

# REPORT

## Australian Cultural Imprints at Work: 2010 and Beyond

March 2011



Australian Government  
Department of Education, Employment  
and Workplace Relations

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## Acknowledgements



IBSA wishes to acknowledge the work of BTLi who have prepared this report.

Members of BTLi involved in this project were:

- Colin Pidd
- Liam Linley
- Marie Larkin

A large number of people and organisations have supported IBSA and BTLi in this project. A fuller list of acknowledgements can be found at the end of this report.

IBSA is particularly grateful to these people who were prepared to share their views and cleverness around both the original studies and their relevance to the future of Australian enterprise.

For further information about this report or any other work being undertaken by Innovation & Business Skills Australia Ltd, please visit [www.ibsa.org.au](http://www.ibsa.org.au).

Innovation & Business Skills Australia Ltd

Level 11, 176 Wellington Parade

East Melbourne VIC 3002 Australia

P +61 3 9815 7000

F +61 3 9815 7001

E [reception@ibsa.org.au](mailto:reception@ibsa.org.au)

W [www.ibsa.org.au](http://www.ibsa.org.au)

This work has been produced with the assistance of funding provided by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The views expressed in this work do not necessarily represent the views of DEEWR. In addition, DEEWR does not give warranty or accept any legal liability in relation to the content of this work.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Starting Point</b>	<b>6</b>
What is Culture?	6
What is a Cultural Imprint?	6
Why Undertake Cultural Imprint Studies?	6
Motivating tactics	7
Differing perceptions of quality	7
International product marketing	7
<b>What Did They Find?</b>	<b>8</b>
First Study: Australian Quality Council – Cultural Imprints 1994	8
Effective Management Style	8
Relationships	8
Trust and Information	10
People and Technology	10
Feedback and Recognition	10
Structure and Change	10
The importance of a 'Cause'	11
Second Study: Leaders in Australia – The Australian Cultural Imprint for Leadership	11
An Important Question: Australian or Just Human?	13
<b>Application of the Findings:</b>	<b>13</b>
How Were the Findings First Used?	13
How Were the Findings Used Beyond the Sponsoring Organisations?	14
<b>Is It Still Relevant Going Forward?</b>	<b>16</b>
Ongoing Use and Value	16
Comparison and Fit with Future Trends	16
<b>Cultural Imprint into the Future: recommendations</b>	<b>17</b>
Recommendation 1: Create a training program, not a model	17
Recommendation 2: Build diagnostic instruments	17
Recommendation 3: Share learning and insights	17
Recommendation 4: Conduct further research	17
<b>Thanks...</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Appendix A: Social and Organisational Change Since the Cultural Imprint studies</b>	<b>19</b>
Globalisation:	19
Gen Y, X and Boomers together in the workplace	19
Partnerships	21
<b>Appendix B: Australian Culture Today</b>	<b>21</b>

## Executive Summary

This project set out to review findings from Australian *Cultural Imprint* studies conducted in the mid-1990s, and to consider their current relevance to the Australian workplace. The project methodology included consulting with individuals including those who:

- were involved in the original studies
- have used the findings from the studies
- have not previously been exposed to the studies' findings, or
- are social researchers or cultural commentators.

The review has confirmed that findings from the *Cultural Imprint* studies are as relevant today as they were in the mid-1990s. In fact, some would say more so.

Australia is a country of 'Fair Dinkum', 'Fair Go' and 'Bullshit Detectors'. A place where, on balance, *who I am at work is more significant than what I am or do at work*. There is no question that the 'alphabet soup' of management and leadership theory has changed since the studies were first conducted. Globalisation, partnering and technology have also shifted in the last 20 years and Generation Y have begun to take their place in the myriad occupations and ways of working that didn't exist two decades ago. Yet, for all this change, the overwhelming anecdotal and qualitative evidence suggests that models representing the Australian cultural imprints remain relevant, accurate and powerful.

Themes that have maintained their resonance include:

- Australian identity is more entwined with relationships than tasks.
- Extraordinary efforts and endeavours are possible if Australian bosses know their workers individually and what they can bring to the task.
- The common good is more motivating and powerful than the American-style "impossible dream".
- False crises or 'burning platforms' are much less motivating than sensible plans and shared aims.
- Leaders who pitch in and help, who share the pain, who care about their followers – as well as the task at hand – can get great things done.

This review has also revealed that very few people have found a way to tap the cleverness and the insights of the *Cultural Imprint* studies in a way that creates sustainable shifts in leadership and management practices. There exists a vast opportunity to take these insights and transform them from theoretical models into learning and development activities – from clever 'info-tainment' to profound methods of leading changes.

An opportunity exists to bring together the consultants and leaders who are deeply immersed in this material to share what they have learned and to build a tool kit of practices, methods and checklists for an even more skilful and innovative Australia. In the parlance of the *Cultural Imprint* paradigm, the 'cause' would have many 'volunteers'!

A consistent message from the review's consultations was the need to put the *Cultural Imprint* findings into practice:

*"We don't simply want an insightful model – we want a practical training program."*  
Kevin Coates, General Manager HR, Santos Pty Ltd

## Background

In 1993 the first *Cultural Imprint* study in Australia was commissioned by Telstra (then Telecom) with support from the Australian Quality Council. The study followed similar successful overseas studies examining national culture and its impact in the workplace. The Telstra study – ‘What is Quality in Australia?’ – examined the Australian imprint for ‘quality’. The study created immediate interest among Australian audiences and in 1995 three organisations – Shell, Sydney Electricity (now Energy Australia) and Westpac – jointly commissioned a new *Cultural Imprint* study into the subject of ‘leadership’. Both studies were undertaken by John Evans and Christina Afors for Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd.

Together these two studies added considerably to the body of knowledge on the impact of cultural imprints on perception and behaviour in the Australian workplace.

Fifteen years on, IBSA sought to review the *Cultural Imprint* studies of 1993 and 1995 to determine their relevance and value in the Australian workplace of 2010 and beyond.

## Methodology

The project to review the *Cultural Imprint* studies of 1993 and 1995 has involved revisiting and summarising the findings, thoughts and applications of the original studies with the help of those originally involved and those who have used the material.

Four specific groups have informed this review:

1. People who worked in the original sponsoring organisations – Australian Quality Council (Standards Australia), Westpac, Shell Australia, Telecom (Telstra), Sydney Electricity (Energy Australia) – at the time of the studies.
2. Internal and external consultants who were accredited to use the resulting material (formally or informally), and their clients.
3. People at work in 2010. The findings and information from the *Cultural Imprint* studies were presented to people in diverse range of organisations who were asked questions about its resonance, relevance and importance. Organisations included national, multinational, government, and community organisations.
4. People who write or comment on current culture, including social researchers, popular culture commentators, brand researchers.

Tracking down executives, managers and human resource practitioners, who were in the sponsoring organisations at the time of the studies, proved to be a significant challenge. Retirements, career changes, and some sadder reasons all played a part. However all those contacted recalled the studies. *All* people traced thought it was “breakthrough stuff”.

The review gathered the thoughts, opinions and ideas of more than 700 individuals ranging from those who have been intimately involved long term with the *Cultural Imprint* studies, to those who have been freshly exposed to the information. The number and diversity of individuals and organisations contributing to this review has provided robust and valid findings.

It was not the intention of this review to replicate the original *Cultural Imprint* studies. Rather, the review draws on:

- A literature review investigating a wide selection of recent articles, opinion pieces, research papers, films and social commentary – both quantitative and qualitative.
- Experiences and interpretations provided by the four groups identified above, used to explore the validity of insights recorded in the original studies.

The key findings and definitions of the original study were considered as a starting point.

## The Starting Point

### What is Culture?

The definition of culture is a fraught question. Fill a room of anthropologists, organisational development specialists, management consultants and assorted academics and the debate is furious. Answers range from the simple "it's the way we do things around here" to arcane definitions that include words like semiotics, artefacts, instinct and imprint. Also mentioned are: national culture, tribal culture, drug culture, high culture, organisational culture, etc.

The working definition of culture for the two *Cultural Imprint* studies was:

*"Culture is the integrated systems of beliefs, values, paradigms, structures, processes and symbols that influence the behaviour of groups of people".*

### What is a Cultural Imprint?

Studies by animal behaviourists – Lorenz and his goslings, Jung and his archetypes – have shown that an imprinting-like process transmits culture. Culture begins to be imprinted from birth, operating below the level of conscious awareness. The resulting 'cultural imprints' are the means by which people in a culture view and respond to the world around them. They shape people's perceptions and responses.

Imprinting, like most types of learning, is invariably associated with emotion. Without emotional content to the experience, imprinting does not take place. The intensity of the emotion is a determinant in how powerfully the imprint is etched.

Emotion explains some of the answer to the often-raised question around immigration and cultural shift. How can Australia have a cultural imprint when it is such a potpourri of new and old cultures, an ancient civilisation and myriad of migrant groups? The accepted explanation is expressed succinctly by John Evans (Director, *Cultural Imprint*):

*"When an immigrant comes to another country, the culture that is there is "the only game in town". In other words, to fit in as a newcomer into a new country or an organisation one generally has no choice around "playing the cultural game".*

Because migration (whether to a new country or a new organisation) is invariably a very emotional experience, the newcomer is ripe for "imprinting". Immigration by its nature also has massive identity implications – part of the real core of the Australian cultural imprint.

*"Each culture has its own unique underlying systems of beliefs, values, structures, languages and symbols that determine how the members of that culture see the world and react to it. New-comers to that culture have to learn the rules to fit in." (1993 study)*

### Why Undertake a Cultural Imprint Study?

Cultural imprints are the unconscious cultural imperatives that drive significant elements of employee, customer and community behaviours and choices. Understanding the link between national culture and organisational culture is important for organisations wanting to motivate employees, attract customers and influence communities. Organisational behaviour that does not align with the national cultural imprint will frequently fall short of its objectives. A number of real-life examples are provided in the box below.

The first Australian *Cultural Imprint* study made the following observation:

*When Australians travel abroad we make certain preparations that enable us to adapt to a foreign culture. We sometimes bone (sic) up on the language, or at least a few common phrases; we take along electrical current adaptors for our shavers or hair dryers; we convert our money into notes of the host country. We equip ourselves to enter a world unlike our own in many respects.*

*And yet, when some companies get serious about quality, world's best practice or benchmarking, one of the first things they do is visit foreign organisations in foreign countries, take copious notes and come home ready to replicate everything they have seen or heard without the benefits of adaptors, convertors or translators." (Quality Study 1993)*

The quest for business insight into the way to surf the national cultural imprint for both service and product delivery excellence and the unlocking of people's energy and expertise is not just important it is vital for business innovation, health (in all its forms), skill development and sustainability.

## Motivating tactics

A typically American leadership strategy, labelled 'burning platform' or 'create a crisis', has not been successfully transferred to the Australian context. American Bob Joss (ex CEO Westpac) recognised that some of the leadership methods (including 'create a crisis') that he had used successfully at Wells Fargo Bank, were not working so well at Westpac in Australia. Under his leadership Westpac became a sponsor of the second *Cultural Imprint* study.

However, others continue to rely on the strategy. A recent American chief executive of Telstra used it very publically as a driver for change, but Australian newspapers and talkback radio revealed how poorly many of his (and his American communications colleagues') 'crisis' announcements were received. Off the record comment by many Telstra employees echoed a similar reaction. For Australians, who have a cultural imprint for a 'fair dinkum' or 'get real' approach, the crisis histrionics simply set off finely tuned 'bullshit detectors'.

## Differing perceptions of quality

The relative ease with which W. Edwards Deming introduced "Quality" into Japanese manufacturing many years ago is another example of cultural imprints at work. Japan, with a national culture virtually obsessed with "perfection" was completely receptive. Continuous improvement, reducing variances to zero, was absolutely congruent with Japanese culture. Building a culture of quality in Japan proved far easier for Deming than doing so in his native America – a place where to get it absolutely right first time doesn't fit their need for "fail first to achieve outstanding results..."<sup>1</sup>.

Meanwhile, in Australia, the original notion of Total Quality Control (TQC) had to be quickly modified to Total Quality Management (TQM) due to the undesirable connotations of the word "control". In Japanese the two terms are virtually synonymous.

## International product marketing

Branding a product in a way that does not reflect national culture is a sure way of sending product marketing back to the drawing board. For example:

- Attempts by Nestlé to introduce coffee into Japan initially failed because the product was positioned as a beverage next to tea. However, tea has played an important ceremonial role in Japan from ancient times and any comparison with a new product was never going to work. When coffee was repositioned as a 'flavour' akin to ice cream flavours, success was forthcoming.
- Marketing of French 'live' cheese failed in America where cheese is expected to be 'inert, clean and hygienic'.
- Boots Pharmaceuticals in Britain lost massive market share in the 1980s when American advertising was used for pain killers. The advertisements showed people in distressed states (crisis) and proposed the notion of painkillers as a problem resolution. However, in Britain people tend to take painkillers for prevention before they have a problem or 'crisis' - a way to stay in control ('stiff upper lip'). The American style advertisements did not resonate locally and, in fact, had a 'turn-off effect'.

<sup>1</sup>As described by Marilyn Zuckerman and Lewis Hatala in their book 'Incredibly American' based on the AT&T study about the American cultural imprint for quality.

## What Did They Find?

### First Study: Australian Quality Council - Cultural Imprints 1994

Funded by Telecom (now Telstra)

The core question of this study was: What is Quality in Australia? The central finding, particularly from a leadership or managing perspective, was the notion of “*Captain Coach*” as the preferred leadership style.

#### Effective Management Style

Two management styles in the initial Australian *Cultural Imprint* study were identified: the *Captain-Coach* and the *Task Master*.

The *Task Master* is typically autocratic, results driven, and is low on giving feedback. This kind of manager is very separate (both physically and emotionally) from their people. This management style in Australia tends to turn people off... they become *Whingers*, then *Survivors* (just doing the minimum) and ultimately *Prisoners* (“*have no choice but don't want to be here and don't care*”). This is a style that values results over relationships.

In Australia, the *Captain-Coach* approach is more appropriate and involves creating causes, plans and goals, defusing crises, supporting team members, acknowledging others identity and helping or leading by example rather than being demanding of others... and, most importantly, sharing the pain.

In terms of implementing *quality* – the management style of “*Captain Coach*” – was seen to be imperative. The study identified a number of critical factors that an effective manager needs to focus on to implement quality. They are:

- Relationships
- Trust and information
- People and technology
- Feedback and recognition
- Structure and change
- The importance of a 'cause'

These factors are detailed below.

#### Relationships

'Good quality' for Australians is perceived primarily in terms of the relationship they have with those around them and the organisations with which they are involved. It is more about 'who' they are than 'what' they do. In Japan, quality is more to do with the striving for perfection. In Germany, it's more about reaching specified technical specifications. Good quality for Australians is a relationship in which a person has a sense of secure identity and self-worth – identity as perceived by others establishes the person as an individual and helps maintain or enhance self-esteem.

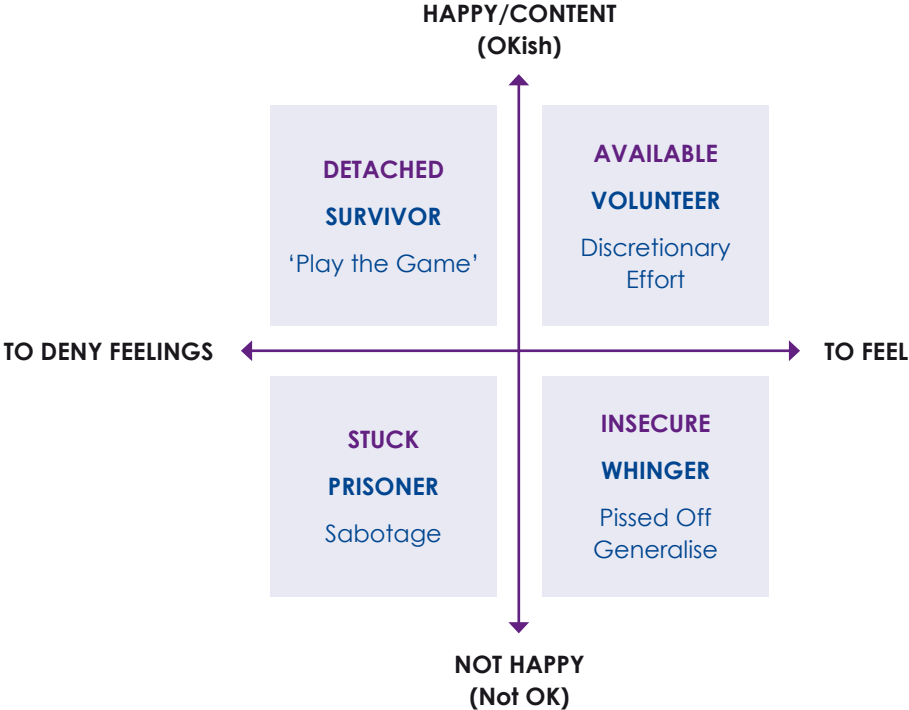
These relationships are determined more by the informal structures and practices (saying “G'day”, perceived inclusions and exclusions, knowing my name and using it, etc.) than the formal signs such as job titles and qualifications. Whilst Australians are comfortable with hierarchical differences in work/job status there is strong need for a sense of 'equal humanness' with all colleagues at work regardless of job status. For example, any boss in Australia who insists on being called Mr or Ms or Dr can expect short shrift in the credibility stakes. Equally, rightly or wrongly, a business card with an array of qualifications and sundry membership letters will more often than not create raised eyebrows and snide comments pertaining to the colloquial 'wanker' ... thus credibility rather than being enhanced is substantially reduced. In countries such as Japan or Germany these qualifications and membership letters are seen as an enhancement. This is not to say qualifications aren't highly regarded, rather it's about a need for understatement and modesty.

The study also moved towards debunking the oft-quoted notion of cutting down 'Tall Poppies'. The studies would suggest that as long as a person has their “own good” – “what's in it for me” in smaller proportion to organisational good or common good, then we – as a nation – tend to treat those people with respect and not cut them down. For example, recent *Australians of the Year* Gustav Nossal (2000) and Fiona Wood (2005) have hardly been cut down. However many of those who invoke the 'cutting down Tall Poppy' defence are often seen to have their own good way ahead of common good – some would suggest another well-known *Australian of the Year* Alan Bond (1978) is an example of this balance being “out of whack”.

Identity can be enhanced, supported or threatened by the way we view and experience the world at any point in time. A quality relationship adds to that identity; a situation that detracts from it or threatens it is not a quality relationship.

Christina Afors, (who was from overseas – and hence a more “objective” observer not immersed in the Australia culture) who, along with John Evans, conducted the original Telecom study observed that: “... *Australians appear to have a remarkable capacity to become detached in situations in which they are not happy*”.

The study devised a *quaternitiy* to express the interacting forces impacting on relationships and identity.



The quaternitiy depicts two key interacting forces that impact on relationships and identity. They are the capacity 'to feel' or 'to deny feeling' (the extent to which we are able to be reached or influenced), and that state of being either 'happy/contented' or 'sad'.

Depending on the balance between this interacting 'tension', we move from *Volunteer* – available to listen, contribute positively, maximise discretionary effort, interact with good intent; to *Whinger* – predominantly see only the negative, recruit fellow whingers, be 'pissed off'; to *Survivor* – do the minimum, play the game, withdraw discretionary effort; to *Prisoner* – stuck, in pain, undertake relationship or task sabotage. Movement between the quadrants can be in any order or direction.

Quality and virtually all positive action requires Australians to be in the *Volunteer* quadrant – in the local vernacular, Australians tend to be 'full on or full off'.

## Trust and Information

The Telecom study demonstrated the importance of communication for organisations. It found that Australians see receiving information as a reflection of trust and that it contributes to having a secure identity and feelings of self-worth. The actual content of the information (as important as this is) is not as important as the experience of being trusted with information, of being included and valued.

When an Australian employee is 'kept in the dark' while others are not, the study found that the excluded employee is likely to become detached and uncertain, and experience diminished feelings of self-worth. Hence, in Australia, managing *exclusion* is just as important as managing inclusion.

The findings differentiate between two information types: one that is perceived as coming from individuals, and the other as coming from the organisation. Information seen as coming from the individual determines whether an individual feels personally accepted and recognised, whereas information seen as coming from the organisation either promotes trust – or doubt and confusion.

When people feel they have not been entrusted with information, they are likely to move to the *Whinger* or *Survivor* mode. If such communication failure continues, they will become helpless and operate in the Prisoner space.

## People and Technology

The impact and demands of technology in relation to people and workplace relationships were also established in the study. It analogised the interplay to *Big City/Small Town* relationships and *Hi-Tech/Hi-Touch* situations

- A *Big City* relationship is challenging and exciting, but can also be impersonal and show little regard for the individual on a personal level.
- In a *Small Town* relationship, people's identities are clearly established and known among each other. There is little privacy and other people's business is discussed and well known.
- A *Hi Tech* service is convenient, quick, prioritised and follows orders, rules and routines. It is impersonal.
- A *Hi Touch* service is adaptable and personalised, where any rules can be bended or broken to suit a situation or need.

The study shows the clear link between *Big City/Hi-Tech* and *Small Town/Hi-Touch*, and offers various implications and uses for each approach to business, transactions and services. It suggests that the challenge for businesses of the future is how they will operate effectively in a *Big City* environment as a *Hi-Tech* company, whilst encouraging a *Small Town* approach and recognising individual identities through *Hi-Touch* responses.

Successfully meeting this challenge, according to the study, will help develop volunteers within the organisation.

## Feedback and Recognition

The concept of feedback for Australians is mostly thought of in terms of content and is generally linked to bad news, serving as a screen for impending criticism and blame ... and a breakdown of a work relationship.

As in other cultures, recognition for good work is important to Australians, but must be done in a way that is sincere and low-key. The study indicates that praise and recognition that is over the top and given undeservedly is considered to be inappropriate and embarrassing. Hence the relatively poor value of 'Employee of the Month' schemes in Australia compared with America.

## Structure and Change

The study suggests that for change to be successful in organisations in Australia, it needs to be presented in a planned and structured way that builds on past successes, rather than disregarding past work and achievements. Effective Australian managers value the present as they begin to talk about the future. They don't begin a change process by deriding or even ignoring the present because this is 'felt' as a diminution of identity which in turn moves people out of the *Volunteer* quadrant and reduces their capacity to hear or contribute.

Change without clear structure is seen as chaotic and confusing, and may lead to a loss of identity and diminished relationships as people either become detached from the process or try to undermine it. The need for structure also leads the study to another finding: Australians respond best to clear and precise operating guidelines.

A further finding within this is Australians have finely tuned *Bullshit Detectors*; they expect to be told the truth and are prepared to face it in most instances.

### **The importance of a 'Cause'**

According to the Telecom study, providing Australians with a 'cause' is a very powerful way to motivate involvement. A "cause" transcends being the *biggest* or the *best*; rather it has social, moral or community implications.

Based on this finding, it was suggested that organisations should review their mission and vision statements to include the desirable elements of a 'cause' that will gain support from employees.

In summary, in Australia, *community contribution* is a more compelling motivator than being the biggest or the best. In contrast, the American 'Impossible Dream' is a motivator based on achieving greatness despite adversity. In Germany a key motivator is the achievement of technical excellence, in Japan the search for perfection, in Italy it is often recognised as style or design.

### **Second Study: Leaders in Australia – The Australian Cultural Imprint for Leadership**

Funded by Westpac, Sydney Electricity (Energy Australia), Shell, and Cultural Imprint

The core question for this study was: What is Leadership in Australia? The headline finding from the study was a simple statement: *Leaders care for their followers.*

The study used a working definition of a 'leader' as someone who *"is followed without coercion, and without favours being offered"*.

In Australia, according to the study, there is an important distinction between the terms 'leader' and 'boss', and also between a good boss and a bad boss:

- A leader is concerned with the welfare of their followers and is closely involved with them at all times. A boss remains somewhat distant and is concerned more with the task at hand.
- A 'good boss' does many things a leader does, and may claim to hold similar values. They may act like the 'captain-coach' (as described in the first study), and also avoid actions that may put a divide between them and their people or followers.
- A 'bad boss' is often referred to as a 'bastard' and they are unlikely to develop into true leaders. They may take credit where it is not due, sacrifice others in their own interests and use followers to their own advantage. Bad bosses tend to be results-driven at the expense of their people.

In Australia, this study found that the 'good boss' is well accepted, in some instances even more so than a leader. Good bosses can also become leaders as they retain trust and become prepared to care for and show genuine concern for their followers, as well as learn to recognise the occasions in which it is necessary to distance themselves.

The authors of the leadership study reflected that:

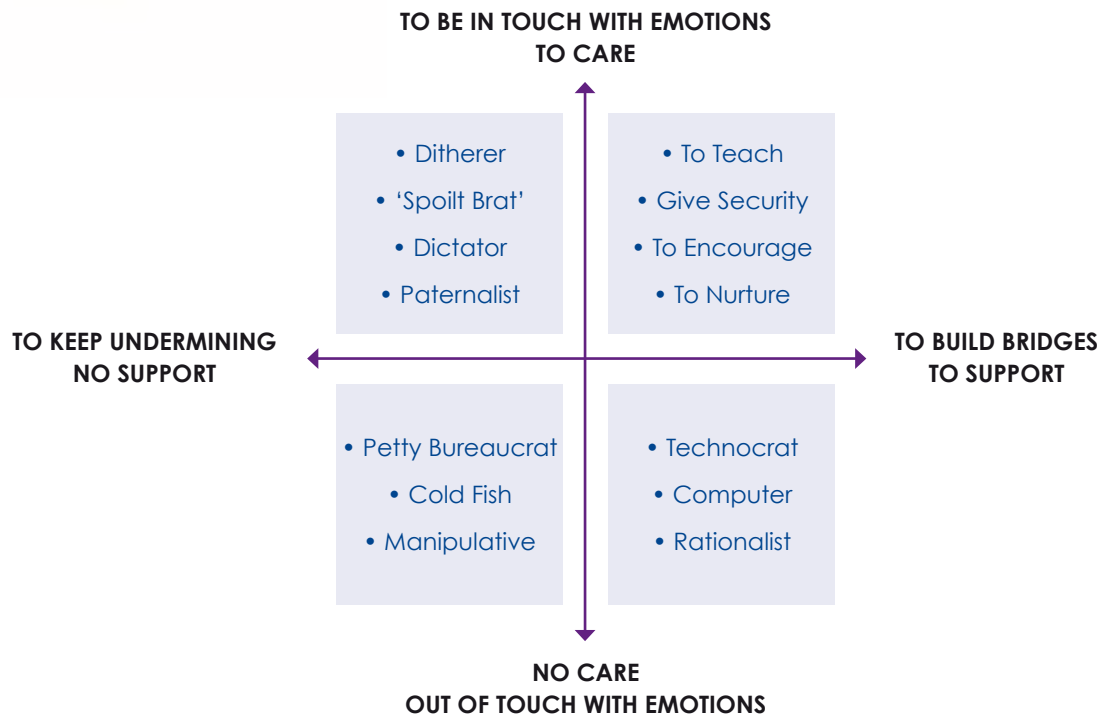
*"... the most significant single observation ... is that leaders care for their followers. Within that context, the leader's role is to build bridges between now and the future – bridges that allow followers to move from their present identity, within comfortable and familiar relationships, to a new identity in a different situation that initially threatens insecurity and a need to establish new relationships. Building a bridge rather than selling the future."*

This finding is congruent with the original 1993 study, and means that effective change in Australia is more about identity shift than role or task shift.

Leaders need to be *fair-dinkum*, able to be both true to themselves and true to the task. The transparency of a leader's identity is critical in developing trust in those around them. Caring leadership can only be trusted when the identity of the leader is clear.

The study also identified the need for leaders to be skilful in determining the appropriate level of personal involvement and support to provide at any particular time.

This concept is best represented in the Leadership quaternity devised in the study:



The study:

*"... presented a picture of a leader in the Australian context – someone Australians would follow voluntarily, without coercion or favour."*

The 1995 study reinforced the earlier studies findings around the importance to Australians of establishing good relationships and feelings of self-worth in the workplace. It also showed:

*"...what that means for leaders who have built bridges to the future for their followers – bridges that they can cross without fear of failure. Most of all, it stresses the need for leaders to care and share their (followers') pain".*

There were a number of quaternities identified that granulated the axes of Care and Bridge building:

- The importance of consistency and sticking to principles.
- Knowing the right balance between being firm/decisive and wavering.
- The critical judgement of a Leader between ensuring followers "don't fail" and acting on their own accord. (Note: a critical finding was that Australians have a very strong aversion to failing – hence the notion "there is no such thing as a mistake ... it's a learning experience" – is simply seen to be a nonsense at a visceral level, even if it makes intellectual sense.)
- Being able to work the very fine balance between public (overstated) and private (understated) acknowledgement or feedback.
- The art of balancing close support and support "from a distance".

A particularly interesting finding noted by those consulted during the review was around '*managing mates*'. Although this is a universal issue, it is made more difficult in the Australian workplace because of the criticality of equal humanness and mateship identified in the first study.

## An Important Question: Australian or Just Human?

The question that is often asked is: are these findings truly Australian or just human? This question was raised during the release of the first reports and is still asked in 2010. The answer is complex.

Firstly, does it actually matter? If the findings work – if they explain behaviour, enhance awareness and move leaders and others in workplaces to make more significant contributions – then they are valuable, regardless. However, research evidence and anecdotal evidence points very strongly to the conclusion that some of the findings are truly unique, some are unique by degree and others are global. The findings may well be a melange of characteristics we share with other cultures as well as imprints that are uniquely Australian, but the tiniest of differences can manifest themselves in huge transformations – for example, the oft-quoted difference in DNA between humans and gorillas is less than 3%.

The *volunteer* model quaternity (shown previously) is useful for identifying differences between cultural behaviours. While many cultures may broadly follow the behaviours of the four quadrants described in the Australian volunteer model, the causal factors that create the movement from one quadrant to another vary between cultures. In Australia our OK-ness comes from the right combination of 'Knowing Who I Am' and 'What I Do' or 'What I Am', whereas in some countries – such as Germany and Japan – job title, qualification and organisational status is paramount.

## Application of the Findings:

### How Were the Findings First Used?

All sponsoring organisations ran introductory information sessions on the findings and the emerging material with extremely positive responses. In 1994, the Australian Quality Council ran more than 16 public sessions in all capital cities with equally positive responses. The resonance of the material with participants in these sessions was overwhelming. Comments included:

*"Such a relief to know someone understands me."*

*"Now I know why some of the American management texts make intellectual sense but don't always feel right."*

*"Phew – this means I'm normal!"*

*"No wonder we stuff up our customer relationships all the time".*

More than 15 years later, virtually all of the participants contacted still recall the sessions very positively but expressed what became a mantra during this review:

*"... I never quite worked out how to use it in a practical sense – but it did give me confidence that I wasn't alone in how I felt".*

A more difficult question to answer is whether and/or how the organisations involved in the studies have changed, based on being equipped with the findings from the early 1990s.

In the 18 months after the original study's release, Telecom embedded the findings into their leadership programs – including them in the design of the programs, materials and content. Customer interactions and activities were also scrutinised. Findings about customers (not published in the original public document and still not widely distributed) were used to begin building a hierarchy of customer relationships based on the balance of Hi tech/Hi touch and small town/big city values.

Whether this all proved to be useful depends on who you ask. Accurate historical customer satisfaction data is privileged and media reporting of Telstra customer service tends towards the negative. On the other hand, a conversation between John Evans and Ziggy Zwickowski (then CEO of Telstra) in November 2004 identified that: "the data was just as relevant and important now as it was when the study was first reported".

There were some clearer successes using the material. Westpac initially embraced the findings with great enthusiasm. David Clancy who managed the Leadership Development unit ensured all his staff and all managers were exposed to the material. The successful merger between Westpac and Western Australian based Challenge Bank was almost completely driven on the principles of the study, for example using:

- Cause and bridge as a metaphor.
- Tell people *all* the news including the bad news early and truthfully.
- Communicate informally (person to person) before formally (role to role).
- No-fail first steps.
- Complete reduction of any sense of crisis.
- Don't sell the future state – help people choose to buy in.
- Show care to both employees *and* their families.
- Manage people's shift in identity rather than only their shift of roles, skills or activities.
- Be very clear about the value to the community.
- Don't get caught up in big/bigger/best as a driver.

Also through Mike Berry, Westpac's NSW Business Banking was transformed using the principles of the studies. His New South Wales unit of Westpac's business was completely restructured and refocussed, virtually without loss of staff or customers. Revenues continued to grow faster than other parts of the Bank during the transformation and this trend continued into the future after the transformation had been bedded down.

However, beyond these specific examples the question remained for most people:

*"this material is great/terrific/powerful and resonates so strongly – but how do you actually implement or use it?"*

For the sponsoring organisations, this was the Achilles heel. The findings had extraordinary face validity ... massive resonance. People loved hearing the material. BUT ... just how can the findings best be used?

### How Were the Findings Used Beyond the Sponsoring Organisations?

Senior executives who have been exposed to the material said that the explanation of Captain Coach is the best, simplest, explanation of a successful manager they had read. Many explained how powerful it was for new managers as a guide for their role.

Jude Pettit (Vic Roads Executive) states:

*"... if you want a new manager to really understand what being a manager is all about just show them the 'Quality Study' and, in particular, the piece about captain coach"*

*Cultural Imprint* ran a series of accreditation workshops for people to become immersed in the material. These ran for more than five years. *Cultural Imprint* also devised a leadership 360° performance review process that was based on the material. The distribution of the material and this instrument was self-limited by a business model loosely based on product franchise – meaning that consultants tended to add it to their toolkit rather than use it exclusively. The consultants who were accredited tended to be already highly successful in their own right and therefore the material (a series of insights rather than a series of modules with manuals) was always unlikely to become the core of their practice. Hence, one of the 'products' with potential to really assist implementation of the research findings had a very limited audience.

Many who were exposed to the material reported that it had a massive impact – see the Andrew O'Keefe example on page 15.

Andrew O'Keefe was working with IBM when the *Cultural Imprint* findings were released. For Andrew they became a 'call to action' due to the way they helped explain the way in which IBM's numerous mergers and acquisitions were playing out in Australia.

Andrew had been surprised to find that the staff/team mergers and organisational transitions he was overseeing in Australia were, by and large, smooth and unproblematic. Intuitively staying away from the 'burning platform' and 'impossible dream' motivational approaches, Andrew had unconsciously adopted a management approach more suited to the Australian culture.

When Val Howarth, originally from Telstra, took him through the findings from the Telstra *Cultural Imprint* study, the findings resonated closely with what Andrew had experienced. He put actions in place to help his team work towards recommendations from the study, such as moving people into the volunteer quadrant.

For Andrew, the *Cultural Imprint* studies have been foundation pillars of a successful career as a senior executive, consultant and author. His 2006 book *The Boss* makes both explicit and subtle mention of cultural imprints.

According to Andrew, when he was consulting, the *Cultural Imprint* findings always had a great impact on clients and were enthusiastically discussed during lunch breaks and during and after sessions.

Consultations across Australia reveal consistently positive responses:

*"fabulous material ... resonates so well ... great edge to have"*

But,

*"I/we only use it as background, or info-tainment ... it's great for awareness raising ... it helps us work out what not to do ... but not so great at what we need to do."*

It appears that the volunteer model is the only element of the studies that is consistently used. And, further, that only the quadrant labels are used – not the axes descriptors. This is ironic given that the significant cultural difference is explained more by the causes of the four behaviours than by the behaviours themselves!

Once again the message is: *Fabulous material ... Just don't quite know how to use it!*

## Is It Still Relevant Going Forward?

To what extent are findings from the cultural imprint studies relevant today? The world and the Australian workplace have changed considerably in more than 15 years. Do the original findings hold true? Are they relevant for the workplace of the future?

This review sought to answer these questions by considering:

- whether the original findings are still used and valued by organisations and consultants today
- whether organisational, global or societal changes have impacted on the validity of the findings.

### Ongoing Use and Value

Among the groups and individuals consulted for this review (more than 630 people in total) there was virtually universal agreement on the resonance of the material (the *Volunteer Model* and the elements of relationship and structure).

Recently interviewed consultants and members of organisations involved in the studies overwhelmingly indicated that the findings remain relevant in the organisations in which they are involved. For the consultants interviewed, this is demonstrated through their continued use of the core findings. For a small number of these consultants (less than 20) the findings and models uncovered in the studies continue to be the major focus of their work. While small in number, these few consultants combined have a local and global client list that would be the envy of many big consulting companies.

Consultants did indicate that through time, they have regularly made changes and modifications to the way they reported *Cultural Imprint* findings to clients. These modifications have been gradual and continual – however, they are generally limited to the language and stories used, rather than large-scale changes to the models themselves. Consultants who were interviewed expected this evolution to continue, with a constant shift to more recent and relevant examples, language and stories.

That the findings from 1993-1995 can be used and illustrated with the stories and issues of today, suggests they are strong and robust. Similarly, the strength of the findings is demonstrated through stories from the past being able to serve as important lessons today, as told by consultants to clients across Australia.

### Comparison and Fit with Future Trends

The Boston Consulting Group identified a number of critical points about future managers in their 2006 report, *The Manager of the 21st Century – 2020 Vision*. The report identified:

- Disappearing retirement and an increase in older people at work
- The trend towards three generations in the workforce
- The growth of India and China as massive economies
- A move to off-shoring of whole functions (eg: IT, call centres)
- Focus on human optimisation
- Increase in workplace flexibility to retain and attract staff
- The emergence of People and Creativity logic
- Taking accountability for outcomes for women
- Serving all stakeholders
- Cult of the top team
- Experts dominating
- Managing substantial personal wealth

The *Cultural Imprint* studies make a logical and valuable fit with these findings. There are many crossovers.

First of all, the obvious cultural self-awareness that is the foundation of cross-cultural skills required for globalisation and off shoring. Liberating people's cleverness and creativity as well as recruiting and retaining people is as much about care, identity and culture as it is about skills and structures. Building a strong top team as opposed to the cult of CEO is clearly built on relationships and a shared purpose or cause.

Multi-generational workplaces with the “exciting” mix of Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y is about more than transactional communication and information sharing abutted to stereotypes ...it is about recognising differences, managing exclusion as well as inclusion, working with the notion of equal humanness, building and enhancing the identity of all people at work (especially woman, as identified in the *BCG* report).

These are all strong factors in the Australian *Cultural Imprint* studies. In many respects, where the *BCG* report identifies the “what” of managers and leaders into the 21st century, the *Cultural Imprint* studies identifies the “how” particularly of the people elements, in the Australian context.

The *Cultural Imprint* data, when juxtaposed with the *Manager of the 21st Century* provides a well-built organisational ‘house’. The *BCG* report describes the perfect house exterior – the capacity to deal with the external elements now and into the future, while the *Cultural Imprint* data keeps the house running superbly on the inside. The combination of technical leadership and people leadership is a complementary and valuable mix of ideas and possibilities. The *BCG* report outlines the competencies of the future (the future is now) and the *Cultural Imprint* data reflects the cultural DNA that can make these competencies real and doable in the Australian context.

Appendices A and B contain a review of social and organisational change that has occurred since the *Cultural Imprint* studies and an assessment of Australian culture today. Together these sections show that the findings of the *Cultural Imprint* studies are as relevant to Australian organisations today as they were when they were first released in the 1990s.

## Cultural Imprint into the Future: recommendations

This project to review of the Australian *Cultural Imprint* studies from 1993 and 1995 has revealed the resonance that the studies’ findings still have with Australian workers and leaders. However, the review has also revealed the relatively limited extent to which the findings have been used in Australian organisations. Through extensive consultation and literature research, this project has generated a number of recommendations for capitalising on the insights into leadership that the studies provide.

### Recommendation 1: Create a training program, not a model

To ensure that findings from the Cultural Imprints studies can be translated into real action in Australian organizations, practical resources and advice is needed.

- Bring together a number of skilled practitioners to build a series of easy to read guidelines covering a range of topics, including:
  - Leadership, management
  - Learning
  - Customer service
  - Teams and partnerships
  - Reward and recognition
- Create a series of practical workshops based on the above materials and topics.

### Recommendation 2: Build diagnostic instruments

To enable organisations to consider their unique context and challenges a series of diagnostic tools or instruments should be developed in partnership with Cultural Imprint Pty Ltd. The instruments could address the topic areas of: leadership, organisational change, change readiness and others as suggested by the *Cultural Imprint* studies findings.

### Recommendation 3: Share learning and insights

Consultants and managers using *Cultural Imprint* material should be given the opportunity to share their learning and insights around usage and improvements via a national Search Conference.

### Recommendation 4: Conduct further research

Further research could be used to complement and strengthen work to implement findings from the Cultural Imprint studies.

## Thanks...

We talked to many people in many organisations – too many to list. However, in particular, we would like to thank the following people and organisations for their substantial comment, contribution or access to their people in workshops:

John Evans from Cultural Imprint  
Judith Pettit (VicRoads)  
Tim Pence (Nous Group)  
Val Howarth  
Andrew O’Keeffe  
Ken Simper  
Nigel Tanner  
Anne Shannon (Seed)  
Fabiola Mazzocco (Transpire)  
Benchmarking Partners  
Mike Berry (Ex Westpac, Credit Lyonnais)  
Tim Wilding (Ex Coca Cola Amatil)  
Department of Justice Victoria  
Port Phillip City Council  
Darebin City Council  
Goulbourn Valley Health  
Ericsson  
Commonwealth Bank  
ANZ  
IPAA Victoria  
Brady Corporation  
Western Australian Special School Principals  
Stonnington City Council  
IPAA  
Toll Global Forwarding  
Merri Community Health  
Merrimu Inc  
Santos  
Brady Corporation  
Telstra  
Vic roads  
The Starting Point

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## Appendix A: Social and Organisational Change Since the Cultural Imprint studies

How have global and societal trends over the last decades impacted on the findings from the *Cultural Imprint* studies?

### Globalisation:

Although sometimes varying, definitions of globalisation typically agree that it involves deeper global interactions, and a growing consciousness of the world as a single place (Pickering, 2001).

For more than half a century, people have speculated about the world gradually turning into a monoculture (Pickering, 2000). With powerful and relatively recent advances like the internet, this assertion is as strong as ever. In theory, the more Australians mix and associate with people from different countries, cultures, ideals and ideologies, the more they are open to adopting new values, products and ideas that may not be traditionally in line with Australian behaviours or customs. It has been argued that, as globalisation has brought about a shift in the speed and direction of change, there is a pressure on countries to modify their economies, their cultures and their populations to receive these movements (Professor Andrew Jakubowicz).

The flip side of this is the view that globalisation may also reinforce a nation's culture, as people may be better able to clearly and strongly identify their country's values and ideals through comparisons and contrasts with other cultures. This idea suggests more of a cultural exchange, rather than cultural imperialism (Storey, 1997).

Some research into cultural studies support this view, indicating that people do not passively absorb culture so much as actively engage in it, like a 'social exchange'. Indeed, there are many aspects of culture, like language, religion and politics that have largely resisted outside influences (Tomlinson, 1999).

During consultations for the review, participants who discussed globalisation tended to suggest that it may not have a great impact on the current relevance of the *Cultural Imprint* studies. It was suggested that certain aspects of globalisation, such as technological advances (see below) may have more impact on organisational processes than on the deep cultural characteristics discussed in the studies.

Other study participants highlighted the fact that globalisation has been going on for centuries, and that the glacial pace of cultural change has left it largely unaffected.

### Gen Y, X and Boomers together in the workplace

The extent of change that has occurred in technology, society, and education since the oldest generations in today's workforce were raised, has triggered worldwide interest in understanding how the newest generation of workers, *Generation Y*, operates in the workplace.

Much had been written and hypothesised about Generation Y and how to best manage and retain them in jobs – how to get the best out of them and their working relationships with Generation X and Baby Boomers in what is an aging workforce. Organisations worldwide have made considerable efforts to better understand, accommodate and harness their abilities.

There is, however, much media hype and speculation about Generation Y, which may contribute to an untrue or overblown picture of the reality. It needs to be recognised that, like all generations, Generation Y is made up of individuals, just as it should be known how global shifts and trends can influence a large cohort.

It is not difficult to see how real and perceived differences between the generations have come about. People now in the latter stages of their careers were likely brought up in an environment where they had little chance to question authority at home or at school. Furthermore, this group also had parents who lived through the great depression and Second World War, who likely instilled values such as thriftiness and respect for authority.

Many researchers suggest that Generation Y has specific and unique characteristics in the workforce that managers and organisations need to understand in order to maximise productivity and harmony in the workplace. In an attempt to separate fact from fiction in published literature, a United Kingdom study (with participants worldwide) found that Generation Ys tend to be optimistic, demanding, ambitious, inquisitive and confident. It found that there was little evidence to suggest that – in comparison to others – Generation Y were any more risk-taking, self-aware, creative, team playing or global in their outlook. Interestingly, this study also found that technical ability is not a Generation Y prerogative, and that this has tended to occur with interest and individual need, rather than age (Ashridge, 2007).

In terms of the work/business settings, research (McCrinkle, 2007) suggests that the biggest market segmentation is not a gender, cultural, income or technology divide, but a generational divide. Generation Y is seen as being different to Generation X and Baby Boomers when at the same age, primarily due to Generation Ys being 'natives', rather than 'immigrants' of technology and all that goes with it.

The Internet is flooded with forums and discussions between managers and business owners worldwide, sharing stories of their Generation Y experiences, what they are good at, what makes them frustrating and why they will never/only hire them. To others, however, the extent to which these generational differences really impact the workforce is questionable. Some consultants and managers interviewed for this project, suggested that these differences are not as great as some have claimed, and feel that many recommended approaches for dealing with Generation Y are simply good basic ways of treating people, and have been so for some time.

However, sitting beside this debate, is the question of whether Generation Y actually relate to the findings from the *Cultural Imprint* studies. This question impacts greatly on the future use and value of the findings in workplaces across the country.

Comparing traits typically attributed to Generation Y with findings from the *Cultural Imprint* studies shows some interesting comparisons. Australian research says that Generation Y place great value on relationships – in particular, relationships in which they feel they are understood, respected, accepted and included. This research also indicates that the extent to which they are regarded in their social groups will play a major part in determining the self-esteem and perceived self-worth of people in Generation Y (McCrinkle, 2007).

This finding holds very similar sentiments to the relationship findings from the first *Cultural Imprint* study. That the importance of secure relationships is still very much alive and important among the current new generation of workers, suggests strongly that many of the *Cultural Imprint* findings may hold true for some time to come.

The relationship findings are very much the crux of the first Australian *Cultural Imprint* study, and from this branches many other findings, including the importance of effective communication, trust and the expectation to be told the truth, as well as the need for appropriate recognition. Indeed, research indicates that all these elements that surround 'secure relationships' are seen as important to Generation Y (McCrinkle, 2007).

By the age of 18, the average young person has viewed over 500,000 television commercials, in addition to countless Internet and radio advertisements, much of which is pure hype. It is not surprising then that it has been highlighted Generation Y greatly value trusted guidance from real-life role models who have genuine messages worth delivering (McCrinkle, 2007).

Putting this idea alongside the *Cultural Imprint* studies, it seems clear that Generation Y have not missed out on developing finely tuned "bullshit detectors" as suggested were part of Australian culture in the early 1990s. Considering the proliferation of media and advertising, they may have even had more practice at using and honing them.

Work-life balance has also been highlighted as a strong Generation Y value. Whether this means choosing a lower paying job that is enjoyable, deciding to work part time, or simply working as a means to travel or concentrate on a hobby or interest, it has been widely reported that Generation Y are willing to sacrifice money for time or enjoyment (Trunk, 2007). In relation to the *Cultural Imprint* studies, it appears that Generation Ys are tapping into the notion of *Who-ness/What-ness*. When they see themselves as a traveller, artist, thinker, friend, mother or person *first*, and a sales representative, accountant, manager or receptionist *second*, they are acknowledging *who* they are, over *what* their job says they are.

Indeed, many workplaces have recognised this and offer benefits such as allowing staff a certain amount of time per week to work on a project of their choice, unrelated to work (Spiro, 2006). This coincides with the importance of balance and identity in Australian culture revealed in the *Cultural Imprint* studies.

Overall, the preceding discussion suggests that despite differences in growing up and the numerous aspects that make each generation diverse, the *Cultural Imprint* findings appear to remain relevant for the newest generation in the workforce.

## Partnerships

Partnerships between organisations have existed for a long time, however more recently we have seen them form in greater numbers than ever before. Successful partnerships offer organisations the ability to share resources, ideas, facilities and client bases for the betterment of all parties (Weiss & Hughes, 2007).

Not only has the value of partnerships between organisations been researched and widely discussed, key aspects and ingredients that are vital to successful partnerships have also become widely highlighted. Many such aspects of successful inter-organisational partnerships are similar to the aspects of quality, relationships and leadership valued by Australians, for example:

- everyone wants things done quicker
- high tech/high touch
- increased awareness that leadership is about an organisation's culture

## Appendix B: Australian Culture Today

For a long time, there has been debate and discussion between prominent writers, researchers and social commentators regarding the existence and definition of Australia's identity and national character. Significant areas of discussion and debate typically focus on whether or not there is a national identity, whether this identity is at all unique, and whether it is important that Australia has a national identity at all.

Some, such as social researcher Hugh Mackay (2007), acknowledge that – in comparison to many other nations – Australia is relatively young and therefore has very much an evolving national identity. The Howard government also suggested that this is an evolving process, stating in its 1999 multicultural policy, *A New Agenda*, that: "Australian multiculturalism will continue to be a defining feature of our evolving national identity".

Further to this point, Hugh Mackay argues that some commonly suggested notions of '*Australian Identity*' are not particularly unique to Australia in relation to other western cultures. This acknowledgement is not new, with contributors such as Stephen Castles (1999) suggesting that Australians should let go of the idea of having a national identity and instead consider Australia to be a community without a nation.

However, the idea that Australia has not yet formed a solid identity contradicts commonly used notions of 'Australianism', seen and heard in the print media, from the government, in film, television and music and from prominent writers and social commentators. Terms such as 'unAustralian', a 'fair go', 'pitching in', and 'getting the job done' feature significantly in the media, in parliament and in film, music and television.

Are these terms and ideals simply tools used by the media to explain how somebody has displayed a characteristic we like or don't like? Are they nothing more than a way of selling a product? Do politicians just use these terms to sell policy, their party or as a case for attacking the values of the opposition? Or are these ideas and terms real descriptors of a true Australian identity?

Author John Hirst is one commentator who strongly believes in an Australian national character, identifying values such as stoicism, making no fuss, pitching in and helping each other as being ingrained into our culture (Hirst, 2007). Hirst also believes that foreigners can see a unique Australian character, but also that Australians have also broadened their 'relaxed' style to include and accommodate an increasingly multicultural population.

Whether such traits exist in most Australians may not be the point; they are still presented, promoted, upheld and made fun of, regardless of their reality, or the extent to which they may be exaggerated.

Author Catriona Elder (2007) suggests that the Australian identity has been shaped by decades of storytelling, myth-making, news reporting and cinema and, through this, Australians have developed shorthand ways of expressing particular characteristics that are considered to be 'Australian'. This in itself is not an entirely new idea, with views from the 1980's suggesting that prominent notions of Australian identity have been invented through a desire to obtain and protect land – and the need to have a story about non-Indigenous white Australians (White, 1981).

Such stories and impressions of a national character have clearly been displayed in Australian films for some time. Until recently, the Australian film industry has been largely financed by government film agencies to produce 'Australian stories'. It appears there is a clear desire from the government to the consumer to have this national character and celebrate it.

According to Janke (1998), by exporting culture, we will always run the risk of caricature and banality. Characters such as the no-fuss, lovable larrikin Mick Dundee (*Crocodile Dundee*), or Darryl Kerrigan with his 'fair go' stoicism (*The Castle*) – whether or not they are true representations of Australians – have shaped how many people from outside the country see Australians and even how some Australians see themselves. Films such as these have certainly resonated with Australians and have also highlighted character strengths and flaws, as well highlighting cultural differences with other countries.

A question that stands alongside whether these characteristics are real and exist, is how much they apply to an increasingly multicultural state and a state which increasingly aims to acknowledge its Indigenous people. Are such characteristics so foreign to some people that they are alienating and therefore further separate Anglo-white Australia from the rest?

Writer and academic Donald Horne (1921-2005) suggested a more pluralist view that Australia's national identity should be rooted in political and civic values, like tolerance, individual liberty, equality; values and ideals that can be recognised and upheld by all people and cultures who wish to be here. Such a model may perhaps be more inclusive, allowing people from all corners of the globe and all walks of life to endorse and present a national persona to be proud of and easily understood.

Certainly, there is more to the Australian film industry than Mick Dundee and Darryl Kerrigan. Stories of ethnic Australians such *Looking for Alibrandi* and *The Wog Boy* are now part of a tradition that celebrates a multicultural Australia. Films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2004) and *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986) explore harsh realities of the relationship between white and Indigenous Australians, highlighting failures in Australian history. Here, looking beyond the typically presented 'Aussie', we see stories of other Australians, whose existence and stories are of growing importance to an increasingly multicultural country, and a country which seeks to better understand and become proud of its Indigenous people and their history.

Elements of Australian culture found in the initial *Cultural Imprint* studies can be recognised beneath the discussion about our real versus our portrayed national character. World Vision Chief Executive Officer Tim Costello, in a recent speech (January 2010) to Darebin City Council emphasised this point:

*"Australian-ness is still exemplified by the movie 'The Castle' – a story about mateship [who-ness] that transcends status [what-ness]...we are all ok if we have a mate, a friend an equal. This is the very thing that gives us courage, energy and focus. In this state we can do anything."*



Level 11, 176 Wellington Parade  
East Melbourne VIC 3002 Australia  
P +61 3 9815 7000  
F +61 3 9815 7001  
E [reception@ibsa.org.au](mailto:reception@ibsa.org.au)  
W [www.ibsa.org.au](http://www.ibsa.org.au)

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