

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE 28

DR MARIE-LOUISE AYRES

Director-General
National Library of Australia

DR MATHEW TRINCA AM

Director
National Museum of Australia

DR RACHAEL COGLAN

CEO and Artistic Director
Craft ACT: Craft + Design Centre & Design Canberra

Hosted by IPAA Future Leaders Committee members MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE, Assistant Director at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and MICHAEL SANESE, Manager – People and Organisation Culture at PwC

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Enquiries should be directed to Caroline Walsh on 0413 139 427 or at caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au

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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service. My name's David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. Today it's Work with Purpose with a difference. Today we speak to the leaders of a number of Canberra's cultural institutions, and examine how those cultural institutions have adapted to the challenges and opportunities of 2020. Please enjoy.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: Hello, everyone, and welcome to today's special edition of Work with Purpose which features an event from the IPAA Future Leaders Committee, designed with an expert panel who will focus on today's topic which is 2020, a year of looking back, and also moving forward. This event was to have been part of the Future Leaders series. However, COVID has allowed us to think about different ways we can share what's important to us as a cohort. We thought the panel's discussion may be inspiring for a wider membership. I'm looking forward to sharing today's discussion with you all, coming to you from the IPAA studio in Barton. My name is Megan Aponte-Payne, and I'm an Assistant Director at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, as well as a member of the IPAA Future Leaders Committee.

I feel very lucky to be here today to represent the Committee and to share my thoughts, as well as to hear from these leaders personally about how they are leading the APS. I'd like to start today with acknowledgement of the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of the city and region. I would like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who might be tuning into today's event.

I'd also like to acknowledge my fellow co-host, Michael Sanese, who is a Manager of People and Organisation Consulting at PwC, and also an IPAA ACT Future Leaders, a committee member. I'd also like to welcome our three guests today. Dr Marie-Louise Ayres who is Director-General at the National Library of Australia. Dr Mathew Trinca AM, who is Director at the National Museum of Australia, and Dr Rachael Coghlan, who's CEO and Artistic Director of Craft ACT: Craft and DESIGN Canberra Festival.

Now a little bit about each of our guests, Dr Marie-Louise Ayres was appointed the Director-General of the National Library of Australia in March 2017, having joined the library in 2002. Prior to this, she was a Curator for the Australian Defence Force Academy's collection of Australian literary manuscripts. Her work has always been centred on providing digital access to the cultural history of Australia and addressing the challenges of preserving born-digital content, particularly challenging at the moment. Marie is also a chair of the National and State Libraries Australia. She was awarded her PhD from the Australian National University in 1994.

Dr Matt Trinca AM started his career at the Western Australian Museum in Perth in 2001 as the museum link Program Manager. He then joined the National Museum in Canberra in 2003 as a Senior Curator and Assistant Director before being appointed as the Director in 2014, a position he's held since then. Mathew advocates for close collaboration among institutions across the cultural sector and beyond. And for this he was made a Member of the Order of Australia earlier this year. Matt was awarded his PhD in History from the University of Sydney and is also a graduate of the University of Western Australia.

Dr Rachael Coghlan is the CEO and Artistic Director at Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre, which is a not for profit organisation for the development of visual art, craft and design in Australia. Rachael has extensive experience in senior strategic roles in various national cultural institutions, including the National Arboretum in Canberra, the National Museum of Australia, Old Parliament House, and the National Portrait Gallery. Done it all. Rachael also has a PhD, which she was awarded from the Australian National University in 2018.

We've got some very talented people with us today. Welcome to you all. At this stage, I'll hand over to Michael, who will begin our proceedings today.

MICHAEL SANESE:

Thanks, Megan. As she mentioned, my name is Michael Sanese, and I'm a People and Organisation Consultant specialising on government and public sector workforce matters, and fellow member of the IPAA Future Leaders Committee. I'm incredibly excited to be here today to hear about some of our local and national treasures and how you've responded to some of the events that 2020 is thrown at all of us. And also hear about some of your leadership journeys throughout as we all know, an unprecedented year. I'm very much looking forward to it. The Future Leaders Committee has been incredibly excited to get the perspective from this part of our community.

Welcome, and I look forward to hearing all about it. Welcome Marie-Louise, Mathew, and Rachael. Firstly, I'd like to invite each of you to share some opening reflections on how you're looking ahead after the year that's been. You're welcome to share either personal reflections or reflections on behalf of your organisation. Marie-Louise, might like to begin?

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES:

Yes. In terms of the organisation, I would say despite the difficulties of this year, nothing has changed about our strategic purpose. In some sense it's very much about continuing on a track that the library has been on for some decades. And that track is about making sure that our collection is accessible to as many people as possible. Give you a little indication, even pre-COVID, for every person that walked in our physical doors, 75 visited us digitally. Over the last year, it was 1:90. So we'll continue down that strategic direction as an organisation.

- MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: It has however, made us I think, think more carefully about how we can best do that. And it's given us an opportunity to think really carefully about who we're serving, and to dig deeper, double down on making sure that we are collecting from the full diversity of the Australian population and connecting with the full diversity of the population. I would actually say nothing has changed in our strategic purpose, except that it's allowed us to focus on that sense of serving beyond Canberra.
- MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah, wonderful reflections. I think that's been a shared sentiment. We've had the time to reflect and truly think about our purpose. That's a really great way to open today. Mathew?
- MATHEW TRINCA: Yeah, just picking up on what Marie-Louise has said, I think that there's no doubt it's been a year like no other. The year began with Canberra mired in the smoke from the bush fires. I think we had hail, and heavy rain in February, which was welcomed, but it was a great change from where we've been. Coping with that, and I suppose a summer like no other in Australian experience, quite frankly. We might have hoped coming out of that, that we'd had some time to pause and reflect on what we've just been through. In fact, we were thrown into this crisis that now it's not just a crisis we're facing, but a global one.
- I do agree, I think that in many ways, the fundamentals of our business have become important again for all of our institutions, organisations. But there's no doubt that thought about that, thinking about it has become even more important. I was struck by what Marie-Louise about thinking through then now to discharge a sense of mission in this environment. If I had to choose a character for this year, it's about just the close attention that we've had to give to almost everything that we've considered this year. And the capacity for thought, not just in our organisation, but as a community.
- And indeed, beyond the shores, the capacity of us to think through what's happening, and try and address those issues rationally, analytically, consciously, but with some warmth and emotion for people, for our people, and for people outside our organisations. I think that's been uppermost in my mind. It's been what has carried us through this year.
- MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah, that's a really great sentiment, and I think I'll carry some of those thoughts. And we start to unpack some of your leadership traits, and how you did spend time reflecting and thinking about your workforce, and as we managed, not just COVID as you mentioned, but all those other things that were thrown at Canberra throughout the year. Lastly, Rachael?
- RACHAEL COGHLAN: I guess, absolutely, we've stayed true to our mission and possibly developed a deeper understanding of it, but the emotion that I'm left with right now is just extraordinary gratitude, which seems odd after such an intensely challenging year. But I think that I feel grateful for the community I serve, which is contemporary craft artists, and makers, and artists. They've had a very hard year and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have supported them and help them sustain their practice, and feel connected to something bigger than themselves in a very difficult year.

I feel grateful for my team. We're a small arts organisation. Recent studies have shown that actually small to medium arts organisations in Australia are actually in many ways outperforming the bigger ones. We have larger and faster growing audiences than the larger organisations, and to some extent, small was beautiful in 2020. Being small, we were... pivot, the word we're all trying to avoid. We were able to move very quickly in and out those different stages in a way that's much harder when you've got several hundred staff members and things.

We were able to close down on the day we had to close, we were able to open up the next working day that we were able to, and we had a really clear COVID plan of how we're going to do it. But we were grounded in a belief of what our mission was, and who we were there to serve, which is our members. As a membership organisation, you have just such a clear sense of who you're serving. I see that as an enormous privilege to be able to serve my membership.

In terms of how I'm looking ahead, we're ten days out from the DESIGN Canberra Festival, and I wish I had a bit more of a long-term vision right now. But I have very long lists for each of those ten days. I'm grateful also that that festival can proceed, there was a long period of time where there was a dark cloud hanging over that festival. We checked in with our community to see what they wanted us to do, and they urged us to proceed. They said, "Please, we need some good news to look forward to. We need some opportunities." It's just been really wonderful. I just feel an enormous sense of gratitude in this very difficult year.

MICHAEL SANESE:

Yeah, that's a really nice way to close the opening remarks from all three of you. I think what I'm hearing is that the listening to the community and listening to the people is incredibly important as we navigate whatever's next and where we actually want to spend our time focusing on. The limited time that we have with ourselves and within the community. I might just pop this back to Megan, as we explore the next part of today's discussion.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE:

Thanks, Michael. What I thought was really interesting from your opening remarks, were you reflected on both more time to think, but also having to respond really quickly. It's really interesting that those two have in some ways been able to come together because I think my personal experience in the public service where I am, is we have just been constantly responding. I think only now we are starting to do the thinking about what it means next. I think we'll come to this that's probably the culmination of our discussion. But I did want to start today firstly, by acknowledging that the IPAA Future Leaders Committee curates the Future Leaders Program.

One of the things we want to do is we want to encourage future leaders to think about innovative ways to work. And so at risk of using the word pivoting again, I did want to ask you, particularly in the areas that you work, because you do... I mean, Marie-Louise, it's very interesting to hear that you already had 75 people using online resources to one in person, but I guess the arts in particular, are generally objects, and they generally involve people interacting with them. I'm interested to hear from you about how you've used maybe technology or innovative ways to adapt to COVID restrictions through this period.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: I'm actually going to just take issue with something that you said –

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: Sure.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: Actually, you're characterising this broad church of arts and culture, actually, as if it is all about the physical, and that is wonderful. We have huge physical collections, 270 kilometres of physical collections. But for us as a National Library, and for big libraries around the country, that's not really the case. Our collections are digital, our access methods are very digital. What we've really missed this year with the doors closed, and my colleagues... I cried when we closed the doors, is the sense of vitality that comes when you're right in touch with people who are seeing and using your collections in the flesh when you've got that super human thing going on.

Although I think we've all done a really good job at conveying... to talk to hear about words, emotion, gratitude. I think we've probably seen our colleagues seen ourselves conveying that in the digital realm through webinars, curator talks, all of those things. But it is fabulous having people back in the building and having that sense of physically shared humanity. I wouldn't want to have our doors closed forever because we'd lose that sense of connection and vitality.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: That sounds like that's the message you've received, Rachael, as well.

RACHAEL COGHLAN: Look, I think it's some it's a really interesting experience this year, and we all have different resources to be able to respond to these opportunities. I made a decision really early that I would continue with our exhibition program, even when we closed and that was a little bit contentious. We have exhibitions that lasts for about five weeks. And then we have a five-day turnover. So we have a really intense changing exhibition program. Artists have usually worked on those exhibitions for couple of years beforehand. A lot of organisations equivalent to me, they closed their doors, and they've deferred their programs. We realised there were a number of really not great consequences of doing that.

One is... and this is when we talk about reflecting on our mission, we would probably say exhibitions were a core part of what we do. But actually, it's what they represented that was much more important. Artists in a way they need to account for their time. They need to be able to get a future opportunity, they need to show that they did an exhibition here, they got a residency here, they got a commission here, they need to show their CV grows and evolves and expands, they need to have visual evidence of that. While the exhibition is a great way, and it's a shorthand for showing that there's artistic excellence and peer review, it's not the only thing.

We were able to shut our doors, we did install the exhibition, we shut our doors. And then we learned very, very quickly from home, thanks to lots of googling, how to do our own videos, and how to do e-catalogues, and we set up a brand new online shop. All these things that we had actually talked about doing for quite some time, I'll concede, but we're a small organisation, and we didn't have the resources. But it gave us a beautiful gift, which was time to develop these new assets and to break down what's important. An example I'll give is exhibitions usually a great part of that is you have an opening event.

And it's where we come together, we're really community focused organisation, it's about relationships at its heart.

You have someone who writes an essay for the exhibition, and they tend to speak at the opening, that's part of what we do. That would probably mean you're likely to go with writers who are in Canberra, maybe Sydney. It's a pool that you can define. What we've been able to do through this brave new world is reach out anywhere in the world. So we've got an exhibition opening tonight, our annual members show of more than 70 artists absolutely beautiful. And we were able to get one of the world's leading contemporary craft curators, and writers, Glenn Adamson, who actually is an American, but based in England to write our essay.

We were then able to do a Zoom video, and we've recorded that. I mean, we would not have even considered that six months ago, and they're the gifts that we got through this process, I do worry that there will be a growing disparity because if you look around this room, there's quite a lot of work in doing these sorts of digital opportunities at a high level, and we don't have those resources. I'd be really interested at some point to talk to Marie-Louise about how do we democratise some of that digitization because it is expensive. But it is obviously incredibly important for creative organisations.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: Do you envisage a world going forward, where you would almost have those jewel pieces of work both at in-person exhibition and the online aspect?

RACHAEL COGLAN: That's what we've done. We continue to install and de-install exhibitions. We are about objects, unashamedly. I'm yet to see digitalization of an object that is equivalent to seeing it in real life, the materiality, the craftsmanship. There's some really interesting and quite expensive ways of capturing that digitally, but there's nothing that replicates the option to do an in-person. But also, again, the relationships of seeing it in-person, meeting the artist, et cetera. But those two lines of interpretation, and creating enduring content means that it lives on much longer, which means that our contribution to our members is far greater than what we could have previously done. So they'll continue to go side by side moving forward.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: Matt, has your experience been similar?

MATHEW TRINCA: Yeah, look, I think that's a good point that Rachael makes about the essential distinction of the sorts of things that we do. Even if the focus of all the three places that we are working in is quite different, the sense of material character to the things that are in our collections or on display gives the way we introduce people to ideas, which is really what connects all three organisation. It gives them a particular way into those ideas. There's no doubt in the thinking that we've done this year that has surfaced again, as Marie-Louise has pointed to as the prime distinguishing characteristic of a museum in our case. This is centre of evaluation really.

It's true also, that this world has shown us that you can engage people and actually in a kind of reciprocity between the material world and the virtual, rather than thinking of them as distinctions. Thinking of them as separated in some way.

The example for us was in late March when we closed the doors and got our staff home and working digitally. We were two weeks away from opening a major exhibition we'd invested \$3 million in courtesy of the Australian Government, relating the story of this 250th anniversary of Cook's Virgin Endeavour celebrated a founding moment of nation conventionally, thought of at least.

This exhibition was to tell the view from the shore, the view from the perspective of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as recommitting as to that narrative we know so well from the journals that Cook and Banks and others has left behind. It's a massive piece of work, a lot of investment with communities up and down Australia's East Coast indeed with institutions. Marie-Louise has been a very generous supporter of that through line of collection. Suddenly, we couldn't open that exhibition that was due two weeks in the future from when we closed.

What we had to do was think about the material we already had online and augmented and think about that is a terrible way to do this, but let's say. We turn quickly to the question of recommitting all that content online. Of course, modern exhibitions of the sort that the museum makes now include a lot of digital content as a physical experience in the show. We had wonderful resources, including a fabulous film called The Message that they made by a very great Aboriginal woman, filmmaker, Alison Paige, really about constructing that vision. A notional vision of what life must have been like onshore at the time of Cook and Banks, and others settling on the Coast.

: The capacity to bring that to an audience was so important for our publics and for those communities we've worked with, but also for our people. They were so delighted that in the midst of all of this, we're able to find a way and do what we do best, which is engage people in ideas that matter to them. That will say something to them about their lives in this country. I mean, after all, that's why we exist, we exist for the public service. I was very struck at the time, at how, both affirming it was for our audiences at a difficult time, when they were all home as well as you remember, and also for our staff. In a way, we're allowed to recommit to the core mission of the museum through the work.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: I think that's, that's so important. Michael's going to lead us into the next part of conversation, which is exactly about workforce.

MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah, absolutely. I think you touched on it, Marie-Louise, the physically shared humanity. I think that comes from the community engaging with our passion, and our purpose, but also, the workforce element. All three of you touched on that moment. You shared your emotional story that when the doors closed you broke a tear and in the way that your organisations were able to pivot. I'm very interested in understanding some of the leadership approaches in managing your workforce during a hugely ambiguous and scary point, particularly if I can take you back to that day that you did have to close, and how you connected and maintained your staff morale, and ingenuity, and innovation throughout this period. I'll start with you, Rachael, that was a proud moment you said before.

RACHAEL COGHLAN:

Look, I think what I guess... I'm CEO of a small organisation, very, very small organisation. I am not only the Artistic Director and managing a team, I'm the Chief Finance Officer, and I'm the IT Director, and I'm the HR Manager. I'll put you through, and it's still me. What that means is in that very intense time where you're seeing these COVID cases rising around the world, and we were meant to be going to Milan Design Week because we had an exhibition going there. A lot going on, I had to learn really quickly about the COVID stages and what we were going to do. I had to learn about financial opportunities to help fund my organisation to make sure I could keep employing my staff. So it was a really intense time.

We spent a lot of time just getting a really clear framework. So we knew when everything's tightened up or loosened up, we knew what we had to do. I have a strong belief that it's important to have the house in order so that then you can be creative and pursue your vision. And so we had that in place, which was all very clear. Then it struck me that one of the most important jobs I was going to have in lockdown was managing the mental health of my team, because we're a small team. We have we occasionally have meetings but often we're just talking through walls and chatting. You're overhearing conversations. We're really close. I'm really lucky that... We keep saying we're so lucky that we had such a gorgeous team to be in lockdown with together.

But I ended up googling, researching, I love researching and writing. How can I support people working from home? Someone suggested that you have a daily check in call, and you ask people, the first question is, "What are you grateful for?" We would go around, and that was really good, because everyone responded very differently. I am a painful optimist so I tend to see silver linings. But shockingly, not everyone is like that. It was a way of really taking the temperature of the team. You could tell... Everyone would come up with something, but you could tell when someone actually wasn't having a great day. That meant that I'd chase them up later and have a little chat, suggest some strategies on how we can work together.

I felt that actually managing mental health and well-being was as important as finding out how we make videos and online shops and everything else that we had to do. We were all on a very steep learning curve. I was learning, they were learning, and we were going, "Let's just give it a go and see what happens." Of course, we manage the risk to our organisation, but we were also happy to just try radically different things, and that worked. One of the things that happened which I had not anticipated, is that a couple of my youngest staff members were living in group houses, they didn't have great Wi-Fi. That's a really distracting and very hard environment to do your work in.

And so in fact, when things were opening up again, there was an overwhelming message from my team of, "We're going back to work. You can stay at home, Rachael, but we're going back in." Because it was just so hard for them to do the work. And I think that's something to be really mindful of, again, in the disparity. We went home, we worked on the laptops we already owned, no one issued us a new laptop. No one provided Wi-Fi. So you had what you had, we didn't have a new desk to sit on. This is the difference between community arts sector versus some other organisations. But I think just checking in on people and remaining connected was the most important role that I had during lockdown.

MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah, that raw connectivity. Marie-Louise, I'll pivot over to yourself.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: Well, because we've got hundreds of staff?

MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: We were able to, through the magic and ingenuity of our digital team have everybody working from home almost immediately. But of course, that meant people working weeks, literally, around the clock. Unlike some other agencies, yet we couldn't issue... We didn't have laptops to hand out. You just have to deal with what you are dealing with. Look, I think at a personal level, probably one of the most important things that I did, and it wasn't my idea at all. Good ideas come from your team, is that all that entire period I sent a weekly email that's got the instructional, here's what you need to know.

I've done a weekly video, learned how to do it myself at home, and I've continued. That is more around the human element, how are we going here? And I think that served us quite well because in ordinary times, I'd say I'm the leader who's always running around the building at high speed, saying, "Hi, what are you up to?" You had to change that. That worked quite well. You mentioned being really grateful for your team before, I just have never been more grateful for my executive team, who none of us have ever worked so hard. Everybody was just on the same mission just got on, we all carved up what we needed to do, and that was really important.

Matt would probably also feel that, particularly when you're in the larger institutions, having your tribe or people who are like you, is really, really important. The heads of the cultural institutions in Canberra we're on the phone, "What are you doing?" My colleagues at the State Libraries, State and Territory Libraries. It's just been all year, "What are you doing?" You're chatting to your mate, he is hitting up the British Library. I think that was really important too to keep checking in with others, not just about how you're getting your work done, how are you serving the public, but precisely what you're talking about. How are your people going as time goes on? How tired are they getting?

Being very conscious, as you just mentioned, I was working at home in Canberra, in a big house with one other person, quite a nice dog, nice garden, Mount Ainslie out the back. Many of my colleagues were working in small houses with three kids being schooled at home. Some of them just by the way things had happened, had serious illnesses. Really serious things happened this year. I think being really super attentive to those human things was very, very important. I said I shed tears when we closed the library, but I'll tell you there's been a few times too where you just think about somebody in your midst, in your community who's having to deal with something else on top of what the organisation is, and it's not fair, and there's not much you can do about it, that's probably been my lowest moments actually, where you wish you could lift a burden for somebody in a car. It's tough.

MATHEW TRINCA: Marie-Louise is right. Really there's a great sense of mutual support, I suppose, and solidarity amongst the heads of the major national institutions, we're fortunate enough to have that. I think if you had to take what we've heard together with what I'm about to say, I suppose the enduring thing is that in all

this extraordinary moment of getting staff home in the space of days, 250 people in our case, and a few other [inaudible, 00:30:46], but not many, is complex in some ways. In getting them working at home on Teams and other digital tools within days, by the end of the week, we felt we were a functioning organisation with everybody at home. That was huge.

The only way it happened was about the quality of communication that we had without people and also how we were thinking through what they were going to need over the course of the subsequent weeks. We did much the same thing. I was, and I'm still doing weekly director's broadcasts or team meetings through Teams, and the executive meet every morning at 8:30 via Teams just to discuss, "Okay, what's ahead today." The decision making horizon just came incredibly down to hourly, and daily preoccupations, especially in the early part of the lockdown. And it didn't let up. It was very intense, and you felt the need... at least we felt the need to communicate as honestly, and as transparently as we could to people.

So many people are worried. We were all wondered what was coming next, and me included, to be frank. What people needed was that communication to be present, but they also needed to believe in it. They needed to know it had real integrity that you were giving it as unadorned as you could, but not in a way that was alarmist in a way that actually made them feel secure. This was being thought through, their interests were being served and so were the public's interests. If I had to think about a single thing that I take from this year, you knew it before, but this has been the proof of the fact that there is no substitute in leadership for active communication, and for displaying your integrity and the integrity of the organisation, and the reliance on your great executive.

I'm astonished by what my senior leadership was able to do this year, and how they worked collaboratively, but autonomously when they needed to. Right through the organisation you saw people adopting change in a way you'd never see normally. I think that's been a character not just of ,my organisation, but probably all of us, and the broader public sector.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES:

You just talked about integrity, and I couldn't agree more. And that's not the same as being able to give people what they want, or what they want to hear. Certainly in the COVID environment, many people in the community and many people in our community of colleagues wanted way more certainty than we could give them. That's what I think it's most important is to be upfront about what certainty you have and what you don't have. In our case, as well as the natural disasters, and the entire roof of the library was destroyed and has to be replaced. We were also partway through our top to bottom whole of library restructure. And that has continued.

It's a similar track where people want absolute certainty, and all you can give them is the certainty of your integrity. And that when you can tell people when you have clarity you'll convey it, and it will be accountable, and you'll be transparent. It's really the same lessons going through, but it doesn't always meet the needs of people who just want to know what's happening next and where we simply can't provide it. I think that as we head into next year, where we don't know what the year is bringing, we cannot know what more climate catastrophes, or more pandemics, or more whatever. I think that that's something that really each individual needs to grapple with, is the extent to

which you can live with uncertainty. That as a leader, you have to be crystal clear about what's above the line of that certainty, and what is just really murky and might become clearer a bit later on.

MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah. You mentioned earlier as well you had a strategic vision and you knew your course. I read about the shift that your institution was facing. Did you find at any point you had to pivot, or refocus on one more than the other, or you said, "No, we're on this journey, and I know we've had some things thrown at us now but..." How did you manage the shifting priorities from the immediate well-being of needs to where the organisation needed to be for the future?

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: Look, obviously, there's some things... we all have left things behind that we had planned to get done over the year where you say, "That's just not going to happen, and we'll have to think differently about it." I think that looking at a practical level for our restructure, we would have wanted it done faster. Would you ever embark on something like this if we knew any of this was going to happen? I wouldn't. But we had. I'd like that to be ever faster, because that's causing existential angst to some of our colleagues. But you just got to continue on all of the tracks, I think, even if a little bit more slowly. But for us as an institution pivot's not the right word.

We've been on this long term digital track. Last year we made more business decisions long before we knew this was happening, that we're going to continue us on that track. I don't see any reason to pull back from that, particularly when you're engaging with your collections and trying to keep people that view into them. When you're moving from having an on site event of tens that turns into hundreds online, or hundreds on site that turns into thousands or tens of thousands, and they're all over the country or the world, no going back from that.

MATHEW TRINCA: Yeah. Unbelievable.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: Yeah.

MATHEW TRINCA: I think that one of the things that we found useful was, as I talked about that narrowing of... or closing interview horizon, and you started to realise that you were preoccupied with what was happening next hour, or next day, you needed some antidote to that. And the leadership needed an antidote to it. So we commenced very early on, a kind of blue sky look around the world at what was happening when we thought this would go. I can't tell you how useful it was to have our senior leadership, not through the organisation, because frankly, I don't think our staff could have handled us asking them to do that while they were trying to work through their jobs, and their application, their jobs in completely different environments.

But the senior executive started to say, "What's happening globally? Where is this going to go in five years? And how do we think about almost very long term?" And if nothing else, it gave them some relief from where we were, but it had set them up also, for that discussion to be generalised amongst the staff next year when I think it will be useful and constructive, as we draw breath and move through into year two of this.

MICHAEL SANESE: Yeah. And I think Megan was going to talk about maintaining that continuity.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: Yeah. You've talked about what's here now and also the future. Marie-Louise, you also talked about the fact that you and your executive have never worked harder than you're currently working. Rachael, you talked about the two tracks that you're now going down both digital and in person. I feel in a way when the pandemic started, we all had adrenaline, we thought, "Great, we'll just put 100% into this, we'll get through this." It's now almost turned into a war of attrition. How do you maintain that sustainability of your staff when they're still working at 100, or 110%, as young people say?

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: At a practical level, I'm having a week off next week.

MATHEW TRINCA: Very good. I'm pleased to hear it.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: Because it's true, you get tired, and I'm worried that in the not too distant future I'm going to do or say something I really regret because I'm tired. I've done the same from my executive team. I've said, "Look, you can't take a month off at the moment, take a few days, take a week." And similarly further down really encouraging people to take time out where they can, but being practical that you just can't have particularly a senior team out from home time at the moment. I think that's really, really important.

I do think that sense of just wearing down of energy is super, it's real. But I also feel we'd have to remember who we are in Canberra, we're not health departments making decisions about people's lives or deaths. We're not Treasury making decisions about livelihoods. We are about feeding and nourishing the souls of the Australians around us and that in itself, feeds back in to how you feel about your work and how your staff do. We get amazing feedback. You would too from your communities. I feel as if there's something more replenishing us than might be the case maybe in some of the big blind agencies.

RACHAEL COGHLAN: I think that the thing that's really struck me about this year and is I think our organisations of whatever size, we are creative cultural organisations, I think change is actually good for us. I think it's a risk because we always take on more than we can do. It's just the nature of our organisations and our sector. I think that actually having a moment to really take stock, genuinely, not just another strategic plan.

I love the strategic plans they're really important, but really go, "Hang on..." There's this great phrase I love, which is called kill your darlings. Because we all have our pet projects that we really, really love, and we're quite invested in. I think it's been a really good opportunity to kill some of those off, not because they are unsuccessful, quite the opposite. But actually, we need to put our energy into something else. And I think that's how you remain creative and vibrant and relevant and serve the communities that were existing to serve.

I really think that there's an issue at the moment of just how we can take some of those learnings from the shutdown to go forward. We still do the checking in every meeting, and what are you grateful for, as a way of just keeping in contact. I really learned in shutdown that I really like my own company. And I know that sounds really bizarre, but I think my life beforehand was just so busy. I would have a running order of my life every day. Kids drop offs, and sports and work and events and everything, and a lot of that just got taken away, and most of it hasn't come back. I think that's a really great gift.

Knowing how to just have time to be still and read a book is a really valuable thing to take forward, and I think we're all better as an organisation at predicting things like the hours you work, your well-being than we were before the lockdown. I feel like there's some real positives that actually, in some ways we're busier, but in other ways, actually, we're better off.

MEGAN APONTE-PAYNE: I think that's right, I think in many ways, it's forced us to see the human element of the workforce. You can't hide behind a Zoom call if your kids are running past. And so it's forced us to think about well-being and how we support our staff, where perhaps in the past that was hidden a bit more.

MATHEW TRINCA: I try not to think about this as being an interregnum somehow, and more about the way that what we're doing is recreating the way we work, our organisations are. There's a lot of discussion about we're in this phase of crisis, and how can we, when we recover, when this is over when we recover, I just don't think that's what's going to happen. I think we should be thinking about that's why we're organising our business. I'm as interested about what we're doing and what we've done already that's taken forward. Using this as an opportunity really to apply design thinking or prototyping in a very rapid period of change, that will actually continue.

MICHAEL SANESE: That's a really powerful closing remark. I can't believe how quick the time's gone. I've really enjoyed hearing all your perspectives. I think, Marie-Louise feeding and nourishing ourselves. Thank you for continuing to guide these institutions and communities, because it is really important. Your leadership stories today have been really, really powerful. I'd like to, on behalf of IPAA, and IPAA Future Leaders Committee, thank you for your time today. I look forward to walking through the halls and experiencing some of your events moving forward. Thank you.

RACHAEL COGHLAN: Thank you very much.

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES: Thank you.

MATHEW TRINCA: All right, thank you. Nice to talk to you.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

There you have it, a conversation about the cultural institutions here in Canberra, and how they have adapted to the challenges and opportunities of 2020. We are now just weeks away from contentgroup's GovComms Festival, which is a part of the OECD's Government After Shock global dialogue. We're delighted that IPAA is a partner for the event which will run for 24 hours from 10:00 AM, on November the 17th. We launch in Canberra, and follow the sun featuring content across Australia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, North America, and finally home via the Pacific Islands, and New Zealand.

At the same time on the same platform, our good friends at the Social Marketing School at Griffith University will be running 24 hours of free education. All up, there will be over 150 hours of content, all directed at understanding how governments can more effectively communicate with citizens and stakeholders. So, google the GovComms Festival and sign up. There are now over 600 people registered, so we look forward to you joining them for this big event.

Thanks again to IPAA, and to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support for Work with Purpose. This program would not happen without the support of Caroline, Sunny, Sarah, and the team here at IPAA, and Emma back at contentgroup. Thank you so much for your great support, and to the audience for coming back once again in such strong numbers. That's it for now, we'll be back next week, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

SPREAKER 7:

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.