



INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
AUSTRALIA

02 6154 9800
PO Box 4349 Kingston ACT 2604
admin@act.ipaa.org.au
www.act.ipaa.org.au

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

EA SERIES FINALE: THE SES-EA PARTNERSHIP

David Fredericks PSM (Guest)

Secretary, Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources

Michelle Oliver (Guest)

Senior Executive Assistant to David Fredericks PSM

Dr Stein Helgeby (Guest)

Parliamentary Budget Officer, Parliamentary Budget Office

Paulette Billings-Brown (Guest)

Executive Assistant to Dr Stein Helgeby

Emma Rees (Host)

Chief of Staff, Australian Public service Commission

Caroline Walsh (Opening remarks)

Chief Executive Officer, IPAA ACT

9 December 2021

CAROLINE WALSH:

Yuma. Hello and welcome everyone to this evening's event. Thank you all for being with us today to join us for the 2021 EA Series Finale, the SES-EA Partnership. My name's Caroline Walsh, and I am the CEO of IPAA ACT. I'm going to make a few opening remarks and do some housekeeping for today's event. And then I will pass over to the chair of tonight's event, Emma Rees, the Chief of Staff at the Australian Public Service Commission.

I'd like to start tonight's event by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land in which we're meeting this evening, the Ngunnawal people, we acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution that they make to the life of this city and our region. And I would also like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are in the audience with us today as well.

For those of you who might be unfamiliar with IPAA ACT, we were established in 1953, and we are the professional body focused on the promotion of excellence and professionalism in public administration. We are a not-for-profit and nonpartisan organisation, and we provide a platform for debate and discussion about public administration and striving for excellence in Public Service in Australia.

IPAA ACT has a number of specialist committees, including our amazing EA Committee, without whom today's events would not be possible. Special thank you to all of those on the EA Committee who are with us tonight and who work so hard to bring events like this for audiences like you, despite some of the challenges of COVID. If you would like to know more about IPAA, you can follow our social media pages on LinkedIn and on Facebook and listen to our fortnightly 'Work With Purpose' podcast.

I would now like to welcome the chair of tonight's event, Emma Rees. Emma is the Chief of Staff to the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Peter Woolcott AO. Emma joined the APSC in 2020 after a decade at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Her experience includes strategic communications across multiple policy areas. And in 2014, she led digital communications during Australia's Leadership of the G-20 Leader Summit. More recently, Emma has worked in the team supporting the Thodey Review. As such, she's now very happy to see APS Reform Progress at pace, supporting a dynamic and modern APS. Please join me in welcoming Emma.

EMMA REES:

Yuma. Good evening, everybody. It's great to be here tonight. Thank you, Caroline, for that generous introduction, and congratulations to you and the IPAA team on a great year. You draw insights from the best in the business to deepen conversations on important matters for those of us in public service, whether that's integrity, APS craft, or on partnerships, as we are discussing tonight. And so what a wonderful conversation to end the year on.

So briefly, well, before I begin, I'd like to also acknowledge the traditional lands on which we meet and pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. And I also like to pay my respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us tonight.

So tonight, we are going to have a panel discussion with our lovely panelists, who'll introduce in just a minute. I will then invite all of you to get involved. We'll have some Q&A from the audience, and then Sarah Kalleske will provide closing reflections before we move on to some networking and refreshments.

So now it's my pleasure to introduce today's speakers, David Fredericks, Michelle Oliver, Stein Helgeby, and Paulette Billings-Brown. David Fredericks PSM was Appointed Secretary of the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources in February 2020. He previously served as Secretary of the Department of the Environment and Energy, Deputy Secretary at the Department of Finance, Attorney-General's Department, and at Civil Justice and Legal Services. David has held senior ministerial advisor roles at both the Commonwealth and State level. He has practiced as a barrister in Sydney for five years and has degrees in Law and Economics from the Sydney University. He was awarded the Public Service Medal in the 2020 Australia Day Honors for services to the budget and to reform in the Attorney-General's portfolio.

Michelle Oliver is the Senior Executive Assistant to Secretary Fredericks and is also at the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources. She has worked with David for six years, starting when he was a Deputy Secretary at the Department of Finance. Michelle has 10 years' experience as an Executive Assistant in the ACT Government and the Australian Public Service. She's passionate about customer service. Michelle tells me she's always backed herself in an industry that is often described as 'not for the fainthearted', and she encourages other EA to do the same.

Dr Stein Helgeby was appointed to the Parliamentary Budget Office in November 2020. Prior to this, he has been Deputy Secretary of Governance and Resource Management at the Department of Finance, joining the Department of Finance in February 2010 as the Deputy

Secretary of the former Financial Management Group. Before this, Dr Helgeby will be worked in the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance, where he was responsible for budget and financial management policy research, taxation, business tax reform, and inter-government relations. That sounds a little bit busy! And I understand both Dr Stein Helgeby and Secretary Fredericks spent some time together in the Victorian Government.

Paulette Billings-Brown has been Senior Executive Assistant to the Parliamentary Budget Officer Dr Helgeby for over 11 years, starting when he was Deputy Secretary at the Department of Finance. Prior to that, Paulette has worked as a project officer in both private and public sectors, specialising in IT projects. She also brings many years experience as an executive assistant in the private sector. Paulette is passionate about encouraging and supporting other executive assistants and officers to recognise their capabilities and to acknowledge the importance of their role as champions of the development of productive working relationships at all levels. Welcome to you all. Please join me on the stage.

So as we move through our discussion, I'm going to ask each of you slightly different questions and to bring out each of your unique perspectives. Now, my observation is that trust, discretion, and clear communication are just some of the hallmarks of an effective partnership. Sometimes the subtle art of managing blood sugar levels is involved.

DAVID FREDERICKS: That's a reference to me.

MICHELLE OLIVER: I didn't even tell her that.

EMMA REES: No you didn't. And a sense of humor is often helpful, as you can see. But let's hear from our experts, Paulette, if I may start with you.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Sure.

EMMA REES: Can you share with us please what you see as being the foundation to a strong SES-EA relationship?

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Ooh, a strong relationship takes time, takes time to build one. It doesn't happen straight up, but a lot of communication, a lot of open communication, right from the beginning. And trust they're the two big things I would say that you've got to set down your foundation with.

I remember from the first day sitting down with Stein and talking about our expectations, what we like, what we dislike, how we'd like our day to run, how we need it to close at different times, the priorities of life, the juggle of family and work. So the communication and then keeping

that - we talk all day, every day, it doesn't stop. As much as he'd like it to, get some work done every now and again. Every now and again, we stop and say, "Oh, okay, I'll do something." But we're bouncing off each other all the time. Good dad jokes, bad dad jokes.

STEIN HELGEBY: I do the good ones.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: David does the bad ones. I'm learning the dad jokes. They all make the day enjoyable because we spend a lot of time together. So that communication has to be enjoyable as well as respectful and understanding that we're busy, we are working, now's not the time for a joke. Let's keep going. But then trust that the information that we have and that we see and that we hear and that we move through, won't be misused. It's that trust that we're going to do what we've been asked, and you don't have to come back and keep asking us again, "Is that finished? Is that done? Or have you forgotten about that? And it's done, we're there, let's keep going."

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: I would say, over time, it's a privilege to be in the role that we're in. It just takes time. And as we've been together for a couple of years now, yeah, it just keeps building and growing, and yeah, the dad jokes keep coming.

EMMA REES: Good to know they never run out. Michelle, for you, what does successful EA-SES relationship look like?

MICHELLE OLIVER: Well, for me, it's like a clear open in communication, like Paulette said. Executives so busy being in the secretary EA role, even busier still. And so David's really... I'm going to give him a wrap here... David's really great at knowing exactly what his staff do, and he's great at directing instructions or what he wants done at the appropriate member. So that makes our lives really easy.

The other thing that is really good to know too is the strengths and your weaknesses. David, I know, knows my strengths and my weaknesses, and he knows what I can and wouldn't want to do or shouldn't be doing. So he's really great at thinking, "I need to get somebody else to do that." Like I'm not going to sit down and write a brief or anything like that, he knows that, and I refuse to do it anyway.

EMMA REES: Imagine you'd be a very busy lady if you pick up all notes.

DAVID FREDERICKS: Note to self.

MICHELLE OLIVER: And the other great thing that we have is we are very transparent. We both, I know David like the back of my hand, and I'm pretty sure he knows me very, very well as well. And sometimes a really tough, we have a really tough role and huge demands. So it's just about getting

that job done, doing whatever I can to make sure that he's got whatever he needs to support him. Because I always think of that role, it's not about me. It's always about the person behind me and that I'm working for and whatever I can do to make him get to his end result is my main aim.

I've been lucky enough and been rewarded and been taken with David up to the Secretary role. So yeah, just clear, open communication, be transparent, let your boss know what you can, what you can't do. Don't procrastinate and make yourself sick to think, "Oh my God, I just can't do this. I'm not going to do that." And you've got to also to throw in that emotional intelligence - know and read your manager, you're boss, and think, they're just are not in the mood for any of this today, protect them, keep everybody out, unless you really don't like somebody, you just throw them in at their own cost. "Yeah, sure. He's free go in."

But yeah, you've really got to be able to read what they like and what they need. So I think I'm really good at doing that with David. Tuesday, was it Mondays and Thursday, we try and avoid?

DAVID FREDERICKS: Afternoon.

EMMA REES: Afternoon.

DAVID FREDERICKS: Late afternoon.

MICHELLE OLIVER: So that's when his sugar levels low, and he gets a little bit antsy.

DAVID FREDERICKS: I'll explain that.

MICHELLE OLIVER: So yeah, it's all IMs. So yeah, that's probably the most important things for me in making this relationship.

EMMA REES: That's fantastic, Michelle. Certainly, when I started in my role, I was acutely aware of what I didn't know. And the fantastic thing I find about working in the executive where you see everything is that you come to understand just the enormous amount of expertise that an organisation holds and the people around you holds. So drawing on that is obviously a strength you employ.

But David and Stein, can I ask you both please, to reflect on what a great relationship does in order to help you achieve the outcomes and the decision-making that you do?

DAVID FREDERICKS: Yeah. You want me to go first?

STEIN HELGEBY: Yeah.

DAVID FREDERICKS: You go. So firstly, can I just thank everybody for coming today. I mean,

this is a magnificent turn-up, and I appreciate fully that it's pouring with rain out there, so you've all gone the extra yard to come here. So I'm very, very grateful for that. And I hope we can make this worth you all. So good on you for coming and taking interest.

So it's interesting. I think we're just going to hear recurring themes here today, which is a really good thing because I think that's something that everybody in this room, I think, will be able to take away, have a think about. So the first one for me, and it's come through, is trust and loyalty. I can be really honest with you, I trust Michelle implicitly, like implicitly. And that includes with a lot of detail about myself, my personal life. In many ways, I doubt very much that I have a secret, not just a work secret, but a life secret from Michelle. Because I can't operate as a whole per... When I'm a secretary, I need to be both the secretary and a whole person as well. And in many ways, Michelle, through her sort of loyalty and her trust, allows me to be both. So I'm very open with Michelle about everything.

But I can be that because I trust her implicitly and trust her loyalty implicitly. And I'm lucky, we've been together for six years. It's a long time. She's put up with me for six years. That's a credit to her.

So I think that element of trust and loyalty is core. You do obviously need time to establish it. I think once it's there, it's an enduring thing. And to be honest with you, it's crucially importance for me is it's what survives and hangs in there, when I, Michelle, we, the department, are under pressure. And so, during the COVID crisis, I mean, I was appointed a Secretary and within a couple of weeks was in the middle of managing the department through a COVID crisis. So that was, I'll be really honest with you. That was-

MICHELLE OLIVER:

Tough.

DAVID FREDERICKS:

... not easy on us. And I was at the kind of edge of my abilities to be really honest with you. And in many ways, the great continuum I had was Michelle because she'd been with me for six years. So in a world that was kind of unsettled, new, even more challenging than I'd experienced before, Michelle was kind of there as my one constancy, and that's really important.

The second thing I'd talk about is the communications thing, because as interesting, Paulette that you went straight to that, because I think that's really worthy of everybody thinking about because unlike trust when you're under pressure, communications can come under pressure. So there are times where... I regard myself as a good communicator with Michelle. There are times I know because of pressure, time constraints, I'm distracted. I don't communicate with

Michelle as well as I can. And that has negative implications potentially for the department. And so you got to go to discipline.

So trust and loyalty for Michelle and I comes really, really easily. And it's kind of just an enduring feature of our relationship, communications, kind of it's kind of what Paulette said. You got to keep working at it because it does come under pressure. You can miss fire. And so it kind of... And yet, it is absolutely crucial.

So unsurprisingly, trust and loyalty, I think are just crucial to a relationship and communication. And can I just say one last thing, then I'll hand over to you Stein? I think you're all sitting there saying to yourself right now, "This bloke isn't telling me anything different to how I know I have to conduct any other relationship in my life." We all know they're the kind of crucial ingredients to a relationship with a partner, with your parents, with your kids.

So in many ways, for all of you, you just got to take your own life lessons and how you function in your own lives and transport it into a relationship with SES or with anyone else you're working with. So it's nice that you can draw on your own life experience and who you are with a bit of tips from us to put it in a kind of a workplace environment, but you don't have to reinvent the wheel. You've all got the capacity to do these relationships and to tick all the boxes I've just said because I'll bet you London to a brick, you're all doing it in your personal lives, anyway.

STEIN HELGEBY:

I'm trying to think of something different to say because I agree with absolutely everything that Paulette, Michelle, and David have talked about, but it is all continual communication, open communication, and that builds trust. And I think the thing I want to say is what you get when you make that investment, and you make it over time, and you get a team, and you get a team which is greater than any one of you. So, there are things, for example, that Paulette's attuned to that don't come naturally to me. There are probably some things that I get that it would help if I communicated those things to Paulette because she can then come at it from a different angle.

So, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. And I really think that all of this stuff about communication and trust at whatever is about being more effective and being more impactful and things. And to me, it comes down to at the end of the day, if things are working well, then you as a team are projecting a set of values, and you're presenting a set of expectations, you're doing it explicitly, but you're also doing it implicitly. And I think the implicit communication of those things is perhaps the most important part. But yeah, I completely agree with everyone else.

EMMA REES: Thank you, Stein. Yeah, I definitely would agree that it's often the tone that you said in the executive that filters throughout an organisation. You talked a little bit about change, David, but Michelle, Paulette, I'm wondering if you might be able to share with us how you both navigate sudden changes, whether they're in the political context or crises like we've seen over the past 18 months or so.

MICHELLE OLIVER: It's a really good question.

DAVID FREDERICKS: Yeah, indeed.

MICHELLE OLIVER: A really good question. David and I, as a partnership, have been through three, going over into Budget Group, which I must admit, I was pretty, I think, naive to admit what we were heading into. David obviously had a lot more intel and knowledge and background than what I did. But the change in the pace, the work, the demand on him was incredible. And I just had to pick up and lift my game. That was quite incredible.

Then we went from being a Deputy Secretary, Deputy Secretary EA on a Friday at 5:30 in the afternoon to a Secretary and a Secretary's EA on Monday morning. And that was just incredible. But you draw on your people that you know. I've got some great contacts within the department. Paulette is one of them, Rhana (Crago) is one of them. You draw on what they know to help you to get through and make it right. Not for me, but for David, so that he's got everything that he's need, but you go into a completely raw environment.

So there's so much to know and so much to learn. So it's just about asking the questions and drawing on the people that are there to help you, which is really, really important because I don't know all those answers, I don't know who to go to and stuff. So I used my team. I used my Deputy Secretary EA's when I started in industry. So yeah, that was really important for me.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Your network is your bigger team.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Networks are really, really important.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: They are.

MICHELLE OLIVER: And the strengths of your team is crucial.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: And like you said earlier, you back yourself. Even though you're nervous, you're unsure. It's brand new. It's different. You know you've got the skills behind you, you've done it before, just in a different context or in a different department or a different scene. It's like, "No, I can do this - back yourself, get in there, put the foot down, and off you

go."

MICHELLE OLIVER: Yeah. And of course, you're going to make mistakes. And you're going to make plenty-

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: You put something in place, you don't do it again. You move on. You put your hand up, "I did that. That was my fault."

MICHELLE OLIVER: And that's really important, though. What you just say there, Paulette is that, yeah I did stuff up. I made that mistake and put that process in place where you never, ever do it again. I think David knows that I do do that. If I do muck up or make a big mistake, I'll always do something to make sure that I never ever do that again.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Absolutely.

MICHELLE OLIVER: It's crucial to. I don't want to keep on annoying him or pissing him off. So, you've got to make sure that you've got it right....so that he doesn't have to say it again, I don't want to hear him say it again. And nor should he have to, so yeah that's really, really important.

EMMA REES: Paulette, you and Stein have been through bit of change this year, including extended periods away from the office. Any reflections on the change that you'd like to add?

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Well, we've been home since August. We were going to go back this week. Next week? Maybe tomorrow?

STEIN HELGEBY: Maybe.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: It's funny, even with all the change, we still work the same. We still do the same things. We still talk the same, be it through IMs, phone calls, video chats, emails. We are still communicating all day, even though it's not me yelling from my desk, to his office, and him back out to me and that sort of thing, or us walking around or everyone hearing me from the other end of the office. But that change, even though we've been away, it's still the same. I think the hardest thing for us has been the technology. There's been a few different platforms we've all had to learn over the time.

EMMA REES: Oh, good.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: So doing the IT support remotely, "Can you just hold your phone up, turn it around the other way," on FaceTime. Now I'm looking at... We're doing whatever you can, but that's just what we do. What else can I try? What else can we look at? And at the same time, we keep calling on our networks.

MICHELLE OLIVER: We've actually had the IT guy who lives across the apartment from our office.... David's rung at 7:30 in the morning, and he's run over in his pajamas.

DAVID FREDERICKS: Yeah. I'm pretty sure they were Batman pyjamas.

MICHELLE OLIVER: That's how loyal they are.

DAVID FREDERICKS: Can I just chuck something here ... so here I can do a bit of a contrast for you, because I'll be really honest with you, like for Michelle and I during lockdown which I don't know how many weeks you were effectively at working remotely when I was in the office?

MICHELLE OLIVER: So the first time, I was in the office the whole time.

DAVID FREDERICKS: And then the second time, it was probably four weeks.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Second time we rotated, yeah.

DAVID FREDERICKS: So I'll be really honest with you. So I missed Michelle's physical presence in the office. Well, I just... Well, it's just true.

MICHELLE OLIVER: You got that on recording, right?

EMMA REES: We've got that recorded.

DAVID FREDERICKS: It's being recorded I did. And to be fair, though, I did, I missed staff generally. And by then I was a Secretary, so I had a staff of four. So we set up a system where one person came in every day. So I didn't... I worked in the office the whole way through the lockdown. And we had a rotating system where, so I was lucky. But we had a rotating system where each person came in every once every four day.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Every four days.

DAVID FREDERICKS: So I had someone there every day, but I'll be really honest with you. Like, without someone there, I was actually quite lonely. And just to be honest, like I was rattling around on this floor all by myself.

So it was nice to have a person there just to occasionally have informal social contact with. And in many ways, it kind of was fun being in there, just the two of us in each case, because there was this sort of, "We're in this together. It's tough times." And so I'll be honest with you, I didn't perform as well in my relationships with my staff when we're dealing remotely. I know that's a good lesson for me. It is kind of my nature and so I think people in the department, my department, know that I'm quite keen for physical attendance in the workplace.

But yes, I think it's because... Can I go back to the analogy I said about

relationships? For me like it's like being, did we function as well? Would you function as well with your kid? If you are separated for two months working remotely with your kid? Well, probably not.

MICHELLE OLIVER:

No.

DAVID FREDERICKS:

Can you do it with a partner? Probably not.

MICHELLE OLIVER:

Depends with how old the kid is, though.

DAVID FREDERICKS:

True. There'd be some benefit. But it's just that I think, yeah, for me, there was an element of that I missed, I need that kind of human contact, and so that's hard, but you got to adjust. We did a really good job of adjusting. But as I say, it wasn't as good a high-quality experience as being together.

EMMA REES:

Thank you, David. And all of you for those really honest reflections. I think at the APSC we're always looking for the lessons of the experiences like we've all shared through COVID and resilience... my impression is that everyone has quite different needs. I'm like you, I like people around me. Other people I know are quite happy at home because they're much more introverted. But can I ask? I might start down the other end of the platform, but what kind of tools do you use or how do you draw, or what would your recommendations be around how to be resilient through change in these different circumstances?

STEIN HELGEBY:

So that's a very good question as well. I mean, if you think about something as a crisis or you think about something as a novel thing that you've never been through before, then I think you make it more daunting for yourself. Whereas if you kind of start from the view of like, I may not have done exactly this, but I've done something a little bit like that, so I'll build on that. Or I have seen this work somewhere else, or I've heard about this.

If you start from the basis of what you kind of have some knowledge of or understanding of, I think you will approach a crisis more confidently, which is not to say that you don't get the heebie jeebies because sometimes you are pretty much on the edge. But it's to give you the sense that if you just kind of ground yourself a little bit more, utilise those skills you built up because we all build up lots of skills in all of this change, and you rely on those things, then I think you actually you get through them, or at least you get through them better. I mean, I would say that for me personally, the last... well, the whole COVID thing and lockdown and all that kind of stuff ... the ICT actually has been the biggest-

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Challenge.

STEIN HELGEBY: ... challenge for me personally. And Paulette knows that there are some ICT platforms that I don't-

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: You would prefer not to use.

STEIN HELGEBY: I would prefer not to use, I won't mention WebEx, but there are some other platforms that I work quite well, but I have picked up some of my own skills along the way. So sometimes Paulette will say, "I can't get into the system," or she will say it's frozen on me, and I'll go back, and I'll say, "Have you tried turning it OFF and turning it ON again?" So I feel that I'm doing my bit to build our skill set.

EMMA REES: I'm glad digital capability in the APSC is clearly running high. Look, we've probably got time for one more reflection before I throw the audience. So this is you guys on notice. Get ready to get a question ready and a tip. Can I ask Michelle, possibly you, what would be a tip for you for the audience tonight?

MICHELLE OLIVER: Well, you heard it in my bio, just back yourself, just back yourself, if you know you can do it and you want it... I went into Department of Finance, wanting to be a Deputy Secretary EA. That's what I wanted. I went in there as an APS4. Three weeks later, I was an acting APS5, two months later, I was actually awarded the APS5, and six months later, I was acting Deputy Secretary EA. I knew I could do it. I backed myself. And I did everything in my power to make sure that I did it right. I learned, I watched, and built that experience and my knowledge and built that trust with David.

I probably shouldn't say this, but he is a great mentor. I do sit back and watch him a lot, as probably a lot of his colleagues would do, but I, in particular, did. I don't have the greatest resilience, and I've had to work really, really hard at resilience, but when it comes to the workplace, I think my resilience is really, really good. You have to be able to bounce back. You have to be professional. You have to put on that professional face, and you've just got to suck it up, dust yourself off, get back up, get on that horse and ride it, just do it. So that is probably my biggest lesson learned. Just trust in yourself.

EMMA REES: Trust yourself. I love it.

MICHELLE OLIVER: If you really want something, just back yourself.

EMMA REES: Back yourself. Paulette, advice? Your top tip.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: We have to do a lot of organising. So understand your organising style. Everyone does it differently. Some people use a calendar. Some people use Post-it note. Some people use a to-do list, whatever, understand what your style is, because unless you're organised... If you

are not organised, how are you going to organise your SES, your team, the department? So you need to know your style because that helps a great deal because you'll call on it all the time.

MICHELLE OLIVER: But there's always new things coming about, though. Isn't it?

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Oh, yeah.

MICHELLE OLIVER: We've got Onenote now-

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: New technology, new different things.

MICHELLE OLIVER: ... which I don't want to know about. So even though some of EAs over there want to me to do it, but there's always something new that you've got to learn, and you've just got to make what works for you.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Yeah. And the other would be build your network because they're your team. They help and back you through all the challenges and things that we do. I've used my network widely this week.

MICHELLE OLIVER: And we hear that as EAs all the time. Don't we?

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Yeah, we do.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Build your network, get yourself a mentor, but it's crucial because you rely on them all the time.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Big time. We're always asking each other, "Have you used this platform?"

MICHELLE OLIVER: Because I rely on a particular person all the time to help me out. Oh stop it, I wasn't talking about you, Rhana! But yeah, you do need that so that you can ask those questions, and there's other people out there that've got a wealth of knowledge.

EMMA REES: Fantastic. So we might turn to the audience for some questions.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Don't these guys have to answer that question?

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Oh, no.

DAVID FREDERICKS: I can answer really quick.

EMMA REES: You got 15 seconds!

DAVID FREDERICKS: You got to find and work relationships. You can't succeed in the workplace

MICHELLE OLIVER: No.

DAVID FREDERICKS: In any of your jobs, I can't succeed by myself. It's just absolutely crucial that I find teams. I've built my whole career on finding teams, building trust, getting the benefit of four heads instead of one. And it's a magnificent thing when you get that collective sense of achievement.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Thank you, David. Stein, you've got 10 seconds.

STEIN HELGEBY: Be curious because curiosity is what builds knowledge and experience, and confidence. And I think the worst thing anyone can do is put a lid on their curiosity.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, I'm Sarah from DSS. I find developing EAs one of the hardest things because I've never been an EA, and I honestly don't know how it's done. It's like dark magic or something. So, I've got ideas on how to develop APS staff in my branch or EL1s or all of that, but I'm interested in thoughts on how to develop an EA when you've never been an EA? And frankly, it's probably better for the world if I never was an EA.

DAVID FREDERICKS: Want to answer that?

EMMA REES: Who'd like to kick that off?

MICHELLE OLIVER: It'd probably be a great idea to get involved with some of the EAs and just find out exactly what they do. Look at the end of the day. We all do the same as an EA. You do the same sort of thing. Doesn't matter if you're an APS4, APS5, APS6, or an EL1 EA. It doesn't matter. We'd all do that same thing. It's about managing the diary, managing stakeholders' time communication, communicating with all these different people out there. And a really good EA will be able to do all of that. But if I was you, I'd certainly speak to some of your more senior EAs and get some advice off them.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: See if one of them might, if you have a particular EA that needs support or growth, see if you can find-

MICHELLE OLIVER: A mentor.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: A mentor for them. Ask one of the other senior EAs are they available to possibly, maybe you could recognise a skill that the individual needs to bolster a bit and put that to one of them asking, "She needs, or he needs a little bit of support in this area. Is that something you could possibly assist them with for a bit of time and guide them along the way to give them some growth in that space?" And then, out of those mentoring sessions and different times, different things come up.

So it might be that, sometimes one of us is stronger in one area than

another, and we'll say, "Oh, you really should talk to," or "go and sit down with Jill over here because she can really do this. She's the one to go and talk to, and you can learn something great from her from that". Or, "John over here, is great in Excel (because I'm not) – "How do you move all these columns"?"

MICHELLE OLIVER: Well, as EA that's what you do, though. Isn't it? I can't work Excel ...

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Yeah. You do. You pull on your network. It's your network again. It's really using that network.

MICHELLE OLIVER: But I'll always find somebody else that can.

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Yeah.

EMMA REES: They're around!

MICHELLE OLIVER: I mean, who wants to know Excel?

STEIN HELGEBY: Can I chip in on that? Because I've seen Paulette do this, and she's really good at it. And she does the same thing with the EAs she's trying to bring up as she does with me, really, which is invest time and be patient, be methodical. Take time out, find a safe place, talk through something, point to people who might know more than she does, (not that many people), but particular things, point to other people who can provide support. And then what she does, I've also noticed is she actually cycles back, and I think she cycles back really well. And I think if I was to say, "How do you kind of do that?" "I would say make sure you have a full loop."

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Close the circle.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Yeah. Sort of like a performance agreement. Really. Isn't it?

PAULETTE BILLINGS-BROWN: Yeah.

EMMA REES: Thank you. Have we got any more questions from the audience probably got time for one.

MICHELLE OLIVER: Oh Danielle, don't give her the-

DAVID FREDERICKS: What's she going to ask?

EMMA REES: Yeah. She's been stewing all day.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah, I do. So what I wanted to ask actually was David and Stein, what is something that you could say that your EAs what's the biggest thing they do to help you in a day? Like that you get the most of it could be, is it something that is operational, or is it something that's just

something that the coffee that you get in the morning? Like what is the biggest thing that helps you get through the day?

DAVID FREDERICKS:

Okay. So the humorous answer to that question, as you know, is that coffee first thing in the morning, I'm just hopeless before I get a coffee, but that's quite.... My answer to that question is simultaneously simple and complex. What Michelle does for me, as you know, is she just gets me through the day. And now, in my world, that's going to require different things at different times. So often times, it's just her capacity to organise me and to make sure I'm doing the right thing at the right time.

Something Michelle's fantastic at is keeping me on time. And she often, to be her absolute credit goes out of her way at her own personal expense to intervene in meetings, et cetera, in order to get me out. And so, for me, that's really important because it just takes a bit of pressure off me to have to think about, "I have to kind of end this meeting." She always just does that instinctively, as you know. So often times... So, by and large, for me, it is just getting me through the day. Different days will require different emphasis from Michelle.

The thing about the trust and the communications point is I trust Michelle and/ or will communicate in order for the tools to know what I need to get myself through that day. And that's the thing I'm most grateful for, to be honest with you. I get to the end of the day, and I've got to the end of the day because Michelle has helped pilot me to the end of the day. I've got wonderful staff that helped me get through the day. And by and large, I will have worked with Dep Secs or people to get me through the day.

Well, the reason I use the language to get me through the day is in my position if I get through the day, then I've achieved things for myself, for the department, and for the government, frankly. And so that's my calculus. And as I say, Michelle's kind of my how would I describe it? My pilot to get me through the day.

MICHELLE OLIVER:

I'm like that dog with a bone. It's time. David.

EMMA REES:

Stein?

STEIN HELGEBY:

So I think the most important thing she does is interpret and anticipate. So she interprets what's going on around, and she feeds that through to me in particular ways. And she anticipates, and it was like, I would go through every day, and I'd get to the stage where I'd think, "Oh, well, what about blah.." well it's already there. She's already organised the people, she's already got the stuff sorted. She's put something in people's calendars, blah, blah, blah. She's already there. And gee, that's a huge benefit. And that helps you get through the day and get

through the day in a very good way. But she interprets as well.

So I have tea days or coffee days. Tea day is, "Okay, I'm feeling pretty good." Coffee day is this is going to be pretty hard. And first question she asked me in the morning is tea or coffee? And that's what that means. Confident or difficult.

EMMA REES:

Thank you. Look. Unfortunately, that's all we have time for Q&A tonight. But please join me in thanking Michelle, David, Paulette, and Stein for a fabulous conversation tonight. With that, I'd like to invite Sarah Kalleske, Executive Assistant to Kathie Lee, Head of Service, ACT Public Service, to join us on stage for her closing remarks.

SARAH KALLESKE:

Thanks again to all our wonderful speakers as well as to our excellent host, thank you, Emma. I'd also like to thank everybody for coming out and celebrating the outstanding work and contribution of our EAs this year. It has been another challenging year for all of us. And so many of us working from home and trying to make that technology work has been, I think, the bane of most of the EA's existence.

I think what I've taken away is that you've got enormous respect for each other and the great camaraderie. And it sounds to me like you have lots of fun along the way, which I would imagine is really important. The strong communication was obviously key to our success. Having the sense of humor, the emotional intelligence and understanding everybody's expectations. I certainly have worked for my executive, who is the Head of the ACT Public Service, Kathie Lee, for about five years. I think Michelle, you said that it's a privilege to work in that environment, and it absolutely is. We get to see the human side of these incredibly intelligent people that most don't get to see. And they're people like we are, and they have a great sense of humor too.

I think I went to a course last week that was about obviously EAs, and they talked about superpowers, and the EAs had superpowers, and it was quite interesting what the person reflected on - what they thought their superpowers was. So I think Michelle and Paulette, you've got lots of superpowers, and David and Stein obviously know those superpowers.

So I think the anticipation as well and understanding each other's needs is really important as well. I won't go on, but I would like to thank IPAA ACT and their partners for their ongoing support, KPMG, Hayes, Telstra, MinterEllison, Commonwealth Bank, and Microsoft. Thank you.