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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #69

EA AS A LEADER

Hosted by Holly Noble, Director of Strategic Planning and Performance,
Department of Finance

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. IPAA ACT has long recognised the importance of Executive Assistants in keeping the APS running and running on time. In this podcast, we have a discussion with Stephanie Ebert who is EA to the CEO of Services Australia, Michelle Oliver, who is EA to David Fredericks who is now the Secretary of DCCEEW, but at the time was the Secretary of the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources, and Sarah Kalleske, who is EA to the Head of Service and Director-General at the ACT Public Service. The discussion focuses on emerging issues and challenges that EAs face every day, and the speakers speak about their experiences, their expertise, and lessons learned over their long and distinguished careers. They also share some great personal insights about their time in the public service that really look at the need for confidence, resilience, and managing up, and also leadership within their own teams. The discussion was facilitated by Holly Noble, who is the Director of Strategic Planning and Performance at the Department of Finance.

Holly Noble:

I'd like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are meeting. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution they make to the life of this city and this region; I would like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may be joining today's event.

Holly Noble:

Good afternoon, everyone. And welcome to today's event. The EA Series, the EA as a Leader. My name is Holly Noble. I'm the Director for Strategic Planning and Performance at the Department of Finance. And I've worked closely with IPAA since 2019. And I'm a past chair of the Future Leaders' Committee. For those of you who are unfamiliar with IPAA, IPAA ACT was established in 1953 and is a professional body focused on the promotion of excellence and professionalism in public administration. We're a non-profit and non-partisan organisation that provides a platform for debate and discussion about improving and striving for excellence in public administration in Australia.

Holly Noble:

Today, we're lucky enough to hear from members of the IPAA EA Series Committee, who will be kindly sharing their personal insights and views on what it's like to be an executive assistant. They will talk about how to create impact through adaptive and situational leadership and how EAs can adapt their ever-changing work areas so that they can rise to meeting the increasing expectations and challenges that they face. The format for today's event involves a 30-minute panel discussion we'll then invite you, our audience to contribute your ideas through the chat function that's available in Microsoft Teams. So, if you think of the question, please don't be shy, pop it in the box, and then we'll wrap up today's event.

Holly Noble:

Now it is my pleasure to introduce you to our speakers today. Stephanie Ebert has been providing senior level support within the APS for 15 years across all levels of government and is an Executive Assistant currently working to the Chief Executive Officer of Services Australia. Michelle Oliver is the Senior Executive Assistant to Secretary David Fredericks PSM, at the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources. Rhana Crago,

who was originally on our panel, sends her sincere apologies for today's event. And last but not least, Sarah Kalleske. Sarah started her Executive Assistant career in the Commonwealth Public Service in 1986, before moving to the ACT Institute of Public Administration Australia Public Service in 2015, where she's now working as EA for Kathy Leigh, Head of Service and Director-General of the Chief Minister's Directorate.

Holly Noble:

Thank you all so much for being here today.

Sarah Kalleske:

Thank you.

Holly Noble:

To set the scene a little bit of background. I actually started my career as an Executive Officer at Hong Kong Shanghai Bank in England, before transitioning to Australia and the APS in 2011. Since then, I've been lucky enough to work across a number of different corporate and enabling sector roles at Comcare, IP Australia, and the Department of Finance. In my current role, I look after integrated business planning at the Department of Finance, but also a centralized secretariat where we look after eight different committees. This means that myself and my team are really lucky enough to work very closely with the exceptional EAs and XOs across finance and their senior executive.

Holly Noble:

I can say with confidence, the strength of our working relationship with EAs and XOs is directly related to the effectiveness of how we can do our day-to-day operations. I've never been in a role where the strength of an EA role has not been paramount. So, thank you all for joining us today.

Holly Noble:

I'm keen to ask you, if you could all briefly share with us, why are you an Executive Assistant? What do you love about your job? Sarah, I'll start with you.

Sarah Kalleske:

Thanks. Well, as you said in your opening that I've been a career EA since 1986, so I'm very much on my downhill to retirement, but it feels like I've been an EA for only five minutes, it's gone remarkably quick. One of the things that I like about being an Executive Assistant is the diversity that it brings each day. And if I can say, and maybe some of you would understand what I'm talking about is the addiction to being an EA and being someone who's in the know, but not necessarily knowing the detail of what's going on, but you get that sense that something is happening. So, that emotional intelligence plays a really big part of being an EA.

Sarah Kalleske:

The other thing that I really love is the challenge of getting those really hard meetings to happen in the ACT Public Service, Kathy Leigh who's my Executive and the Head of Service, she has 15 direct reports. So I'm looking at 15 calendars regularly and trying to find that little gap. So having access to all of those calendars is really important. And I quite like being given that challenge of finding that spot, but I also really like to work with the EAs across the ACT Public Service.

Sarah Kalleske:

And knowing that I'm not going to put a clinger in their calendars, that's got that flow on effect. And I've been at the bottom of the pile where you are the one that's having to fix it. So, I'm very conscious that I don't do that, but I do also like to say that occasionally I don't have a choice and I don't have to talk to anybody, and I love it because it just happens and I'm just bang, it's happened. And I think I love the wheeling and dealing and it's like Tetris, that I can manipulate one calendar and do a deal with someone else to make it all work. So, I think that's really why I love it. And that's why I've stayed doing this role for such a long time.

Holly Noble:

Wheeling and dealing makes sense. Michelle, how about yourself?

Michelle Oliver:

For me, it's more pace. The pace can be nice and calm, and we've had some nice calm time leading up to a new government where now it's just all stations go and literally, physically just running sometimes. So, the pace is great. Networking, I love networking. I love like Sarah said, negotiating and getting... I like to think I get what I want and negotiating with ministers' offices and other agencies as well, obviously. But for me working at Industry in particular, it's a really exciting department and I love the fact that I'm in serving the Australian people and making sure that we are got really good outcomes for everybody, but I've got kids and I've got grandchildren, I want to make those positive changes for them. And if you can be part of that, then that to me is an absolute positive. And that's what I really, really love, especially working at the department that I'm in. So, we've got a great department and it's just an amazing place to work.

Holly Noble:

Steph, can I go to you?

Stephanie Ebert:

Yeah, no, absolutely. I actually love the fact that it's never the same two days in a row. What was a burning issue yesterday, isn't actually a burning issue the next day. I, again, love being able to collaborate and network and discuss things with all of my counterparts in all different agencies and departments and even in the Minister's office, brand new ministers, bringing them in and dealing with all of the changes that happen. I like to be able to be in an area that I can see the direct correlation to the changes you make in a policy or changes you make in something that you're doing there and how that actually rolls and the flow and effect to the Australian people.

Holly Noble:

A very powerful role, very impactful. You each have a wealth of experience. Sarah, can you tell me what has been some of the standout moments across different phases of your career and why?

Sarah Kalleske:

I've had a few over the... If I say 30 plus years really fast, but some absolutely stand out. And the first being obviously being asked to apply for the job that I'm currently in and working for the Head of Service, because when I came over from the Commonwealth to the ACT, being the new kid on the block and I managed to find my way working down the corridor from the Head of Service and then being asked to apply, I was thinking, I can't. I didn't know anything about the ACT Public Service, but I realised very quickly that being in so many

policy departments in the Commonwealth, I was very familiar with a lot of names. So, it actually helped me, so that would be obviously the highlight and I'm in the drain job because I get to do things like this and meet and speak to so many interesting people.

Sarah Kalleske:

Another highlight for me was a few years ago, I got to meet the former Governor-General, Sir Peter Cosgrove and his wife. And it wasn't particularly a nice experience why I was meeting them. We had a former public servant who unfortunately had cancer and he was nominated for a PSM, but he was in hospital, and he was not going to be able to receive his award. So, my boss, Kathy being on the council was able to make things happen. So, I got to escort the Governor-General and his wife through Canberra hospital. And it was quite funny watching all the people around them making sure there weren't any bombs or anything in the room before we went in and I got to watch him do that investiture, which was quite an honour. So that would absolutely be one of my highlights and being awarded an ACT Public Service Leadership Award a few years ago as well, was very humbling that I was nominated by my peers. So, you can't get anything better than that.

Sarah Kalleske:

And then last year I was asked to work for our current Chief Minister for a few months while he was in transition of getting a new executive officer, so that was an absolute highlight. And I think I rocked in the corner in the fatal position for the first few weeks thinking, what the hell have I done? Because it is such a different environment working for a minister than what it is in the Public Service. So, they all call each other by their Christian names, whereas I'm used to calling them Minister.

Sarah Kalleske:

And remembering that actually I can't call you that, was quite interesting, but just watching the politics play out. And I actually went and watched the Chief Minister in question time and knowing that he's quite an introvert to watching him in question time was quite amazing. Because I came, I came back from it and I said to him, "It's very theatrical, isn't it?" And he suggested is. That was an absolute highlight. And they even said that they'd have me back, so I figured I couldn't have done too bad even though I was rocking in the position for a while. So yeah, they're my absolute highlights.

Holly Noble:

Those are some amazing experiences. Thank you for sharing those with us. Michelle, you have 10 years' experience as an executive assistant in the ACT Govern and APS. Could you share a time in amongst all of that when things were tough and you found yourself facing challenge and uncertainty, how did you navigate that challenge and what did you learn and how was resilience an important part of your ability to respond?

Michelle Oliver:

That's actually a really good question. And I've got a lot of examples, but I'll give you one. Well, I was working with the David Fredericks at the time, he was a deputy. And knowing for well that he was going to be at one stage tapped on the shoulder to be secretary. You watch that diary, you see little things come through the diary and you just know that something's going on. And that went on for quite a long time, quite a few weeks. But probably the worst experience in that part of it was that he did get word that he was being invited to lead up a department. And I was working from home, or I was actually on annual leave and all my colleagues, including Rhana were contacting me and just saying, David's secretary, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "Look, I've got no idea. I haven't heard anything." I was really put in a difficult situation as well.

Michelle Oliver:

So, I had my partner at home at the time. He just told me to breathe, be calm. The secretary, well David was up at a cabinet meeting in Sydney, and I knew how it was a very important one. I sent him a lovely text message and hoped that he would call me. He did call me, and he did invite me to go with him to the secretary role, so that was an enormous relief. But then when you get into, we had Friday, that was Friday night at 17:30, we started in the new department on Monday. I was on annual leave; I didn't even get to say goodbye to my colleagues at finance. We started in the new department 09:00 on Monday morning. I'd gone from a deputy EA on Friday to a Secretary's EA on the Monday. I really didn't even have anybody to talk to, to get advice. I was taking down officers and setting officers up and yeah, well the whirlwind just began. I walked into a department that was incredibly supportive with the deputy EAs, who I'm forever grateful to and for.

Michelle Oliver:

And it was really challenging. It's a very different level to deputy stake-ish role. And stakeholders, you're dealing with completely different levels of stakeholders. You're expected to be able to get their names and phone numbers within five seconds. So just really those networks were crucial, and it was a really trying time. At the end of the day, I just backed myself. And I always just wanted to be a deputy EA never thought that ever I'd be a secretary's EA, would've been nice, but just never backed myself quite enough to get to that.

Michelle Oliver:

But I knew I had a deputy that could be a secretary, so I really proved myself. And then once we got into that role, it was just backing myself, believing in myself, using my networks, using my contacts, speaking to people for advice that I'd never even spoken to before, but it was a really good outcome and three years later and we're still together and he survives, and I've survived, and I love it. I love it, really do. And I'm so glad that I'm being honoured to have that position.

Holly Noble:

That's so fantastic advice. Resilience is so important.

Michelle Oliver:

It's very important, yeah.

Holly Noble:

Tapping into those networks. Leadership starts with a conversation you have with yourself. It has to resonate with your values. What does that mean to you all and what are you doing to ensure you continue to grow and develop as a leader? And Steph, we might start with you.

Stephanie Ebert:

Yeah, thanks. So, leadership has always been one of those things, there's multiple books and things like that you can read and there's everything you do. But I think what I've actually adapted lately, well, not lately in the last 10 years is the growth mindset and you never finished learning on your leadership journey. So, continue using and I actually use my networks in as an EA for my leadership because there are so many amazing people that have been in the positions a lot longer than I have, and that it can actually impart so much more wisdom and leadership than I can. So, looking up to them and asking them those questions has actually enabled me to further my own leadership journey. And take that and actually help the EAs that are starting theirs.

Holly Noble:

That's amazing.

Stephanie Ebert:

Yeah.

Holly Noble:

Sarah?

Sarah Kalleske:

I think leadership for me is about putting your hand up for things like today that you're willing to put yourself in a situation where you're not particularly comfortable. It does get actually easier with a bit of time I've learned over the years. I think, I'm the same. I work with a really great bunch of EAs across the ACT Public Service who make me look good, but they're always looking at someone to guide and implement. And I've been really fortunate that in my office, Kathy has allowed me to grow in terms of that leadership. And she sees that it's actually valuable to her because you are helping the other EAs that are new to an organisation, and they don't know necessarily what they're doing and how they need to support their executive.

Sarah Kalleske:

And so, me being available and I get random questions all the time about all sorts of things. And sometimes I think why is someone asking me that? But I always make sure I help. And I mean, before I came even today, I just sent out an email to all the EAs across the ACT and the number of emails I got back saying, "Good luck. You'd be great." And I'm thinking, will I? But when I went to the ACT, there was nothing in terms of an EA cohort, so I basically developed everything that we've got with other people, of course. I mean, we've got email lists, phone lists with photos, and I developed an induction guide last year, which was really important because I realised very quickly that new EAs coming on board while we've been in COVID, they've just picked up their laptop. "Here you go. You're on your own working from home." And so, them being able to find the contacts and all the email addresses and all those sorts of things were really helpful.

Sarah Kalleske:

And just to support them because working from home and talking to your wall all day is really hard. So, I found that something that I've grasped and just run with it. And I never thought I would be in a situation where I was doing that. So, you get thrown into it. And you can either sink or swim, I guess. So, I just figured, oh, well, I might as well have a go and see what happens.

Holly Noble:

Sounds like there's a number of people who are very grateful that you did. Michelle?

Michelle Oliver:

Well leadership. I like I've learned working for David, the Secretary it's just to watch and listen to how he runs his department. And he's very respectful and I've learned a lot from him in particular and his leadership. And then you put that into practice in your own leadership. And with the EA cohort at Industry, we have a big network, and they do an amazing job, but basically just look, listen, and learn, and then putting that into your

own perspective. And of course, there's people out there that you will see that you think, okay, that's just something I'm not going to do. Because not everybody's a great leader, but it's about just taking those notes and those points and those positive points and putting it into your own leadership style is really important for me and my leadership and being really respectful to others is really important to me.

Michelle Oliver:

The other thing is what's helped me a lot is mentoring the EAs, the junior EAs, that's been a huge privilege for me when a EA will reach out to me and get my leadership and my advice, that's quite an honour, and they'll put that into practice and you can see them do that when they're doing their interviews and stuff like that. But also too, I have a mentor. And that's really important for me. I have several mentors and not everything's easy to do, so it's great to have that mentor where you can go to and just get that wise council and then take it back and put it into practice. Yeah, so that would be my leadership.

Holly Noble:

Another very important part of a diverse network that helps you on your leadership journey.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah.

Holly Noble:

That makes complete sense. The past couple of years have impacted the way that we all work. And I think Sarah, you've definitely mentioned that in one of your answers before. Steph, can I ask, what do you consider to be the positives of that change and how have they impacted your role as an EA?

Stephanie Ebert:

I think the positive changes that I see is the fact that we've actually been able to overhaul the way that you actually do things with your executive. So, I was so used to just being completely paperbased and the change that has occurred and having to move into digital systems, it's actually changed the way that I'm able to do my job as well. It means that there's that little bit more flexibility for me with kids that are quite young, that I can go at 5:00pm and go and pick them up and do dinner with them. And I can still do things at 7:00pm at night with the boss. And instead of having to stay in the office and do those kinds of things, it's the ability to actually do those things from home. And it's changed the mindset of the way that you can do your job. So, I think that's been my main positive for the last couple of years. It's completely changed or overhauled the way I see my job as an EA.

Holly Noble:

Makes perfect sense. Lastly, just to wrap up before we move on to questions from our audience, which I hope everybody is actively participating in the chat, if you could all share one key piece of advice, a call to action or a mantra that's been important to you in your EA career that you would pass on, what would it be? And Sarah, I'm going to put you on the spot.

Sarah Kalleske:

I think for me, my number one advice, and I've seen it over the years that people often think that knowledge is powerful, but I actually think the powerful thing is knowledge sharing. So, the more information that I am privy to that potentially a lot of people don't have access to, I share my knowledge and I can see that people are really grateful and happy for me to pass that knowledge on. So that's the one thing that I think I would pass on to someone, if you are new and you've learned the ropes, pass on that information to someone else, because keeping it to yourself is not powerful at all, so that would be my piece of advice.

Michelle Oliver:

You remember everybody's replaceable, right?

Sarah Kalleske:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Oliver:

So, there's no point keeping it to yourself.

Sarah Kalleske:

That's right.

Michelle Oliver:

You're better off sharing it and building everybody's knowledge. It's not like everybody wants your job.

Sarah Kalleske:

Yeah.

Michelle Oliver:

So yeah, building. It's a great.

Holly Noble:

Yeah, knowledge shared is knowledge gained.

Michelle Oliver:

Correct.

Holly Noble:

Michelle?

Michelle Oliver:

Well, I totally agree with Sarah and it's a very good point and yeah, I do the same thing, there's no point keeping it all to yourself. It's going to make somebody else's life easier than so be. It's a better outcome. Mine

would be learning from my mistakes. You've got to own up to it and learn by your mistakes and what your mistakes are, but then putting processes in place so that you don't make those mistakes again. That's really important. The last thing you want is your SES coming out and saying the same thing to you where you've made a mistake, so that's been really important to me. So yeah, if I've ever made a mistake, I'll put a process in place so that I'm not going to do that again. And I've always done that owning up to your mistakes like just be honest. And back yourself. If you can't back yourself, then you're doomed. You've got to be able to back yourself, trust yourself. And yeah, just do it, just go out and do it.

Michelle Oliver:

I was once told that, for a job description, women will read the job description and see the duty. "No, I can't do that, I won't apply for the job." Yeah, I can do that. And I'll apply for a job. We're so hard on ourselves that you just need, "I can do this." And if I hadn't have backed myself, then I definitely wouldn't be here today. And it's really important to read an audience and to be able to read the people around you and know, I can muck around with a lot of people, but there's just some people you can't. So, you got to be able to read your audience and read them well and put those reactions in place where need be.

Holly Noble:

Yeah. I mean, some of those things can be quite subtle in terms of nuances, and so being able to pick those.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah.

Holly Noble:

Is really.

Michelle Oliver:

And everybody's different. So absolutely you've got to be able to act appropriately. And especially in the role that, we're all in, you have to be able to be able to do that.

Holly Noble:

Really like what you were saying about learning from your mistakes and putting in a new process and it's a continual journey. It links really nicely with what you were saying earlier, Steph, about that growth mindset. One piece of advice from your Steph, if we were sharing?

Stephanie Ebert:

Yeah. This one has been a mantra of mine for years. You're in a position of privilege, not power. I've met so many EAs and they tend to crash and burn because they wear their titles if it's their own and you put a lot of people [crosstalk]... It is. You put so many people offside doing that. Understand that, yes, you are in that position, you sit outside that boss's office, but it's not you that holds the power. You can sit there, and you can help do things, but you're there to help. And you're there to assist. You are not there to actually put people offside.

Michelle Oliver:

It's better to be easier to work with, isn't it correct?

Stephanie Ebert:

A 100%.

Michelle Oliver:

And be approachable.

Stephanie Ebert:

Oh yes.

Michelle Oliver:

Because you want people to come to you to have those positive outcomes.

Stephanie Ebert:

Yeah.

Michelle Oliver:

So why build up a brick wall?

Stephanie Ebert:

Oh yeah.

Michelle Oliver:

You're so right, Steph. So many people, EAs in particular think that they do hold that power and you just don't, everybody's replaceable. You've got to remember that.

Stephanie Ebert:

It's also, they're also the ones that aren't career EAs.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah. Know your boundaries, I suppose?

Stephanie Ebert:

Yes, absolutely.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah.

Holly Noble:

That some amazing advice. Thank you, ladies. That's just fantastic. We're going to take some questions from the audience. So thank you everybody that's been submitting those and sending them in. Whoever feels like answering, jump in. So, we are circling back to resilience now. Being an EA to someone very senior can often find the EA displaced when their executive retires. The skills an EA at that level has, doesn't always compliment the skills required to fulfill that level outside of an EA role. Has anyone in the panel been in that position or worked with someone that's been in that position? What did they do?

Sarah Kalleske:

I think it's happening a lot. It's happened to me quite a few times at a lower level. And it's very unsettling because you just don't know who you're going to end up with and you sometimes left in the corner as if you're a bit of a nuisance and hopefully you'll just go away. I mean, I've just been very fortunate that when I've worked in different divisions or branches, I've learned to work with people and take on some work. So often I found that someone will approach me and say, "You would be really good for this particular role or that particular role." And I did actually take one of them and I went and worked in our ministerial and cabinet area, and I was the cabinet liaison officer for a while.

Sarah Kalleske:

And then I jumped into other ministerial work, which was fantastic, because I learned machinery of government. I thought I knew it, but I didn't really. So, I think that was a really... As uncomfortable as it was, it was actually really important for me to diversify. And then I just found that I don't know, someone just tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Are you interested in working for this person?" I'm like, it wasn't my passion being a Cabinet Liaison Officer and doing all that ministerial work, it was very processed. So, I was comfortable doing it, but my passion was definitely EA work. And I came back, and I haven't left since. So, it is really uncomfortable when that happens and I'm sure there's quite a number of people in the Commonwealth at the moment sort of waiting for who knows what changes are going to happen because of the recent elections. So yeah, I know Michelle and Steph are probably going.

Michelle Oliver:

The thing that I would add to that question is, this is where your networks are going to come in. If you haven't got your network out there and sorted in that situation, you're leaving yourself open to, you're not going to be in control. So, by having and building those networks, you will get something and potentially you could get something really rewarding. I potentially could be in that situation in a few years' time or whenever the secretary decides to retire.

Michelle Oliver:

I too want to retire, but I might not be ready to at that point in time. And then that's when it's going to come down to my networks, not about just somebody come up and hopefully somebody will come tap me on the shoulder that I'd like to work for. But if not, then I've definitely got my networks out there where I can go and say, "I'm looking for a job." And whether it's private or government or whatever, but yeah. And make that network that you've got very diverse, don't just rely on government, get out there and into private sector as well, you never know where you're going to end up. So yeah.

Stephanie Ebert:

I've also found that diversifying exactly what you do as an EA. So, yes, we are absolutely an EA, but then I've also, sometimes I'll take on some of the EO work or look at the way that different things are done in ministerial and things like that. It just means that you then create another network. And you're able to sit there and go, "okay, well maybe there's a career post this if I need it."

Holly Noble:

Great way to build your confidence and show that cross skilling, that's exceptional.

Holly Noble:

Speaking of networks, we've had a call from the audience advice. How would you build your network between departments, whether it's ACT Government, whether its Public Service, but also private, what would you do?

Stephanie Ebert:

Well, the first one that I actually did, I used to rock up to any, and all type of networking events that were put on, get out there, say hello to people. I can't say I'm an extrovert. So, they're always a little bit uncomfortable for me, but I'd always go and say hello, meet people. And that's how I actually started to create my networks. And then, you create your networks within your agency or within your department. And that extends because your network becomes another network because it grows.

Sarah Kalleske:

Yeah, I think one of thing is you've got to actually talk to people. I mean, my world just is in Microsoft Teams talking to people electronically, but there are times where you actually do need to make the phone call and I think in our roles as well, people can be intimidated to approach you. So, making yourself... I'm just a normal person like everybody else and I might say something stupid as well. Just getting to know people personally as well, I think is a really good way of getting to know people. So, just like you said-

Michelle Oliver:

And everybody's putting [crosstalk], so it doesn't matter where you are and what department you're always going to cross back to that other person. "Oh, I used to speak to you at such and such remember me from finance days..." That just happens all the time. I've had people from New South Wales government ring me up and say, "Michelle, can we have a coffee?" Just lovely to put faceto-face because we're on the phone all the time. So, it's really important to have those coffee catch-ups whether they're just a catch up or whether it's a blue bit of a mentoring session, but get on the phone and build your contacts up and take them with you wherever you go. It's a small world.

Stephanie Ebert:

I also found that if you are starting in new areas, like I'd put pictures up of the dog or the kids or those kinds of things. So, people don't necessarily chat with me in the beginning, they'll see photos. And they're like, "Oh, she's just a person." So, then they feel a little more comfortable to go, "Oh, you've got kids or you've got a dog. How long have you..." Just their conversation starters without you actually... They're little prompts without actually starting a conversation.

Holly Noble:

That's a great practical tip. I'm going to do that, that's fantastic. And I imagine, if someone else is reaching out to you that growing their network, your network grows too. So it's beneficial for everyone. That's just fantastic. It was going to come up at some point, people always want to know about tips and tricks. What are some of the unique things that you do as an EA that sets you apart from other EAs?

Stephanie Ebert:

Sets us apart?

Michelle Oliver:

Well, I don't know about setting us apart. Two tricks that I'll share. One thing I have done is in my emails, when the secretary ever sends an email out, it is red, it is bold, and it is in huge font. So, I'll see it in my inbox first thing in the morning or during the day, I can see it straight away. Because at the end of the day, he's the most important person I've got to look after. So, if he's wanting something, yeah. So, I've bolded, it made it red and made it huge font.

Stephanie Ebert:

I can say I do exactly the same. So, it must be something about work.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah. There is one of EAs at work, she does the same thing, but she'll have it color-coded, So, she's got different codes for her deputy secretary and then her HODs. The other thing that I have created, and I've learned from a minister's office actually is she used to put a template in her meeting invites, and it had all the information in it. Sarah will have seen it coming through because Kathy has an invite with the Secretary. So, I just have a template, now that's in my signature block. It has the meeting location, it has the VC details, it has everything in there, the correspondence, any attachments in there that is in that template, it's in my signature blocks. I just fill it in and send it out. I can sometimes delete stuff out of it, add to it. I'm about to add because we've just started teams at work. So I'm just about to add a little thing in there for teams and it's ready to go.

Michelle Oliver:

And the great thing about that is it's got attendees in there from the other externals to the internally. So, everybody knows who's attending that meeting. And the great thing about that is the secretary loves it. So, he can go in there, he can see all the information. He's not asking me questions. He can see it all in there. He knows if they're internal, he knows if it's on the phone, he knows if it's teams or whatever. So, they're two really good things. One other good thing that I do is I have templates. I have templates for declines, for meetings. I don't have to recreate the wheel every time I'm declining a meeting. I just pull up my Word Document, copy, paste, see you later, and I have different types of declines like, "Yes, the secretary is decline... Apology, but Deputy Secretary such and such can attend." I've copied his EA. So, I have that.

Michelle Oliver:

So, when you're doing something all the time, get your templates together. I've shared that with all my EAs and the network, sharing my knowledge. And that just makes my life so much easier because you are sometimes doing the same thing over and over, so there's three tips for me.

Sarah Kalleske:

Amazing. I do something similar to that where I use signature. My signature is different for each thing that's repetitive.

Michelle Oliver:

The only thing I find though with that, with signature blocks is if IT as wonderful as they are, come in and do.

Sarah Kalleske:

All the

Michelle Oliver:

If they do a reset, you lose a whole lot unless you'd know to back them up-

Sarah Kalleske:

Template.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah. So, I've got lots of different signatures as well, but just be aware that if you do need to have a reset done on your computer, you will lose it. Yeah.

Sarah Kalleske:

I mean, we have rules set up as well. So, particularly if the Chief of Staff to the Chief Minister sends an email to Kathy, it bumps into my inbox and the executive offices at the same time. So, I don't have to be in Kathy's inbox to know that's her number one customer. So, you're right, just those little neat tricks. I'm sure there's plenty more, but I just can't think of them.

Stephanie Ebert:

There's so many. I think, most of them actually revolve around templates and knowing how to categorise your emails and just those little tips and tricks around emails. So, I mean, first one of the first things I did was go and learn how to actually use Outlook properly. And it's saved me. It's amazing.

Sarah Kalleske:

I think we're all time poor, all those little neat little things. The control button does an awful lot in the calendar. So, you can open up three or four days at the same time just by pressing control, instead of having to go into that day and then get out of it and then go into the other day, if you press control and open up all the dates, you see them all at once. And if I'm looking at 15 calendars, it is very ugly, but I've got be curved screen so I can potentially see them when I'm in the office, but not at home.

Stephanie Ebert:

I was going to say, must be harder than home though, if you used this big screen and then you go home and you dealing with your laptop.

Sarah Kalleske:

Like my little one. Yeah, so those sorts of things are always very helpful for us.

Michelle Oliver:

The other thing that I also do too, and it was one of the mistakes that I'd made, and it was a process I put in place is that I'll invite myself to every single meeting that the Secretary has. That way it's in my calendar and I can keep him on time. I get the alert to say, a meeting in 15 minutes, five minutes, whatever. And then I can keep him on time. Once I didn't, I got in trouble. So, you'll see my name in every meeting that the Secretary has, and it'll go into my diary, bang he's on time. So yeah, I've given you a ton of tips now.

Holly Noble:

Okay. There's some amazing tips and tricks for time saving when every minute counts. Speaking of making time count for work life balance, are you available 24/7, do you have a cut-off? How do you manage that?

Stephanie Ebert:

Yeah, you definitely need a cut-off, you can't be on 24/7. It's a quick way to crash and burn. So, I tend to do kid drop off and I'll pick them up, I'll do dinner time with them. And then if I have to, I'll actually I get back on between the period between 7:30 and 9:00pm is when I'll send emails. But I also have this nifty little thing at the end of my signature block says I'm sending it outside of normal work hours, unless you have to, don't respond. But I think it's so important to be able to just shut off otherwise you're just going to continually go. Everything just keeps going through your head. You need to have your own time as well.

Michelle Oliver:

And it's hard to like, you can take that equipment home now, right?

Stephanie Ebert:

Yes.

Michelle Oliver:

So, but I do switch off and I've got my phone and if it comes from my phone and it's urgent, then I'll address it. But if it's not that it'll be there tomorrow morning. And it's a really busy role, but you're entitled to have that me time, my time. And it's really important that you take that time. It's also handy if you've got a boss manager that's also supportive of that and they should be. And as long as you, I've heard of boss's emailing their EAs at 3:00 in the morning, dreadful.

Sarah Kalleske:

Are they expecting a response?

Michelle Oliver:

It was in ACT Government too, actually. But yeah, it's like seriously 3:00 in the morning, but are they expected to answer it? No, she's just up, thinking about it, but you've just got to think I'll fix it up when I get in there in the morning, and you always hit the floor running when you get in there anyway. But yeah, it's really important to have some me time.

Sarah Kalleske:

I think, unfortunately for all of us going through COVID the last couple of years and lots of us have worked from home, that time that you would normally use traveling, when it first happened, you're just logging on at 7:00 in the morning instead of at 8:30 when you actually get into the office. So, I was burning myself out in the first year or so because things were just happening all the time here in the ACT and we had to do things that potentially our counterparts in the Commonwealth didn't like particularly around parliament house. And Ministers, not necessarily being able to fly into Canberra so we weren't popular, but we were protecting Canberra community. And for my boss and for the Chief Minister that was very high priority. So, the first year or so was really hard. But now I actually make myself not log on until 8:30. So I've got my phone if my boss is looking for me, I'll send her a message back, but I'm actually not working.

Sarah Kalleske:

And also at the other end of the day, I think Microsoft Teams now has something that I noticed a couple of weeks ago that they updated something about Viva. And it actually says to me at 6:00 every night, time to shut down. So having those sorts of things reminding you actually it's 6:00, whereas with our jobs, you could just keep going forever and you still not find the bottom of the pile. So, you really have to make a commitment not to do that.

Holly Noble:

It's firm boundaries. And as you've all alluded to, it will be there tomorrow, which makes sense. Yes, exactly.

Holly Noble:

We've had some questions come in around difficult executive or difficult relationships. How do you manage a difficult relationship to ensure that particularly if it's an executive they're using their time effectively?

Stephanie Ebert:

I'm actually a firm believer of if the personality isn't going to fit, the job isn't going to fit. A 100% yeah, I truly believe there is that person that's going to be perfect for that executive and

Holly Noble:

It's not you.

Stephanie Ebert:

It's not. Yeah. You can definitely work with some difficult people, but that's only a stop gap. You could only do it temporarily because you end up not liking the job that you're in.

Michelle Oliver:

Yeah. Then the anxiety, the mental health or that was stuck to play a part. I've been in that situation, and I got out of it. And I've never looked back since, but it's just not going to work if you can't make it and the manager can't make it work, then it's time to move on.

Sarah Kalleske:

I mean, I've found myself in a situation like that many years ago that I was working for someone that was known to be quite difficult. He was quite an academic. So, his interpersonal skills were quite lacking. And I just found one day, I just had to stand up to him, which was quite challenging at the time, but it put him back in his box and I found another role, but he didn't approach me in the same way after that.

Holly Noble:

Sets the foundation for a really strong working relationship.

Michelle Oliver:

Nobody's got any right to treat you disrespectfully, you're entitled to as much respect as the next person and you have to put up with it and Sarah, I've done that same thing where I've said, no. And that takes guts. And it takes time, but once you start doing it, then that builds, and you can do it more easily. So yeah, it's really important to be able to say, "Actually, that's inappropriate. You can't speak to me like that." And, but yeah, if it's not going to work, it's just time to... Yeah.

Holly Noble:

We've had some questions come in again, difficult, but possibly slightly different type of difficult. Someone who's possibly not using their time very effectively and may be resistant to change type difficult? Actually, hasn't specified. So regardless either, or how would you manage that? Any suggestions?

Michelle Oliver:

If it has an impact on me?

Holly Noble:

Yes.

Michelle Oliver:

Like if their laziness or their inability to do their work is then impacting on me, I would just have a meeting with them and you'd need to be very careful, right? And just go and have a coffee or something and just say something or if you don't feel... And it depends what level you are in the APS or local government, but you can address it with your manager and get them to maybe think about having a word to them or something like that, I suppose. But yeah, when if it was going to impact me, then I would definitely have said something.

Stephanie Ebert:

I think that I agree with you about definitely saying something, but I think there is also different ways that you can approach it. Just have an informal chat with the person that's being difficult saying, "Oh, well, if you don't

like it the way I'm doing it, what is the best way for you? What would make it easier for you?" So, turning it back on them and making them think about the way that they would prefer it to be done also can really help.

Holly Noble:

It's very hard to say no. Anything else?

Sarah Kalleske:

Well, I think sometimes you can show them there's a different way of doing something and maybe that jolts them into them realizing that I'm actually having a go at you because you're not worth using your time efficiently, but showing them how to do something differently perhaps?

Stephanie Ebert:

I imagine that might be true, particularly if they're new SES, if you're working with someone who hasn't had to use that level of support before. And they don't know how to use [crosstalk]. You definitely can. But I think it's a brand new SES officer, they just love being able having an EA or somebody to be able to help them step back into that next level. So, they don't have to play in the nitty gritty of, "There's this email, well, I've already actioned that for you. I've sent it here to be actioned." Yeah. "Oh, is that what you do?" "Yes." "You get to go and sit in the meetings and listen to all the people and I'll do this part."

Holly Noble:

That's great tips and tricks. This is an interesting question. Not that the others haven't been interesting, but this one particularly took my interest. There's a lot of females in EA roles. Why do you think that we don't attract more male EAs?

Stephanie Ebert:

And we don't.

Holly Noble:

No.

Sarah Kalleske:

And I've been really fortunate to work with a number of male EAs and they just add a different dynamic to a team. A lot of women together can be a bit bitchy at times. And you just find that just them being around, it's not the same. I think again, unfortunately, I mean a lot of roles, nurses, teachers, it's definitely a female dominant profession. And I don't know how you change that. It's a really hard one, but if anybody approaches me, I encourage them, you've got skills that potentially are transferable from whatever you're doing to what we are doing, put an application in and your CV and have a go. I don't know how it is in the Commonwealth with males.

Michelle Oliver:

It's the same. We've got quite a few male EAs in the department. One in particular that comes to mind, he's just amazing. He's really amazing and he's great. And he puts his hand out and he's proactive and he's really great to be around and he's moving up in leaps and bounds and he's just a great example for the males to

come in there and to do that type of role. It is a more female dominant role, I think. But because I always think that being an EA, everything's neat and tidy it's in its place. I'm like that at home. The kids are on time or whatever and making the bed and whatever, but you know, that's what it's like, that's being an EA. You're organised, you can run that family, you can run an office and run your SES. So, it's just more of a female dominant role, but it's nice to have some males in there as well. Gavin in Defense.

Stephanie Ebert:

He's fabulous.

Michelle Oliver:

He's a gun. Yeah, he's great to deal with. Jack, great. It's so lovely to see guys up in that level, running a Secretary's office. Wow, go for it. And they're great guys.

Holly Noble:

Ladies. Thank you so much you've shared so much advice, experience. The mantras were amazing. We've talked about networking. We've talked about feeling the fear and doing it anyway. Amazing efficiency tips. So, thank you very much for being so generous and sharing today. And if you have a flood of emails in your inbox after you've talked about networking, I'm sure everybody will be happy to participate in that.

Holly Noble:

That's all we have time for today. I'd really again like to thank Sarah, Michelle and Steph for being part of today's panel and also representing the EA committee. If you'd like to be involved or just want to know more about the work that we do, you can contact us through IPAA by subscribing to IPAA Content and selecting the box for EA Series Information.

Holly Noble:

Before we close today, I'd just like to take a moment to mention a few upcoming IPAA events. David Gruen is presenting an event titled, "Realising the potential of data in government." Which is a follow-up to his 2022 event, "The promise of data in government." At the National Portrait Gallery, next week on the 15th of June. The inaugural Frances Adamson Oration will be held at the QT Hotel in Canberra to mark International Public Service Day on 23rd of June. This event will feature oration to be given by her excellency, the honourable Frances Adamson AC.

Holly Noble:

We hope you can make it to one of those events. Finally, we'd just like to acknowledge the event would not have been possible today without the support of IPAA's partners, KPMG, HAYS, Telstra, MinterEllison, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia and Microsoft. I'd like to thank you all for attending today's event. And we really hope that you've enjoyed it. We value your feedback and there's probably a QR code that's popped up on your screen for a survey, please take the time to let us know how you felt. On behalf of IPAA ACT, we look forward to seeing you at future events. Thank you and goodbye.

David Pembroke:

So there you have it ladies and gentleman. Holly Noble wrapping up that great conversation. And it's just great isn't it to understand roles and challenges of keeping the APS moving and moving on time. And those

challenges that the EAs face. They're just at the fulcrum of decisions that need to be made and the need for priority and choices and everything that comes with it. So it's just a wonderful thing that the series continues to recognise just such a wonderful role that our EAs play across the entire APS. And a big shout out to all the EAs out there. Thank you so much for the hard work that you do in keeping the APS moving in the right direction. WorkwithPurpose is a part of the Govcomms Podcast network. A big thanks as always to our friends and colleagues at IPAA who have helped to put together great content, and also to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support. And also to the team at contentgroup who help us with the technical production of this program. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.