

New Masculinity: From Compliance To Compassion

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Authored by Lorenzo Bresciani, Founder And Managing Director, Manifesto

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M A N I F E S T O

Social change that seeks to encourage positive behaviour in the workplace needs to look beyond male compliance to a set of laws or guidelines and to encourage an evolved definition of masculinity – one that puts compassion at its heart. Surprising new role models are emerging for how this can be done.

As part of my work for brand strategy consultancy Manifesto I have undertaken several recent market research studies into perceptions of masculinity and this submission is based on many of the findings of this work. The first point to observe is that there is widespread understanding that old school masculinity is under siege. The findings of my research speaking to men and women over the past two years reflect the prevalent currents and views playing out within popular culture.

There is much debate about masculinity and certainly the #MeToo movement has become a flashpoint for the discussion of contemporary masculinity and its many flaws. In some quarters of society, especially in parts of mainstream and social media, masculinity is under tremendous scrutiny. Men are acutely aware of this fact.

Reading some headlines and articles you could be forgiven for thinking that 'toxic masculinity' is a form of disease, one that infects young boys soon after birth and stays with them for life. Certainly the nature of the public debate about masculinity is a source of unease for many men, but their overall reaction to the changing social values around masculinity is much more nuanced and surprisingly more positive than might be expected.

So how do men view the world of masculinity and how do they feel about the evolving changes in values and their place in this new world?

Traditional masculinity is easily defined and perhaps surprisingly many men feel quite happy that its values and tenets are being challenged.

Old school masculinity is typically viewed as comprising certain key values or behaviours that are easily identifiable (see Figure 1). Physical strength comes up as a central tenet of masculinity. For obvious reasons it is linked to notions of power, influence and control. It is one of the first things people talk about in the discussion of what defines traditional manhood.

Another element of more traditional masculinity is the notion of being emotionally closed and inaccessible. Emotions are seen as irrational influences and controlling them is seen as highly desirable. Being 'emotional' is often regarded as a female trait. Emotions are to be suppressed or subjugated.

Another side of old school masculinity that comes up in discussions of the topic is the desire to never show weakness. To show weakness is to display "a chink in the armour" and a vulnerability that might undermine control and authority. In this view weakness, either physical or psychological, is to be shunned at all costs. It is not something you admit to others or to even to yourself.

A final theme that comes up around discussions of masculinity as it has been defined historically is that of man as 'provider' not carer – that men can, and sometimes even should, be disconnected from the nurturing aspects of parenthood and raising children.

Interestingly, there was a surprising level of rejection of these old school masculine values and a widespread recognition that such values and the behaviour that flows from them are destructive on many levels, to both men and women alike – and especially to the healthy functioning of the male psyche today.

Figure 1 - Old school masculinity has certain defining traits - not all are listed here but these are some of critical ones that men find problematic.



**PHYSICAL
STRENGTH**

Is strong physically and uses this strength to control this environment and to bend others within it to his will.



**EMOTIONALLY
CLOSED**

Does not open up or share emotions which may undermine his perceived strength to others and himself.



**NO ROOM
FOR WEAKNESS**

Is confident at all times and does not admit or allow self doubt or weakness which might undermine strength.



**PROVIDERS
NOT CARERS**

Does not so much focus on caring directly for others – but will seek to provide for them with – physical not emotional provider.

Old school masculinity is a model for behaviour that is deeply flawed, in part because it sets up the potential for a massive disconnect for men between their inner and outer worlds.

According to the values of old school masculinity, the image men present to both themselves and the world outside needs to be strong and invulnerable. You can't project doubt, fear, insecurity or weakness to others for fear of undermining your sense of masculinity, nor can you accept these things in yourself. The values and behaviours of old school masculinity are not a recipe for sound psychological adjustment.

One needs to be careful when drawing conclusion between masculinity and mental health, but it is not surprising that according to data from MensLine Australia, men experience mental health issues at alarming rates:

- Men are three times more likely to die by suicide.
- Men are nearly twice as likely to die because of drug use
- Male deaths by alcohol abuse-related causes are almost twice those of females

Men in my research studies, although not obviously under overt psychological stress, reported concerns about the expectations that the values of old school masculinity place on them in day to day life.

They report that it is challenging to live up to the masculine ideal. And to many of them the idea of being released from these more potentially destructive masculine expectations is liberating. The realities of life today and the changing way we live means these values feel out of date.

There are clear social changes that have occurred over the past decade that are simply not compatible with the values of old school masculinity.

Old masculinity seems poorly suited to the new realities of life today. Compared to only a decade ago we can see a number of key changes that men readily identify.

1. More women in the workforce – men now share the workplace with women and women are increasingly in senior roles at work.
2. Shared responsibilities at home – all men and especially those with kids recognise they are expected to have a role in life at home raising kids and doing housework
3. New emotional expectations – new but often ambiguous or vague expectations for men to be more open, vulnerable and emotionally accessible.

4. New standards of behaviour – there is a recognition that some standards of behaviour and use of language by men from the past is no longer acceptable – e.g. sexism, boys club mentality, homophobia, etc.
5. Greater female assertiveness – women are now seen as more self-empowered and prepared to speak up, forcefully at times, about their needs and expectations.

For the most part men are positive about these changes and especially those I spoke to who have families and are raising children. Building on these social changes it is not difficult to construct some key characteristics of what modern masculinity is asking of men, and research participants are able to identify some of these quite easily.

Figure 2 - When men and women talk about aspects of new masculinity they talk to the following traits – physicality, openness, care & emotional bravery.



**ACTIVE &
PHYSICAL**

Physicality can still be very much a part of what it means to be masculine – fit, healthy, active and challenging yourself physically



**OPEN AND
VULNERABLE**

Guys today do like the idea of being open emotionally and even will admit to vulnerability and limitations.



**CARE &
COMPASSION**

Men and especially dad are encouraged to care for and nurture those close to them – providing emotional care, love and support.



**EMOTIONALLY
BRAVE**

This is about the idea of being able to face issues and challenges rather than pretend they don't exist through a denial of reality.

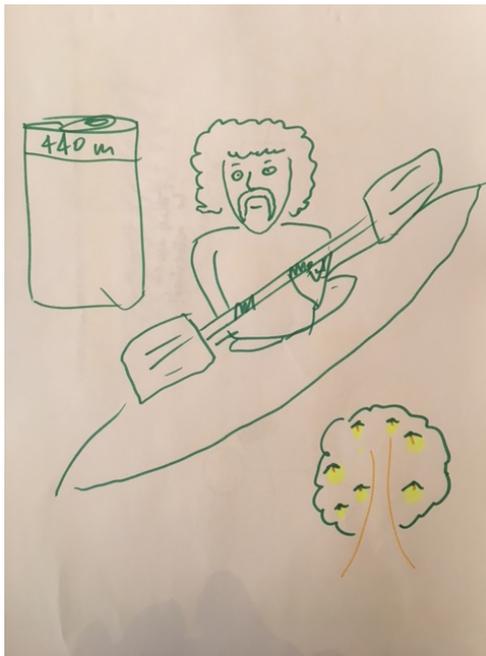
However, the traditional archetypes of old school masculinity are deeply engrained in the psyche of men and are still apparent and active today in culture.

As part of one particular research project we asked men to draw a picture of what the Solo brand represented to them. Some men drew lemon trees or a glass of the soft drink itself, but many drew their recollection of the Solo Man himself – the moustache, the hairy chest, the muscular and virile persona, even the canoe. Solo man is a personification of the old school Australian masculine ideal as it was in the 1970s and 80s. This powerful imagery around masculinity has been a key reason for the brand's enduring success.

The startling thing about this is that the campaign has largely been off air for over 20 years. Despite this long time of absence from our TV screens the psychological structures in peoples' minds have endured. This suggests the possibility that what people learned about Solo Man and masculinity decades ago is still active in their minds even today.



Figure 3: When people in research were asked to draw what Solo (the soft drink) meant to them many drew images as below – derived from the classic ad campaign.



If a mere advertising campaign from the 1980s can still be so active and resonant in the minds of men today, what other influences from their past or present in popular culture will be influencing current thought patterns?

The archetypes of traditional masculinity are everywhere and have been for decades (and longer) consciously or otherwise influencing our expectations for who and what a man should be. They are in the stories, myths and legends we grew up with, they are in the gender roles we saw playing out every day in our childhood homes. They are in the way we played together at school and in our choice of heroes on the sporting field and the silver screen. The traditional definitions of manhood have been powerfully influential in society and culture as far back as you would care to look and show only gradual signs of change. Undoing the influence of such powerful archetypes is an exercise that is decades in the making. It's a long road ahead.



For men who have grown up with a traditional definition of masculinity the current debate about masculinity being ‘toxic’ and the need to redefine it can be challenging and uncomfortable.

Although some aspects of masculinity are recognised as unhelpful, nevertheless the rules of masculinity are familiar. They are a known quantity. They provide certainty. For a defined group of men, these rules are what they grew up with, and in many cases, they have used them to construct and define their identity and sense of self-worth.

The risk for this, potentially sizeable, group of men is that they switch off from the debate and from the need for masculinity to evolve. The risk is that they disengage. If there is one thing men are especially good at, it seems, it's denial - avoiding conflict and not facing up to the real issue.

What we could easily end up with is a generation of men who demonstrate a sort of surface level compliance with what is expected of them. Increasingly men have learned the language of political correctness, they know the right things to say in a mixed gender context, and they are familiar with the inflammatory words they need to avoid.

We need to be careful we don't create a situation where some men learn to negotiate the new regulated world of gender equality - in and out of work - but that their underlying values do not evolve accordingly. Compliant behaviour is clearly good, but it is a fragile position if 'hearts and minds' don't follow.

As a society we need aspirational definitions of masculinity that encourage more than just superficial compliance from men. We need to get people to go beyond doing the right thing because of social pressure or sanction and to do the right thing because they feel it and believe it.

In other words we need men and masculinity to embrace compassion. At its heart, compassion is about a very deep sense of relating to another person and caring for their well-being. In many respects compassion is the polar opposite of 'objectification'. Emphasizing compassion within masculinity gives all of us the best chance of real, lasting and meaningful, as opposed to situational, observance of rules, customs and laws.

Old masculinity is directed outwards but it is inwardly blind. Doubts and fears are suppressed or not acknowledged. If it has strength it is a strength like steel, inflexible and, once overloaded, it breaks. New masculinity is inwardly and outwardly aware.

It has a deeper strength that comes from a recognition and acceptance of one's limitations and vulnerabilities. Its strength is like a tree branch – it has flex and bends rather than breaking under pressure.

One of the keys to getting men to embrace new expressions of masculinity is to recognise that a lot of what we think about as masculinity today, doesn't need to be rejected or thrown out.

Much of what men have always valued about themselves and their masculinity in terms of physical strength, bravery, courage and confidence is still to be valued. As a construct masculinity needs to evolve, but it can, and should, bring forward some of these elements.

Masculinity, does however, need some pretty fundamental editing and an evolution.

What needs to be added in particular is the strength to go inward and to face and accept often difficult mental challenges – to be vulnerable, to be open, to be emotionally accessible, to know and understand your feelings, and to show compassion, care and understanding to others.

In research we have found this framing and means of communicating new masculinity (one that builds on the positive things about being a man) is critical to its acceptance.

It means that men don't have to reject most of what they have learned and who they are in order to fit in with where society is moving. Mostly it means learning values and behaviour in a way that most men agree are good for them, their family and society.

Old masculinity and its tenets may have been intellectually discredited, but there is a vacuum in its place as new masculinity has not yet been codified in culture. However surprising role models for new masculinity are emerging.

Another challenge is that the rules around new masculinity – what it is, how it is defined, its implications for behaviour, what matters and what doesn't – are vague and unclear. New forms of masculinity are emerging all the time, but they have not yet been mythologized into the shared stories, legends, rituals, myths, symbols and icons that codify beliefs and shape common understanding in culture. There is a long way to go before this will happen as we are at the start of journey in this regard.

Nevertheless, some positive signs are emerging and in surprising places. Australian Rules Football at the elite level isn't perhaps the first place you would look for signs of new masculinity, but that is what we are seeing.

In recent years, either through choice or necessity high profile coaches like Nathan Buckley and Damian Hardwick and their respective teams (Collingwood and Richmond) have embraced many of the tenets of new masculinity, not just to lead the way on a social issue, but because they have viewed values such as openness, vulnerability and compassion as essential to team success.

In a 2017 interview in The Age, Buckley opens up about his approach: "I'm more happy to show the human side, and I'm taking a leap of faith with that. The reality is that if you actually open yourself up, if you're more vulnerable, more real, and show different layers of yourself, you create stronger connections. People engage with you more. They see a better version of you."

Similarly, under coach Damian Hardwick and captain Trent Cotchin, Richmond's Tripple H sessions (where players talk about a Hero, a Hardship and a Highlight) have been credited with establishing a new openness that has forged closer connections and a strong team culture at the club.

Further, the attitude to mental health issues amongst AFL players by clubs, media and public alike has also been an area where there has been very positive change.

The issue has been discussed with an openness, courage, honesty and an acceptance of vulnerability that was totally unknown a decade ago. These are small steps, but important ones because of the ability of sports like AFL to reach and influence people – especially a new generation of young men and women.

We need more actions like these and more stories, role models, symbols and rituals to build an understanding of what new masculinity can be. Sport is an area of huge potential for reinforcing positive masculinity if harnessed in the right way.

As a society we should encourage institutions to drive change where we can with policy, guidelines and legislation that start to shift expectations and behaviour in the right direction.

However, one hopes it will also be ordinary people, especially men themselves, who will lead the way by their example and with new articulations of masculinity that put care and compassion at the heart of what it means to be a man today. The words of Paul Kelly, as always, seem a good place to start...

*“On a crowded beach in a distant time,
At the height of summer see a boy of five,
At the water's edge so nimble and free,
Jumping over the ripples looking way out to sea.*

*Now a man comes up from amongst the throng,
Takes the young boy's hand and his hand is strong,
And the child feels safe, yeah the child feels brave,
As he's carried in those arms up and over the waves...*”

Deeper Water, by Paul Kelly, 1995.
