

# TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

## WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE 29

### **LIZ COSSON AM CSC**

Secretary  
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Hosted by DAVID PEMBROKE, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, contentgroup

9 November 2020

Enquiries should be directed to Caroline Walsh on 0413 139 427 or at [caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au](mailto:caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au)

Delivered in a partnership between IPAA ACT and contentgroup

contentgroup

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. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

Today, my guest is Liz Cosson, the Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. DVA is the Australian Government department that delivers income support, compensation, and other support services to war veterans, serving and former serving members of the ADF, the Australian Federal Police, and their families.

Liz Cosson served in the Australian Army for over 30 years, becoming the Army's first female Major General back in 2007. She began her career in the Australian Public Service in the Department of Veterans' Affairs in 2010, before spending time in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Department of Health, before returning to the role of Chief Operating Officer and Deputy Secretary at DVA. She was appointed Secretary of DVA in May of 2018. Liz Cosson, welcome to Work with Purpose.

LIZ COSSON: Thank you.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Your career has been a life of public service, and I know that you did grow up in a military family. But did you always have your heart set on the public service and the military as a career?

LIZ COSSON: I certainly had my heart set on joining the Army. That was always something when I was growing up, that I said to my parents, "I want to be a soldier."

DAVID PEMBROKE: Age what?

LIZ COSSON: I was probably about 16, because mum and dad were posted to Papua New Guinea, and I went into boarding school and I realised that I missed them so much. It's a time when you, as a child or as a teenager, you think actually, my parents were okay. And I reflected on the life that we had, moving around and having the opportunity to visit mum and dad in Papua New Guinea. And I thought, I really do want to follow in my dad's footsteps.

He didn't want me to join. He and mum thought that was not going to be a good career for a girl. And so dad asked me to do some secretarial training to start with, so I went to a business college and then worked in real estate, here in Canberra for two years, before applying for the Army.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. I noticed that gap in your career, before you moved into the Army. So were you a good real estate agent?

LIZ COSSON: Well, I was a secretary, so I talk about the fact I'm book-ending my career as a secretary. I worked for Hodgkinson Real Estate and I sat on the front desk, and did his books and took phone calls, et cetera. And then joined the Army two years after working in that real estate field. I just knew that wasn't for me. I wanted to be a soldier.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Looking back on that time, that being inspired by your family and your father in particular, about that life, what was it? I know you admired him obviously, but what was it about the life and that commitment to service that appealed to you?

LIZ COSSON: Well, we've got a long history of serving our nation in my family, both on my mother's side and my dad's side. And I always remembered the stories of my mother's father, who served in the First World War when he was 18 years of age. And he left the little country town of Victoria, left his nine siblings behind and marched out of that little town and said, "I want to go over to Europe." And he was disowned by the family, because they thought he should be on the land and supporting his siblings.

But when Pop returned, minus two and a half fingers, after serving in the First World War, he set up a little post office in this country town. And I always remembered hearing him talk about that. And I loved him of course, to bits. And my dad used to talk about his father who served in the Second World War, and his grandfather who was killed in action in the First World War.

And just that whole sense of service, I grew up with it and it did make me feel very proud to be Australian. And then when dad was posted anywhere, my brother and I, we changed schools many times. My brother was born in Malaysia, and we also went over to America and we lived over there during a pretty torrid time. And I'm watching the elections now in the US, and when we were there, it was the time when Robert Kennedy was assassinated and Martin Luther King was assassinated, and there were riots in the streets in Washington.

I just remembered the experience growing up with a military father and having that opportunity to experience other cultures and other nations. And then just to feel that family, that he felt for the others that served with him, but also the family that came together whenever you did move. It was just a wonderful childhood for me, and something I knew I wanted to live as an adult.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Just when you think back to those moments with your grandfather and his two-and-a-half fingers, did he tell stories about his two-and-a-half fingers or did he make stories up?

LIZ COSSON: He probably made them up, but he did say that they were shot on the battlefield in France.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Shot off?

LIZ COSSON: Yeah, shot off on the battlefields in France. Unfortunately, it was the middle of winter, he told me, so he put his hand into the snow to help the healing process as far as he was to stop the bleeding, and then the medics came. He was very proud, because he used to roll his own cigarettes and he'd do it with the stumps of his fingers. And I can still see him sitting there, talking about that.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So that time, 30 years in the Army is a long time. What did you take from that as a professional, now that you have a different job as a senior administrator of a very important government department?

LIZ COSSON: So my military service over 30 years, as you pointed out, and I learned a lot, particularly about myself, during that service. I often tell people that you learn a lot of military discipline during your military career, but you learn a lot of self-discipline, as well. And you help understand who you are as an individual. And so I certainly learned who I was and the importance of being authentic, because as you'd appreciate joining back in 1979, it was at the end of a decade where we finally had equal pay for equal work, for women.

I initially thought I had to be like my male colleagues, and I identified quickly that I couldn't be someone I wasn't, so that authenticity. And I learned about values. The military lives by its values, and they are very important and held very dear to them. But they also teach you a lot about leadership and the importance of leadership. I was just speaking to a group of young leaders the other day, and they asked me, "Do you have to lead differently from when you're in uniform to now, as a public service servant?"

DAVID PEMBROKE: Good question.

LIZ COSSON: I know. And I said, "Well, I look at it that you either command in the military, and there are times when you are required to command, because you may be putting people's lives at risk and sending them into harm's way. So you may need to command." And I've been in experiences where I've had to use my command style.

I've also had to manage, manage resources and people. But leadership is something where you inspire, and you want people to come with you. So setting that clear vision and direction, so that people will follow and you will deliver the outcomes that you're hoping to deliver. So my leadership style in the military and my public service leadership style is exactly the same.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But is it harder outside of the APS, because you don't have those structures and disciplines and ranks, and other things where it's reasonably codified in the Defence Force? Because it necessarily has to be. The APS, not so much.

LIZ COSSON: The difference for me, when I was no longer in uniform, is you can't see the level you're at in the public service. So I could walk into a room in the military, wearing my uniform, wearing my rank, and people would immediately know where I sat in the hierarchy. My first few meetings in the public service, in a suit, it's not obvious. So it really does reinforce the importance of owning your space and knowing who you are, and approaching your role with some credibility and confidence, so that people then can identify who you are.

But it is surprising, there is still a lot of unconscious bias out there, where people don't necessarily recognise a female as the leader when she might be standing with a strong male. So I have seen, still to this day, a little bit of that, David.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How does that get solved, that point of unconscious bias? Because I can hear all the females in the audience, all going, "Yeah, exactly. Happens every day."

LIZ COSSON: It can happen, and not as often as I used to see it. But I normally just speak, introduce who I am, introduce myself, and I don't want the person to feel uncomfortable, but it becomes quite evident to them who I am. And you can see they're uncomfortable, because it was unconscious. I actually didn't mean to be insulting. You just be confident in yourself and know that sometimes, that's going to happen.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, I'm intrigued, you were awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross for your work in supporting the Bougainville Operations, and you were also heavily involved in the late 90s, in East Timor. What did that experience teach you in that it was a genuine conflict, that there were lives at risk, genuinely at risk, and you were heavily involved?

LIZ COSSON: Firstly, with East Timor, I didn't deploy to East Timor. But my role was in our land command, we called it then our Forces Command, where we were responsible for doing all the planning for the logistics, for the forces that were about to put the boots on the ground. And it was extremely challenging, but extremely rewarding. And what I've recognised is that in any time of need, we just all come together as a team. And I found this during COVID, as well.

We are so resilient as people. And you see there is a need here. We need all hands-on deck. We need clever thinking, and we need innovation, to find out how are we going to do it? Because it was a time when we really didn't have the computer systems, and the IT, and the data that we have today. So a lot of it was manual, tedious work to pull all of that logistics planning together. But my goodness me, it was so rewarding when we knew that we were able to support the forces that were about to go into East Timor.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But the risks were high, weren't they?

LIZ COSSON: Risks were high.

DAVID PEMBROKE: You had to get it right.

LIZ COSSON: Absolutely, and we had to make sure that the supply chains were in place for the troops, when they were on the ground. And it was just through a real team effort, of a number of different organisations coming together to make that work. And we were successful, as we know.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But you talk about that high performance, why is it that it takes a crisis? Because I think that's one of the great themes of Work with Purpose, is that the APS has performed outstandingly well in a crisis. The Army, in those two instances, again, it was crisis that led to that high performance. Why is that the case?

LIZ COSSON: Well, it's interesting. There could be many reasons for it, but one of the things I know that we've been in the department, going through transformation for the last four years. And when you have a shared purpose on what's the vision? Where are you heading? What is that purpose? You can actually achieve incredible outcomes, because you all share it. It was at NASA back in the 60s, had a look at how they were successful, putting a man on the moon. And it was recognised in that review, that everyone from the janitor to the receptionist, to the engineer, to the astronaut, all shared that one purpose, put a man on the moon.

And we talk about this a lot in the department. What are we here for? And when you know why you're here, you can achieve incredible outcomes. And we knew for East Timor, that our purpose was to make sure when those boots hit the ground, they had all the equipment they needed and that we could resupply them. And having that shared purpose, that shared vision was really important to the successful outcome.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But I would argue that a lot of that shared purpose and mission and understanding is still there, but perhaps when there's not the crisis, we're not performing to a higher standard, as we need to. Once you get the vision clear and we know where we're heading, the North Star, what's your style about trying to get that message out and then get the performance out? Because I imagine through COVID as well, you would have had to have again, clearly articulated to your people, this is the role that we are playing in this particular crisis.

LIZ COSSON: When I reflect on when the pandemic was announced and we activated our pandemic continuity plan, what I saw in our department was this willingness to come together and to not only support Services Australia, when they recognised other Australian citizens needed their support, but they also came together to say, "Well, how are we going to do this?" I mean, the initial response was how are we going to continue to serve our veterans and their families, and come up with new ways of doing that? And so I won't go through all the mechanics that we put in place, but that was a lot to do with our success.

But then to directly answer your question, David, how you communicate with your staff, and what we did and saw as the whole foundation to delivering outcomes for veterans was communication. And we found different ways to communicate, but we regularly communicated. And I started to do my own personal iPhone videos to send to staff. We got messages through our staff reference group, who are our staff on the ground, who were able to communicate.

You can't communicate enough when you're dealing with the challenges we did, with the pandemic, with COVID-19. And to talk to staff about the difference they're making, because you are motivated when you know you're making a difference and the work that you're putting in is actually achieving your purpose. And when I was able to talk to them about, we now know where all our veterans are by postcode, and when the nine towers in Victoria went into lockdown very quickly, we knew every single veteran in those towers because of the work we'd done, the mechanics that we'd put in place, to then be able to ring them or SMS them. And then to say to our staff, "This is what you did."

There was a 90-year-old veteran in those towers, he said to the staff member who rang him, "I get Meals on Wheels. Are they going to be able to come and give me my dinner?" And the staff member was able to talk to the department down there and say, "How are we going to get the veteran his Meals on Wheels?" And I said to the staff member who was just so touched by this story, and I said, "You made a difference for that veteran."

And little stories like that, so it's not just numbers where you've delivered 225,000 stimulus packages to veterans. But it's the individual stories and that staff can relate. But we also did shout-outs to staff, where a veteran would write to us and tell us how Abby from the phone call made him feel special. And we were able to let Abby know that. So all of that, the communications, the positive stories, the positive reinforcements about you've purposed, but you've made a difference as well, through all of this.

DAVID PEMBROKE: It's interesting, you put your finger on communication, because we were talking with Sue Weston the other day. And I did say to her, "What have you learned out of COVID? What has it taught you?" And she said, interestingly, it was that communication, the importance and the critical nature of that useful, relevant, consistent, that you're continually going there.

What have you learned? What did you learn through COVID, that you might not have? Even though you've had such a distinguished career, you've had so many other things go on, you've learned a lot, but what did COVID teach you?

LIZ COSSON: Not only communication, that was certainly a key lesson for all of us. But I learned how a difference in applying flexibility to the way you work. Before COVID, there were a few managers I'd suggest, would think, "Well, unless I can see you, you're not working." And we were able to equip probably about 90% of our 3,000 staff across Australia with technology, so that they could work remotely. And by March, we had about 80% of our staff working remotely. That was really important, because of the environment that we're in, because we also see face-to-face services for our veteran community. They didn't like that initially, but they recognised it was for their own wellbeing, that we weren't expecting them to come into our offices.

But we also conducted four staff surveys during the COVID period. And what we picked up from that was this self-reporting of feeling trusted, feeling empowered, and feeling the flexibility to do their work, never losing sight of why they were working for the veterans and families. And they felt happier. I don't know, you can't measure happiness, but you can feel happiness. And I could feel it through the staff surveys, that they appreciated all of that, the flexibility, the trust, and the empowerment to do their work.

They also self-reported productivity. But we've got real facts on productivity, as well. And I learned from that, you don't have to see somebody to know they're working. But I also know that there are different ways that you can engage staff, which for me, I used to go around to the different offices and talk to staff, and I'd ask at the end of my presentations, "Are there any questions?" Maybe three hands, two or three questions. But we trialled a broadcast where I would broadcast through Teams, and I reached over 1,300 of our staff in one broadcast.

And the questions didn't stop because they were online, sending their questions. And my facilitator was able to theme them and say, "We've got a lot of questions on this, Liz." And consistency in that messaging, through that great reach. I don't want to lose the goodness that came out of all of this.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. That's my next question. How do you bottle this in order to continue to perform at a high level, to deliver for the veterans and the AFP and ex-service, and all the rest of it and their families? How do you bottle that? Because I know that's the question in the minds of almost every member of the SES and the APS.

LIZ COSSON: Yeah. I don't want to rush to anything, and we've just finalised our report on some of the key lessons, and it's quite a hefty report. But it really does capture everything we did in the department. It was only today, I was asking the team to just do a couple of other pieces of work with it, so I can share it with the Secretaries Board, because I think there were some really incredible lessons from that, for all of us as leaders, on how you bottle the goodness. And because we know there are some weaknesses with it.

For example, I looked at our EAP statistics, to see what was being reported now, in comparison to 2019 and 2020. Mental health issues are still the top reporting issue for our department. But during COVID, as COVID was a second issue, but domestic violence was the third. Whereas in 2019, it was mental health, and it was bullying and harassment and workplace change. Workplace change doesn't even have a mention in 2020, because we've all changed. We've all had to adapt to the change.

I feel that it is just really important to continue to talk to staff about what they felt. And importantly, for us to know what are the outcomes that we still need to deliver and how we can do that and measure it, because productivity can be self-reported. But when I can see it, that's good. And I want to continue with the productivity.

But we've put a lot of effort into cultural change and that's hard when you're working remotely, so we still need to get balance. Talking to the staff through my staff reference group, saying, "I want to find the balance. So if you've only worked at home during COVID, I want you to come back into the office for a couple of days." You need to have the balance now, and that will be really important, but I'm not rushing. I think that would be my key message, David. Don't rush it. Get some balance in it and keep some flexibility but keep measuring and keep engaging.

DAVID PEMBROKE: You made quite an interesting comment. I think it was in the middle of last year, where you said, "Look, if I can't fix this, I'm out of here. I'll leave." You're still here. So clearly, you feel that you're on the path. And we've had this COVID intervention, really, in the middle of this period where you're obviously trying to get that transformation that you alluded to, to land it.

What was the problem that you were trying to solve, that you thought that you had to fix or otherwise you're going to leave? And where does that position you now, or COVID position you now, in order to achieve what obviously you've been setting out to achieve?

LIZ COSSON: For the last few years, we have been transforming, because we have heard from our veteran community that we needed to change. The view being that we didn't know them, that we didn't understand the nature of service. We weren't connecting them to the right support. We weren't respecting their service. And we've put in incredible efforts through our Veteran Centric Reform, engaging with our veteran community and talking to them, and listening and learning from that.



Twelve months ago, or beginning of last year, 2019, there was a lot of media and calls for a Royal Commission, particularly into veteran suicide. And I expressed my commitment to veteran community. I see that our role in the department of Veterans' Affairs is an extension of your military service. I see my role as the Secretary is an extension of my military service. I'm here to support those who have served our nation. Given that our Australian Defence Force is a volunteer force, we need as a department, to recognise that service and the sacrifice that many give to our country.

There had been a huge divide between Defence and DVA, and that's now closed. And I listened with interest, your interview with the CDF and Greg Moriarty. And the three of us are so closely aligned on why we are here to support current serving members, and particularly when they leave. Now, the majority of people leave well, leave the military service well, but there are a few that have had a torrid time and they find it really difficult to make that transition to civilian life.

I knew 12 months ago that we still had some work to do. And my commitment was that if I feel I'm part of the problem, I will leave. I would hate to think I am contributing to a problem when I am so committed to the service, to our Australian Defence Force and families. And so when I was interviewed again, just recently, to say, "Well, are you leaving?" No, I'm not leaving because I can actually point to significant change that we've made.

And I am always the first to acknowledge that we got more to do, and I want to do that with the veteran community, and with the announcement of a National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention. I want to work closely with the National Commissioner. Dr Boss is independent, but within the Attorney General's, because I want to find solutions. I can read stories about what we're doing wrong, but I really want to hear solutions on how we can get it right. I certainly don't accept the suicide rate. It's not acceptable and we need to be doing more for our veteran community.

I'm engaging now with some of those young men who may be impacted by the Inspector-General of the ADF Afghanistan Inquiry, to say, "We will set up a team that will be dedicated to you. If you need us to support you, we are there for you." And to give them hope that we as a department do care, because all the negative media is actually saying, "Don't go to them. They don't care." When we actually have over \$11 billion funding to support our veteran community. And I really want to get that message out, David. So I'm not going anywhere, at this stage.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Good. And how are you feeling anyway, at the end of what has been an incredible year? The challenges of the bushfire, the activation of the Defence Force, the reserves in that period of time, and then the COVID period. How are you holding up? Because these jobs are big jobs that Secretaries of departments have. You feeling okay?

LIZ COSSON: I'm feeling okay. Yeah, I'm feeling okay. I've had the great support of my wonderful husband and friends and family, and also my department. I mean, I've got some wonderful leaders in the department. I've taken a bit of leave here and there, just to have a few days to myself.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Have you found that important?

- LIZ COSSON: Absolutely.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: That you get that break away, because they're brutal jobs, aren't they? You can't really go and turn the phone off.
- LIZ COSSON: You do need to look after yourself. And I do that through exercise, through gym. I've certainly kept that up. But it's interesting, looking at some of the staff surveys, where they said that there was that blurring between home and work. And we saw leave rates drop, but we saw unscheduled absences drop, as well.
- But I've said to the whole department, and I'm taking my own advice, take leave and don't pick up the phone. Don't log onto the computer. I found knitting again. I found baking again. Not so well, my husband would say. But you have to reconnect with you time. And I feel good. I'm looking forward to the end of the year, for a break. Absolutely, like everyone is. But I feel okay.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: But how do you get ready then, for next year? There's the big opportunity. You obviously have a huge slate of work in front of you. And obviously, some of those contextual challenges will come again. But again, probably to maybe offer an observation about the wider APS. How does it now take the Thodey reforms that are there, and locked and loaded, and ready to go? And how do we come out of 2020 going into 2021, where there's still... Look what's going on overseas. There's still not a lot of certainty in lots of things. We don't know what the world economy is going to do. We don't know a lot of things. What's your wider view and your advice to people as they get ready for not only a break, but they get ready to come back next year?
- LIZ COSSON: We have our Executive Leadership group coming together in a couple of weeks, where we're doing scenario planning. What could we be facing next year? We certainly weren't ready for what we faced in 2020, but look at what we did, look what we achieved. What a foundation to build on. And we've pulled together some scenarios on what we might face next year, just so that we're ready for that. We've dusted off again, the business continuity plan, because we also know we're hitting into cyclone season and bushfire season. Are we ready for those?
- You need to continue just to refresh and understand, what are the lessons that we've learned, but think ahead on what those challenges might be. And it still might be a challenge you didn't expect, but at least you've been thinking about how you'd respond. And don't lose what we've learned from this year. We've been incredibly innovative and agile. I don't like using that word. But we have been able to adapt to how we've delivered. And I just want to make sure that we recap on that and say, okay, that's our foundation. Now, how are we going to build on that to face anything that happens next year?
- DAVID PEMBROKE: You do have that individual responsibility there in DVA, but you are a member of the Secretaries Board and there is that wider responsibility. How does the APS become better joined up? How does it become much more of that aspiration of one enterprise, where the organisation is really working as a single, harmonious enterprise?
- LIZ COSSON: That was wonderful in the Thodey report, talking about how you become one. And that's what we saw us do.

DAVID PEMBROKE: That's right. Yeah, exactly.

LIZ COSSON: When my colleague, Rebecca, had to stand up for Services Australia in surge for Australian citizens, I had all our grads over at Services Australia. And not only did they feel that they are making this incredible contribution to Australia, but they came back to the department so energised in service delivery. And we just had another request to see if any staff want to go and support another activity, to surge. And I've said, "Absolutely."

We still have our key outcomes we need to deliver. But the experience that we get as one APS, by doing that, is incredible. And just being able to surge to respond to other departments' needs. Department of Health, my Chief Health Officer went over there during all the planning. She went over and contributed but came back richer for that experience.

So that one APS, I actually think exists, because we are one and the Secretaries are really united in talking about, well, what are we going to face next year? And how do we support each other in that endeavour? I would like to think that we as a department, as small as we are, can contribute and make a difference for those other departments.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, best of luck with that. Enjoy your break and thank you for your service.

LIZ COSSON: Thank you.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms network, and if you are interested in government communication, let's face it, who isn't? And Liz Cosson has just told us about the importance of communication. Just type in GovComms into your favourite podcast player, and search for the program. We now have over 250 episodes. And I'm pleased to say, interestingly enough, that the OECD in its wisdom has now started to research this fundamentally important practice, which in turn, I'm sure will draw much more attention to it.

For Work with Purpose, if you do see the social media promotion for this program, a like or a share never goes astray. And a review, oh, how we love reviews. So if you do get the time to give us a review, that would be great.

Thanks to the team at IPAA for your ongoing support, and to the Australian Public Service Commission. Thanks also to the team at contentgroup who are busy producing huge amounts of content, not only for Work with Purpose, but on all sorts of programming areas as well. But most importantly, to you the audience, thank you for turning up each week. And thanks for your feedback in the recent IPAA survey. It really does and has helped us to get a better understanding of your needs, and to improve this program and the other elements of the Work with Purpose platform that will emerge in the new year.

When it has to be said, we will all have enjoyed a good rest. I'm sure we won't know each other and when we come back, we will be ready and raring to go for another great year. Thanks again, to Liz Cosson for another great program. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

SPEAKER 3:

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.