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PURPOSE

## TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #116

**WHY CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY  
MATTERS: UNPACKING THE APS CALD  
EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY**

# TRANSCRIPT

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David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again 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 meeting 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 where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

Now, one of the magnificent things about our wonderful country is our multiculturalism. And I'm sure many of you listeners will be among the growing number of people born overseas who now call Australia home. Now, in 2021, after years of steady growth, the share of people born overseas as a percentage of our country's total population reached 24%. And while that diversity is largely reflected in the APS, it's not reflected in the APS's Senior Executive Service. So to address the imbalance, the Australian Public Service Commission launched its Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Employment Strategy and action plan, with a target to increase CALD representation in the SES by 2% per year.

Now, when the report was released in April of this year, it was 11%. Other key actions in the plan, which is a first, focus on increasing cultural understanding, embedding cultural capability in leadership and management, and modernising CALD recruitment and progression across the APS. Now, this episode is the first of a two-part series on cultural and linguistic diversity in the APS. Now, later this month we will chat with Jim Betts, the Secretary of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, and the arts, about how everyone can and should champion CALD employees across the public sector.

But we begin today with a conversation with three APS executives who have either led on the development of the strategy or are themselves CALD leaders in the APS. Dr. Suzanne Akila joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2015 and is currently the special adviser on negotiations over the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field, which is located between Australia and Timor-Leste. Suzanne was named Female Lawyer of the Year for Government by the ACT Women's Lawyers Association in 2018 and was a Sir Roland Wilson Foundation scholar completing her PhD at the ANU. Suzanne, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Thank you so much.

David Pembroke:

Jo Talbot is the First Assistant Commissioner Workplace Reform and Diversity at the Australian Public Service Commission. Jo has previously held chief operating officer and chief people officer roles in the APS, and Jo is Australia's representative on the Public Governance Committee at the OECD and a government representative on Australia's Open Government Forum. Jo, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Jo Talbot:

Thanks, David.

David Pembroke:

And finally, Radi Kovacevic is the Acting Group Manager: Technology and Major Capability Group at the Department of Home Affairs. With over 25 years in the IT business, Radi has a deep understanding of technology, digital transformation, and capability strategy. Radi's role drives the home affairs technology delivery in the traveller trade and migration ecosystems. And indeed, Radi is also the Department of Home Affairs Cultural and Linguistic Diversity SES champion. Radi, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Radi Kovacevic:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Now listen, we're going to go around the table to start with. So just perhaps Suzanne if we could start with you, why does cultural and linguistic diversity matter to you personally, and what does it bring to the workplace?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

I mean, that's such a personal question because it varies for so many people. I think for me it's fundamentally about identity. I mean, we have such rich identities whether you're culturally and linguistically diverse or not. It's about what you bring to the workplace, your personal history, the way that we engage with one another. So it's fundamentally about who we include and how we include that kind of array of different experiences, histories, that richness that people bring as individuals into the way we work.

David Pembroke:

Okay, and for you, Radi?

Radi Kovacevic:

Oh look, I think parents migrated back in the '70s. Villawood, I think it was a migration centre. For me personally, I didn't speak English until second grade, so it was a bit of a challenge. So understanding the difference that we bring to the public service and those others that can bring to the public service. First third of your career is really settling into the public service. The second third, leadership, and last third, which is what I'm in, is giving. So I think personally there's a lot that I can give back towards social inclusion, diversity, and the wellbeing of all Australians.

David Pembroke:

Are you mindful of it on a daily basis? Are you thinking about it when you do your work or is Radi just Radi?

Radi Kovacevic:

Radi is just Radi. But it was not until actually I was nominated as the CALD champion for the department that I sat back and went, "Well, what does it actually mean?" It was one of those things. I don't think I actually identified as CALD until 10 years ago, to be realistic. I don't think about it every day, but I do get calls quite often from others, and it reminds me of where I came from and the challenges that I've gone through and the opportunities I can provide to others in the public service.

David Pembroke:

Was that a deliberate choice in not identifying as CALD?

Radi Kovacevic:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Radi Kovacevic:

Yes. I think the first third of my career was more about settling, understanding. I really struggled through university with English. The first third of my career was really around improving my communication, my English skills. I was really fortunate to be the first 10 years of my career in Department of Treasury under the Ken Henry era, and a strong leadership course at that time, which really cemented the second third and now the third part of my career.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Now, before we do come to you, Jo, I might just throw back to you Suzanne as well around that. Have you always identified through your career as someone from a culturally and linguistic... Or are you just Suzanne?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Well, I mean, so I was reflecting as you were talking Radi that some people have the option and some people don't have the option. So, so much of identity-

David Pembroke:

What do you mean by that?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

So people perceive me in a particular way when they see me. Obviously you can't see what I look like, but people will see me and ask me, "Where are you from? Where were your parents born?"

David Pembroke:

Right.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

English is my second language, but I've always spoken it. I was very fortunate in the sense that I grew up in the United Kingdom and Australia, so language has always been very powerful for me, but I've had people say, "You speak very good English for... It's like, "Well, what a compliment." And so I think identity is just so complex, and it shows to me how important it is that we are curious to ask the question, "What is your history? How do you relate to that identity?"

I think that's fundamentally important. It doesn't matter whether you're CALD or not. There are people who are Anglo-Saxon who've grown up in India, and they have a completely different relationship to race than somebody who's grown up in an environment where they actually racially are the same as the group that they're in. So I think it's just about curiosity. I've never had the option of opting out. Particularly around my hair, I have pretty big hair, and so people are always asking questions about it, and there is this thing, it can be light touch, but it can also be really othering.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. I'm sure at different stages of your career there's been different moments where it's not been-

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Absolutely.

David Pembroke:

... very welcome.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

No, that's exactly right. I've been in rooms where we are dealing with pretty serious national security issues and secure rooms, and I might be the only woman and I'm certainly the only person of colour. There's an awareness you can't put down. You can try, but I don't think it's beneficial for me to do that. So that cognizance is always with me. And in some ways it's a bit like a curse because I don't know if you've seen the film *The Matrix*, once he sees *The Matrix*, you can't unsee it. And it takes a lot of effort to not see structural power and to see those exchanges every transaction through the lens of power. It's a bit of a curse, and sometimes I think people are a bit like, "Can you lighten up, please?" It's not always that fun at the old dinner party.

David Pembroke:

Well, and Jo, you were given the responsibility and perhaps even the privilege to really think about this for the first time. This is an opportunity to start to think about it. Take us through that experience when it was dropped on your desk and said, "Hey, Jo, this is something we want you to do."

Jo Talbot:

Yeah, look, David, I do see it as a privilege. But as you alluded from the start, we are an incredibly multicultural society and it's really important that we foster in the APS as a leader that we create an environment where people feel that they belong. We can really bring that rich diverseness of experience and perspective that people bring. Look, really, bringing that into our daily work, we get better outcomes in terms of advice and service delivery, and importantly represent what Australia actually looks like, which is a very diverse multicultural society.

David Pembroke:

Now, in terms of those numbers where it got to 11% back when the report was released earlier this year, did that surprise you at the time? Once you'd done the work and you got the data and it was like, oh, okay, we're 24% as the population, but we're only 11%, was that a surprise?

Jo Talbot:

It probably didn't in senior executive roles, because I've been in the senior executive service for quite some time, and you look around, I guess, at colleagues and there wasn't the representation there. Obviously there are some departments and agencies where there is better representation. Obviously when I was at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade there was a lot more colleagues who were from a CALD background. But you've really highlighted there is, I guess, some of the areas we're focusing on because whilst the other levels in the APS might be more broadly reflective of the community, we're not seeing people from a CALD background actually progressing into some of the senior executive roles at the moment.

David Pembroke:



Do you think there is a bias that needs to be addressed?

Jo Talbot:

Look, there's a range of things that we're needing to focus on, and there's a range of things that are clearly creating some barriers. I think recruitment is one of them. We really need to look at how we recruit and ensure those recruitment tools are inclusive. Still we're based on merit, but there's a lot that needs to be done. The feedback we've had, particularly in developing the strategy, is that people are not seeing themselves progress through their career.

David Pembroke:

In that assembling of the data at the point, were there any other points where you've thought, "Okay, this is something that we're really going to have to address."? Recruitment obviously being one.

Jo Talbot:

The other is creating greater cultural understanding. I'm sure Radi and Suzanne will talk about this, but it's really important organisations really understand the composition of our workforce and really understand about people from different cultures. There is sometimes, unfortunately, people look at people with one lens and assume that, okay, if you're a person from a culturally and linguistically diverse background we understand who you are. It really doesn't give the understanding of the rich identities and the backgrounds that people have.

So part of what we are doing with the strategy is we're doing sprints with 20 agencies, and we're getting to actually understand what is the actual representation of CALD people within their workforce and from which countries or which cultural backgrounds they might be from, so that they actually are able to better understand and build their own cultural capability and awareness and engage particularly with each of those cohorts within the workplace.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Now, Jo mentioned recruitment and there was nodding of heads over here with both Radi and Suzanne. What made you react like that when the point of recruitment was made into the APS? Radi, I'll start with you.

Radi Kovacevic:

Geez, I don't know how many interviews I've had to sit and I've done well and not well. Communication I would say is not my strong point. And then I think if you look and reflect on the CALD representation within our organisation, I think I've got the stats here, 43.4% of home affairs staff were born overseas in the APS level, 21% non-English speaking background, which is a reasonable amount I guess. The emphasis through any interview is strong communication, and that may not be for all.

RSCS representation, the stats that I have is around 2%, which is very different from other organisations. Now, that might be different through the next census and other things like that, but it's pretty low, and there's obviously a barrier there. Large representation through the IT field, as you'd expect, the STEM fields, and being a mentor of a few CALD SES officers across the APS, the barriers have been somewhat the recruitment process and the way the recruitment process is run. I think there's opportunities there to help improve that possibly-

David Pembroke:

How can you improve?

Radi Kovacevic:

Possibly through representation of CALD representation on selection committees.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Radi Kovacevic:

Now, that's going to be very difficult, not easy to do given that if we're looking at only 2% of SES representation in our department, for example, but that's one opportunity through that. The other one is actually through just some training as Jo had mentioned. We've got a few things going on in the department around unbiased training, more about this, actually me speaking to other SES, networking, communicating, liaising, all the rest across the APS. So it's probably not one single formula, but there's got to be, personally I think, more done by the SES in order to improve CALD representation at the SES level.

David Pembroke:

Okay. And for you, Suzanne, recruitment?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

My nodding was more about the bias part of the question.

David Pembroke:

Oh, was it? Okay.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

And I think that that plays into recruitment. I mean, there are I think 25 different forms of cognitive bias. One of them is affinity bias. Basically that means that we like people who remind us of us. It's pretty simple. You look at the way that that operates in a public service and you end up replicating forms of structural power over and over and over again. Dave, that's a great example of that.

When you think of what a diplomat is, I think people have a pretty good sense of it's usually a man, he's tall, he's got a full head of hair, he's confident, he's wearing a suit, he's usually white. These are ideas that we have that are really deeply imbued in our culture. If we don't challenge the perception of what leadership is, of who can be a leader, of who can do the job, actually recruitment is going to replicate all of those problems. It will continue to replicate structures of power, and you'll have the same people doing the same thing over and over again.

So I think for me it's also a question about retention. So recruitment is one part of it, but retention is another. You have a lot of people who find... Obviously the public service is just so different. There are different-

David Pembroke:

It's not homogeneous.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

... organisational cultures within and subcultures within every organisation, so it's hard to generalise, but there are places where it doesn't feel particularly welcoming or people don't feel seen. They don't have that visibility of who they are. That's not just for CALD people, that's also for LGBTIQ people. Class is an issue. In particular, at DFAT, you have a group of eight university students who tend to come through. So I think it's really about

lifting the lid on that stuff. It's going to be uncomfortable, and unless people are prepared to have some pretty uncomfortable conversations, nothing's going to change.

Jo Talbot:

Yeah, that's why I think conversations are really important, like the ones that we're having now. It's a euphemism, but you can't be what you can't see, and so-

David Pembroke:

Perhaps maybe take us through one of those conversations. How does that look, those sprints, how are they being constructed in such a way that builds a capability for an organisation to be able to have these conversations from the inside out?

Jo Talbot:

So we're sort of doing these sprints with 20 agencies as I mentioned before, and really helping guide them and coach them through. We're not trying to be really prescriptive. There's a range of headline actions that we're getting people to focus on, but really one of it is really understanding what exists in your current workplace, what maybe changes do you need to make to your recruitment practices or to some of your documents. I mean, language, we've talked about here, is a really important thing. So certain words can be taken really the wrong way and being seen very negatively. So ensuring that whatever you're doing you're sending the right messages. What we are trying to create really in the APS workplace is a sense of belonging. We really want people to be able to feel that they can come into the workplace and they can bring the diversity that they have and that that will feel safe and respected.

David Pembroke:

And now, reflecting on those conversations, have you been surprised by those conversations? Are people aware of these things that they perhaps should be aware of? Or are they coming off a very low base and thinking, "I'm really only addressing this for the first time because I've never really thought about it before because I'm not from a CALD background, so I don't have to think about it. I'm just going to get on with my job."?

Jo Talbot:

I think the data's been really interesting. I think when people have started to actually look, I think they've been quite surprised by looking at what Radi's talked about, is actually seeing CALD people actually sitting in quite large numbers at executive level or APS levels, but not making it through into the senior executive service.

So that really then does enable though a conversation, and this is really important that people engage with CALD employees in their workplace to understand what's happening here. What are the barriers? Do people not feel supported? Was the recruitment process not an inclusive process? There's lots of ways we can look at this, but this strategy is going to be in place for a number of years. There's a lot that we need to do, but the first things we're really focusing on at the moment is really around recruitment and progression, ensuring that we've got a statement which Secretaries Board has just endorsed around a statement of leadership on cultural diversity. And really important, that sets the standard of what we expect of APS leaders and how we expect them to actually foster a sense of belonging and ensure that there's cultural respect in the workplace. That's a really important step and a really important signal for CALD employees to know that they're in a supportive workplace, that we're trying to create safe workplaces, and we're trying to create them free from any racism as well.

David Pembroke:



Yeah, well, indeed. But what about that for you as CALD people involved in the public service?

Radi Kovacevic:

We've run a number of sprints actually. We've got a few going on this year as well as part of what Jo mentioned. Having been involved in a couple and will be involved in a few later in the year as well, different levels, some of the SES get it, and some are coming from a, "Well, I didn't realise this was a problem actually." I think the more that we do of that, I think the better benefit we'll get out of it. Now, the longer term, I love them because actually it's the good, the bad, and the ugly that comes out, and every SES officer walks away with a different perspective and towards actually an improvement as well. I think the more of them the better, and I think they're one of the most effective mechanisms in SES awareness of CALD broadly.

David Pembroke:

And for you, Suzanne, in an earlier answer that you gave, you sort of suggested to us that you don't want to be an irritant. It's almost like you feel like you don't want to be a pest in raising this. You're prepared to agitate to a point, but you don't want it to become part of, "Oh, she's just her, and you know that she's always going to be griping and raising it." So how do you feel about feeling like that and the wider move to try to assist?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

I mean, it's fundamentally connected to my identity. There's a lot of literature on this, particularly by women of colour, that their very existence is disruptive. People have written books about this, like being in the room is a disruption. People don't like it. It's different than the norm. It completely undoes known structures, things that are familiar.

So I live with that all the time. That's just all the time. Sometimes I move between the position of, "Well, problem belong you. I was posted to PNG, that's your problem." And other times it's like, "Well, actually the truth is it's very much my problem and I live in that every day." So I have to be very, very cautious in the way that I raise it. But the crux of this, and I think Jo touched on this and you did too, David, that people see themselves as the periphery of it. They're like, "Well, I'm just doing my job. Why is this my problem? I'm really nice" or "I've got friends who were from blah, blah, blah" or "I loved travelling to India, it was fabulous. India was gorgeous." You get a lot of that and it's like, "That's great."

But the reason that this is so uncomfortable, and this is the crux of it, is that people have to see how they are part of the problem. They need to ask themselves, "How am I making this issue persist? How am I supporting this to continue?" That is so uncomfortable for people. It's certainly not an easy conversation with senior people. And if you think about what culture is, we live in Australia, a lot of senior leadership is Anglo-Saxon, it's male, and there's a lot of comfort there for those people who sit in those positions of power. They've never had to question it because the world is designed by them-

David Pembroke:

For them.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

... for them. And that is really uncomfortable, and that takes a great deal of personal courage to be prepared to say, "Wow, I'm part of this. I have contributed to this. I am either making it worse or I'm not doing anything to prevent it." That's hard. That is a really difficult conversation to have. And it's really hard for someone like me to be the person who prompts that conversation, because there's always in a disjunctive power. There's an asymmetry there, whether it's hierarchical formally or it's not hierarchical and it's just in terms of societal power. I think often there's a little posse of women of colour that we get together and we try and try and knock these problems out, like how do we have a productive conversation with people that isn't... It shouldn't

be threatening. It shouldn't be targeted in a way that's like putting people down. It's supposed to enlighten people, but that's hard. If they're not prepared to do it, you just can't have the conversation, and then nothing changes, nothing gets any better.

Jo Talbot:

But just on conversations, I want to jump in there because, part of the work we're doing, it should not be the CALD network or employees having to do all of the engagement, all of the conversations. So really importantly here, it's about allies, it's about the CALD champions, it's about how as leaders in the APS we can actually really lean in and we can listen and we can look at and engage in a really open way. Because yes, some of this might be uncomfortable for people to have these conversations. This is the experience that people have been having. Listening to their stories, and I've sat down and done 10 plus tens with cold employees and they've said things which are incredibly concerning about how they have been treated or how they have felt. But this is about how do we change this.

And so we really do need allies. And so, I'd really encourage people listening that get involved, go and join the CALD network. The CALD network is just not for cold employees. Have a chat with the CALD champion in your agency or department and see about how you might be able to assist. And also, look, inform yourself. We've got the Mosaic Digital Magazine, which we've produced, and that's a really good way that you can go in and deep dive in on particular areas around cultural inclusion that you may not know about and learn a bit more about other cultures. Part of us, in my view, being in the public service and being a member of such a society is to inform ourselves and to get to know people a bit more.

Radi Kovacevic:

Good point, Jo. We've got a strong CALD network within our organisation, and it's actually excellent. They put a lot of effort into it, but that's a good point, you don't have to be CALD to be part of it and something I'll have to take back as well because there's-

David Pembroke:

It's got to be the key to it, doesn't it really?

Radi Kovacevic:

It really is actually. That's a really good point. So something I will definitely take back.

David Pembroke:

And so from your point of view, Suzanne, looking at this construct that's put in place with the strategy and the plan, the focus on recruitment and progression, you have the sprints, the Secretaries Board coming out and making it a priority, the magazine, which is bringing a spotlight to the stories, does that encourage you?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Oh, absolutely. I mean, it's fantastic there's a platform for it. And in a lot of ways, the greatest risk is people look at the strategy and they're like, "Well, that's a great strategy. If the HR department could go in and look at that, please, that would be great." But the strategy enables us to, I mean particularly as people of colour or CALD people more broadly, to say to senior people, "This is for you. I know about this stuff. I am culturally competent. I have had to live in multiple worlds my entire life. I've had to work on connection, work on critical thinking. I'm self-reflective because people ask me questions about myself all the time, but you need to do that too." And it enables us to actually use something that is evidence-based, and not just that, but a broad buy-in at a senior level. It's a tool to be able to say, "This is for you."

So actually, I do find it really encouraging. The greatest risk is that people don't internalise it, they don't internalise their piece of the puzzle, which is like, "Well, actually you've got to work out how to implement this. I can give you suggestions, but ultimately you need to work out what you need to do differently." It's not just like a policy. What are you going to do differently in your day to day to manifest this?

David Pembroke:

Radi, are you encouraged at all by what you've seen inside Department of Home Affairs? Those statistics that you read out there were not-

Radi Kovacevic:

They're not-

David Pembroke:

... fantastic.

Radi Kovacevic:

... not fantastic. From the APS perspective, absolutely fantastic I think. From the SES, not so much. But work that's been done across the APS, so just to get a CALD employment strategy across the line across all the agencies have been a great achievement. Our secretary actually earlier this year had led, and I actually led a podcast, my first ever podcast. It was on the Recognising International Day of Elimination of Racial Discrimination. I was joined by the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Commissioner, Giri Sivaraman. That was uncomfortable actually. I'm little disappointed that it didn't get more views, was my thing, something that I reflected on. But since then, there's been a lot more downloads, very uncomfortable conversation around racial discrimination, the elimination of racial discrimination in order to deal with CALD more broadly.

David Pembroke:

What was uncomfortable about it?

Radi Kovacevic:

The fact that we raised racial discrimination more broadly. It's that thing, it's not my problem, whatever.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Don't say the R word.

Radi Kovacevic:

Don't get it. It was actually really quite tough. But the work that the APS is doing on the employment strategy, we've got our own action plan as well, and my thing is I'm most worried about is that it gets parked as another document as part of many broader strategies that are going on at the moment. You're right, it's not for me. I get it. I got it totally, understand it. For you, you need to understand it, you need to read it, you need to get engaged with it and help. So it's huge personal vested interest. There's unpacking those difficult conversations, great to have them. And I think over just the last year I think there's been more progress than I think previously.

David Pembroke:

Okay. And so Jo, part of your responsibility is to make sure perhaps that the strategy and the plan doesn't become more brochureware that sits in the corner and it's all fine and binded and beautifully graphic designed

and all the rest of it. How do you think about that working with your partner agencies? Because you are obviously leading, but it will come down to the leadership inside these organisations. How and what can the APSC do to move it along or to keep it moving? It seems we're suggesting there's progress, there's momentum, but how do we keep that momentum moving?

Jo Talbot:

It really is around working with the core agencies at the moment and sharing a lot of the successes. There's been a lot of learnings that agencies are now talking to each other and making those really vital connections. We'll keep reporting on that progress, and importantly, as you mentioned before, we've got targets year on year. We'll also be giving updates through Chief Operating Officer's Committee just around how we are progressing and the success that is occurring in different agencies. The idea is to try and scale this up more broadly across the service and to get those lessons learned around what's actually worked. Also, what maybe hasn't worked as well. We'll be having to give regular updates through to Secretaries Board.

I think the important thing though is really around how we work across the system, particularly with the senior executive service around them understanding what their role is as leaders. That is really critical. We know that the role around culture in an organisation is so important that our senior leaders are actually there and their behaviours, their actions, and the language they use is really so critical. That kind of authorising environment then means that people will be more inclined to realise that, "Okay, I do need to maybe think a bit differently around how I might approach these things. I do maybe need to inform myself a bit more and maybe I should go and have a read on Mosaics and learn a little bit more about some of my colleagues that I'm working with."

So we are incredibly committed. We really want to remove these barriers that are in place at the moment. I'd really encourage people to go and talk with people in their workplace and understand their lived experience. Because I think when you actually get it on a cognitive level and an emotional level, you want to actually do something about it. Because I think fundamentally none of us want to have a workplace where people don't feel that they belong. I think that hopefully will drive some action, but we've got to keep having these conversations and keep talking about it. That I think is the best way for us to keep progressing this. And even if it is uncomfortable at times, we don't get change without actually looking at what the real issues are.

David Pembroke:

Sure. But it's interesting, in the first answer that you gave Radi, you started down the path of a story where you mentioned the Villawood Immigration Centre and your parents coming here and you not speaking. That's an incredible story. I would be fascinated to unpack that a little bit more, to understand a little bit more about your background and what that brings to... If I was leading, I'd be interested to know that, to understand that. So how do we start and keep those conversations? And again, Suzanne, your diverse background, I'd love to know, well, where has it come from? What does it look like? What does that mean that you bring to my team? I would've thought it's a fairly obvious thing that it's a strength that you can draw and once you identify people and celebrate people and show the curiosity and the interest, you'll get performance level go up.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Absolutely. I think I've often had to think about, "God, why am I so stubborn? Where has that come from? And no matter how tired I am, no matter how impossible something seems, I will just go, go, go. Where does that come... " And that absolutely comes from the generations that have come before me of just sheer resilience, just sticking at it, believing that if you hang on you can achieve something. It's almost like willful blindness. Actually, it's been really good for me to reflect on that because that doesn't always work. There are limits, and it's also healthy to be like, "Okay, that's where that comes from. That's good." But it means that I can also explain that to the people around me and be like, "If I'm being like that, if I'm really going hard, just remind me we are not in a war. It's okay, it's just work." But people bring that.

David Pembroke:

That's right.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

And that sheer resilience of overcoming what's in front of you is so innate when you come from somewhere else. You just have to.

Radi Kovacevic:

Yeah, absolutely right. And look, I mentioned earlier that we're growing as a country in terms of the migration population. If we're looking at policy settings over the next decade, how can it not benefit the APS having more from a CALD background? We're seeing more actually STEM into the IT, the science fields because it's easy for us, it's easy for me. Maths was really easy. Policy would've been really hard for me. So if we're looking at shaping the next 10, 15 years, the opportunities that CALD employees, particularly at the SES level, could offer could be immense. I think those stories of Villawood, and I had to repeat Year 2 actually because I could not speak English effectively, comes back to you learn a lot in the first few years of your formidable years. But yeah, shaping policy and future, CALD is where it's at.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Yeah, I'm at DFAT, so at DFAT, one of our core competencies is value translation. That's how I would describe it. You need to be able to engage across a network of people that might not make sense to you, and you've got to make it make sense to you, and you've got to make it make sense to Canberra. And then you've got to try and take that and make it a policy that works for the national interest. It's a pretty unique skillset, you can build it. Actually we can use that to build it out across the public service. Cultural competency and value translation being a knowledge broker, it's pretty powerful.

David Pembroke:

Here at contentgroup, obviously we're not the public service, we're sort of quasi public service in lots of ways, but we have cultural catch-ups where people from the different cultural backgrounds come and they prepare a presentation and they prepare food and they prepare the stories. And it is so much fun. And they're so proud when they come to do their presentation. We all learn and we understand it and we get to understand the background, so we get to understand the people. And everyone understands a little bit more, and so the team works a little bit better because there is that empathy and understanding. And it's simple. It's like ask and get them to... Because people want to do it. When they're given permission, they'll step forward, no question.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

And you've got to give people space to be vulnerable. Sometimes people are going to make mistakes, and that's okay. You're like, "Actually, that's okay." I don't mind if somebody asks a question provided that they come with it with good faith. We've got to be able to have space for people to step forward and be like, "I actually don't know that" or "This might seem a bit awkward, would it be possible to ask you a question?" And sometimes the answer is, "No, I'm not in the mood to explain this to you." And then often it's yes. Occasionally the burden of having to explain, it can be really taxing. But you do it in good faith because you know that it'll deepen a connection, it'll deepen a relationship, it'll build empathy. It'll make a connection.

David Pembroke:

Now, a couple of questions before we go. The 2%, are you happy or sad? Is that enough, not enough?

Radi Kovacevic:

Whether it's 2%, 10% or 20%, I'm not sure if that's the answer really. I think it's part of the broader strategy. Knowing that internally what our percentage is is a good thing because then it's like that call to arms, "We've got to do something."

David Pembroke:

Well, you've got to have accountability.

Radi Kovacevic:

We've got to have something. But if we're going backwards, then that is not a good thing either. So not fussed about the 2%.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Suzanne?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

Yeah, I feel the same.

David Pembroke:

You the same?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

It's a double-edged sword in the sense that you might end up in some organisations with more CALD SES than-

David Pembroke:

Yes, than 2%.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

And that's also fine. You want the right person for the right job. At the same time, you do need accountability. You do need something measurable. So I always feel a bit torn about this because you might end up with a Secretaries Board where it's more than 50% women. Are we then going to be like, "Well, wait a second, that's too many. That's one too many women."? No, of course not. And we wouldn't want to be in that situation, so I think we've always just got to be quite cautious about that, that it's a target and if we exceed it, that's fantastic. If we're getting the right people in the job, if people are feeling included, in fact, the lower the cognizance of those numbers and the more comfort people are experiencing, I think that for me is the goal.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Now, to Suzanne and then to Radi, advice for perhaps aspiring CALD people who want to journey into the SES, who want to take advantage, who want to contribute at the highest levels, what advice do you have for them?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

I think you have to find your allies. You need to make sure you have people in your corner, whether they're from a culturally and linguistically diverse background or not.

David Pembroke:



Or not, yep.

Dr Suzanne Akila:

In fact, for me, some of my strongest allies are people who have had to come on a journey to understand what it means for me to be in the workplace, and that sometimes it's painful or uncomfortable and that they can really buy into that and be there with me in it. So I think you've got to find your people. That's advice for anyone, that's not just for CALD people. The public service is a wonderful place to work, but it's still a place to work, which means that it has its challenges. You have to find your people and you have to find a way to live your experience in an authentic way that you can feel comfortable with. And once you start to question that level of comfort, you need to go to your allies or you need to leave. I know that's a bit harsh, but retention is an issue, and it's a retention issue for a reason.

Radi Kovacevic:

Yeah, I think you answered what I was going to say. My secret sauce has been networking. You're right, bringing people on for the journey, reaching across the APS, educating, perseverance, and being just bloody stubborn. So never give up is really the advice I'd give. Reach out to the networks that are there and reach out to us. There's now CALD... We're basically there for you to help, so reach out to us and the network more broadly.

David Pembroke:

Okay, a final question for all of you, and I want to take you into the future. Five years time, Suzanne, we've had the strategy, strategy's been in place, Jo's cracking the whip and making sure that the sprints are happening and the conversations and the magazines are being printed and doing what she can. You and others inside your organisation have been having some success. What does it look like? What does it look like?

Dr Suzanne Akila:

To me, it looks a lot like people feeling more comfortable with discomfort. That to me is that we can raise things, that there is an openness, a format or a platform for us to be able to say, "That didn't work. How can we do this better?" That to me is the culture that I would aim for. That's what it looks like to me, people are okay with getting feedback and have the tools to grow and that we'll support each other. That to me is a really bright future. And of course, it would be great to see some more CALD people as SES.

David Pembroke:

Well, I'm sure Jo will not be happy if she doesn't have her at least 2%.

Jo Talbot:

Absolutely.

Radi Kovacevic:

Five years is not that far away.

David Pembroke:

No, I know.

Radi Kovacevic:

But not having the need for a CALD champion would be, I think in a nutshell where I'd be at. The difficult conversations are had, the strategy's in place, it's working. Greater representation of CALD in the policy areas would be my aspiration for five years.

David Pembroke:

All right. And Jo, final word.

Jo Talbot:

Final word, that's a tough act to follow. Look, I'm definitely hoping to see greater representation and really that there are more CALD voices around the leadership table. But really importantly though is that we are actually looking and have put some steps into place to address some of those barriers that people have been telling us about, that we are creating an environment where people feel included in the workplace. I really hope that we're still continuing to have the conversations with our CALD employees. I think you've got to keep progressing with this. Yes, five years is not a very long time, but it does create quite a bit of time to make some of these what are systemic changes in the workplace too. But we're on the journey I think, which is really important. I'd really hope to see a lot more leaders in the APS really taking that statement of inclusive leadership and really applying it in the workplace and creating that culture. I think that will be something I'll be really hoping over the next five years.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, I will commit to in 12 months' time we will come back and we'll have another conversation. I would like to see what's changed, what's happened, what worked, what didn't work, where are the challenges, what do we need more of, how do we keep going. Because it is obvious that if really we can make this a richness to the inputs that we need into the public service, as you said before, it's almost like a superpower that Australia needs to grab hold of and take advantage of this wonderful gift of multiculturalism that we have in these wonderful people who are committed to public service to improve the policy and program service and regulatory outcomes. So yeah, all right, so your hands in the middle, we'll be back in 12 months and make sure we do that.

Because again, these are important issues and we need to keep talking about them because it's important that we continue to strengthen the Australian Public Service. So to Jo, thank you for coming in. Radi and Suzanne, thank you for coming on to Work with Purpose for another fantastic public service conversation. And to everyone out there, how about you have a think about what you might be able to do over the next week in terms of CALD. So if you're not a part of the network, go and find out about it. If you're not involved in some sort of way, get involved, start a conversation, discover the people who sit around you. Where are they from? What are their stories? Be interested, be curious. Do it and see what happens. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. So anyway, great conversation, and thank you very much to Radi and to Suzanne and to Jo.

So to you also listeners, we are well clear of the 100 episodes of Work with Purpose, and indeed, news to come in the next couple of weeks, but we have just recommitted to a long-term agreement with IPAA. And so for many years to come, we are going to be making these programs. But what does help everyone are the ratings and the review. So if you can jump onto Spotify or Apple Podcast, wherever you listen to podcasts, and take a few moments just to say, "That was great. Here's a fantastic review for them," and it does indeed help the program to be found. You can find out all about what's coming up on IPAA ACT on LinkedIn. And also, if you follow contentgroup, we do publish our Work with Purpose content.

Now, if you haven't bought tickets for our first Work with Purpose Live, you should, and there is still time. So join us on the 20th of November for a conversation about men's mental health with Matthew Breen from Canberra's Running for Resilience and Matthew Short from the Department of Health and Aged Care, and

Lachlan Vivian-Taylor from Comcare. And indeed, the event is proudly sponsored by our good friends at Comcare. So please come along to that live recording.

Work With Purpose is produced as a collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, ACT, and supported as always by our very good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission. My name is David Pembroke. We'll be back probably next week with another episode of Work with Purpose, but for the moment, it's bye for now.