

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE 18

FUTURE LEADERS WITH KATHERINE JONES

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Department of Defence

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MATT MCMAHON: Hello and welcome everyone to this podcast, exploring the topic about what could or should the APS look like one year from now. This was explored recently with the IPAA future leader series hackathon, which participants, future leaders, both past and present explore that topic, and also introduced a number of key themes that our keynote speaker, Katherine Jones provided. Some of those themes included interdepartmental governance to enable greater collaboration, flexible working in a digital world, how do we maintain momentum with surge capacity to support greater mobility in an agile way. It was a fantastic discussion across the groups with some great ideas.

Before I begin, I will introduce our podcast panel today. Firstly, we have Katherine Jones. Katherine commenced as the Associate Secretary of the Department of Defence in June 2020. Prior to her appointment as associate secretary, Katherine was the Deputy Secretary for business enabling services in the Australian government Department of Finance. She held that role since October 2017. She has practical experience in delivering shared services in government and was responsible for delivering whole of government digital service systems to support collaboration and customer service, including the innovative GovTEAMS platform.

Katherine has previously held senior positions in the Attorney General's department, including as the deputy secretary responsible for national security, criminal justice and emergency management, she was the head of international crime cooperation division and the head of the social inclusion division with responsibility for policy and programmes across indigenous justice, native title, legal assistance, and human rights.

In 2017, Katherine received a public service medal for her outstanding contribution in the field of national security. Welcome back, Katherine, to your second IPAA podcast.

KATHERINE JONES: Thank you, Matt. It's a pleasure to be here.

MATT MCMAHON: It was fantastic. I was re-watching it the other day and I thought it was just wonderful with Peter Woolcott AO, who is our Australian Public Service Commissioner. It's been an interesting time since that first one back then way in the beginning of this COVID environment.

KATHERINE JONES: Well, it feels like it was a different world then, but it was great to have that conversation with Peter. I've loved all the subsequent podcasts. I think it's a fantastic initiative and IPAA should be really proud of what it's done with the podcast.

MATT MCMAHON: It really has. The hackathon reflected on a number of those things about the usefulness of the podcast itself. I'd also like to introduce our other panel here today for the podcast, and we've got a wonderful future leaders with us today. We've got Holly Noble, who is the Chair of the Future Leaders Committee. Holly is also the director of business transformation in the Department of Finance. Welcome, Holly.

HOLLY NOBLE: Thank you, Matt.

MATT MCMAHON: We also have Rachel Martin who's a member of the Future Leaders Committee and is the Associate Director National Security and Justice in KPMG. Welcome, Rachel.

Rachel: Thanks, Matt.

MATT MCMAHON: So Katherine, I might open up by just giving a short reflection on some of the key points that you raised in both your own keynote and in some of the Q&A. I think it was just fascinating to understand some of the areas that you raised, including around identifying the need for change and in individuals driving the change themselves. I just wanted to open up the discussion today with just maybe a short reflection on that.

KATHERINE JONES: Thanks, Matt. Well, firstly, it's fantastic. It's very exciting being here with Rachel and Holly. I'm looking forward to hearing about what the hackathon focused on. I think the fact that the young leaders group came together to really think through and develop further ideas for change and reform is fantastic. It fits with the theme that I discussed in the introduction to the hackathon, which is for genuine change to happen in an organisation, I think it needs to come in two ways. You need leadership and whole of organisation commitment and a structured approach to driving change.

You need the culture that is supportive of change, but you need individuals who know their areas of work, they know their customers, they know their clients, they know their stakeholders and they're the ones that are capable of making those step changes. You can have the most wonderful bling approach to reform at a whole of organisation level but if you haven't got the commitment of people like Rachel and Holly to make a difference where they work, you will have something that could look good in a glossy brochure but actually won't drive long-term enduring change in an organisation.

MATT MCMAHON: I think that is often the cliché top down bottom up or the strong commitment of your leaders is just essential because it really does drive a key path. I think that's an area that you reflected on in your time in Department of Finance and now moving into Department of Defence around transformation and how to actually drive that change across an organisation where perhaps culturally it has stayed very much the same for quite a period of time and how challenging that can be as well.

KATHERINE JONES: It is also a leadership challenge. In the Department of Finance, the transformation journey had already commenced when I came there. I just played a role encouraging it to continue on, on its journey, but leadership needs to create the environment where people feel that they are supported when ideas are raised, that resources are given to take through change and that people who are close to where the work is done are given the opportunity to raise their ideas further up the line. So, it's a supportive culture. I think it does need to be wrapped in a clear strategic direction of where you want your organisation to go, the type of organisation you want, but then, my personal view is make space and provide the environment for people to come forward with ideas.

MATT MCMAHON: I think one of the other areas you mentioned was around change being one of those endless process. It's a form of continual evolution and change. I think that that is something that in Finance, it doesn't just end in 2021 or 2022. It is a continual process.

KATHERINE JONES: I have been reflecting on this a little bit, particularly now that I have moved across the defence. I think one of the great things in being in an organisation like Defence is that you start to think, you don't think in just in terms of the next two, three, five years, you're thinking 10, 20 years, because that's the strategic horizon that you've got to work towards. So for me, coming new into Defence, the issue that I'm grappling with is, how do you contribute to making your organisation an organisation that has a dynamic approach to change? That it's ongoing, that it's not transactional, it's not static, that it's built into the DNA of the organisation, and you've got the capability to constantly refine and improve the way that you organise yourself and that the way that you operate. I think having that longer time horizon is really important and has helped me think a little bit differently about change.

MATT MCMAHON: I think another really keen area and it was one of the themes which is around maintaining momentum with surge capacity to support greater mobility in more of an agile way. I think mobility is been a really key area and reflecting on the first IPAA podcast, yourself and Peter Woolcott AO, talked about mobility and the APS reform and how that in a way COVID's accelerated a range of areas and mobility is an area of that. The hackathon participants did reflect on that and the importance of it and the challenges.

They highlighted issues around we should have an APS wide process for surge mobility, including criteria that sit around that. How do we know the priorities across government to do that? There's not necessarily a list that everyone just taps into every day. It's more complex than that. I think another area was around mobility and secondment architecture and how to use secondments as mobility. So, any thoughts on how mobility is really sort of moved perhaps since your first podcast and now, but probably more broadly across the APS?

KATHERINE JONES: I think my starting proposition is one APS. I think if you start thinking about your role and your contribution as being part of that much broader entity, psychologically, the idea of moving to different parts of it is a much straightforward proposition. I think the leadership across the breadth of the APS are increasingly thinking in those terms. That the departments are just parts of the broader organisation. I think the Secretary's Board have created the COO Committee that I'm on. We certainly have an appetite for thinking about how we can work together to develop those types of structures to facilitate greater mobility.

I think the COVID experience has taught us that we do have the capacity to very quickly pivot and push resources to the highest priority. The challenge for us is, how do we ensure we can do that in a non-crisis environment? I certainly think we can. I think we've proven the case that we can respond in difficult circumstances, but I think we can now translate that into a more enduring model.

MATT MCMAHON: I think certainly now we're seeing it being embedded in state government responses, as well as it's not just a federal response. We're using the resources of everyone to try and mobilise, but you're right, in a time of crisis is generally when it's needed. It's, how do we envision what mobility is like in 5 years' time or 10 years' time? Because that's something I think we were looking at with the APS reform work in thinking about that, but we're a bit more accelerated with time now.

KATHERINE JONES: It's good for the organisations. It's good for the outcomes that we're trying to achieve. It's great for people in their careers to be able to experience the breadth of opportunity that the whole APS offers.

MATT MCMAHON: It really is. It really is. Might throw to Holly who will do some reflections and some questions too.

HOLLY NOBLE: Thank you, Matt. So, we actually had two groups who were talking about interdepartmental governance to enable greater collaboration, which is fantastic that there were two groups talking about governance. It just fills me with joy. There was some fantastic reflections, but a couple of key ones, just if I can pick up on what you'd mentioned before, you talked about people being close to where the work is done, giving the opportunity to make decisions. The groups were reflecting that we often see interdepartmental governance work well at a senior level and the COO Committee was mentioned, but when we get to the more operational levels, it doesn't always work as effectively.

There was a broad conversation around the merits of a decentralised decision-making model, encouraging people to engage with risk in their decision making proactively and delegating capacity downward, so that we have got more space for strategic thought. Any reflections on how you've seen decentralised decision making work well? It is quite a big shift for a lot of areas, but keen to keep pushing.

KATHERINE JONES: I think you can think about that through a few different perspectives. One of them, I think, is to recognise that there's an awful lot of activity and decision making that happens in the APS, it's not in Canberra. You don't have to be so Canberra centric and you can see that there's fantastic work that's done in the regions, in remote areas and very effective outcomes that are responding to local needs. I think that's a really good example of where the APS in a lot of its core business is able to operate in a less sort of structured way, although there's structure to it. I don't want to suggest there's not.

I think the point you're really trying to address is how do we ensure that there's agency and authority at lower levels in organisations to be able to come together, consider solutions to problems, and have those solutions implemented. I think it works sometimes. I think there are some challenges around that happening. I think sometimes decision making is at fairly high levels in organisations. I would love to see more of a model where we could give specific responsibility to cross departmental groups to develop genuine cross or whole of APS solutions.

It has just occurred to me, maybe we should be doing some direct tasking out of the COO Committee to some cross departmental groups to help us develop those ideas. When you operate at the more senior levels, you get the great advantage of a perspective of being able to see across but you do become a little bit removed from what are the genuine problems that are thought to be solved, whether they're problems around how we operate or the policy or operational problems that it's our responsibility to solve. I think there could be some great advantage in giving authority to people at different levels to tackle some of those issues.

HOLLY NOBLE:

That's great to hear. Something else that you talked about was the commitment of people being really important to underpin effective transformational change. Culture and collaboration is a value that we have as part of our culture that came up a lot. The group spent quite a lot of time discussing that. There was an interesting point put across that possibly collaboration is often not put forward because there's a competitive slant to things particularly when budget becomes involved. There were some reflections that culture is often different depending on which team you are working in. It is often transient depending on which people are in that team at what time.

We know as future leaders that there is a role for leadership at all levels. We all play a role in building a dynamic culture that values collaboration, but it's often difficult to know where to start, particularly if you're incubating that in your own organisation or department. What's the first step for someone who's looking to take an active role in shaping that?

KATHERINE JONES:

That's a great question and I think really goes right to the heart of how we need to think about working in the APS. My personal view is we all have to model collaboration. It needs to be part of our DNA, but I think before you reached this sort of behavioural cultural issue, I think there's a step before that, which is an understanding that the way to deliver solutions for the Australian people, it absolutely requires collaboration. I think if we can have that as the fundamental mindset when people enter the APS, that is the way to be rewarded in your career, the way to achieve in your career, the way to deliver the best outcomes is through collaboration.

I often say it's not just what you deliver, it's how you deliver it. The how is being collaborative and working up solutions that will be enduring. I know from many years of experience that you will not develop enduring solutions if you're doing them in a silo. I think it's encouraging that you've got a model that in every aspect of the way that you work as a leader, and collaborative leaders at any level can make such a difference to their organisation. I think you have to live it every day of your career and live it not just within your own organisation but outside your organisation.

HOLLY NOBLE:

I think that's some great advice. You often hear leadership at all levels, but someone's always watching you as a leader. So, if you're modelling those behaviours outwardly, then hopefully it will catch on and have a ripple effect. We had one more theme that emerged when we were discussing interdepartmental governance.

There was a conversation around the difference between a proactive approach to interdepartmental governance and possibly a reactive approach. While we've seen through the COVID environment that that reactive approach has sparked us into action, we've absolutely had to push forward, and we've seen some fantastic momentum gained. How do we build on that momentum? The group were considering that there may be a place for a bit of a gap analysis of what we've done really well for particular interdepartmental governance themes, what we can learn and how we might push forward with that. If we were to challenge you to think of a couple of key areas for us to start with, what would they be?

KATHERINE JONES: Thank you. That is a great question. Gaps in the way that we operate across departments. I think, there's probably in terms of the proactive piece as you framed it at the beginning, because you're right, we're fantastic at when there's a problem right on top of us, we go right, bang, let's have a task force or a committee. Let's come together and solve. We do that extremely well. I think it's probably at the strategic priority setting piece where, the question is, "do we do enough sitting down and saying, "What does the next 5, 10 years going to look like across this area of activity that will affect the Australian people? Have we really thought on that long-term horizon? What are all the different equities that we're going to need to draw upon? How can our policy knowledge, our operational knowledge, our service delivery knowledge help inform our thinking right out to the longer term?"

I think there is probably a gap there where we don't necessarily have the space to do that sufficiently. I think that would be something that would be fantastic if we could spend some more time doing. I think probably that another area that I'm really passionate about is how we can build foundational enabling services. The one way of operating that I think is the springboard for being able to encourage that greater cross agency, cross department collaboration, whole of government collaboration. We are on a journey to achieve that with initiatives like the Shared Services programme and the GovERP programme, which at its essence aims to be the programme that will provide the core for a lot of joined up digital services across government for government. I think we have got some aspiration in that space. We have made some good first steps, but there is a long way for us to go. So, that would be the other area where I'd love to see greater momentum and achievement.

HOLLY NOBLE: There's some great things for us to work on. Thank you. I might pass to Rachel.

RACHEL MARTIN: Thank you. I was privileged enough to be part of a group discussing why we need to enable greater flexible working going forward. So, I mean, just to call the elephant in the room out right at the outset obviously, COVID has challenged the way the APS works digitally, flexibly and remotely now and into the future. Many of our colleagues in the APS and indeed the VPS in Victoria are still grappling with those challenges today and will be for the months and the weeks to come. Many of the conversations about this topic revolved around the cultural challenges inherent in continuing this way of working going forward.

Obviously, most of us will have experienced the fact that a button was pressed, and everyone sort of dispersed to where it was safe to do so in line with health advice. In terms of how we keep that momentum going and the cultural practises we need to embed in leaders throughout organisations, I guess it was one that the group talked around a lot and no one really felt like they had an answer. Perhaps there isn't a

silver bullet, but interested in your reflections as to what we can do from a cultural perspective to maintain that flexibility, which so many people really enjoyed picking how they maintain contact with the office, but worked flexibly as well.

KATHERINE JONES:

I think it is one of the few silver linings over what we are all experiencing in the COVID environment that this aspiration that we have had to really take the flexible work concept to the next level has materialised. I think we need to be quite clear about how we frame it. If we want to make this as something that we're going to embed into the way that the APS operates in a way that the private sector is also thinking through, we need to understand that there are a range of objectives that need to be met here. We can't lose sight of the fact that organisations still have to deliver their outcomes. We have to understand the operational need, the organisations as a whole, but also the different parts of it, because we all work in incredibly varied organisations that have functions, some of which are quite readily capable of being performed remotely. Some are not.

We need to understand that, because you do want to make sure that there's an equitable approach across your organisations, but I think we have very much demonstrated that the key to unlocking flexible work arrangements. I think we always thought it was about IT and having IT. The IT obviously is an enabler of it, but it's not the key. I think it's about leaders and managers creating the right environment, giving permission, managers learning a new way of managing which isn't that you can sit there and see all your team and know that they're working. It takes what I think is one of the most exciting things about this environment. You have to operate so much more as a joined up team. Then you think about all your responsibilities collectively, and whether or not someone's working in the office or from home or down at the local cafe is less important than the team delivers on its objectives and everyone knows their roles and responsibilities.

I think the last few months have demonstrated that. We need to continue to encourage leaders and managers to support that way of operating. That it's not an exceptional way of operating. In fact, that it should be the normal way. I think there's just a great value in having that commitment from leaders. I think we must recognise though, we do not want to end, I certainly don't want to end, in a space where we have people who work from home five days a week. Some people have said they would love to work at home all the time. I think that's going too far the other way particularly if you talk to young people. They want to be mentored. They want to be able to have interaction with team members. We are social beings, but I think the model of people coming in five days a week, working their standard hours and feeling guilty if they have to adjust those hours, I think we may have moved away from that.

I do know that there is a bit of a default coming back to some people being in the office all the time. I think leaders must continually message about the value of flexible work, but it's a balancing. I've heard arguments about you should set targets of 80% of your people working from home or you shouldn't support it at all because it's not going to work in this area. It's not that black and white. I think all organisations should think quite flexibly about flexibility. I'm going to end on that pithy little note.

RACHEL MARTIN: I think there's a lot to think about in what you just said and you've actually provided the perfect segue into the next piece that was roundly discussed in the group, which was around resilience and maintaining resilience in a digital work environment. The hackathon was attended by people in that future leader bracket. There was quite a bit of conversation. If we define one aspect of leadership as having resilience yourself and then building that in your team, the ability to do that remotely and to support your team, whether that's colleagues at level, support up and support down in a period like this when you're working remotely, there were a lot of reflections and a lot of conversations about things people have learned from that process.

Just the importance of picking up the phone as opposed to relying on email. Lots of little anecdotes around that. I think everyone would be very interested in your reflections around what you've learned through this process, what you've seen work well in terms of building the resilience in your team, maintaining that connectivity. If this is going to be part of how we work into the future, it appears to me to be a new skill, or perhaps a different way of delivering an old skill in a new digital world.

KATHERINE JONES: That's a great way of describing it, Rachel, because I think that's right. I think leaders and managers and team members do need to think differently, but I think there is the ability to get a lot more autonomy, but in an appropriately joined up way with teams. I am passionate about video conferencing capabilities. GovTEAMS is great. I'll just mention that again, but there are other formats for doing that, but if you've got some of those more mature advanced digital platforms or video conferencing platforms to operate on, you can be incredibly engaged as a team across multiple locations. You can co-author and collaborate on documents. You can have full team meetings. You can have hybrid approaches where some people are working from home, some people are in the office.

I think this sort of binary idea of working at home but being a little bit detached or working in the office and being able to have those water cooler conversations, I think we have moved beyond that and we should move our thinking beyond that.

There are some things that you miss when most your team are working remotely. You just don't have those corridor encounters. That's a challenge. The video conferencing platforms can give you a way of doing that. I know the times when I worked at home. I've be on GovTEAMS, I've be video conferencing, WhatsApp-ing, texting, IM-ing. The phone would ring. There are multiple ways that you can connect and have serious structured conversations as well as those interactions that create team, create collaboration, and inspire ideas. You need to think differently about how you are going to engage but think of it through the lens of being part of a team.

MATT MCMAHON: Thanks, Katherine. I think that last point, my late grandfather was a secretary of the chief minister's department in Northern territory. He often reflected on how hard it was to answer the phone. That was his only form of communication because they didn't have email. If you needed a letter written, it got written. It's a very different world from the '70s to the today, and I think that is a significant challenge for all of us. So just to wrap up in a way, one of the areas that you did put forward to the hackathon participants was in a form of a challenge and thinking about what are the what are the opportunities, what are the ways that we could shape into the future. Particularly as a counsellor of IPAA and chair of the COO Committee and in your new role as Associate Secretary in Department of Defence, what do you see as some of

the possible key next steps that either the future leaders or the APS perhaps need to take?

KATHERINE JONES: Well, certainly, I do know that the group are doing a report to IPAA, so that's fantastic. That will be great for the team at IPAA, the council, to have a look at that. I think one of the critical things is go back into your own organisations though, report back on the conversations, be bold, see if you can get invited to your executive committee or executive board and say, "I participated in this hackathon and we had a fantastic conversation and here are some of the issues that we felt should be explored. Can we discuss them with you?"

Continue participating through the young leaders programme, but I think getting those ideas into the conversation within your organisations, and perhaps I've just thought that again maybe at some point we should invite some of the members to come to the COO Committee and could talk to us about some of the ideas you've put there, so that there's a voice directly to the COO Committee. Don't just do a report and then leave it alone. Be persistent, try to influence in your organisations and use your network to influence. That's one of the critical things for you to do as public servants, I think.

MATT MCMAHON: Well, thanks, Katherine. What a fantastic way to round out this podcast, and thank you so much to Holly and Rachel and all the hackathon participants. I think the reflections and the comments and the ideas, and while not everyone has all the answers, I think it's just an amazing approach, a different approach to perhaps coming up with different ways of thinking and new ideas. I think the hackathon was successful in that. As you said, the future leaders committee will be preparing a paper for the council. I think we will most likely take you up on that invitation to the COO Committee I'm sure, but that's another great step as well. So, thank you very much, Katherine, Holly and Rachel for being here today and thanks to everyone for listening into this podcast.