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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #67

A GREAT EXHAUSTION OR A GREAT INSPIRATION?

Hosted by Clara Fallon, Associate Regional Director, Hays Recruitment

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

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

In today's episode of Work with Purpose, we go back to a recent webinar that IPAA held about the challenges we're all currently facing in both the public and private sector, and that is around issues of talent shortages, evolving employee expectations, and just indeed the impacts of COVID, the great exhaustion, or indeed is it the time of great inspiration?

So for leaders, what does it all mean? What does it mean around culture? What does it mean around the expectations of employees? Indeed, how are leaders in the public service managing this? So to discuss all of those issues, IPAA brought together three of the leading minds in the Australian Public Service, Belinda Casson, who is the Acting Chief Operating Officer of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Michael Nelson, who is a General Manager at Services Australia, and Rachael Jackson, who is the Chief Operating Officer at the National Indigenous Australians Agency. Now, the conversation is put together by the Associate Regional Director for Hays Recruitment, Clara Fallon.

Clara Fallon:

Good morning everyone and welcome to today's event, A Great Exhaustion or a Great Inspiration? My name is Clara Fallon and I'm the associate regional director for Hays in Canberra, and I'm delighted to be your chair today. I acknowledge that we are attending this session from the lands of the Ngunnawal people. I also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the various lands on which you all may be joining this meeting today, and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in today's session. On this land, we enjoy the view of the Brindabellas to the west and the snowy mountains to the south. I pay my respects to the elders past, present, emerging, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the surrounding lands and waters. So about IPAA, for those of you who are unfamiliar, IPAA ACT was established in 1953 and is a professional body focused on the promotion of excellence, professionalism in the public sector arena.

IPAA is a not-for-profit and nonpartisan organisation that provides a platform for debate discussion and all about improving and striving for excellence in public service in Australia. So just as an overview, today you'll hear from our expert panel who will share their knowledge on the challenges faced by changing expectations in a new government, the community and talent shortages and the evolving employee value proposition and what that means for leadership. It is my pleasure to firstly introduce Belinda Casson. Belinda is currently the Acting Deputy Secretary and Chief Operating Officer for the corporate and enabling services group at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Prior to taking up this role from the 1st of July this year, Belinda was the first assistant secretary for People, Parliamentary, Communication and Insurance Division and Chief Risk Officer in the Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Belinda has held senior roles in the Department of Finance, the ATO and the Department of Health, and Belinda has also experience in workplace relations and work health safety policy, and really looking forward to your brain on this today. Thank you.

Next I'd like to welcome Michael Nelson. Michael works with Services Australia and brings a wealth of experience in federal and state government public service. Michael has led various corporate functions but primarily HR-related during a career spanning 20 years in the public service. He's currently the General Manager of the People Division, where he has responsibility for all enterprise wide HR functions. He's also spent five years working for consulting firms and managing emerging businesses to realise their potential. He has a passion for transformation and business improvement and for working closely with clients to deliver their desired business outcomes. Thank you, Michael.

Finally, I'd like to welcome Rachael Jackson. Rachael is coming up to her three-year anniversary of Chief Operating Officer at the National Indigenous Australians Agency. Rachael previously held Chief HR Officer functions at the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, the Department of Finance and the Attorney General's Department and was the Executive Director, Governance at the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate. Rachael holds an Executive Master of Public Administration.

Thank you all so much for being part of today. As you can all see, this event is being videoed, being recorded, and a copy is going to be available for everyone post the event on the IPAA website. So you can go in and look at that. If you'd like to join the conversation with us online, the Twitter hashtag is hashtag IPAA events. So I'd like to start with some opening remarks. If we think about increased digitalization of work and giving employees data to break down the work that's being performed and automate where possible, but rather than dropping head count, allow freeing up our employees to perform high-value work and really an emphasis on the human element, is this us addressing the great exhaustion with inspiration for innovation? I'd like to start with you, Belinda.

Belinda Casson:

I'm clearly very excited to talk about this.

Clara Fallon:

Wonderful.

Belinda Casson:

It's an excellent question. I think the short answer is column A, column B. So I think it would be mad for HR practitioners like us to pretend that staff and managers and stakeholders and everyone else aren't exhausted after COVID. So COVID, pandemic, natural disasters, I think the level of exhaustion in the system is something that we can't ignore. But I'm also incredibly excited by what's been happening in the last couple of weeks and months in the public service. It's obviously going to continue to ramp up in terms of feeling and seeing and hearing people feel inspired by what they're working on. We know in HR that people who are engaged and connected to the purpose of their work do great things. That's both a blessing and a curse though because incredibly engaged people at the moment are also very tired. So there's a really big issue there to grapple with, so it would be good to unpack that today.

As you said in the opening remarks, I'm at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, and I guess to come to the point about the purpose of your work, I joined this department, perhaps we don't need to say exactly what year, but a long time ago as a graduate. So being able to support the department with corporate and enabling services now in what is my policy spirit home is actually incredibly exciting for me, but also exhausting. Let's not pretend that's not the case.

I think we're a couple of blocks away today from the Jobs and Skills Summit up at Parliament House, and there's already commentary this morning coming from ministers and attendees about the key role that the public service, the Australian Public Service but all of them for that matter across states and territories, we want them to be model employers. So unpacking some of these issues around exhaustion and inspiration and getting that balance right is something that is a big focus for the government and I think absolutely top of mind for executive boards and committees right across the APS. So looking forward to unpacking some of that stuff today with Michael and Rachael, getting to hang out with them and talk shop and have some folks listen in as well is a pretty fun way to spend a lunch break. So thanks for having me.

Clara Fallon:

Wonderful. Thank you. Michael, you can speak next. Thank you.

Michael Nelson:

Yeah, thanks very much, Clara. Really good points. I absolutely agree. I think I'm starting off from the same position as you, Belinda, that I think, yes, the great exhaustion, absolutely we've experienced that over the last couple of years. But equally there is a great level of enthusiasm, and in part that's been through what we've achieved and what we have learned that we can achieve by having a bit of pressure placed upon us as public servants. I suppose I want to talk about the Service Australia experience over the last couple of years. So yes, times have been trying. We've had to go through novel periods where we've just had to explore new ways of operating, but they've also been incredibly rewarding in terms of what we've achieved as an agency. That hasn't been done on our own. That's been done with collaboration across the public service.

I say that because the number of times that we've had to stand up teams to surge, if you like, you've probably all heard those terms used fairly regularly over the last couple of years, to actually meet the demands of the government and also meet the needs of the Australian community has been substantial. So pandemic payments, support through floods and fires and numerous occasions of having to do that, they have been very trying. I think what's been useful through that process and period has been the fact that we have been able to collaborate. We've actually chosen to engage with our staff in different ways to what we've previously done. So we've actually given them a licence to be more creative. Also we've, I suppose, driven a really purposeful approach to meeting the needs of Australian people. So our technology advancements over that period had been absolutely substantial.

If I think back to probably the three main things that made our approach to dealing with the pandemic's fires and flood successful as an agency, it comes down to the leadership that we've had through that time, pulled the leadership group together. The CEO was very, very purposeful in pulling people together, having regular meetings, having a great cadence to make sure that communication was really clear, they understood what the problems were and how we'd need to go about solving those things. Communication, as I said, was absolutely central to that. So not only within that group but communicating out to the staff, out to our other stakeholders and also through the government. Then the third one was around trust. So this was a time of great trust and that was placed in our staff to be more creative, to try and develop things within really short periods of time to meet the needs of the Australian population.

So we're transforming, we're able to move from, I suppose by way of example, times when payments would have typically taken X number of days to pay people, to being able to pay people within their bank as soon as they rolled up to seek payments. So within 40 minutes, money was in people's banks. The approach that we talked to that was, I'd probably describe as tight, loose, tight. We had tight in terms of what was expected and what was needed of the agency. We're loose in terms of being able to give people the autonomy to do things that was creative. Then it was tight again in terms of monitoring how we were going. Do we need to tweak anything? How do we use that? Quite a useful process, though. At the heart of that, of course, we have a fantastic culture within Services Australia around helping people. So that was front and centre and really important for our success.

Have people been exhausted through that process? Yes, they absolutely have. We've been very conscious of that. We've needed to be. They've been working very long hours for very long periods of time. So in order to do that, we've just been monitoring and supporting them as best we can. Where there's leave available, encourage them to take leave. Tools available to support them. Understand that the continuum, if you like, of well-being doesn't just stop and start at the workplace or at home. It's across the board. People will take their tiredness home, they'll bring their tiredness back to work, their stresses, their demands as well. So being really conscious of the needs of our people has been front and centre of what we've had to do. So the two, I suppose, really important things that have been part of our success have been people have been at the centre, so really human-centric approach and using tech to support us to deliver for the Australian people as well.

Clara Fallon:

Excellent, thank you. Rachael?

Rachael Jackson:

Thanks, Clara. So at the outset, you said I'm coming up to my three-year anniversary. The agency is three years old now. So a lot of this happened when we were still building as an agency. National Indigenous Australians Agency stood up 2019, and we were in a building process when we had bushfires and then COVID came along. So the agency has been in this crisis mode for a while, like everyone, but we still, we didn't have a lot of the foundations that probably Michael and Belinda had. So that, I think people have been exhausted through that time. But we have a really strong sense of purpose in the agency. In 2020, the main focus was what do we need to do to keep COVID out of communities, protect our elders? The agency was united in that and that was very strong coming through.

We've got a national presence, very remote regional and capital city presence. So people were very united in that. But then the vaccines came. Things got opened up more. Life change. There was at some point I think people talked about post-COVID and now I think we've just, it's living with COVID. So that cycle of moving out of crisis mode but still having this information coming at us all the time, the expectation's very high. People do feel tired. But then the election, in the prime minister's acceptance speech, the first line he spoke about his government's commitment to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, and that gave the agency a lift. But it's also a big responsibility. We are heading towards the first referendum for a long time. So we are also on a transformational agenda to make sure that we have our focus and resources in the right place and the skills in how we work.

So it's trying to introduce transformation at a time when people are tired is really hard. We are still in that process of developing our roadmap. But people are, I think, engaged. I've been leading this development of the transformation roadmap. People are coming in wanting to be involved. I've been out talking to staff. They're excited by the change. But we haven't yet articulated what the change is. So keeping people enthused and motivated, while helping them understand what needs to change in order for us to meet the expectations of First Nations people, of government is really top priority. It's really important to capitalise on that excitement and inspiration that people have, while paying attention to the well-being of staff, making sure people don't overdo it. We have to work in a sustainable way. So I think there's a lot we can say today about well-being, but it has to be at the core of everything we are doing, looking after our staff and making sure that we are set up for that success because the weight of responsibility is heavy, and the next couple of years are going to be really important for the agency.

Clara Fallon:

Yeah. And it's how do we find that stamina? As you mentioned, Belinda, the highly engaged individuals are also feeling quite exhausted, and the balance there in giving the creative licence that Michael speaks about, and the balance of this ongoing change effort, while keeping people at the core but utilising the technology as well to alleviate some of that, it's a really interesting piece being underpinned by the leadership. So important. So thank you for those opening remarks. I'd like to pose a question to you, Rachael, in regards to how and what you've done, if anything yet, that's addressing these challenges by the changing expectations of the new government, and then the community in turn with the changing expectations internally of your workforce? Can you speak a bit more tactically to that?

Rachael Jackson:

Yes, I can. I mean, there's a lot that we've been doing in engaging with staff and our executive on how to meet the changes that expected of us by community and by government. Some of the really tactical things that we've been talking about is for staff to remember that there has been a changing of the guard, to be mindful

of the language, remembering it's a new government, in some cases, a lot of new advisors, how we work with ministerial officers is really important in building that trust and that relationship so that we can have a really productive relationship. And just for some of our people that don't have quite the day-to-day engagement with ministerial offices, I think it was important for us to overtly say, "Remember, think about the language you're using."

But on an enterprise view, we are looking at our transformation agenda. We had started talking about how we positioned ourselves to work in partnership to give effect to self-determination. I think when the government came in with very high expectations of going to a referendum in the first term, we thought, well, we just need to put a injection into this transformation agenda and really make sure that we're well set up for this. So we are looking at, we've got streams of work, looking at our policy and strategy, our investment, our engagement and our data and information, making sure that that's all connected and informed in the way we support government and First Nations communities, but also our people. It's a really important stream that goes across all of those lenses because if our people aren't skilled in working in the way that we need to work, I mean, working in partnership is quite different from a traditional public service way.

I think it's not just our agency that needs to put community at the centre of all that they do, but some traditional public servants, we're used to delivery, and how you do that is sometimes a bit crash and crash through. But now we have to take our time to listen to the voices, to listen to the experiences, and make sure that we are giving that common sense of purpose, that space to hear where we need to go, where the community wants us to prioritise our efforts, and making sure we have the right data to inform those conversations. There's so many elements to that. So how we bring that together that makes sense for staff without being overwhelmed with a whole lot of different activities and agendas underway is going to be really important. So we're spending a lot of time talking to staff about that.

Once we've developed it, we will make sure that we give the people an opportunity to connect with it in a way that they can understand what it means for them, not just as an organisation but at an individual level. So I've been offline working on that for a couple of months, and that's an indication that the CEO thought, "No, this is really important for the agency to respond." It was a pretty big signal to the agency too that we needed to spend some time to develop or how we're going to work in the next couple of years.

Clara Fallon:

Mm. And Belinda, I know there's been some interesting momentum in terms of a shift in the culture from an employee value perspective and perception in how you engage in the workforce. Do you want to add to that?

Belinda Casson:

Sure can. Look, anyone following my secretary on LinkedIn would know that from very early on, our goal is to essentially to mirror some of those national conversations around what do great jobs look like? What does that mean to have a fair workplace, a safe workplace, a productive workplace? Those things go hand in hand. It's not rocket science. So I think picking up on Rachael's point around the way we're shifting, the way we approach policy and delivery, that focus on listening also translates to the way we have to do culture in the public service.

So yes, we have a strong foundation, but we've only been this department for two months today, and it was only six months since we had a machinery of government change and before that. So that constant change for staff is something we always have very front of mind because that plus the workload, I think, of the pace of things and the lead up to the election, but then obviously post as well is something we're trying to, we're leaning into but also stepping back because I think also giving staff the opportunity to be heard about how they feel about that, participate in the conversations. So one of the earliest conversations we've had with staff at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has been around culture and diversity, particularly leaning into diversity.

We've got commentary from the prime minister and ministers about no one getting left behind. Again, that's just probably another example of how things that are happening at that national political level also ring true for government departments, not least of all a government department that has two cabinet ministers with responsibilities for employment skills and training, the workplace relations system. So we've got, again, to play out some of those national conversations about the labour force. And there's not many humans left. I don't need to tell Hays. We've got to step back and think what are the re-skilling opportunities in the public service in our own department across the sector, so that we've got people ready to do the jobs that are coming as well as the jobs that people are doing now. I know Michael's work at Services Australia here is pretty APS leading, so I'll let him talk about that.

Clara Fallon:

Yeah, fantastic. Interesting in terms of just that question around the community expectations, Michael, and the balance that your workforce has to consider as well as the government agenda. What are you seeing there?

Michael Nelson:

Yeah, look, first of all, the term listening has come up a number of times, and that's absolutely the centre of our approach right now. The other thing, which the word probably wasn't used by Rachael and Belinda, but I think it's central to all of our approach as well, and ours in particular, and I think it came through in the election campaign from the government was around the concept of together. So we are reaching out more deeply now than probably ever before into communities to try and engage. But equally we're playing that back on ourselves and again, looking in the mirror and seeing how are we going about engaging with our staff and with one another, with together as a major concept for us to see how we can use that.

The other thing that we are doing is being very mindful of indicators and things that we are seeing come from the government. So we're still really listening and watching what this government is doing. There's still a few things that haven't been resolved yet that we need to and we will need to engage within coming months. I talk in particular about the bargaining policy and the workplace relations policy for the APS. So we are thinking about how do we go about that? We're starting to talk to staff about there will be changes into the future in relation to bargaining in particular. We can expect those. We don't have a great deal of detail, but let's be ready for some more change in relation to that.

Clara Fallon:

We're seeing in some of our research, 64% of employees now intend to look for this adaptive hybrid environment in their next role. That's consisting of flexible schedule for outcomes rather than just the set in office or work from home. So what are the key people and culture priorities for you personally and for the organisation? And what are the risks of you not achieving the desired outcomes? Belinda, could I get you to comment on that?

Belinda Casson:

Yeah, thank you. I think at the core of every leadership challenge is balancing the insights and data that you have available to you with your instinct and getting the balance right between those two. I think some of the workforce data is giving us incredible insight, I guess, in HR but also from a practical perspective for a line manager about how things are looking and feeling. So it's coming back to that point around listening and instincts, but also using the insights that are available to you and the data and those sorts of things. So I think balancing these incredible priorities of the newish government, 101 days with the sustainability aspect, I think. That's got to be something that staff don't just hear us saying, that they feel it in the way that their lived experience day to day with their line managers and their team.

So these things have shifted quite significantly for us in terms of what are staff looking for as a baseline now? I think access to flexibility is become a very critical part of a baseline. I think we think about the three things that are, we try to put at the centre or we're moving towards putting at the centre of this concept about what are the baseline factors. I think in addition to flexibility, you've got well-being and inclusivity. So I guess if you get those things working well, individually and then together, that's the sweet spot of your value proposition, I think. It's been incredibly powerful watching folks all across the public service in terms of the response to COVID, whether it's in communities, it's a vaccination rollout, it's a service delivery of payments and support. I think that purpose that people have had, we've got to hold onto that, I think in a really meaningful way, so that there's that continued engagement, and from that engagement obviously comes the bonus of productivity.

I think the risks of us not leaning into this with the labour market as it is, and particularly in Canberra, but I think just talking to other folks, I think it feels like that in most capitals now that the labour market is so tight, you need to really deeply understand how are those three elements of flexibility, inclusivity and well-being, how do they play out? I think staff have high expectations, but I don't personally feel like that's new. But people have different mechanisms to tell the world about how they feel about their expectations. So before LinkedIn and Twitter and Facebook, so I talk about Facebook, that's how old I am. People have a bit of a megaphone for describing their expectations in a way that we didn't have access to before the technology. So I'm not sure that expectations have shifted that much, it's just that we have the joy of social media as a platform for that.

Clara Fallon:

It's a really good point. Rachael, what are your key people and culture priorities for you personally? And does that align with the organization's priorities?

Rachael Jackson:

Yeah, well, hopefully they do.

Clara Fallon:

Hope so.

Rachael Jackson:

Yes. So I mean, I've talked about well-being, mental well-being, the physical well-being, all very important to productivity but also just enjoyment of life. So I think we've talked about the exhaustion. The exhaustion's not just about work. It's the pressures. There's so much happening on the global stage, that's hard not to have that infiltrate your life, and your worry about the world and the future. So taking time to think about well-being. I think you mentioned about people want flexibility in how they achieve outcomes. In the public service, I think some of our challenge has been how we measure outcomes, particularly at an individual team level. Sometimes, particularly in where it might be policy advice is not as easy as some of the more transactional work to measure. So where I've been focusing on is how we can be, we can keep talking about purpose, how we can be quite purposeful in how we spend our time.

We do all have to change. That's not just the organisation changing, it's individuals. What's our responsibility to look at how we're working? Yes, we support hybrid arrangements. We've just had our census results, people feeling comfortable with being able to access flexible work arrangements. That's all good. But how do we measure the impact? And are you spending your time in the right places? Because I mean I have, as I'm sure you do, daily challenge of being supposed to be in three places at once. And I have to be quite purposeful. Where am I going to have the most impact? How I choose to spend my time is as important as why I'm spending my time on those things. So having those conversations with staff about connecting to purpose but

using the time in the best way, which might not be always the way you want to spend the time. Sometimes we do have to be a bit ruthless with our time to get the outcomes, and having those honest conversations.

Clara Fallon:

I think everyone's come to that realisation, and that's the change in the culture now, just generally in any workplace. Michael, what are you seeing in terms of being able to find that balance? You spoke earlier about that intersect between the workplace and your home and now they are blurred.

Michael Nelson:

Yeah. So for us, I suppose I'll touch on that and then I'll just touch, Clara, on a couple of other things which are really key to us at the moment in terms of our areas of focus in the people space. I think understanding your people deeply is so critical now, so much more critical than what it has been in the past because of all of those pressures, because of the pace of change, because of the amount of information that people are bombarded with every single day through so many channels, we really need to understand and engage with our people deeply. We can sit there and think, well, how do you go about doing that? It's not a survey that's going to do that. That's going and having conversations with people. It probably goes back to the points around 'together' and engaging with others.

So really, really want to encourage managers, and this is something that we try to do as much as we can, encourage managers to actually go and have conversations with staff, get to know them, find out what their dog's name is, find out how many children they have, what they've done on the weekend, raise those things next time you've spoken to someone, say, "How's your dog? What are the kids doing? How's your mother?". Those sorts of things, that's how you genuinely engage with people. It's through that genuine engagement, you're much more likely to understand how people are coping, how people are engaging at work. If there are issues, they're more likely to come and talk to you. If you don't have those relationships, it makes it much more difficult to manage. I suppose I just really wanted to make that point, the really critical thing about being a human, having a conversation and being genuine with others.

Just touching on two other key people priorities for us. One is around culture. So we learned, and it became really obvious to us through the COVID period over the last two years that our people are so committed to helping others. So let's harness that and let's not diminish that over time. So we've got a really significant transformation agenda, a lot of technology advances that we're planning over the next couple of years. A few people initiatives that we're progressing as well. We're really conscious of the fact that we actually want to build on the culture that we have. But if we don't manage the change appropriately, we could actually damage that. So it's front and centre for us in terms of managing culture. The other one is around capability organisation and in particular the war for talent. We all know that the labour market is so tight at the moment. We've all got big agendas.

We are playing in a pool which is shrinking in terms of the talent that we need to engage with and maintain, and that's a really difficult thing. For us as an organisation, we've tried to break it up into areas of focus for us. So we'll buy the talent. So we're revising our recruitment processes, so let's look at how we can give a better candidate experience to not only our internal staff but those from outside. No shock to anyone that if someone has a poor candidate experience, they probably won't apply again. We can't have that. We need to be really, really purposeful, to use that word, about making sure that a candidate experience is good. So it's a buy, borrow, build and transition model. Building is really about investing further in capability of our people, trying to make sure that we understand what capability they have, what they need, and how do we best and most effectively engage and invest in that.

Clara Fallon:

So a really good segue in terms of our final question around the employees and looking at work, and for work to be more personal to not only attract but retain in this type market. So in terms of the evolution of this employee value proposition, what are you doing differently or what is your agency doing differently that will address this, not just now, but in a sustained manner? Belinda?

Belinda Casson:

Yeah, thank you. It's a really, really good question. We are starting with flexibility, I think, is a really big priority for us. I think leaning into the staff, the union feedback we've had about flexible work policy settings, what we know about the market, but also observing, to come back to this point around the importance of data and insights, observing that when people have been working remotely, looking at census results around how people still feel engaged, they feel like we're taking care of their well-being. All those sorts of really important markers I think are really closely tied to then some of those baseline expectations around flexibility and well-being and inclusivity, as I said earlier. So at a practical level for us, we're looking at our policy settings. We have become the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations principally from what was previously Education, Skills and Employment, but we've brought colleagues in from two other departments.

So we use language around being a startup, which we're two months in to a brand new department. We're not DESE 2.0, we're not AGDE 2.0, we're DEWR. We're starting from not totally from scratch, but it is a new enterprise, it's a new executive, new secretary. So that opportunity to reset, restore some of those conversations and the primacy of that, and reframing that approach is something we're leaning into at the moment. Lots of public service agencies of course have had business continuity-related measures in terms of some of the peak of COVID and winter flus over the last couple of weeks and months. We've used that time again, like we did during COVID lockdowns and the last two years before that, we're looking to see what lessons have we learned about the way we can make hybrid work work. I think in a more sustained manner, look at how we can keep doing those in the long run, as opposed to, I guess, what has just been a case of reacting to the external environment for the last two-and-a-half years.

So one of the observations I would make is that we did it all at speed, at pace, under pressure to respond to COVID and then natural disasters and various other things. But we probably, in terms of a reset, probably need to make sure that managers and staff feel capable and skilled and supported to now do this for the long run instead of just doing it as a response to that external factor or factors plural. So that's a really big focus for us. What is our flex fitness, I guess, to keep doing this as a long-term sustainable approach to work instead of just a reaction to external factors? That's the challenge for us.

Clara Fallon:

Yeah, great. Now I'm just conscious of timing, but I wonder, Rachael, would you like to respond to that in terms of the employee value proposition change, if at all, that you are seeing?

Rachael Jackson:

Yeah, I mean it's something we're all focusing on, and we're all fighting for people. We've got so much to do. But I think a big part of it is the experience at work and the interesting work, creating mobility opportunities, all of that is important. But I think what we might have lost a bit in the crisis mode that we've talked about was everybody had their shoulder to the wheel to get the work done. Now we need to remind our managers and our leaders that if they're not spending 20 to 30% of their time developing their staff, then they're not doing their jobs.

We need to be thinking about the future of the public service, we're stewards of the public service, and who's bringing up the next gen public servants. I think we've just been running, as you said, Bel, it was just at pace. We really need to remind staff to get back to the basics. We've been focusing a lot on manager essentials and

learning to lead and those sort of programs, but it's also that on the job experience, how much time are you spending having quality conversations with your staff about setting expectations, making sure they've got role clarity, they're the sort of things we're focusing on. I think that will improve the employee experience. And when that word of mouth gets out, that then the EVP goes up as well.

Clara Fallon:

Yeah, yeah. No doubt everyone is focusing on it in all sectors and in industries, but it's the nuances that are relevant to you and your workplace, your workforce. It's really interesting to see it change. So what I'd like to do is just have a look at our Q&A opportunity for our viewers today. We do have a question from Jade. It's about "COVID opened up a more inclusive way of working that took family responsibilities into consideration. It makes you realise that full-time work five days per week in an office is designed for people without family responsibilities. How will the APS make sure that it learns from the experience and keeps the best bits, and what are the actions that we will see?" Would anyone like to start on addressing that question?

Rachael Jackson:

Well, I mean I think we were all learning from it already and we're trying to put it into practice. But I would say it's also opened up a whole lot of experience to people with disability, who's saying, "Now I'm more enabled to participate in some cases than I was before." We've got a very dispersed workforce, and all of a sudden when everybody was working from home, everybody was on a level playing field. So there's so many, not just about families, there's so many different elements to how we're working now that we absolutely need to learn from. I think we are embedding it into the way we work. Michael talked about the employee experience in listening to what people need. We need to absolutely keep doing that and making the space for that listening.

Clara Fallon:

Yes. Do you have any thoughts on that question?

Michael Nelson:

Yeah, I do. It's an interesting one. I think we could see some broad principles being rolled out across the public service that could be used, and the public service commission have done that in some respects so far. But maybe we could see something more like that into the future. Because I think the other part of it is, you really do need to understand the situation in which people are working. So there will be particular types of work that simply can't be done from home. There will be work that is sensitive in nature, which make it difficult to work from home. So it's grappling with some of those sorts of concepts and trying to provide people with flexibility that not only supports them, but still enables the business to meet its needs as well. I think that's critically important.

The other thing that we've been mindful of is the research which is coming out now, which is talking about some of the issues that can come out of people working at home, not necessarily in a hybrid way, but for longer periods of time, where exercise goes down the drain, where they are isolated, so they're not connecting with their colleagues in the same way. They're working longer hours. So having people to come back into the workplace, engage with their colleagues as humans face-to-face is really important as well. So we need to be cautious about how much we embrace the whole working from home concept. Yeah, I just think that's an important consideration for all of us.

Clara Fallon:

I can resonate with that in terms of people leadership and the perhaps delayed knowledge share or the learning through osmosis, when you're sitting next to someone and you're able to very quickly, in real live time just bounce something off them, and for productivity. But it's a balance and it's a fine line, and I think it's going

to be tailored for all right? What we'd like to do now is just have a think about some closing remarks. I think this has been a really valuable discussion. I think we could probably sit here for two days and knock through a number of the points raised. But I'd like to just invite you all to offer a key takeaway to our audience to perhaps apply or think about as people leaders in this current environment. So would you like to start, Rachael?

Rachael Jackson:

Thanks, Clara. I think picking up on my earlier comment of referring to people leaders, thinking about how you're spending your time, being very mindful about how you're spending your time, and that's not just choosing what you do during the day, but having an awareness of where you're at personally. So for me, I've got people who will tell me if I've skipped some training sessions, if I don't exercise, I might get a little snappier in my responses. I lose my balance and my equilibrium. So making sure that you're doing the things that keep you well and happy and have that balance. But also when you're spending your time at work, are you just doing busy work? Are you spending time developing your staff and being quite mindful in choosing what you do? Sometimes it might not be what you want to do, but it's the important thing that you need to do. And remembering your role as a steward of the system, which is the APS.

Clara Fallon:

Thank you. Michael?

Michael Nelson:

Yeah, look, I echo Rachael's points, I think. For me, in a more pointed way. Probably just going back to my earlier point, which is just around getting to know your staff, engaging with people genuinely, being a person to them as well, so they feel that they can connect with you, and understanding the importance of trust in our workplace, in our relationships. So one of the things for me, and this is just a little tip to take away, is the importance of the congruence between messaging and behaviour. So as soon as you start messaging something and you start to behave in a different way, you start to diminish your trust with your people. I think that's a really critical point in an era when trust could be seen to be at a really low point for many people, it's critically important that we maintain that. That's all. Thank you.

Clara Fallon:

Thank you. Belinda?

Belinda Casson:

Look, obviously always in furious agreement with these two. As a general rule, I think the value of the check-in is something that I don't think we can overstate. I think how are you going with life and work are really important questions. I think we don't want to waste the crisis that we've had responding to COVID. If people are continuing to do that genuine, "How are you going?", being mindful of the pressures people are under in their work and their home life and all the other bits and bobs of adulting, that's where really beautiful staff engagement and productivity happen. I think all the kindness that we saw in COVID, again, we don't want to waste that. We want to say that's the thing we want to keep going with. Certainly, while it was incredibly stressful and tiring, particularly for those of us in the front line of HR, observing the best of humankind in really trying circumstances is something I think we can keep doing, through keeping tabs on people, checking in, putting well-being at the centre of leadership is a pretty good way to keep going.

Clara Fallon:

Yeah. Wonderful. There's been lots of wonderful themes today that I hope you can all take away with you and apply or just food for thought around what you are doing and how you are doing that with your people. But I'd really like to thank you all for being involved. Thank you all for joining us, and see you next time.

David Pembroke:

So a very big thanks to Clara Fallon for hosting that conversation with Belinda Casson, Michael Nelson and Rachael Jackson, and I'm sure you got a lot out of it just as I did. It was a great session and really looking at that, the detail of these challenges around workforce. So another great conversation there and a big thanks to the team at IPAA for making the webinar available to the Work with Purpose audience.

A big thanks as always to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support for Work with Purpose and indeed to the team at the content group here who help us to put it together every week, the program and help to get it to air. Also a big thanks to the team at IPAA, who also do a great job in helping put the programs together. A big thanks to you, audience. If you do have a time to go to your favourite pod catcher to give us a rating or review, it does help the program to be found. So if you do have time, please, we'd really appreciate you doing that. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks with another episode of Work with Purpose. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks very much and we'll see you then.

Voiceover:

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