

Reform must focus on respect 20 July 2016

When it comes to inquiries, the Royal Commission is the main game for child sexual abuse. This is the case even though the majority of abuse occurs in domestic settings where the community's authorities are seemingly fighting a losing battle.

Even the Commission has its limitations with many major institutions remaining unexamined, particularly the public education system.

So in the end we will have a snapshot, albeit a very comprehensive one, of how institutions dealt with child abuse cases.

Hopefully we will also have a consensus, facilitated by the Commission, on what is expert advice as to how institutions prevent and if need be, manage child sexual abuse cases. To that end the extraordinary exercise that is this Royal Commission can rightly be seen as an investment in the safety and well-being of children.

Importantly, for that investment to render a good return, institutional governance must remain at the forefront of reform.

Too often the case studies have revealed significant shortcomings in the governance and oversight of organisations where managers and others have not reported to authorities when they should have.

Too often, boards of governance seem to have taken their collective eyes off the main game of ensuring that compliance procedures and regulatory standards were being met.

Too often not enough rigour and scrutiny was taken by boards in the performance of executives and those in positions of responsibility.

This has applied in Church organisations, charitable bodies, private companies and government departments alike. Plainly, the interests of children did not rate enough to ensure that organisational negligence didn't prevail.

With well less than a year of public hearings left the Commission will intensify its scrutiny of organisational culture and practice. On a superficial level some would argue that having the right protocols in place with the right reporting procedures will ensure safe organisations. The Royal Commission case studies show that not to be so. What does work better is a concerted commitment by organisations to develop and sustain cultures where everyone is respected and where everyone is safe. This also requires resources and dedication. It usually comes about through a continuous education program and a commitment to on-going best practice.

But it starts with an unwavering respect for the dignity of everyone involved in the organisation. Abuse of any kind is wrong. It is never justified nor is it ever excusable. Child safe environments should, in turn, become healthy workplaces for everyone. Another decent return from this Royal Commission.

Francis Sullivan
CEO Truth Justice and Healing Council
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