



"We are what we put up with"

by Leanne Faraday-Brash

"You can't be serious. You mean I have to pay for scaffolding because someone has to put up a few hundred lousy roof tiles. How's a guy expected to make a buck?" That was conversation I overheard 6 years ago between the painter and the builder when we decided to renovate our family home. And what's more we're expected to wear seatbelts, P platers have to drive sober, schools can outlaw peanut butter sandwiches for fear of killing someone and secretaries (or perhaps Executive Assistants) being chased around the desk by frisky executives can actually stand up and say they want it to stop and have some hope in some circles they will get a hearing. The world is changing. And at some point that message may even reach that last bastion of maledom, footy.

The fascinating thing about match day sledging unlike sexual harassment in another workplace, as highlighted by the Selwood/Headland case, is that the person being maligned wasn't on the field. This issue brings into sharp focus so many questions that have previously not been asked (at least by as many people). Can someone be third-party harassed? That is, could an overhearing player or umpire have been offended? When playing for such high stakes does the means justify the end? What's OK sledging and what's not? Is racial harassment of the other player different and worse than sexual innuendo about someone not even present? Is sexual harassment a form of violence? Does committing it mean the perpetrator is a misogynist, even prone to violence or simply exercising an accepted way to throw someone off their game?

There are more questions. Would you expect someone to get more upset if someone intimated they slept with your girlfriend than with your six year old daughter, because, hey you'd have to know the latter occurrence couldn't possibly be true, wouldn't you? Well, Brodie Holland thought so when he was interviewed on radio last week about the incident. And by the way, racial harassment, well that was definitely not on, he said. Where is the logic? It's a virtual miracle he's able to follow Mick Malthouse's match day game plan with a capacity for reasoning like that!

The footy field is the AFL player's workplace. Sledging is unwelcome behaviour that may offend, intimidate or humiliate. Technically, it falls under the EEO definition of harassment. Imagining this could be eradicated is far fetched. Would we want to go that far? Do we need to? I love my footy and I've got to admit that it can be quite funny to watch a player (from the opposition team of course) miss a goal from 20 metres out directly in front and get called a bozo for his inaccuracy.

The footy match is a win/lose paradigm. It is by definition, competitive rather than collaborative (at least between teams). They are combatants in every sense. But surely all these issues are a matter of degree. Can there not be some boundaries around behaviour such that we can draw a line in the sand and say some stuff just isn't on? You can work for an underwear manufacturer and use sensually provocative marketing campaigns but still ask your employees to come to work fully clothed and enforce a sexual harassment policy. You can work for Ansell who manufactures



condoms but you don't presumably walk around at work proudly modelling the product.

If the AFL stance championed by Michael Long was that racial vilification was not acceptable and ten years on most players understand that, then aren't we at the same place on sexual violence against women, children, men, anyone for that matter now? Adam Selwood may not have made specific references to Des Headland's daughter. The truth is we'll probably never know. The tribunal doesn't and there were QC's involved! What Selwood did admit to saying was entirely disrespectful of women and aggressive in its intent.

When I first started working in the area of what I call workplace justice 16 years ago, and was asked to conduct sexual harassment and bullying briefings, there was many a bloke in manufacturing who thought the world had gone stark raving effing mad for us even to be having any of those conversations. The only reason they were probably still in the room two hours later is because apparently, I do have a sense of humour (maybe not apparent here) and can tell a good story (and the real ones provide the best material). Maybe it's also because they got a couple of hours off the line while still getting paid and if they were lucky, the promise of a sticky doughnut too. There are still plenty that feel that way and others who don't but feel peer pressure to remain silent. But there are more that don't and understand the world is changing and that people have the right to feel safe at work. Admittedly not all of them leave the briefings and spontaneously and permanently alter their behaviour because they say, and justifiably, we know each other well, have worked together for years and Billy gives as good as he gets. In which case, provided no one else overhears, they're sweet and two less people for us to worry about at work. But even those guys when questioned would tell you that they draw the line on what they find acceptable. They would expect the other guys on night shift to be able to respect that line or expect some swift and powerful pushback!

For many of them it would be jokes about their partners and most certainly about interfering with kids or their race or religion or one of the other fellas trying to "have a grope" which would send them scurrying for boxing gloves or company policies and grievance procedures because they just know you can't do that any more if someone really finds it unwelcome and expect to get away with it.

It's not an easy sell for women to come out and talk about respect for women because hey, we've got a vested interest, but so does every son, every father, every brother with a sister who just understands that in a civilised country like ours at the forefront of Equal Opportunity and respect for the individual that this is what we have to stand for. The AFL, as a big high profile employer and its individual clubs are no different to the banks, the professional firms and other influential companies. They must take the higher moral ground, protect their brand, act with social conscience and position themselves to attract women members, sponsors and spectators to the game. There is no 'down side' to promotion of these ideals. It does not preclude extreme physicality in the game, acts of outstanding courage, exceptional teamwork, sublime skill, spectacular marks, freakish goals and Coleman medallists who take seriously their status as role models with huge 'reach' who stand for everything we could want in a son, a father and a partner.



If players are sophisticated enough to follow the share prices section of the newspaper and disciplined enough not to punch an umpire then they have the self-control to be accountable for other things they say or do without rationalising it all away by saying, hey that's just footy!

Coaches in sport and managers in factories ask their charges to be accountable. This is just one more way to be accountable and a tangible way of changing both the fabric of our society and the physical and emotional safety of the people we care about.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leanne Brash', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

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