Episode 101 Transcript: A masterclass in human-centred design in the public sector

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian people. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are podcasting from today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and 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 from which anybody is listening to this podcast today, and also to all First Nations people who may be listening.

So in the hundredth episode of Work With Purpose that went to air a fortnight ago, Dr Gordon de Brouwer, the Australian Public Service commissioner told us that it is the Australian people and their welfare that is at the heart of the work of Australia's public servants, and indeed when Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was elected in May of 2022, in his acceptance speech he said the following, and I quote, "I want to find the common ground where together we can plant our dreams to unite around our shared love of this country, our shared faith in Australia's future, our shared values of fairness and opportunity and hard work and kindness to those in need. And I can promise all Australians this, no matter how you voted today, the government I lead will respect every one of you every day."

So how does the Australian Public Service help deliver on that promise? How do they ensure that the government's policies, programs, and projects are designed with people at the centre? What are those design processes that ensure their needs and wants are not left out as government deals with the challenges of an increasingly complex, rapid, and interconnected world?

Well, audience, when we asked you last year about what you wanted more of and what you wanted less of, it came through loud and clear that you are keen that Work with Purpose engage with experts so that you can be better at your jobs. Well, today we deliver with a conversation with three of the best about the topic of human-centred design and how you can build better understandings of the people who you serve in order to design and deliver better policies and programs.

The first of our expert panel today is Bec Bodel, the acting assistant commissioner of behavioural insights and design at the Australian Taxation Office where she leads teams of behavioural insight advisors, research analysts, and designers. So, for over 10 years, Bec has worked across a number of federal government agencies including the ABS, the Department of Industry, Treasury, and the Australian Tax Office. She has tackled many complex problems such as deregulation, mental health, taxpayer engagement, and support for small business during the COVID pandemic. Bec, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Bec Bodel:

Thank you. Happy to be here.

David Pembroke:

Our second guest is Brenton Prosser, a professor of public policy and leadership at the University of New South Wales Canberra. He's also the director of the UNSW Public Partnerships and Impact Hub and director of the John Howard Prime Ministerial Library at Old Parliament House. He has worked in senior

leadership roles across public, private, and the non-government sectors, as well as at leading universities in Australia and the United Kingdom. Brenton's research interests are politics, minority governance, public policy, public trust, democratic engagement, and mental health. Brenton, a warm welcome to Work with Purpose.

Brenton Prosser:

Thank you very much.

David Pembroke:

And last but by no means least is Dr. Nina Terrey, a co-founder and global partner at ThinkPlace which is a company that really pioneered design thinking in the Australian Public Service. Nina leads the sustainability and equity practise at ThinkPlace and she's also a world recognised designer in the field of complex system transformation and she's also an adjunct academic at several Australian universities, and indeed in 2022 she was invited as a visiting scholar to the Parsons School of Design in New York. Dr. Terrey, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Dr Nina Terrey:

Thank you very much.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So listen, audience, class is in, and given that we have three such high quality guests and we are all going to learn so much today, this episode will run a little longer. So if you're heading out on your run or you're in the car or you're in the garden, please know and understand that it will run a little bit longer than our normal 30-minute time slot that we allocate. But Bec, I'm going to throw the first question to you. Human-centred co-design and place-based approaches are now commonly used terms across the public sector. Why are design-led approaches so important for the contemporary public sector work?

Bec Bodel:

I think honestly our societies increasingly diverse. The people that we're designing for are increasingly diverse. The world is more complex, and I think the only way that we can really tackle that is by thinking in a design-led way. So I know when we think about design, we think about an approach, processes, methodologies, tools that we can use to engage with people and really engaging effectively with citizens is the best way to tackle that complexity. I think we need to be able to create space for exploring the complexity that lives within that system and sort of being able to make sense of connections and see all the different parts to pull them together and be able to solve problems and come up with really robust solutions as well. I think in the tax world we like to say we make it easy to comply and hard not to, and the only way that we do that is thinking about the whole system and the people that exist within it.

David Pembroke:

And, Brenton, for you, why is it so critical that the design be at the heart of policy and program making?

Brenton Prosser:

I think there's a range of reasons, but I tend to take a historical perspective, and for some time public administrators were thinking in terms of return of value to the taxpayer like the return of value to a shareholder and market approaches were quite prominent and there's a lot of beneficial parts to it. But

we've discovered over time that market approaches don't always function in complex policy systems. They don't always represent marginalised to harder-to-reach groups, and we have some royal commission showing that we don't necessarily as a Commonwealth deliver service as well. Human-centred designed thinking can really help us actually understand the nature of users' experience and what their needs are. I think more recently, and you alluded to it before, David, in the context of APS reform, if you're going to place people at the centre of policy and services you need to actually have robust tools to do that.

David Pembroke:

And Nina, this is a game you've been in for a long time and been seeking to influence this. Now that it is much more mature as it's gone through the process, what are your reflections on why it is so important?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Yeah, look, I want to build on the previous comments because what is really critical is at the heart of this this is actually about centering users and key actors in any kind of complex system so that we genuinely listen and understand what their needs are. I kind of think there's three dimensions that they are time-tested and I think they will continue, and one of them is the need to have empathy because empathy is about understanding someone else's experience and what is going on for them in their particular context. That is really critical when it comes to public sector because we are constructed in ways of organised programs, organised institutions, and it means that we come at often the work we do from those lenses. So building empathy with those who we serve is critical, it's timeless.

The other aspect is design is also about looking at the systemic and being strategic so that you're actually intervening where it could make the most effect and of that it is actually inviting creativity, and I think that is something that is really important for new policy settings. It's liberating I think for public servants and I believe ministers and the broader public want that. They want to see that creativity that comes at the heart of what they fundamentally need.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So, Brenton, to you then, where should this be most applied? Where are the biggest areas of need for design thinking?

Brenton Prosser:

Well, there's actually quite a broad range and those areas are broadening, and you mentioned before, I had spent some time in the UK and for those that are interested The Policy Lab Network in the UK and have a look at their website, there's an amazing array of areas where these principles are being applied, but closer to home we can see them in some really important areas. The Chaffey project of Northwestern Victoria is bringing together early learning and aged care in a human-centred design approach for some really positive outcomes. IPAA members that went to Glyn Davis's oration last year will have heard him talking about justice reinvest and indigenous approaches to taking a new take on correctional services or correctional relationships. There's some exciting things being done through the PM&C and New South Wales government about more inclusive approaches to data, so the people from perhaps marginalised or other groups actually have more control over how their data is decided, designed, analysed, and used so when they sit down at the table it's not just the public servant that has all the information about their data. So I think that's really important.

We see in areas like the social services, for a long time we've realised that interfaces with the public can be really complex and hard to navigate and can make it difficult for informed choices. People in social

services, the techies are doing some amazing work with user design and design thinking to make those interfaces much more accessible and intuitive. And then there's some great work around citizen engagement and public trust. Citizen Journey project is tracking, working with young people to design approaches to track engagement with our public institutions over time, where are the hotspots of engagement, where are the cold spots, where are the black spots where people might fall through to extremism, and then how can we actually be using human-centred design to better connect our young people to our communities for lifetimes. There's plenty of examples, I'll stop there.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, there are plenty of examples but, Bec, as a practitioner, someone who's in it in a daily basis, we hear at the moment, given the challenges of government, the pressures of government, the pressures on public servants to deliver, where is the time to do the thinking, where is the space to be able to deliver this more broadly. Great examples that Brenton mentions, but I'm sure people listening right now are thinking, "I would love to do this but I just can't. I just don't ever get the time, ever get the opportunity because I've got to deliver."

Bec Bodel:

Yeah, I guess for me it's where is the time not to. I think anything that we're doing, anything that we're delivering for the public, any changes that we're making, whether we believe it, they are designed. It's whether they are designed well. So I think of course it's a bit hard when you're trying to do your job and get things delivered. I think for us in the ATO, we have a pretty well-developed design capability which is of huge benefit which Nina can probably tell us more about, but also I think we have our corporate processes support that and we have a methodology and a toolkit that we use.

On a really basic level, I think there's sort of three things that I think about if I was public servant faced with a challenge and I was trying to think about how best to solve that. I think the first thing is know your purpose, know what you're trying to do, setting a really clear goal, understanding what it is that you're trying to deliver, make sure everyone's on the same page, particularly there are so many different perspectives just within the ATO or within the public service in general and you have so many different stakeholders, being really clear on what it is that you're trying to do collectively.

And then I think about taking a principles-based approach to these things. So it's not always that you can go through your lovely design process, but things like engaging in diversity of thinking. So as we said, there's lots of different people. It really is to your benefit to be involving those different voices. So where you can, the people who are going to be the recipient of the policy or the product or the service that you're designing, but also other areas of government. I think there's so much for us to benefit if we think about what Services Australia is doing and how that overlaps with what the tax office is doing and how we're helping citizens in general engage with government.

And then I think connected to that is understanding the whole and not just the parts. If we think about trying to, for example, improve tax performance of small businesses, well, what are all of the different things that are happening in the system for them and how're we thinking about that holistically and collectively, that they also have obligations to other parts of government. They might be accessing grants, they might be paying superannuation, all those kinds of things that come together to form a more complete picture. I think we can do a lot to help our success of engaging with people when we think what are the other systems that they're using, even just software or other people that they're engaging with, what's the other conduit that government can go through to engage with those people.

I think there's lots of things that can kind of weigh us down in our day-to-day about how we're doing it, but there's little things that we can do. Nina mentioned before having empathy. Well, how do you

actually do that? What are the kinds of tools that you can use? You can go out and do user research, you can speak to people, you can do empathy mapping, and I think there's all these little tools that we can take advantage of on a smaller scale to sort of beef up the way we do design in the public service.

Brenton Prosser:

I might just jump in there, and I think Nina might have something to add, is I'm conscious that at the moment there's a shift away from using external consultants in the public service, and having worked as one of those people on the dark side, a lot of our work actually was in design thinking and human-centred design and consultation and collaboration, doing it on behalf of departments. I mean, one of the questions I have is if that's being rolled back externally, what's being done about the capability internally to pick that up so it doesn't create a gap. Now I'm hearing differing accounts on how big the rollback on external consultants is, and Nina might have a perspective on that, but I think it's an interesting question around how do we help build the capability within the APS so that they can be partnering and delivering this really important work.

David Pembroke:

Nina?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Yeah, I was just going to jump in because I think there's some... I'm the type person that's put a bit of a camera on it. So I was just going to reflect on a couple of things I pick up where Bec was talking about, well, what can you do effectively as a public servant. I'm reminded that my experience teaching at Parsons in New York, students from all over the world coming in for the first time after multiple years during the pandemic learning online, and I think that's actually a feature that we're in now which is there's a lot of still remote and hybrid working, so our connectivity even as peers is different, but it does mean though that it's incumbent upon us to be teaching some really practical tools and techniques.

One I was just going to share because it's about are we listening, are we able to ask questions that are inquiring to understand, and I think that's a really great place to start. A simple activity that I do is I actually get people to pair up and the activity is to design a gift for that person, but you can never ask the question, "What gift would you like?" And so you have two minutes to genuinely understand that other person, who are they, what they're about, what drives them, motivates them, maybe things that are worrying them or their deep ambitions. And then you have to, based off what you are hearing, try to unpack the deep need that that person has and then to actually rapidly construct a gift, and then you do it vice versa, you share the gift back and then the partner rates as to whether they felt that met the need.

What was really interesting when I ran that activity, even with some students in New York, different cultures and different settings, is they hadn't realised how much they weren't paying attention to the other person because we have a lot of internal dialogue. If you think about being inside any program or service, you've got all these constructs and ways of seeing the world, different data points. So when you want to step out of that, it's really important that we practise the skill of listening. So that's just one activity that I would really recommend because it's quite powerful when you realise either A, your gift got a two out of 10, you're like, "Oh, I didn't really get that," or you fully delighted someone and they went, "Wow, you kind of really got me." So being design led is finding the moments where you can actually get that.

And then the other thing I would build on is I think the skill set you need is the confidence to facilitate very ambiguous context so we can move from understanding and listening to but what do we do with

that. So taking insights and make them actionable. So, Bec, you talk about things being innovative and you need to work with experts who know how to do behavioural interventions. So it's not about having all of the literacy and the skills, but being able to stand up and convene people, bring your colleagues together, talk through some of this information, say, "But how might we do something different?" So really generating that arc of creativity and thinking differently about the challenge that you have.

Bec Bodel:

Just one comment on that as well. I think one of the things that we're seeing a lot more demand for in our capability services is around facilitation and I think probably to your point about the use of consultants. It's something that is being expected a lot more, and there are definitely places in government where you can sort of seek out to uplift your skills in facilitation because it's so important to be able to bring together those different views and then move it forward and take that conversation somewhere really constructive.

Brenton Prosser:

And developing empathy doesn't need to be a difficult thing. There's an exercise that I've used previously where you just ask people to take on the role of a stakeholder other than themselves and try and represent that perspective because a lot of the time we spend saying, "Well, if just everyone else did their job right, I'd be fine," but when you actually step outside of your role and then you have to work through the challenges and work as a team, you're suddenly going, "Well, actually it's a lot harder than I thought." So yeah, there's a lot of potential there I think without making it overcomplicated.

David Pembroke:

So interestingly, you mentioned facilitation. I know Jamie Nicholls over at DAF has convened a community of practise around facilitation and so that's available to people and I'm sure Jamie would be very keen if anyone listening would like to get involved in that. But I just want to go back before we go forward just to explore the two pieces there, and luckily we've got Nina here with us who was in the very early days of the ATO because the ATO is the benchmark and the model, and as a taxpayer I can tell you, as a small business taxpayer, I think it does a great job the way that it engages with you. It's very clear, it's very easy to understand, and if you are compliant there's lenience. I find it a very, very good experience. But how do we get everyone? It didn't happen overnight, and you were there at the beginning of when it all happened and you observe where they are now. Everyone's at a different part of their journey in this. So how do we start people to move towards where everyone is at the ATO's level?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Well, a couple of comments to that. Look, I think critical to this is understanding where is the organisation that you're in at now and what is its strategic purpose and what are some of the most critical challenges that it faces. It's always about nesting any approach or methodology in the work that you need to do. So it's not something that just should be done because it should be done. It's about saying what are the critical issues and how does a much more empathetic, innovative, and collaborative, participatory approach actually help us solve that. So some of this actually is about within whichever area you work how might you bring in tools and techniques and apply them and actually design projects with a front end that does incorporate design research or behavioural insights, actually looks for different ways of convening to think differently and to come up with different ideas.

I am seeing a trend at the moment across the public sector and I think it's about this capability building that is required. Where I do think external advice helps in terms of capacity building, I think that is a role critically for an outside voice, but it's about building the policy muscle which design-led approaches are a really powerful approach for that. So one place to start I think could be the policy environments or the areas of strategy in organisations that are trying to demonstrate the right sort of actions or choices. If we can make choices that are both people-centred as well as system-centred, then you can start to move towards I think getting traction, and then over time building frameworks and capabilities in areas that are dedicated to do it.

Bec Bodel:

Yeah, yeah. And obviously the tax office has the benefit of being large and so our sort of relatively small team in the context of the organisation. So it's not that we're there to help everyone, we couldn't possibly, but I think because it has been around for 20 years now, the organisational awareness and appreciation of design is... I have not seen it like that anywhere else, and I think it is a huge credit to how the work was sort of rolled out over time, that it is really when you speak to our senior execs there is an understanding of why it is important to do these kinds of things.

I think having things that you can demonstrate where the impact of design has been such that something has been delivered in a better way, having the feedback of stakeholders who say, "Actually, it is easier to interact with this thing," where you can have... Measurement and evaluation can't be overlooked, the importance of that when we're thinking about design-led approaches and how we argue the case for them, I think it is really important and the organisational support for that is absolutely necessary. I think it's sort of both. It's top down and it's bottom up.

David Pembroke:

But, Brenton, to your point, if indeed the private sector was delivering a lot of these services, it's been rolled back and it has been rolled back and it'll be continued to be rolled back with the announcement of taxes on external consultants in the budget. So there's going to be more disincentive. How does the muscle get built? If this is the environment and how then does it, is it the role of leadership such as the tax office and perhaps Services Australia to step forward? Is it the role of the Public Service Commission through the academy? Is it the Evaluation Centre over at Treasury? How does this problem get solved at an enterprise level across government before we then sort of step down into, okay, once we get into the processes and the skills and the tools and other things?

Brenton Prosser:

Look, I'm seeing plenty of desire and intent and enthusiasm across all those areas. You have someone like Subho Banerjee on here and he'll talk quite eloquently around these sorts of things. I think part of it is recognising some of the structural barriers that are inherent in our organisations, and I'll talk about a university because that's one that I'm working on a daily basis. There's a lot of things that we do as standard practise in university that just about make partnering with the APS impossible. And so we need to be thinking about how can we actually be more flexible so we can bring things, our expertise, but also acknowledge the practise expertise and the expertise within departments and get the best of both and come together and work together.

I don't think it's a case of people don't want to. I think it's a case of we really need to sit down and talk about what sort of structural things do we need to change, cultural things perhaps, incentives in the workplace for people to be able to genuinely engage in this and be rewarded. I think the will's there, and I think bringing together leaders to talk these things through in a open and constructive way instead of

the university charging on thinking we know best, I think that is one of the paths that are really important.

Dr Nina Terrey:

I was going to say that there's a lot of discussion around mission-led shifts for the public sector and I think what that means, I think, convening and the public sector working together with stakeholders, whichever part of the system that they're working in to achieve whichever mission is actually critical. So I think it's about lifting beyond the boundaries of maybe what sort of enterprise you're from to actually say who do we need at the table to really help progress really critical issues facing us. So if we're transitioning communities because of our commitment to climate and net zero, then we really need to bring the best to bear to that. There is quite a lot of discussion around kind of the third space that's needed, and I think design plays a role in this sort of third space. Christian Bason talks about it in his latest book, and that is actually something where design plays a role. Wherever you are from, whether you are embedded inside the public sector or outside, it's about that ability to create environments that enable the right deliberation, bringing the right people to the table.

Certainly in my experience, I think what's critical is that there needs to be an independence in that third space, and what I mean by that is an example many years ago, one I'm actually personally quite proud of, it was part of a royal commission and then it ended up being jointly sponsored by government and private sector around is what called the Out of Home Care system. That was designed later and we came in to help kind of bring to bear an insight-driven change process which is let's understand young people's experience of this Out of Home Care system. What was really important was to break down the predominant worldview that everyone held. So that's a challenge I would put back as not being inside the public sector, how do you create an independent view in.

So what I mean by that is in that program it started with, well, there's something wrong with the system writ large and children were ultimately bouncing around. So our program, to cut it short, ended up, through a lot of getting stories, understanding young people all over the state of Victoria where this was held, and we ended up helping reframe from a Out of Home Care system to the home is wherever the child is. Now that fundamentally flipped the entire set of stakeholders, government and non-government, to think about what matters to the child. We then convened those same stakeholders that held the power of the system with young people, and you needed that independence to broker that, and there were fundamental shifts within a day of just listening to young people, where one young woman stood up and said, "If you did your job properly, you wouldn't have a job because I would have a home throughout my whole life."

So I guess for me the challenge for the APS, and I say this because I am acting and advocate even though I'm on the outside, is that you need to find ways to create the environments where people can do truth telling, where you can generally disrupt and really reframe how you're approaching challenges. So build the capacity internally, I fully support that, and then when you need to, do find those trusted advisors and partners who can create spaces of neutrality. That is really important when things are very complex.

Bec Bodel:

I think as well one of the benefits of us having a team is that we don't necessarily align to, obviously this is within the tax office organisation, we don't align to the priority of a particular stakeholder within the organisation. So often we are called in to do that similar thing, the objectivity, the unbiased voice, and I think that is the role of a designer working in that way is to be aware of your bias and name it or sort of be able to address it where you can.

I think as well there's a role for working across government. There's no reason we can't do things across. I've facilitated many things for other agencies and we're called on sort of to do things across department because obviously the thing that I offer for Services Australia is never having worked there is different to someone who's able to come across to tax and do a similar thing. So I think there are opportunities for us to collaborate more across government agencies to be able to offer some of that stuff that perhaps in the past we would've turned to consultants for and we're not able to do that as much anymore.

I think as well you mentioned the Centre for Evaluation, there's also the Australian Government Consulting function. There are things that government is trying to do in terms of setting up those teams who can offer different services. I think it's really important for us to understand why it is that we go to a consultant in the first place. Often it is about objectivity. There's many reasons why people do that. I think being aware of why that's happening and it can be when there are difficulties and you're needed to mediate things like that that can be difficult for an internal person to do. But I think we need to be able to acknowledge those things and think about what's driving us and why it is useful to have an external voice or how we can make it functional for someone internally to do a similar role.

Brenton Prosser:

We can work across departments. We see in times of national disasters and international emergencies, the walls come down, people work together and they do a great job, and then the disaster pass and the wall goes back up again. And so it's not impossible, it's about how do we approach it. We would all agree the nature of the policy problems that we're looking at here are complex, uncertain, changing, no simple solution, and they're cross-portfolio. We're not going to address these sorts of challenges unless we take a collaborative with the community and a cross-portfolio approach.

David Pembroke:

But to you, Bec, given that you're the APS representative here on the panel, just in terms of your advice to people who are working in their department or agency at the moment thinking about how do I reach out, what's the best way to go about trying to build those collaborations and partnerships? What advice do you have to people about that? Because ultimately the person sits where the person is and the person doesn't really think about this bit of government, this bit of government, this bit of government. They just want an experience that's perhaps joined up a little bit more effectively. So internally, how do you then encourage that cross-pollination where you're working and working effectively together?

Bec Bodel:

Yeah, I think it's important for us to sort of spruik design. I think things like this are great for people to actually understand the options that are available to them in terms of things that can help. I do think, coming back to when you're sitting there in your policy role, you're a policy officer, there is a person on the end of the thing that you're doing and keeping them in mind is useful for you to be able to identify. We think about it as a systems map or a stakeholder map. It's not useful for us to think of a small business as just a person who pays tax. That isn't even complete from a tax perspective, but being able to identify how they are experiencing things, keeping them front and centre, and then identifying other areas of government. Of course, there's all of the difficulties about how do you find the right person, but we have to try, and I think there's probably, I will admit, there's more that we can do as design practitioners in government to connect up.

There have been various things over the years which I'm sure people are familiar with, but I think there's a lot more we can do to bolster that design community in government. There are things, obviously APS Academy has a human-centred design training which was sort of born out of the former team I worked

at, but I think things like that are really useful as the nuts and bolts of how you go about starting. But I do think we have a responsibility to connect more just in a more deliberate way across government. People are always free to reach out to us at the tax office on where to start as well.

David Pembroke:

But it's interesting this point that Bec raises around being an advocate for your work, isn't it? So, Nina, in your experience through your career, how important is it to tell people that you've done a good job, not just do a good job?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Before I answer that question, may I go back a step if that's okay?

David Pembroke:

Sure.

Dr Nina Terrey:

For this podcast, I wanted to also communicate for anyone who is practising design across the public sector, I think it's really important to understand your trajectory of where you need to go as a designer. And so that some of the trends I'm seeing and things I'm personally leaning into is there are domains of expertise to really start to think about your literacy. So for example, the literacy of sustainability, the literacy of equity, the literacy of how systems are much more regenerative and actually doing more than what they are doing now. I'm just seeing the need to actually go further than where we have been or asked. So all the basic tools and all the insights we can give and the pathway mapping, all those things, they're pretty common and they should be well bedded down, and if you're not, to your point, Bec, there's lots of programs out that can do that and free things online. So you can really do a lot of that personal investment.

But I think where there is a new domain to step into is where you are really stepping into different types of complexity. So I'm personally exploring that around sustainability, looking at regenerative systems, so when you talk about actually looking at a set of actors that need to come together to create a system that's more regenerative. So we're doing some work in New Zealand around the tourism sector. I mean, you're actually saying, "But what do you even mean by regenerative?" So all of a sudden you're not just doing a process and running a workshop and what are our issues, what are our ideas, and let's go forward, it's much more sophisticated. So I guess what I would press upon the design community and anyone who obviously works in the capacity of designing futures and changes is that think about the literacy that you need to build because there are new frameworks emerging, there are important questions to ask, and really, really important deliberations where there isn't actually an answer.

I think as designers you really help create a safe environment to do exploration, to even put ideas down. What if we tried this experiment? What if we actually tried to convene these sorts of partnerships to learn? So I think I just want to maybe impart that, that I think I'd like to make sure everyone takes from this podcast. Find inspiration for your role as a public servant. I personally feel as an outsider and advocate because it's so important and having just come from a sustainability conference where everyone kept saying, "Where's government? Where's government? What are they doing?" I sat on a panel and I did speak on behalf of government to say, "Actually, it's got a critical role." Even David Attenborough said, "The planet's not going to be saved unless government steps up." So there's some really big agendas that government's got responsibility for and I think these sorts of skill sets are fundamental.

David Pembroke:

Now, Brenton, I do want to come to you in a minute to understand universities roles in that, but I want to go back to the question that I [inaudible 00:34:54].

Dr Nina Terrey:

Sorry, I deliberately sidestepped that.

David Pembroke:

No, but it is, but I suppose it goes to that point where you're saying that you've attended a conference and people are saying "Where is government?" Government is doing lots of things but nobody knows. So there's a problem externally and there's probably a problem internally that people aren't explaining to the higher-ups, such as that has obviously happened over time at the ATO which has now got the leadership engaged, embedded, and supportive. But how important is it in your experience for if you're starting out, if you're making steps forward, if you're having progress, how important is it to let people know that that great outcome was a result of this process?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Yeah. Look, I think if anything it is about relationships and how government and sectors and depending on what the area that you are responsible for, what system do you steward, it's how you work together and actually demonstrate that it was actually a collective effort that creates a result. So all the projects that I've worked on have been a cross-section of not-for-profit, government, community members, and individuals, academics, and as a result of that I think success is bred because everyone can tell the story. So that's where I've seen things work really well.

Bec Bodel:

Yeah. I think for us it is important to continue to highlight the role of design because we have seen over time, because the design is so embedded in the tax office it can be a little bit invisible. I do think it's fair to say that it's sort of a given. Everyone understands that there. We're doing parts of the process. We're helping people design things in a more deliberate way. It does become a little bit invisible. So I think it is really important for people to say where we have engaged with a design team or a design process or we have gone out to the community and it's based on a different kind of research that's not the statistics and data that are incredibly important but not all, the things that kind of tend to lead our decision-making. I think it's important to highlight those other design things as well so people can see how important and critical it is because otherwise it does risk seeming sort of less critical.

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Brenton Prosser:

I was just going to add a couple of things and imagining I'm an EL1 sitting behind a desk, human-centred design and co-design can be quite daunting, intimidating, and sort of like these dark arts or something. But when we're coming up to budget time, not long after budget this podcast will come out, and a lot of attention is given to the money being spent on new initiatives, but there's a huge amount of government resources being spent on doing the job of government and that's people's everyday job. Nina's points around empathy, impact, what's the influence on the user, they may sound simple but

they're quite profound. It doesn't need to be a special dark art or something like that. Everyone can think about how that works in their day-to-day practise.

The second thing I was going to reflect actually comes from my experience as a chief of staff working in politics, and over the time one of the things that I saw was increasingly the pressure on ministers to be responding to media and the media cycle and those sorts of things. One of the challenges of if you're strictly working to the will of the minister, which loyalty and support of the minister is a key feature of the APS, but if the minister's increasingly attuned to the media that presents a real challenge, and when I look at our APS, it's a much bigger sector. Our public sector's much bigger than the academic sector. There's an immense resource there and expertise about the public they serve, and I think human-centred design and co-design and these things are ways of coming to ministers with an evidence base and giving them an independent perspective on the public that they serve and they know and it gives continuity of the time that creates a counter to the mediatization and the pursuit of announceables.

So I think it's both something that doesn't need to be so big and scary, but it's also something that I think is really fundamental to the APS doing its role and not being caught up with some of the recent political trends.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So practical steps though, as you say, if I'm an EL1, I'm listening to this now, you've convinced me. Okay, I agree, I really want to be a part of this. What's the advice? What's the practical steps? Where do I go next?

Brenton Prosser:

I'd start looking for kindred spirits, and they are around, and then you've talked about training and those sorts of things. That would be where I would start. I'd start small and grow. I've always been a believer in the yeast principle, the small success, and then people want to hear about it and it grows from there. That may be not particularly inspiring, but that would be my starting point, looking at building a network and a community to actually support you in thinking about and reflecting. But there are opportunities for further training both in professional academic terms if you want to take it the next step.

David Pembroke:

And for you, Nina, your advice?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Yeah. Look, I think a couple of things I want to build on about join some communities. There are a lot of communities globally to I guess be part of the conversation about design-led approaches, where they're working, what they're doing, how they're scaling, and really making I think a difference I guess in the policy cycle or the service delivery cycle. I personally actually do listen to communities from the UK and Europe. I think there's a lot of progressive ideas coming through those sorts of parts of the world. So I would just follow your nose a bit in that. So get online and explore.

And then on that note, I just, I'm a big reader myself and so I just read and read, and you need to be a bit like Alice in Wonderland and follow the white rabbit which is you read an article but then I might go look at the reference and go, "Well, what is that reference about?" Then I'll go follow that reference and I'm like, "Oh, that's interesting. Who wrote that? Oh, that's interesting." In some cases, I then go and actually email that person and then I go and have a call with that person. So don't be afraid to exercise your own inquiry to find people and people are really willing to talk to you, and so I just want to encourage that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, mentoring, that's what you're talking about, isn't it really?

Dr Nina Terrey:

Yes. Yeah.

David Pembroke:

And how important is that, Bec? Has mentoring been important in your career?

Bec Bodel:

Yeah, I definitely think so. The benefit of coming to the ATO from, I've worked in other areas where design was less mature, I did have various leaders across roles who really have a passion for design and see the importance for government. I think it's important to have people who understand government deeply and also people who understand design deeply, and I think the combination of that can be really important. But absolutely, I think the biggest thing that stood out for me across my career, I read this book really early on, it's very light reading, it's called Don't Make Me Think by Steve Krug and it's about web accessibility actually.

David Pembroke:

Steve who, sorry?

Bec Bodel:

Steve Krug.

David Pembroke:

Krug, Steve Krug.

Bec Bodel:

Krug.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Bec Bodel:

Yep. It's about web accessibility guidelines, that kind of thing, and one of the things it said that I just have never forgotten that was someone who wasn't able to read a newspaper now can just by you doing your job a little bit better, and I think that's the most important thing to think about. It's in the context of web accessibility, so screen readers being able to read web pages, but thinking about it, it was really about who is the person that is using this thing and then how can we build that into the way that we're doing things. I think that piece of advice is something that always sticks with me and finding people who share that same sort of...

David Pembroke:

But you're also suggesting it doesn't have to be perfection and you don't have to do every last step of it.

Bec Bodel:

It really is, yeah.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, it doesn't happen, yeah, but that's the advice, isn't it? Do something.

Bec Bodel:

Yeah. One of the things as well on the path of engaging with people, it's such a valuable resource. Those insights that you get from user research are things that people want. So if we think about research that we've done in the organisation, we have various ways of sharing that with people, user research libraries and such. That's something that people want and they get value from, and you can be a useful resource within your organisation for having that knowledge.

I think it's a really important thing to remember about, and absolutely echo what you say, it doesn't have to be every single step of the process and if you can't get right through to ideation and testing and delivery then you fail. The discovery thing in itself is so important and doing any little activity that you can do. As we said, there's a million different playbooks out there and things that you can try that can help you, depending on the problem you are trying to solve or the problem that you're approaching, the different tool that might be best placed to help you. It's tiny steps every day that help change your mindset and help you think about the organisation.

Brenton Prosser:

I think it's really important that you don't have to do everything for every policy issue. Archon Fung who's developing his democracy curve, he's looked at deliberative democracy and he kind of asked the question, it seems like every question the answer is a citizen's assembly and it isn't actually. His democracy can ask questions around who's involved, how are they involved and what level of power and influence do they have, and you make different decisions for different context, and I think that's an important thing as well to be thinking about how do we go about this in the most strategic and targeted and effective way and not feel you have to throw the kitchen sink at everything.

David Pembroke:

Nina?

Dr Nina Terrey:

I just had a thought as you were talking. My mind was going to, I guess when you look at the toolkit, I think be really clear if you're thinking about designing, are you designing for a preferred future state or are you trying to find the current state, what's going on. The reason why I bring that up, one organisation I do follow and I would recommend it is Nesta in the UK. They do a lot of work in the government setting and I think it is very important to look at design literature that's nested in government context. Generic design doesn't really, it's too plastic, it's too commercial driven. It doesn't understand the complexities that we grapple with in a public sector domain.

But the reason I bring it up is because they were doing more futuring and design-led activities that are getting citizens to stand in the future. So they were looking at really basic but important ways of visualising and storytelling future scenarios of a policy setting and then just enabling community groups and going around different counties with iPads and then asking them to do voting in that process. So they're capturing hard data on a Likert scale of one to five, do you see yourself in this future, what are

the challenges from today to get there. That particular program was looking at changes of energy use. So that's sort of like low, net zero footprint type of scenario, but then they had the deliberative part too. It's a more contemporary version of having deliberative democracy, but sort of meshing different methods together.

But as a result, they really ran, I think, quite an impressive program that really scooped up about 600 citizens in less than a month, but they had multi data sets. They had these counting data sets to what extent citizens felt they agreed or disagreed with this, but they had qualitative dimensions too and storytelling and ideas for what they could do today. So that helps those various governments look at those different interventions or campaigns to help people understand what they can do differently. So I just want to impress upon do look for those live cases, whoever's doing it around the world, because I think you can pick those up and present those in your work environment as well. Could we try something like this? So I just encourage you to have the courage to try some different ways of doing your work.

Bec Bodel:

Just on a really practical level off the back of that, there is an international designing government community, so you sort of look that up. They're having a conference that's coming up in October. It's a virtual one. So you can be a part of a global community. They have a Slack group and everything that they talk about their experiences, and you're right, it is such a unique thing in comparison to all of the opportunities you might have available to you in the private sector that we don't necessarily have or have to grapple with different constraints in government. Super important to have those people to connect in with.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Now we are going to have to wrap it up because we could talk all night. There's plenty to talk about. But a final piece of advice really and a simple piece of advice from each of you to the audience about what they might be able to do that sort of takes them forward on the journey. Bec, to you, what's one thing, just one thing?

Bec Bodel:

I'll stick on my train of make sure you understand the problem you are trying to solve and who you are trying to solve it for. There's many tools that you can use to do that, we've talked about some of them, but I think it's super important to make sure you're really clear on that before you take your first step.

David Pembroke:

Very good. Brenton?

Brenton Prosser:

I think don't overcomplicate it. Most public servants are there because they're passionate about serving the public, and so just think about in day-to-day practise what little steps can you take and look for communities.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. And, Nina, final word for you.

Dr Nina Terrey:

My advice is to the people who are practising design and have the fortunate roles across the public sector, just have a think about how you are developing your design-led expertise, and think about some of those intersectional areas or topics that you can start to explore and start to build your literacy. If it's sustainability, if it's a very specific topic or domain, I think that would just start to stretch your own, I guess, rendering of how design can make an impact.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well, audience, we promised and they delivered. A big thanks to Bec and to Brenton and to Nina for sharing their expertise with you. Really valuable, valuable insights there, and I think that if you can take very simple points that were raised there I think even in the summary there and just start your journey or wherever you are on your journey, continue to move forward because it's going to be continuing to be important to put the people at the centre of what you are because again, as Gordon said, and as the Prime Minister has asked, that the Public Service needs to deliver for the Australian people. So a big thanks to our guests today.

And to you, the audience, thank you. A hundred episodes, this is 101, the episodes of Work with Purpose and we're delighted with that. So you can catch it on Spotify, Apple, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts from, and indeed, as I do ask each week, a rating or a review. We're still getting more ratings and reviews which is great because it's helping us to be found and we're absolutely delighted with that, and indeed, you can follow the content about Work with Purpose on LinkedIn, either with IPAA, ACT, or from contentgroup as well. So listen, Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, ACT, and proudly supported as it has been for many years by the Australian Public Service. A big thanks again to our guests today for sharing their wisdom with you. My name is David Pembroke. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

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