'good leaders' like Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and former NZ prime minister Jacinda Ardern show strength and humility; former US president Donald Trump is the 'worst example'.**

She has also just signed an international publishing deal for another book with Random House, and *Head and Heart* will be released in the United States in September. All of which is to say that Ferguson's star is rapidly rising among the ranks of global leadership names like Brene Brown, Adam Grant and Simon Sinek.

“I've learnt from all of them,” Ferguson says, “When I think of Brene Brown, she is all about vulnerability and courage. When I think of Adam Grant, he writes and speaks about motivation, and Simon Sinek writes and speaks about being fulfilled. I think my reason for being is all about impact – the impact we can all have to create the positive change we desire, one moment at a time.”

And for Ferguson, a large part of that is helping people to recognise that, no matter what they do, they are, in fact, already in leadership positions. “What I have learnt is to break down the elitism of leadership. We are all leaders: in our families, in our communities, from the person that checks you into the building to go and talk with the CEO to the CEO himself.”

Ferguson cites one of the 757 women she interviewed for *Women Kind* (co-written with journalist Catherine Fox) as an example of someone she considers a true leader. The idea for the book was born during a long walk on the beach and a “desire to counteract the toxic, social media landscape I was seeing”, Ferguson says. “No one asked me to do it, I think I was just pissed off, to be honest, with watching the denigration of women online. And so we created #CelebratingWomen where I interviewed two women from all around the world every day for a year. It was just an incredible experience, and it has created spin-offs globally.

“But of all the women I interviewed, the one >

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Kirstin Ferguson at home  
on the Sunshine Coast.  
Picture: Lachie Millard



**Kirstin Ferguson at home at the Sunshine Coast with her dog Huey; with her husband Glen and daughters Emil and Zoe, top right; and with Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, above, in 2018. Dorsey endorsed her messages of positivity at a speech in Sydney.**

“**THE MOST EFFECTIVE LEADERS ARE THE ONES WHO LET OTHER PEOPLE SHINE**”

who remained with me was a hotel cleaner. We never celebrate cleaners. She was employed by her friend, she was, in effect running a small business, she was someone who was escaping a family violence situation. I thought, ‘You are a leader, leading your family out of a dangerous situation and into safety.’”

In her second book, *Head and Heart*, Ferguson also recognises the different styles of leadership, from those who lead with their head, to those who lead with the heart. The art of true leadership, she argues, is to employ a balance of both – and to know when to use each.

“Modern leadership puts people at the centre of all their decisions. Tough things have to happen, but a good leader would deliver those tough decisions with empathy, and also have courage to voice what everyone’s thinking, or to say, ‘This is awful, I know, and we are all feeling this.’”

Asked to name a great modern leader who does just that, Ferguson is quick to answer: former New Zealand prime minister, Jacinda Ardern. “From start to finish, she was excellent in terms of good leadership. Even her resignation was an exercise in leadership.

“Good leaders have humility, and she had the humility of knowing when to go. She would hold the space as a leader, she was firm and direct during the pandemic, for example, but she’d also let the country see her on FaceTime with vomit from her child on her shoulder. She let people see she was human, and she allowed herself to be kind when it was needed.”

Ferguson also cites Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as an excellent leader, and under the most trying of circumstances.

“He stands out on the world stage, because he is both strong and empathetic, and he’s very aware of how impactful his words are so he chooses them really carefully and effectively.”

Asked to name the opposite – the worst example of a modern leader, she is also quick. “Donald Trump is the worst example of a leader

I’ve ever seen, he literally ticks every box of not what to do. He has zero empathy and zero self awareness. I’m only talking about his leadership skills here.”

One of Ferguson’s many roles is to coach people in senior leadership positions, many of whom she says, “want permission to lead in a certain way, including with empathy. What I see sometimes is a disconnect between their personal values and the values of the organisation. They want to lead with empathy but it’s not encouraged, so they leave. And the culture slowly changes because all the good people go.

“I want to change that, and I want to change the conversations we have around that.”

And one of the ways Ferguson says organisations can do that is to identify what she calls the “dinosaurs and dickheads” in leadership positions.

“I’m on a bit of a mission to slay both of these types of leaders, because they have such a negative impact on those who have to work with them. Dinosaurs believe in command and control, they hold old fashioned ideas about workplaces, for example, in working from home, because they don’t believe in their people, that they won’t work if they can’t see them.

“Dickheads believe they are always the smartest people in the room, any room. They’re not interested in the other people in the room. They don’t want to hear ideas, because their ideas are always better, and they have no humility. And yes, you can be a dinosaur and a dickhead at the same time, and believe me, you don’t want to work with them.”

It’s this sort of plain speaking that has earned Ferguson her reputation as someone who can change both individuals working in an

organisation, and the culture of that organisation itself. “I hope that I can help people see their own leadership potential, and for organisations to recognise that the most effective leaders are the ones who help others reach their potential. They don’t have to be the star of the show all the time, they can let other people shine.” One of the ways leaders can do that, she says, is by identifying what sort of leader they are, and then working on areas they may need to strengthen.

“Head to Heart was based on a lot of research,” she says. “I spent about a year researching it and then about another six months writing it. And one of the things I did was create a scale (at [headheartleader.com](http://headheartleader.com)) which anyone can access and it’s free.

“I think it’s very helpful to do this because it helps identify what sort of leader you are, and what you might want to work on. For example, Ferguson laughs, when I did it, it said my number one leadership trait was humility, which is not actually good because the research shows the second you think you are humble, you probably aren’t. The second you think you are a great leader, it’s probably time to put the mirror in front of yourself.”

Ferguson does, readily admitting that for someone who is considered a standout in this field, she gets it wrong, and regularly. The trick is, she believes, to acknowledge mistakes and missteps, and seek to rectify them.

“I think I made leadership mistakes daily. There have been times when I’ve been triggered by something that I think isn’t being done right. I can get angry. I can become dictatorial. But when I go away from that moment, I see that I haven’t been the best version of myself, that I’ve been a cranky version of myself, and I need to rectify that. Sometimes that looks like an apology, and that’s very important too. And it happens to all of us, being triggered in a moment and behaving in a way we are later very unhappy with ourselves about.”

And just like that, we are at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, March 2022, and the scene of that infamous slap.

“In my research I looked at how the brain works when it is triggered and it goes into what’s called an amygdala hijack,” Ferguson says.

“Probably the most public example of this is when Will Smith slapped Chris Rock at the Oscars. It’s basically when the amygdala,



(a cluster of nuclei located in the brain's temporal lobe) which can trigger our fight or flight response is set off by not just physical threats, but also emotional ones. It disrupts our prefrontal cortex so that emotions completely dominate our thinking, and we lose the ability to self regulate our behaviour, and that's what happened to Will Smith. He was angry, he was triggered, and before he even knew what he was doing he was on his feet, and on that stage. And when we do it, when we have our own amygdala

**Kirstin Ferguson at her graduation ceremony at the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1993. She received the Air Force Prize (dux of her graduating class), becoming the first female to do so.**

hijack, we've sent off that angry email, we've flown off the handle, we have to go back and fix it, because the moment you do it, trust has been broken. You have to say, 'I am very disappointed in how I acted and it won't happen again.'

How we behave in the room – any room – is important: the board room, the meeting room, the lunch room, but so, too, Ferguson says, is noticing who's in it. Or rather, who's not in it.

"Good leaders tie in diversity and inclusion. Notice who is missing from the room, don't just notice who is in there. If you look around, and we all look identical and we've all been here for 27 years, then maybe you need a rethink."

You might also need to encourage some people in that room to speak up.

"I think being a really great leader is like conducting an orchestra, and giving everyone a chance to play. It's about saying, 'We have a problem, I don't know the answer, but all of you might have. So I welcome any ideas.' Even better, sometimes you might actually know the answer, but maybe you don't need to share it every time. You don't always have to show what you know, because it will give others the chance to grow and to feel a part of the solution. Also, there's a very real chance they might come up with something that's better than yours."

She is married to Glen Ferguson, a senior executive at Boeing, who she met on the second day of her posting to the RAAF Amberley Air Base when she was just 21. She laughs. "I was posted to the F111 squadron, Glen was a navigator, and I had obviously watched far too

much Top Gun. We have been together for 25 years and we have two children, Emil, who is 23, and Zoe, who is 21."

Ferguson says some of the skills needed for a long-term partnership and raising a family can also be applied to leadership, most notably, listening. It's also a skill she says her volunteer role as a call taker at Lifeline has helped her to improve.

"I started doing it during the pandemic which, as we know, led to some life changes for many people, some rethinking and reflecting. For me, it was more I felt very conscious that we can take and take and take and not give back at all. Listening with empathy to someone on the phone at Lifeline has really helped me to learn the power of listening, really listening to someone. You're not there to fix anything, you basically have to be quiet and let someone be heard. It's taught me the power of silence and of asking really good questions."

Ferguson's long-term work in leadership has taught her all sorts of life lessons along the way – and helped her reframe some of the space's most repeated adages.

"There's a phrase that if you are very successful and you're at the top of your profession, you should throw down the ladder for the next person to come up, but I think that's way too limiting. That's only for the next person after you, and one at a time."

She smiles broadly. "I think you should throw down a big fishing net and let everyone have their chance to be raised up." ■

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