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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

SHARYN O'NEILL

Western Australian Public Sector Commissioner
and State Recovery Controller

Hosted by DR GORDON DE BROUWER PSM, IPAA National President

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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name is David Pembroke, thank you for joining me. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and our region.

Today, another interview from our Work with Purpose – A National Perspective series hosted by Dr Gordon de Brouwer.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Hello to all listening and welcome to Work with Purpose - A National Perspective, a podcast about the Australian public service. For those of you who've been regularly tuning in, you may be surprised to hear a different voice from your regular host, David Pembroke, CEO of contentgroup, who IPAA partners with to bring you this weekly podcast supported by the Australian Public Service Commission.

My name is Gordon de Brouwer, and I am the IPAA National President. As national president, I'm opening some conversations with public service leaders from across the nation today. I am pleased to host a discussion featuring the WA Public Sector Commissioner, Sharyn O'Neill. So welcome, Sharyn.

Sharyn was appointed a public sector commissioner on the 30th of July 2018, following 12 years as Director-General of the Department of Education. I think her priority as Commissioner is strengthening and unifying the public sector to better serve the needs of the community. Sharyn started as a teacher and moved through the Education Department and as Commissioner. She's got lots of awards and among those is that she's a fellow of IPAA, so that's great. Sharyn also, I think led the WA Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. So, thanks very much Sharyn, for joining us today.

SHARYN O'NEILL: Yeah. Good morning. Thank you.

GORDON DE BROUWER: So we might start off with just some of your own recollections, Sharyn, around how the pandemic started, and when did you recognise the significance of the emerging pandemic?

SHARYN O'NEILL: Well, probably we were watching from afar what was unfolding internationally and then, Western Australia had its first reported case in about February, I think of Diamond Princess in Japan, and cruise ships became a thing for us later, but then it was like this mad pace. I think before that we were watching and preparing, but it was somewhat theoretical and then came this — once there was a Western Australian case — this really cracking pace and we've got all the Director-Generals together, we formed an Emergency Cabinet Committee; the Pandemic Plan went out and then we found ourselves in a state of emergency and you know, that's something that we haven't had.

And so, I think that really woke everyone up, including me to the reality of what we were facing and it wasn't very long, I mean, all of that's a 10-day period. National Cabinet, restrictions being brought on, and all of a sudden, we found our world changed. And for Western Australia, that's a pretty cruisy but on the front foot place as well, that shook us, I think. That was my recollection. It was just so quick. We have COVID time, don't we? Things happen at different time.

And so that was my early experience. And all of a sudden, I was at National Cabinet, this new beast alongside the Premier — every premier has one advisor — and there I was, and we were awake. We were awake to it pretty fast.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thanks. How did the responsibility come to you, Sharyn as Commissioner, as opposed to a department head?

SHARYN O'NEILL: Well it's interesting, I am the only one around Australia that is at National Cabinet with their Premier, all of the rest are the head of the premier's department. The Premier here felt that I was able to bring with me the power and the work of the public sector, which he knew was going to be needed on steroids, and so to have me at the table with him, he felt was a direct connection. I'd been a department head for a long time so, I guess there's good experience working across the sector, with the Premier's Department, with the Commonwealth and the Premier was of the view that going forward, we wouldn't be resting at all as it turned out, but we would be placing a lot of emphasis on the work of the public sector to draw us all together. That was the basis of his decision.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thanks. Throughout this conversation, I'd like to go through three broad areas. One's to think about what the impact of the pandemic has been on service delivery and advice, so how the public service works with the public and serves the public. The second is around the impact on public sector workplaces and some of the changes there, and then to talk about relationships and coming back, frankly I guess, to cross-government, and then the Federation.

We might start off though with the service delivery. Have you got any observations around how in WA, the pandemic affected or changed the way services were delivered, and some of the stories and elements of that, and how you thought about that?

SHARYN O'NEILL: I think like every other place, we were thrown into a non-contact way of operating and as much as public sectors are trying to move — I think into a more contemporary, digital, online space — I think we found ourselves really needing to work quickly to ensure service delivery wasn't so directly impacted. And so, like everyone else, schools, towards the end of term, really winding down, I guess. Western Australia very quickly got schools back in second term and some particular reasons for that around economy. But also the research said that children weren't being infected, we didn't have community spread, and the importance of our frontline workers being able to work and also standing shoulder-to-shoulder. So, a whole range of reasons why we felt that way.

Like everyone else, public transport was pretty dead. Visitors to prisons not happening. Our hospitals kind of ghost-like if you like, no one there. So those same experiences as everyone else. But, what I saw across Western Australia in terms of service delivery was that word that's become so important, that pivot that people were really taking care in a way that I'm not sure our service delivery has done so well before about the user experience, if you like. So even though we

talk about it all the time, I think we were caused in a really fast way, a really deliberate way, to think around how people were going to experience our service or receive it, rather than the way that we were going to deliver it. A different side of the coin, and I think we were forced... I mean, this was public sector reform on steroids, in my view. We've had a programme of public sector reform, but there we were, we had to deliver it differently. We had to have that reform on the front line right there and then, in a way that people could receive it in this new world, and a large part of that comes down to the way in which we viewed our own services, I think.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yep. If you've got some — sorry to put you on the spot about this — but some concrete examples of how that worked? And maybe also across the state, WA is a really big state, and across the regions in WA, and then also with Aboriginal communities.

SHARYN O'NEILL: Yeah. The one that comes to mind for me is everyone's 'Go digital, go global', and then we have this whole aged community that aren't, not all of them, but a lot of them aren't necessarily hooked into working online. And so while we might view going online as the modal future, I think we had to think about how personalised services could be delivered to older people who weren't going to go and buy their food online unless they were getting help. And so reaching into community support groups... a different way of thinking about that problem, rather than just a one-directional 'We will provide you this service, here it is, we are doing online'. And that was particularly felt in the regions, the digital divide in the regions, let alone remote Aboriginal communities.

And I've been running the impact analysis, and from a regional perspective, that digital divide, the assumption that our services can be received online, regardless of whether they can be delivered, whether they'll be received online and what that does to people from lower income families, Aboriginal communities, I think that just needs to be reconsidered. And I just call it for the moment 'user experience', as much as we might have grand ideas about how we might deliver it.

And so I think we learned some lessons there and the protection of Aboriginal people in remote Aboriginal communities as well about service delivery, about partnering and their voice, about the extent they wanted people into their communities or not. So while we have this great power of the public service to provide a terrific public service, I think we were made to think around how people want to receive that service in a concrete way.

GORDON DE BROUWER: On the changes that you want to keep, so you talked about lessons learned, how are you going to go about keeping them or identifying them? And then how do you keep what you want to keep and not just let it dissipate or fall away?

SHARYN O'NEILL: You know, while I've been as Recovery Controller here in Western Australia, working through the impacts and plans across a range of areas, we ran at the same time, or we are running at the same time, a study around the public sector. And a lot, Gordon, for me comes down to mindset, whether we saw this as an episode, and then we sit back now, and we go back to normal. So for me, it would be very easy just to declare, this is now happening, we're all operating in a certain way, but we know the culture always has to catch up.

So I think it is a great question about how we go about doing that, but we have taken our director generals from the get-go, through this process. And so actually we are changing, not our structure of departments, but our structure of collaboration. The Director-Generals meeting each week, working across the normal divides, I guess, or the normal standard pillars that seem to form between departments and working in a different way. And so I guess I come from more of a mindset, rather than changing structures... we are working on just continuing the way that we are.

Here in Western Australia, the recovery effort has been given to the public sector, which is the point I made earlier. And so we are reorganising ourselves to make the recovery the agenda forward, so rather than it being an episode, we are just continuing in this vein. I think there will need to be some consideration of structure and definitely culture to embed this way of working into the future. So I think one thing we can do is stop talking about public sector reform and just get on and do it, right?

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. Some jurisdictions are collecting information through surveys of communities or businesses that you work with, or also through pulse surveys of staff and seeing how things have changed, getting, say, measurements of changed performance and satisfaction, or impact. How have you gone about getting that sort of evidence?

SHARYN O'NEILL: Yeah we developed a full survey and in fact, some other jurisdictions are using our survey, that went to all of our department heads, but also all of our small CEO organisations as well, just trying to get to exactly the questions you're asking. You know, what was the sense of productivity during the working from home period? What are some of the lessons learned that we can build on? And it's not surprising the results that come back are around the challenge around digital, a greater sense around working flexibly, partnership — how do we really embed the partnership approach that we've taken in this state to recovery?

So it is quite a large survey, it was expansive and extensive, I must say. And in addition to that, we have had in place our 'I Think' platform, which enables the 140,000 public sector people here to contribute ideas for public sector improvement through COVID and beyond. We have tried to take an opportunity here to relook at ourselves and see what improvements can be made and how we sustain the momentum that we have and the way that we're working at the moment, but let people sleep at the same time because the pace is not sustainable at this point.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yep. That's a good segue to talk about the changes that have happened in the WA public sector workforce. Can you talk through some of the changes that happened, the different styles of working, working from home, how you managed that in terms of timing and thinking about work, health, and safety, those sorts of things?

SHARYN O'NEILL:

Yeah, that was an interesting experience for us, working from home. I wouldn't say the public sector was the first to get going on working from home here in Western Australia, because we didn't have any community spread. And so at the time we had the concern of the cruise ships, which I alluded to earlier, which I guess, became the focus of people's fear and uncertainty and concern, but there was no community spread outside of that. So there were two schools of thought about working from home, but the private sector moved pretty quickly to work from home, and then decisions were made here to... further discussions here among Director-Generals, and then we had people work from home, including vulnerable people.

And so, I think it was managed very well. It was sensible. There were some pressures around digital capability, that was mixed and varied, but every state would say the same thing. I was really pressing forward on making sure managers knew how to manage and lead in this environment. So we made available a lot of resources and had sessions with managers, because it is a different way of working and a different style and it certainly suited a whole range of people, and then other people asked if they could come back.

And I think that is also an interesting observation. We didn't make people go, it was a choice and a range of people that didn't go at, probably at the maximum, we had 62% of people who could work at home — when you take out the front line, the teachers for us, the nurses, etc. — 62% of people who could have worked at home did and we're down to about 7% now, which is our vulnerable cohort. But it took some stepping up, I think, and some learning around how to communicate, how to lead at a distance, and I think it was a good effort and I really pay respects to my colleagues in the way that they managed that.

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Thanks. How did that vary between Perth and the regions in Western Australia? How did you approach that?

SHARYN O'NEILL:

The large proportion of our population is in Perth, but we do have regional communities and workplaces around Western Australia. It was based on choice and capability at the end of the day. And so where in regions, people had to move quickly to build in a digital capability, that happened, with a lot of support and across agencies as well. So on the ground, out in regions, agencies assisted each other in this regard.

And I understand in some places where digital capability wasn't as stable, people found ingenious ways to communicate, good old-fashioned phone meetings as well. So people just made do where it wasn't optimal, but I think it shone a lot for us in terms of sustainability, or future operations, if we had a second wave, or found ourselves in another situation. The digital issue is something that we need to think about, but also, the management and leadership issues in regions where they're less connected, I think that's a clear focus for us in Western Australia.

GORDON DE BROUWER:

So when people are having to work in very different circumstances and with different things happening, they have to innovate or they have to come up with solutions. Did you find there was sort of a jump in innovation, in trial, experimentation through the public service? And then, how do you keep that, how do you maintain that?

SHARYN O'NEILL:

Well, it is one of the things I really enjoyed — I mean, there's not much we enjoy about a pandemic, so I don't want that to be taken the wrong way — but people just stepped up. They gave themselves permission... were given permission, and they gave themselves permission, I guess, in this situation. What is really interesting about that is that there's already scope for a range of these things to happen, but people either feel restrained or constrain themselves.

And so working from home is already a policy position of the government, agencies can make that decision, but all of a sudden people have the freedom to enact that in a way, and I think they also had the freedom to lead, perhaps they hadn't felt before, which is something that I'll pick up with director generals as we go. I think staggered starts, for example, no one's saying you can't do that. We had some more flexible recruitment or perhaps some less constraint around some of the requirements. Those requirements actually aren't there, they're ones that we impose on ourselves.

And so I think this is a really interesting point that's worthy of discussion among certainly our colleagues here is, again the mindset that this allowed people to have that I need to be innovative, I need to find solutions, I can do that, I have the freedom to do that. I just think that was a characteristic of the time that we've been through that we don't want to lose.

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Yeah I think, frankly, everyone shares that, and it is a deeply shared experience. One of the issues with that is that when things go wrong, how do you deal with a mistake? So there are always mistakes, and that's a sad thing, but there are always mistakes. But if you're in a bit of a different world and there's a bit more experimentation and innovation, people are doing things themselves, something goes wrong, how do you not revert back to where you were before, but learn from it? So how do you develop that culture?

SHARYN O'NEILL:

Well, that whole intelligent and common-sense accountability that we don't always quite crack is an important consideration here, and I think how people respond when it doesn't go exactly right, tells us something about the culture. But at the heart of that, during this process, I think we've had to look — each of us in our workplaces and certainly our agencies — about what matters and get to the heart of what actually matters, when you're having to make decisions around where to put priority, where to put resources.

And we had people moving resources across agencies with freedom and as a public sector commission, we assisted people to do that in an easy and transparent way, but you can never do that, you know, forsaking integrity and merit and etc. Finding that balance, I think, and coming back and asking ourselves again, what really matters? And therefore, what should we be held accountable for?

And the mythology, busting the mythology that sits around a lot of what we do, the layers that we add on from an accountability perspective in case something goes wrong. So risk appetite comes to mind. During these periods it's all about risk and look how well we manage, but I'm not suggesting we have to throw out all of the good accountability and governance that goes with it. In fact, at this time it has to be even better, but about the right things. So having that conversation, I think.

GORDON DE BROUWER: That's great. If you're happy now we'll just shift on to talk about some of the relationships and probably four bundles that people would be interested in hearing you. One's on communities, business, and how the interaction of government, especially I think public administration with the communities and what you learnt from that. Then we will go on to working within government, relationship with ministers and then actually with the Federation and how you found National Cabinet. You want to start with the community, the broader community?

SHARYN O'NEILL: So, what we decided to do here is take a partnership approach. It was called State Led and was led through the public sector and partnership with the broader community, business, not-for-profit, et cetera. And we decided to hear the voices. I have mentioned 'I Think' already, we had over 30,000 hits from the general public, including industry and others. So we were seeking their voices, and we got some interesting ideas and thoughts through that.

But generally, working with industry, we ran more than 30 ministerial round tables involving more than 600 people. And we opened up and said, 'here is our assessment of the impact to date' — knowing that this impact unfolds from a health to an economic to a social crisis — but here is our take on the impact to date. And we just laid it out for them in a really transparent way. Is this your experience of the impact on the ground? Industry, individuals, not-for-profits unions, public sector, et cetera.

And eight in ten people said that it did. And I was really encouraged by that because often people think that public sector is disconnected from reality on the ground. But they told us where the gaps were. I was really happy to receive that. So, a collective effort around assessing the impact. And then we asked them about what ideas do we have short term and long term going into the future? And the Governor himself also ran a round table. And so, we have tried to take here a collective approach.

In terms of relationships, open, listening. Making decisions about what's in and out, that's the government's decision, of course, but I think positioning the other sectors alongside us. And so that certainly has been well received here in Western Australia.

To the relationship across government and ministers, and just working with the government — high degree of collaborative effort. It is interesting, same with the National Cabinet when you see the common cause, you know, working with and for and against a common issue, the galvanisation — rather than vulcanisation that happens — has been quite remarkable. And that's certainly my reflection on being a participant or at least an advisor at National Cabinet. The, let's just call it the 'oneness' that was most evident in the early days, the level of sharing, the openness, the willing to help each other across normal divisions and lines — I found remarkable.

The humanity in that room, I also found remarkable. And I remember the day that I walked out of one of my first National Cabinet's with the Premier and we're up on the 14th floor or 13th floor, and we walked out to a window and our Premier just put his hands on the window — it looks out over Perth — and I could just sense the gravity. He said, "I really feel deeply about these decisions we're making that impact so greatly on the lives of Western Australians", you know, closing businesses, etc. And so the gravity, the humanity, the collaboration — it's just remarkable to have been able to be an observer to all of that and to feel so encouraged that people were at the heart of the decisions, regardless of what other people might say. That was certainly from my perspective, a great privilege to be able to see that in motion.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. That's wonderful. It's so important. What's your reflection then on the health of the Federation in that case? So trust, respect for sovereignty, trust, empathy are very important. What's the impact of that and how do you maintain it?

SHARYN O'NEILL: Well, it's a really, I think, an interesting challenge. Western Australians, as you would know, we guard our uniqueness strongly. I don't always think it's understood about the contribution of Western Australia to the broader Australian landscape. So I think it is a very fine balance between the interests of your own state and the interests of the nation.

And my early observations of National Cabinet were that those finely balanced interests were managed, I think, very well, and I pay great regard to all the first ministers and the Prime Minister around that. I think that is increasingly a challenge as we see this pandemic take different courses in different states, and so our government has a very firm position around its hard border for the protection of Western Australians. It's what's allowed us to open up internally and try and reboot our economy. We couldn't have done it if we hadn't put that in place.

And so I think that is a challenge — and that federated model — these are when the challenges are at its greatest, I think when the balance starts to shift and I don't pretend to have an answer to that, but I just know that I can see and feel the great challenge of it.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah I think people who've worked in the Federation know that — have seen that themselves as well — but what this has given us is the ability to talk, and to have the proper conversations and the serious conversations, even if interests are very different. And I think there is probably a lot more respect for that difference now than there was previously.

Do you mind if I shift the tone a little bit as we close, and I want to get a little bit personal, if that is okay? And probably ask two questions.

One is what you learned about yourself through this, what you discovered yourself, and then these are really difficult times, and what you learned about resilience and how to be resilient?

SHARYN O'NEILL: A couple of things I learned about myself from the very light end, one can do without nails and hairdressers for a while. Who knew? I learnt about myself that some of the things perhaps I have worried about over time are really First World problems. And so a great reminder for myself around 'why I do what I do', which was always about social justice for me. So this has brought forward for me, a strong reminder around being centred, about 'why we do the things that we do'. It is about people, people around me.

From a personal perspective, also that for a pretty strong, independent woman, we are all dependent on someone else. They're good reminders I think about our place in the world and our place in community generally. So standing out on the end of the driveway at six o'clock in the morning for Anzac Day — which is how we celebrated it here, with a candle — was so moving, and I think for me was striking to me in a way that just reminded me to be part of the community, not just helping administer for the community.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thanks very much. And thank you, Sharyn for talking, but also thank you for what you have done over the past few months and your contribution to the nation and to your state, Western Australia. And congratulations on what you have achieved. So again, thanks very much.

SHARYN O'NEILL: Thanks very much for having a chat today. Such important topics, and I'm really pleased to be able to share my thoughts with other people, but hear other people's thoughts as well. So thank you.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And there you have it. Another great conversation hosted by Dr Gordon de Brouwer, Work with Purpose - A National Perspective. Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms podcast network and if you do want to check out that GovComms podcast, please type it into your favourite podcast browser and it is sure to come up. If you do happen to come across our social media promotion for Work with Purpose, please pass it along and share it because it will help it to be found. And if you do have enough time to give us a generous rating, probably a five-star review, that would be appreciated as well because that will help us to be discovered. Thanks again to our good friends at IPAA and to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support, and thanks to you, the audience, for coming back once again. That's it for now. We'll be back at the same time next week, but for the moment it's bye for now.