

CCES Community Webinar

In conversation with Michael Outram APM (Retd)

Key themes and take-aways



On 11 March 2026, the Centre for Customs and Excise Studies (CCES) and International Network of Customs Universities (INCU) co-hosted a webinar with Michael Outram, the former Commissioner of Australian Border Force (ABF) between 2018-2024.

This webinar brought Michael into conversation with Professor David Widdowson to discuss what effective leadership looks like in high pressure, high stakes environments, exploring leadership lessons learned, the importance of culture and integrity, and how leaders at every level can navigate uncertainty while supporting their people.

The key takeaways are outlined below.

1. Never ignore your instincts.

Michael reflected on several seminal moments in his career including the UK Miner's Strike in the 1980s, the London Baltic Exchange 1992 and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. Each crisis was unique, and being able to tailor a response quickly mattered. Crisis leadership is about adapting to novelty, and that often means routine responses are not sufficient. Don't ignore your instinct; it's a survival mechanism.

2. The hardest reform is cultural.

Reform isn't just about changing systems, it's about building trust, connecting your people and their work to the bigger picture, and establishing professional standards and safety. While the C3 doctrine (Command, Control, and Coordination) provides a vital framework for managing crises like COVID-19, it functions as an operational tool rather than a definition of organisational identity or culture. Respect at work, diversity, and operational discipline are not mutually exclusive and are

equally fundamental. You can't build a high-performing, trusted organisation on a foundation of inequality. Inviting the Australian Human Rights Commission and Sex Discrimination Commissioner Dr Anna Cody into the organisation to gain assurance around workforce culture and to help oversee cultural change was important.

3. Trust can't be surged in a crisis

Michael talked about the time when he had to publicly defend his team and their conduct in relation to the Ruby Princess Cruise ship. He also discussed the importance of leading as a connector and a translator to help others see the entire system and not just their slice. Building trust and cooperation through investing in partnerships such as the Sydney Airport co-investment model, where Government and Industry were able to co-design and finance border modernisation was highlighted as an example.

4. Invest in your networks - it takes a network to defeat a network.

We often think leadership is about having authority. But more often, it's about how you lead without command. The JATF governance model is a powerful example. A 2-star Commander with no direct control over resources, only a multi-disciplinary team. Success relies on operating task groups covering disruption, detection, and processing. This governance model is relevant for any multi-agency border operations.

5. Federated partnerships – you don't need control to lead.

Operation Tin Can was an example of where the ABF with the support and assistance of the WCO, the World Shipping Council and 43 countries received access

to real-time supply chain data from four major shipping lines. This led to 100 tonnes of cocaine being seized in six weeks. For the first time, shipping lines provided real-time supply chain data to law enforcement. This federated intelligence and targeting at the border is now being extended to air cargo. These partnerships only work if we understand what we're protecting - the border as a strategic asset.

6. The border is a living, breathing system, understand its role and value.

The border has two purposes - security and prosperity, measured as assurance and throughput. The traditional assumption is that these compete. More security means more friction. Both assurance and throughput are driven by shared capabilities - visibility (how much can you see), precision (strike rate, risk stratification), and resilience (adaptability, learning). This framework resonates globally; every border agency faces the same trade-off between assurance and throughput.

7. The technology horizon – the 'border as analytics'.

The key to increasing viability and precision at the border is to fuse trade data, financial, and law enforcement holdings. The better you can see and the more accurately you can target, the less you need to physically touch. Technologies such as AI enable customs to shift from a "border-as-checkpoint" to a "border-as-analytics" function, embedding inspection into the supply chain. This is where we have assured trade pathways where demonstrably low-risk, high-visibility flows earn materially faster clearance times creating a market for private investment. Currently a port operator who invests in real-time tracking creates value for everyone but captures none of it. That's a market failure.

8. Systems thinking and digital readiness are important capabilities.

Today's leaders need to develop the following capabilities.

- **Systems thinking:** The border is an inter-connected system where sovereignty, security, trade, and technology intersect. Leaders need to see beyond their slice.
- **Crisis readiness:** Each crisis is novel and can't be taught from a textbook alone. Leaders need to be exposed to immersive learning, tabletop exercises, scenario planning to build patterns of behaviour and to test their judgement.
- **Digital fluency:** Our budgets and employee numbers will never keep pace with volume increases. Leaders must understand what technology enables and govern its use responsibly.
- **Network building:** Success hinges on partnerships, across agencies, sectors, and countries.

Links to further information:

Beyond the checkpoint: managing Australia's border as a strategic economic and national security asset (Michael Outram APM, National Security College, Australian National University).

www.nsc.anu.edu.au/research/beyond-checkpoint-managing-australias-border-strategic-economic-and-national-security

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