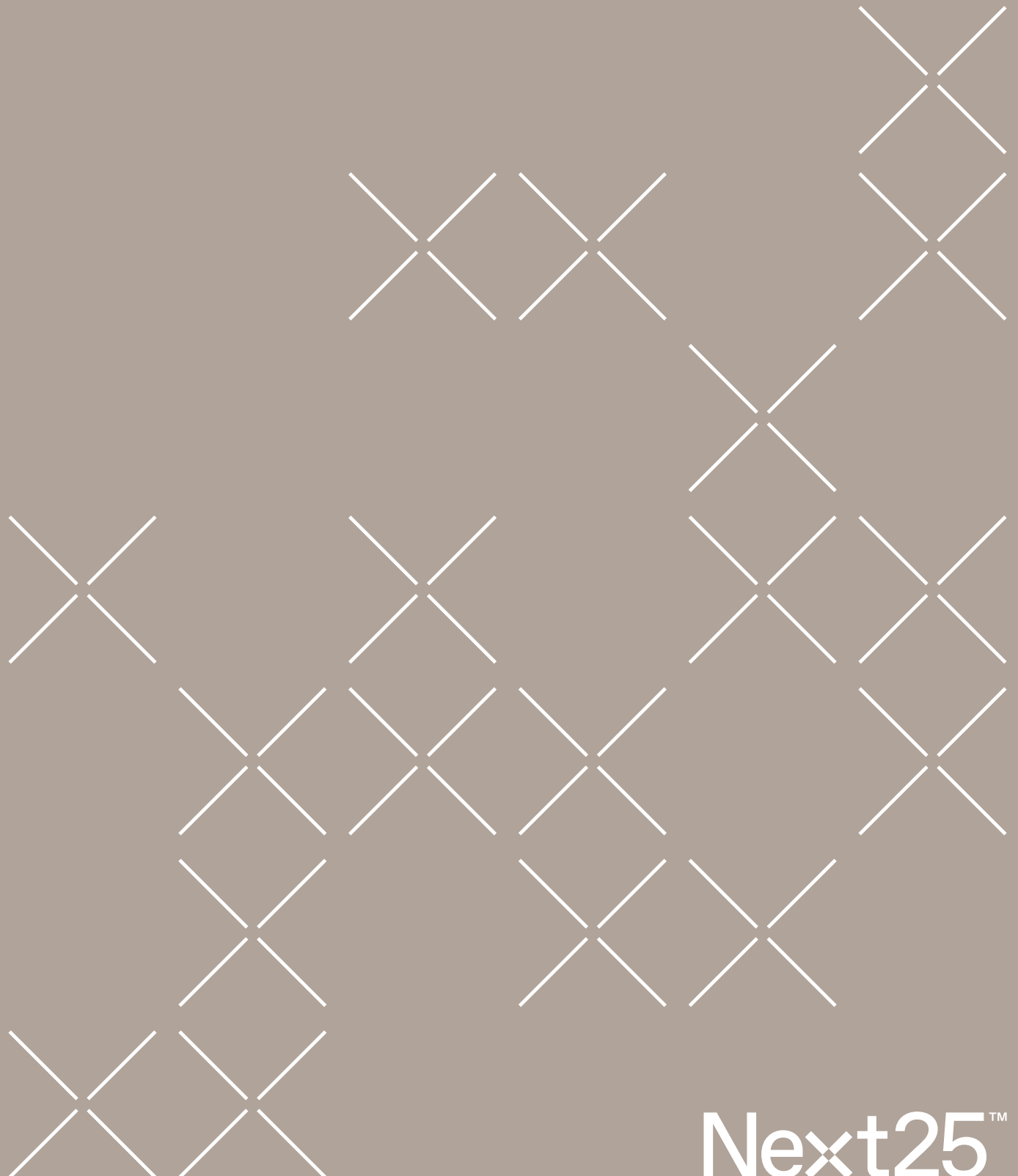


# Taking Responsibility for Mistakes in Australia

Navigator Snapshot #1



Next25™

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# 1. Next25 Navigator and the Future Australia Wants

How do we define a flourishing Australian future? The [Next25 Navigator survey](#) (2021) sets a clear direction by engaging 2,825 people to answer the question, “What future does Australia want, and are we on track?” The survey results show that, overwhelmingly, the public believe Australia is not on track to deliver a flourishing future (see detailed findings [here](#)).

To dig deeper into the survey findings, Next25 conducted 26 qualitative interviews with demographically representative members of the public and an additional 16 people who are informed by their professional roles. Both interviewee groups presented similar responses to our questions and will be referred to as one group (N=42 for qualitative aspects). See Annex II for further details about the interviews and interviewees.

*Taking Responsibility For Mistakes in Australia* is the first in a series of snapshots drawing on in-depth interviews to investigate some of the most significant findings from the 2021 Navigator survey. The following two releases explore Australia’s concept of the “fair go” and dissect perceptions of institutions by age and gender, respectively. Together, these three snapshots provide additional insight on important national issues. This deeper understanding creates a foundation for actively improving Australia's future-making system. Let’s make the future Australia wants.

# 2. There is Widespread Concern that Australia Does Not Take Responsibility for Mistakes

Our quantitative and qualitative research reveals a strong belief that the nation has a problem admitting when we are wrong.

Interviewees describe taking responsibility as “honesty”, “transparency”, and “owning up”. However, there is a shared frustration that people in power, particularly politicians, are failing on this front. People say that truly taking responsibility requires more than a verbal admission. There is an expectation that action will be taken to “ensure it doesn’t happen again”. While it is understood that some mistakes are “not malicious” or are “in good faith”, people say they still want to see honesty and action toward “fixing it” (Man, 50-59).

Our research found that people’s expectations of others to own up are influenced by the closeness of the relationship and perceived power. For example, individuals see themselves and their community as doing a better job of taking responsibility than the broader public and leaders, who are further removed. While there is a higher expectation for leaders and those in positions of power to take responsibility as their mistakes often have wider implications, interviewees also say Australia has “lost the art of forgiveness” (Man, 70+). Overall, respondents are clear that everyone has a role in contributing to the problem and in improving how Australia takes responsibility for mistakes.

# 79%

of the public believe **everyone taking responsibility for mistakes is important**, but only

# 44%

believe **we are doing a good job at this as a nation**



# 3. Perspectives on Australian Culture

## Underdog mentality and aversion to showing weakness

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On one hand, Australians are seen as “fair dinkum and honest” (Man, 60-69). However, other aspects of Australian culture are viewed as perpetuating the problem of failing to take responsibility for mistakes. As a nation “started by prisoners” (Woman, 30-39) possessing a “frontier mentality” (Man, 50-59), Australians often view themselves as “pretty rough” (Man, 50-59) and as having “a strong underdog mentality” (Woman, 30-39). This national identity is seen as a “strength and weakness of Australia” (Man, 50-59), as it can impel chauvinism and a desire to “never show weakness” (Man, 30-39), preventing honesty and owning up. While “being an ‘honourable person’, and ‘a good bloke’ [is a] strong part of our culture” (Woman, unspecified), some see admitting mistakes as “letting your guard down” (Man, 50-59), which can fuel aversion to vulnerability.

“It's both a strength and a weakness of Australia, as we're a pretty tough breed. But sometimes what goes along with that is too much ego, too much male chauvinist sort of attitude, and not enough willingness to say, ‘Yeah, I was wrong’”

— Man, 50-59

“I think one of the biggest things in Aussie culture is big, strong, macho, go to the gym, biggest-muscles alpha ... It kind of all stems from that you never show weakness”

— Man, 30-39

## Australia has not yet properly confronted its past

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Several interviewees pointed to the very foundation of modern-day Australia being built on the back of colonisation, an issue the nation “still needs to confront” (Man, 50-59). Many say Australia’s problem with taking responsibility is rooted in how “the origin of the people on the land of this country is not recognised and we don’t take responsibility for that” (Woman, 50-59).

“We've got this big historical thing that we need to confront and get over and turn ourselves into a better country and better people”

— Man, 50-59

Interviewees highlighted how failing to take responsibility for the past perpetuates scapegoating of responsibility for injustices and inequalities today, saying “it’s

just too easy to get away with things” (Woman, 20-29). There is concern about the lack of responsibility taken for the Stolen Generations in politics and our national consciousness. While some interviewees say that they see people acknowledging injustices on an individual level, many are troubled by the lack of collaborative action, particularly in politics.

“It's easy to just kind of sit back and say, ‘Well, I'm fine, my life's going great.’ But I think it's moving past that and taking responsibility for things that maybe you weren't actually involved in causing, like issues that you weren't part of creating ... the intergenerational issues that are affecting people from Indigenous descent. Nobody alive now was involved in the initial Stolen Generations, but that doesn't mean that there are no effects being felt. If everybody denies that it was their responsibility, and that it is their responsibility ... it's just too easy to get away with things”

– Woman, 20-29

“Taking responsibility for the Stolen Generations ... I think we grapple with how to do that ... at a political level. Individually, people [realise] that was wrong. That [it] wasn't the right thing to do. But that doesn't then necessarily emanate into our national consciousness. We're still struggling with ... the Statement from the Heart, we're still struggling with a Voice. But that's because I think that then gets sucked into the political [sphere]”

– Man, 60-69

Our quantitative research shows that 61% of Australians say respecting First Nations heritage and culture in everyday life is important. But there is still a long way to go, including in addressing the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Man, 60-69). People are calling for Australia to take responsibility for the lasting impact our colonial history continues to have on the lives of First Nations peoples.

#### Complacency and risk aversion preventing Australia from owning up

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Most interviewees believe Australia is getting worse at taking responsibility for mistakes. Many say Australia has become complacent – due to many years of economic prosperity – with little desire from leaders to take risks. As one person remarked, “Thirty years of economic prosperity has made us completely soft” (Woman, 50-59). Some observe that Australia’s long-term economic success has led to “a sense of entitlement” because “things have gone well for a long time, you feel that should continue happening, and it feels unfair when you don’t get the things you believe you should” (Woman, 50-59). This creates an environment where showing vulnerability by admitting you are wrong can be considered too much of a risk.

“People used to [take responsibility] in the past. As time goes on, it has become 'not my job', 'not my fault'”

— Woman, 60-69

“Honesty is not rewarded. It can be an admission of failure”

— Man, 50-59

“We are so risk averse - shareholders, work culture, public service, the government”

— Woman, 40-49

#### Blame culture is taking over

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There is a strong sense that blame culture and aversion to vulnerability is taking over the nation. One interviewee described Australian culture as producing behaviour where we “act like a bunch of teenagers” who are “thin-skinned and defensive”, always looking to remove blame away from oneself (Woman, 50-59). Another interviewee explained how a culture of “not wanting to acknowledge mistakes and be vulnerable” is perpetuated by the way we “fear the repercussions and pre-empt the consequences” (Man, 50-59).

Government rhetoric that puts greater culpability on the individual is also viewed as a vehicle for blame culture. For example, one interviewee reflected on how those who receive welfare payments are often blamed for their own circumstances, but this fails to recognise that “there’s a difference in taking responsibility for mistakes that are your own versus things that the system has done to put you in a disadvantaged position” (Woman, 30-39).

“Blaming seems to be such a big part of society’s behaviour. Who can we blame for this dreadful situation?”

— Woman, 40-49

“I’m not going to go blaming someone who shoplifts because they don’t have enough money to eat because job seeker payments are too low”

— Woman, 30-39

#### Declining journalistic standards and concentration of media ownership

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While interviewees often referred to the influence of Australia’s historical roots and national culture on our ability to take responsibility for mistakes, the media are also seen as a modern-day contributor to the problem. There is a perception that Australian media are stirring up finger-pointing and blame culture. The media are described as “sensationalist” and called out for placing more importance on the entertainment value. As one interviewee noted, “It’s not about understanding, it’s

about creating content, and sensational content” (Man, 50-59). The “poor quality of journalism inside that ecosystem of taking responsibility” is viewed as creating a “minefield” for politicians with the media seeking to publish “gotcha moments” (Man, 50-59). People see this as creating an environment where “politicians do not have the opportunity to describe things in a way that allows them to take responsibility” or one that “creates space for mistakes to be made” (Man, 50-59).

“We have moved into a spin culture. Admitting mistakes is admitting to fault - and then you shouldn't be in the job or won't get re-elected. Weasel words”

— Man, 50-59

The media has many roles, including to inform and entertain. However, people say the media's role of holding the powerful to account is being undermined by the “link between capitalism and the Fourth Estate” (Woman, 50-59). One interviewee pointed to the Covid vaccine rollout as an example with “the Murdoch media not calling out the Prime Minister and the government” (Man, 50-59).

The concentration of media ownership dominated by “the big players” is viewed as exacerbating polarisation among the public. Declining diversity of voices in the media is seen as negatively impacting national discourse, as one interviewee explained, “I can see why they wanted to privatise the ABC and cut its budget because it still seems now to be one of the few sources where you can go to have conversations” (Man, 70+).

“You must look at the evisceration of the media industry in Australia, and the domination of the big players. I mean, I just look at my own family as an example, the source of their understanding is very narrow, they're in places where there is limited media - or they don't seek out a source of views. So, polarisation is exacerbated by the media”

— Woman, 50-59

#### Online platforms becoming the court of public opinion

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Many consider online platforms as “the court of public opinion” that can be “wonderful on the one hand, in terms of providing information, but on the other hand, we see these views that can be very harmful to society” (Man, 60-69). Where the family was once responsible for instilling values within younger generations, that role is now seen as usurped by “influencers” who are “bound up in capitalism and brand” (Man, 70+).

“The ability to sort of shame people online and on social media is so prevalent, the ability to be someone that they're not ... that probably creates a lot of that dishonest feeling because you can be whoever you want to be”

— Woman, unspecified

There is concern that “the ability to shame people online and on social media is so prevalent” (Woman, unspecified) and that “you rarely see people say when things are right, but you see a monumental response when there's some level of criticism” (Man, 70+). Fear of criticism in the public domain can feed dishonesty as people seek to avoid owning up to mistakes. The notion that online you can “be whomever you want to be” (Woman, unspecified) is seen as contributing to an environment enabling scapegoating and avoiding responsibility.



# 4. Who Needs to Step up?

## Most are concerned about leaders

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While we all have a responsibility to own up, our research shows there is a higher expectation of leaders. Mistakes by political and business leaders are viewed as being of a greater magnitude due to the wider impact on communities, broader society, and the environment. The need for greater honesty also applies to more passive mistakes, where damage is caused by failing to act or faltering on a promise.

“Honesty and integrity. If we say we're going to do something, and we don't do it, then we need to be honest about that ... I think it's just transparency”

— Woman, 40-49

“It matters because those mistakes [at a political and institutional level] have real world consequences going forward. So, if it was a mistake about the fact I ordered a latte instead of a long black, I could live with that ... But when you're talking about possibly destroying thousands of jobs and an entire industry in a place because of the desire of a foreign company to get profits out of coal...that is of a magnitude that must be called to account”

— Man, 70+

Politicians are front of mind for the vast majority when considering who fails to take responsibility for mistakes (9 in 10 interviewees). The political sphere is seen as an environment where “honesty is not rewarded” (Man, 50-59). There is a common perception that politicians “will try and get out of taking responsibility if they can” (Woman, 20-29), attempt to skirt around issues rather than being honest, and often fail to provide “straight answers” to “real questions” (Man, 50-59). Interviewees believe politicians are “playing the blame game” in order to “save their own skin” at the expense of others (Man, 40-49; Woman, 40-49).

## 4. Who Needs to Step up?

“The common perception is they [politicians] will try and get out of taking responsibility if they can. They aren't upstanding leaders who take a stance and stand by that. People would respect them more if they did”

— Woman, 20-29

“Politicians are not taking responsibility for answering questions”

— Man, 70+

“I find that politicians tend to play the blame game. If an error has been pointed out or found, then it is pinned to someone else...They never actually say, ‘Yep I was the one that stuffed up that one’”

— Man, 40-49

Politicians are called out for treating their roles like “a power game” and creating unbalanced outcomes, specifically to the detriment of women in parliament. Trying to get ahead is related to scapegoating others, as one interviewee noted, “A woman is often the sacrificial lamb to help the boys keep comfy positions and pay packets” (Woman, 40-49). This is perpetuated by the view that parliament, as a workplace, fails to enforce adequate consequences for mistakes. The result of the “sexual abuse scandals” is one example recalled, where “if that was to occur in any other workplace, you would see a suspension of duties, not a demotion into an area where we have wanted higher representation of women” (Woman, 40-49).

While politicians' behaviour is most condemned, business leaders are also criticised as significant contributors to the problem of not taking responsibility. A third of interviewees said business leaders do not take responsibility, while just over a third said that some do own up. However, there is suspicion that when business leaders admit mistakes that “it's more about optics” (Woman, 40-49). Interviewees condemned instances when business leaders have failed to own up, including damage caused by oil spills (Man, 30-39), financial law breaches by the Crown Casino (Man, 50-59), misconduct associated with the Financial Services Royal Commission (Man, unspecified), and Rio Tinto's destruction of Juukan Gorge (Woman, 30-39; Man, 50-59; Man, 50-59; Man, 60-69).

However, there is also a sentiment that Australia seems to “have lost the art of forgiveness”. While people are calling for those in power to take greater responsibility for their actions and decisions, it is recognised that consequences “disproportionate to the mistake” (Man, 70+) can fuel fear of failure instead of providing space for reflection, growth, and learning from each other.

“The distinction between a crime and a mistake is being lost”

— Man, 70+

### The public is viewed more favourably

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Our interviews show that, overall, there is less focus on the public taking responsibility for mistakes, particularly compared with leaders. As one interviewee reflected, “I think more so than politicians or CEOs, most people will accept responsibility for mistakes, admit a mistake, and try again” (Man, 70+).

One in three interviewees said members of their community own up to their mistakes, but only one interviewee said politicians do the same.

While the public overall is viewed more favourably than leaders on this front, there is nuance in perspectives from a generational lens when considering who does and does not take responsibility. Younger generations are criticised for failing to take responsibility as a result of becoming more entitled and “protected” (Woman, 50-59). Some see young people as “taking advantage for the sake of fun” and say they will “not rock up to work” (Man, 30-39). Along with changing attitudes towards employment, parenting styles are also mentioned as a contributing factor, with “helicopter parenting” preventing young people from being able to “fall down” and learn from mistakes (Woman, 50-59). The tendency to “wrap ourselves in cotton wool” (Woman, 50-59) instead of “deal[ing] with it” (Woman, 60-69) is viewed as becoming more prolific over time.

"My parents never took my side. It was, ‘You did it’, ‘You deal with it’, and ‘You'll be punished’. That doesn't seem to happen anymore"

— Woman, 60-69

However, others say that “standards are creeping higher” (Man, 30-39) as time goes on. It is thought that previously “people took pride in getting away with things... that was a feather in their cap” (Man, 50-59). Interviewees say the “blame game” is more common “in older generations” while young people are viewed as standing up and saying “Let’s do it ourselves” rather than attempting to shift the responsibility onto others (Man, 30-39). These differing generational perspectives provide insight into how Australia's blame culture might evolve as young people age.

“I think the younger generation is [doing] a lot more. I look at my brother's behaviours versus how I would typically behave and then based on my parents' behaviour, I'm like, wow, there are big differences there. So, I think there's the blame game more in older generations. The younger generation is starting to say, ‘Let's do it ourselves’”

— Man, 30-39

### Individually, we think we are good at owning up

---

Interestingly, while the nation overall is seen as failing to own up, majority of people interviewed are sure they take responsibility for their own mistakes. Two thirds of interviewees said they do take responsibility, while a further quarter said they “try their best”. No one said that they do not take responsibility for their mistakes. There is a strong sentiment that “The easiest thing is to put your hand up saying look, I made a mistake” (Man, 30-39).

“I'm always the first to own up. How can I fix it? That is how I was brought up. It was ok to make mistakes when I was growing up. Maybe it was a simpler time”  
— Woman, 40 - 49

“At work I take responsibility for mistakes. If I don't do something, there is no point trying to hide it. It's only going to come back and bite me”  
— Man, 40 - 49

#### **But how can this be true, considering people are convinced that the public does not take responsibility for mistakes?**

This dissonance highlights the strength of blame culture across the nation. We seek to scapegoat others, including our community and the broader public, while failing to acknowledge our own role as a member of these groups contributing to the problem.

“I worry that we've abdicated that process away from you and me, as citizens. And we've pushed it to the court of public opinion or to the judicial system or to some other area. So, in the end, it really doesn't matter what I say or do, and if I can get away with it from the standpoint of institutions”  
— Man, 60-69

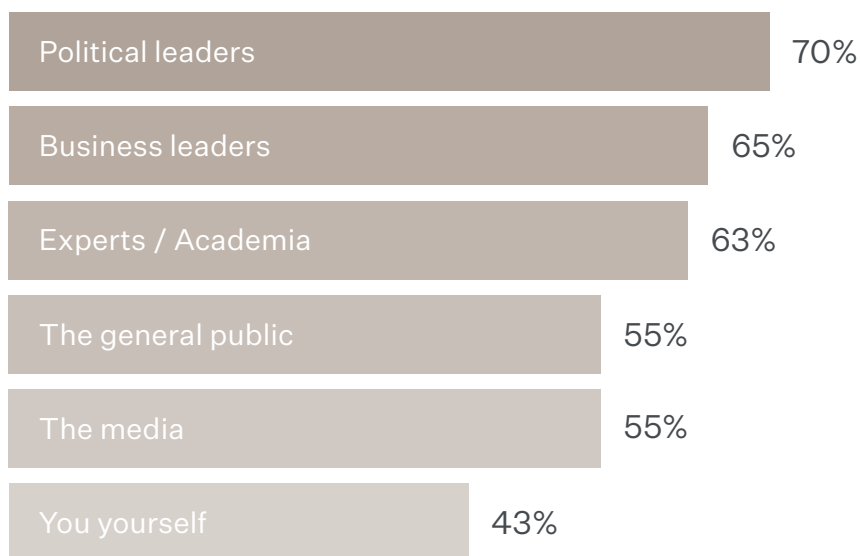
## 4. Who Needs to Step up?

The tendency to shift responsibility for mistakes onto others also extends to scapegoating responsibility for Australia’s future. There is a perception that those further removed from ourselves, such as leaders and institutions, have more influence on the future than us as individuals. As one interviewee put it, “You give up your agency and sort of say ‘This is the fault of society’ or ‘This is the fault of the government’ or ‘This is the fault of big business’” (Man, unspecified). An increasing sense of individualism is observed where communities feel disconnected and powerless to take collaborative action. In the face of public siloes and a lack of individual agency, responsibility for mistakes and the future of the nation is often outsourced to leaders.

“You give up your agency and sort of say, ‘This is the fault of society’, or ‘This is the fault of the government’, or ‘This is the fault of big business’. And it's quite important ... you don't feel you have the ability to respond to systemic level impact. Somehow that agency has been taken away from you or your community ... Because historically, you would have had a helping hand from community players to help you have that ability to respond. Nowadays, we don't know our neighbours, we don't have that local group of people there to help or hold your hand, we don't have those kinds of relationships. So, you've got to take individual responsibility, because there is no communal responsibility, and the institutions are not going to step in and help”

— Man, unspecified

Figure 12: Who can contribute to improving Australia



# 5. It Starts at the Top

There is a strong consensus that leaders and those in positions of power need to role model honesty and transparency.

“If you present yourself as a leader, or an exemplar, or a hero, and you don't take responsibility for your mistakes... I think that's worse than embarrassing. That actually damages society significantly. At the moment, I think those who present themselves as leaders are damaging us because of their failure to take responsibility for their own mistakes”

— Man, 70+

“This lack of accountability is endemic at the top ... the fish rots from the head, it's the tone at the top”

— Woman, 50-59

While all Australians have a responsibility to own up, our research suggests there is an opportunity for leaders to create “a ripple down effect” by demonstrating courage in admitting mistakes.

“So, then there might be a ripple down effect... if the powerful elites are not taking responsibility for their mistakes, then why should I? At the level of individual agency, you can certainly look at it from that perspective”

— Man, unspecified

# 6. Opportunity for Positive Change

The Navigator 2021 survey revealed Australia is failing at taking responsibility for mistakes. This snapshot draws on the voices of the public and those with opinions informed by their professional role to delve deeper into the problem. While Next25 acknowledges this is a widespread issue across the nation, our research highlights an opportunity for those with influence to role model integrity and transparency for greater leadership outcomes and improved public trust.

Change is driven by people. With the knowledge in this snapshot, we can all reflect on taking responsibility for our mistakes and what failing to do so means for Australia's future. Rather than perpetuating blame culture and risk aversion through finger-pointing and dishonesty, Australia has an opportunity to reconnect with the art of forgiveness by cultivating an environment that authorises and rewards honesty. There is a strong call for leaders across business, politics, and media to role model this behaviour by being more concerned with opportunities for learning and growth rather than fearing a loss of power or profits. The public also has a responsibility to enact positive change in their own communities and hold space for others to do the same.

Together, let's make the future Australia wants.

## Acknowledgements

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# 7. Method and limitations

## I. Further detail on the quantitative Navigator survey

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Navigator has a sample of 2,825, is nationally representative and has been analysed across gender, age, household income, education, employment, state / territory, and region (metro, rural / regional). Fieldwork was conducted by Catalyst Research, online, between 16 December 2020 and 12 February 2021. The margin of error for the full sample (2,825) is + / - 1.8%. Every demographic and segmentation measured has a sample size of 500 or more and the margin of error is + / - 3.7%. In terms of limitations, the study results reported represent the first iteration of a long-term research program.

## II. Further detail on the qualitative research

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Following the initial survey, semi-structured interviews were held with established and emerging leaders and the general public (n=42) to deepen Next25's understanding of three emergent themes: the fair go, responsibility for mistakes, and differences in age and gender. Between May-July 2021 the Next25 research team conducted hour long online interviews with emerging and established leaders (n=16) on the themes of fair go, responsibility, and age and gender. Participants ranged in gender, age, sector (ie, business, academia / expert, community). During August 2021, Catalyst Research conducted hour long online interviews on the same themes with the general public (n=26), participants ranged in gender, age, employment status, education level, and state and territory. Regarding limitations, the qualitative nature of the method could not eliminate respondent bias. Further, within the general public interviews, not all participants were asked all categories (individual, your community, general public, politicians, business leaders).



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