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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #74

REVISITING 'WORKFORCE TRANSFORMATION'

Hosted by David Pembroke, Founder and CEO, contentgroup

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

I begin today's program by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land from which we broadcast today, the Ngunnawal people, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands on which people are listening to this podcast today.

Today, we revisit a conversation from earlier this year, in which discussed the hot topic of workforce transformation and the skills that leaders need to make it stick.

Change is now with us and ever precedent, whether it is in response to an external shock, or internally generated to capitalise on an emerging strategic opportunities. With change, comes a need for workforce transformation. Given the risks and opportunities that leaders face today, what skills do they need in order to successfully lead workforce transformation?

In this episode, we were joined by Adam Canwell, who is the Oceania Workforce Advisory Leader at EY Australia, Dr Andrew White, a Senior Fellow in Management Practice at the Oxford University's Saïd Business School, and Harinder Sidhu, the Australian High Commissioner to New Zealand.

The conversation focused on the research that Andrew and Adam have undertaken for EY, to ensure successful workforce transformation. But the podcast begins with my voice.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen, before we come to the research that Andrew and Adam have been undertaking, I want to ask you a personal question, and I want to ask you to reflect on your own experience and to tell the audience how you feel about leading in such uncertain times. And what's the one thing that you've observed in your organisations or the organisations that you've been working with that is helping people to thrive. Harinder, I'll throw that to you first.

Harinder Sidhu:

My first reaction is, how do you think about leading in uncertain times. I think my first reaction is to say terrified, and then the flip side of that is actually quite excited. And the reason is that where there is flux and ambiguity, there is tremendous scope for creativity and for your ability to really make an impact. Instead of just minding the ship, you're actually moving it forward. But when I think back, particularly about the enormous transitions we've had over the last two years, I'd say the one thing that when my teams were really doing well, it's when they had a really distinct sense of purpose and a shared sense of purpose. And I think that's what made all the difference to people being able to see it through as opposed to people wobbling and falling off the edge. And when you think about that, that really allowed me as a leader to lean into that and to drive that sense of purpose.

David Pembroke:

Did you feel that anxiety or did you feel anxiety at times? And if you did feel anxiety as a leader, how did you cope?

Harinder Sidhu:

So yes, I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel anxiety. Often in the last few years, I've had to deal with very large things that we've had to achieve on the path of the government in very short spaces of time. But with that, I think there's a recognition all the way through that you are really doing something quite unique and different, and I'm a person who gets very excited by the ability to actually achieve something and to drive to the goal. So the way I tried to deal with, it's like steering a ship in a tempest. You have to keep your eye on the horizon, on the goal, but you have to stay in the moment and actually get through the moments. That's really mostly how I dealt with it with my teams.

David Pembroke:

Dr. Andrew White, your particular experience and the one thing that you've observed.

Andrew White:

David, firstly, thank you for having me and it's great to be here with such a good panel. I'd probably echo a lot of what Harinder said. I think she really put a finger on so many of the important factors about going through the times that we're in. I recalled as we were having this initial conversation what it felt like right at the beginning of COVID, and I remember sitting down with my boss and said, "It feels like the floor has just disappeared and we're falling and I don't know when it's going to stop." And both of us found that metaphor really quite interesting. At what point were revenues going to stabilise? We knew they were falling, but where they were going to stabilise. At what point were we going to see how resilient the organisation was and where the new normal would settle to around working from home and how that would work and how that would operate? So there was something about I think the nervousness of that, just not knowing where the stability was, not knowing where the foundation was. And I can still remember that quite vividly.

I think if I would say that there are the two things to build on what we've already spoken about, one would be living with a sense of impermanence that nothing is permanent and also then living with a sense of not knowing. Those two things can be terrifying and they can be hugely energising. I think like Harinder, we're living in a time of real anxiety and great opportunity. It's in periods like we're in today where I think whole industries are destroyed and whole industries are created and not many people live through times like this. And we've got a great opportunity to get things right like climate change, like digital technology over the next few decades, and we've got a great opportunity to get things wrong, and I think that's the crux of where real leadership is.

David Pembroke:

So how can you be confident when you don't know if confidence is a prerequisite to effective movement and progress?

Andrew White:

I think it comes back to this whole question of purpose. Why do we exist? There are some things which don't change, I think. And so our operating model might be changing, but who we are and what we are and what we care about doesn't change. So it forces us, I think, to come back to something really important, and whether we call that purpose or values or a vision for why our organisation or our part of the organisation exists. So it gets us to, I don't know, a higher place. A place of where things are really important. And I think that's in many ways the job of leadership, is to articulate that.

And I think the other thing that doesn't change is our ability to be compassionate and empathetic with each other and care. And I think these two things, they have a chemical reaction to them in terms of focusing people, energising people, motivating people. So that's where I would go. It brings us back to something, as to why we exist as people and why we exist as an organisation.

David Pembroke:

So Adam Canwell, your personal reflection. And again, the one or two things that you have observed, and particularly, I imagine in this role that you have with EY's global leadership practice, you would've seen so much. What are some of those things that you've seen that have helped people to thrive?

Adam Canwell:

Yeah, I was just reflecting. I think as you asked your question, our minds go back to the beginning of these two years and how it felt, and obviously the answer is extreme anxiety and not knowing. I think the key, because what none of our people, our workforces, needed from us at that moment in time was us to lead from a point of stress. We had to find a way of anchoring ourselves in something that we believed in so we could lead with purpose and anchor ourselves and take people through it. And that's not having to have all the answers, but it's actually leading from a point of belief and then being able to be creative and future focused in what we were doing.

If I go back to the beginning, there was a really key point for EY as an organisation where, obviously as you're facing into the largest uncertainty where you don't know what's going to happen with all of the work that you're doing, you don't know what's happening with your team, our executive team took a step back and said, "If we really look at this, this is a health crisis and this is impacting on people. And all of our reaction is going to be people centred or human centred." So any decision we take is going to be with people at the heart of every decision that we take. So we absolutely said we all shared the pain. We will not do redundancies unless we absolutely have to. We will look after everyone as best we possibly can. And that was a true...

And we came out with that as a point of principle across all of the organisation very quickly. And that was an incredible moment because it was a point of we didn't know, we had no idea, but we were going to be united in our belief as to how we needed to lead it. And we gave ourselves a really important navigation and framework to allow us to work through it, which gave everyone across the organisation faith in our decision-making but a belief in how we were going to take decisions. So it was that point of belief that allowed us to lead in as coherent a point as possible because everyone is under incredible anxiety and stress, so you have to have something that allows you to anchor.

Then you go pragmatically some of the things I saw. We quite quickly said, "We've got to have connectivity with our people because we suddenly we're virtual. We're not connected." So we clustered everyone in our organisation into clusters of 15 who met every week with one of our partners. We're a partnership. We're a partner led business. So a group of 15 would meet every week with a partner. We actually worked with a psychologist, Jono Nicholas, who founded the Wellbeing Outfit, and we spoke to Jono, because one of the things you've got to be able to do is bring real conversation into the organisation. Where are people really at, and then what do we need to do to support people? And we just came up with a really simple tool based on what Jono said.

It was just a very quick check-in, "1 to 10, where are you at? With 10 being I'm great, I'm ha".ving a wonderful time. 1, I'm in trouble, I'm really miserable, and I'm really suffering with this and red flag, I need some help". And at the beginning of each meeting for the first few months, we would just do a simple check-in with a number. What that gave you was a weighting of the workforce, but also we could personally treat anyone in our organisation who was in trouble and it wasn't a difficult mechanism to put in place. So it's a beautifully pragmatic way of getting the pulse of the organisation and being able to act on it in a very micro way really quickly because people are ... You're a sole decision making frame. You've got to know where your people are at.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen. Both you and Andrew have been very busy with this piece of research. Adam, perhaps tell us about that research and maybe even bring us into some of those earliest conversations that you and Andrew

had about some of the questions that you were asking each other and some of the problems that you were trying to solve.

Adam Canwell:

Yeah. It has been our life for the past two years, hasn't it, Andrew? And it's interesting casting back because obviously, we actually conceived this well before COVID, but I think COVID highlights a lot of what we're saying and brings a lot of it to life actually. About three years ago actually. So Andrew and I partnered together on different initiatives, both work we've done in the market with clients and then also work that Andrew has done with EY on research. We must have been working together for about 10 years in different ways.

And about three years ago, EY, we were looking at who we were and who we wanted to be. At the heart of our consulting business, we said what we really want to do is help our clients deliver transformation or transformative programs successfully. We want to be standing shoulder to shoulder with our clients, helping them deliver really significant changes to their organisations, and we want to be famous for doing that. Andrew, myself and our global sponsor, a guy called Craig, we're talking about that. You don't have to go very far to find some pretty poor statistics about the success of major programs. I think John Kotter in 1997 said, "No more than three in 10 major change programs deliver success in their own terms, so there's a 70% failure rate."

Now, if you're a large organisation saying we want to be our clients' partner of choice as they lean into this, and you're sitting in an industry that's got a 70% failure rate, you should really have a hard look at that and say, "Is there anything that we could do?" Particularly as we started with this conversation in a world of such intense turbulence and shifts and change and some really complex, tough, wicked problems in front of us, it would be good for everyone if we could find a way of improving that rate of success. And that was really the starting point when Andrew and I were really debating, how would you address that as a reasonably complex problem?

David Pembroke:

So Andrew, the research has commenced and it's been released, and there are six factors that you've identified for successful workforce transformation: purposeful vision, psychological safety, purposeful technology, adaptable leadership, discipline freedom, and radical interdependency. So Andrew, could you just take us through those factors and just explain a little bit more about those?

Andrew White:

Yeah. All big words, aren't they?

David Pembroke:

Yeah, but I'm sure you tried to cram them. There's a lot in each and every one of them. They're stuff full of insights.

Andrew White:

So let me try and bring it to life in terms of a couple of case study stories. So one of the other things that Adam and I have done is some podcasts with some of the interviewees because what we didn't want this to be is very conceptual. We wanted it to be grounded in real stories of transformation.

The first one is what happened at L'Oreal, this is the big consumer goods company, back in about, I think, 2016 when they were doing incredibly well. This wasn't a failing company, but they looked forward into how the world was changing and realised that their dependence on retail supply chains wasn't going to be sufficient, that they needed to develop direct relationships with consumers. They needed a digital interface

through which they could relate to consumers. And they needed to work not just with advertising agencies but also with people like influencers and the whole way in which marketing was changing. So the CEO took the entire executive team off to Silicon Valley for a significant period of time, got them to leave their jobs behind to the extent that they could, and said, "We need to understand the future."

So what do we take away from that? I think a couple of things. One is that they consciously disconnected from the status quo. They went to a different place to understand this purposeful vision. It's difficult to do that when you're in the fray, when you're under the pressure, when you've got the diary that's all around how we're currently working, the committees, the board meetings, etc. There's something about stopping and there's something about going to a different place to observe the future. And people would say that's a luxury. I don't think it's a luxury. I think it's an absolute necessity. And I think if you don't do it and if you don't discipline yourself to do it, you're failing as a leader.

They went to Silicon Valley because that's where their future was being created. Silicon Valley is not always the answer. It can be going out into nature or it could be going to visit an operation in a different country where they may be further ahead in terms of government practices. But it's that separation from the status quo, which allows you then to get into that purposeful vision. And that has to be, for those leaders, a safe space where they can say, "We don't know what the future will look like because that can be, if we're honest, a vulnerable place to be in where you don't have answers." So that starts there.

And very quickly, you then have to take that to a workforce. And when you take that to a workforce, that workforce can be disturbed because you're telling them that their way of working, their way of operating is going to change. We had other cases where people had been doing a very similar job for decades, and along came the head of the function and said, "Your way of working is going to change." That puts somebody into a state of anxiety. They may hear that and say, "Are you telling me I've been doing my job all wrong?" How do you lead people through that process?

Often, when we set up a transformation project, we start with a project plan, and that's a very rational thing, but where's the plan for the emotional transformation? What are the measures we're going to use? What are the interventions that we will use to help that person and help probably hundreds of other people like that person go through the process of shock, of anger, of anxiety, of not knowing with both pace and patients to then help them see that they have a place in the future?

That story was out of one of the big insurance companies, and they had a decision, do we implement an IT system in two years across all the countries we're working in or do we implement it in one country in six months? Getting the technology right early and landing it and making it visible, it's not technology for technology's sake. It's because technology can often show us what my future looks like. And so I might be, say, working in New Zealand but it's implemented in Australia or vice versa, but I can go and see it and I can get a better view of how it would work. And it shifts me from being reactive about the loss of the status quo to being creative. That's a really important emotional transition that people go through.

So those two stories capture a lot of what we mean by those six factors. We can talk more, but that's really what we're talking about. It's about the separation from the status quo to really get into a vision for why we exist, the safe space that's needed to go through the emotional processes with leaders, with workers, and then making that technology real early so people move from let's say reactive about the loss of the status quo to being creative about the future.

David Pembroke:

So Harinder, listening to those stories, reflecting on those six factors, in your experience not only in your current role as Australia's High Commissioner but obviously the senior roles that you held with DFAT, what are your reflections on the research and how can it be applied in the public sector context?

Harinder Sidhu:

Look, I think it all applies everywhere the same, I think, in the public service context. I must say all of that resonates a great deal with me. In various roles I've played, not just in DFAT but elsewhere, I've seen exactly that issue.

The one thing that really comes home to me is that all of this is actually emotional work. Fundamentally, we're dealing with people. Successful change always involves bringing people along. So you talk about an IT change, and too often, I think that we in organisations think of IT changes just as a technical change and everyone else will welcome it. In fact, interestingly enough, I find in my experience in DFAT and elsewhere, even when you make a change that is demonstrably for the better, people will suffer some level of grief when they lose the world as they are attached to it. So I think it does resonate.

It's not COVID, and I think we can get fixated on COVID, but it's worth remembering that COVID was a crisis. It's probably led to a bunch of transformational changes, the biggest one being work from home and flexible work and the uptick in the use of technology. But there are many other changes in training.

There's a couple of observations I'd make there from my experience in DFAT where we had, just to give you an example, we had COVID and we had several different types of work that came from that. Everything from helping trade expose businesses to rescuing Australians to bringing them home, while we had the blast in Beirut to deal with, a significant consular crisis. We had to evacuate distressed Australians and others from Afghanistan in the midst of all of this. These were all overlapping multilayered crises that we were dealing with, at the same time as we were dealing internally with leadership transition, while we were trying to undertake some corporate reform and while outside around us, the world continued to change and shift.

When we think about change literally, we always think about managing the one single change from its start to its finish. But in fact, we're in a world where we're dealing with multiple change. The ability to lean into that emotional work and to give your people confidence and actually to feel that confidence yourself and take you through that, I think, is absolutely vital in the leadership.

And the only last thing I'll say in terms of my reflection on all of this is while you as a leader, it really is on your shoulders to articulate the vision. Allan Gyngell, who is someone I really admire, says, "The job of leadership is interpreting the future to the present." And I think that's very true in terms of what you're trying to say, is to say there's a vision out there and that's what it means for you today. And if we can come along that path, I can take you there. And I think that's really our task.

The last thing I wanted to say here was that we tend to forget the leaders themselves. So we tend to see leaders as these neutral actors who need to have all these qualities, but in fact, they also are dealing with all these changes in the process. So the level of emotional work and regulation that you need to have while you are leading your people is something I think we need to take into account and find ways to support.

David Pembroke:

So just in terms then of this notion of purpose, because the research tells us that one of the six factors is this notion of purposeful vision, and in the very first answer that you gave, you spoke about purpose. Is it a little bit easier perhaps in the public sector because of that purpose, because of that mission and because that is baked into the work that is done in the public sector that perhaps it's a little bit easier to lead because there is that baked in purpose? What are your reflections on that particular proposition?

Harinder Sidhu:

Yeah, David, that's an interesting perspective. I do think that a lot of people join the public service and work in the public sector because they are driven by a sense of meaning or purpose, but I don't think it's exclusive to the public sector. The public sector has its share of people feeling that they're doing work that's not purposeful as anywhere else. I really do think that this boils down to the ability of leaders and actually the organisation as

a whole, so it's not individual leaders here. It's the whole organisation, the leadership of the organisation to be able to articulate the purpose. And that goes down to not just telling people what you're going to do, but why you are doing it and persuading them of that why.

So I've worked in a senior role in the Department of Climate Change previously. That was really clear, I suppose, what we were getting to. We were very outcome focused. But when you work in a large public service organisation that has a huge amount of day to day administration in it, it can sometimes be difficult to discern the wider purpose. And so there's a task on all of us right through the organisation to articulate that and to keep everyone focused on the goal, to keep their eyes on their prize, I suppose.

David Pembroke:

So Adam, as you listen to Harinder's reflections, how would you respond?

Adam Canwell:

There are a couple of interesting things that came to my mind as you were thinking just on this purpose piece and delivering transformation in the public sector. I think my experience, and actually there's some interesting data in the research that I would touch on which say there's an incredible strength of the public service that so many people do join it because they believe in the mission. They're deeply committed to it. Of course, that also makes them much more intense critics of leaders when they feel it's not being led in a way that is in tune with how they see it should be led. So it's both an incredible strength. If you can authentically tap into it, you can achieve wonderful things, but it's also a dangerous space because you're never going to be perfect in the eyes of everyone across the public service.

We very deliberately, with this research, when we were doing this, we've got a global database of over 2,000 programs and then we've done deep dive interviews across about 30 organisations. And when we were conceiving it, we thought that we might find quite significant differences between industries or countries or something that we might end up having a few different points of view about this. As we analysed all of the data, there's no significant difference by country or by industry across these six levers. They're all true in all contexts.

The only thing that you can really see quite clearly in the data is that it is much more difficult to deliver transformation or major programs in the public sector versus the private sector. And as we've tried to unpick that, there appeared to be two things. One I think would be obvious to most, and they probably both are, but one would be you've just got much less freedom to act as a leader in the public service than you do as a leader in the private sector. You've got less tools that you can pull on in terms of how you can drive change in the public sector. You're a bit more constrained in your go-tos.

The other piece that it looks like, particularly when a program is a longitudinal program, it goes above six months, because of the fast pacing, pace of change in the political layer and different agendas that are playing, it's very difficult to stay a course. So those two factors interestingly show it is more difficult to land really successful programs in the public sector, which I think is important. The piece that then you can see is that people then to what you were saying, David and Harinder, you've got to go to the belief system because that's the piece that if you can really tap into that energy of what do we all believe.

And underneath all of that is the ability of leaders. I think, Harinder, you said the ability of leaders to lean in. It was quite interesting. When we looked at the different ... There's a really stark difference in the data between the leaders of successful programs and the leaders of unsuccessful programs. Leaders of successful programs do lean in. They listen. They care. They're with the workforce. When you look at the data on the leaders of unsuccessful programs, they lean out. They look after themselves. It's really interesting. They externalise everything. They've always got someone else to blame, the consultants who weren't very good. The technology didn't work. I didn't have political backing. The board weren't behind me. There's always an other person that or an other thing that is at fault for the transformation.

I was looking at some stuff this morning, and I think it was Collins. I can't remember the original person who contrasted effective leadership is the analogy of the mirror or the window, i.e., when things are going tough, when it's really difficult to get stuff done, do you look out the window to find someone else to blame or are you looking in the mirror to look at yourself and say what do I need to do differently? And at the heart of all of this was leaders who are constantly looking in the mirror because they know that they're a really key part of the success and they've got to be constantly working on themselves and constantly stretching to what do they need to do differently.

David Pembroke:

So Andrew, Adam has really clearly articulated the challenges there in the public sector, that challenging context that's there. And I believe that you are working with leaders in the Victorian public sector. So how are you using this research and the skills and the knowledge that you have to improve the performance and that transformational leadership in the Victorian public sector?

Andrew White:

So we're at the beginning of thinking about that. We've just finished the research and we're now thinking about how do we take this into teaching interventions, into workshops, etc.? But there's a few things I want to talk about in terms of where we've got to in our thinking.

One thing we know is that nearly all transformation projects start, this came through our empirical data, with let us say positive emotions, excitement, anticipation, a sense of we might be doing something different and interesting. We also know that not long after that, all transformation projects tend to go in a negative direction and so the emotions become more difficult. There is a critical point in there that, and I'll use the phrase that Adam talked about, certain leaders are able to turn that I think by looking in the mirror and not blaming other people and turn that back into a positive direction. Sometimes that's weeks. Sometimes that's months. Sometimes that can even be years. And they land the transformation in a successful emotional place, and we think that parallels their performance.

If I just touch on that for a moment, what they then end up with is a situation where transformation begets transformation. It leaves such a positive sense of we can do this. There's a confidence in us as a team. There's a resilience in us. So we can do this again. Conversely, that pivotal point can also be a downward trajectory, and that can lead into a very difficult place. What we notice is that leaders don't suffer as much as the workforce. We think because of their power, their status, they can jump ship, they can switch onto other projects. They've got more agency. The workers are the ones that really suffer. And when I say suffer, I mean suffer. Some of the language that came back in the free tech survey was not good, to be honest. It was things that I don't think would've been out of place in a clinical environment around a mental health activity.

So what do we learn from that? It's that we are able to upfront work with people and help them design a process and help them think through how do they get that positive outcome rather than that negative outcome? And what are the interventions that they need to put in place? Simply put, if you think about let's say your left hand is your dominant hand, and in your left hand being dominant, you know how to do a project plan, you know how to think about tasks, you know how to think about KPIs, you know how to think about critical activities and reporting of data and all of that. Your right hand is not your dominant hand, and that's about leading the emotional journey. And most leaders don't know how to do this as well. They've been brought up knowing how to do the stuff with the left hand. The right hand is about leading that emotional journey, even designing that emotional journey. Having a deep intuition as an organisation, how long do we need to give people to really process things? When do we move from patience and creating space for things to pace? What are the interventions we will put in place to listen at a one-to-one level, at a team level, but also through technology? How will we understand where our organisation is? What measures or indicators will we use to understand the states that we're in?

Well, I talked about reacting to the past that they're the grief that Harinder talked about in terms of the loss of the past or flipping to being creative about the future. And what are the interventions we need to make to move the organisation? And so that's what I think we're giving people a heads up around. It's how to be as good at the emotional as people are at the rational. But when the two things come together, that's where the magic happens.

David Pembroke:

So Harinder Sidhu, I've noticed you scribbling notes down there and the head is nodding. There's obviously some reflections there from what Andrew had to say.

Harinder Sidhu:

Yeah. This piece, I was just reflecting as Andrew was talking about all the various change projects I've led and the ones that have worked and the ones that haven't, and you have to be honest about the ones that haven't. And it's this pivot point, I think, that actually ends up being the undoing. Too often, very often, I have seen that when we go down, and we always know, you start with the honeymoon and everyone is very excited, and then actually you've got to do the hard yards to get that change better down. There's a point where you hit a plateau, I would call it, rather than a negative. You hit this plateau. People start to lose confidence that we're actually going anywhere. Why are we trying, persevering with this thing? Because actually, I'm not seeing any change. Where are the benefits I've been promised, etc.?

And I think that what it calls on us as leaders to do is to bring confidence and courage to the story, to have faith that we will actually get there in the end. And when I think about the times I've been able to do that, that's come from a point of experience where I have known that we were going to go through. One of my little sayings is to say, "You're not going to get to the light until you get through the tunnel first." So letting people know that there is actually going to be a light. Just follow me and we will get there.

And then it's really incumbent on you to deliver that. There's a bit of work that has to be done to maintain confidence and faith. And at the same time, to be able to helicopter enough over everything that's going on, to start to see when in fact it is starting to go off the rails, to be able to make a call. In the midst of COVID, we were running a very big HR modernization process. And there was a live debate, and I don't know that we ever really landed on the right spot that we knew we had to do this work. There was a live debate about whether it was a good thing to continue with a major transformation program in the middle of COVID. After all, it's all changed anyway. And it was really difficult to see through the noise and to work out whether we were in a plateau or we were going off the course because of external circumstances where actually, in and of itself, it wasn't working the way it should.

And in the midst of that also, it's very difficult to convey to people the need to keep going on this reform process because the distraction factor is so great. So actually, while it's one thing for Andrew to explain that, when I think about what it's like in reality on the ground to make those calls and to keep that going, that's actually quite a phenomenal task in its own right.

David Pembroke:

So listen, Adam and Andrew, the research has life beyond today. There is a lot more that needs to be done. Obviously, there is the applied work not only with the Victorian public sector but I'm sure many clients around the world. What's the plan from here. And what else do you need or you feel you need to discover? Adam, to you first.

Adam Canwell:

Yeah. I'll pick up maybe a little bit what Harinder was saying just there and then talk about and also where do we go with this next because Andrew and I seem to like spending every hour on research, so we've just

committed to another couple of years of this. I think one of the really key things, and I think you named it well, Harinder, of saying that there is a difference between a plateau and almost a collapse of confidence in a program. And obviously, the point you want to get to as the pressure goes up is this plateau. And if you look to quite a lot of the psychological research, it would say the heightened pressure and the heightened stress of the transformation program is really important because you can actually only get through to a transformed state if you learn new ways of thinking, new ways of being, new ways of doing, so that heightened pressure where what you get is the leaders in the workforce having increased pressure on them, but the organisation shifts resource to support them is a point where you almost create a learning crucible. And it's a really important.

So that point plateau is actually fundamental to the success of the program. Obviously, if you don't put enough pressure, you never get there. If you put too much pressure, you get almost this systems collapse where everyone loses confidence. People can't function. People can't work. So how you get people and the workforce to a productive place of heightened pressure and heightened stress? So we use it for performance and learning is the key of transformation. That's really at the heart of where a successful transformation happens.

Now, of course, as you were saying, Harinder, that's really difficult to get right. You don't deliberately plan for that or no one really deliberately plans for that because none of us really want to put people through heightened pressure, stress or keep people in a place of distress over a period of time. But actually, I think the architecture of that, so you do raise the pressure but you shift support in effectively is at the heart of success. The exploration we signed up to now is to do a more longitudinal piece of research saying we know that there are, in any long-term program, there are turning points where you've taken the pressure too far and you've got a bit of system collapse going on. What do you need to do? Where do you pivot to as a leader to bring it back to coherence? Or you haven't put the pressure up high enough. What do you need do to put it up but at the same time, support it?

And so a hypothesis going into it is over a longitudinal program above six months, there will be points of turning where you will need to take deliberate leadership steps. And that's what we really want to explore so we can really explore that plateau. How do you get people there? Can you keep people there? Do you need to give people time off? There's a whole bunch of things when you really look at that that I think will be really valuable to explore. So I think it's a key point of what does transformation really mean and how do you get there? And then of course, what is the leaders' role to maintain some equilibrium in the system as you go through transformation?

David Pembroke:

And so Andrew, to you, as we come towards the end of this particular podcast, what advice do you have to leaders managing that very difficult period around a successful transformation? What advice would you give to them and what can they draw from the research in order to be better able to manage and make the right decisions when that pressure is on?

Andrew White:

One word, listen. Listen to yourself. Listen to the people that you interact with. Listen to the people that you don't interact with. Listen to the broader system. Use technology to listen. I think so much of this comes back to working with people on the human journey, working with yourself, working with the people you interact with, noticing who you're not interacting with, creating a culture of listening. And it's an innate human thing, and in some ways it's really difficult to do, and in other ways we've got two ears and we've got a brain and we've got an ability to understand. It's a hugely human thing to do. And so if there's one takeaway, I would say it's that. Can I add another one in there as well?

David Pembroke:

Why not?

Andrew White:

What we started to pick up was a number of the interviewees said, "We think about transformation being an episodic thing. So I do a project or I'm in a period of transformation and then I'm in a period of stability." I think we have a sense that that comes out of a 20th Century model that was largely where management and leadership ideas came out of the manufacturing of cars and where that's created a system that likes predictability. It likes stability. Now, some of that, in the commercial world, it's how stock markets work because they like dividend stocks. They like predictable quarterly results. A lot of our governance systems are set up around this. They're set up around stability. Yet the world we're moving into, I think, is putting us into a place where we are in a continual state of transformation. And I'm not sure that word then works. It's more like we are in evolution, which if you think about it, is our natural state. If you look at a tree, a tree is never static. A body is never static. A flower is never static. It's in cycles of living and dying, and it's in evolution.

And so what that means in practice, I think this is what Adam and I have got to figure out, but I do think there's something about the ways in which we've created organisations on not fit for purpose. There is something about oil and water going on at the moment, two things not mixing. The scope and the need for transformation that is being asked of, of organisations and the capabilities, let's call them the 20th Century capabilities, which were brilliant. They have given us so much in the world, but not being sufficient. So to us, that's the big exam question, and we don't have easy answers to it, but I think it's probably one of the most important things that's going on at the moment that if we can bring a little bit of understanding around, it's going to be really important.

David Pembroke:

All right. And Harinder Sidhu, I will give you the final word. From a public sector perspective, reflecting on what Andrew has just said, what does it mean to you and what should it mean for the audience leaders in the Australian Public Service? What do they need to take away?

Harinder Sidhu:

So really, I think the thing to take away is all the points that Andrew has made. This notion about change and the way our organisations are structured, I think that's a very live conversation in the public service at the moment. Are we really structured the way we need to be, to be as agile and delivered to our ultimate customer, the Australian citizen, as best as we can? So I think that notion that we need to keep adapting because actually, it's our customer set that keeps changing as well, and we need to recognise that very explicitly as we go along. That is one of those things that can lead back to that sense of purpose that we started off talking about.

Can I make one last point here? We've talked a lot about pressure. We've talked a lot about speed. But one of the things, if we possibly can, is to try to find time, because actually, we can make time for people that generally helps the whole process of change. And sometimes, I find, often what I'm trying to do is I'm trying to find space and time to allow things to settle, so we can keep moving forward. But it was great. I really have learned a lot. Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Harinder Sidhu, Adam Canwell and Dr. Andrew White, thank you so much for joining us on Work with Purpose today. A great conversation. And no doubt, we will be coming back to you as you continue to sit that big exam and we'll see where your results are for that big exam because it's a fascinating, relevant live, as Harinder has

just said, conversation and topic that needs continued conversation, needs continued debate, needs continued understanding. So, thank you to all of you for your time today on Work with Purpose.

And a big thanks as always to the teams at IPAA and the contentgroup for helping to create and produce today's program. And also, to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support.

Now, a rating or review for the program always helps the program to be found. A bigger audience, who doesn't want a bigger audience? So please, if you do have the time, that always helps. That brings to a close this episode of Work with Purpose. Thanks again to all of our listeners. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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