

# TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

EPISODE #80

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE:  
WHY MENTORING MATTERS

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CAROLINE WALSH:

Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service and how it serves the Australian community. My name's Caroline Walsh, and I'm going to be your host for today. I'm also the CEO of the Institute of Public Administration Australia. Before we get started this morning, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the really deep contribution that they make to the life of our city and our region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody's listening to this podcast and joining us today. This month, the world celebrated International Women's Day, lauding the progress we've made, but also shining a spotlight on the continuing inequities women face in the workplace and beyond. By some estimations, it will take several centuries for women to reach parity.

For a while now, mentoring has been hailed as one of the antidotes to these challenges and a key to opening more doors to leadership positions for women. Mentoring involves establishing a relationship with a more experienced counterpart in your field of interest and gaining insights and advice from them. Whether this happens in a formal or an informal setting, mentoring can help women take the next steps in their career, ask for more support or even money, and gain confidence when speaking about their achievements. On today's episode, we're going to unpack mentoring, how it makes a difference in women's careers, and why every woman would benefit from having a mentor in their lives. Sorry, I'm going to say that one again.

On today's episode, we want to unpack mentoring, how it makes a difference in women's careers, and why every woman would benefit from having a mentor in their lives. In this context, we also want to touch upon the work of an inspirational female leader who championed women through coaching and mentoring, Dr. Margot McCarthy. Margot sadly passed away in 2022, but she was a powerhouse in the public sector as the first female National Security Advisor, a leader in social policy, and a key founder of the APS Academy. To honour her contribution, the ANU National Security College and the Australian Public Service Commission have both recently established scholarships in Margot's name, and we pay tribute to Margot.

Now, I'd like to welcome our panel of two fantastic female leaders. Joining us today is Nina Davidson. Nina joined ONI as the Deputy Director of Intelligence in October 2021. From 2015 to 2021, Nina was Head of Office of the Australian Government's Productivity Commission. She was responsible for the overall management of the commission's work across its research, reporting, and advisory functions, and its corporate enabling functions. Welcome to Work with Purpose, Nina.

NINA DAVIDSON:

Thanks, Caroline. It's really great to be part of today's conversation.

CAROLINE WALSH:

And our second guest for today is Tania Rishniw, who is joining us from the Department of Health. Tania is currently the Deputy Secretary of the

Primary and Community Care Group. Tania's responsible for leading the Department's work on policies and programs relating to mental health, primary care, population help, prevention and cancer screening. Tania joined the Department of Health in 2015 with a background in social, environmental, and economic policy. Tania has more than 20 years of experience as a leader in the Australian Public Service. Welcome Tania.

TANIA RISHNIW: Thanks so much, Caroline.

CAROLINE WALSH: Great.

TANIA RISHNIW: Makes me sound old.

CAROLINE WALSH: Experienced.

TANIA RISHNIW: Experienced, indeed.

CAROLINE WALSH: Experienced is the term we use, yeah. Thank you both for joining us for the episode today. We're really excited to explore this special topic with both of you. To start us off, Nina, can you tell us about a time when someone coached or mentored you and how it made a difference?

NINA DAVIDSON: For me in a lot of ways, Caroline, it's less about a specific time. It's that I have benefited over my career from mentoring, coaching by a number of people. And when I look back earlier in my career, I often think now that a lot of the time I don't think I was even conscious that I had these fabulous mentoring relationships where part of it was just, I guess if you like, the role modelling of colleagues that I worked with, but it was also the way without me even being conscious of it, that they were advising and guiding along the way. And that certainly shaped my career.

It was influential in opportunities I pursued because people took the time to talk to me about how I might consider options. And also, another thing that comes to mind, particularly today as we're reflecting on Margot and her contribution in many ways, Margot is someone from whom I benefited from her advice and guidance. I had the great privilege of working with her when she was at Prime Minister and Cabinet, and I can recall just side conversations where she was providing advice and guidance to me, which was incredibly valuable.

CAROLINE WALSH: Lovely. And Tania, is there a great example of mentoring and how it supported you?

TANIA RISHNIW: Like Nina, I've had mentors throughout my career, and in fact, at any point in time, I've often had more than one, and they give me different things and they give me different advice and different perspectives. The examples that kind of most readily came to mind for me, and Nina's already mentioned Margot, who was just this amazing force of nature, and all of us, whoever

worked with her, know how privileged we were to work with her. I was going to reflect on Caroline Edwards, who is also a friend and mentor and has worked for so long in Indigenous Affairs and Prime Minister and Cabinet and in Health with us through COVID as well. I still remember the day when I was being encouraged to apply for a promotion and like most women, I said, "Oh, I'm not sure that I'm ready. I'm not sure. Surely there must be someone better."

And Caroline took me aside and she said, "Why do you think that you know better than the people around you and the people who are mentoring you and the people who are asking you to apply? Because actually, they're much better at looking at you and reflecting on how you fit within the organisation." If you can't trust yourself, trust those around you, trust your mentors because they won't be encouraging you if they don't think you're ready and if they don't think you can do it. A fantastic moment of reflecting and trusting in what your mentors are telling you.

NINA DAVIDSON: Yeah, that's a great example, I think, of making a real difference.

CAROLINE WALSH: It really is. Nina, I loved what you said about sometimes it's not even a conscious mentoring relationship. But sometimes they do really stand out.

NINA DAVIDSON: They do. And I think it's often what's happening almost unconsciously, and then what that builds to, because then, as Tania said, you'll have a range of people that you go and seek advice from, depending on what you need at that time, or people might be offering that to you.

CAROLINE WALSH: Yeah. Great. Just before we get into what makes a good mentor, I just wanted to reflect on two women who stood out for me because I've had a range of people, men and women who have supported me, but I had a particular circumstance that stands out because I had one of my four kids was really unwell and quite unpredictably unwell for a period. I actually took six months off work and then had to reintegrate back into my senior executive role, and what would that look like and how would I take that on?

For a short period, I was working for two days a week, and two women, Stephanie Foster and Janet Connell, both supported me during that period and helped me see that actually, life is a series of chapters, and sometimes the chapters aren't quite what you hoped that they would be, but it also taught me to think about how else can I help other people who might be struggling when their chapter isn't going the way that they wanted it to go as well? That's just my own personal reflection of two that really stand out for me.

NINA DAVIDSON: It's a really great example.

CAROLINE WALSH: It's always that knowing that there will be another chapter.

NINA DAVIDSON: That's right.

CAROLINE WALSH: There will be. And you get to write that chapter.

TANIA RISHNIW: Yeah. Nothing lasts forever, right? Yeah.

CAROLINE WALSH: Now, Nina, can you help us and our listeners to think about what are the characteristics that makes for a good mentor and a good mentoring relationship?

NINA DAVIDSON: Yeah, it's a really good question, and we've sort of touched on it, and I think even in just talking about some of our reflections and experiences. Often it just is an organic thing that happens, but not always that. I think that some of the ingredients are openness and honesty. It's been willing and able to have honest conversations, and that includes, particularly if it's a formal mentoring relationship, that if it's not working that that's okay. It's finding the right person for you at the right time. Listening in a two-way sense, of course, is really important reflection, I think, too. So, I guess speaking from the perspective as a mentor on some occasions, it's sort of being able to listen and reflect on what the other person's experiencing and being a sounding board, being just able to pose what are hopefully helpful questions as people are working through, it might be particular issues.

And on particular issues, I think that can be quite helpful, particularly in the context of formal mentoring relationships where it's if you like, a structured set of discussions to have some in real life issues that you are working through, that you can use the mentoring relationship to just test ideas. It's not about getting direction or necessarily answers, but it's just to work through. Most often, I find in those conversations it's, "Yep, you're on the right track, go forth and do," particularly for women.

Often Tania, you touched on this, it's that confidence and self-confidence issue. It's just kind of working through some of that. The other thing I'd say just about the characteristics of a good mentoring relationship, there's just often two-way value. I know I get such a lot out of the relationships in which, if you like, I play the role as mentor and every conversation I walk away with something, thinking about something in a different way, which is terrific. And just really value having the opportunity to understand the perspectives of colleagues in a range of roles too.

CAROLINE WALSH: Can I just ask you a follow up question? Because you did say at the beginning that sometimes there's a relationship that just doesn't quite work. What would your advice be for someone who is either a mentor or a mentee and they're thinking, "I'm not sure this gels?" How do you navigate that?

NINA DAVIDSON: Yeah. Well, look, it's something that I think it's always important to talk about right up front. It's sort of part of the initial kind of conversation so that

then it just sort of creates that room. If it's not gelling, it doesn't work. We've recognised that upfront and it's okay not to continue on. That's just if you like a kind of basic way of laying the groundwork and maybe even setting a point if it's establishing a new formal sort of set of mentoring discussions, it's let's come back and check in at the six-month point. Is this still working? Is it giving you what you need?

And if it's not, that's okay. It might be maybe I can help you find someone else who might just be better placed to provide you what you need at this time as the mentee, just to know it's okay to just be honest and say, "Look, thanks, but this is just not giving me what I need right now." And it's not to say that maybe a bit down the track or if different issues come up, you might want to reconnect with that person. It's back to your point, Tania, that often at any one time, you'll have a number of mentors who are playing a role in your journey. And so, it's just what you need and what you can best get. That sounds very transactional. I don't mean it that way, but just what you can have in that relationship.

TANIA RISHNIW:

Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? I absolutely agree, Nina, and I now often start any mentoring relationship, I mean, firstly, the first time you're ever asked to be a mentor for someone, you are completely humbled and thrilled and take that opportunity incredibly seriously. Often people will say, "Oh, I wasn't sure about asking you." Most people relish being asked to be a mentor or a coach or even just asked for advice. The other thing, and I'll often start those conversations with, "What do you want to get out of this relationship?"

And part of it is having those honest conversations and I will seek out different mentors depending on the issue that I'm grappling with, because sometimes I need someone to give me some tough love. Sometimes I need someone to help build my confidence. Sometimes I need someone who's a really different thinker and will give you a different perspective on an issue. I will pick and choose who I ask for advice depending on what I'm wrestling with. And you shouldn't be afraid to do that.

CAROLINE WALSH:

Yeah. Yeah. Horses for courses. Different stages, different challenges. Thanks. Tania, we've heard a bit about how mentoring can make a difference in women's careers and what a great mentor and mentoring relationship can look like. I'd like to now reference the work of Margot McCarthy and her investment in the success of others and supporting other people. You worked with Margot at the Department of Health and Aged Care. Can you tell us a bit more about how Margot empowered other women?

TANIA RISHNIW:

Yeah, and Nina, as we mentioned earlier, Nina and I both had the privilege and the joy of working with Margot. In preparing for this podcast and asking for colleagues who had worked with Margot and who Margot had mentored, there were kind of three key kind of descriptors that kept coming

up. And one was she was absolutely fierce and fierce in a really gentle, unassuming way. But when you think about her career and her promotion within Defence, in a time when female SES in Defence were not the rule, they were absolutely the exception.

To be the first female National Security Advisor for the Prime Minister as a woman is just an incredible feat. Then to move from that into social policy and into an area like aged care of really complex issues and challenges, she was absolutely fierce. She had this amazing curiosity and compassion, so she would always question, but it would be really questioning the curiosity and really at the heart of the social policy challenge, what is going on here? It was a questioning that went to the issue, not the person. The other word or the other descriptor that always comes up is Margot was a class act, and it sounds-

CAROLINE WALSH: I love that.

TANIA RISHNIW: But she was an absolute class act and no one who knew her would describe her as anything but stylish, direct, absolutely had a core of integrity and ethics, and she brought that to every mentoring relationship. And she specifically chose to mentor young women and both in the security and intelligence area because she was a leader in that area, but also in social policy and health and aged care. And across the APS, she was instrumental in setting up the APS Academy because she felt so absolutely fundamentally committed to those core values of the public service and seeing women take every opportunity to help build the public service. She very deliberately mentored women. She very deliberately would often give you some really challenging questions about why we're doing it that way, but it was always about the issue and about making both you a better leader, but the public service a better place to work.

CAROLINE WALSH: Fantastic. We all want the public service to be a better place to work for everyone, and certainly we've made some strides in gender equality and equity and parity across the service in lots of areas. But Nina, according to the Australian Women in Security Network, the share of women working in security roles ranges between 11 to 25%. How can mentoring help to bring this number up?

NINA DAVIDSON: Yeah, good question, Caroline. And just a note there, we've still got a way to go across security roles in terms of how women fill the broad range of roles across our security work. I think mentoring can play a really important role, but I'd also say that mentoring is only one part of the puzzle to improving career outcomes, including for women and women in security and intelligence. One way that I think mentoring can play a role is to help encourage people to consider career options and pathways that they might not otherwise consider. It's sort of to open up the thinking even for women who are already in the sector, but also for women who are outside of it, who might not just have such opportunities on their radar. I think in any sort

of sector, mentoring can help women navigate career paths and move into leadership positions.

It's by drawing on others' experience that can help navigate the now. I think that's where, again, it's another way that mentoring can play a role, but as I said, mentoring is only one part of the puzzle. There are other, if you like, broader issues that organisations need to be aware of and focus on. And that really goes to the culture of workplaces. Really considering do all types of people feel welcomed and valued? Is it a place where everyone feels that they're empowered to deliver and contribute? I'm stating the obvious here, but it matters so much, much because diversity is so important to delivering effective outcomes across the public service.

Is there enough diversity of experience and perspective to really get those good public policy outcomes that you are sort of talking about, Tania, that Margot was so committed to achieving? And so we really need that diversity in our workplaces, ensuring that our workplaces are diverse, that they're inclusive for women to come in, but also for people from all types of backgrounds. And in having that sort of focus in our workplaces, it means that not only can we attract people to come in, say to my sort of sphere or the security sphere, but also make it a better place for people to continue careers in as well.

CAROLINE WALSH:

Yeah, great. You just talked about the puzzle and mentoring just being one part of the puzzle. I think the other thing we need to think about is that women in the workplace is not the only sphere we need to be considering. We know that women often juggle work and unpaid caring responsibilities, and according to the ABS, 62% of women spend five or more hours are on unpaid indoor housework compared with only 35% of men. How can workplaces contribute to carving out time so that women have time to invest in their own careers, whether that be through mentoring or other avenues?

NINA DAVIDSON:

Yeah, again, statistics that show that still we've got a way to go and in addressing imbalances, and I know these sorts of statistics and experiences of women were really prominent too, during the COVID lockdown periods of living and what that meant for what else women were sort of taking on. Look, I mean, in a way, this is a broad brush response, but I think to boil it down, to allow women more time in the workplace to undertake mentoring and as well to just do more and do more differently in their working days, it's about creating conditions that make it just as possible, more possible, more accepted for men to spend less time in the workplace. And perhaps it's feeling like, or for whatever societal and cultural reasons that might exist, that they need to put work ahead of other household responsibilities, caring responsibilities, so that the more that men do in the context of caring and household responsibilities, the more that frees up capacity for the women in their partnerships, their constructs to do more on the work front.



And from an organisational perspective, there are a variety of things that come into play there. How flexible are our work practices for all our employees? What does access to flexible work look like? What does access to parental leave look like regardless of whether you're the primary or secondary carer? There's been a lot of change over recent years in terms of policy changes, legislative changes, too. I think about when I started in my career, presenteeism was a real thing, just being present in the office. Oftentimes, not always, but it seemed to be more about how long you were there rather than the quality of the work that you're doing in the time that you were there.

And it wasn't common. I won't say it wasn't acceptable, but it just wasn't common for men to be ducking out early to pick up the kids from school, to take time out. But that's something I've seen at least a shift in over my career where more men, given what we're talking about today, sort of making those decisions and are supported to make those decisions in their workplaces. And I think it's regardless of what sort of caring responsibilities people have or it's just about how to support our staff, in my case as an organisational leader, to have more flexibility to pursue their whole of life interests and responsibilities, whatever they are.

TANIA RISHNIW:

I think we've learned, I mean, the last three years have been tough on everyone, but some of the benefits of COVID have actually meant we've learned to look at working in different environments, working remotely, working from home in a different way, and organisations have shown that they can flex. And I'm hopeful that that will actually make work and opportunities much more accessible to women in particular, but also men and people from across the country.

The other thing I often reflect on, and particularly I see time and again with young women kind of right in the midst of their career at kind of EL1, EL2 level, self-limiting, and actually censoring themselves before they actually even have an opportunity to be told, "No, this is not the opportunity for you" or "How are we going to make this work?" I will hear them saying, "Oh, look, we're thinking about having a family" or "I'm pregnant. I'm not going to apply for that promotion." And I say, "Why not? What is it?" Because this is, as you said, Caroline, this is a chapter, and actually if you are the best person for the job, you are the best person for the job, and I will wait for you. I will make arrangements for that. My encouragement for them is also don't be your own censor.

CAROLINE WALSH:

I completely endorse that. A small anecdote from me, I had my first ever interview for an EL2 role on my first day of maternity leave with my first baby, and I got the job and they waited for me, and it was fantastic. It was great. But there were leaders in the public service who were willing to do that. Well, not willing. It was-

TANIA RISHNIW: It was a benefit to them. It was a benefit to them. And I keep saying to young women, the organisation gets as much out of you as you get out of it. Go for it.

CAROLINE WALSH: Great. We're nearly out of time, but I'd really like to pose one final question to both of you. What would be a call to action? What is something that all of us can do each day that might be able to empower other women around us?

TANIA RISHNIW: That's a big question. And so, I'm going to take a little bit of leeway and say not just one thing, but I mean, I always feel I need to lead by example. I need to be as courageous as I'm asking the women around me to be. Part of it is actually leading with courage and leading with authenticity and integrity. Part of it is creating the environment where women can actually have a voice and amplifying that voice. The other one that I often say, and I've had to learn through my career is stop saying sorry. Don't apologise if you don't mean it. So often, particularly women start with, "Oh, sorry I was late" or, "Sorry, I couldn't make it" or, "Sorry, I just wanted to do this." Take out sorry. Take out just. Stand by your statements. You've earned the right to be at that table. Use that opportunity to use your voice.

CAROLINE WALSH: Yeah, amazing. Thanks, Tania. And Nina?

NINA DAVIDSON: Look, I think they're all really great, really great points and terrific things to build in day by day. The thing that came to my mind too was really around voice, ensuring that women in my organisation across the service have opportunities to find and use their voice and the amplification point that Tania made too, I think it's valuable and important and it's recognising contributions. This is something I think about not just for women – it's women, men, all contributions. I think that we can all just get caught up in the doing and the delivery and not taking the time to recognise and value the contributions that people are making. And that in itself sort of builds confidence and people's, I think, field of vision for the next thing, too.

CAROLINE WALSH: Amazing. Thank you, Nina, and thank you Tania for such a fantastic and empowering conversation today.

NINA DAVIDSON: Thank you, Caroline, and thanks, Tania.

TANIA RISHNIW: Thank you, yeah.

NINA DAVIDSON: It's been a great conversation.

TANIA RISHNIW: It has. Let's continue it.

CAROLINE WALSH: Thank you, Nina, and Tania. If you are interested in some of the statistics and information we've referenced today, we'll leave links these in the show notes for you and don't forget to connect with us. The best way to do that is

via IPAA ACT or contentgroup profiles on LinkedIn, or by sending us an email to [events@act.ipaa.org.au](mailto:events@act.ipaa.org.au). Work With Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration Australia, supported by the Australian Public Service Commission. We'll be back with another episode in a fortnight, but if you can't wait until then, we have plenty of public sector content for you to catch up on the meantime. You can listen to prior episodes of Work With Purpose on all our podcast platforms, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, and more. And last but not least, if you enjoyed today's podcast, please leave us a review. We love hearing what you think about this podcast. Thank you for tuning in today and goodbye.

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